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HEAVEN AND HELL ON EARTH:
FLUX AND STASIS IN LITERARY UTOPIANISM AND NATURALISM

by

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ABSTRACT

HEAVEN AND HELL ON EARTH:
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DAVID E. HUNTER III

Literary utopianism and naturalism present apparently polar views regarding the possibilities and limitations of human agency: the former portrays humanity as having created a communal society based upon rationality, while the latter argues that people are victims consumed by their desires. This comparative study of Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward (1888), Frank Norris’ McTeague (1899), Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie (1900), and Frank Baum’s The Wizard of Oz (1900), postulates these fictions as examinations of whether life in America at the end of the nineteenth-century is inevitably caught in state of flux or whether it is possible to attain stability. Yet these works are less interesting for their ostensibly dominant perspectives on the human condition, than for their complicating elements which elevate the works above their prevailing philosophies and prevent them from remaining mere manifestos.
The utopian novel enjoyed immense popularity during the last decade of the nineteenth-century, and has been described as “perhaps the most widely read type of literature in America” during this period. Between 1888 and 1900 approximately 190 utopias appeared in America. The popularity of utopian fiction during this decade lies partly in its historical context: by laying a path between an American society beset by internal turbulence and anxiety, and blissfully secure communities in someplace or sometime, utopian novels proposed that humanity was capable of creating a stable heaven on earth. However, even as the utopian tide began to ebb, a new fiction of naturalism was arising in America that implicitly questioned the idealism underlying the creation of utopia. Literary utopianism and naturalism present apparently polar views regarding the possibilities and limitations of human agency: the former portrays individuals as masters of the social environment, while the latter argues that people are victims inevitably consumed by their desires.

This study will focus upon the most popular and influential utopian novel of the period, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), as well as upon two representative novels of the “classic” period of literary naturalism in America, Frank Norris’ *McTeague* (1899) and Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900), and conclude with a look at another immensely popular work of utopia, Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1900). These
representative works of the naturalist and utopian traditions will be treated as "cultural artifacts" enacting a dialogue that implicitly questions whether life in America at the end of the nineteenth-century is inevitably caught in state of flux or whether it is possible to attain a state of stability. Yet these works are perhaps less interesting for their ostensibly dominant perspectives on the human conditions than for the elements that disrupt the narrative thrust; these complicating elements elevate the works above their prevailing philosophies and thereby prevent them from becoming manifestos.

Utopian and naturalistic literature are often relegated to a relatively minor position within the American literary canon, although naturalism has been partially reclaimed as vital literature. Nevertheless, nineteenth-century American literature remains dominated by the shadows of writers such as Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and Walt Whitman; their work is linked by what Robert Butler calls the quintessential American impulse simply to move: "One of the central and most distinctive values in American culture is a desire for pure motion, movement for its own sake. A relatively new and chronically rootless society, America has always placed an unusually high premium on mobility rather than security and stability." The value placed upon movement, rather than security, is a trait distinct to classic American literature, in contrast to the classic English novel's treatment of movement as usually directed toward a secure niche in a stable society. The protagonists of Tom Jones, Oliver Twist, and even Robinson Crusoe see their journeys as a necessary evil, a means of finding their identities in a place-oriented society; in contrast, movement in American literature is often undirected: Twain's Huckleberry Finn heads West without looking back, and Cooper's Natty Bumpo moves toward the wilderness
because he thinks his integrity is threatened by civilization. Canonical American writers frequently treat life as a process of becoming rather than a state of being, an open-ended journey into such outlets as Cooper’s West, Melville’s ocean, Twain’s river, and Whitman’s open road.

However, the desire for security, as opposed to movement, grew during the second half of the nineteenth-century, a period of intense labor unrest with millions of Americans unemployed. The “Gilded Age,” a period of superficial ostentation and thinly veiled corruption, followed the Civil War and saw the blooming of industrialism, and the subsequent increase in hostility between laborer and industrialist. As America increasingly committed to industrialism, a general belief arose that the cards were stacked in favor of industrialists, who enjoyed unprecedented wealth during this often turbulent period. While the United States might still seem to offer opportunity, it was no longer an opportunity available to all: “Born an employee, die an employee.” The rift between capital and labor was aggravated by mechanization, which aided in the easy replacement of the unskilled worker. The desire of workers to ensure their jobs and exert some control over their working environment, such as the length of the working day, led to a massive number of strikes: “[B]etween 1880 and 1900 in industrial cities, where over 68 percent of the population had been born abroad, there was an incredible total of 38,303 strikes.” The most notorious outburst of the period was the Haymarket Riot of Chicago in May, 1886, which resulted in the deaths of several striking workers and more than a dozen policemen. Economic insecurity during the period was intensified by recurrent industrial depressions,
phenomena around which utopian fiction was based; the popular literature incorporated various explanations and suggestions for cures for the depressions.7

Industrialization played a major role in producing widespread fears of economic insecurity, and thus helped produce, during the latter third of the nineteen-century, what Perry Miller describes as “one of the most radical revolutions in the history of the American mind.”8 This transition was produced not only by economic insecurity, but perhaps more importantly, by cultural insecurity stemming from growing challenges to traditional views about science, religion, and the family in a post-Darwinian world of urbanization and immigration. The influential vein of evolutionary thought developed by Herbert Spencer’s social naturalism in Social Statistics (1850), posited the state as an evolving organism and suggested the gradual adaptation of human nature to the conditions of social life and eventually to perfect harmony or utopia. Many utopian writers, such as Bellamy, responded to the optimism of Spencerian evolution, adapting selected portions of evolutionary thought to confirm romantic conceptions of the purpose and value of literature.

Yet Herbert Spencer also presented the materialistic and deterministic implications of evolutionary thought, drawing an image of man standing alone and fragile, at the mercy of immense universal forces that he could neither understand nor control. This aspect of Spencerian evolution profoundly influenced writers such as Theodore Dreiser, who recognized that [Spencer’s ideas] drove out of his mind whatever idealistic tendencies he had entertained and confirmed the most pessimistic fears that his observations had suggested.9
Furthermore, religious identity, security, and sense of place were threatened by Spencer's ideas: Philip Gerber states that for Herbert Spencer "the concept of religion, with its claim to revealed truth and its ultimate assumption of self-existence, was an element of the unknowable and thus to be discarded." Severing the dependence of cultural values on inherited, although reinterpreted and muted, religious beliefs, Darwinism muddied the image of humanity as the center of divine creation. Americans were no longer special creatures living in a "city upon a hill," but merely another species on the periphery of existence, vying for survival in both their natural and social environments. Brian Lee summarizes the cultural struggle as "between modernists and anti-modernists, or between socialists and capitalists, struggles which took as their ground the village or the city, the past or the future, and the individual or the collective." Conrad Ostwalt describes a "sense of Americans that they were chosen people in a promised land suffered questioning as the garden of promise became the battlefield of ideological conflicts." No longer able to easily approach existence in the traditional way of seeking communion with the supernatural in a benevolent universe, with its accompanying dream of opportunity, Americans turned to the social environment in search of a new American vision. The experience of estrangement during this period led to literary experimentation revolving around new ways to view America, experimentation that produced an implicit confrontation between the prevailing perspectives of utopianism and naturalism.

Conclusive definitions of literary utopianism are chimeras. A utopian work has been traditionally and specifically defined as "a fairly detailed description of an imaginary community, society, or world—a 'fiction' that...represents a prescriptive, normative,
alternative” to the author’s society. However, utopianism has also received more general definitions, which are perhaps more useful to literary study: Ruth Levitas defines utopia as “the expression of the desire for a better way of being. This includes both the objective, institutional approach to utopia, and the subjective, experiential concern of disalienation.” W. Warren Wagar speaks of an “impulse to make life good,” while Ivan Doig states that “whenever you honor, in whatever action or thought, the prospect of an improved life ahead, you flash an impulse in the direction of utopia.” Frederic Jameson proposes that utopian discourse functions “to provoke a fruitful bewilderment, and to jar the mind into some heightened but unconceptualizable consciousness of its own powers, functions, aims, and structural limits.” Most broadly, utopian works are expressions of authorial concepts of goodness.

Defining literary naturalism is an enterprise similarly fraught with contradiction and lack of conclusion. Naturalism has been traditionally defined as a combination of realism and pessimistic determinism, “a sense of the role of such forces as hereditary, environment, instinct, or chance in determining behavior and belief.” Certainly central to the naturalist perspective is a frequent lack of self-control in events determined by apparently unalterable, and often external, forces. Naturalists are occasionally characterized as meanly experimenting upon characters unable to respond to various experiences in ways that suggest they have the will to control their desires. Yet naturalism “reflects an affirmative ethical conception of life, for it asserts the value of all life by endowing the lowest character with emotion and defeat and with moral ambiguity, no matter how poor and ignoble he may seem.”
Furthermore, critics such as Charles Child Walcutt and Donald Pizer have characterized naturalism as a more complicated narrative, marked by a tension between a belief in progress through human initiative and a philosophy of determinism. Literary naturalism is read as a literature of transition between the notion of the sovereign self that authors itself into life, and the negation of the notion of self as characters are absorbed into events. Rather than a monolithic vision, naturalism can be considered to be a dialogue between polar views on the human condition: "Free will has the effect, that is, of rescuing the autonomous self too completely from a world of things, while determinism conversely absorbs any possibility of agency into that world, making distinctions between oneself and one's circumstance disappear."  

Both utopianism and literary naturalism share an interest in "documentary organization" and the incorporation of melodramatic and sentimental formulas. Moreover, the two fictions engage in a process Darko Suvin has labeled as "cognitive estrangement," in which the reader is encouraged to view society from an alternative perspective. Naturalism is often criticized for depicting a reality not seen in life, while utopia argues for transformation by representing a current moment in history in a radical manner. Naturalist novels agree with utopian works that dramatic social recreation would be necessary to reform the social environment in which individual behavior is conditioned. On the basis of its deterministic philosophy, naturalism is not even a necessarily pessimistic fiction:

The world can be determined, after all, toward the Millennium as easily as toward Apocalypse and the ability to take credit for actions is not essential to individual happiness, or perhaps even virtue....Because fiction can reveal not only the effects
of economic conditions but also their causes, it can direct attention to the means of social reform as well as to its ends. Instead of submitting to the jungle law of Spencer’s social Darwinism, then, a naturalist author can illustrate possibilities for transcending it.22

Although naturalism can and does generate multifarious possibilities, the fiction’s emphasis upon the determinist rejection of human agency usually produces the plot of decline. Although both fictions share a similar social context, they react in radically different ways to the destruction of the social environment by such forces as Darwinism and urbanization: utopian works arouse a optimistic belief in economical, moral, and spiritual possibility, by arguing for the ability of people to form a new understanding of the world and how it works; such understanding is usually not attained by characters in naturalist novels, although they may search in vain.

In 1868, Émile Zola heralded the new fiction of naturalism—of characters “completely dominated by their nerves and blood, without free will.”23 Although he theorized a materialistic, deterministic universe, Zola’s intent was to give humanity hope: “Zola attempted to shift humanity’s efforts toward controlling the determining factors, primarily the social environment. Herein lay humanity’s moral freedom, the opportunity to correct evil and promote good.”24 Thus, literary naturalism shares a similar foundation and purpose with utopian fiction. Yet despite a common focus upon the social environment, one type of fiction was read by millions, while the other was frequently ignored by the reading public. In contrast to naturalism’s rejection of the view of individuals as endowed with autonomy and responsibility, successful utopian fiction was
able to incorporate this American belief in individual liberty with its focus upon the state as the agent of social evolution.

During an age marked by economic and cultural insecurity, the American public embraced a vision confidently promising an easy journey to an orderly and egalitarian future to such an extent, that Darby Lewes notes “it is difficult to comprehend the full impact of Looking Backward on its society.”¹ Four years before Bellamy wrote his novel, an editorial in The Nation had deplored “the decline of the novel of ‘purpose’”; after Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), another reform novel, Looking Backward was quite possibly the most popular American novel of the nineteenth-century.³

Looking Backward follows the traditional path of the utopian novel, in which a traveler-narrator, through conversation with an inhabitant of utopia or a visitor from the present, raises the social problem(s) which this earthly paradise has solved. The novel’s protagonist, Julian West, is a wealthy Bostonian who represents his class through his selfish preoccupation in his own affairs in 1887. Troubled by insomnia and the social turbulence of the times, West routinely has himself mesmerized and sleeps in a secret vault beneath his home. When his house burns down, West is presumed dead, but he survives in his hypnotic trance for 113 years. He is found by accident in the year 2000 and helped by Dr. Leete and his daughter Edith, to adjust to a Boston that has been transformed into a utopia. The bulk of the novel is composed of long lectures given by the Leetes to West concerning the operating principles of their earthly paradise.
The pedagogical bulk of the novel is punctuated by the dramatic subplot of Julian’s psychological crisis, which revolves around Julian’s anguish over his identity in the utopia and around his attraction to Dr. Leete’s daughter, conveniently named after West’s former fiancée, Edith Bartlett. West had been frustrated by a series of strikes that have prevented the completion of his luxurious new home and therefore delayed his marriage to Edith Bartlett. Despite his wealth, West is impotent to control his personal environment. He is also worried about the general economic and social situation: “As one of the wealthy, with a large stake in the existing order of things, I naturally shared the apprehensions of my class” (120). His nervous insecurity regarding the increasing social tension in 1887 produces insomnia; Jean Pfaelzer comments that “it is a reflection of the nervous nature of the times that West, in the nineteenth-century, is ‘a confirmed sufferer from insomnia’” (4). West is frustrated to the extent that he expresses a desire to stabilize the labor situation through violence; he imagines that if the laboring classes “had but one neck that he might cut it off” (101).

Apprehensive and unhappy about the disordered state of the times, Julian West seeks peaceful rest in his subterranean chamber. In isolating himself from the rest of humanity and concerning himself only with his own desires, West embodies the type of individualism which is blamed by the novel’s pedagogical voice for the social distress. Yet such isolation is necessary for his arrival into the utopia; West’s chamber functions as a symbolic womb for a reborn West: the room even has an umbilical cord, a “small pipe...insured the renewal of air” (105).
Sleeping far longer than Rip Van Winkle, West awakens in an earthly paradise that has been easily created through economic ordering, and reorganization of society and of the desires of the individual. The gradual transformation of industrial society has occurred without violence or compulsion, a process experienced by West, as he adjusts without pressure to the future by simply conversing with the Leetes and taking brief field trips. Dr. Leete describes the labor strikes which West had hated, as a product of the increasing concentration of capital under an increasingly consolidated industrial system:

The movement toward the conduct of business by larger and larger aggregations of capital, the tendency toward monopolies, which had been so desperately and vainly resisted, was recognized at last, in its true significance, as a process which only needed to complete its logical evolution to open a golden future to humanity. Early in the last century the evolution was completed by the final consolidation of the entire capital of the nation. The nation, that is to say, organized as the one great business in which all other corporations were absorbed. (122)

The utopia functions as a socialist state: all items are mass produced and sold through a single government-run company at the lowest possible price. However, Bellamy repositions "great corporations," the frequent enemy of socialistic tracts during the nineteenth-century, as a necessary and inevitable means to a paradise in which the abundant wealth of the nation is available to all. Furthermore, technology is no longer defined as an evil force responsible for the anxiety of the industrial society in the nineteenth-century, but instead is viewed as a benign force which creates material security for all, when properly utilized.

If West, initially isolated and selfish, represented humanity in 1887, the human condition in the utopia is embodied in "the Industrial Army": the nation has been reconceived as an army in which all citizens, age twenty-one to forty-five, must serve. The
social structure is efficient because not only is the administrative bureaucracy divided along military lines, but also because all citizens work as efficiently as possible out of a “public spirit” of duty and communal effort. Through a system of state education, citizens are taught so thoroughly to love their place as cogs in the social machine, that labor is “so absolutely natural and reasonable that the idea of its being compulsory has ceased to be thought of entirely”(131). Moreover, a happy labor force is guaranteed by a fair work schedule, in which dismal, monotonous, or physically draining jobs require fewer hours of employment.

In opposition to social strife and class conflict, Looking Backward describes a society based upon “the necessity of mutual dependence”(178). Of all the wonders of the utopia, West is most enchanted with a vision of individuals fused together as interconnected cogs in a great social machine:

A regiment was passing. It was the first sight in that dreary day which had inspired me with any other emotions that wondering pity and amazement. Here at last were order and reason, an exhibition of what intelligent cooperation can accomplish. The people who stood looking on with kindling faces...Could they fail to see that it was their perfect concert of action, their organization under one control, which made these men the tremendous engine they were, able to vanquish a mob ten times as numerous? (194)

If naturalism centers around the tension between determinism and individual freedom, in an often disturbingly unresolved style, the utopian author answers the question of what an individual can mean. The narrative interest created by the tension between an individual and the body of people that forms a society in the beginning of the novel, is resolved by the novel’s pedagogical voice delighting in the mechanization of human beings.
The novel proposes that both people and the economy can be given a more autonomous life; humanity takes its place in “the tremendous machine” of society, while the forces of production are somehow regulated with unprecedented efficiency through a “machinery of distribution”(137). The demise of “excessive individualism,” competition and unregulated profiteering, has brought an end to waste so that the country’s economy is exactly arranged to the needs of its citizens. The seemingly paradoxical result of the forced mechanization of people is to enable the individual to get “enfranchised from discipline and control”(149). Simple recognition of a labor principle, that maximum efficiency is achieved through cooperation, became a basis for social cohesion rather than conflict.

The utopia of Looking Backward is based upon society’s ability to recognize and solve social problems; this positivist outlook, with its emphasis upon the “logical evolution” of society, posits humans as rational, self-aware creatures. Occupations are selected according to the desires of the citizens; each person possesses a self-awareness of his or her “natural endowments, mental and physical,” which enables one to select a job “in accordance with his natural aptitude”(161). Furthermore, Mrs. Leete provides an example of the rationality of the citizens of utopia, in a rare interruption to her husband’s lecture: utopian citizens “choose houses no larger than we need, and furnish them so as to involve the minimum of trouble to keep them in order”(168). By eliminating the causes of social strife—competition, poverty, and unemployment, the utopia has eliminated personal anxiety. Instead, every man, woman, and child shares in the economic resources of the nation and is therefore economically independent according to Dr. Leete:
That any person should be dependent for the means of support upon another would be shocking to the moral sense as well as indefensible on any rational social theory. What would become of personal liberty and dignity under such an arrangement...[of] galling personal dependence upon others as to the very means of life, the poor upon the rich, or employed upon employer, women upon men, children upon parents...(214-5).

Dr. Leete informs West that without the struggle to survive, people would work as diligently to garner honor as nineteenth-century people struggled to amass money.

The vision of a noble humanity is based upon a claim that spiritual or “moral and material” evolution has occurred: “We are like a child which has just learned to stand upright and to walk...humanity has entered on a new phase of spiritual development, an evolution of higher faculties, the very existence of which in human nature our ancestors scarcely suspected”(175). With its emphasis upon evolution and a rational humanity, the utopia hinges upon a belief in human perfectibility through evolution.

West experiences an inordinately long sermon during his time in the utopia, which links a belief in progressive evolution with the hope of an earthly paradise:

For twofold is the return of man to God “who is our home,” the return of the individual by the way of death, and the return of the race by the fulfillment of the evolution, when the divine secret in the germ shall be perfectly unfolded. With a tear for the darker past, turn we then to the dazzling future, and, veiling our eyes, press forward. The long and weary winter of the race is ended. Its summer has begun. Humanity has burst the chrysalis. The heavens are before it. (238-9)

A religious aspect to the utopia is generated by millennial expectations regarding the temporal setting of the novel, the year 2000. This connection is made explicit by Dr. Leete’s comment that some members of the utopia “hold that we have entered upon the millennium, and the theory from their point of view does not lack plausibility”(165). Yet
Dr. Leete describes this belief as shared by some, not all, citizens; the millennial theme is not fully developed in the novel because Bellamy desires to construct a recognizable utopia. However, enough millennial expectation, the replacement of the “weary winter” with “the dazzling future,” is kept to add millennial urgency to the novel’s implicit call for change.

Rather than focusing upon sacred text in his sermon, Barton claims evolution, the “divine secret in the germ,” as the foundation for human, and hence social, perfection. Religious imagery adds a gloss to the scientific principles at the heart of the utopia; such intermingling is evident in West as he adapts to the utopia: even though West discovers criminals still prowl among evolved humanity, this potentially discordant element is overshadowed by the wonder he feels after learning that the criminals have difficulty lying: “If lying has gone out of fashion, this is indeed the ‘new heavens and the new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness,’ which the prophet foretold”(123). Although the description of lying as a whim of “fashion” might undermine the claim to a permanent change in the human character, the phrase also emphasizes the novel’s tenet that human beings are self-aware creatures capable of rational self-control.

Just as Dr. Leete stresses the importance of social environment in human evolution, in such claims as “nearly all forms of crime known to you are motiveless now…”(225), Barton proclaims that “the fear of want and the lust of gain became extinct motives when abundance was assured to all…”(282). The intellectual and the minister, as well as other discrete individuals, unite to proclaim a monolithic message, to the effect that paradise can be created without divine intervention. Barton’s sermon is ostensibly directed at his
listeners in utopia, but stylistically functions as an unmediated voice of pedagogy directly and hence effectively aimed at Bellamy’s reader: Barton “would fain exchange my share in this serene and golden day for a place in that stormy epoch of transition…”(281).

The abrupt juxtaposition between an evil past and a blissful present polarizes choice, and creates an urgency for change that effectively replicates the choice between heaven and hell in exhorting sermons such as Jonathan Edward’s “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” The nineteenth-century novel, particularly the renaissance of literary utopias in America, offered a sense of imperative urgency and compelling alternatives a century and a half after Edward’s exhortation to sinners sliding on the “slippery slope.”

After experiencing momentary joy in finding himself in a utopian world, West suffers from a psychological instability that is similar to religious uncertainty: “In my mind, all had broken loose, habits of feeling, associations of thought, ideas of persons and things, all had dissolved and lost coherence and were seething together in apparently irretrievable chaos”(137). Having lost his sense of identity, West struggles without success to adapt to the reality of his new world. Just as social strife in the world of Bellamy’s readers is attributed to a failure to recognize basic labor principles that would increase economic efficiency, a lack of self-knowledge produces mental devastation that brings West to the edge of insanity: “There are no words for the mental torture I endured during this helpless, eyeless groping for myself in a boundless void”(141). West’s personal anxiety leads him back to the shelter of his suspension and in a narrative twist, he reawakens in the Boston of his past.
West has apparently partially adapted to utopia, because the “festering” urban streets of the past disorient and confuse him. Julian becomes increasingly oppressed by the poverty rampant in the city, as well as enraged by the selfishness and culpability of his former class. Upon finding his way to a dinner party at the home of Edith Bartlett’s family, West explodes like a biblical prophet who cannot contain his disgust, condemning the company for their apathy to the suffering around them:

Therefore now I found upon my garments the blood of this great multitude of strangled souls of my brothers. The voice of their blood cried out against me from the ground. Every stone of the reeking pavements, every brick of the pestilential rookeries, found a tongue and called after me as I fled: What hast thou done with thy brother Abel?(306).

Following in the footsteps of a prophet denouncing evil in the Old Testament, West blames the apathetic upper class for the suffering around them. Also, instead of a move towards utopia merely being desirable and possible, West’s guilt implicates Bellamy’s readers, presumably possessing the leisure to read fiction, in the need for social change.

Although West feels a crippling guilt over his former apathy, he is “saved” as a “prophet persecuted for righteousness’ sake”: in an echo of religious conversion, West rejects his class and is thrown out of the Bartlett’s home. Having earned a new identity, Julian reawakens from his tomb-like chamber and finds himself back in the utopia of the future: “As with an escaped convict who dreams that he has been recaptured and brought back to his dark and reeking dungeon, so it was with me, as I realized that my return to the nineteenth century had been the dream, and my presence in the twentieth was the reality”(310). West remains saturated with guilt because of a belief that he is unworthy to have joined the utopia as a former member of the upper class and an impotent prophet.
who failed to effect change; consequently, West is left looking backward. However, *Looking Backward* closes with the inference that the future Edith, his “angel,” will help him to gradually rebuild his self-respect. Bellamy concludes his novel by calling for a similarly gradual process of social reconstruction, proclaiming that his contemporaries would see the golden utopia “if we deserve it by our faith and by our works”(319).

The often complex combination of optimism and entreaty may have been the vital factor that made *Looking Backward* vastly more influential than the almost two hundred other late nineteenth-century American utopias. Certainly the novel has only a limited appeal as a work of persuasive aestheticism; Kenneth M. Roemer provides an accurate, if biting, summary of the reading experience: “The narrative is improbable, antagonistic, contradictory, and stylistically suspect. The plot is outrageously improbable.” Moreover, the characters lack individuality, a fact readily admitted by Bellamy: “When you know half a dozen men, you know all, and when you know three women you know all.” Since utopian novels revolve around ideology, rather than character, the audience does not have emotional engagement with the relatively worry free protagonist, as he or she experiences the perfection of utopia.

Yet something about the novel’s description of a socialized equality and a nationalized economy made it one of the most highly regarded novels of the nineteenth-century. Although the novel’s characters are little more than flat reactions to ideological or emotional situations, those situations become the ingredients in a recipe for social praxis: they replace negative assumptions about social inevitability with a historical view that extrapolates hopes from the past into the future. One such hope was the tendency
toward equality during the nineteenth-century, Dr. Leete explains that equality is based upon intent, rather than ability, in the new Boston: "it would be an extraordinary sort of logic which should try to determine a moral question by a material standard. The amount of the effort alone is pertinent to the question of dessert. All men who do their best, do the same"(141).

Although utopian works inherently contain a claim to a historical view, *Looking Backward* explicitly claims to be a historical account; the author begins his Preface by apologizing for the implausibility of the method of time-travel, rather than at the possibility of utopia: "The reader...will of course recognize in these disturbances of industry the first and incoherent phase of the great movement which ended in the establishment of the modern industrial system with all its social consequences"(100). Although ostensibly written for inhabitants of the utopia, the novel effectively calls upon Bellamy's readers to accept the self-evident truth of utopia: "The readers of this book never having practically known any other arrangements, or perhaps very carefully considered the historical accounts of former epochs in which a very different system prevailed, cannot be expected to appreciate the stupor of amazement into which Dr. Leete's simple statement plunged me"(151).

The narrative structure of *Looking Backward* reinforces its claim to historical status: since the bulk of the novel consists of description of utopia, with only confusing flashes of the nineteenth-century, the world of the future increasingly seems real. Through techniques such as character doubling and dream experience, the novel changes the reader's perception of reality. After West's experience in a miserably realistic Boston at
the end of the novel is revealed as merely a dream, or rather a nightmare, the old hellish
world is relegated to the pages of history, while the dream world becomes real.

Nevertheless, the most important factor behind the enormous popularity of Looking
Backward was the argument for an easily achievable utopia: by simply popularizing the
"right" perception of society, humanity could replace the "cyclical" process of history with
upward "progress in a right line" (102). In addition, Bellamy rejects the notion of traveling
elsewhere to find utopia, but rather sets his novel in Boston, a move implying the
attainability of a real utopia; since West is able to view portions of the future Boston, Dr.
Leete's confident arguments for utopia have "evident" support.

Moreover, the novel's vision was original enough to garner attention, yet familiar
enough to be persuasive; the economic solution was grounded in millennial imagery, as
well as in the familiar form of the romance, specifically between West and Edith Leete.
The aesthetic structures of Looking Backward meshed easily with the contemporary
sentimental romance, particularly since the contemporary form of the latter fiction
traditionally celebrates a reconciliation of natural and social growth: "the romance is
fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the
world of experience...the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall."s By his role in
the romantic subplot, West replicates the social transcendence that has produced utopia;
his redemption supports the view that human nature was really "good, not bad...generous,
not selfish, pitiful, not cruel, sympathetic, not arrogant, godlike in inspirations, instinct
with divinest impulses of tenderness and self-sacrifice, images of God indeed...not the
travesties upon Him they had seemed" (234). Looking Backward combines a powerful,
even mythical, image of redemption with scientific rationalism; the improvement of the
human race is explained in evolutionary terms: without the struggle to survive and fear of
poverty, "the principle of sexual selection, with its tendency to preserve and transmit the
better types of the race, and let the inferior types drop out, has unhindered
operation" (269). The consequence of this operation has been "not only a physical, but a
mental and moral improvement" (270).

Bellamy enticed his readers with a vision that combined opposing elements:
individualism and communism. Dr. Leete repeatedly asserts that individuals retain
sovereignty over their own person: "In fact, you will find, Mr. West, as you come to
know us, that there is far less interference of any sort with personal liberty nowadays than
you were accustomed to" (182). Yet the lives of the citizens of utopia are managed by an
authoritative state, one that does not normally have to use force in order to exercise
control. The stability of the state was insured with the establishment of the "national
party," whose purpose was to create "a family, a vital union, a common life, a mighty
heaven-touching tree whose leaves are its people, fed from its veins, and feeding it in
turn" (146). In terms ominously reminiscent of Nazi Germany, the national party sought to
transform the nation into "a fatherland, a father who kept the people alive and was not
merely an idol for which they were expected to die" (146). Although they are ostensibly
individual creatures, inhabitants of utopia are viewed part of an organic society, as the
limbs of the social organism. Disguising an authoritative state under the guise of liberty
enabled Bellamy to avoid a common paradox in utopian works: the individual with the
most freedom is the most isolated, and thus has least opportunity for change.
Yet the vision of the nation as the great community is not monolithic, but retains some of the privileges and structure of middle-class capitalism; this combination would have undoubtedly been reassuring to readers fearful of being swallowed up in a communistic system. The Leete family follows the social paradigm by going to eat at a communal dining room, “into which a stream of people was pouring”(213). However, this communal arrangement is deceptive because “every family in the ward has a room set apart in this great building for its permanent and exclusive use”(213). Utopian productivity thus allows its citizens, such as Leetes, to isolate themselves from the “public sphere,” by eating in private rooms in a large public building. Such privacy is particularly evident in comparison to the Boston of Julian’s nightmare, which is miserably overflowing with people and their noise: “The roar and rattle of wheels and hammers resounding from every side was not the hum of a peaceful industry, but the clangor of swords wielded by foremen....the screams of half-brutalized children”(301,305). The idealized lifestyle of the middle-class during the late nineteenth century is also the standard for the “majestic” entertainment of utopian life: music on radio, short working hours, retirement at age forty-five, and no servant problems. In addition, although the economy is structured along military lines, the liberal professions enjoy greater autonomy than the industrial workers.

Utopian novels, such as Looking Backward, have been deemed marginal literature at least partly because they fail the modern test of realism: the novels were viewed as “unworthy of the important psychological activity of suspending disbelief, particularly because such suspension was always betrayed by the novel’s compulsive infusion of material from the non-art, ‘real’ world.” Furthermore, the utopian society hinders
possibilities of narrative discord and complication. Yet according to Wilfred McClay, "a utopia is not only an imaginative projection of a radiant social ideal; it is also a way that a society confesses how and why it is unhappy with itself." The importance of *Looking Backward* does not lie only in its representation of "a radiant social ideal," or a believable society of the future. The novel succeeds in conveying a particular perspective on social discontents and hopes at the end of the nineteenth-century, particularly the central belief in the ability of human agency to construct a stable paradise on earth. However, *Looking Backward* is perhaps more important, and certainly more interesting outside of its historical context, to the extent that it fails to successfully describe a utopia; its failures, which stem from often evasive and contradictory narrative, reveal a skeptical, conservative foundation to the ostensibly idealistic belief in the innate goodness of people.

Even as *Looking Backward* proclaims the inevitable perfection of society and the human race, the novel paradoxically acknowledges that the subconscious controls individual behavior: West’s insomnia forces him to flee from society into his sleeping chamber, into which “no murmur from the upper world ever penetrated”(105). Yet West’s subconscious, which is linked with the anxiety and unrest of society, remains bothered by his social environment and he cannot sleep. His mind needs to be forced into sleepy submission by an external agent, a hypnotist. Thus external force is needed to control the subconscious minds of the individuals who form the “great community”; the novel maintains its internal logic by disguising an authoritative state as a “fatherland” or community of free individuals voluntarily joined together.
Bellamy is able to combine seemingly paradoxical elements, such as communism and individualism, because the novel's narrative structure, consisting primarily of pedagogical conversations between Dr. Leete and West, precludes a direct "experience" of utopia through narrative description. Instead, the reader receives a secondhand conception of utopia from Dr. Leete's statements and West's abbreviated accounts. Yet this indirect experience also reveals contradictions within a state that largely remains a theoretical, rather than "felt," construction throughout Bellamy's experience; *Looking Backward* fails to substantiate Dr. Leete's assertion that "the splendor of our life is, on its social side, that which we share with our fellows"(165). Whereas Boston in the nineteenth-century is grippingly depicted in a brief episode as a society caught up in remorseless action, the Bostonian utopia seems to be a ghost town, consisting only of the Leete family.

The reader is constantly assured, through West, of the utopian world's merit, but the merit is not validated by direct experience. The utopia is based upon a supremely effective system of education that functions, in conjunction with a belief in the radical evolution of the human species, to produce rational citizens who conform to the social system. Education is even claimed as the tool for managing both the thoughts and emotions of individuals: Edith eventually confesses to West that "it was nothing less than my duty to fall in love with you at first sight...no girl of proper feeling in my place could do otherwise"(211). *Looking Backward* can plausibly assert the power of its institutions by remaining reassuringly vague in description: regarding the machinery of the education process that so thoroughly indoctrinates the mind, West states "I shall not describe in detail what I saw in the schools that day"(164). The novel is similarly vague regarding the
validity of its economic system: the utopia’s claim to efficient productivity and distribution largely escapes the test of consumer consumption because a society in action is not evident in the utopia. In addition, even if the citizens of utopia have evolved morally, they would still be subject to physical frailty so evident in West’s “nightmarish” vision of nineteenth-century Boston. Yet even though Dr. Leete is a physician, he does not refer to illness, hospitals, or death; his omission implies a society of physically perfect, if unseen, beings.

Dr. Leete’s explanation of the perfect society is colored by misdirection and an underlying distrust of individuals. He attempts to elevate human beings beyond the level of animals “insensible to any motives save fear of want and love of luxury...”(153), by offering a variety of incentive, such as “honor” and “patriotism,” as more effective propellants of human behavior. Furthermore, each citizen seems to have free-will in a system that is “entirely voluntary, the logical outcome of the operation of human nature under rational conditions”(180). Yet every choice in the utopia is carefully limited and determined, whether the decision concerns consumer goods or marital spouses. Although each citizen is allowed to choose a vocation, both parents and state educators emphasize and document suspected aptitudes, because “the public policy is to encourage all to develop suspected talents which only actual tests can prove the reality of”(166). At the same time, each citizens must accept the authority of the state or lose his (or presumably her) rights as a human being: “A man able to do duty, and persistently refusing, is sentenced to solitary imprisonment on bread and water till he consents”(207). A further guarantee of the society’s unruffled, static nature is ubiquitous surveillance by an “inspectorate”: “Not only is it on the alert to catch and sift every rumor of a fault in the
service, but it is its business, by systematic and constant oversight and inspection of every
branch of the army, to find out what is going wrong before anybody else does”(246).

Utopian texts often describes the transitional period to utopia as a time of bloody
revolution, probably following the biblical paradigm of the Apocalypse. However,
Bellamy ostensibly avoids bloodshed by describing the creation of utopia as a natural
product of an evolved social mind. This narrative evasion is apparent in Bellamy’s
metaphors concerning this period of social development, specifically in his gripping
comparison of nineteenth-century American society to a

prodigious coach which the masses of humanity were harnessed to and dragged
toolsomely along a very hilly and sandy road. The driver was hunger, and permitted
no lagging, though the pace was necessarily very slow....[The seats inside the
coach] were very insecure, and at every sudden jolt of the coach persons were
slipping out of them and falling to the ground, where they were instantly compelled
to take hold of the rope and help to drag the coach on which they had before
ridden so pleasantly.(97)

This metaphor signifies the anxiety of late nineteenth-century America; the citizen-
passengers travel in an uncertain vehicle constantly in danger of overturning or throwing
its passengers by the wayside when it hits a bump in the road. There is a denotation of
violence in the description of a constant competitive struggle for better seats on the coach
and in the chaotic struggle when the coach is overturned. Implicit blame for the disaster is
attributed to the well-to-do passengers, whose ‘hallucination’ that they are of “finer clay”
and belong to a “higher order of beings” than those who pull results in the conviction that
“no very radical improvement was possible”(97).

Of course, the metaphor only indirectly signifies responsibility for the violent social
disaster. Agency is spread among impersonal forces, such as “hunger” and “coach and
road,” a move that prevents the metaphor from becoming an accusation at the passengers riding on the unstable backs of others. The metaphoric disaster is not apparently due to the miserable people pulling the coach or how it is being pulled. Instead, both passengers and laborers are steered by “hunger” toward an unknown destination; however, Bellamy dislocates agency to the point that the metaphor loses polemic effectiveness, because the passengers apparently cannot change the direction of the coach-nation; the entire society is seemingly controlled by abstract forces that have little to do with their relations to one another. Nevertheless, the metaphoric evasion largely mirrors the avoidance of agency in the vague narrative explanation of how a perfect society was created: “The nation, that is to say, organized as the one great business corporation in which all other corporations were absorbed”(156). Bellamy claims that society can be transformed without bloodshed into a smoothly running social machine.11

Similarly, West comes to the utopia as a result of a disaster, specifically the destruction of his house by fire, a symbol of implicit violence, as well as of cleansing. Yet West travels by means of unsolicited time-travel, which suggests that conscious activity is not essential to extract the future from the present; additionally, the stress on the “naturalness” of the evolution to utopia seems to undermine the millennial urgency of the novel. However, such “naturalness,” working in conjunction with the novel’s claim to historical status, also promises that the inspired reader’s efforts will be both right and successful.

Although Looking Backward emphasizes upward progress and the Preface to the novel suggests that most future Americans will have a dynamic view of progress, the novel
repeatedly describes utopia as a place of uniform stability. Furthermore, there is little physical movement in the novel, since West scarcely budges from the area surrounding his nineteenth-century home; the bulk of the novel occurs within the Leete home, which was built upon the foundation of West’s old home. The household roles are clearly defined and uncontested: the father works, the mother keeps the house in order, and the daughter shops. Furthermore, Dr. Leete often uses words such as “perfect” and “solved” to describe his society, signifying a static view of history: the “fundamental principles on which our society is founded settle for all time the strifes and misunderstandings which in your day called for legislation”(245). Jean Pfaelzer claims that “the most glaring contradiction in the utopian concept of history” is the “overt celebration of infinite progress and the not-so-covert longing for a static state….change must be accounted for…yet, paradoxically, the literary devices of utopian fiction negate the central axiom of history: change itself.”

In spite of the fact that utopian fiction seems to describe the end of historical process, *Looking Backward* reveals narrative contradiction that signifies the inevitability of change. For example, during the late nineteenth-century, West had stored gold in his bunker, in order to alleviate his anxiety with the knowledge that his money is stored nearby. Yet after he arrives in utopia, West notes the irony of his storing up gold as security: “That a time would ever come when it would lose its purchasing power, I should have considered the wildest of fancies. Nevertheless, here I wake up to find myself among a people of whom a cartload of gold will not procure a loaf of bread”(235). However, the utopia is constantly described as “golden”, a telling cliché in regards to stability; either
gold is still valued and human consciousness has not changed as radically as Dr. Leete proclaims, or the placid utopia may not always be valued as the ideal state of society. Moreover, the evolutionary foundation of the utopia leaves open the possibility that the evolved human may not last; atavistic criminals do exist in the utopia, due to biological reversions to tendencies which became fixed in human behavior in earlier societies. The human animal remains within each citizen of the utopia, and therefore a multitude of potential serpents remain in the new Eden.

Rather than a straightforward document of polemic, the utopian novel struggles to combine a persuasive message of an easily obtained heaven on earth with a more realistic knowledge of the human animal. *Looking Backward* perhaps most clearly illustrates its status as a representative example of utopian fiction with a scene at the end of the novel. During his “nightmarish” return to the late nineteenth-century, West fails to move the mindset of his peers at the Bartlett dinner party, despite a plea successively calmly rational and passionate; instead, he is called “madman” fanatic,” and “enemy of society”(309). His failure is another indication of the conservatism and mistrust of human beings underlying the novel’s emphasis on the natural transition to utopia. The novel thus embodies the central paradox of utopia, which is simultaneously good place (eutopia) and no place (outopia).

*Looking Backward’s* mixed message of urgency and inevitability was widely received as a testament to every person’s agency to effect positive change, a message sure to appeal to a reader who does not awaken from West’s nightmare, but must return to the nineteenth-century at the end of the novel. In light of the inconsistencies of *Looking
Backward, its enthusiastic reception suggests an audience fearful of social relations in the capitalist society during the late nineteenth-century and hungry for a confident call for constructive change. Despite hints of “no place,” the desire for utopia dictated the interpretive reception of Bellamy’s novel.

Although a close reading of Looking Backward reveals rampant inconsistencies, the narrative was embraced as a paradigm of optimism, inspiring dozens of literary imitations; readers felt empowered by the novel, and by 1890, two years after the novel’s publication, more than 150 Bellamy clubs had formed throughout America, desiring to implement Bellamy’s call for a new American society. However, the publication of utopian fiction waned after the election of William McKinley in 1896, who promised to restore the economy with expansionist foreign policies. Yet even as the utopian wave was fading in intensity, new naturalist writers were implicitly reevaluating cherished American assumptions that had been of central concern in Looking Backward: human agency, personal freedom, and the sacredness of family life. While Bellamy had idealistically believed that recognition of “excessive individualism” in American society would facilitate the creation of utopia, naturalist writers rejected the idealistic hope that human beings could create utopia by creating and maintaining a state of stability.

After almost two hundred utopian novels had been published in America, it is not surprising that Frank Norris’ McTeague, one of the earliest and most deterministic of the American naturalist novels, was condemned by reviewers as an offense against ideality. Yet the novel’s opening pages seem to fully support the American belief in opportunity
and subsequent happiness: despite his low intelligence, McTeague is a dentist in San Francisco who has attained a state of personal “utopia,” by achieving what he considers to be great success: “When he opened his ‘Dental Parlors,’ he felt that his life was a success, that he could hope for nothing better”(3). He has established a state of bliss, despite being unable to comprehend elementary concepts such as “capital” and “labor.” Like Bellamy’s utopia, which is based upon communal behavior, McTeague’s social success is an implicit condemnation of American individualism and the ideology of the self-made man who achieves success through enterprising behavior. The hulking McTeague is physically and mentally suited to the life in the mines, where he had enjoyed working as a child; he attained material success through neither skill nor desire, but as a result of the ambitious desires of his mother.

The first description of McTeague indicates his desire for a secure environment, as he avoids external and internal turbulence by remaining within a narrowly defined social world. Living and working in the same building, McTeague is content to watch the constant, repetitious flow of city life from the bay window of his dentist parlor. The reader meets a settled McTeague in a small, static space, as he is falling asleep in his dentist chair on a Sunday afternoon: having enjoyed a “greasy” meal, McTeague “lay back in his operating chair at the bay window, reading the paper, drinking his beer, and smoking his huge porcelain pipe while his food digested; crop-full, stupid, and warm….Late in the afternoon his canary bird, in its gilt cage just over his head, began to sing”(1).

McTeague’s harmonious psychological state is created and maintained through certain controlling routines and habits, such as his Sunday afternoon ritual of drinking
steam beer, sleeping in his dental chair, and of playing his concertina. Yet his reliance upon routine suggests the vulnerability of McTeague’s happy, but sheltered life. Throughout the novel, McTeague’s contentment is continually disrupted, implying that commonplace trappings and routines of daily life are only temporarily effective in stabilizing hidden turmoil, whether within the individual, or in his surroundings.

McTeague is not alone in the novel in his reliance upon habits to maintain stability and ward off insecurity, particularly concerning the threat of change and subsequent loss. However, McTeague’s low intelligence makes him more vulnerable than most people to change, as he is entirely unable to adapt and function outside his narrow sphere on Polk Street: when McTeague must leave his sphere to buy theater tickets, his confusion leaves him muttering incoherently, “‘I want—I want….I will—I will—I will—yes, I will’”(94,6).

McTeague is easily called out of his stasis by his friend, Marcus, who brings his cousin Trina into McTeague’s environment for dental treatment; this encounter awakens the dentist’s sexual drive, thereby indicating that at least this scene of contentment is doomed. Yet it is not doomed by man’s “nature,” but by society; as if in rejection of social utopia, Norris describes McTeague’s social conditioning as the culprit which leads him out of a utopia of bachelrorhood and into a ruinous marriage. Although McTeague is not ignorant about sexuality, his limited experience with women leaves him with “the perverse dislike of an over-grown boy”(23). When he bends over an anesthetized Trina, his mind becomes a battleground: “Suddenly the animal in the man stirred and woke; the evil instincts that in him were so close to the surface leaped to life, shouting and clamoring”(18). Social conditioning, specifically the Protestant notion of Original Sin,
shapes the man's interior battle into a replay of man's Fall in the garden of Eden. McTeague is comically remorse over losing the "battle" by kissing Trina and succumbing to his sexual instincts, which his social-derived conscience labels as the "perverse, vicious thing that lived within him, knitted to his flesh"(32).

The comedy of the scene is extended by the dentist's "disgusting" act leading him to propose marriage to Trina immediately after she regains consciousness, as this simple man unwittingly engages in a parody of social convention. Winifred Bevilquoa describes McTeague as "[m]orally compelled to the altar in large part so that he may know carnal bliss without guilt, [McTeague] unwittingly ties himself to a mate whose neuroses will contribute mightily to his degeneration." McTeague's inability to resist his sexual instinct is not the cause of his subsequent degradation on the novel, but rather, it is social convention that prevents McTeague and, later an awake and desiring Trina, from placating sexual desire without the sanctity of matrimony, and thereby maintaining a contented state.

Yet the scene remains ambiguous as to whether McTeague is representative in his inability to maintain a stable state. McTeague seems to represent humanity as a victim of both biological forces and social convention, yet he is constantly described as a unique "brute." The description of McTeague succumbing to his "evil instincts" is an implicit condemnation of the man, yet the scene is also characterized as "the old battle, old as the world, wide as the world" which "sooner or later...faces every child of man"(18). Again, "The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins"(18). The language creates a link of humanity between McTeague and the reader, while the heavy hyperbole distances the reader from the novel's grotesque characters. Furthermore, after the dentist had
demonstrated, through his kiss, that the biological instinct of every man may prove nearly irresistible, he remains celibate during his lengthy courtship of Trina, although he is preoccupied with thoughts of her.

McTeague maintains stability during the courtship by retreating to a place between Nature and the city, and therefore implicitly to a place between his childhood and his adult life: “Near the station Trina and McTeague sat on the roadbank of the tracks, at the edge of the mudbank, making the most out of the landscape, enjoying the open air, the salt marshes, and the sight of the distant water. From time to time McTeague played his six mournful airs upon his concertina”(71). The novel characterizes humanity as tragically unable to maintain a state of stable utopia, because their lives are disrupted by drives and instincts beyond their control or comprehension. Hochman proposes that “[a]t the imaginative heart of McTeague lies the problem of change, of gain and loss, and its implications for the precarious self.” McTeague is full of characters defined by a wide variety of habits and obsessions, “all serving to defend the self from whatever may threaten to subvert it in the present, or to buttress it against the reverberations of some threat experienced in the past.” Playing “his six mournful airs” on his concertina is a habit upon which McTeague continually falls back in an unconscious effort to stabilize internal flux, specifically his passion for Trina.

Yet McTeague’s sexual desire, and the social mores that control that desire, expose him to external flux: his “narrow point of view was at once enlarged and confused, and all at once he saw that there was something else in life besides concertinas and steam beer. Everything had to be made over again. His whole rude idea of life had to be
changed”(20). Social convention, marriage, seems to set the male “brute” on the road of evolutionary progress and perhaps utopia; Trina “submits” to McTeague and subsequently establishes domesticating habits for McTeague to follow: he gives up steam beer and learns to enjoy consumer recreations like window-shopping. McTeague grows increasingly civilized in his apparel, such as wearing a silk hat, and in his eating habits; he even begins to entertain intellectual opinions, although they are comically conventional. Furthermore, McTeague regains a measure of equilibrium in part by broadening his structure of habit: he lulls his inner beast with Sunday ritual of afternoon walks with Trina.

McTeague’s new habits provide him with such a sense of security that he looks to the distant future and creates a utopic dream; McTeague’s attention is caught by very vague, very confused ideas of something better - ideas for the most part borrowed from Trina. Some day, perhaps, he and his wife would have a house of their own. What a dream! A little home all to themselves, with six rooms and a bath, with a grass plat in front and calla-lilies. Then there would be children. He would have a son, whose name would be Daniel, who would go to High School, and perhaps turn out to be a prosperous plumber or house painter. Then his son Daniel would marry a wife, and they would all live together in that six-room-and-bath house; Daniel would have little children. McTeague would grow old among them all. The dentist saw himself as a venerable patriarch surrounded by children and grandchildren.(191-2)

However, this sentimental vision of a utopic future is short-lived, and a few pages after his “vision,” a shadow is cast over McTeague’s happy marital state when he enrages Trina by bungling a real-estate transaction: “'Thirty-five dollars just thrown out of the window,’ cried Trina, her teeth clicking, every instinct of her parsimony aroused’”(205).

The novel indicates that humanity is doomed by the insatiable desire that stems from human insecurity and fear of loss. McTeague’s initial state of contentment, in his dentist
parlor, is limited because he desires more, despite believing that he cannot achieve greater success. He has desires that remain unsatisfied, both implicit desires such as the desire to return to his childhood, indicated by his constantly playing “six mournful airs,” as well as a more explicit desire: “But for one thing, McTeague would have been perfectly contented….It was his ambition, his dream, to have…a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive” (4).

Chance intervenes in the form of Trina winning a five thousand dollar lottery, and consequently McTeague is able to euphorically attain his long-desired “wonderful, beautiful tooth…bright as a mirror, shining there in its coat of French gilt….No danger of that tooth turning black with the weather, as did the cheap German gilt impostures” (85). Like those who seek a utopia or a heaven on earth, McTeague treats his golden idol “as if it were something sacred” (84). Yet for Norris, utopic stability is like the veneer covering the molar, inevitably wearing off due to the influence of physical Nature or man’s inner nature. Consequently, despite gaining his object of desire, when McTeague later sees a gold tooth similar to his ornament, except that it has four roots, he is left staring and, implicitly, desiring.

Human desire is characterized as not only insatiable, but also irrational; McTeague’s utopia is destroyed by the irrational actions of characters suffering from a perceived loss, or fear of loss: the lottery winnings, which logically should create a state of contentment, sets off Trina’s proclivity for miserliness and thereby ruins McTeague’s domestic bliss. Moreover, the winnings create a fierce jealousy in Marcus, who was also Trina’s former suitor, directed at McTeague; this jealousy leads to Marcus informing upon and ruining
the unlicensed dentist. Sexual desire, despite appearing to be the dominant force directing human behavior during McTeague’s internal “battle,” is secondary in the motivation of Marcus; he pursues McTeague to death’s door not out of frustrated love or desire for Trina, but because “that money he got away with, that five thousand, belongs to me by rights”(366).

Once again human equilibrium is shown to be a temporary phenomenon, when McTeague quickly degrades due to the loss of the structure of practicing dentistry and the loss of being able to order his world with predictability. McTeague initially mourns not the economic insecurity represented by his job loss, but instead having to give up the routine of keeping his dental appointments: “There’s Vanovitch at two on Wednesday, and Loughhead’s wife Thursday morning, and Heise’s little girl Thursday afternoon at one-thirty; Mrs. Watson on Friday, and Vanovitch again Saturday morning early—at seven. That’s what I was to have had…”(229).

McTeague represents a common theme of literary naturalism in his incapacity to adapt to change and loss, particularly of an economic nature. Despite the physical strength of his hands, McTeague reacts passively after he loses his job, “looking stupidly out of the windows, across the roofs opposite, with an unseeing gaze, his red hands lying idly in his lap”(151). McTeague is often out of work and compelled to live in a series of increasingly degraded apartments, whose squalor is highlighted by his symbol of utopia, the gilt molar. McTeague’s incremental fall indicates the inadequacy of relying upon habit to maintain a secure position in a world of flux, since along with the loss of the habit of his
profession, McTeague loses the habits which Trina had established for him: clean cuffs, silk hat, better beer and tobacco.

Although McTeague seems to try to arrest his “fall” by suddenly slipping “back into the old habits”(209) with which the novel began, these habits prove insufficient to sustain an equilibrium in the face of McTeague’s inability to adapt to his professional loss. The loss of routine represents the loss of a security, both psychologically and literally; aggravated by Trina’s squalid miserliness, the McTeagues move to increasingly poorer quarters, ultimately ending up in a sordid lower-depths apartment, into which “all the filth of the alley invades their quarters like a rising muddy tide”(274). As the uncontrollable domestic environment threatens to overwhelm him, McTeague searches for equilibrium in an alternate landscape.6 He begins indulging in the habitual pleasures of his childhood in order to find contentment: taking his fishing rod, McTeague seeks stability by the oceanfront. He finds a measure of contentment in “the solitude of the tremendous, tumbling ocean; the fresh, windy downs; he liked to feel the gusty Trades flogging his face, and he would remain for hours watching the roll and plunge of the breakers with the silent, unreasoned enjoyment of a child”(283).

Yet his contentment in the spacious outdoors is limited by his monetary needs, which he meets by stealing some of Trina’s money and fleeing the city. Not used to relying upon gold for security, McTeague quickly spends the stolen money, and he must immediately return to work to which he is physically suited: a piano loader. McTeague again tries to reestablish his previous habits on lazy Sunday afternoons, but without his concertina “he could no longer play his six lugubrious airs...and it was a
deprivation” (270). Like other primary characters, McTeague is obsessed by desire for that which he cannot rationally claim, having stolen Trina’s money; only when McTeague discovers that Trina has pawned what he had possessed and used in his structure of habit, his concertina, is McTeague’s driven by rage to murder his wife in a brutal beating.  

Just as McTeague relies upon routine and childhood memories for stability, Trina initially tries to maintain order “her clean, trim little habits” (77). Yet her security as a neat and self-ordered individual is threatened when she surrenders her autonomy in marriage; a newly married Trina reacts with fear and weeping at the sight of her husband maintaining his slovenly habit of snoozing in his operating chair. Fearing that her life with McTeague may become “one long continued revulsion, or else—worse than all—she would come to be content with him, would come to be like him, would sink to his level of steam beer and cheap tobacco” (105), she decides that she will raise McTeague up to her level of gentility and domesticity. By assuming the Victorian role of the wife as the “angel of the house”—housekeeper and the source of refinement and domestic contentment—Trina attains “an equilibrium of calmness and placid quietude” (106) in her marriage, illustrating that human agency is able to create a domestic utopia, at least temporarily.

Trina also finds security in the role of the female who submits to the dominant, protective male in the traditional heterosexual relationship. During their courtship, Trina resists McTeague’s amorous advances until he grabs her. “Then Trina gave up, up in an instant, turning her head to his. They kissed each other, grossly, full in the mouth.” However, the potential stability provided by satiation of desire is interrupted by guilt: “Trina wrenched herself free and drew back….Suddenly she put her head between her
hands and began to sob”(84-5). The scene’s implication is that Trina has been socially indoctrinated to perceive sexual desire as evil, and experiences it as a “quick, terrifying gust…”(50). Trina’s guilt as been attributed to her inability “to reconcile the social model of womanhood which associated womanhood with purity and spirituality, with her passionate inner nature.”

Still, Trina finds a measure of stability by interpreting her sexual desire according to social convention; conceiving of herself as the submissive female conquered by the lusty male, on her wedding night Trina puts up token resistance to McTeague and then she surrenders “all at once to that strange desire of being conquered and subdued”(103). Trina’s need to repress her desires highlight the social forces acting against the contentment borne from satiation of natural desires. Society is also defined by turbulent forces explicitly present in the urban environment: after McTeague “crushes” Trina with a kiss during their courtship, their bond is interrupted by “a roar and a jarring of the earth suddenly grew near and passed them in a reek of steam and hot air. It was the Overland, with its flaming headlight, on its way across the continent”(72-3). The couple temporarily avoid such turbulence by retreating to the initially pleasant confines of their flat, where their apparently stable bond is represented by Trina sitting on McTeague’s lap by the window overlooking a bustling street.

Nevertheless, the picture of marital stasis is undermined by Trina’s anxiety concerning her role as wife to a man whom she describes as “all that I have in the world now”(180). She repeatedly questions and seeks reassurances of love from her uncomprehending husband: “He had come to submit to them good-naturedly, answering
her passionate inquires with a ‘Sure, sure, Trina, sure I love you. What - what's the matter with you?’”(189). McTeague soon loses sexual interest in Trina, a loss which the narrator characterizes as a natural product of the female submitting to the male’s advances; the passion which had proved so disruptive to McTeague's initial state of contentment, is not transferred to other women, but merely recedes.

Yet McTeague’s sexual apathy spurs Trina to ask him to “love me big.” The combination of repressed sexual desires and a desire for security pushes Trina into masochism: she explicitly incites McTeague to sexual violence by inviting him to “attack me.” Trina takes pride in her masochistic bruises as she surrenders control of herself to the physical domination of her husband; she experiences a perverse sense of security by submitting to McTeague’s brutal treatment: in “some strange, inexplicable way this brutality made Trina all the more affectionate; aroused in her a morbid, unwholesome love of submission, a strange, unnatural pleasure in yielding, in surrendering herself to the will of an irresistible, virile power”(310).10

Although Trina experiences pleasure from her husband’s physical domination, she is primarily defined by her desire for economic security. Even as she celebrates a lottery prize of $5000, Trina expresses to McTeague her fear of losing it: ““Think of all this money coming to us just at this very moment. Isn’t it wonderful? Don’t it kind of scare you?’”(89). Random occurrence in the form of the lottery prize heightens, rather than alleviates, Trina’s sense of insecurity and becomes a burden: “it was only since her great winning in the lottery that she had become especially penurious...Never, never, never should a penny of that miraculous fortune be spent, rather it should be added to”(188).
Trina’s desire for economic security implies a belief that she can exert control over her environment in her socially approved role as a thrifty wife: Trina describes her miserliness as “a good fault, and, anyhow, I can’t help it” (193). Human irrationality transforms a potentially positive desire for agency into obsessive hoarding. Trina fetishizes her hoarded coins, in order to gain a measure of physical security; she not only sleeps with them, she treats them like a lover: “I love you so! All mine, every penny of it....How I’ve slaved and worked for you! And I’m going to get more...” (308). When McTeague loses his job, the couple needs her hoard; however, not only does Trina refuse to use any of her money to prevent the couple’s slide into poverty, she also forces McTeague to beg for money to maintain basic needs; she even denies McTeague the change for transportation he needs so that he can look for work. Economic mastery is more important than physical mastery; due to the economic “fall” of her physically strong husband, Trina is able to dominate her husband, even as she perversely delights in his physical abuse of her.

Trina’s hoard provides both economic security as well as sexual satisfaction; after McTeague leaves her, Trina gains control over her physical desires: she spreads her gold hoard over her bed and spends a night of “ecstatic pleasure in the touch of the smooth flat pieces the length of her entire body” (202). Yet this state of mastery lasts shortest of all, as McTeague reappears and beats Trina to death.

Yet a paradigm of habitual repetition defines not only Trina’s attitude toward money, but also her language; when Trina discovers McTeague has abandoned her and taken $400, she breaks out into wailing: “He’s gone, my money’s gone, my dear money—my
dear, dear, gold pieces that I’ve worked so hard for....No, no, no, it’s not true. It is true....My money’s gone, my husband’s gone, gone, gone, gone!”(194). Every day Trina bewails her loss in repetitive terms: “Her four hundred dollars were gone, were gone, were gone.”(198). This repetition is not limited to Trina, as a similar lament occurs when McTeague loses his dental clients: “Trina took the little slate from him and looked at it ruefully. ‘Rub them out,’ she said...‘All gone, all gone,’ she said. ‘All gone,’ echoed the dentist.”(152). Such repetitive wording suggests a childlike attempt to deny an unpleasant reality.

If the McTeaguses’ failures to impose their wills upon their surroundings form the novel’s tragic foundation, the attempts by Trina’s father to control his world are comical failures. Papa Sieppe’s repeated efforts to impose external order amongst the chaos of sudden change merely reveal human impotence; indeed, his efforts even comically contribute to a chaotic environment, such as when he insists upon controlling the maiden voyage of his son’s toy, a “small tin steamboat” powered “by means of an alcohol lamp”(73), and then promptly sinks the toy.

When Trina and McTeague mourn the loss of inviolate gold or patients who provide structure in the life of a simple man, they appear driven less by a lust for monetary gain, than by a fear of loss, to which greed is but one represented response.11 The McTeaguses are representative characters suffering from a general sense of insecurity; this fear of loss links the diverse characters in McTeague, as they seek security in an environment continually destabilized by chance and the actions of other characters. The lyrics of McTeague’s favorite song reveal his fear of loss, as well as foreshadowing his end: “No
one to love, none to Caress, left all alone in this world’s wilderness”(78). Similarly, an acquaintance of the McTeagues, Maria Macapa, is defined by loss: when asked her name, she automatically responds “Maria—Miranda—Macapa....Had a flying squirrel an’ let him go”(15).

According to Barbara Hochman’s analysis of Frank Norris’ fiction, such repetitive responses function as “stabilizing mechanisms,” habits that evoke and then neutralize loss or the threat of loss.12 Although Maria leads an uncertain existence, scavenging and stealing in order to survive, she enjoys a mental equilibrium by habitually retreating to her past wealth. Maria may have lost wealth in her native country and had to immigrate to America; when asked about her background, Maria repeatedly dwells upon a vague description of “lost” gold dishes she may have possessed. By affirming memories that she apparently cannot lose, Maria is able to cope with loss and lead a static existence.

Once again, however, a character’s secure state, albeit a psychological rather than material security, proves temporary in this fictional world at the end of the nineteenth-century. Maria’s stasis is disrupted by the flux of life, or more specifically by the “natural” desire to bear a child. Her desire for the continuity of a child clashes with the desire of another character; by interrogating Maria, a junk dealer named Zerkow repeatedly attempts to turn Maria’s repetitive statement into a serious story that would lead him to the lost gold: “‘Where did it all go to? Where did it go?’” Zerkow’s life had been stable for sixty-five years notwithstanding, or maybe even due to, his “consuming desire” for gold; as human irrationality rapidly erases a lifetime of relative stability and transforms a
miser's passion into a destructive obsession, *McTeague* provides another illustration of the fragile human condition.

Norris' characters are so frantic for security, particularly the implicit security of money, that they demolish one another over the loss of possessions which they never truly possessed. Zerkow's desire to secure Maria's gold drives him to marry her; yet when she becomes amnesiac over the death of their baby and cannot provide even her repetitive memories, the junk-dealer feels robbed. After Maria is prevented by amnesia from retreating into the past, her loss of habit leads directly to her murder. Moreover, like Trina, Maria perversely enjoys the physical attacks of her husband, Zerkow; the two wives even share "long and excited arguments as to which were the most effective means of punishment"(311). However, this masochistic "security" is illusory, as Zerkow cuts Maria's throat because of her amnesia.

Similarly, not only does McTeague leave Trina crippled by gnawing on her fingers, he also literally leaves her and steals her hoard in the process. Yet McTeague fails, in stealing the hoard, to satisfy his desire for the money Trina has accrued through miserly behavior of the McTeague's salaries: "He had spent her money here and there about the city in royal fashion, absolutely reckless of the morrow, feasting and drinking for the most part with companions he picked up heavens knows where, whose names he forgot in two days"(364-5). In a burst of irrational spending without fear of loss, McTeague rejects the miserliness under which he has suffered for years, and thereby fails to escape the violence inherent in his nature as a human being.
In Norris’ deterministic universe such self-destructive behavior is coupled with characters unable to understand the behavior of others. McTeague is the novel’s representative character because his puzzlement regarding the words and actions of others, particularly those of Trina, is so encompassing that he remains a hapless victim despite injuring others; even as Norris attributes McTeague’s bewilderment to his low intelligence, the novelist creates a gallery of characters failing to understand the desires and habits of others. Although Maria’s habitual response to inquiries about her name is not understood by other characters, her response is a source of amusement to them. Furthermore, Maria fails to understand the habit of another character, Old Grannis:

“What you alus sewing up them books for, Mister Grannis?” asked Maria….‘Well, well,’ answered Old Grannis, timidly, rubbing his chin, ‘I—I’m sure I can’t quite say; a little habit, you know; a diversion, a—a—it occupies one, you know.’ (26). Old Grannis’ failure to explain his habit indicates an inability to know himself, let alone others.

The result of such incomprehension is isolation from one another; characters fail to connect emotionally and intellectually, even when living in close physical proximity. Consequently, individuals in *McTeague* cannot anticipate the actions of others, but rather primarily can only react to the constantly changing behavior of others driven by primal urges and groping toward security, in one form or another. Against the utopian paradigm that posits the ordering of the desires and behavior of rational human beings, Norris presents isolated individuals caught up in a world of apparently unpredictable and hence uncontrollable social flux.
Nevertheless, the novel cannot be accurately summarized as merely the portrayal of hapless victims caught up in “unrelenting naturalism determinism.” Characters attempt to shape their immediate environment by groping, however blindly, for security in one form or another, often through the use of habit. A more explicit refutation to the novel’s deterministic vision, in which most characters are doomed to solitude and death, is the romance of Old Grannis and Miss Baker. *McTeague* is dialectically transformed into a dialectical novel when these older characters are able to exercise their will and create a slice of romantic heaven in an otherwise hellish environment.

Occupants of McTeague’s apartment house, Grannis and Miss Baker have a comically circumspect courtship of sorts for years: without ever having spoken to one another, they routinely sit on opposite sides of the wall between their respective rooms and leave their doors open; they thus share a thrill at virtually “occupying the same room”(275). Although their relationship is a paradigm of contented stasis, the Old Folks remain isolated. Furthermore, habit fails again as a guarantee of stability: when Old Grannis gives up one of his habits, by selling his bookbinding machine, his placid life begins to feel “sad and unoccupied.”

However, the Old Folks are able to escape from solitary, uncommunicative lives by simply exercising human will; Miss Baker decides to break the habitual pattern of their relationship:

With the brusque resolve and intrepidity that sometimes seizes upon very timid people—the courage of the coward greater than all others—she had presented herself at the Englishman’s half-open door, and, when he had not heeded her knock, had pushed it open, and at last, stood upon the threshold of his room. She
found courage enough to explain the intrusion. "I was making some tea, and I thought you would like to have a cup."(276)

Afterwards Miss Baker does not "understand how she could have brought herself to do this thing"(277), which might suggest that her decision to bring tea was not a wholly conscious one. However, her actions seem the product of a choice when she not only opens Grannis' door, but also finds the courage to explain her breach of the social barrier. Old Grannis demonstrates similar initiative when Miss Baker's loses her courage and she begins to leave the room: "'Stop,' exclaimed the old Englishman, rising to his feet. 'I didn't know it was you at first. I hadn't dreamed - I couldn't believe you would be so good, so kind to me.'"(277). The injunction to stop stresses the exercise of his will to shape his environment.

During previous encounters, such as literally bumping into each other, Grannis and Miss Baker had failed to communicate because they were unable to overcome the "timidity of their childhood"(149). After they indicate their feelings, they are able to productively communicate: Grannis takes Miss Baker’s tea tray, while she moves his pamphlets off the table. Despite ignorance of each other’s feelings, the older characters, particularly Miss Baker, find happiness by rejecting the sanctuary of habit and gambling exposure of one’s self to another. Routine is exposed as not only a temporary defense against spontaneity and unexpected events, but also as a constraint against the benefits of the unexpected.14 By lowering their defenses against the flux of life, the older characters earn loving human contact; by risking hellish exposure, they gain heavenly communion: "Old Grannis put his arm about her, and kissed her faded cheek, that flushed to pink upon
the instant. After that they spoke but little....They stood at length in a little Elysium of their own creating"(280). Their mock heroic romance produces a static state of bliss, where it is "always autumn"(282).

The relationship between Old Grannis and Miss Baker provides aesthetic ambiguity to *McTeague*, by countering determinism with the successful use of free will. Nevertheless, the narrative reduces the impact of the older characters by characterizing them as unique in the novel; while virtually every other character is preoccupied with loss and order, the older folks demonstrate altruistic interest in the welfare of others: while Old Grannis empathizes with Trina's sinking fortunes to the degree of buying Trina and McTeague's wedding photograph back for them when they sell it, Miss Baker nurses Maria Macapa through a bout of pneumonia.

Furthermore, the older characters do not appear to suffer from the animal instincts and rampant lust that influence the behavior of other characters. Instead, they seal their communion with each other through Grannis's kiss on Miss Baker's "faded cheek"(493). This controlled gesture of affection between elderly characters reveals that they are not subject to the primal urges, the "foul stream of hereditary evil"(27), that drives McTeague to kiss Trina "grossly" on the mouth. The older couple's romance is met by a doubling of perverse relationships—McTeague/Trina and Maria/Zerkow—and they depart somewhat early in *McTeague* as aberrations soon forgotten in the memorable violence that follows.

If Grannis and Miss Baker are left in a placid heaven, McTeague is left in a veritable hell, chained to a corpse in Death Valley. After murdering Trina and taking her money, McTeague can no longer remain in civilized space and flees to his childhood environment
around the Big Dipper mine; "within a week’s time it seemed to him as though he had never been away"(282). Whereas *Looking Backward* heralds evolution, McTeague’s return to his origin signifies a move towards man’s devolution; this theme is reiterated when McTeague arrives at his last destination in the novel, Death Valley: “it was abominable, this hideous sink of alkali, this bed of some primeval lake lying so far below the level of the ocean.”(360).

Additionally, although he has fled civilization, McTeague is followed by Marcus, who still feels cheated of Trina’s fortune. McTeague possesses a “sixth sense,” and he dreams that he is being followed: “There was something behind him; something following him. He looked, as it were, over the shoulder of this other McTeague, and saw down there, in the half light of the canon, something dark crawling upon the ground, an indistinct gray figure, man or brute, he did not know....”(362). This brutish figure that follows McTeague may represent the animal within each human being, and something from which individuals apparently cannot escape in this naturalistic world.

Whereas the utopian novel looks to the future for a state of contentment, McTeague looks backward in rediscovery of a simple life consisting of mining the earth, eating, and sleeping; however, both novels describe characters desiring a state of stasis, in which they concern themselves only with the present moment. Even so, McTeague’s simple yet satisfying life in the mines is a temporary existence, because human society, specifically the law, drives him away. McTeague cannot find lasting stability, even after he finds gold in the wilderness, in addition to the gold taken from Trina.
McTeague only discovers a place of ironic stasis at the end of the novel; he attempts to flee through Death Valley, a place of ubiquitously uniformity: "League upon league the infinite reaches of dazzling white alkli laid themselves out like an immeasurable scroll, unrolled from horizon to horizon"(360). McTeague’s desire for security propels him from "near constant motion" into a static wasteland. After Marcus catches McTeague, he defeats Marcus in combat, but not before a dying Marcus handcuffs himself to a bewildered and helpless McTeague. Void of even "a single clump of sage-brush"(360), Death Valley provides an empty background that magnifies McTeague’s isolation. Although he is too limited to comprehend his fate, McTeague remains a tragic figure who attempted unsuccessfully to defend himself against forces of which he had little comprehension. The paradigmatic tension of McTeague is chaos provisionally contained within a stabilizing medium. The tragedy of McTeague is the tragedy of the human animal who cannot escape destabilization by routine and the laws of society.

The final tableau of McTeague perversely mocks McTeague’s agency, his effort and desire to construct a positive, placid environment: McTeague has again found a static existence, except it has been transformed into a state of hellish imprisonment. Yet movement, specifically McTeague’s escape from the consequence of his lethal actions, also fails to produce lasting contentment. Only characters apparently not subject to consuming desires, specifically Grannis and Miss Baker, succeed in creating a slice of heaven on earth. Of course, the example of these elderly characters (whose altruism also marks them as aberrant) might not counterbalance McTeague’s dominant voice that pessimistically denies the agency of the individual to overcome inertia and limitation.
However, Grannis and Miss Baker successfully demonstrate human agency not only because they are elderly, placid creatures, but more importantly because they open themselves to change and are willing to reject the consistently circumspect nature of their relationship.

On the other hand, McTeague repeatedly demonstrates a failure to adapt, particularly by his unwillingness to surrender his habits. Throughout the novel, he holds on to a song bird, no matter how inappropriate the circumstance; consequently, even when he is doomed to a painful death in Death Valley, he clutches on to the "half-dead canary chittering feebly in its little gilt prison"(375). Unlike the canary in the "gilt" cage, McTeague has trapped himself by his inability to tolerate the flux of changing circumstances. By irrationally clinging to his old habits for protection, McTeague avoids having to come to terms with loss.

McTeague has been described as a character of grotesque proportions, who, despite great physical strength and capacity for violence, falls beneath life’s vicissitudes. However, McTeague cannot be merely dismissed as a character of such extreme proportions as to be unrealistic. While fleeing from San Francisco, McTeague encounters a character who embodies the fall of the individual beneath the social machine:

An immense Indian buck, blanket ed to the ground, approached McTeague as he stood on the roadbed stretching his legs, and without a word presented to him a filthy, crumpled letter. The letter was to the effect that the buck Big Jim was a good Indian and deserving of charity; the signature was illegible. The dentist stared at the letter, returned it to the buck, and regained the train just as it started. Neither had spoken; the buck did not move from his position, and fully five minutes afterward, when the slow-moving freight was miles away, the dentist looked back and saw him still standing between the rails, a forlorn and solitary point of red, lost in the immensity of the surrounding white blur of the desert.(334)
Although he has stolen gold from Trina, McTeague fails to follow the example of Gran尼斯 and Miss Baker: he does not lay open his self through altruistic charity toward Big Jim. Whereas the Old Folks are enviable characters embrace a static existence based upon communion and giving of their selves, McTeague and Big Jim are tragic figures who are harassed and destroyed by forces they do not understand.

In trying to fortify themselves in a static existence based upon habit, characters in McTeague are unable to accept flux as the inevitable condition of life for creatures driven to irrationality by the urge to survive. Most of the characters in McTeague fail to follow the example of the Old Folks and assuage, through human contact, the painful awareness of the unstable nature of life.

The opening description of the title character of Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie portrays her as both ignorant and in want, driven by a desire for nebulous goals: “A half-equipped little knight she was, venturing to reconnoiter the mysterious city and dream wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy”(2). Having consciously separated herself from her rural position in a fixed society in order to obtain vague objectives in Chicago’s “swirl of life,” Carrie represents the experiential possibility of human agency in a naturalistic universe.

Throughout Carrie’s rise in society and her consecutive relationships with Drouet, Hurstwood, and Bob Ames, Dreiser’s novel depicts portrays a social humanity controlled by their desires. Foremost among the forces that drive human behavior in Sister Carrie is
the desire for security; Carrie is identified by the heading of the first chapter as “A Waif Amid Forces.” Her desire for money is not only for the goods money can buy, but also for the alleged security it provides: “Some of it she now held in her hand, two soft, green ten-dollar bills, and she felt that she was immensely better off for the having of them. It was a power in itself”(62).

From the moment she arrives in Chicago, Carrie pursues a better or more secure life. Throughout the bulk of Sister Carrie, she lacks interest in significance in the world that does not affect her urge to find a secure social position full of possibility: “Her imagination trod a narrow round, always winding up at points which concerned money, looks, or enjoyment”(39). Carrie soon allows Drouet, a traveling salesman she encounters on her journey to Chicago, to lead her into becoming his live-in lover because she becomes increasingly aware of her impotent position in society, particularly in the city. By accepting Drouet’s offer of protection, Carrie finds a state of momentary security: “She had been dominated by distress and the enthusiastic forces of relief, which Drouet represented at an opportune moment, when she yielded to him”(118).

If security is economic equality and human rationality in Looking Backward, gold and habit in McTeague, notions of a secure state are relative to individual perception in Sister Carrie “In the view of a certain stratum of society, Carrie was comfortably established—in the eyes of the starveling, beaten by every wind and gusty sheet of rain, she was safe in a halcyon harbor”(81). Unlike the stolid title character of McTeague who lacks initiative, Carrie is not content to rely upon the uncertain protection of her flirtatious
lover; despite her dependency on Drouet, the narrator explains that she would leave him were she to experience “the slightest tide of success”(85).

Carrie finds, in Hurstwood, someone who has achieved the wealth and stability she desires. Hurstwood has risen “by perseverance and industry, through long years of service, from the position of barkeeper in a commonplace saloon to his present altitude...a kind of stewardship which was imposing, but lacked financial control”(42). However, as in _McTeague_, stability built upon a foundation of habit will not last over time; Hurstwood has been married for many years, but his marriage runs “along by force of habit, by force of conventional opinion. With the lapse of time it must necessarily become dryer and dryer—must eventually be tender, easily lighted and destroyed”(84). Hurstwood’s desire to maintain his secure position has held his loveless marriage together: “Once in a while he would meet a woman whose youth, sprightliness and humor would make his wife seem rather deficient by contrast, but the temporary dissatisfaction which such an encounter might arouse would be counterbalanced by his social position and a certain matter of policy”(85).

Walter Benn Michaels has noted the fierce power of permanent dissatisfaction in the realms of desire in _Sister Carrie_. Character behavior in the naturalistic novel is driven by not only a desire for security, but also by a often complimentary desire for social success, a desire that often manifests itself as consumer desire. Yet character behavior is also propelled by the frequently destabilizing force of sexual desire. Despite his desire to maintain his social position, Hurstwood quickly embarks upon an affair with Carrie after meeting her. Such episodes of destabilization express a world caught up in flux, in which
desires propel characters to break from their old situations and attempt to reconstitute new situations.

The desires of individuals interact in *Sister Carrie* in a complex web of desire, a web which the narrator describes as the fundamental force behind human life: “Trite though it may seem, it is well to remember that in life, after all, we are most wholly controlled by desire. The things that appeal to desire are not always visible objects. Let us not confuse this with selfishness. It is more virtuous than that”(97). Just as Trina’s miserliness in *McTeague* was not the product of simple greed, desire in *Sister Carrie* often denotes a deeper need than merely sexual or consumer desire, such as the urge to find a satisfying state of stability in an inherently unstable world.

From the moment Carrie is described traveling to Chicago on a speeding train due to dissatisfaction with her previous life on the farm, physical motion is thematically linked with internal unrest; often her desire for a secure social position produces nervous movement, particularly when Carrie is repeatedly faced with uncertain choices that may or may not result in her heart’s desire: “At her window, she thought it over, rocking to and fro, and gazing out across the lamp-lit park toward the maplelit houses on Warren and Ashland avenue. She was too wrought up to go down and eat, too pensive to do aught but rock and sing.”(128). Carrie lives in an industrial society, which alleviates the movements of unsettled characters, and thus provides the illusion of alleviating character anxiety; when she is a particularly impotent newcomer to the city, Carrie finds “relief from her own nervous fears and imaginings in the humdrum, mechanical movement of the machine”(37).
Movement is generated by dissatisfaction, and implicitly by the desire to change one’s personal environment; the narrator describes physical motion, traveling, as a perceived means of freeing oneself from a state of dissatisfaction:

To the untraveled, territory other than their own familiar heath is invariably fascinating. Next to love, it is the one thing which solaces and delights. Things new are too important to be neglected, and mind, which is a mere reflection of sensory impressions, succumbs to the flood of objects. Thus lovers are forgotten, sorrows laid aside, death hidden from view. There is a world of accumulated feelings back of the trite expression—‘I am going away.’\(305\)

Just as McTeague attempts to create a new life by fleeing after he murders his wife, Dreiser reveals that characters naïve and experienced, specifically Carrie and Hurstwood, assume that they can erase the past and create a new future by simply moving to another place.

Movement, or rather the belief in the possibilities of movement, draws characters to act upon their desires, although characters frequently appear to be the victims rather than masters of their desires. Consequently, the ability of characters to move adds to the inherent flux of the industrial society in *Sister Carrie*. Character dissatisfaction or internal unrest is encouraged by routine motion, perhaps suggestive of the possibilities of motion: just as Carrie initially succumbs to Drouet’s flirtatious conversation while traveling on a train, she succumbs to Hurstwood’s flirtation primarily while she is walking and riding in a carriage with him; during these moments, Carrie’s mind is “illogically drifting and finding nothing at which to catch”\(222\).\(^2\) The most explicit example of movement’s ability to lull anxieties and suggest possibilities for the satiation of desires is the train ride which takes Carrie and Hurstwood out of Chicago:
As Carrie looked out upon the flying scenery she almost forgot that she had been tricked into this long journey against her will and that she was quite without the necessary apparel for traveling. She quite forgot Hurstwood’s presence at times, and looked to homely farmhouses and cozy cottages with wondering eyes. It was an interesting world for her. Her life had just begun. She did not feel herself defeated at all. Neither was she blasted in hope. The great city held much.

Although Hurstwood has apparently tricked Carrie onto the train, she does not act on her decision to protest her abduction. Rather than protesting the loss of a stable position with Drouet, the motions of the train helps Carrie envision vague possibilities for greater satiation of her desires in a new city.

Although desire often destabilizes lives in an inherently unstable world, the most dramatic example of which is Hurstwood’s fall, desire drives human behavior with such force that the novel treats morality as a relative system that must judge behavior in the context of a specific desire. When Carrie decides to leave the static protection of her sister’s home and move in with Drouet, her decision is guided not by moral upbringing, but by her desire for a better life, one that offers variety as well as security; during her internal debate, Carrie thinks of her “nice clothes” and “the cold streets”.

The novel’s narrator characterizes habit as a means for maintaining social stability; conscience is borne from habit: “The victim of habit, when he has neglected the thing which was customary with him to do, feels a little scratching in the brain...and imagines it to be the prick of conscience, the still, small voice that is urging him ever to righteousness.” Consequently, habitual patterns of behavior, which society labels as the products of conscience, act as buffers against surrendering to destabilizing forces, such as stealing from an employer’s safe. However, conscience usually fails to provide stable
guidelines in the naturalistic world, because characters are driven more by apparently automatic impulses than by severe self-examination.

*McTeague* treated habit as a temporary means of self-defense against the world’s destabilizing forces, but also as a state of mind that may prevent characters from accepting change and finding peace. *Sister Carrie* characterizes habit as the source of morality, but also as a cause of dissatisfaction that must be overcome if one is to satisfy one's desires. Drouet postpones marriage to Carrie by telling her that they will marry when he returns from his business trip: "Carrie accepted this as a basis for hope - it was a sort of salve to her conscience, a pleasant way out. Under the circumstances, things would be righted. Her actions would be justified"(72).

Whereas obtaining a rational perspective was the basis for satisfying human desires in *Looking Backward*, finding, or rather succumbing, to a particular perspective in the naturalistic world enables characters to silence the habitual voice of conscience. In addition, by not punishing Carrie for her affairs, the novel questions the rigid guidelines of contemporary morality, like the utopian novel questioning the prevailing socio-economic system. The paradox of American culture uncovered by the novel is that the individual who risks instability by acting upon a desire and achieves a particular goal is highly esteemed as embodying the American success story, yet at the same time, traditional morality attempts to provide social stability by suppressing the inclination to act upon one's desires.

*Sister Carrie* portrays a society of restless individuals driven and occasionally consumed by their desires; more specifically, characters are defined by their dissatisfaction
with their lives: the greater the level of anxiety and consequent desire for something better, the greater the degree of restless motion. As the novel focuses upon the causes and effects of physical motion, the possibilities and limitations of the seeking self in an uncertain environment are implicitly examined; in attempting to answer whether individuals can satisfy their desires and thereby create a stable environment, the novel questions whether people have selves apart from their desires.

If Carrie apparently cannot think about the world except in relation to her desires for much of the narrative, Drouet’s mind is explicitly described as “free of any consideration of the problems or forces of the world”(3). Hurstwood is similarly characterized by “disorganized, aimless, wandering mental action”(36). His desire for Carrie consumes him, until his “passion had gotten to that stage now where it was no longer coloured with reason”(150). He has only a limited ability for an objective view of his behavior, particularly before he takes money from his employer’s safe; “he did not know what evil might result from it to him - how soon he might come to grief. The true ethics of the situation never once occurred to him, and never would have, under any circumstances.”(193). Hurstwood seems to lack a coherent self, as he becomes increasingly prone to the indecision of multiple internal voices in regard to the morality of his behavior. In addition to the natural limitations of the minds of these characters, the natural limitation of language hinders self-analysis, even if individuals are inclined to be introspective: “How true it is that words are but the vague shadows of the volumes we mean. Little audible links, they are, chaining together great inaudible feelings and purposes”(6). Yet the narrative leaves open the possibility that people have selves which
they can learn to examine and thus gain self-control; however, most, if not all, of the characters in the novel seem helpless before the effects of only vaguely comprehended internal unrest: "Not trained to reason or introspect himself, he could not analyze the change that was taking place in his mind and hence his body, but he felt the depression of it"(339).

Character behavior usually depicts characters defined more by their desires, than by dialogue with moral centers. Yet because the desires are in a state of flux, such as Drouet desiring the next attractive female he encounters or Carrie starting successive relationships with men possessing greater social status, characters driven by desires cannot be complete, stable entities; there can be no utopian perfection in the naturalistic world, so long as people, in pursuit of satiation of their desires, are in a process of becoming. Although characters in a naturalist universe appear unable to control the larger social environment, their desires can lead them to change profoundly their personal environments.

Desire lies at the center of the process of becoming, as desiring characters compare themselves to others and then attempt to improve the self by emulation. However, not every character in the novel is prone to the flux of desire and subsequent imitation. Carrie's sister and brother-in-law, Sven and Minnie Hanson, lack economic security since Sven spends taxing days cleaning refrigerator train cars, while Minnie worries about whether eighty cents will be enough for dinner. In spite of the fact that the Hansons have moderate desires and dreams of rising through hard work and owning property, they do not explicitly seek to emulate others. Instead, they lead a relatively static existence, and apparently are not dissatisfied with their social position; Carrie is dissatisfied living with
the Hansons in part because they usually do not go anywhere. They are apparently relatively satisfied with their social position, since their lives are not characterized by motion. Although they have dreams, albeit small and specific ones, the Hansons have accepted their impoverished state; Minnie Hanson is described as “no companion for her sister - she was too old. Her thoughts were staid and solemnly adapted to a condition”(38).

However, the lead characters of Sister Carrie are driven by their desire to obtain what they lack, often through emulation and dissimulation. Drouet is perhaps the most successful example of the potential satisfaction to be gained from constant desire. As a traveling salesman, Drouet’s life is characterized by constant movement, which denotes constant desire. In addition to a desire for “good clothes” and to emulate successful men like Hurstwood, Drouet seeks women, or rather, new sexual conquests. “He loved to make advances to women...because his inborn desire urged him to that as a chief delight”(63). Although he preys on innocents such as a naïve Carrie, Drouet is not condemned for his behavior because he is not controlled by a discrete self: “He could not see clearly enough to wish to do differently - drawn by his innate desire to act the old pursuing part”(58).

Drouet seems to be the only character who is entirely satisfied with his constantly moving and constantly desiring life, perhaps because his imagination is limited and therefore his desires are limited primarily to play the role of the sexual conqueror. He embodies qualities that are contradictory in the utopian novel: instability and contentment; he “carried the doom of all enduring relationships, with the female sex at least, in his own
lightsome manner and unstable fancy”(123). Drouet is finally described as “an old butterfly,” imagery that indicates that his uncertain life of constant movement will continue to be at least a superficially attractive one, but one that may not last. Moreover, the metaphoric description of Drouet as “a moth of the lamp”(71), suggests that his irrational desires may destroy him. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that his life may not be a long one, Douet remains content throughout *Sister Carrie*, “one who would remain thus young in spirit until he was dead”(123).

If Drouet embodies the benefits, as well as the limitations, of constant desire in Dreiser’s world, Hurstwood represents the consequence of waning desire. He is initially invigorated as Carrie’s suitor and experiences the contentment borne from the pursuit of the satiation of desire, specifically the desire to grasp a more satisfying, intense life: “She increased in value in his eyes because of her objection. She was something to struggle for, and that was everything”(149). After the couple flee Chicago and reach New York, Carrie rises rapidly to fame and fortune while Hurstwood slowly declines into apathy. The movement which characterizes their lives, specifically vertical movement on the social ladder of success, is described as an inevitable facet of human life by the narrator: “A man’s fortune, or material progress, is very much the same as his bodily growth. Either he is growing stronger, healthier, wiser, as the youth approaching manhood; or he is growing weaker, older, less incisive mentally, as the man approaching old age. There are no other states”(338).

Hurstwood declines, like McTeague, because he is unable to tolerate flux, adapt to new circumstances, and fight to invent a future. While McTeague lacks the intelligence to
hold a job and cannot make Trina use any of her hoard, Hurstwood lacks a belief in his agency that would enable him to perceive a hopeful future. Whereas Carrie only momentarily took comfort in her past and "the better side of her home life" in her rural town when she felt particularly vulnerable after arriving in Chicago, Hurstwood increasingly begins to live in his stable past, until he even begins to hear "the old voices and the clink of glasses" from his previous job in Chicago (432). Like McTeague, Hurstwood is a somewhat tragic figure because he tries to find stability, but he dooms himself by trying to "be as nearly like the old Hurstwood" as possible and relying upon a model of stability that is no longer valid in the ever changing movement of life: "he looked and dreamed a new dream of pleasure which concerned his present fixed condition not at all" (135).

Hurstwood becomes an increasingly inferior copy of his old self, just as he can only find an occupation in New York that is both similar and inferior to his old position. The novel expresses anxiety as a relative product of one's perception of life's flux: "A vast excitement about the cold, hunger, starvation and the like was really worked up by the papers until nearly everyone felt some of the terrors of winter, although they were not really suffering at all" (360). Consequently, Hurstwood condemns himself by resigning himself to a position of impotence: "He took his situation too philosophically. He was too well satisfied" (360).

Hurstwood increasingly avoids moving in New York in order to avoid comparisons between his old success and his new inferiority; whereas Carrie attaches herself to the flow of the sidewalk crowd and proceeds on carriage rides, although she initially has less
possibility for social success than Hurstwood, he merely sits in his apartment all day because "[t]he world seemed to have no attraction"(392). Yet he struggles against his fate, struggles to reaffirm his belief in the hopeful possibilities he had once seen in movement: "[S]ometimes this independent, undefeated mood came upon him....It was in this mood that he would occasionally dress up. Go for a shave, and putting on his gloves, sally forth quite actively. Not with any definite aim. It was more a barometric condition. He felt just right for being outside and doing something"(368).

Nevertheless, Hurstwood is a representative example of what the narrator characterizes as the unavoidable product of aging: the loss of desire to compete and struggle to change one's life. Hurstwood eventually loses his belief in the possibilities of purposeful movement and therefore he views life as a hellish prison:

Hopelessly he turned back into Broadway again and slopped onward and away, begging, crying, losing track of his thoughts, one after another, as a mind decayed and disjointed is wont to do. It was a truly wintry evening, a few days later, when his one distinct mental decision was reached.(459)

Other characters value life and the possibilities of motion at the end of the novel: Drouet sets out for a night of pleasure in the city, Mrs. Hurstwood and daughter travel on vacation to Rome, Carrie exhibits constant motion in her rocking chair as she seeks new desires, and even the people most lacking security and contentment continue to move as "gaunt men shuffling"(543) before a handout; however, Hurstwood is a still figure as he escapes the bleak present by turning on the gas jets in a flophouse and waits for the gas to kill him.
The strength of one's desire determines the intensity or the satisfaction of one's life in *Sister Carrie*, for "it is when the feet weary in pursuit and hope is vain that the heartaches and the longings rise" (487). Dreiser's world is one of constant flux, and characters thrive to the degree that their desires propel them into the unstable maelstrom of society; the perception of one's agency to act upon desires finally determines whether one's existence is a heaven or a hell: "Life had always seemed a precious thing, but now constant want and a weakened vitality had made the charms of earth rather dull and inconspicuous" (491). If the Hansons, Carrie, and Drouet embody varying degrees of desire, various levels of hope to satiate those desires, and thus various states of contentment, Hurstwood's existence is finally perceived as a torment to be escaped by committing suicide and embracing the stasis of death.

If Hurstwood represents a mindset to be avoided, Drouet appears to represent an ideal state of mind: one can find contentment by continually desiring and embracing the process of *becoming*. However, like McTeague's absolute reliance upon routine, Drouet's solution may apply only to those with lesser imagination and intellectual capacity. On the other hand, Carrie embodies the plight of one, who, after satiating driving desire by adapting to the flux of ever changing life, still fails to find contentment. Her desire for success stems from several intermingled factors, including a desire for economic security, a desire for a life of variety and possibility, and a desire for social empowerment. Soon after she arrives in the big city, Carrie "became conscious of being gazed upon and understood for what she was - a wage-seeker." (13); John Kasson analyzes Carrie's shame as "directly tied to her position as one without a secure economic niche in
the capitalist order of production, her status and her need nakedly exposed.” Carrie is vulnerable to the dictates of her desires throughout most of the novel, because she is defined by her lack: Carrie “could not well forget that she had nowhere else to go”(285).

Carrie’s notions of what may satiate her need remain vague and restricted by her limited horizons; however, she is characterized as an imaginative individual who is predisposed to seeking after higher truths because “[o]n her spiritual side, she was rich in feeling, as such a nature might well be”(107). The novel suggests that a person like Carrie cannot reach her imaginative potential in a state of stability, because imagination is insufficient without an irritating desire to provide propel an individual in pursuit of possibilities; “In reality Carrie had more imagination than he did, more taste. The thing in her that could sink and sink and make her feel depressed and lonely was a finer mental strain than he possessed”(69). Only people lacking the ability to dream can be happy in a static state, unlike Carrie, who “had imagination enough to be moody”(41).

Her dissatisfaction with her social position combines with her imagination to broaden her horizon in successive stages. She adapts to new roles, initially by imitating the appearance of others, such as girls employed in the department stores; the narrative language does not endow Carrie with much agency in this process, but rather she seems to be a mere product of a dialogue between her desires and consumer goods: “Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion; they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves”(98). However, she desires such objects less a matter of jealousy and greed, than as tools for establishing herself higher on the ladder of social success. In addition, whereas Hurstwood tried to model his future upon his past, Carrie looks backward to create a new
future, by establishing her old standards as inferior to new standards she has recently encountered; after visiting more luxurious surroundings, "when she had come to her own rooms, Carrie saw their comparative insignificance....She was not contrasting it now with what she had had, but what she had so recently seen....She longed and longed and longed"(113).

The difference between Hurstwood and Carrie's rocking movements delineate their diametrical views on movement and possibility: in his apartment in New York, Hurstwood uses the lulling motion of his rocking chair to retreat from the flux of reality into his stable past. Yet such relative stability does last: Hurstwood soon has been reduced to the almost infantile state of mind that characterizes man's "second childhood," as he gazes down at the blank floor from his rocking chair. On the other hand, Carrie's rocking chair enables her to look out the window as she rocks restlessly. Perhaps by reminding Carrie of the possibilities of motion and exacerbating her internal unrest, her rocking motion facilitates her thinking about the present and about the future;4 Carrie sees more clearly while rocking: "She was rocking and beginning to see"(359).

Carrie rises in the world not only because of her desire to escape the inadequacies of the past, but also by chance: Carrie receives material success from an acting career based upon an unsuspected talent, as well as by lucky coincidence. Consequently, Bob Ames, her final suitor in the novel, can logically argue that because her face is her success, she has "paid nothing to get it"(387). Yet her desire for social success has led her into a position from which random chance could shine upon her.
Conscious decision seems to play a subordinate role in the most of the actions of the characters in *Sister Carrie*; desire is treated as a determining force, yet individuals are not depicted as the originators of various desires and therefore they are not held responsible for the desire-driven behavior. Donald Pizer takes this theme a step farther in his analysis of literary naturalism: “instead of assuming that assorted desires and activities were organized at the behest of a personality, activities and desires now seemed capable of constructing unaided those individuals in whom they occurred.”5

Hurstwood’s defining behavior in the novel is driven by desires he does not control nor understand. His apparent lack of control is most notably depicted in the safe scene: Hurstwood examines money from an open safe at his place of employment, the door to the safe mysteriously closes, and Hurstwood panics and leaves with the money.6 Yet the guilt of his action is debatable, because the narrative does not characterize it as the product of a morally conscious choice. Naturalist characters apparently lack the wills that would enable them to resist or alter desire-driven behavior; instead, the novel’s lead characters primarily choose to avoid acting on problematic situations: Hurstwood ignores the threats leveled against him by his wife as a consequence of his infidelity with Carrie, while Carrie “had not the mind to get firm hold upon a definite truth. When she could not find her way out of the labyrinth of illogic which thought upon the subject created, she would turn away entirely”(91-2).

After she realizes the American dream of success, Carrie is thrilled with her security; “the world was so rosy and bright”(457). Yet Carrie continues to rock to the end of *Sister Carrie*, a recurrent images that signifies that she remains internally unsettled.
Another clue to her mindset is that "[u]nconsciously her idle hands were beginning to weary her" (458).

With his somewhat authoritative commentary, Ames sounds the "call of the ideal" for Carrie; "through a fog of longing and conflicting desires, she was beginning to see" (337). With Ames' aid, Carrie discovers that material success may provide security and stability, but not contentment in Dreiser's world. She becomes subject to less materialistic and more mysteriously elusive desires; Carrie lacks any answer for satiating these longings. Ames provides a number of guidelines for creating a state of personal contentment, such as to desire knowledge, cultivating your powers, and not to desire "every passing vision of joy" (482). Perhaps most usefully, Ames proposes that the "proper" perspective will produce contentment: "Your happiness is within yourself wholly if you will only believe it" (482). However, Ames' guidelines do not soothe Carrie's indeterminate longing, and she is again "the old, mournful Carrie—the desireful Carrie,—unsatisfied" (487).

Dreiser's title character is defined by rapidly changing attitudes and social position; a stable conclusion to her life, based upon simple wisdom, would be incongruous in a world of driving needs and passions. Consequently, the novel ends with Carrie desiring to undertake another journey toward more re-creation of her identity, yet unable to find the path to satiation of this desire. Although Ames has helped to open Carrie's eyes, he does not represent a particularly satisfying state; Ames preaches on vague benefits of altruistic work: "if you want to do most, do good. Serve the many. Be kind and humanitarian. Then you can' help but be great" (388). Yet the validity of Ames' utopic vision is
questioned by the narrative’s treatment of the humanitarians who try to help the homeless in the city, such as Hurstwood, but accomplish little change.

As she sought to realize her dreams through successive changes of scenery, Carrie achieved only a momentary stability of her drifting selfhood, which was inevitably disrupted by inner discord. This drift of the self is completely destabilized in the case of Hurstwood, while Carrie exemplifies a necessarily uncertain future, because she is defined by constantly regenerating desires. In other words, Carrie’s desires enable her to evolve to a greater “spiritual” or humane awareness, but desire is such a driving aspect of her character that she will never know lasting contentment.

The tentative conclusion of Dreiser’s novel is that characters must allow themselves to pursue satiation of their driving desires in order to lead vital lives, yet the inevitable result, at least in the case of Carrie, of the pursuit of such self-satisfaction is not happiness: “Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel” (487). The novel depicts a tragic reality in which the development of the human species, through questioning and wondering about the reality and meaning of the human condition, requires that the best and brightest members of humanity must remain dissatisfied.

Although they generate opposing perspectives on life, utopian and naturalist fiction proclaim their views through confident narrators. However, whereas utopian fiction makes specific predictions regarding the social future, the naturalistic novel rejects the certainty about the value of experience seen in traditional buildingromans, but rather
expresses a profound doubt or perplexity about what happens in the course of time; in
Sister Carrie, Dreiser provides only tentative conclusions regarding the final development
of his female protagonist. Consequently, the authorial voice of the narrator that
summarizes the bulk of the narrative action, is absent during the conclusion of the novel,
except as it is inadequately represented by Ames.

Despite its notable absence at the end of Sister Carrie, the narrator does provide an
optimistic analysis of the human condition earlier in the novel. This sporadic perspective
complicates the monolithic determinism of the novel by describing people as moving
toward complete rationality through evolution: “Among the forces which sweep and play
throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind. Our civilization is still
in a middle stage scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely
human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason”(73). The narrator also predicts that
evolution will produce not only a logical species, but a good one: “We have the
consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot
fail. He will not forever balance thus between good and evil”(73).

Moreover, dissatisfied minds can shepherd humanity to a bright, even utopian future:
“The great forces of nature…may be perceived by the wise, working in the commonest
moulds…. before a true and natural life may be led”(118-9). Of course, education of the
species is also required: “Many individuals are so constituted that their only thought is to
obtain pleasure and shun responsibility…. They think only of themselves because they have
not yet been taught to think of society”(132). These optimistic assumptions could easily
have been taken as passages from Looking Backward. Like Bellamy’s utopian novel,
Dreiser highlights a hope for social development and growth that stems from society simply adopting a rational perspective.

Yet these narrative hints of optimism regarding the human condition are overwhelmed by the novel's predominant dismissal of human agency; the narrative episodes combine to form a monolithic dismissal of humans having the ability, or even the desire, to effect social change: "Man frequently imagines, when a change for the better takes place, that his reasoning has done it. As a matter of fact, all such complications are largely modified by the inherent qualities of the things themselves"(241). In addition, the narrator describes the possibility of Carrie manifest her will as a narcissistic enterprise: "Like all human beings she had a touch of vanity. She felt that she could do things if only she had a chance"(157). Dreiser undermines the desire behind progressive action, such as utopian fiction, as futile attempts to take credit for the creation of social products that are not the result of human agency. However, *Sister Carrie* also endorses the value of the individual who seeks meaning in experience, even as such effort is characterized as futile in an uncertain world in which life is in flux.

A shift in the modern consciousness is widely attributed to this historical period; the preface to Harold Kaplan's *Power and Order*(1981) positions Naturalism as partly responsible for the shift in values.

There is a tendency among critics and students to think of literary naturalism as a closed chapter of modern literary history, except for some archaic survivals. That is wrong on two counts, one of them being the obvious point that much modernist writing...found its creative energy by reacting against the stylistic and philosophic implications of naturalism. Yet, much deeper than the negative differences, there is a continuity in modern imaginative culture with the work of the naturalists.....[T]he major literary contribution of naturalist thought is a myth of
power and conflict charged with apocalyptic themes of order and chaos, creation and destruction, purgative crisis and redemptive violence.8

Cultural forces, such as literary naturalism, interacted with such events as the world wars and the use of nuclear weapons, to rekindle an apathetic sensibility that humanity may be helpless before an inevitable, man-made Apocalypse. Such apathy is indicated by the dearth of utopian fiction in the twentieth-century. Although conceptions of utopia have been reiterated throughout world literature in images of Paradise, Arcadia, the Golden Age, the Island of the Blest, and of course, the Garden of Eden, some scholars now claim that utopias were not written after about 1910.9 Moreover, despite the fact that utopian literature historically thrived in times of economic depression, Kenneth Roemer notes the scarcity of American utopias produced during the Great Depression, after the naturalist movement.10 Modern society is characterized by a realistic or pessimistic consciousness that does not recognize the dream of utopia, except “as a kind of unconscious reminder to civilization of its deepest, most irrational, most nostalgic, and most violent urgings.”11

The utopian novels were filtered through a determinist lens to evolve into the anti-utopia or dystopian genre that remained popular throughout the twentieth-century; the two fictions indicate a shift from progressive enthusiasm to estrangement and resigned indifference. While both utopian, particularly pastoral utopias, and dystopian fiction protest similar areas of a modern society and provide fearful images of urbanization, industrialization, and technology in general, utopian literature provides hope, while dystopian literature merely warns. Utopias like Looking Backward focused attention and confidence in the promise of the future and things to come; although this perspective
periodically reasserts itself, more often than not, modern society looks for a dream of goodness in the past.

In the same year and same city that saw the public birth of Sister Carrie, another immensely popular utopian novel was published, which has had an even longer and arguably greater impact than Looking Backward. In contrast to the limited commercial success of Sister Carrie, Frank Baum's The Wonderful Wizard of Oz soon became the "fastest selling children's book in America." In the winter of 1899 Baum attempted unsuccessfully to sell a children's fantasy, but in April, 1900, a small Chicago publisher agreed to print The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. It was embraced not as a tale of utopia, but as children's fiction: "The Wizard of Oz is an archetypal American fairy tale...the best-known modern fairy tale." Of course, the essence of utopian narrative is a depiction of the fantastic.

Yet Baum explicitly characterizes his work not as a fiction of purpose, such as a utopian polemic or a morality tale, but as a simple literary commodity intended only as pleasure reading. Baum attempts to control potential interpretation of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz in its Introduction: he states the need for a series of newer 'wonder tales' in which the stereotyped genie, dwarf and fairy are eliminated, together with all the horrible and blood-curling incidents devised by their authors to point a fearsome moral to each tale. Modern education includes morality; therefore the modern child seeks only entertainment in its wonder tales and gladly dispenses with all disagreeable incidents.

A further obstruction to an interpretation of Baum's novel as a utopian work is the atypical utopian protagonist: Dorothy is, of course, female.
When *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has been treated as a utopian work, it has been labeled as a pastoral utopia, a Jeffersonian agrarian paradise. The traditional myth of America, in which progressive individuals could rise by dint of their own agency, conceived of the nation as a new Eden, a promised land intended for the reconstitution of man. Certain values were traditionally associated with America’s agrarian roots, such as simplicity, independence, and self-reliance. In *The Virgin Land*, Henry Nash Smith points to the “agrarian utopia” as the ideal which spurred westward expansion: “[T]he image of this vast and constantly growing agricultural society in the interior of the continent became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth-century American society—a collective representation, a poetic idea…that defined the promise of American life.”¹ This agrarian ideal may have impeded the development of literary utopianism in America, since progressive individuals could implement actual utopian communities, rather than writing fiction. However, this agrarian ideal lost impetus in the late nineteenth-century due to a number of factors, perhaps the most notable of which was the end of desirable public lands and Turner’s famous declaration during the utopian movement regarding the closing of the American frontier. The transition away from the agrarian ideal has been characterized in Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden*, as well as Smith’s *The Virgin Land*, as America’s transition from sacred to secular foundation. Conrad Ostwalt emphasizes the impact of Darwinism upon the garden myth of America: “After Darwin, Americans would find it increasingly difficult to view their world as the paradisiacal garden created for them. Gradually, men and women found themselves in a world where the Creator no longer
ruled benevolently—a world that was indifferent to the needs of human beings and that was sometimes hostile to humanity.”

The agrarian life appeared less appealing at the turn of the century not only due to the loss of the garden myth, but also because the decade’s economic depression struck particularly hard at farmers during this period: by the end of the decade, nearly a third of the nation’s farms were mortgaged and one out of five workers were unemployed. Not surprisingly, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* treats Kansas not as a garden, but as a dry and dismal picture of stasis:

> When Dorothy...looked around, she could see nothing but the great grey prairie on every side. Not a tree nor house broke the broad sweep of flat country that reached to the edge of the sky in all directions. The sun had baked the plowed land into grey mass, with little cracks running through it. Even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blade until they were the same gray color to be seen everywhere. Once the home had been painted, but the sun blistered the paint and the rains washed it away, and now the house was as dull and grey as everything else.(11)

Kansas denotes unchanging reality, a place as grim as the city from which the protagonist of *Looking Backward* so eagerly desires to escape. However, while the ideal of that novel is a communal setting, a lack of differentiation, in terms of color and landscape, signify hellish conditions. Borne in the ashes of Darwinism and naturalism, Baum’s novel recognizes deterministic forces: “When Aunt Em came there to live she was a young, pretty wife. The sun and wind had changed her, too. They had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also. She was thin and gaunt, and never smiled now”(13).
Aunt Em embodies a fate that confronts people in naturalism: her environment has determined her fate, a colorless life without vibrancy. Baum implies that one must turn to the world of the imagination in order to rediscover a vital life; Oz is described as “a country of marvelous beauty” with “stately trees bearing rich and luscious fruits...gorgeous flowers...a small brook rushing and sparkling along in a voice very grateful to a little girl who had lived so long on the dry, gray prairies”(20). As a place of vibrancy and movement, Oz suggests the garden myth of America; it is a fantasy and static, grey Kansas is the perceived reality of America.

Oz represents the perceived beauty and dream of a lost past; after marveling at the wonder of Oz, Dorothy is told that “in the civilized countries...there are no witches left; no wizards, no sorceresses, nor magicians. But, you see, the Land of Oz has never been civilized, for we are cut off from all the rest of the world”(23). However, whereas the 1939 MGM movie version of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* describes the land of Oz as a dream, the novel emphasizes that Oz is a distinct place far from Kansas, although inaccessibly surrounded by hostile barriers of nature.

Nature is not only linked to a hellish stasis, but to forces of malignity, particularly in the form of witches. Outside of the capital city of Oz, the pastoral utopia of Oz may be corrupted by the Wicked Witch of the West; her domain is similar to Kansas, a boiling land lacking trees and people. The Witch’s power rests on her control of otherwise wild forces of nature: the Killer Wolves and Crows, the Deadly Bees, and the Winged Monkeys. However, the novel suggests that these natural forces are not inherently evil: the leader of the Winged Monkeys explains that “Once...we were a free people, living
happily in the great forest, flying from tree to tree, eating nuts and fruits, and doing just as
we pleased without calling anyone master”(172). Their once free life is suggestive of the
Americans who headed West in search of freedom, but now that freedom is a thing of the
past, at least in Kansas. The Winged Monkeys have been immobilized by a golden cap,
which anyone can use and command the once free species.

The Witch also commands a species that signifies Darwinism not as a progressive
force, but as one of chaos: the Kalidahs have heads like tigers and bodies like bears.
When the Wicked Witch uses her forces to capture Dorothy, she makes Dorothy do
housework around the castle. The Wicked Witch immobilizes Dorothy in a prison of
domesticity, instructing Dorothy to “clean the pots and kettles and sweep the floor and
keep the fire fed with wood”(146).

As she labors in a hostile environment, Dorothy replicates the experience of Aunt
Em, who was transformed into a grey automaton by her harsh labor. Perhaps the Witch
represents the eventual fate of Aunt Em if Dorothy does not return and redeem her
environment: like Aunt Em, the Witch is withered; when Toto bites the Wicked Witch on
the leg, she does not bleed, since her blood has dried up. Fortunately, human agency can
defeat a malign nature; just as water transforms Kansas into a place of fertility, Dorothy
destroyed the Witch by simply throwing another force of nature on her, which causes her
“to shrink and fall away”(150).

Nature transforms both the physical environment and individuals into images of
stasis; however, individual agency, specifically the formation of loving relationships, can
defeat the deterministic force: “It was Toto that made Dorothy laugh, and saved her from
growing as gray as her other surroundings” (13). However, this relationship comes at a price, as Dorothy is caught in a cyclone because she is distracted by her little dog, Toto, after she has been lulled to sleep by the gentle motion of her swaying home. In contrast to the urban environment of naturalistic and utopian fiction, equilibrium and stasis is a ubiquitous force against which one must fight in a rural setting.

If the uniformly grey description of Kansas points to the decline of the garden myth in the latter half of the nineteenth century, immigration and industrialization also shifted the vital center of society during this period. The attraction of Oz lay in Baum’s depiction of the capital city of Oz, the Emerald City; after its publication, readers wrote Baum for more books about Oz, not more “Dorothy” books. Additional evidence of the importance of the city in Oz is evident in some of the alternate titles Baum had considered: The City of Oz, The City of the Great Oz, and The Emerald City. This last title was the novel’s original title, but it was rejected by the publisher because of a “superstition that claimed that any book with a jewel in its title was doomed to failure.”

The city is central to the competing visions of utopian and naturalistic fictions, because it is the site in which new values are tested as massive numbers of citizens come together for the first time; in Frank Norris’ McTeague, the stolid protagonist is gripped by the spectacle of the city: “The street never failed to interest him” (5). McTeague watches the turbulent world of Polk Street and San Francisco, although he cannot comprehend any larger significance to the repetitive movement of the city, as the various levels of society file past his window at their appointed time. He represents the movement of American society, having travelled from his rural origin to a bewildering urban environment.
The forces of determinism appear most insurmountable and invulnerable to individual agency in large cities. Consequently, in *Looking Backward* Bellamy delineates the possibility for exercising human agency through technology and socialism, and turning Boston into a place of order and beauty. The protagonist of the novel is told that the citizens of utopia rationally choose to spend their individual salaries for the common good: "There is no destination of the surplus wealth so popular as the adornment of the city, which all enjoy in equal degree"(118). The protagonist is particularly amazed by the orderliness and opulence of Boston’s streets and buildings, the product of a reconciliation between a rational society and the natural world. *Looking Backward* proposes that America can acquire a semblance of its garden myth by integrating it within the city: the presence of nature is future Boston, with "parks filled with fountains and statuary, beautiful public buildings, and houses set in broad gardens or yards"(27); in this static society, nature has been made uniform. As the mythic repose of American nature, the West is literally integrated with the city in the utopia, as well as symbolically domesticated by the marriage of Julian West to Edith Leete.

People are the victims of nature in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*; a small storm cellar is little defense against the deterministic might of nature, and Dorothy is taken to Oz against her wishes and while she is wide awake. In contrast, Bellamy’s novel posits humanity’s capacity to fully control nature in all its forms; for example, every street in the utopia features rain coverings. The optimism propelling utopian literature reached a peak in 1893, when Bellamy’s utopia was enacted to some degree at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, specifically in the White City exhibit:
To many visitors at the time and to various observers later, the spectacle of the White City in Chicago was the culmination and embodiment of all that America had been and might become, from the celestial city upon a hill to the New Jerusalem...Turner’s famous ‘Frontier thesis’, first propounded at the fair to members of the American Historical Association, signaled, for many, the end of America’s rural past and the official inauguration of its urban future.7

The White City consisted of a collection of buildings designed along neoclassical lines and containing the newest wonders of technology. The exhibit seemed a testament to the victory of the communal effort of the higher classes, specifically the exhibit’s corporate sponsors, over individualism: “It seemed the victory of elites in business, politics and culture over dissident but divided voices of labor, farmers, immigrants, blacks, and women.”8 However, just as the attractive surface of Bellamy’s inevitable utopia covered evasions and an unsettling tyrannical core, the buildings of the White City “were not as substantial as they seemed at first glance; made to look like marble temples of industry, they were in fact only plaster.”9 Just as Bellamy’s novel was read as a testament to human agency and rationality by an anxious yet optimistic populace, visitors saw in the White City the promise of a Bellamy-like Utopia that would reconcile the machinery of industrial production with the genteel tastes for harmony and order.10

Chicago forced itself into the nation’s eyes during the Columbian Exposition; as a huge, encompassing city, it represents the new setting of the American myth of success. In an ironic echo of America’s frontier myth, Chicago expands outward in Dreiser’s Sister Carrie; the city is depicted as “optimistically” devouring empty Nature:

Street-car lines had been extended far out into the open country in anticipation of rapid growth. The city had laid miles of streets and sewers through regions where, perhaps, one solitary house stood alone—a pioneer of the populous ways to be. There were regions open to the sweeping winds and rain, which were yet lighted
throughout the night with long blinking lines of gas lamps, fluttering in the wind. Narrow board walks extended out, passing here a house and there a store, at far intervals eventually ending in the open prairie. (16-17)

Dreiser’s naïve title character travels to Chicago because she perceives it as a place of opportunity and pleasure: “To the child, the genius with imagination, or the wholly untraveled, the approach to a great city for the first time is a wonderful thing....What old illusion of hope is not here forever repeated! Says the soul of the toiler to itself, ‘I shall soon be free. I shall be in the ways and the hosts of the merry’”(10). Similarly, Dorothy journeys toward the city of Oz because the apparent power of the land lies there; the Emerald City is at the literal center of Oz.

Dreiser’s narrator characterizes the belief in the possibilities of the city, an optimism underlying Bellamy’s utopia and Dorothy and her companions’ quest for Oz, as a product of ignorance. The city is not a giant community brimming with opportunity; like the “great and powerful” wizard of Oz, the city seems inhuman and proves a disappointment. Carrie’s great expectations soon meet the reality of the city: a bleak apartment, a harsh job in a shoe factory, and the necessity to reject conventional morality, specifically becoming Drouet’s mistress, in order to begin to realize the American dream of success.

America was increasingly perceived as a nation of cities during this period, in part because urbanization was driven to new highs by industrialization and massive numbers of immigrants to America: “In eighteen of the twenty-eight cities over 100,000 in 1890, foreign-born adults preponderated.”11 As Dorothy heads to the city of Oz after being deposited by the cyclone, she is joined by diverse companions; they form a group of
potential immigrants who will attempt to make sense of Oz, and perhaps realize meaningful self-examination in the process.

The path to the city, with all its perceived possibilities, is, of course, the Yellow Brick Road in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. At the same time it depicts a fantastically attractive land, Baum’s novel repeatedly questions the possibility of people easily finding Paradise; although Dorothy easily finds the Yellow Brick Road after landing in Oz, she does not find instant success, in the form of answers and contentment, by simply following the clearly delineated path.

Like American society, Dorothy moves away from home and toward the city. She is struck by the outward appearance of the Emerald City, noticing from afar “a beautiful green glow in the sky just before them”:

As they walked on, the green glow became brighter and brighter, and it seemed that at last they were nearing the end of their travels. Yet it was afternoon before they came to the great wall that surrounded the City. It was high, and thick, and of a bright green color. In front of them, and at the end of the road of yellow brick, was a big gate, all studded with emeralds.(95)

Since the Emerald City is newly constructed, it is a testament to human agency, that is if the inhabitants of the city are human; they construct a paradise, at least in terms of its physical appearance. At the same time, however, the citizens are willingly controlled by deterministic forces, specifically by the capricious will of the Wizard:

Just to amuse myself, and keep the good people busy, I ordered them to build this City, and my palace; and they did it all willingly and well. Then I thought, as the country was so green and beautiful, I would call it the Emerald City, and to make the name fit better I put green spectacles on all people, so that everything they saw was green.(178)
Baum expresses a pessimism worthy of naturalist author, denying any transcendent value to the efforts of the citizens of the city. Yet, the city is a thriving haven from anxiety-producing forces outside the city: the Wicked Witches.

Baum’s imaginative city is a thinly veiled copy of a biblical paradise; Karla Walters notes striking similarities between the Emerald City and the New Jerusalem of the biblical book of Revelations:

New Jerusalem needs no sun or moon to illuminate it, for ‘having the glory of God…her light was like unto a stone most precious…the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass.’ Furthermore, the city’s gates were of pearl and it has twelve layers of precious stones in its foundation, including jaspar, sapphire, and emerald. 

Despite its appearance, however, the Emerald City is neither a man-made heaven nor a vague fantasy existing somewhere over a rainbow, but a thriving center of economic activity. However, it bears less resemblance to Bellamy’s economic utopia, than to Dreiser’s cities and his desire-driven characters. Before she can enter the Emerald City, Dorothy must don green spectacles, ostensibly to protect her eyes from the brilliance of everything inside the city walls; however, the Wizard, the ruler of the city, later admits the purpose of the city ordinance is to reinforce the illusion that the Emerald City is made of emeralds. Yet paradoxically, the Emerald City is actually constructed of emeralds, which are common in Oz.

As in Sister Carrie, perception is the basis for a specific desire; like Drouet and his desire to seduce new women, the inhabitants of Baum’s fantasy are content constantly desiring variations of the same quality. The green spectacles of the Emerald City project a desirable shade of green on every person and object, particularly sales objects:
Many shops stood in the street, and Dorothy saw that everything in them was green. Green candy and green pop-corn were offered for sale, as well as green shoes, green hats and green clothes of all sorts. At one place a man was selling green lemonade, and when the children bought it Dorothy could see that they paid for it with green pennies. (202)

In an ironic twist upon the traditional association of green with nature, the city of Oz is an artificial site of satiation of desire, specifically the desire for all things green; the inhabitants accept the value of the shade of green, even though they know that it is a fictitious value.

Stuart Culver proposes that desire, specifically consumer desire, enables the inhabitants of the Emerald City to participate in a communal activity: "...one consumes simply to be consuming when consumption is the preferred mode of participation."13 They purchase supplemental commodities that seem to be desired just because they are green, such as popcorn and lemonade. As a former salesman, Baum may be suggesting that consumption is a means to happiness.

Regarding the effects of desire, Baum expresses a theme embodied by Drouet in *Sister Carrie*: the Wizard’s people are able to lead vital yet content lives by embracing continual desire for an unnecessary quality. However, Dreiser’s novel is countered by its tragic depiction of Carrie never knowing contentment because of her insatiable desire. In contrast, Culver describes the life of the green bespectacled inhabitants of the Emerald City as “an endless cycle of visual fascinations and mistaken appropriations; desiring green, the Ozites pursue value in the abstract....”14 The inhabitants thus create a utopia of cyclical consumption that provides them with both desire and lasting contentment. In *McTeague*, habitual behavior only provides an illusion of control and unchanging stability,
since desire is depicted as a disruptive force of degeneration. However, in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* consumer desire generates repetitive behavior, as well as a stable society that withstands knowledge of its own artifice: even after the Wizard is exposed as a fraud, the inhabitants of the city elect to keep their spectacles.

After setting forth on the Yellow Brick Road on her quest for home, Dorothy encounters three characters who define themselves by their *lack* or emptiness: a primarily empty Scarecrow desiring a brain and suffering from an aggravated sense of inferiority, a Tin Woodman desiring a Heart, and a Cowardly Lion desiring the Courage To Be: as King of Beasts, “I learned that if I roared very loudly every living thing was frightened and got out of my way…. [but] whenever there is danger my heart begins to beat fast”(65). The three companions desire personal wholeness and to rectify what they perceive as an unfinished state; this desire is the objective behind those who seek to create a utopia at the end of human and social change.

The lives of Dorothy’s companions appear based upon their desire for wholeness. Although they want tangible evidence of the proof of their success, the companions grow in the qualities they desire by moving and seeking; they explicitly demonstrate the qualities they desire when they attempt to help Dorothy against the Wicked Witch. Moreover, by simply joining together in a quest, the companions form a unified person: thinking, feeling, and doing. In addition, a Bellamy-like belief in the effectiveness of cooperation is demonstrated not only by the companions, but also in scenes testifying to the communal power of individually weak creatures, such as when mice are persuaded to carry the sleeping Lion out of a field of slumber causing poppies.
In *Sister Carrie*, characters who lose desire die, either literally in the case of Hurstwood or symbolically in the example of the Hansons. Similarly, Dorothy’s companions express Dreiser’s view that dissatisfaction breeds life. After the companions realize their desires by receiving symbolic props of the qualities they desired, they separate from one another. Each becomes a king in his own domain, with the Scarecrow taking the place of the Wizard as the true ruler of a city valuing illusion over substance.

In the process of realizing their desires, however, the companions lose the driving forces that had marked them as more human than the other inhabitants of Oz. This loss is evident in the character development of the Tin Woodman. As a mere woodman, he had fallen in love with a girl from Oz; as a consequence of this love, he was cursed by the Witch of the East. Her spell caused this hard-working woodman to chop off a different part of his body every time he swung his ax. Not knowing another trade, he “worked harder than ever,” but luckily the tinsmiths in Oz can provide tin substitutes for the chopped off body parts until the woodman was all tin. As man and machine become one, Baum creates a memorable symbol of the continual merging of industrialism and a nineteenth-century society “working harder than ever.” Technology creates a state of stasis for the Woodman: tin rusts and leaves the Tin Woodman standing in the same position for a year without moving before Dorothy comes along to oil his joints.

While held motionless by rust, the Tin Woodman deludes himself into thinking he is no longer capable of the love he had for the girl. However, as he journeys to fulfill his desire for a heart, the Tin Woodman demonstrates a love for all creatures: “Once, indeed, the Tin Woodman stepped upon a beetle that was crawling along the road, and killed the
poor little thing. This made the Tin Woodman very unhappy, for he was always careful not to hurt any living creature; and as he walked along he wept several tears of sorrow and regret" (50). Similar to the danger Old Grannis and Miss Baker face in *McTeague* when they deviate from their habitual patters and brave a new relationship, the Tin Woodman's selfless love poses a risk to himself; when he mourns the insect, his tears begin to rust his armor.

Yet after the Tin Woodman receives his symbolic heart, he desires only to keep his tin shining brightly. Even after he has proved to himself that he is capable of love, he does not seek out his ladylove; he and his companions essentially reject the qualities they have gained in pursuing their desires. In addition to the selfless love they showed repeatedly for Dorothy, together they formed a human of perfect emotional, mental, and physical aspects. However, at the end of the novel, the companions elect to separate from one another and Dorothy. The tragedy of the companions is that even though they sought more humanity, they end up with less.

Dorothy and her companions travel to the center of life in Oz, an inhumanly glorious city, in order to have an audience with a being possessing a divine reputation. Just as Bellamy integrated millennial urgency within the utopia of *Looking Backward*, Baum secularizes biblical motifs in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*; however, whereas Bellamy attempts to elevate the human condition by appropriating sacred imagery, Baum exposes religion as an illusion given power by desperate and unquestioning people. The inhabitants of the Emerald City characterize their ruler as a divine being and an unsolvable mystery:
Oz is a great wizard and can take on any form he wishes. So that some say he looks like a bird; and some say he looks like an elephant; and some say he looks like a cat. To others he appears as a beautiful fairy, or a brownie, or in any form that pleases him. But who the real Oz is, when he is in his own form, no living person can tell. (193)

Even the other forces of Oz succumb to the power of imagination and human myth-making; the good Witch of the North describes the Wizard as “more powerful than all the rest of us together” (24). Although Dorothy and her companions demonstrate agency when they set to satisfy their desires, their journey signifies their desire to look outside themselves for resolution. When Dorothy and her companions return to the Emerald City after disposing of the Wicked Witch, they discover the true appearance of the Wizard: nature conquerors technology, as Toto knocks down the Wizard’s screen and reveals a little man desperately pulling levers as he loses control of his machinery.

Despite the revelation that the “god” of Oz is merely an illusion, their quest for truth enables all the companions to find what they sought: psychological self-actualization. John Algeo proposes that “[i]t shows the innate longing in human nature to seek some explanation, however fictitious, of the unexplainable in nature and in our daily existence.” 15 The companions’ desire for props is revealed as the defining desire for illusory or symbolic fulfillment.

On the other hand, Dorothy seems to have a real, substantive notion of fulfillment: simply return home. Although it has become a cliché, the phrase “there’s no place like home,” appears only once in the novel, when the Scarecrow questions Dorothy’s preoccupation with getting home:
I cannot understand why you should wish to leave this beautiful country and go back to the dry, gray place you call Kansas.’ ‘That is because you have no brains,’ answered the girl. ‘No matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There’s no place like home.’ The Scarecrow sighed. ‘Of course I cannot understand it,’ he said. ‘If your heads were stuffed with straw, like mine, you would probably all live in the beautiful places, and then Kansas would have no people at all. It is fortunate for Kansas that you have brains.’ (124-5)

The Scarecrow believes that being human means having brains, or in other words, leading a rational existence. Dorothy counters with a conception of humanity as defined by an emotional desire to live in one’s community, no matter how dismal that community may be. Dorothy’s home is not stable, literally not fixed in the earth, but it is the place where she can define herself: “an ordinary little girl who had come by chance of a cyclone into a strange land” (115). However, the objects she gains and her unplanned deeds, such as killing the witches, define her in the eyes of the inhabitants of Oz as not just a “little girl.” Dorothy desires to return to home because there her identity is not dislocated between her actions and her consciousness. Instead, she can feel confident that her Aunt Em will tell “her how glad she was to have her little girl at home again” (106). Dorothy defines home as a place of emotional security with one’s family, despite the fact that her home lacks economic stability; after all, Dorothy returns to an uncertain, poverty-stricken farm environment in which houses can be routinely wrecked by nature.

*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* may be a limited *buildingromans* narrative describing the protagonist’s moral development. Dorothy initially is an apparently insensitive little girl who plays with Toto “all day long,” and does not demonstrate any concern for her hardworking aunt and uncle, “who did not know what joy was” (19). Moreover, when the
Tin Woodman and the Scarecrow discuss what is more important, a heart or brains, Dorothy is not concerned with her companion’s plight; at the same time she listens, “she did not say anything, for she was puzzled to know which of her two friends was right, and she decided if she could only get back to Kansas and Aunt Em it did not matter so much whether the Woodman had no brains and the Scarecrow no heart, or each got what he wanted”(46).

When Dorothy journeys with her companions, they repeatedly demonstrate selfless love, particularly when they sacrifice themselves in an attempt to save her from the Wicked Witch. Dorothy grows in altruistic concern for others and develops her conscience: when her companions thank her for her aid in their development, Dorothy responds “I am glad I was of use to these good friends. But now that each of them has had what he most desired...I think I should like to go back to Kansas”(142). Dorothy learns to think of others; her desire to return becomes less a matter of concern with her own plight, and more a result of her love for others: when Dorothy tells Glinda the Good at the end of the novel that she wants to return to Kansas, Dorothy explains that “Aunt Em will surely think something dreadful has happened to me, and that will make her put on mourning; and unless the crops are better this year than they were last I am sure Uncle Henry cannot afford it”(129).

Yet Dorothy rarely indicates choice in her actions, a fact that suggests she undergoes little moral development. Without conscious consideration of her acts, Dorothy runs after Toto rather than seeking shelter from the cyclone and she kills the
Wicked Witch of the West by accident in a fit of anger for stealing one of her silver slippers (94); she did not know that water would melt the Wicked Witch.

Furthermore, Dorothy does not consider whether she should remain in Oz, but simply clicks her silver slippers together and flies home. Dorothy initially perceives Oz as an pastoral utopia; however, she still elects to return to her family rather than remain as the ruler of Oz. When Dorothy leaves, the land of Oz has become a true civilization under the wise rule of the Scarecrow. She essentially rejects the now stable, yet ultimately fantastic, vision of Oz in favor of a return to the grim stasis of Kansas. Home is expressed as a place of contentment, but where one continues to desire; by characterizing the Emerald City and Kansas as desirable places, the novel argues for both community and progress.

While technology fails when the Wizard’s balloon leaves too soon headed back to America, the magic of the silver shoes, which is linked to confidence in oneself, provides a means for Dorothy to go home. After Dorothy clicks her silver slippers, sails across the great desert separating Oz from our world, and falls to the ground before “the new farmhouse Uncle Henry built after the cyclone had carried away the old one” (237); her journey to utopia has been a real journey that has taken sufficient time for Uncle Henry to build a new farmhouse. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* seems to exemplify the possibilities of self-reliance: a little girl changes a land and learns that she had the ability to return home throughout her adventure, and figures of insecurity find wholeness within themselves.
Although her efforts are often motivated by impulse, Dorothy does illustrate human agency and the difference an individual can make on the social environment. However, even as she appears to be a shining testament to human agency by helping Oz become a more static and stable utopia, she rejects utopia in order to simply go home. Yet Kansas remains the same place that Dorothy left: she returns to Kansas just as Aunt Em is going “to water the cabbages”, a scene signifying a place of extreme poverty. Moreover, Aunt Em embraces Dorothy and asks “‘where in the world did you come from?’ ‘From the Land of Oz,’ said Dorothy gravely. ‘And here is Toto, too. And oh, Aunt Em! I’m so glad to be at home again!’” (237). The novel lacks closure regarding the fate of its heroine: she may somehow enliven the lives of her family with a greater ability for selfless love, or she may become an increasingly grey figures who speaks “gravely.”

Baum’s novel is not easily summarized, because potential themes of the novel are offered and then undermined by successive narrative. For example, the Emerald City initially appears based completely upon illusion, but then is revealed as actually built of emeralds. Furthermore, after Dorothy leaves the illusory city, she discovers that her clothes and Toto’s collar have changed to white. Similarly, although Baum’s novel is starkly symbolic in its language, the narrative lacks the certainty of a typical fairy tale or utopian account. Just as “evil” impulses seem to inevitably overwhelm “good” centers of morality in novels of naturalism, Baum characterizes the good witches of the North and South as less powerful than the wicked ones of the East and the West. Yet Dorothy receives a kiss from Glinda the good that acts as omnipotent talisman; the narrator states that “she is protected by the Power of Good, and that is greater than the Power of
Evil" (143). The Wizard is unmasked as a fake, but then is shown as a provider of effective, if symbolic, solutions to real problems. Such narrative complications reveal The Wonderful Wizard of Oz as an uneasy mixture of longing for the goodness of utopia and ironic suspicion of that longing.

Dorothy’s search for a way to return home mimics the larger search of late nineteenth-century America, and takes its place in a gallery of narratives depicting displaced individuals seeking a place where they can once again feel at home. The concluding years of the nineteenth-century have been characterized as “a period that in a crucial sense recapitulates in especially intense form a determining growth pattern of American civilization, the perpetual struggle for a mature national identity.”

The boom in utopian writing signified a particular moment of social hope and fear. In 1892, Bellamy bewailed the apparent death of the American dream:

We are today confronted by portentous indications in the conditions of American industry, society and politics that this great experiment [America], on which the last hopes of the race depends, is to prove, like all former experiments, a disastrous failure. There can be no more new worlds to be discovered, no fresh continents to offer virgin fields for new ventures.

Even as American culture continued to endorse individualism and materialism, feelings of helplessness and despair ensuing from late-nineteenth century economic, social, and political chaos were grew during the last decade of the century. As America lost its sacred pastoral myth, American literature offered distinct possibilities for individuals seeking satiation of desires and a degree of equilibrium. Utopianism and naturalism fiction sought answers to problems of ultimate meaning in individual lives, by depicting protagonists who are peripheral and seek centrality, dislocated and seek reorientation.
Both fictions depicted worlds lacking "realism"; their perspectives were more stark than traditional, mimetic literature.

If Bellamy generates nightmarish implications, Dreiser and Norris offer glimpses of heavenly contentment: naturalism concerns what human beings do to each other while utopianism concerns what humans can do together. By describing what life could be, either a heavenly community or hell full of uncomprehending automatons, the literary genres provide polar perspectives; this polarity provides a relatively simple structure for how one perceives the past, present, and future. Such a stark structure is particularly useful in the continual search for coherency and meaning among the sheer variety of experience available in our fragmented world.

Both fictions may seem limited by extreme, memorably dominant perspectives, yet the works are not restricted to stark themes—naïve optimism or pseudo-scientific determinism. Although the utopian novel may attempt to generate a closed, static vision, utopia is inherently unfinished and open to the questioning of its own plausibility. Similarly, naturalism resists closure by questioning the authority of the overly confident narrator describing a world of uncertainty. Even as these fictions resisting totalizing conclusions, they also generate memorable perspectives that implicitly questions the validity of other perspectives. As they question and evaluate one another, these conflicting narrative views provide structure in the quest for the meaning of the human condition.

While *Sister Carrie* and *McTeague* occupy relatively prominent positions in the American literary canon, *Looking Backward* and *The Wizard of Oz* are absent from that
canon. The utopian works have been rejected as serious fiction, and certainly neither of the examined works was conceived of by their authors as such: Bellamy openly admitted the narrative failings of his novel, and Baum characterized his work as only pleasure reading. Yet it is also true that both works have been profoundly influential, *Looking Backward* sold millions of copies and for decades influenced everyone who thought about social questions, while Baum's work remains the most popular American fairy tale.

Cultural movement is generated by conflict between the dominant ideologies of the novels; yet the extent to which novels escape being mere doctrinal tracts, depends upon the degree of internal conflict generated by differing yet compelling views within a particular novel. Utopian novels such as *Looking Backwards* may lack timeless, aesthetic appeal because it fails to provide sufficient internal opposition. On the other hand, naturalist novels remain vibrant because the doctrine of determinism, although central to narrative understanding, is prevented from becoming totalizing by the desire to believe in free will. Consequently, *Sister Carrie*, with its greater ambiguity toward the forces underlying human actions, is considered a more aesthetically interesting novel than *McTeague*. Norris' novel is dominated by its determinism because the doctrine produces unforgettable grotesque and brutal behavior.

In an effort to escape narrow definitions of genres like naturalism and utopianism, Mikhail Bakhtin identified heteroglossia or diversity as fundamental to the form of the novel: "The writers are artists and their novels should not be viewed as embodying a single philosophical doctrine...competing ideologies are able to exist side by side in the novel as competing voices, dialogically implicating each other and enriching the unity of the
Such heteroglossia is seen in utopian and naturalist texts, adding complexity to often marginalized fictions. Yet these fictions also generate viewpoints, either progressive or determinist, that take a dominant position within the text. By forcing the reader to experience their world in new ways, utopian and naturalist literature add diversity to the social text and enrich our dynamic world.
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