

## Chapter 1

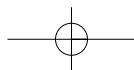
# Turning the Century

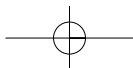
Michael A. Elliott and  
Jennifer A. Hughes

*Satisfied that the sequence of men led to nothing and the sequence of their society could lead no further, while the mere sequence of thought was chaos, he turned at last to the sequence of force; and thus it happened that, after ten years' pursuit, he found himself lying in the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900, with his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of force totally new.*

*The Education of Henry Adams (1907)*

Henry Adams's meditation on "force" in the well-known "Virgin and the Dynamo" chapter of *The Education* climaxes in the language of physical violence. Throughout the chapter, Adams manages to describe the scientific discoveries on display at the Great Exposition in Paris with cool detachment but also to render the turbulence of his emotional state. "Force," as Adams represents it, is the source of revolutionary power, a turning from one world order (the spiritual order of the Old World epitomized by the Virgin) to another (the technological world of scientific discovery represented by the Dynamo). The "historian," Adams's self-nomination, can grasp the outlines of this shift, but only in the crudest of terms. The forms of historical knowledge that Adams has at his disposal no longer appear functional. He had sought a history that could produce more coherent meaning than mere sequence, that could create order out of the "chaos" of his time. The turn of the century, however, unleashed forces that rendered this project impossible and instead made Adams acutely aware of his own inadequacy





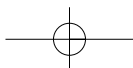
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to compass the turn of the century. The historian of the nineteenth century put himself at bodily risk in attempting to confront the twentieth.

The world of American fiction did not have a spokesperson who articulated the dilemma so baldly, but Adams's assessment of his inadequacy offers a useful starting point for considering where fiction found itself at the turn of the twentieth century. There was a growing sense that the nineteenth-century conventions that governed the production of fiction were not sufficient to the demands of an age in which so many forces were unleashed upon the United States: not only the scientific and technological forces to which Adams refers, but social and political ones that were altering the human landscape. The explosion of mass culture would drive the nascent film industry; massive immigration from eastern and southern Europe sparked fierce debates about the composition of American society; and African American leaders sharpened their response to the escalating racial violence suffered by their communities.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the relationship of literature to society had been brokered in the United States by the ascendance of American realism, a mode of literary production and reception that prized the ability to document social realities with the premise that doing so would lead to a more just social order. Realist fiction prized the careful observation of social manners, questions of character over those of plot, and the articulation of local distinctions, including non-standard forms of English. On the one hand, it cultivated the drawing-room novels of Henry James; on the other, the regional fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman. Hamlin Garland, a vocal advocate of realism, explained, "The sun of truth strikes each part of the earth at a little different angle; it is this angle which gives life and infinite variety to literature." Variety, indeed, was a cornerstone of realism, which placed an optimistic faith in the power of fiction to negotiate social distinctions, to render them on the page in such a way that they could be recognized, even celebrated, without becoming debilitating. William Dean Howells, whose work as an editor and novelist placed him at the center of American realism, sounded this optimistic note in an 1887 *Harper's Monthly* column: "Let fiction cease to lie about life . . . let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know – the language of unaffected people everywhere – and there can be no doubt of an unlimited future, not only of delightfulness but of usefulness, for it."

By the end of the next decade, that optimism seemed less possible – and not only for Howells, but also for his contemporary Mark Twain,



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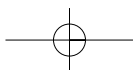
for the younger writers whom Howells promoted, like Stephen Crane, for naturalists such as Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris, and for African American novelists such as Charles Chesnutt and Pauline Hopkins who chose to lodge their protests against the racism that too frequently seeped into American writing. Howells's own fiction offers a guide to the waning of this realist faith in the ameliorative power of mimetic fiction in his 1890 novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. There, Howells contrives to bring together an improbably divergent set of social types – a Midwest tycoon, a bohemian artist, an evangelist of the Social Gospel, an unreconstructed Southerner, a German-born socialist, and so on – to work on a literary magazine edited by Basil March, a recurring character in Howells's fiction whose experiences closely resemble his own. The periodical is clearly a microcosm of the nation, and the novel's first half includes comments by several characters about its possible social benefits. But the literary center cannot hold: The group first splinters after a turbulent dinner party and then fractures permanently when a violent streetcar strike precipitates the deaths of some characters and the departure of others. At the novel's conclusion, the magazine will continue, but with its staff reduced and its aspirations tempered. Even the size of the novel represents a departure from Howells's earlier writing; the book is among his longest, and reads as though the author was uncertain how to bring his characters to a state of satisfactory conclusion.

Realists like Howells had believed that fiction could produce a more equitable society, and the diminishing conviction in the power of fiction to have this effect becomes most visible in the turn-of-the-century literature that attends to the physical, economic, and psychological violence suffered by African Americans during this period. Considered by many scholars to be the nadir of American race relations, the 1890s and early years of the twentieth century saw a dramatic rise in the number of lynching deaths of African Americans. Over 100 of these gruesome murders were recorded each year from 1890 to 1900. In an 1896 decision that devastated hopes for social equality of the races, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* against integration in public facilities. In 1898, rioting whites stormed the black community of Wilmington, North Carolina, randomly murdering men in the street, driving black public figures from the town, burning a building that housed a local black press, and preemptively ousting a lame duck city government that had given municipal positions to African Americans. Decades after emancipation, African American authors found themselves still negotiating, in both the North and the South, a brutally

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racist national atmosphere. They did not have the luxury of describing, as Adams did, broken bodies in only metaphorical terms. The reality of the nation's racism kept expectations in check regarding what work literary realism or any other genre could do for the cause against racist violence; nevertheless, an awareness of the need for counter-narratives to racism compelled African American literary efforts. In other words, even though they may have been more guarded in their expectations, African American authors shared the reformist impulses of many of the writers associated with American realism. Indeed, the hope of producing racial equality may have been the most ambitious literary aim of the time.

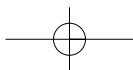
Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, in the preface to her 1900 novel *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, asserts the role of fiction – both realist and romantic – to be “a preserver of manners and customs – religious, political and social” and the goal of her fiction, in particular, to do that which European American authors neglected to do: “faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro.” However, Hopkins was not just working against a dearth of representation, but against an abundance of misrepresentation. Much literature, as well as the popular stage and the press, continued to propagate insidious antebellum stereotypes of African Americans as lazy, ignorant, conniving, degenerative, ridiculous, or childlike. In *Contending Forces* Hopkins disabuses her readership of the speciousness of these types, while interrogating narratives of moral and social progress in the years after emancipation. Although she is clearly committed to creating realistic portraits of African American lives, she departs from the conventions of the literary realist novel of manners by placing historical events in the foreground and delineating the role that history itself has played in shaping African American identities. Through plot-lines that unabashedly treat rape, incest, mob rule, and murder, Hopkins traces the legacy of slavery and the failure of Reconstruction: “While we ponder the philosophy of cause and effect, the world is horrified by a fresh outbreak [of violence], and the shocked mind wonders that in this – the brightest epoch of the Christian era – *such things are*.” Her italics mark the urgency of the effort to make real and known the suffering of African Americans through the art of fiction. Hopkins decidedly claims validity for her work through the values of realism – “*such things are*” – but the terrible necessity of testimony against outrage replaces realism's naïve enthusiasm for pure variety. In the sensational, melodramatic *Of One Blood* – serialized in 1903 – Hopkins pushed even harder against the conventions of

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mimetic fiction. Seances, the animation of the dead, and the search for a hidden Egyptian civilization are just a few of the fantastic plot elements of Hopkins' occult novel. The truth about race, she suggests, will not be found through the careful documentation of social niceties, but in the unseen forces that have driven Africans across continents and centuries.

The fantastic plot in *Of One Blood* was perhaps the most radical solution by an African American novelist to the problem of documenting racial violence in an age when so many turned a blind eye to it. Hopkins and other African American intellectuals, including Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt, published their works alongside texts that cried "such things are *not*," texts that explicitly and implicitly denied African American experience. Dunbar, in an 1898 article entitled "Recession Never," points with indignation to the sinister language surrounding American racism: "Progress! Necessity! Expedience! But why is it necessary to excuse these acts of sophistry? Is not murder murder? Is not rapine rapine? Is not outrage outrage?" Fiction becomes a battleground for claims of history; Chesnutt joined Hopkins and Dunbar in that battle with his 1901 historical romance *The Marrow of Tradition*. He already enjoyed a respectable literary reputation among a mixed audience for his two 1899 collections of framed short stories, *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth*. While these stories manipulated dialect, sentimentality, superstition, and humor to address slippery and difficult issues of race relations in the post-Reconstruction South, they made no claim to address any specific historical event. *The Marrow of Tradition*, in contrast, directly responds to the 1898 Wilmington race riot and the media coverage that downplayed the violent actions of the white mob, glorified it as a "white revolution," and perversely represented nameless members of the black population as instigators of the riot.

At the center of *The Marrow of Tradition* are two families, the Millers and the Carterets, through whom Chesnutt details the ways in which the fates of both races depend, precariously, upon one another for survival. The central character, William Miller, a successful and respected African American doctor and a reluctant leader in the local black community, has a young son with his wife, Janet, the unacknowledged sister of Olivia Carteret who is wife to white supremacist newspaper editor Major Phillip Carteret. Olivia suppresses documentation of their father's marriage to his black servant, Janet's mother, and refuses to recognize her sibling. The novel opens with the birth of the Carterets' first and only child, the sickly son who is to be the sole heir to the



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Carteret fortune and name. The Carterets, like many of the white characters in *Wellington*, North Carolina (Chesnutt changes the name of the town, though the parallel to Wilmington remains clear), believe that “Negro domination” and the burgeoning of a black community will undermine the future of both their son, and the nation at large. However, the political and personal destinies of the two families meet when Major Carteret uses his power as the editor of the local press to foment the white riot that leaves the Miller’s only son dead by a stray bullet, and the Carteret’s son dying of a breathing condition with no doctors available to treat him. Chesnutt ends the story with significant hesitation and lack of resolution: Dr Miller has been called to the Carterets’ home to operate on the dying child and he stands, a father who has just lost his only son to an accident of racist hostility, at the base of the stairs. From the second floor comes the call, “There’s time enough, but none to spare.” Chesnutt leaves off writing with these words, abandoning the reader with only the exigency of the situation. Why should Miller help the family that destroyed his own? One cannot help but read a parallel question into Chesnutt’s novel: Why should African Americans attempt to be helpful citizens in a country that abuses them?

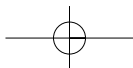
Howells wrote that he found *Marrow of Tradition* “bitter, bitter,” a comment that betrays how ill-prepared the conventions of literary realism were for the harsh violence of the turn of the twentieth century. But the novels of Thomas Dixon suggest that Chesnutt’s dire, emotional climax to *Marrow* may not have been out-of-place at all. Inflamed and inflammatory, Dixon was a prolific Southern writer who infamously sentimentalized the history of radical racism and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in his first trilogy of novels: *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902), *The Clansman* (1905), and *The Traitor* (1907). The contemporary popularity of these novels, which offer stories of valiant white heroes of the Southern aristocracy defending pristine porcelain virgins from the sexual voracity of degenerated “black brutes,” evinces just how invidious the debate around race was while Hopkins, Dunbar, and Chesnutt were writing. Indeed, Hopkins, Dunbar, and Chesnutt each enjoyed a humble readership compared to Dixon. Hopkins’ writing was published serially in *The Colored American*, which aimed specifically at an African American audience, and enjoyed a circulation of 15,000 subscriptions during the height of its popularity. Dunbar’s popularity, advanced tremendously among white readers by a positive review from William Dean Howells, rested problematically upon his African American dialect poetry; his later novels did not enjoy many reprintings.

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Chesnutt, similarly, would sell more books using the dialect framing of Uncle Julius than he would with a serious historical romance like *The Marrow of Tradition*. While Hopkins, Dunbar, and Chesnutt did reach many readers – albeit sometimes with ambivalence – they knew the enormity of the forces they were writing against. As a point of comparison, Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* sold over one hundred thousand copies in the first few months of sales, and the other volumes of his trilogy met with similar success.

*The Clansman*, which Dixon adapted into the film *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 with the help of D. W. Griffith, casts the Civil War, the assassination of Lincoln, and the implementation of Reconstruction as well as its collapse, as parts of an epic narrative of white America struggling to overcome the "Black Curse." Although reading Dixon brings insight into the high tension of white anxieties over black citizenship and enfranchisement during this era, modern readers will find Dixon's sensational storylines ridiculous in their blatant white supremacist agenda. For example, in *The Clansman*, the impetus for the formation of the Ku Klux Klan is the rape of a young white woman named Marion (whose only dream was to marry young and "to fill the world with flowers, laughter, and music") by a black man, Augustus "Gus" Caesar. After the rape, Marion and her mother decide to commit suicide together and thereby hide her shame. In one of the most outrageous moments of the text, Marion's effort to conceal her rape is thwarted by a doctor who looks into the eyes of the corpses with a microscope in order to discover "on the retina of these dead eyes the image of this devil as if etched there by fire." Whatever doubt lingers in characters' minds over this pseudo-scientific evidence is abolished when Gus, under hypnosis, reenacts the crime for a jury of clansmen. The white men lynch Gus, and begin to "reclaim" the South by terrorizing black communities. Dixon ends the novel with his young white hero asserting that because of the clan, "Civilisation has been saved, and the South redeemed from shame."

Dixon's white supremacist fantasies are read today by few people other than scholars seeking to contextualize racism in the early twentieth century. Though Dixon's ideologically and stylistically dated writing has descended into relative obscurity, it nevertheless serves as evidence for the prophetic assertion of W. E. B. Du Bois that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line." Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* (1905), which includes elements of autobiography, history, sociology, philosophy, fiction, and musical analysis, stands as one of the most lastingly relevant texts of the twentieth



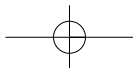
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century, as well as an influential experiment in terms of its varied generic and aesthetic composition. The dynamic conceptualizations and potent metaphors that he uses to probe the color-line influenced the development of American Modernism and fueled the Harlem Renaissance. In *Souls*, Du Bois locates the problem of race in the United States as a problem of perspective, of viewing things from the outside versus from the inside. A history of racism, argues Du Bois, created a “veil” between the races, obscuring the vision of each, but giving African Americans a particular insight into the forces that continued to divide them from whites. Utilizing the language of psychology, a discipline undergoing significant changes in the 1890s and early 1900s due to the work of figures such as William James (Henry James’s brother) in America and Sigmund Freud in Europe, Du Bois proposes that black folk in the United States have a “double-consciousness.” He writes:

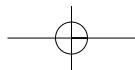
It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Henry Adams describes forces that destroy intellectual coherence; Du Bois describes forces that may ultimately engender creativity through courageous endurance.

For Du Bois, the “two-ness” of African American experience enables a new, authentically American art exemplified by the sorrow songs. He opens each chapter of *Souls* with an excerpt of a piece of canonical Western literature and a line of music from these songs, using this juxtaposition to both validate and differentiate the artistry of the music. Born from the horrors of slavery, songs such as “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” represent to Du Bois the unflagging will of black folk to produce art and perform their humanity. The acceptance of hybridity then, for Du Bois, provides the ideological structure necessary to negotiating the “veil” that attempts to partition black experiences from the dominant white culture and to surviving the rending of “unreconciled” forces that would fragment and diminish the black psyche. In this way, the sorrow songs are paradigmatic in *Souls*, and Du Bois concludes the book with an appreciative and insightful analysis of this music. He emphasizes that the sorrow songs are organic to African American experiences: exile, betrayal, mourning, strife. Yet what Du Bois works to uncover for his readers





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is the way that these songs represent a blending of displaced African and displaced European cultures on American soil. They carry centuries-old African melodies and rhythms even as they partially absorb the English language or the distortions of the minstrel stage. Du Bois avers that the sorrow songs refute the much-cited argument that the darker races are in a less-advanced stage in human progress. Rather, they signify the common struggles of humanity, and Du Bois proffers them to his readership as a hopeful gift, wondering: "Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are these not gifts worth the giving?"

Music and history collide in Du Bois' penultimate chapter, the fictional story "Of the Coming of John." When the title character, John, leaves his small town of Altamaha, Georgia, in order to be educated at Wells Institute, a fictional black college, he finds that his education leaves him with a disturbing paradox: knowledge of history and his place in that history occlude his happiness, and yet he would not be content without that knowledge. John's epiphany occurs when he wanders into an opera house and becomes infatuated with the music, only to be ejected because of his race. John's situation perfectly exhibits double-consciousness; he discovers through the music his own love of the beautiful, yet he is also made painfully aware that whites regard him merely as a black body without capacity for such appreciation or intelligence. John returns to Altamaha wise and somber, but resolute in doing what he can to serve his community by teaching. However, the white school superintendent closes his school because of John's "almighty airs and uppish ways," and John's complete downfall is ensured when he murders a young white man, also named John, for molesting his sister. The story ends with John standing at the scene of the murder, listening to the noise of an approaching lynch mob and conflating that sound with opera music. Du Bois' free indirect discourse elegantly captures John's confusion: "Hark! was it music, or the hurry and shouting of men? Yes, surely! Clear and high the faint sweet melody rose and fluttered like a living thing, so that the very earth trembled as with the tramp of horses and the murmurs of angry men." John's last thoughts are of Wagner's lyrics from the "Song of the Bride" and then of pity for white John's father. He turns in a gesture of surrender, with his eyes closed, toward the sea, and waits listening to the mingling of remembered music and the rumble of the mob. Such operatic gestures and references confer upon John's death an aura of aesthetic tragedy, as if to say such endings are determined when white cultural ideology directly confronts African American experience in one

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person. The music appears as much responsible for leading John into the “coiling twisted rope” as white John’s inculcated sense of entitlement to black John’s sister. As beautiful as the music is to John, it only reminds him of “the veil” that divides how he understands himself and how the white world apprehends him. Finally, the high cultural form of the opera helps Du Bois convey the terrible irony of John’s intellectual and emotional sophistication being destroyed by the crude forces of white racism.

Appearing in a book that bridges autobiography and sociology, polemic and documentation, “Of the Coming of John” offers a particular function for the work of fiction at the turn of the century. It supplements social scientific descriptions of the violence of everyday life, but it also stands apart from non-fictional narrative in its effort to harness the energies being unleashed upon the world through a stronger sense of plot than the fiction of the previous generation had deployed. Moreover, with its collision of operatic drama and folk melodies, Du Bois positions his fiction as a mediating work among competing forms of mass culture. This role is significant, for it suggests something of a larger shift in American fiction during this period. As Nancy Bentley points out, Chesnut’s *Marrow of Tradition*, follows an earlier tradition in its thorough skepticism of the cultural forms that circulate information and images through mass populations; both the newspaper and the stage feed the violence of the Wilmington riot in Chesnut’s account. Du Bois, on the other hand, remains more ambivalent, suggesting that forms of mass culture could make visible a history of African American suffering – a notion that would later capture the attention of the ragtime-playing protagonist of James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912).

This kind of engagement with forms of mass culture slowly developed in the literary fiction of the turn-of-the-century as literary authors grappled with a world in which their own art appeared to be diminishing in its social significance. No work of fiction more fully treats this question than Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900), the novel of Carrie Meeber’s immersion into the commercial society of the urban metropolis, her extramarital relationships with two men, and subsequent success as an actress. In Dreiser’s Chicago and New York, the very geography of the city streets is configured so as to produce an orgy of display for the masses who walk them. Plate glass windows extend down to the sidewalks, soliciting consumers for the commodities housed inside, and the pedestrians themselves participate in the making of spectacle. “To stare seemed the proper and natural thing,”

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Dreiser's novel tells us of the Broadway promenade. "Carrie found herself stared at and ogled." Looking and being looked at are the cornerstones of the social world that Dreiser depicts. The education of Carrie Meeber therefore shapes her into a font of longing for the material things that will enable her to succeed in this spectacular economy. "She did not grow in knowledge so much as she awakened in the matter of desire," Dreiser writes – and what Carrie learns to desire are those things that will make her more desirable to others. As Priscilla Wald has argued, Carrie is not seduced by the men she meets, but by the city itself.

Dreiser figures this economy of desire most evocatively in Carrie's achievements as an actress. In a crucial passage in which the novel describes Carrie's talents, Dreiser describes his heroine as being in possession of a "sympathetic, impressionable nature" as well as "an innate taste for imitation." Throughout the book, the question of which instincts and forces are "natural" and which are not recurs, and the genius of Carrie's thespian career seems to rest in her ability to walk a line: She is *naturally imitative*. This characterization depicts not just Carrie but the theatrical realm in which she succeeds as occupying a kind of borderland between the real and the false, between the slavish copy and the wholly original. Carrie is neither, and her inability to achieve a kind of self-consciousness about this position is a crucial component of this performance as well. In the final sections of *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser introduces Robert Ames, an inventor from the Midwest who seeks to instill in Carrie a proper sense of the value of things, as well as an aspiration for more serious drama than that in which she has appeared. However, if the novel intends Ames to provide a final (male) correction to Carrie's unfocused, constant (female) desire, then it is also deliberately ambiguous as to the possibility of success. At the conclusion of *Sister Carrie*, which exists in multiple versions because of editorial intervention, Carrie is reading Balzac and is newly aware of the social injustices of the kind European naturalism portrays. Yet there are no indications that high literature will remake Carrie's acting career or the stage on which she performs; the penultimate chapter informs us that "the old, mournful Carrie – the desireful Carrie, – unsatisfied" remains.

Literature, in other words, may be able to describe Carrie's desires, but Dreiser's novel is ambiguous about the extent to which literary narrative itself will have a decisive role in this new economy of desire. In an age of visual, mass culture, could literary art be enough of a force to sway, or even survive, Carrie's – or the masses' – superficiality and

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insatiability? Dreiser recognizes that *Sister Carrie* itself must compete for the attention of the public that it is trying to represent. Newspapers, though, are a different matter. Hurstwood, whose decline is juxtaposed in the novel with Carrie's success, becomes enraptured by the newspapers, which he uses to learn about the local events that affect his search for employment. Eventually, the newspapers paralyze Hurstwood; he sits reading rather than venturing into the city itself. In contrast, the Sunday newspaper offers one of the few depictions of unalloyed pleasure in the life of Jurgis Rudkis, the protagonist of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). A "most wonderful paper could be had for only five cents," he realizes. "There was battle and murder and sudden death – it was marvelous how they ever heard about so many entertaining and thrilling happenings; the stories must be all true, for surely no man could have made such things up, and besides, there were pictures of them all, as real as life."

*The Jungle*, of course, is full of its own "battle and murder and sudden death" in its grim account of the meat-packing industry in Chicago, and the purpose of the book was to show that the horrors it detailed "must all be true." While occasional rumors of media corruption are floated through the novel – and in one particular episode Sinclair blames the newspapers for exaggerating the violence of a labor dispute – in fact *The Jungle* suggests that the newspapers do on occasion provide a check against the capitalist excesses of industrial life. The novel mentions that they have exposed the mishandling of waste, the canning of horsemeat, and the medical experiments on indigent patients at a hospital – the kind of muckracking with which Sinclair himself was famously identified. Near the end of the novel, as Sinclair introduces his reader to the Socialist party, he even includes a paean to its national organ, *The Appeal to Reason*: "It had a manner all its own – it was full of ginger and spice, of Western slang and hustle: It collected news of the 'plutes,' and served it up for the benefit of the 'American working mule.'" *The Jungle*, in fact, does something different by collecting the stories of an immigrant family – "working mules," one might say – and using them to reflect on the working conditions created by the "plutes," or plutocrats. But what the novel shares with the propaganda newspaper as Sinclair describes it is a desire to circulate the truth among a mass public, and in doing so create an audience that conceives of itself as a mass public and is able to strike a blow for its own interests.

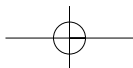
Sinclair's novel conceives of itself as a mass cultural event about the process of mass production, and it confronts the forces of mass

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production in two different arenas: The making of meat out of the bodies of animals, and the making of members of the American working class out of immigrants. While the exposé of the former received more attention in Sinclair's time – influencing legislation regulating the meat industry – the link between these two processes is in fact the burden of the novel. Early in the novel, Jurgis and his family tour one of the slaughterhouses and witness how the steers walk to their deaths under their own power. “[I]t was quite uncanny to watch them,” Sinclair writes, “pressing on to their fate, all unsuspecting, a very river of death.” At this point in the narrative, however, the recently-arrived immigrants fail to make the connections between the fate of the animals and their own voluntary migration to the meat-packing factories: Just as no part of the animal goes unused by the factory, all of the physical and mental energy of the laborers is extracted by their labor – and by their constant effort to secure for themselves the barest material existence. Just as the public prefers not to see how its sausage is made, it also turns a blind eye to the way that immigrant laborers are ground into the political process – led through the citizenship system and manipulated as voters by the bosses who run Packingtown.

Jurgis's epiphanic moment, which occurs upon his introduction to socialist politics near the conclusion of the novel, finally yields an identification with the beasts that he has slaughtered: “his new acquaintance showed him that a hog was just what he had been – one of the packers' hogs.” *The Jungle* reinforces this relationship by repeatedly referring to Jurgis and other laborers using animal imagery; Sinclair has all of the subtlety of a propagandist. In fact, his characterization of the powerlessness of the Packingtown class is so effective that Jurgis's self-realization has less emotional force than the chapters that precede it. The optimism of Sinclair's conclusion, in other words, is less convincing than his *tour de force* of the brutality of the economic and social forces that have converged upon the lives of Jurgis, his family, and his peers.

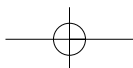
This characterization of a human world driven by animal, bestial instincts was central to the naturalist fiction being published in the United States at the turn of the century. “Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind,” Dreiser writes in *Sister Carrie*. “Our civilisation 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.” Chapter Four of this volume takes up the emergence of



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American naturalism, and its relation to realism, in more detail. For now, we wish to note the way in which naturalists – among whom we might include Henry Adams – believed that these primitivist forces were being unleashed in the world. They contended that the forces of market capitalism existed as extensions of or arenas for this animality. Frank Norris titled the first part of his “Epic of the Wheat” trilogy *The Octopus* (1901) – a naming of the railroad as an insatiable beast whose hunger can neither be subdued nor whose will affected by human intervention. At the conclusion of the first chapter, a character imagines a passing locomotive as a “symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus.” The locomotive is not simply these things itself, but a “symbol” of them, for the true force that Norris seeks to reckon with goes beyond any single object, but rather is elemental and universal; indeed, it extends to the land itself. The novel ends with an agent of the railroad, a speculator and land broker, buried in an avalanche of wheat: “a prolonged roar, persistent, steady, inevitable.” The wheat is greater than any person who would attempt to control it, a symbol of the global, natural forces that will always prevail over the wills of even the most potent individuals.

The emphasis on animality in Norris has a definitively masculine cast. As Gail Bederman and others have described, the turn of the twentieth century was a moment in which white manhood was widely considered to be in jeopardy from both the emasculation of “over-civilization” and competition from non-white peoples. For this reason, just as fiction worked to expose the brutish nature of American men, Theodore Roosevelt was urging them to engage in the “strenuous life,” and groups such as Ernest Thompson Seton’s Woodcraft Indians (and later the Boy Scouts) were being founded to give a chance for white children to cultivate a relationship to American Indians. Jack London took this primitivist turn even further in his highly popular dog novels *Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906). In the first, canine protagonist Buck is stolen from a Californian ranch and transported to Alaska, where he awakens to his primal memories of wild life and becomes transformed into the “Ghost Dog” of the wilderness. The latter novel reverses this movement by bringing a dog of the “savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild” into the civilization and domesticity of the south. In both cases, London’s novels attempt to

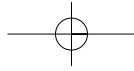


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dramatize the power of social environment over their male, animal protagonists. Progress is measured through the lens of a violent evolutionism, and can only occur when the forces of nature – figured as masculine – are properly recognized.

Male authors and male protagonists (animal or otherwise) were not the only ones, however, who felt the forces of everyday life outstripping the aesthetic conventions that realism and other cultural institutions had developed for the representation of their society. American realism had subsumed much of women's writing under the category of "regional" or the more diminutive label of "local color fiction," but the rich body of work by authors such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman emphasized the role of women in negotiating the relationships among local, national, and even global forces. Terms like "regional" and "local color" may be problematic as names for the complexity of this fiction, but at least they suggest something of the uneasy relationship of such texts to an American realism that still placed male-authored novels at the center. On the other hand, both of these terms are wholly useless when accounting for the kind of female experience depicted by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1899), her Gothic account of the "rest cure," a treatment used for women suffering from nervous ailments. With its first-person monologue, its narrative fragmentation, and its vision of both oppression and release, Gilman's story reads much more like the modernist fiction of the decades that followed it than the prose that had dominated the literary marketplace of the preceding one. She would later write a utopian novel, *Herland* (1915), but never an account of everyday domestic life as conceived by the realists.

Kate Chopin, on the other hand, did begin her literary career writing short fiction of the regionalist variety, two collections of Louisiana tales, *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). *The Awakening* (1899) departs from this set of conventions, though, by focusing away from the material conditions of domestic life and its psychological pressures. Edna Pontellier, Chopin's protagonist, engages in both sexual and romantic affairs outside of her marriage, and decides to take up residence apart from her husband. Her "awakening" takes place only by degrees; she is unable to articulate what compels her to do what she does, it is not a process of clarity or even clarifying self-consciousness. In a passage that describes Edna as she is "beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being," Chopin describes Edna's inner life as "tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning!" What throws Edna into turmoil

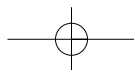


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is her own kind of call from the wild: “The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.”

Edna Pontellier, famously, listens to the voice of the sea, acting on the desires that it represents and then, when she comprehends the difficulty of achieving them, swims out into the ocean in what most readers interpret as a suicide. This kind of ending is more than the failure of consensus that fractures the unifying vision of, say, Howells’s *Hazard of New Fortunes*. Rather, it registers a sense that modernity itself is incapable of assimilating the emotional and psychological currents that are driving Edna Pontellier into the sea. Chopin’s narrative cannot fully explicate those currents. Suggesting them evocatively, rather than articulating them in detail, is part of the dilemma of the novel. The literary imagination of the turn of the twentieth century simply has no space in which a heroine like this can live. Nor is her demise an isolated example. Although written in a style much more fully conversant with the idiom of American realism, Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth* (1905) also ends with its protagonist’s death, another possible suicide, this time the result of a complicated matrix of upper-class social mores and economics. Lily Bart simply cannot afford the life that she wants to live with what she conceives to be honor, and takes an overdose of sleeping medication as she repays her last debt. In doing so, she joins Henry Adams and Edna Pontellier on the honor roll of victims to the “sequence of force” that dominated their age.

By the time ten years had passed in the new century, the arena of American fiction was home to an emerging modernist aesthetic that would confront the forces of spiritual alienation, mass representation, and social violence in significantly different ways from the works of the late nineteenth century. By 1910, Gertrude Stein had woven the interior voices of women into the taut short fiction of *Three Lives* (1907); James Weldon Johnson was a short two years away from publishing his existential masterpiece of the experience of racialization in *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912); and in three years Willa Cather would publish *O, Pioneers!* (1913), the first of her novels that combined the regionalist devotion to place with the questions of feminine desire that sweep Edna Pontillier out to sea. The sense of transition into a new era of American literature was also highlighted by the passing of an icon, for 1910 was also the year of the death of Samuel L. Clemens,





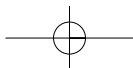
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or Mark Twain, the preeminent figure in American letters during the preceding three decades.

Out of chance beginnings in journalism, Southwestern humor, and travel writing, Mark Twain rose to prominence at the end of the nineteenth century as a representative figure of American literature and culture. During the last decade of his life he enjoyed a fame that transcended conventional boundaries, puckishly (but perhaps accurately) describing himself as “the most conspicuous person on the planet.” As important as his writing had been to the development of the national literary identity of the United States – readers championed his rough-and-tumble tales, his masterful use of dialect, and his balance of nostalgia and critique in narratives about the antebellum nation – was his literary *persona* as “Mark Twain” to marketing him as an American icon. Like Dreiser’s *Carrie*, Mark Twain maintained an incredibly effective (and likeable) artificial naturalness that is at least partially responsible for his enduring reputation.

Still, in spite of his exceptional successes, Mark Twain was not immune to the wrenching forces of the turn of the century. The dynamic world of new technology captured his imagination, and his investments into printing innovations in the early 1890s devastated his finances. In order to repay his creditors and avoid bankruptcy, he started on a world lecture tour and made an agreement to publish anything that he managed to finish. The deaths of two of his three daughters, as well as his brother and his beloved wife, arguably affected just how much he would publish during the last fifteen years of his life, though abundant unfinished manuscripts evince that he persisted in writing through his mourning and personal struggles. Nevertheless, readers of Mark Twain’s later writings – the travel narrative *Following the Equator* (1897) that accompanied his world tour, and short stories such as “The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg” (1899), “The War Prayer” (1905), and “What Is Man?” (1906) – will find darker evolutions from the writings that propelled him to fame.

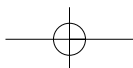
Though the possibility for human goodness does not entirely disappear in the later works, never again is there a literary moment testifying to faith in humanity equal to Huckleberry Finn’s “crisis of conscience,” Huck’s decision to “go to hell” rather than turn his friend Jim in to the authorities. Rather, in the late works we see sympathetic characters unable to free themselves from their cultural conditioning or transcend their natural frailty. When the honesty of a village is put to the test in “The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg,” the righteous citizens self-destruct out of greed, as well as of pride in their own



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righteousness. When a prophet explains to a congregation in “The War Prayer” that any prayer for victory in war calls simultaneously for the suffering, death, and defeat of other human beings, the congregation reaches the consensus that “the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said.” They ineluctably persist in the belief that their prayer is humane and just. The congregation’s disturbingly blithe and narrow assessment of the prophet and his words may reference Mark Twain’s own frustration with attempting to change the world through literature. In “What Is Man?,” an Old Man instructs a Young Man in cynicism and determinism, teaching him that men are but machines which may have a degree of free choice, but certainly do not have free will. The Old Man avers that the choices that people make are choices offered by cultural training. Even virtues – heroism, self-sacrifice, love – all come down to the training of persons to desire them, nothing more.

In “The Turning Point of My Life” (1910), one of the last pieces Twain published before his death, he playfully applies his philosophy of determinism to the trajectory of his own life. He first refutes the title of his piece, declaring that there was no one point in his life that should be given “too much prominence, too much credit.” Instead, he suggests that one point might be more “conspicuous” than others, though “in real importance it has no advantage over any one of its predecessors.” Somewhat ironically, then, he compares young Sam Clemens’ ridiculous decision to actively contract the measles (in order to end his tedious anticipation of contracting the illness) to Caesar’s decision to cross the Rubicon. At once donning comic arrogance and applying determinism to its extreme ends, he asserts, “I was one of the unavoidable results of the crossing of the Rubicon.” The bathetic humor of his approach distracts his readers from the story’s espousal of entropy in the place of meaningful destinies and progressive narratives. Mark Twain maps out how his decision to have the measles led his frustrated mother to apprentice him to a printer to keep him out of trouble, and how his apprenticeship allowed him to wander, how his wandering led him to finding lost money, and how that money financed a journey down the Mississippi (with hopes of leaving for the Amazon), and how he ended up instead apprenticing himself to a river pilot, and so on. Whereas Henry Adams abandons historical narrative when it fails to offer him the force of sense and meaningfulness, Mark Twain revels in its chaos. The dogma of determinism may rob a life of glory, but it also cleanses a life of guilt: Circumstance, not any human being or nation, dictates history. Twain does not conclude with despair but with



his characteristic risibility: "Leaving the Rubicon incident away back where it belongs, I can say with truth that the reason I am in the literary profession is because I had the measles when I was twelve years old." Twain's embrace of the absurdity of the modern condition made him the exception rather than the rule in the turn-of-the-century world in which he lived, but it would fit perfectly with the twentieth century that followed in his wake.

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