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UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM

CHARACTER IN LATER NINETEENTH-CENTURY
AMERICAN NATURALISM

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

BY
DAN SEMMENS

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Character in Later Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism

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1988

This study considers American literary naturalism written at the close of the nineteenth century, focusing on Stephen Crane's Maggie and The Red Badge of Courage, Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie, and Frank Norris' McTeague.

I intend to show that intellectual postulates and physical realities emerging during the latter nineteenth century in America encouraged the appearance of literary naturalism. Evolutionary thought and industrialization contributed conspicuously to the strain of pessimism that naturalism propounds.

I contend that naturalism is a combination of realism and romance. It utilizes a realistic presentation, but posits the argument of romance fiction.

Character, I propose, is crucial to the naturalistic argument. Crane, Dreiser, and Norris refuse to engage a language that lends character willed thought or action.

Symbolism, imagery, the use of a passive voice, and the naming process are employed to compromise the individual's autonomy. The overriding means of diminishing the self, I intend to demonstrate, is achieved through irony. These naturalistic authors' verbal processes soften ingrained perceptions of the world by refusing to signal meaning.

In Maggie Crane's ironical art submerges the self beneath the Bowery's codes, while in The Red Badge of Courage it reveals a self that is over-eager to impose meaning. In Sister Carrie Dreiser's patterning of incident shows a self that is directed by a complex of never-understood impulses. In McTeague Norris depicts a self struggling unsuccessfully to escape deterministic and environmental forces.

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1. American Literary Naturalism: An Introduction

The aim of this study is twofold: to describe one period of American naturalistic fiction in literary terms; and to explore the authorial treatment of character in such fiction. The first topic for consideration, since it is only intended to inform and complement the second, will not be treated exhaustively. The definition of the term "naturalism" has been provided by a number of critics: for example, Lars Åhnebrink in his study Naturalism in America researches the origin of naturalism thoroughly and presents a number of definitions of the word. Additional definitions can be found in C. C. Walcutt's American Naturalism: The Divided Stream, Donald Pizer's Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth Century American Literature, and Lilian Furst's Naturalism. The description of naturalistic writing during a brief period of American fiction is included here only to establish the groundwork from which the reader can consider a certain kind of character. The novels most relevant to this study are Stephen Crane's Maggie and The Red Badge of Courage, Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie, and Frank Norris' McTeague.

When we use the term "character" we are talking about a characteristic of a literary work. It is a descriptive term which identifies something within a text, and becomes less relevant and easily misconstrued when estranged from the text. Character is a product of the author's vocabulary. Words are the origin of character. When we discuss a Mr. X in the novel we do not mean so much a man composed of body, mind, and soul, we mean more a thing composed of syntax and semantics.



Speaking of the character Ishmael and the girl who lives across the street are two different things entirely.

If we discuss character in the same terms that we speak of "the girl who lives across the street," we are guilty of naïveté. Such an analysis, though it might be interesting, exists largely outside the realm of literary discourse. It would have some critical value simply by its reference to a work of literature, yet the analysis is too susceptible to personal moral persuasion. The means of communication is not the text, but the person who performs the analysis. Interpretation of character as person is an exercise divorced from the medium that it attempts to address, and rarely has substantial literary value. Thus we must temper our interpretation of character with the language that generates it, rather than imposing upon the language our interpretation of character.

If character is but the product of language, it might seem contradictory or unsound to consider character at all. And unless character is kept in literary perspective, such could well be the case. Character, though, is a means of orientating our discussion. In fiction acts and thoughts are voiced through character as it responds to or dictates the events into which it is placed. Character is a device by which we can approach the text; it offers us a means to enter the written page. C. H. Rickword has challenged this position:

'character' is merely the term by which the reader alludes to the pseudo-objective image he composes of his responses to an author's verbal arrangements. Unfortunately that image once composed, it can be criticized from many irrelevant angles—its moral, political, social, or religious significance considered, as though it possessed actual objectivity, was a figure of the inferior realm of life.¹

Rickword is assuming that we are speaking of character in the same fashion that we speak of "the girl who lives across the street"; but this is an abuse of the term "character," which we know to be determined

primarily by words. It is a device, one of many, that is at once of language and informs the discussion of language. As it cannot exist independent of the process that creates it, character is a means of literary exploration not an end, but through a conscientious exploration of character we can discuss literature fruitfully.

Thus, to avoid misrepresentation, particular reference must be made to the way that character is mediated through language. Though Maggie might be thought a girl born into regrettable circumstance, and Henry Fleming might be thought a boy exposed to the fury of battle, and Carrie Meeber might be thought a girl who discovers magnificent success in the big city, and McTeague might be thought a dentist residing on Polk Street, none of them actually exists. They "exist" instead by a "compact" between author and reader in which the writer produces something that the reader agrees to believe in. The creative process of fiction demands that the reader accepts the author's language and by doing so the reader "enters" the fictive world.

This study, though, will seek to ascertain meanings outside the boundaries of strict linguistics. As David Lodge says, "It is the essential characteristic of modern linguistics that it claims to be a science. It is the essential characteristic of literature that it concerns values. And values are not amenable to the scientific method."² This thesis will contend that the text is not self-referential, that the meaning of language transcends the written page, and seeks to find answers and reach conclusions beyond the realm of words. As such, character will be discussed in terms of stylistics; an attempt will be made to formulate a "message" through the use of character. Language will support and enhance the discussion. To avoid, or to minimize decoding the "message" with a distorting personal bias, we return to the vocabulary of fiction.

Though in terms of style complete objectivity seems an impossibility, thorough reference to language should validate the discussion.

Through the language of the works considered it will be proposed that this period of American naturalism generates a kind of character notable for its lack of completeness, or to adopt Forster's term, "roundness." Instead of an effectual self comprehending experience and determining outcome, the naturalistic self becomes an ambivalent figure in a world that is ultimately meaningless, or that does not reveal its meaning to man. Character in this period of American naturalism seems incidental; included merely as a device to show the inappropriateness of man's egotistical self-perception. This character is superfluous, often pretending to some great importance, but finally seen as a comically insignificant creature. It often presumes the posture of dominating existence, of controlling result, but can act only under the influence of external constraints and compulsions that are rarely appreciated and never understood. It is a character that through the authorial manipulation of language is stripped of willed action.

In the introduction to Seven Novelists in the American Naturalist Tradition, C. C. Walcutt identifies this same subversion of the naturalistic character. He speaks of the novel's historical progression largely in terms of character. The novel began, claims Walcutt, simply as the telling of an event. Gradually more attention was given to the actor until the "hero" emerged. Next the hero's actions were conceived as separate from the deed; a quantum leap for the significance of character in the novel. At this point character is seen as more than simply responding to critical situations, but is thinking, contemplating, evaluating. Character at this stage of the novel's development has attained a considerable amount of autonomy. Finally, Walcutt states, character evolves to a point where in

naturalism the individual becomes a mere thread in the fabric of fiction, just another element in the forces that play upon the literary world. Character sacrifices the freedom that it had gained with the introduction of the discrete hero. Though it is not the purpose of this thesis to trace the development of character, Walcutt's contention that the naturalistic self is diminished is amenable and supportive to this study's overriding concern. As Walcutt suggests, character in naturalistic works is reduced substantially.

Because fiction reflects and occasionally anticipates the thought of the culture in which it is written, it will be informative to begin by recalling briefly those factors in late nineteenth-century America that instigated, or contributed to, the appearance of literary naturalism.

The years bound by the end of the Civil War and the onset of the twentieth century affected America profoundly. These years provided, at least in part, the impetus for the writings of Crane, Dreiser, and Norris and their critical acceptance. Within these decades a pervasive transition occurred in the United States. Institutions were uprooted, politics reconsidered, and the economy was restructured. The intellectual climate of the Gilded Age, or the latter decades of the nineteenth century, cannot be characterized easily. It is a complex period of multiple and divergent thought which goes far beyond the scope of this thesis. It cannot, however, be ignored entirely as the thought of the age sheds much light on the literary works considered.

Amongst the multifarious intellectualizing which spanned from the transcendentalists to the determinists, a powerful pessimistic strain of thought emerged that is particularly relevant to naturalism. Such thought did not necessarily predominate during the tumultuous Gilded Age, and it had its origins from abroad. Systems of science that had prevailed since

the Renaissance were being questioned by geologists, naturalists, and philosophers. New postulates in various areas of thought suggested through reference to the sciences that man might not have a special place in the universe. Such thought challenged the Judaeo-Christian belief that man existed on a privileged plane between the divine on one hand and the animal kingdom on the other. Perhaps, these proposed modes of interpretation insinuated, man's self-centered perception of himself was unwarranted.

Man's providential conception of the universe was called into question. Scientific evidence and abstract reasoning cast doubt on traditional assumptions of value that essentially derive from a dualistic perception of the cosmos, treating conventional sources of meaning with considerable skepticism. Dualism is so ingrained in Western thought that we virtually always evaluate experience with such qualitative terms as good or evil, right or wrong, mind or matter, love or hate. Such designations, often unconsciously formulated, presume that we have effective interpretive abilities and the freedom of choice; that we can comprehend and judge astutely. The strain of pessimistic thought that manifested itself in American literary naturalism tended to discount the implications of duality. It suggested instead that man's claim to willed action which derives from knowable choice is highly suspect. Man's propensity to endow events with meaning, the naturalist contends, is faulty at best, but more often simply inappropriate.

American naturalistic fiction from 1892 to 1900 rarely protests social conditions, rather it presents a genuine portrayal of circumstance. Maggie does not indict prostitution, The Red Badge of Courage neither praises nor disdains battle, Sister Carrie does not condemn infidelity, and McTeague does not damn sadism. If there is an element of moralizing in these works,

it is evidenced in the depiction of conventional sources of morality as either detrimental or essentially futile. For instance, it is the Johnson's dimly conceived notion of traditional morality that leads Maggie to suicide, and through forceful irony Crane attacks the destructiveness of such shallowly examined morality. Nonetheless, most naturalism appears to refrain from value judgements.

This skeptical treatment of dualism was representative of a period in American history that held conventional thought suspect. During the Gilded Age America was in a period of religious, political, intellectual, social, and economic turmoil. Challenging the country's established truths was the dominant feature of the last three and a half decades of the nineteenth century. A characteristic pre-Civil War faith in individualism, progress, and a democracy solidly founded on a Christian moral order was reconsidered. New ideas brought old beliefs into doubt. Industrialization, executives excluded, made a mockery of individualism and progress as self-employed crafts disappeared, overcrowding and poverty spread, work became systematized, and agrarian spaciousness and self-reliance gave way to urban confinement. In Social Problems (1883) Henry George complained that the current use of machines is "absolutely injurious," "rendering the workman more dependent; depriving him of skill and of opportunities to acquire it; lessening his control over his own condition and his hope of improving it; cramping his mind, and in many cases distorting and enervating his body."³ The end of the frontier in America forced people to apprehend a finite universe where one could no longer boldly strike out alone to find riches; where the promise that tomorrow offered more than the present was no longer necessarily true. Overland routes had been forged to the shores of the Pacific, telegraph wires connected East with West, railways spanned the country, and cities

like San Francisco began to displace the freedom evinced by the open land. Faith in a democracy wavered in the Gilded Age. The postulate of a God who created everything including man's conscience, who would naturally enact His moral law for the new American government, could not be rectified with scientific evidence. Charles Darwin's evolutionary thought did not present a benevolent, providential universe, but an indifferent, purposeless cosmos. Thoughtful religionists could not dismiss Darwin's evolution, so they modified their beliefs, forsaking traditional assumptions. John Fiske and Henry Ward Beecher abandoned Calvinistic doctrines like original sin, the fall of man, and predestination. Societal considerations also changed as William Graham Sumner, relying on Herbert Spencer's theories, suggested a world where all were not equal, but where the strong reaped rewards through fierce competition, while the weak had to suffer. Lester Ward vigorously criticized Sumner's views by debunking Nature and demonstrating the efficacy of the mind, and offered in its stead his nontraditional sociocracy to rid society of inequalities by scientifically founded legislation. William James, another skeptic of Social Darwinism, rejected the precision of any monistic system, yet also repudiated Christian dualism. Instead James conceived a pluralistic, contingent, and "open universe" where truths were relative and dependent upon their practicality, their functional worth. On the economic front the classicism of Adam Smith, Malthus, and Ricardo, which had been adopted unquestioningly in America, was challenged by Veblen. He attributed ancient class characteristics to man's economic state and substantiated his claims by anthropological research. In short, no discipline of the age escaped from fundamental reconsideration.

Within this intellectual and occupational revolution it seems that the two forces that might be said to have most promoted naturalistic

sympathies were evolutionary thought and industrialization. One strongly influenced the thought of the Gilded Age, the other profoundly affected physical realities. One is theoretical, the other is actual, and both encouraged pessimism. Even this focused analysis of the pessimistic strain in American thought is far too broad to be approached in any depth here, but as both forces play directly on the literature of this study, it will be informative to consider them.

Darwin's Origin of Species, which encountered sometimes grudging but almost unanimous acceptance in the scientific community of the United States during the Gilded Age, added considerable fuel to the argument of those who doubted man's significance. The implications of Darwin's book went far beyond biology to attack, though this was not the author's intent, Western man's interpretation of himself as a preferred and special creature in the universe. As his evolutionary mechanism, natural selection, is random and not necessarily intended for purposeful effect, it indicates a nonteleological universe. Darwin raised the possibility that man did not come into being for a specified or comprehensible reason, but that his emergence is indeterminate, and perhaps accidental. Popular Darwinism went further and challenged the existence of the divine while refuting any claims to man's superiority. In the Popular Darwinist's perception of the universe man forsook his egotistical identity and the ability to choose.

Darwin's claims are not compatible with a deterministic philosophy, but the ultimate effect of each is the same. A random universe, and a determined universe, though the means are at odds, essentially render the same result by eliminating freedom of choice. While Darwin's theory implies a nondirected universe where chance prevails, the determinists indicate a rigidly predictable world where incidents inexorably occur. Yet

as each rejects willed thought and action they share a common bond.

Determined and random events coexist in the American naturalistic fiction of the final decade of the nineteenth century. Deterministic sentiments are revealed repeatedly, be they in Maggie's unwavering suicidal journey to the river, Henry Fleming's first uncontrolled march into battle, Carrie Meeber's innate ability to please the audience, or McTeague's inherited volatile disposition lying beneath his stupidly docile exterior. An accompanying randomness is signalled by such references as the verb in Crane's much-alluded to sentence, "The girl, Maggie, blossomed in a mud-puddle.", or the recurring directionless and purposeless shots fired by Henry Fleming and his fellow soldiers, or the safe door unaccountably slamming shut on Hurstwood, or Trina's freak lottery success.

By taking natural selection to its logical conclusion, Darwin formulated the theory of common descent which asserts that all organisms, man included, have a shared ancestor. With this man is wholly associated with the animal kingdom. Man does not exist, Darwin suggests, on a separate and superior plane, but is the result of countless variations of innumerable species. Thus, man shares, or is derivative of, many of the traits frequently reserved for the animal kingdom. In the naturalistic fiction considered here, such primordial urges as the desire to dominate, overpowering sexual attraction, and fierce competition are given conspicuous attention. Crane, Dreiser, and Norris continually remind the reader, particularly through imagery, of mankind's intimate animalistic ties.

These three authors were aware undoubtedly of evolutionary thought as it was a prominent topic of discussion throughout the Gilded Age. "Darwin's Origin of Species (1859), however, was read by almost every

literate American sooner or later."⁴ And they were also clearly acquainted with the social application of evolutionary thought. Primarily formulated by Herbert Spencer in First Principles, Social Darwinism was embraced eagerly by the America of the Gilded Age. Richard Hofstadter tells us that, "With its rapid expansion, its exploitative methods, its desperate competition, and its peremptory rejection of failure, post-bellum America was like a vast human caricature of the Darwinian struggle for existence and survival of the fittest."⁵ The country's competitive economy, individualism, hurried growth, material values, laissez-faire sympathies, and pragmatic philosophy meshed well with Spencer's evolutionary thought. Spencer's overriding theme was that the unifying element in all human endeavors is progress, an assertion not necessarily consistent with Darwin's theory. Social Darwinism holds a dualistic conception of the universe suspect by claiming that such considerations are irrelevant and ultimately unknowable. Instead of a value-laden interpretation of the universe, Spencer contended that the successful individual merely adapts to circumstance in the most beneficial manner. Man becomes greatly simplified in a basic equation where those best fitted to survive flourish, while those ill-equipped perish.

Spencer's concept of progress consisted of two elements. By combining the law of conservation of energy, or what he called "the persistence of force," with evolution, Spencer concluded that all life proceeded from an incoherent homogeneity to a coherent heterogeneity.⁶ Because persistent force could more easily affect homogeneous organisms, they were unstable and vulnerable to change, while the heterogeneous organisms were not so susceptible to the forces of Nature. Thus evolution, which for Spencer combined the Larmarckian idea of acquired characteristics and the Darwinian concept of natural selection, always

tended towards the complex. Eventually, since evolution could not continue indefinitely, a state of equilibrium would result where Nature would function ideally. Death and life would form a harmonious pattern of disintegration and integration with no waste, and with benefit to all. Spencer contended that "evolution can only end in the establishment of the greatest perfection and the most complete happiness."⁷

This philosophical system was absolute. If one adapted well to the environment, then one would succeed; if one did not, then one would perish. The phrase "survival of the fittest" summarized his social perspective. Individual competition would determine those deserving life, and the resulting humanity would have perfect adaptability. Spencer declared that the poor and weak must die: "If they are not sufficiently complete to live, they die; and it is best that they should die."⁸ because "The whole effort of nature is to get rid of such, to clear the world of them, and make room for better."⁹

In the language of naturalism characters frequently participate in a Spencerian society of brutal competition, but they do so unintentionally, without any valuable effect. Pete and Mrs. Johnson, for instance, adapt to their environment and survive while Maggie, as she cannot adapt, perishes, but the fact that the two do survive is not deemed desirable. This same lack of consequential design might be seen in Carrie Meeber's success and in Hurstwood's failure.

In addition to the impact of evolutionary thought, naturalism was deeply influenced by the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. Economically the United States was very much in a state of transition during the Gilded Age. The country was shifting from a primarily land-based economy to a primarily industrial-based economy with rapid urban expansion. Overcrowding and undesirable living conditions for thousands

ensued; a condition aggravated by waves of poor, frequently illiterate immigrants from Europe. In America the free land had disappeared. The luxury of unexploited space, as Frederick Jackson Turner stressed in his influential paper "Significance of the Frontier in American History," had been the source of the country's "fierce love of freedom," but by the nineteenth century much of the nation's land had been settled. Those refusing to succumb to the call of industrialization by remaining in rural areas suffered from dire poverty as the giant investment market focused upon the more lucrative industrial sector. Hamlin Garland's works, particularly Main Travelled Roads, captured the despair experienced by those hapless residents of the Middle Border.

Though America was not fully industrialized during the Gilded Age, it became clear that modes of labor were to change significantly. As machines began to grow in importance, the craftsman and the entrepreneur became less vital. With the advent of industrialization the individual could not so readily forge an independent career, and with growing regularity one had to conform to a manufacturing system to earn wages. Instead of the old means of division along sectional lines, Americans grouped themselves occupationally as farmers, wage earners, industrialists, or businessmen.¹⁰ Loss of regional identity and the rigid categorization of work clouded self-perception.

If they do not dwell on the particular effects of industrialization, Crane, Dreiser, and Norris were certainly familiar with the degrading conditions instigated by industrialization and rapid urban development. Whether in the Bowery, in the slum districts of Chicago and New York, or in San Francisco's Polk Street, these authors were keenly observant of the city environment, and seemed at once attracted and repelled by what they saw. With the exception of The Red Badge of Courage, the

industrialized city is a powerful force in the novels. Through the language of these works the city becomes omnipresent, influencing, often dictating its inhabitants' thoughts and actions. Character conforms to the daunting force of the city, becoming trivial in the depersonalizing mass of a tremendous population. Having lived in impoverished urban conditions, Crane and Dreiser were intimate with the sway of the slums, while Norris, though not exposed at length to urban squalor, witnessed it and frequently commented upon it.

These considerations give us a basis from which to explore the American naturalism of the end of the nineteenth century, but they do not adequately identify such literature. It is not the intent of this thesis to describe naturalism precisely, but an understanding of its literary construction will aid the comprehension of character. Defining naturalism is a treacherous task, as it is not susceptible to a simple definition, and it may be signalled in numerous ways. Emile Zola coined the term "naturalism" for literary application, but his definition of the word, which seems inappropriate for much of his own writing, is also unhelpful when it comes to describing American naturalistic fiction. He directed his definition towards prescribing a method of writing in which the author relinquishes control over his characters, leaving them, once created, as subject to conditions of heredity and environment. Paul Alexis, Zola's most ardent supporter, felt that naturalism is "A way of thinking, of seeing, of reflecting, of studying, of making experiments, a need to analyze in order to know, rather than a particular style of writing."¹¹

The American critic George J. Becker says,

in intent and in origin naturalism is no more than an emphatic and explicit philosophical position taken by some realists, showing man caught in a net from which there can be no escape and degenerating under those circumstances; that is, it is pessimistic materialistic determinism.¹²

As these definitions suggest, naturalism has been interpreted frequently in a philosophical and scientific manner; meanings in part derivative of the historical application of the term "naturalism" which originally had no literary association. Though all of these definitions are informative, and none could be said to be wrong, it seems that they do not encompass entirely the broad implications of the term, particularly in its strict literary manifestations. It is because of the multiple and varied meanings associated with the term "naturalism" that we should be wary of formulating a precise definition.

Those definitions of a literary nature that limit the term to a variety of realism appear especially shortsighted. Critics are prone to confine naturalism within the boundaries of realism. Stuart P. Sherman sees naturalism as "facing unabashed the facts of life."¹³ Some critics have even said that the two modes of fiction are synonymous. "Realism and Naturalism are merely one and the same thing."¹⁴ Certainly naturalism has realistic elements. In fact, the entire descriptive function of a naturalistic work could be said to be composed of realistic sympathies. The naturalistic world is depicted plausibly; as we would expect it to be in "real" life. This objective portrayal of diligently observed reality is often considered a particular variety of realism, differentiated by its frequent allusion to scientific doctrines and a deterministic philosophy.

It is the purports of realism that seem incompatible with naturalism. Realism claims to be largely unprogrammed and detached from the author. The techniques of realism seek to establish the impression of objectivity and disinterestedness. They intend to disguise the promotion of theme so that within the limits of received information the reader is not pushed towards a particular conclusion. Naturalism, though, at least in that period of American fiction considered in this thesis, appears to be

structured in such a way that a "message" is programmed, and events are authorially manipulated to register that "message." Through emphasis on pattern, symbol, and allegory, naturalism, like romance fiction, presents an argument. Thematically and structurally, naturalism might be described in part, as a variety of literature programmed to deny traditional modes of thought and meaning. To transmit a pessimistic strain of thought effectively, naturalism must transcend the borders of realistic writing. Along with a realistic viewpoint, American naturalism at the end of the nineteenth century adopts the argumentative form of traditional romance fiction.

Frank Norris has acknowledged the intermingling of literary modes in naturalism. He assesses the literary form as follows:

Is it permissible to say that Accuracy is realism and Truth romanticism? I am not so sure, but I feel that we come close to a solution here. . . . Does Truth after all 'lie in the middle'? And what school, then, is midway between the Realists and the Romanticists, taking the best from each? Is it not the school of Naturalism, which strives hard for accuracy and truth?¹⁵

Norris' definition is useful because it affirms a mix of literary modes in naturalism; however, for the purposes of this thesis it should not be over-emphasized. The objection to his definition here is his use of the term "romanticism." It becomes clear through his essay "Frank Norris' Weekly Letter—August 3, 1901," the origin of the above definition, that by romanticism he means that fiction which attempts to substantiate the existence of a transcendent Truth beyond rational experience, of confirming a "reality" behind reality. He speaks of a Truth perceived by intuition or received by faith, and with its irrational or super-rational implications such a Truth seems incompatible with the scientific underpinnings of naturalism. As will be discovered, the romance fiction stressed in this study proposes a Truth that is more readily demonstrable.

Nonetheless, by identifying a combination of literary modes in naturalism Norris aids our comprehension of the fiction.

Naturalism, it has been suggested, could be said to be realistic in viewpoint, but to express a "message" through romance elements. As such a designation is dependent on the artificial application of literary terminology it warrants qualification. That no work of fiction falls entirely within the critical definition of a literary mode is clear. Consequently the danger of defining a body of literature by the use of critical terminology is that the definition will either be too narrow, thus excluding all but one or two works, or that it will be too broad, thus including a diverse and unrelated collection of works. Since describing naturalism as a combination of realism and romance functions well throughout the American naturalistic works of the final decade of the nineteenth century, such a description cannot be faulted for being too narrow. However, this partial identification of naturalism is too broad to stand by itself. Many novels might be branded a combination of realism and romance (Moby Dick and Huckleberry Finn to name just two), thus this description of naturalism suffers from being too inclusive.

It is the nature of naturalism's "message" that finally differentiates it from other fictional modes. However, especially with an avowed interest in stylistics, naturalistic fiction is difficult to discuss because of the nature of its "message." "Style is the means," says David Lodge, "by which the writer, or in linguistic jargon 'encoder,' ensures that his 'message' is 'decoded' in such a way that the reader not only understands the information conveyed, but shares the writer's attitude towards it."¹⁶ The word "message" may seem if not inappropriate, then vaguely foreign to naturalism. In fact since naturalism tends to deny meaning or play down purpose, it might appear particularly compatible with a structuralist

examination. Without a message language would then be the only concern of naturalistic fiction. The reason that naturalism might appear to lack a "message" is the paradoxical nature of its "message." It is not that such fiction does not affirm meaning, rather it affirms the lack of meaning. Its "message" is that there is not a meaningful "message." In naturalism, then, an argument is advanced through irony. By denying the conventional messages we find in other fictions, naturalism refutes culturally ingrained beliefs.

Because the naturalism of late nineteenth-century American fiction proceeds by this paradoxical process of denial, it generates a particular kind of novel. As with romance fiction, naturalistic novels depict events normally laden with meaning, but where romance affirms meaning, naturalism deprives events of meaning. One of the most prevalent types of romance fiction is the initiation story, which insists on positing meaning. The very designation "initiation" connotes some type of growth, of development, of understanding. Maggie, The Red Badge of Courage, Sister Carrie, and McTeague can all be seen as novels of initiation. Maggie Johnson is initiated into the realities of Bowery life, Henry Fleming is initiated into the fury of battle, Carrie Meeber is initiated into the life of the big city, and McTeague is initiated into his first experience of love. But where in romance fiction we assign meaning to such events, the naturalistic author refuses us the satisfaction of doing so. The "message" or the "Truth" of naturalism is transferred through a structure that would appear to validate meaning, but that ultimately asserts the inappropriateness of assigning meaning. It attacks our stereotyped world of routine impression by suggesting that the meaningful associations that we make habitually should be reconsidered. It is a type of fiction that lulls us into complacency about the human condition because it plays upon

familiar themes—the girl discovering the bitter truth about life, the boy maturing through battle, the small town girl "making it" in the big city, the man encountering true love—but it startles us from these familiar modes of expression by refusing to live up to expectations. To transmit a "message" devoid of meaning, to assert a truth about the inappropriateness of exacting purpose, naturalism refers to a literary structure that is programmed to elicit meaning. Its message is passed through a deceptive form of communication.

At least in method it seems correct to associate the works of Crane, Dreiser, and Norris considered in this study with traditional romance fiction. Though the truths expressed in each fictional mode are at odds, they share the same objective: convincing the reader of a particular perception of the universe. Thus the form of such works as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, The Pilgrim's Progress, and Dr. Faustus is reflected in the naturalism of late nineteenth-century America. In their effort to convince, both fictions make use of highly patterned plot and character types. Their conclusions, however, are diametrically opposed. Authors of romance such as Bunyan, Marlowe, or Spenser depict a universe where acts have direct consequence. They implicitly assume a dualistic universe with rewards and punishments based on a Christian moral order. The world romance authors depict has a readily deducible system of cause and effect. Acts produce predictable results. It is an optimistic world of causation, often expressed in allegorical fashion. Positive virtues—honesty, devotion, compassion, dedication, oppose negative urges—lust, laziness, greed, pride. The exploits of romance characters serve as lessons. In a world of right and wrong, they show us how we ought to behave.

Naturalism adheres to this same argumentative method, but with its

pessimistic overtones it ironizes any morally causal relationships. The moral code of romance fiction is denied in naturalism as stringent cause and effect becomes casual and irreducible. Action with a satisfying consequence is shown to be beyond man's capacity to will. By adopting a romance structure familiar to the point of cliché and then stripping the cliché of its attendant meaning, Crane, Norris, and Dreiser sharpen the perception of a world without purpose. It is a world where traditional meaning fails. The girl drifts into whoredom and suicide, though she is innocent; the soldier is perceived as a hero, though he lacks courage, lies, and fights with senseless abandon; the small town girl succeeds magnificently, though she leads a conventionally immoral existence; the "dentist" is captured and presumably dies with his captor, though this is not depicted as just recompense. None of these occurrences are given approval or disapproval, they are only representative of fortune, good or bad, and the forces that play upon characters. In the absence of purpose no lesson can be found.

Because of this incongruous juxtaposition of method and theme, the American naturalistic novel of the latter nineteenth century resounds with irony. The pervasive irony of these works is noted extensively by Eric Solomon in Stephen Crane: From Parody to Realism, and it is mentioned by Donald Pizer in Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth Century American Literature and by Milne Holton in Cylinder of Vision. A parodic effect results from using a method that conditions the anticipation of conventional consequence, one that is associated with reinforcing pre-established Truths, but that ultimately resists traditional values. By imposing a structure that ostensibly insists on meaning, but that actually implies the absence of meaning, an ironic effect is accomplished. By utilizing the argumentative form of, but not the argument of romance

fiction, naturalism questions our cultural assumptions. It prepares us for one interpretation, but by frustrating expectation it leaves us with the opposite.

Through an example we might more thoroughly appreciate the usefulness, and indeed the need of a romantic structure in naturalistic fiction. A valuable reference is Mark Twain, an author with whom Crane, Norris, and Dreiser were familiar, and an author who incorporated both realistic and romantic elements into his fiction. Twain, with the assistance of Charles Dudley Warner, coined the term "Gilded Age," and he was astutely aware of the pervasive transition taking place during this period of American history. In many ways his perception of this period aligns him with the sympathies of the naturalistic authors considered in this thesis.

Twain changed significantly during his lifetime. As he matured, he became increasingly pessimistic: his short stories attest to this. The jocular, light-hearted tales like "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1865) or "The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut" (1876) gave way to serious, troublesome stories like "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1899) or The Mysterious Stranger (1916). By the end of the Gilded Age his humor-filled admiration of the human race was shattered; man became trivial and absurd, and his fiction indicted man for assuming a false importance. The elder Twain could write "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," a work that plainly tended towards cynicism, and, as death approached, he could write The Mysterious Stranger, a work that is blatantly pessimistic.

In order to accommodate his growing pessimism, Twain had to adjust his literary technique. At first he favored the use of realism to voice his discontent with man's perception of mankind; however, as his bitterness

grew he found the limits of realism too confining. To describe a futile universe sufficiently, he turned to romance fiction, and in so doing his parallel with American naturalistic authors becomes evident.

"The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" tends towards realism and the condemnation of man is not absolute, while The Mysterious Stranger tends towards romance and the condemnation of man is complete. Given the literary mode that Twain selected for his earlier short story, he could not, nor did he wish to, unleash the entirety of his bitterness towards mankind. Instead Twain contented himself with depicting man as vain and vulnerable, rarely able to see himself honestly, but still capable of recourse. Because the author of the world of Hadleyburg assumes a traditional perspective of a dualistic universe and a population responsible for its destiny, "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" could not affect an extreme posture of hopelessness. For in such a universe man inherently possesses the ability to cause change, to exert a directed influence.

This notion of a telic universe vanishes when Twain writes The Mysterious Stranger. In the work our pre-established beliefs are undermined as expectations conflict with outcome. Twain upsets the reader by encouraging culturally ingrained associations through a romance structure, but he alters the consequences, thus creating an unbreachable gap between assumed Truths and revealed Truths. The contrast between romance elements and unconventional truths is glaring in The Mysterious Stranger largely because Twain's Satan is so dominant and unequivocal. Only by adopting a romance fiction structure could Twain fully exploit the breadth of his pessimism. He used the literary mode as a vehicle to disappoint cultural assumptions, to ironize conventional beliefs. Twain's Satan continually frustrates our expectations, destroying our preconceived notions, deriding our morality, and mocking our supposed significance.

The conventional morality of "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" implies the existence of a proper means of behavior, and the ability to determine, decide, and act in accordance with this behavior. Within such a framework man can change. Hadleyburg changes its name and motto and is once again considered an honest town. The short story suggests that Twain now sees man as greedy and self-centered, but his realism still affords man the possibility of making amends.

Effective action and the possibility of eventual redemption are denied in The Mysterious Stranger. Though Twain's Satan becomes almost stiflingly predominate as he directs all thought and action, he is the mechanism Twain must have to voice his pessimism. With a supernatural character Twain has the ability to posit Truths, whereas before he could only describe. When juxtaposed against a conventional backdrop the effect is dramatic.

Opposed to the realism of "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" where Twain merely records the incidents of a story, in the romance of The Mysterious Stranger Twain argues a case, attempting to substantiate Truths. As the tone acquires a menacing gloom and the bitter irony of The Mysterious Stranger is revealed, it becomes clear that this romance fiction has been tampered with. Twain has obliterated the romance stage where good and evil contend, replacing it with an oppressive monism. One can sense an impatient author who has tired of subtle jabs at established beliefs and who now forcefully attacks cultural assumptions. We learn through Satan that moral sense is an outrage, that man is insignificant, that life is absolutely determined, that human history is nothing but a record of violence, that people hopelessly conform, that laughter is mankind's only buffer, though insubstantial, against an indifferent cosmos, and with paralyzing finality that all life is an illusion. Twain leaves us

nothing. The hope of a better world, of the possibility of causing significant change that existed in "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" is consumed in a void of futility. He not only negates Christianity, but the possibility of meaning.

To voice his pessimistic sympathies fully Twain had to refer to a romantic structure, and in this respect he shares much in common with Crane, Dreiser, and Norris. Without it, he could not depict a universe wholly devoid of reason, purpose, and meaning. Romance is the vehicle capable of transmitting a philosophically extreme interpretation of the world. Because the persuasion in The Mysterious Stranger has such pessimistic overtones, the elder Twain reveals a sympathy with the naturalistic authors considered in this thesis. However, the novelette cannot finally be thought a work of naturalism. The Mysterious Stranger is too overtly romantic, it strays too far from reality to be termed naturalistic. Its reliance on supernaturalism and unrestrained didacticism is foreign to naturalism, as is Twain's raging bitterness.

The use of a character like Satan, despite his unconventional depiction, conflicts with naturalism by suggesting an ordered universe where those with complete knowledge oversee the affairs of the earth. The presence of Satan indicates the possibility of some higher realm of existence where man, though insignificant, fits tangentially into a universal scheme.

Twain's primary thematic assertions—that man's moral sense causes cruelty, that all life is illusion—vaguely resemble, but do not copy, the Truths of naturalism. The world Twain indicates seems too precise and explainable for naturalistic sentiments. Twain shows us pessimistic meaning, the naturalist suggests that our perception of meaning is without foundation. Instead of morality causing cruelty, naturalism tends to deny

the basis for morality; instead of an absolutely determined universe, naturalism eradicates free will by proposing a world of overwhelming influence and utter randomness; instead of laughter being man's only means to combat an indifferent universe, naturalism tends to deny the efficacy of laughter; instead of stating that life is an illusion, naturalism indicates that life is very real by stripping it of illusion.

¹F. R. Leavis, Towards Standards of Criticism (Bristol: Wishart and Co., 1933), p. 31.

²David Lodge, Language of Fiction (Reading: Cox and Wyman Ltd., 1984), p. 57.

³Alan Trachtenberg, The Incorporation of America (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 43.

⁴Samuel Eliot Morison, The Oxford History of the American People (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 774.

⁵Lars Åhnebrink, Naturalism in America (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1961), p. 8.

⁶Richard Hofstadter, Social Darwinism in American Thought (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 36-37.

⁷Ibid. p. 37.

⁸Paul F. Boller, American Thought in Transition: The Impact of Evolutionary Naturalism, 1865-1900 (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1969), p. 52.

⁹Richard Hofstadter, Op. cit. p. 41.

¹⁰Ralph Henry Gabriel, The Course of American Democratic Thought (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1940), p. 145.

¹¹Lilian R. Furst, Naturalism (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1971), p. 6.

¹²George J. Becker, Documents of Modern Literary Realism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 35.

¹³Ibid. p. 453.

¹⁴Lilian R. Furst, Op. cit. p. 6.

¹⁵Donald Pizer, ed., The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 77.

¹⁶David Lodge, Op. cit. p. 58.

II. Character

Character is an essential element in the novel, since, after all, novels involve persons. Yet curiously many critics pay little attention to character, preferring instead to address other aspects of the novel such as action, theme, or idea. This tendency to overlook character seems to stem from the notion that using character as a means of approaching a literary work critically is "old-fashioned," or even sophomoric. Using character as a means of critical evaluation, however, cannot be dismissed so easily, for character fulfills a vital, not incidental, role in the novel.

But before discussing what character does, we must first consider what character is. Authors make characters and readers agree to accept this. The former have the divine position of creating a fictionalized life; a process that has no parallel in actual experience. As Gilbert Sorrento says of his characters, "These people aren't real. I'm making them up as I go along, any section that threatens to flesh them out or make them 'walk off the page,' will be excized."¹

Beyond the "unreal" act of creation, the process of comprehending character in fiction differs from that of life. Our assessment of character in the novel is the product of an intellectual and analytical undertaking, and entirely ignores concerns of convenience and practicality. Where we are compromised in life upon being introduced to another because we worry ourselves with what the person will think of us, in the fictional world we need not consider social consequence. With fiction the reader's position is more detached and contemplative, and not colored by the need

to attend to social niceties.

As a result of this distancing between the novel and experience, the fictional moment of meeting another lacks the vague properties of intuition and spontaneity on which we frequently rely when making determinations about others. To a certain extent this may be attributed to the fact that much of life is experienced simultaneously while fiction is expressed successively, but it is more than the linguistic process that separates the character in fiction from the person in life. A mighty gulf divides being introduced to someone on the page and being introduced to someone on the pavement. Language can approach, but it cannot capture, the emotive, physical, and chemical "thereness" present when we meet another. The infinite nuances of bodily expression, like the aura of light about the gig lamps that Virginia Woolf speaks of, escape the net of language.

But where fiction fails to assimilate experience absolutely, it provides a wealth of information about others which is rarely, if ever, available in life. Fiction can, depending upon how it is presented, know almost no limits about the self and others.² Because the author's process of creation is complete, we can know the fictional self very intimately. This hardly resembles the scarcity of knowledge we actually have of others' attitudes, provocations, and motives.

Yet fictional characters can only take up house in the literary world. Author's can blow the breath of life into their characters so long as they stay within the confines of fiction, but they cannot endow their characters with the ability to "walk off the page." Character will perish without the literary nourishment that is responsible for its existence.

Because characters dwell in this special world of literary dependence, the extent to which we can know them is at once limited and

great. On the one hand fiction distorts our vision since it cannot "become" experience, while on the other hand it magnifies our vision since it can expand experience. Somewhere in this mixture of hampered perception and enhanced projection is the raw material of character—the stuff of which characters are made—which can, and indeed must, be identified. Before identification is possible, though, the stuff of character must be set in motion so that it can be detected, for it only attains shape and substance when engaged in action. Action precedes the existence of character. Aristotle noted this when he said that the two necessary elements of character are articulation of a situation and a reaction, and contemplation about the world as it affects the self.³ The first consideration is grouped about a moral center (What is right?), the second consideration is grouped about an intellectual center (What is?). Both, however, share the common feature of an indispensable interest in the act of being engaged, in participating in the active world that the author has created. When the character does the character can be known. Until then character is like the latent image on photographic paper; it is only revealed when reacting in a solution.

The character that does nothing appears to pose a serious problem for this conception of the basis of character, as such a character, according to what has just been said, could not exist. But really this is just a problem of interpretation because, in fact, all characters do something. Referring back to Aristotle's definition we find that the process of doing can be realized through two general means: acting and thinking. Given this observation a character cannot not do anything. If a character does not act (as is true of so many post-modern characters), or does not think, then a situation is necessarily implied. Not acting or not thinking is the refusal or the inability to act or think, and indicates

that character is engaged in, or responding to, some condition. Franz Kafka's hunger artist, for instance, becomes a character through negation. The doing of the hunger artist is revealed in his abstention from activity. His "is-ness," or his rough outline of being, becomes known by his refusal to do the expected, not by not doing.

All characters, therefore, do, but some authors cause their characters to engage in more action than others. Characters, which clearly need action in order to come into being, may remain defined by the situation or the author may have them grow so strong that they assume the posture of controlling situation. The form of the novel, though, prevents us from neatly dividing situation and character. A situation is dependent upon character, just as a character is dependent upon situation. The reader perceives one vis-a-vis the other so that a change in one marks a change in the other. Despite this mutual interdependence, it seems that we can differentiate the novel to the extent to which the author emphasizes situation or to the extent to which the author emphasizes character. Characters in some novels are primarily made, while in others they primarily make. Edith Wharton acknowledges this distinction when she says,

To begin, therefore, one may distinguish the novel of situation from that of character and manners by saying that, in the first, the persons imagined by the author always spring out of a vision of the situation, and are inevitably conditioned by it, whatever the genius of their creator; whereas in the larger and freer form, that of character and manners (or either of the two), the author's characters are first born, and then mysteriously proceed to work out their own destinies.⁴

The distinction that Wharton makes arises in the manner that the author portrays the character's reaction to situation—as subordinate to, or as dominant over situation. Speaking generally the character of the former status appears in works that emphasize idea or moral construct and this

character conforms to the needs of the author, while the character of the latter status appears in works that emphasize personal experience and this character emerges through a succession of episodes. In the work of idea or moral construct the character serves a purpose; in the work of personal experience the character is the purpose.

Aristotle's conception of character belongs to the first tradition, for he held that action predominated character. "In a play . . . they do not act in order to portray the characters; they include the characters for the sake of action."⁵ Though we can appreciate Antigone's predicament, Aristotle's language places primary significance on situation. The act of choosing between family or state is most significant, not how well Antigone fulfils her role. On the other hand, Virginia Woolf's conception of character belongs to the second tradition, for she tended to stress the importance of the self. With Woolf situation is perceived mainly through character, and not vice versa. Though Mrs. Dalloway has carefully regulated action, it is the heroine's quest for individual worth that seems primarily significant, not the story of the novel. Lying somewhere between Aristotle and Woolf, somewhere between the character that is drawn and the character that is drawing, rests the Jamesian ideal of character. Henry James said, "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?"⁶ In the novels of James' action and character are equiposed; neither is capable of outstripping the other. For Henry James the world and the will are equal weights that balance the scale of life.

Characters, then, vary from novel to novel, but, of course, they also vary within the novel. In a novel characters are known to different extents. Those known most are those that participate in or dictate the action most, while those known least are those that are engaged minimally

in the action. The standard, though imperfect, means of describing this range of characters is with such labels as "protagonist," "background characters," and "intermediate characters." A protagonist provides the thematic center of the novel. He or she is the character to which the reader can respond most fully, and with whom our sympathies and against whom our antipathies lie. In the "novel of situation" the theme emerges through the situation as the protagonist responds to it, thus revealing the novel's idea of moral construct, while in the "novel of character" the theme emerges through the protagonist as it shapes and interprets the situation, thus revealing the reason for the novel's existence. At the opposite extreme from the protagonist we discover the background characters. These are the characters whom the reader only knows briefly. They enter the stream of action and materialize, perhaps magnificently, perhaps faintly, and though they never vanish entirely, they are referred to sparingly. Yet by illuminating the reader in some manner their image remains in the stream, adding momentum to the flow. Finally, intermediate characters function largely as a means of connection or completion. They fuse ideas or characters, or fill in gaps in the action so that the novel can exist as an integral whole.

Occasionally this means of approaching character is fitted very well to the novel; however, it frequently leads to an incomplete or inappropriate discussion of character. It suffers from requiring rigid compartmentalization. That is, the interdependent fluidity of a novel's construction does not mesh well with the segregated nature of assigning characters to categories. Certainly it can be helpful, but rarely does a novel fit precisely into this systematized structure of character analysis. Even worse, at times the method can plainly mislead because some or all of these categories of characters can be absent from the novel. A novel

need not have a protagonist, nor intermediate or background characters.

A much more adaptable and insightful means of approaching varieties of characters can be found in E. M. Forster's Aspects of the Novel. In his essay on character Forster speaks of dividing characters into flat and round. Simply put, flat characters, known also as "types" or "caricatures," are "constructed round a single idea or quality."⁷ They reside in a single dimension and the curving shape that results from varied features is lacking. Such a character, like Caspar Goodwood, represents an idea. A round character, on the other hand, is capable of "surprising in a convincing way."⁸ Round characters have a depth of response foreign to flat characters. Like J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield, round characters are end products. In a sense they "make" the novel.

Forster's method of character analysis makes it possible to consider character from a viewpoint compatible with the action within the novel, instead of taking character from the novel and relegating it to a pigeonhole. It allows one more ease in discussing character in the context of the novel, rather than making largely arbitrary and not necessarily edifying determinations as to which characters may be given the title of protagonist, or background character, or intermediate character. Forster's conception of character also benefits from being flexible, as all novels have some degree of flat or round characters.

Nonetheless, his method seems unduly critical of flat characters. Despite mentioning two positive attributes of flat characters—that they are easily recognized and that they are memorable—Forster indicates that they are of lesser quality than round characters. He says, "For we must admit that flat people are not in themselves as big achievements as round ones"⁹ While this is supportive to his realistic bias, it seems that flat characters can be "as big achievements as round ones," so long as the

former effectively perform their purpose in the novel. Perhaps round characters are likely to appear more impressive than flat characters because they are more capable of eliciting feeling. Since the flat character tends to serve a purpose and the round character tends to be a purpose, the latter will be more apt to gain the interest of the reader. In the novel's context, though, the flat character that adroitly defines situation is as wonderful as the round character that evokes a sophisticated response. Though he remains essentially flat throughout, Stubb provides a needed philosophical counterpoint to Ahab's singular obsession. If the flat character elucidates action, the accomplishment of keeping a character flat equals the accomplishment of making a character round, particularly if a character stays flat and thematically effective for an extended period. Too much should not be made of this, however, since the problem of judging the quality of round and flat characters does not hinder Forster's actual method, and it remains well suited to exploring character in the novel.

Characters become flat or round based on their relationship to the novel, yet another dimension of character involves the author's relationship to the character. Instead of considering what the author has created, this dimension of character is concerned with how character is made known. Regardless of how character is revealed, an authorial presence or an implied "second-self" is always present. An author, even if cloaked in the costume of another character, cannot write himself out of the novel; the author has a narrative voice. But the unavoidable appearance of the author can range from being virtually undetectable to plainly overt. On the one extreme, indirect narration, the author assumes the guise of character and uses this created voice to tell the tale, while at the other extreme, omniscient narration, the author rejects a borrowed

voice and assumes an all-knowing posture. With the former the author can engage the reader's interest immediately because there is little distance between voice and subject. We have a firsthand account of the action. At the same time this means of telling a tale greatly reduces the author's freedom as the author's limits and the character's limits are the same. With omniscient narration this problem does not arise since such an author may go anywhere and say anything. But an increase in aesthetic distance accompanies this inflated level of freedom. Now the author tells a tale from an outside perspective and the reader may feel estranged; too removed for the tale to have any consequence.

Because of the great freedom of omniscient narration, which all of the naturalistic works to be considered later possess to a degree, it is particularly susceptible to being utilized clumsily. A frequent detrimental application of omniscient narration occurs when the author expounds on the method of creation. Explaining character by suggesting reasons for the actions or thoughts of fictionalized persons dims the outline of character by recalling the method of creation. Consequently the character cannot be affected by the action fully, and the emotional effect on the reader plummets. The author stands between us and character and we have to peer around the obstruction of the writer to get a glimpse of character.

A myriad of point-of-view perspectives exists between the extremes of a first person narrator and overt authorial presence. In the novels of this study a number of point-of-view strategies are employed to depict the self. Crane alters his point-of-view usage to fit his purposes, Dreiser intrudes freely upon the narrative, and Norris, while not entirely successful, seeks to establish the impression of detachment. As will be seen, each method has its particular effect on our understanding of

character.

Here, then, is a general look at character. Considering what character is and is not, how character may be approached, and how character may be presented gives us a better conception of the creature, but it does not offer us an adequate view. In order to appreciate the literary device more fully, we must put character in context.

II

"On or about December 1910 human character changed,"¹⁰ claimed Virginia Woolf. The exact date she offers may be questioned, but the basis for her assertion, however audacious, stands as valid.

Woolf's statement, alluding to the first London exhibition of Post-Impressionist paintings, refers to the fact that at some time during the early 1900's the autonomous individual emerged. When Woolf says "human character" it does not seem that she is referring to the fictionalized self, but to actual people. Yet the mechanism by which she notes the change in "human character" is art, thus she suggests that art and cultural assumptions are interrelated. This study shares Woolf's sentiments by contending that art is not a detached process, but that it emerges as societal concerns emerge. If art does not share societal convictions, then at least cultural beliefs stimulate the appearance of art.

Though this work's major concern lies with those years from 1892 to 1900 when the self nearly vanished, it will be useful to consider the general nature of some of the characters which bounded this period. By doing so it is hoped that various ways of making the self known will be realized, and that these means may be contrasted by implication with the means utilized by naturalistic authors to turn the self into an enigmatic blur. Because such an analysis elucidates this study's primary concern obliquely and not immediately, the exploration of the self from the 1830's to the 1890's, what may widely be called the Victorian self, and the exploration of the self from, say, 1905 to the 1930's, what may widely be

called the modern self, will be summary. This synopsis of a few Victorian and modern selves only intends to search the underlying artistic conception of such selves. Once considered we can then explore the naturalistic self; the self that is so overwhelmed by situation that it becomes an almost indiscernible thread in the fabric of action.

The Victorian self often comes into being through a social context. A Victorian character frequently attains his or her identity in relation to the greater body of society. In the novels of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, or Henry James the characters are revealed commonly by the social condition in which they find themselves. It is through their adherence to, or their rejection of, societal values that they emerge. Though the main character in Victorian fiction may be depicted as having deeply moral convictions, it seems that such a self is primarily defined from without instead of emerging from within. The Victorian self finds its shape in traditional, if elaborate and intricate, underpinnings of society, like family, marriage, friendship, and occupational aspirations. And the shape of this character is largely determined to the extent that it becomes integrated with, or alienated from, society.

For the Victorian author interested in society, the self has a moral center. Characters tend to serve a purpose. They may, like Pip, show us the folly of unrestrained ambition, or like Maggie Tulliver, the senselessness of rebellion, or like Isabel Archer, and here the moral connection begins to weaken, the severe ramifications of personal choice. These Victorian selves inform us by being morally representative of something. Though these selves vary greatly, each provokes a consideration of one's duty to society. Here duty means the sacrifice of the self for the greater good of the whole, and thus highlights the social function of the self. One type of Victorian hero—a Pip, a Maggie

Tulliver, or to a large degree an Isabel Archer—begins with mainly egotistical motivations, but upon realizing his or her foolishness, repentance and submission to the needs of others ensues.

As self-discipline was highly regarded, self-indulgence became reprehensible to many Victorian writers. Suppression and denial, especially of purely natural impulses, was vital to the Victorian conception of society. The stuff of flesh and aggression was swept beneath the carpet of spirituality. Succumbing to instinctual urges was greeted with distaste by most Victorians as it meant an absolute disregard of the ideal of duty. "For instance," says the critic Calvin Bedient, "George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver is brought to see—in agony, awe, and histrionic intensity—that to let go of the 'clue' of Duty is but to wander vaguely, driven by uncertain impulse."¹¹ If the self forsook duty for passionate urges, then the self became disengaged from a meaningful universe and could only float in an ambivalent fog.

This implies that such a Victorian universe is not only knowable, but known. By assigning a definite outcome to action many Victorian novelists inform the reader of a world that is both understandable and understood. Surely other novels possess some causality, but in the Victorian novel the causal chain between action and consequence is usually strong, and vaguely resembles the unfaltering causality of romance fiction. If the reader's perception of character is clouded by ambiguity, Victorian authors like Dickens, Eliot, or James still take the created self through a series of causally prescribed sequences.

Reflecting this highly causal universe is an equally highly patterned plot structure. The relationship between the two is so complete that the framework of many Victorian novels becomes a value in itself. The plot promotes the idea, by a readily deducible system, that the cosmos can and

should be known. Action becomes process, or a means to an end. Character in such a novel is defined by the highly organized stream of action. It cannot transcend the rigidly imposed structure, and therefore remains a product of the plot instead of dictating plot. Pip, Maggie Tulliver, and Isabel Archer fit into the artfully plotted story, they do not direct its course. They are the result of ordered time and conscience, of rational experience, of deliberate events. The stream of action into which the Victorian authors place the self follows a known course that often leads to moral ends.

With modern authors like D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce, the importance of the societal whole became subordinate to the self as the psychological treatment of character grew more subtle and complex. Modern authors tended to free the self from a moral center and, while remaining passive to social circumstance, emphasized discovery. The self's shape was determined less by its moral relationship with a structured and known society, and more by a metaphysical relationship to a universe in constant flux. Like Stephen Dedalus' scribbling on his notebook

Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe¹²

the modern self strives to mesh with a changeable and complex universe.

Unlike the Victorian self, the modern self often becomes more important than plot. Where the former learns lessons through experience, the latter seeks to be experience. Realization of moral values gave way

to realization of a total self. Thus the modern self immerses itself into experience and hopes to absorb all, to feel all, to become a part of the world through which the self moves. Ursula, or Mrs. Dalloway, or Leopold Bloom, are all desirous of escaping the confines of skeleton and skin and absorbing every aspect of life: things, emotions, time, consciousness, flesh.

To some extent the modern self is constructed of the drive, passion, and aggression of the animal world. For D. H. Lawrence the generative stuff of flesh which manifested itself in sexual force provided the key for self and world to become one. For Virginia Woolf this stuff of flesh did not have such power, but it still haunted the recesses of the self. The blood of natural life in Lawrence's self is instinctual, and it throbs thick and rich through his characters' veins, while in Woolf's self it is intuitive, and its delicate composition flows cautiously through her characters. Moist, pulsating organic life became an essential aspect of the fully realized modern self.

Character in the modernist's perception, then, tended to benefit from engaging all of its sensibilities and did not rely so heavily on moral determinants. Many Victorian selves could not emerge so vividly when they stepped beyond a moral fabric. In the modernist's artistic conception of character, the world amounted to a confoundingly complex jumble of interaction where the self did not live primarily to know or be known, but to feel and be felt. Victorians used the self mainly to inform and they relied on a consequential universe, while most modernists presented the self to evoke feeling and they relied on an affective universe. The modern self resides in a world that is never static or quantifiable, but that is always evolving.

Without an emphasis upon a social and moral framework, the plot

structure of a modern work can roam in various directions. The modernists crumple the Victorians' flat page of ordered time and consciousness into a convoluted ball. Now the path the reader follows has no designated course, but goes where the author's imaginative freedom will lead it. The banks that had contained the Victorian self became less structured.

Between the Victorian era when the self emerged predominantly from a social perspective and the modern era when the self emerged predominantly from a psychological perspective, for some authors the self almost disappeared entirely. For these authors, methods of perceiving the self lost value. The relevance of right and wrong on the one hand and the relevance of the mind on the other became progressively dim. Scientific positivism, a plagued Christianity, and sweeping economic changes produced a self incapable of finding reassurance outward towards the community or inward towards the soul. Duty lost all substance as society could neither understand nor be understood. Causality, and with it purpose, vanished, and the self lost all effective response. Surrounded by a world of blind forces, the rootless self drifted along, not aware of its destiny or of the vague fingers that pushed it along.

In England it was Joseph Conrad that most aptly presented the self that is overwhelmed by a mysteriously influential universe. In America the naturalistic writers Stephen Crane (an intimate friend of Conrad's), Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser offered the most telling portrait of the diminished self. Crane is the first American naturalist and arguably the most successful.

¹Linda Hutcheon, Narcissistic Narrative: The Metaphysical Paradox (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1984), p. 87.

²W. J. Harvey, Character and the Novel (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 32.

³C. C. Walcutt, Man's Changing Mask (Minneapolis: Jones Press Inc., 1966), p. 17.

⁴Edith Wharton, The Writing of Fiction (New York: Octagon Books Inc., 1966), p. 125.

⁵C. C. Walcutt, Op. cit. p. 14.

⁶Morris Shapira, ed., Henry James: Selected Literary Criticism (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1963), p. 58.

⁷E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (London: William Clowes and Sons Ltd., 1974), p. 47.

⁸Ibid. p. 54.

⁹Ibid. p. 50.

¹⁰Calvin Bedient, Architects of the Self (London: University of California Press, 1972), p. 2.

¹¹Ibid. p. 8.

¹²James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (London: Collins Publishing Group, 1986), p. 14.

III. Stephen Crane and Character

Of all American authors Stephen Crane is the one most strongly associated with naturalism. His work has such a distinct naturalistic flavor that "he is the virtual embodiment of literary naturalism."¹ Key to this designation is Crane's treatment of the self. He vividly presents a self alienated from, and incapable of participating in, meaningful experience. Crane discounts man's traditional perception of a teleological universe, preferring, or seeing no alternative, to describe a world where the self is entirely ineffectual. Consider one of his poems:

A man said to the universe:
"Sir, I exist!"
"However," replied the universe,
"The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation."²

The poem summarizes his view of the universe. Neither overtly hostile nor warmly affectionate, his universe is passive and indifferent. It contains the self, but need not show any concern for this strange and presumptuous creature. The universe remains detached and unaffected by the self, or affected so trivially as to heighten the sense of the self's impotence. It seems that Crane would have agreed with Mark Twain's assertion that the self can affect the universe only as a man might inflict injury on a planet by assaulting it with heaps of mud. The planet, like the universe, does not notice or care.

Such a universe demands a conception of the self different from the self present in all preceding literature. What had begun as the mere telling of an event, literature gradually focused more attention upon the

people participating in the event. Eventually these people were conceived of as separate from the event, as more than responses to critical situations. They could think, alter, dictate, and as such they became more complete as selves. As C. C. Walcutt says in Man's Changing Mask, "Quite apart from physical action, the most important actions are decisions; these are the deeds on the level of highest importance, for almost all action that affects the human condition proceeds from decisions."³ But with naturalism decisions, or the mental act of interpreting situation and arriving at a conclusion, are, if not impossible, at least faulty, since the universe does not lend itself to interpretation. The self is swallowed in the horrible chasm that replaced the meaningful universe of man's traditional perception. The Victorian character whose actions were willed and consequential had responsibility and importance; the naturalistic character acts without predictable results, and thus lacks responsibility and importance. Action in its physical manifestation becomes the only definite point of reference for the self.

But perhaps even this gives the naturalistic character too much credit. In his short story "The Blue Hotel" Crane put it best. The Easterner, speaking of the Swede, says, "This poor gambler isn't even a noun. He is kind of an adverb."⁴ This, it seems, is the precise notion of Crane's naturalistic self. In a sentence the adverb, though often illuminating, is not necessary, and so it is with the self in the naturalistic universe. The self is reduced to merely describing the manner of an action instead of becoming the action or the object of an action. The self is an impression of the universe, suggesting the appearance of appearance. Crane's characters are useful as a means of elucidating transient action or being, but they are too incomplete to "act" or "be" with any effect. As the action proceeds the self participates as a modifier, describing and

not comprehending. It is incidental to the universe, maybe another device through which the world can be discussed, but not really important.

In practice the fictive art of immersing this self into such an unintelligible universe can prove an exceedingly difficult task, for the literary process favors positively establishing things. Words, the elemental units of literature, are employed primarily to convey meaning, and not to assert the absence of meaning. They are systems of signs designed to purport something, not to negate the presence of assumed beliefs. Indeed the very existence of words presumes that man has the capability of interpreting the universe, and a succession of words implies that order may be lent to the interpretation. Thus the nature of language heightens the difficulty of communicating the truths of naturalism.

Crane overtly alludes to the hindrances posed by the necessities of the linguistic process when he compares the Swede to an adverb. He makes a conscientious reference to the medium that he is using to disclose his world, and forces us to consider the implications of language. Basic sentence pattern—subject, verb, object—assumes that persons, places, things, or ideas act, think, or exist with some result. Our constant exposure to this syntactic arrangement fossilizes connotations so that language almost assures causal meaning. In the repetition of word patterns we are unavoidably pushed towards the conclusion that the universe operates by design.

Of the three authors to be discussed, Crane most effectively manipulates the complicated process of language to disarm ingrained perceptions of the self by presenting a universe where little can ultimately be said to be significant. His means of diminishing the self are numerous, but because of the meaning-filled connotations of language he adopts an ironic strategy. The general structure in which he displays his

ironic method may be said to be of two kinds. In a broad sense either the self is overwhelmed and shaped by the stream of action as in Maggie, or the self mistakenly describes the stream of action as in The Red Badge of Courage.

¹Milne Holton, Cylinder of Vision (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), p. 5.

²William M. Gibson, ed., The Red Badge of Courage and Selected Prose and Poetry (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 640.

³C. C. Walcutt, Man's Changing Mask (Minneapolis: Jones Press Inc., 1966), p. 20.

⁴William M. Gibson, ed., Op. cit. p. 406.

IV. Maggie

Maggie was written when Crane, just into his twenties, lived in destitute conditions in one of the most impoverished areas of New York City: the Bowery. It is a tale, at least in part, of what he saw while living there. In the course of the story Maggie Johnson goes from being an innocent child, to being a prostitute, to a suicidal death in the murky waters of the East River. Her home life is savage, dictated mainly by a bestial mother (her father dies early in the novel) and brutally reinforced by Jimmie, Maggie's brother. In the midst of her tumultuous existence she meets Pete, and though she conceives their relationship as romantic, it is plainly, for Pete anyway, just another relationship in his drifting sexual career.

What is most notable about the characters in Maggie is that they have almost no qualities required of the individual self. They exhibit virtually no willed action. Without a moral or metaphysical anchor they are buffeted about by the forces of the Bowery. In his first novel Crane utilizes several methods to nullify the implications of an autonomous self, but the overriding method, and the one that informs all others, is irony.

Life in Crane's Bowery is violent. His style is well suited to presenting such a passionate, chaotic world. It does not so much gently flow as it clamors forth, jumping spasmodically to its destination. He makes use of oddly constructed and succinct sentences that frequently contain a number of contextually curious words. These odd sentences are highly picturesque and suggestive: "She returned and stirred up the room

until her children were bobbing about like bubbles.",¹ or "The woman waved her hands with studied airs of indifference."² His use of color, of carefully distinguished points of view, and of thoughtfully recorded motion all help him to chronicle experience as it is revealed to the observant eye. Crane's style has often been called impressionistic since it displays a keen interest in sensorily received images which are depicted as reality. Joseph Conrad said of Crane, "He is the only impressionist and only an impressionist.",³ and Crane himself said that a novel "should be a succession of . . . clear, strong, sharply-outlined pictures, which pass before the reader like a panorama, leaving each its definite impression."⁴ In Maggie the succession of impressions is cinematic as Crane's artistic eye sweeps the Bowery selecting numerous images—the mad fighting of the youths, the brutish Johnson home, the tawdry dance halls. He minimizes reliance on plot structure as he refuses to link the whirl of violent images by explanation or analysis, preferring instead to let a series of loosely connected images guide the reader through the novel. This fast-paced means of progression reflects the frantic Bowery environment that Crane renders.

All of Maggie, and particularly the first few chapters, is infused with frenzied, exaggerated action. Through a mad rush of impressions Crane depicts a crazed world, a world that knows no moderation. Sometimes his vivid descriptions shock us: "A stone smashed in Jimmie's mouth. Blood was bubbling over his chin and down his ragged shirt."⁵ In the gruelingly incessant fighting, faces contort, objects shatter, people rave. Even moments of exhausted rest are filled with wheezing, gasping bodies as chests pound up and down in a desperate quest for air. Should a rare moment of tranquillity occur, Crane startlingly snaps it. Maggie's dreams of Pete are immediately followed by her mother's destruction of

furniture. Jimmie's irregular musings transform abruptly into the crushing blows of a fist fight. Peace seems an extremely fragile and transitory thing.

In itself the wild action of the Bowery suggests a diminished self. With only a raw, aggressive, physical response to situation, the self is reduced to a mere mechanism responding to a stimulus. It is a self that does not filter experience through the mind, but that reacts immediately and forcefully. At moments the dehumanizing effect of this elemental response is so complete that the self appears to be utterly nonhuman.

With prodigious clatter they arranged themselves at table. The babe sat with his feet dangling high from a precarious infant's chair and gorged his small stomach. Jimmie forced, with feverish rapidity, the grease-enveloped pieces between his wounded lips. Maggie, with side glances of fear and interruption, ate like a small pursued tigress.⁶

In this passage Crane's exaggerated language, his incongruous juxtaposition, and his emphasis on squalor greatly deflate the self. The repetition of expressions keyed by "with" shows the group and each family member to be engaged perversely in an ordinary event. They arrange themselves "With prodigious clatter," the babe sits "with his feet dangling," Jimmie eats "with feverish rapidity," and Maggie eats "with side glances of fear and interruption." Crane's hyperbolic language—the babe's stomach is "gorged," Jimmie "forced" his food—further distorts our perception of the gathering. And the irony of the entire incident reflects poorly on the autonomy of character. The dangerously suspended babe eats in a grotesque manner, the dominant and battle-scarred male, Jimmie, devours his food boldly, the submissive female, Maggie, consumes her food cautiously. The family meal, considered a humane, social occasion, turns into an orgy of consumption, and the children are like wolves attacking a fresh kill. This is a stuffing session; dinner has no unifying quality.

When Mr. Johnson steals a pail of beer from his son, Crane achieves a similar effect. "He [Mr. Johnson] glued his lips to the under edge and tilted his head. His throat swelled until it seemed to grow near his chin. There was a tremendous gulping movement and the beer was gone."⁷ Again the author employs exaggerated language, only this time the described act is observed especially closely. Even the process of swallowing becomes vicious, disfiguring the body into a contorted version of the self.

Crane weakens the self's human bond further by using a wealth of animal imagery. In the passage mentioned earlier he tells us that Maggie "ate like a small pursued tigress," and when Jimmie and "the ally" confront Pete "The glare of the panther came into Pete's eyes,"⁸ Jimmie "snarls like a wild animal," and they "bristle like three roosters." The reductive quality of equating the self to an animal is obvious and need not be expanded upon. Through dialogue, however, Crane exhibits a subtler means of strengthening the animalistic bond. The Bowery dialect—abounding in contractions, lacking the "th" sound, emphasizing vulgar vowel sounds—is so guttural that it verges on being incomprehensible. It softens the sophisticated communicative quality of language and comes near to mimicking the grunts of beasts. Utterances like "Dey was cursed jays,"⁹ or "Dey knows I kin wipe up d'street wid any tree of dem,"¹⁰ or "I'll go t'ump d' mug what done her d' harm,"¹¹ contort the language into a garbled mass of confused sounds. W. D. Howells says of the characters in Maggie, "They are almost inarticulate; not merely the grammar, but the language itself, decays in their speech."¹² It is as if they have adopted a language less than human, and more representative of some distant age when little communicative distinction existed between man and animal.

Frequently these people with inarticulate speech do not receive the personal recognition of proper names. That Crane thought much of the naming process is evidenced by the fact that in the first, but unpublished, version of the novel he abstained completely from the use of proper names. He modified this stance somewhat in the published versions, but by often withholding his characters' names, Crane keeps us at a distance from them. Without the characters' names they are not so accessible; we cannot easily become intimate with them. Names create the potential for a close association, but in their absence the self becomes more alien, more unknown. Name and identity are so closely allied that the neglect of the former greatly hinders our conception of the latter. We only know the woman living next door to the Johnsons as "the old woman," Nell's date as "the mere boy," or one of Jimmie's sexual victims as "the forlorn woman." By refusing to assign these people proper names Crane lends them a singular identity, thus keeping them largely anonymous by severely limiting our perception of them. "The forlorn woman" can only be forlorn, "the mere boy" can only be mere. He prejudices our perceptions and robs the self of any dynamic qualities.

Even characters of frequent mention receive similar treatment, and Crane's process of naming is more interesting here as we can profoundly see how he correlates action and name. For a book entitled Maggie: A Girl of the Streets the occurrence of the name "Maggie" is very rare. She does not even speak until seven whole chapters have elapsed and is known variously as "the little girl," "the ragged girl," or "a girl of the painted cohorts." Her descriptive titles change to reflect the action in Maggie. That "the little girl" becomes "the ragged girl" is indicative of the environment, but more telling is the slight, but significant, change of the articles in the expressions. Maggie changes from being "the little girl"

and "the ragged girl" to being "a girl of the painted cohorts," or from being definite to being indefinite. In the former two designations she is given a shred of individuality, but when she becomes a prostitute, the inevitable product of her Bowery circumstance, she loses virtually all identification and merges with the environment. During the final paragraph illustrating her death the name "Maggie," or a pronoun referring to her, or any representative expression, never appears. Maggie, though still alive, is absent. Her betrayal by family and lover is reflected in the language. She has been so neglected that she no longer exists mentally, rather "the deathly black hue of the river" and "the varied sounds of life" supersede her conception of self. When Maggie loses her name, or any referential expressions, she loses her self.

Crane handles Pete and Mrs. Johnson in the same fashion. After renouncing Maggie, they are, except in dialogue, known respectively as "the man" and "the woman." By refusing to accept responsibility for their own behavior, they are stripped of their names, and become ridiculous caricatures of the grieving self. They both, one in an alcohol-induced stupor, the other in pathetic sentimentality, ironically reflect the human capacity to disassociate cause and effect. They become, not individuals, but examples of the state of human senselessness, thus "the man" and "the woman."

Not only does Crane often abstain from giving proper names, he also repeatedly refuses to elaborate upon traditionally significant events. In startlingly brief terms events of seemingly great purport are dismissed, thereby minimizing the importance of the self in relation to the event. By mentioning only in passing events commonly ascribed considerable value, or that typically evoke a powerful response, he mocks the importance we attach to these events. In one sentence the youngest

Johnson dies, "The babe Tommie died."¹³ while in three words Mr. Johnson dies, "His [Jimmie's] father died",¹⁴ and no further reference is offered. Meanwhile, Crane tells us, "She [Maggie] and Jimmie lived."¹⁵ This reduction to the barest of alternatives—living or dying—and not attaching any value to either, recalls a repeated utterance in the novel: "Ah, what's d' use?" Either people die or people live and so it goes. Consideration of the event makes no difference.

Crane's special attention to the world of things devalues our perception of the self further. Things do a great deal in the novel, frequently as much as the characters. They project a chaotic environment where nothing has a proper place, and where things are tossed about carelessly. "In all unhandy places there were buckets, brooms, rags, and bottles."¹⁶ This means of using things to project and not merely to describe is continually mentioned.

The usual upheaval of tables and chairs had taken place. Crockery was strewn broadcast in fragments. The stove had been disturbed on its legs and now leaned idiotically to one side. A pail had been upset and water spread in all directions.¹⁷

Clearly things receive no respect, but more significantly Crane's description of the action is in the passive voice, minimizing the effect of action upon things. Crane diminishes cause—"Crockery was strewn broadcast," "The stove had been disturbed," "A pail had been upset"—or the human element. Effect occurs with no perpetrator as his language removes people from incident. These flurries of passively presented demolition are set against a dreary backdrop. Doorways are "gruesome," halls are "cold, gloomy," stairways are "dark," the interiors of buildings are like "bowels."

Things, however, do not merely project a disordered and bleak environment. Crane elevates the stature of things by lending them oddly

animate qualities, thereby altering the typical relation of humans to things. In the above passage he speaks of a stove leaning "idiotically"; a word that normally applies to animate cases, not inanimate objects. This enhancement of things through anthropomorphic language recurs throughout the novel. He talks of "ignorant stables," a "seething stove," an "unholy sink," as if these things possessed a mind or the capacity to feel. More than this, objects can dominate. Here Crane stands the standard view of environment on its head. Instead of people acting upon things, things act upon people. Whether "A dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and gutter.",¹⁸ or "The open mouth of a saloon called seductively to passengers to enter and annihilate sorrow or create rage.",¹⁹ or "Two or three theatres emptied a crowd upon the stormswept sidewalk.",²⁰ the Bowery environment has so overwhelmed its inhabitants that they are subservient to things. Through Crane's language people exist, things persuade, force, or overpower.

Where things are shown to be powerful and influential, people are shown to be weak and insubstantial. People have no effective response to the world as their minds are faulty or virtually absent. It is in this depiction of the self's mental process that Crane most crushingly reduces the self, often relying on a devastating irony. The first sentence of Maggie—"A very little boy stood upon a heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley."²¹ informs us of the ironic method to follow throughout the novel. While defending "the honor of Rum Alley" from atop an inglorious mound of rock the "very little boy" is a sadly comic figure, presuming an heroic stance while groveling in the dirt of Rum Alley. It is apparent to us that this is no place for honor. Because of such striking incongruity, the self becomes ridiculous. Crane sustains this mock-heroic presentation throughout the first chapter, mainly by the use of battle imagery. The

children are "small warriors," "small combatants," "vague kinds of soldiers," and they fight with "the fury of battle," "triumphant savagery," "in modes of four thousand years ago." By attaching such militaristic qualities to children and assigning valor to their defense of the grimy Bowery, Crane reveals a self that is over-eager to ascribe meaning to event.

Fighting appears everywhere, so much so that life in the Bowery can be reduced to a series of battles. "Eh, child, what is it dis time? Is your fader beatin' yer mudder, or yer mudder beatin' yer fader?"²² Though the prospect of a fight provokes a primitive and vengeful spirit, thoughts and beliefs do receive occasional consideration. As in the mock-heroism of the first chapter, Crane not only ironizes physical realities, but also the motivations of his characters. Through these thoughts and beliefs, or the lack of them, we can more fully appreciate how thoroughly diminished the characters really are. Of the four most notable characters, none exhibits much mental process, though the language surrounding the character Jimmie shows a flash of complexity. He has a fleeting moment when the flat line of his character appears to curve towards roundness; however, this moment dissipates almost immediately, and once again a flat line traces his character.

In the first chapters of the novel Crane often refers to Jimmie. He is the focal point of the opening fight and the subject of the entire fourth chapter. We come to know Jimmie through language that describes his obsession with power and its aggressive manifestations. When the larger and more confident Pete happens upon the initial fight scene Jimmie shows instant admiration, just as in the fourth chapter the fire-engine gains his respect and awe. "A fire-engine was enshrined in his heart as an appalling thing that he loved with distant, dog-like devotion."²³

Crane's verbal art in this sentence mocks the very power that Jimmie desires; it is presented through a passive voice, the fire-engine is equated to a "thing," and his "devotion" has a senseless, animalistic association. Despite Jimmie's obsession with brute force, many incidents in Maggie indicate that he is neither without trepidation nor ultimately strong. As a child he greatly fears Mrs. Johnson and this dread never ceases entirely. She remains dominant over him. At other times the physical force of Jimmie is ignored completely. When, as a truck driver, he delays traffic the police "turned red and began frenziedly to seize bridles and beat the soft noses of the responsible horses."²⁴ The police refuse even to acknowledge his presence, never mind assigning him responsibility. Later Jimmie needs "the ally" in order to confront Pete, and when "the ally" is captured by the police in the midst of the brutal fight, Jimmie flees. He ironically refrains from aiding his friend by muttering "Ah, what's d' use?,"²⁵ the same cliché that "the ally" had uttered previously in hopes of excusing himself from the fight. As Crane says of Jimmie, "The world was going on and he was there to perceive it."²⁶ but he can only perceive, for he does not possess the ability to affect nor to understand in any depth, thus he recalls the adverb image mentioned previously.

His perception of the world, though, is dim. Jimmie's intermittent observations, always expressed ironically, never capture the significance of an event. At the end of Chapter Four he lapses into a brief moment of thought: "Nevertheless, he had on a certain star-lit evening, said wonderingly and quite reverently, 'Deh moon looks like hell, don't it?'"²⁷ His response, hardly "wondering" or "reverent," seems to hint at a sensitive composition that belies his outward aggressive nature, but the language suggests a mind incapable of comprehension. He must resort to, as he does with "the ally," a cliché, this time sentimental, to express his

feelings. Yet even the cliché is expressed inarticulately as he substitutes the word "hell" for a word or phrase which may have the more decisive meaning that he seems to seek. His other moments of introspection are equally feeble, and inform us more fully of the codes of behavior in the Bowery. Occasionally his thought exposes a mind almost incapable of interpreting a strikingly banal feeling: "Jimmie had an idea it wasn't common courtesy for a friend to come to one's home and ruin one's sister."²⁸ More frequently, though, the irony reveals an environment where public appearance outweighs individual concern. Jimmie wants to "fetch her [Maggie] home" not because he wishes to offer his sister a loving, stable home environment where she might be less susceptible to the evils of the Bowery, but because her relationship with Pete reflects poorly on the family. "It queers us!"²⁹ Here the odd verb, representative of Bowery slang, inadequately conceals his own selfish motivations and reveals the distorted Bowery perspective. His lack of interest in his sister's well-being is ironically played against his own sexual relationships. The two girls he has "ruined" receive no thoughtful attention, rather Jimmie sporadically ponders if they might have brothers that could feel equally compromised by such circumstance.

At one point, though, he does verge upon understanding, and sincerely caring for Maggie's condition, but the insight that he momentarily formulates slips through his shoddy mental framework before he can comprehend its significance. "But arguing with himself, stumbling about in ways he knew not, he, once, almost came to a conclusion that his sister would have been more firmly good had she better known how."³⁰ Crane tells us that Jimmie, though sensing some more profound reason for Maggie's situation, does not possess the mental apparatus to ascertain the cause of her "ruin." Perhaps, Jimmie vaguely muses, Maggie might not be

at fault, but the complexities and ramifications of such a consideration overwhelm him. Such a thought has no place in the Bowery. He immediately discounts it; the line of his character returns to its horizontal position.

Jimmie exhibits little mental process, and when he does it is inadequate, faulty, or selfishly inspired. The character only has a fraction of the decision-making substance that is so vital to a wholly formed character. It is a character that reacts, never from a deeply articulated response, to circumstance mainly from Bowery-dictated impulse.

Where the character of Jimmie is faintly perceptible, his sister Maggie leaves only infinitesimal evidence of existence as the acts and thoughts that make up character are remarkably absent from her being. Maggie, the girl that "blossomed in a mud puddle," is strangely disconnected; the language shows her passively existing while a mad whirl of action goes on about her. Especially for a pretty girl, a freak of the Bowery, the character of Maggie is undetectable, a cipher throughout the novel. We are like the men in the beer hall trying to make out her shape through the smoke-filled room, but for us it is language, not smoke, that impossibly hides her from view.

As "the little girl" or "the ragged girl" of the first chapters, Maggie is the subject of very sparing comment. She is bounced about, almost as some extraneous item, on the tumultuous waves emanating from the Johnson household. Though we are not told how, the character lives to an age where her brother can offer her such expedient advice as, "Yeh've eeder got t'go on d' toif er go t'work.",³¹ and, "having a feminine aversion to the former," she opts for the latter. But reflective of the utter lack of willed action demonstrated by the character of Maggie, her attainment of the job at the dingy collar-and-cuff factory is "by chance."

Throughout the novel she cannot formulate any resistance to, or assert any influence upon, her environment. This is particularly true in the context of her family. Just as Maggie remains separate from the Johnsons' flurries of destruction, so she remains removed from their concerns, so long as she is without "error." When she does enter their realm of notice it is only as the disgraceful sinner, and she is discarded haphazardly, with no more difficulty than it takes to shatter a chair. At the prompt to "Git th' devil outa here.", Crane only tells us that "Maggie went."³² The language shows her responding with minimal thought to the dictates of her family. Character is depersonalized by this simplistic adherence to received information. Her inability to formulate an opinion, to exhibit a discrete mind in relation to the language of the family, is reinforced by this compulsion to accept unreservedly the demands of others.

If Maggie has any identity, it materializes through her relationship with Pete, and then the character is only a "purty good looker" with a sentimental outlook upon life. Her love for Pete derives from a sentimentality which shows a mind unable to assess reality adequately. Often thoughts associated with Pete, though we might contextually relate them with Maggie's mind, are not expressed through character at all, but through the author, suggesting that even blatantly misconceived thoughts are beyond Maggie's mental scope. Through authorially detached comments juxtaposed against Maggie's conventional sentimentality Crane ironically tells us that Pete is a "supreme warrior" and a "knight." Coming from the author, these appraisals inform us that though she feels powerfully attracted to Pete, Maggie cannot formulate such thought. Occasionally, however, she can shadily compose her impressions of him, but these are invariably completely mistaken and feebly concluded.

Maggie perceived that here was the ideal man. Her

dim thoughts were often seaching far-away lands where the little hills sing together in the morning. Under the trees of her dream-gardens had always walked a lover.³³

Her romanticized interpretation is plainly inappropriate. Through imagery that reminds us of the cheap songs of the Bowery entertainment halls, Maggie mistakes Pete's lust for love and her imagined idyllic world contrasts completely with the savage Bowery.

Even at the only point in the novel where Maggie demonstrates any sustained mental engagement, her thought process is methodically minimized.

A clock, in a splintered and battered oblong box of varnished wood, she suddenly regarded as an abomination. She noted that it ticked raspingly. The almost vanished flowers in the carpet pattern, she conceived to be newly hideous. Some faint attempts which she had made with blue ribbon to freshen the appearance of a dingy curtain, she now saw to be piteous.³⁴

With Maggie's sporadic concentration on the images it appears that her mind is only capable of seizing on a few singular objects. She reduces the setting to disjointed components, as if desperately seeking something that she can fully comprehend. Maggie's mind jumps from image to image. But her simplistic selection of objects fails to reveal an effectual mind as Crane's verbal structuring of this passage robs the character's insights of significant worth. Its inverted syntax reduces the bearing of Maggie's contemplation of mundane household objects. Instead of her thoughts being registered as dominant, the things—the clock, the flowers of the carpet pattern, the ribbon—exist as subject, and her thoughts seem merely incidental. The things are primary while her appraisal is secondary, despite these items being thoroughly commonplace, or as in the case of the carpet pattern, hardly recognizable. Only her recognition of the ticking of the clock receives primary consideration, as if her thought process is just sufficient to note such a minor attribute. Further, with her

observation placed in a subordinate position, the over-elaborate language modifying her observation deflates the value of her assessment. "Abomination," "hideous," and "piteous," the three descriptive terms, become hollow in context. By placing the observer in a weak position and phrasing the observation in excessively strong terms, Crane makes his character's observation appear child-like. This ironic presentation of her thoughts is heightened when we consider that her disgusted perception of her home is inspired by a comparison to her entirely misguided belief in Pete's glory.

Opposed to Maggie, who never grasps her surroundings, the characters of Pete and Mrs. Johnson mesh so thoroughly with the Bowery that they are inseparable from their environment. They do not, like Maggie, have dreams of "far-away lands," envy "elegance and soft palms," attempt to impress by constructing something like a delicate lambrequin, vaguely aspire to the "culture and refinement" viewed on the stage, nor do they have the fleeting moral twinges of Jimmie. The language shows them not thinking, but acting in prescribed modes. Pete seeks sex and Mrs. Johnson strives to maintain tyrannical rule over her household. Just as the Bowery is brutal and furious, so is their behavior.

It is by assuming the characteristics that their environment demands that Pete and Mrs. Johnson manage to stay alive. This neo-Darwinian "survival-of-the-fittest" maxim echoes throughout Maggie, lessening the complexity of character to a basic equation wherein those with brute strength and an "air of defiance" live, while the weak perish. From this springs the great respect for power. When the comparatively large Pete hits a child, the child flees "perceiving the size of the assailant"; Jimmie exalts the power of a fire-engine; Pete admires a monkey when it "threatened to trash a cageful . . ." ³⁵ Except for Maggie, and possibly the

infrequent musings of Jimmie, the others thoughtlessly comply with the Bowery environment. Pete and Mary do not analyze, or even thoughtfully consider their condition, they simply act in the manner that the Bowery dictates. Maggie, though it is rare, dimly and mistakenly reflects upon her environment, imposing on it a too favorable interpretation. To her Pete is like a "golden sun," the halls, despite being visited by men with "callused hands" and "painted women," are places of extravagance. Of all the characters only Maggie can imagine "a future rose-tinted" or be distantly aware that "the earth was composed of hardships and insults."³⁶ The others just do what is necessary in order to survive. Her passive, sentimental, and frail constitution make her ill-equipped to adapt to the environment, while the Petes and Mrs. Johnsons of the Bowery, in whom action is reflexive, adapt well to the savage conditions.

Because Maggie cannot adapt herself to the Bowery, she dies. Her death evokes some regret in the reader as she seems a kind-hearted person, and, above all, innocent. As Nell says of Maggie's eyes, "There was something in them about pumpkin pie and virtue."³⁷ Yet when describing her suicidal death, Crane remains completely detached, refraining from any dramatization. In a remarkably compressed chapter that summarizes Maggie's career as a prostitute in a single night that is composed of rapidly passing faces and increasingly gloomy districts, Crane depersonalizes this potentially pathetic episode through language that excludes the expression of human perceptions, thus lending more emphasis to the surrounding forces. Her defenseless journey to the murky waters of the East River lacks emotional language as it intensifies, through motion and setting, the inevitability of Maggie's final destination. Here the sense of the character's lack of control in a determined universe, an idea that throbs throughout the novel, becomes an overwhelming force,

entirely submerging character.

Maggie dies. Pete and Mrs. Johnson live. The latter two, as human manifestations of the environment, have contributed significantly, if not entirely, to Maggie's suicide, and Crane depicts their response to her death in the final two chapters. This response is ironized glaringly as they become comic figures by attempting to assert their own virtue and disassociate themselves from the suicide. A grotesquely drunk Pete tries desperately to demonstrate his compassionate spirit by expressing his love for humankind with a group of prostitutes. "Between the times of arrival and departure of the waiter, the man [Pete] discoursed to the women on the tender regard he felt for all living things."³⁸ But just as Pete cared nothing for Maggie, so the women care nothing for his alcohol-induced tenderness. Pete only wanted Maggie for sexual release; the women only want Pete for a few drinks and some spare cash. Where Pete had contributed to Maggie's whoredom, the streetwalkers now use him unabashedly. Because these women are well adapted to their environment, they will not, like Maggie, allow Pete to use them, at least not without adequate compensation. The women know Pete, not as a "knight," but for what he is, or as one of the prostitutes puts it, "a fool." They leave him, wine dripping to his neck, passed out in the little compartment with a smoke-obscured exit. Realistically and symbolically Pete is utterly incapable of seeing his way out of this confining squalor.

Mrs. Johnson's reaction to Maggie's death is also infused with irony, almost oppressively so. The same lady who has mocked her daughter with unceasing derision and left her homeless becomes excessively sentimental. Mrs. Johnson flaunts the worsted boots Maggie wore as a child which were "no bigger dan yer t'umb" with unrestrained nostalgia. After a mysterious woman begs Mrs. Johnson to forgive her daughter of her terrible sins, Mrs.

Johnson acquiesces saying, "Oh yes, I'll forgive her!"³⁹ The irony of these final words of the novel is scathing. Maggie can be forgiven of nothing, for she has not done anything reprehensible. Indeed, so far as willed action goes, it is doubtful whether she has done anything at all. If anyone, it is Mrs. Johnson that should be asking forgiveness for leaving Maggie no choice but whoredom. Yet it must be remembered that she only responds to the stimuli of her tenement neighbors—just as the Bowery audience in the entertainment halls "hissed vice and applauded virtue," so she "hisses" at Maggie's "vice."

In a famous inscription of Maggie Crane wrote, "For it tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless."⁴⁰ This naturalistic sentiment that the environment directly conditions action appears repeatedly in the novel: the babe, in ineffectual protest "threw back his head and roared at his prospects";⁴¹ the women working in the collar-and-cuff factory become "mere mechanical contrivances sewing seams";⁴² the band's fast pace "imparts wildness to the half-drunken crowd."⁴³ The most striking aspect about Crane's inscription, and the thing that seems especially apropos of Maggie, is his use of the word "regardless." This term captures the futility that pervades the novel, drastically diminishes character by assigning no value to action. In Maggie the sense of powerlessness, of incidents occurring "regardless," is continually reiterated in the banal utterance, "What d' hell!" It severs the causal chain, leaving characters without the ability, or the need, for mental process. Decisions, the core of character, become obsolete. It is a cry of despair; a painful recognition of the absence of reason or effective response, that destroys motive and consequence. With the lament of "What d' hell!" characters acknowledge their own inability to assert meaningful acts or thoughts, and they slip into a world where the

self dissolves into an unidentifiable form.

¹William M. Gibson, ed., The Red Badge of Courage and Selected Prose and Poetry (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 142.

²Ibid. p. 184.

³Milne Holton, Cylinder of Vision (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), p. 6.

⁴Thomas A. Gullason, ed., Stephen Crane's Career: Perspectives and Evaluations (New York: New York University Press, 1972), p. 187.

⁵William M. Gibson, ed., Op. cit. p.137.

⁶Ibid. pp. 142-143.

⁷Ibid. p. 144.

⁸Ibid. P. 173.

⁹Ibid. p. 177.

¹⁰Ibid. p. 154.

¹¹Ibid. p. 170.

¹²Richard M. Weatherford, ed., Stephen Crane: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1973), p. 49.

¹³William M. Gibson, ed., Op. cit. p. 147.

¹⁴Ibid. p. 148.

¹⁵Ibid. p. 147.

¹⁶Ibid. p. 139.

¹⁷Ibid. p. 167.

¹⁸Ibid. p. 139.

¹⁹Ibid. p. 171.

²⁰Ibid. p. 192.

²¹Ibid. p. 136.

²²Ibid. p. 143.

²³Ibid. p. 150.

²⁴Ibid. P. 145.

- ²⁵Ibid. p. 176.
- ²⁶Ibid. p. 148.
- ²⁷Ibid. p. 151.
- ²⁸Ibid. p. 168.
- ²⁹Ibid. p. 179.
- ³⁰Ibid. p. 181.
- ³¹Ibid. p. 151.
- ³²Ibid. p. 168.
- ³³Ibid. p. 154.
- ³⁴Ibid. p. 155.
- ³⁵Ibid. p. 162.
- ³⁶Ibid. p. 155.
- ³⁷Ibid. p. 189.
- ³⁸Ibid. p. 195.
- ³⁹Ibid. p. 200.
- ⁴⁰Ibid. p. ix.
- ⁴¹Ibid. p. 140.
- ⁴²Ibid. p. 161.
- ⁴³Ibid. p. 182.

V. The Red Badge of Courage

Crane's next novel, and the one for which he is most noted, The Red Badge of Courage, continues, though more obliquely, the naturalistic tradition of minimizing character. In it a young man, Henry Fleming, enthusiastically enlists to fight in the Civil War, and after a long wait, experiences two days of furious fighting and a broad range of intense emotions. By the novel's end Henry has secured the regiment's respect and is branded a hero. Despite a plot that would seem to trace the development of character from stubborn selfishness to quiet self-reliance, through irony the novel undercuts Henry's apparent growth and indicates the inappropriateness of assigning value to thought and action.

Published two years after the first appearance of Maggie, The Red Badge of Courage utilizes the same loose, episodic structure of his first novel. As before, the story proceeds through a series of images unlinked by explanation or analysis. Here, though, because of the shorter time-frame, the more restricted point of view, and the singularity of incident, the structure does not appear so sporadic. It proceeds rapidly like Maggie, but the connection between images is less distant. The vividness of these images matches, if it does not surpass, those of Maggie, which is remarkable when we consider that while Crane had first-hand experience of the Bowery, he had no war experience prior to his writing of The Red Badge. The intent of the images is the same; to inform us of a confused, violent, nonsensical universe.

Like Maggie, the environment of The Red Badge abounds with mad

behavior, gruesome figures, preposterous circumstance. It is an environment that Crane's vocabulary seems naturally suited to explore. But where the Bowery is like a battle, the world Henry Fleming finds himself in is a battle. With the exception of a rare flashback, the entire novel involves war. Every crazed thought and desperate action stems from the imminence of, the engagement in, or the aftermath of, battle. There are no divergent interests, or as Eric Soloman says, "He [Crane] writes a kind of grammar in which war is the subject, verb, and the object of every sentence."¹ Opposed to the Bowery where they fight with their fists from atop "a heap of gravel," in The Red Badge they fight with muskets and cannons to annihilate the foe. Here, where honor might be an appropriate consideration, Crane refuses to signal how such honor might be obtained. No underlying causes, meanings, or results of war are mentioned explicitly. Instead the book is concerned with the experiences of one person involved in one minor campaign of a portion of one battle; it has little to do with a Yankee soldier struggling to maintain the country's unity, but is more a universal expression of Man engulfed in war.

By focusing wholly on his character's physical and mental response to war Crane initiates a new kind of war novel, and one that would influence such authors as Joseph Conrad, Ernest Hemingway, and E. M. Remarque. It differs from all preceding war literature, whether it be the realism of writers like Stendhal, Zola, and Tolstoy, who include historical, political, sexual, and logistical concerns in their works, or the romanticism of writers like Sir Walter Scott or James Fennimore Cooper. Though plainly different, both types of war fiction share a general motif of young, innocent soldier stepping into the fiery field of battle and developing, through the war experience, into maturity. We cannot be so sure of such

character development in The Red Badge as the novel possesses many characteristics that undermine traditional war fiction. Henry does not despise, or even dislike the enemy, but his foes are "a suntanned, philosophical lot who sometimes shot reflectively at the blue pickets,"² and he likes the confederate "ragged man." Nor does he exhibit a strong will, staunch leadership qualities, unquestioned bravery, but he has cowardly instincts, deserts his regiment, lies. Crane's war novel denies a sense of victory that is final and explicit as we never learn which side won the overall battle. The author heightens this sense of indeterminacy by refusing to disclose information about the enemy or location, and by depicting action without order. Henry's battlefield is anonymous, the enemy is a blurred bunch of color and motion, the action is frenzied and chaotic. In the folds of the forested hills we do not know direction and, frequently, purpose.

It is also a novel composed with an intense interest in language. This story of a boy going to battle is guided by an author most conscientious of his selection of vocabulary. Crane is not merely recording incidents. "The Red Badge of Courage," says the critic R. W. Stallman, "is a literary exercise in language, in the patterning of words" ³ Crane's special attention to language demands a painstaking and sensitive reading of the novel. It is more the verbal construction of the novel and less the sequence of events that interests us. For ostensibly the events would appear to depict the maturing of Henry Fleming as he transgresses from fear, to contemplation, and finally to battle heroics. The language of the novel, however, seems to contradict this appearance of growth, and opposes the clichéd notion of "growing up" through battle.

In order to portray an ineffectual self, Crane employs many of the devices found in his first novel. Since some of these devices achieve the

same end in either work, such as the duplicate belittling quality of frenzied action and the dominance of things over people, they will only be mentioned to the extent that they offer additional insight.

As in Maggie, animal imagery appears frequently in The Red Badge; however, though the speech of the soldiers is colloquial, the animal imagery here is not so strongly reinforced by the corroded dialogue of Crane's Bowery. Rather the obvious reductive quality of animal imagery subtly correlates to the action of the novel. As the battle proceeds and Henry's emotions alter, so change the animal comparisons. At Henry's first exposure to battle he believes the regiment will be "killed like pigs," a compatriot that flees runs "like a rabbit," after the youth deserts the regiment he feels like a "craven loon." Later in the novel, after he and his regiment have fought with dim results, the men are described as fighting like "hell-roosters," "wild cats," a "mad horse."⁴ Such imagery does not project the transition from cowardice to bravery, for this would imply a mental response that is foreign to the animal realm. The language implies instead the bestial progression from fear to aggression which excludes cerebral experience entirely.

Though Henry and his regiment have adopted the qualities of fierce animals, the war itself, the greater event in which they participate, attains an animalistic association that even this new-found aggression cannot conquer. It is a "red animal," a "blood-swollen god" feasting on the combatants that it gathers. War becomes animate, feverishly devouring the puny participants that it has assembled.

At times the animal imagery almost eradicates character entirely, particularly in reference to the regiment as a whole. The group of soldiers becomes a single sickening organism, slithering about the countryside. It is known variously as "moving monsters wending their

feet," "huge crawling reptiles," "two serpents crawling from the cavern of the night." No individuals exist; they are just a giant seething mass composing one slimy beast. This slippery, scaly conglomeration winds through foliage with insects that "crooned like old women" and that "bowed their beaks and were making a devotional pause." Character gets lost in this repulsive world of squirming, elemental creatures.

They are not only like animals or strange monsters. To diminish character further Crane utilizes machine imagery frequently. Rare in Maggie, this imagery, partly derivative of the industrialization of the Gilded Age, precludes man from emotional and interpretive response. In their relentless, unphased attacks the soldiers are "machines of steel" or, more disparagingly, "Methodical idiots! Machine-like fools!" They perform their function automatically, without thought or knowable purpose. Just as the animal experience expands to include the greater event of war, so the language compares the battle itself to a "terrible machine" that "produces corpses." Each warrior becomes a component of the mechanical contrivance, persisting to perform the designated task of killing mindlessly.

Crane continues the same naming process found in his first novel, often neglecting the proper names of characters. It has the same depersonalizing and limiting effect here (the "tattered man" can only be tattered), and, as in Maggie, it becomes particularly interesting when studied in context. Jim Conklin, whose name we only know through dialogue, receives a hideous wound and dies grotesquely near the middle of the novel. If he ever comes to any substantial realization in the course of the story, Crane never tells us, and he forever remains the "tall soldier." Wilson, on the other hand, goes from being a brash, cynical soldier always critical of others' opinions, to being a quietly confident and

considerate human being. Accordingly, the authorial reference to Wilson changes from "the loud soldier" to "the friend." With Henry the naming process is similarly patterned, but where Crane's naming affirms that Wilson has matured, it implies that Henry has remained unchanged. From start to finish Henry is referred to as "the youth," suggesting that though he may become a fearless fighter, he never articulates the significance of his thought and action. We learn the full name of "the youth" at a critical point in the novel: he is trying to invent a lie so that his regiment will accept him after having deserted. Crane thus associates the major character's full name, Henry Fleming, with a lie, a deception, and indicates that the identity of this self may not be what it appears.

Determining the identity of Henry Fleming is complicated by Crane's ambiguous language. The youth is far more prominent than any of the characters in Maggie, for he is always mentally engaged, interpreting circumstance, assessing the meaning of events. It is primarily through Henry that the incidents of the novel are revealed. Yet for all our knowledge of the youth it is difficult to determine whether the effect of battle has caused any self-realization; whether he has become a complete self through the comprehension of circumstance. Crane's imagery, naming process, and much of the action would indicate that character has been minimized; however, the combined events of the novel suggest that the character has learned and progressed from boy to man. If character has changed thus, then The Red Badge of Courage is not a wholly naturalistic novel as it assumes a universe where things can be understood, and where effective response is possible. In regard to the youth Crane betrays his own dictum: "I always want to be unmistakable. That to my mind is good writing."⁵

The Red Badge has often been considered a novel that traces the

development of character; a Bildungsroman in which Henry proceeds from self-doubt to calm self-assurance. In a review of the novel written in 1896 George Wyndham echoes this sentiment. "It is glorious to see his [Crane's] youth discover courage in the bed-rock of primeval antagonism after the collapse of his tinsel bravado; it is something higher to see him raise upon that rock the temple of resignation."⁶ According to this perspective the rigor of confrontation has molded the youth into a self-sufficient, caring person. He has, we might be led to believe, been immersed in the fury of battle and emerged a man.

Certainly evidence exists to support such a supposition. Crane imposes a structure that appears to guarantee Henry's passage into adulthood. Before having any battle experience the young, untried farmboy has tremendous romantic illusions of the glory to be found in combat. "He had imagined people secure in the shadow of his eagle-eyed prowess."⁷ His vain dreams suggest an innocent, child-like mind, as does his longing for home and unsubstantiated feelings of occasional superiority. Yet for all his glorious visions, the youth is an "unknown quantity" and he utterly dreads the testing ground of battle, fearing that he will be unable to withstand the heat of combat. And he does not. He deserts his regiment under a barrage of fire, exaggerating "the endurance, skill, and the valor of those who were coming."⁸ After retreating into a forest, then joining a procession of hideously wounded soldiers, the youth returns to his regiment under the auspices of a wound inflicted by a friendly soldier. From this point mid-way in the novel to the end Henry would appear to shed his cowardice, firmly grasp the battle circumstance, and fight with great valor. Where before the youth saw a chaotic blur of destruction, he now feels that "he saw everything." He becomes "deeply absorbed" in his setting, viewing instead of being overwhelmed.

Now Henry's much improved vision does not compel him to scurry from battle in horror-filled flight, but he remains in place, fighting so aggressively that the lieutenant singles him out as a superior warrior. "By heavens, if I had ten thousand wild cats like you, I could tear the stomach out of this war in less'n a week!"⁹ The doubt-ridden, insecure boy of the beginning of the novel becomes the color bearer, the symbolic leader of the regiment. Even more, the youth has adopted a "tranquil philosophy" and speaks "soothingly to his comrade." By the final chapter Crane tells us that perhaps Henry has participated in meaningful experience and become a more fully realized self. The youth's "brain emerged from the clogged clouds, and at last he was enabled to more closely comprehend himself and circumstance."¹⁰

Though summarized to the point of oversimplification, such a plot analysis would suggest that Henry's engagement in the war has caused change. Crane depicts his character, it would seem, as recognizing the flurry of events into which it is placed so that the self can then formulate experience in a meaningful manner. Incidents suggest that character has made a purposeful decision about the way in which it behaves. Henry, Crane at times seems to insist, has changed, becoming a multi-dimensioned, substantial character.

The character of Henry is always present. He is shown as continually observing, evaluating, acting. Though it is through him that the novel unfolds, there is a curious blend of indirect and direct narration. It is as if at times Henry is the projector and interpreter of the images, while at other times he is a part of the image that Crane records. We have both a subjective and an objective lens to look through. In his second novel Crane adopts a sophisticated point of view that greatly affects our understanding of character. He shifts his intermixed form of

communication, sometimes relaxing his relationship with character, sometimes intensifying the focus so that the two merge inextricably.

The language throughout the novel describes the vision of the major character as blurred, except for some moments of brilliant sight towards the novel's end. But even when he can see clearly, his interpretive abilities are dim, mistaken, or nonexistent. Particularly at critical moments, and importantly it is at such moments that Henry becomes the sole lens through which we see, his powers of perception are depicted as weak. Because he seems to be an unreliable narrator, a great deal of his dimension is lost. "The test of a round character," E. M. Forster says, "is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is flat pretending to be round."¹¹ Ultimately, the character of Henry Fleming is "flat pretending to be round." Though the novel's structure and events would discourage such a view, when examined closely we see that Crane's ironical method undercuts the apparent fulfillment of character.

Under the impetus of the major character The Red Badge moves from initiation to isolation, isolation to confrontation, confrontation to community. Henry is depicted in relation to his regiment. The language of the first three introductory chapters reveals Henry's tendency to exaggerate. He glorifies war and often dreams of magnificent battles. His visions of "Greeklike struggles" alert us to a mind at odds with reality. In contrast, his mother only offers somber, practical advice when he sets out for battle, and indicates that her son is pompous and too self-centered. "Yer jest one little feller amongst a hull lot of others, and yeh've got to keep quiet an' do what they tell yeh. I know how you are, Henry."¹² Her comments reveal his aptitude for excessive interpretation.

Despite Henry's vainglorious attitude towards war, the author's vocabulary depicts the major character as lacking confidence and security. As they wait at length by the river he remains largely uncertain of his abilities. Henry cannot perceive any comparative doubt in his peers and shares no affinity with the people of "the blue demonstration." "He was a mental outcast."¹³ Crane tells us that his central character believes he will have to be tested in battle in order to realize his identity.

But Henry does not go into the testing ground of battle of his own accord. When he finally finds himself moving towards the battlefield it is revealed that he is not in control of his actions. "He felt carried along by a mob."¹⁴ And despite sensing that "his time had come," the regiment smothered any self-perception. "And there were iron laws of tradition and law on all four sides."¹⁵ Finding himself in the alien position of complete confinement, Crane stretches the language to assert an utter lack of will, adding, "He was in a moving box."¹⁶ Not only does the youth lack control, but the whole regiment seems to wander senselessly. "They were marched from place to place with apparent aimlessness."¹⁷ As the actual incensed fighting begins, all rational, thought-out activity ceases. "He [Henry] wished to rush forward and strangle with his fingers."¹⁸ In the maelstrom of battle the youth becomes no more than a "driven beast." Personal identity cannot be found in the frantic, thoughtless action.

Ironically, it is this mad, irrational behavior that binds Henry to the community for the first time. Through his participation in a group endeavor, if wild and indeterminate, he feels, in typically exaggerated fashion, that "The supreme trial had been passed."¹⁹ His mind has not assessed circumstance properly, however, for this is only a minor and transitory skirmish. Nonetheless, where Henry previously felt grave self-doubt, he now believes he can assert his identity because he has survived

this brief exchange of gunfire. In an appraisal that anticipates the unsubstantiated sentiment of the novel's final chapter Henry "felt that he was a fine fellow." Given the reality of the event, the youth's self-congratulatory attitude reveals a mind apt to make too much out of experience.

The feeling of identity and belonging lasts but seconds. Unexpectedly, the enemy amasses another assault. Under a barrage of persistent gunfire Henry flees unashamedly, feeling certain that only fools would remain to face such fearsome opposition. "He knew all concerning it [the combat]. Of a surety the force was in a fix, and any fool could see if they did not retreat while they had opportunity—why—" ²⁰ He appears cocksure of his perceptive abilities. However, his regiment wins—we doubt Henry's mental process.

To the youth the regiment's victory proves childishly aggravating—"He felt a great anger against his comrades." ²¹ and the moment marks the beginning of his estrangement from the community of soldiers and accompanying feelings of profound isolation and betrayal. His cowardly desertion takes him from the battlefield into a thickly treed forest, a sort of realistic psychological retreat to the womb. Here Crane expresses his character's perception ironically; as unjustifiably self-centered. Henry mistakenly equates a squirrel, which has run from a pinecone thrown by him, to himself: "he was but an ordinary squirrel, too—doubtless no philosopher of his race." ²² Assigning unwarranted significance to the incident, the squirrel is interpreted by the youth as having justified his running from the battle. "The youth wended, feeling that Nature was of his mind. She reinforced his arguments with proofs that lived where the sun shone." ²³ The weird verb "wended" and the general odd word choice signal ironic intentions. Henry ties, through far-

fetched symbolism, great personal meaning to a completely unremarkable event. He makes too much of a mundane incident. Later, while walking by a swamp he sees "a small animal pounce in and emerge directly with a gleaming fish.",²⁴ yet this time Henry refrains entirely from contemplation. His abstention from symbolic association here suggests a mind that is over-eager to posit meaning only into events that lend themselves to a favorable interpretation. It seems that the character's mental process registers experience too selectively.

Walking further into the forest, "going from obscurity to promises of greater obscurity," Henry, in romantic fashion, seeks comfort in Nature. Deep into the woods he comes upon a thickly boughed region that he conceives to be a peaceful chapel, but lying inside is the gruesome figure of a dead Federal soldier. Ironically, in the chapel of Nature, the very place where he had hoped to escape from battle wholly, the youth finds death. The depiction of the morbid corpse in the serene clump of trees reinforces the idea of Nature's indifference that pervades the novel. Nature does not care about the fate of this man. In Nature's religion death is final; the consolation of everlasting life does not matter. References to such indifference recur throughout the novel, particularly in relation to the obsessed fighting. "It was surprising that Nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment."²⁵ Since "her golden process" appears unaffected and disassociated from human activity, drawing lessons from Nature would seem unwise. Seen in this light the squirrel cannot offer any justification for action, rather it, as well as the small animal, simply react by Darwinian "tooth and claw" natural laws.

Besides encountering the aftermath of death, Henry is exposed to the event of death. Emerging from the wilderness he joins the pathetic

procession of wounded soldiers, and the action is hopelessly jarred. The youth's intended complacent repose in the forest does not provide relief as this Nature refuses to accommodate his desires. With the startling gathering of wounded soldiers the character is forced to confront what he so desperately wishes to flee. However, as one of the bedraggled members of the procession is the confident and reassuring Jim Conklin, the youth feels a new surge of hope. Ironically, though, this previously strong, unwavering soldier has been brutally injured. Like Nature, the battlefield does not distinguish between its participants.

An exasperating death scene ensues which appears to represent the most powerfully symbolic passage in The Red Badge. Religious overtones abound throughout the striking passage causing many critics such as R. W. Stallman to claim that Jim Conklin is a Christ figure. ". . . there are unmistakable hints . . . that he is intended to represent Jesus Christ."²⁶ Evidence to support such a claim can be found easily. He has the initials "J. C.," there is an abundance of ceremonial language, he dies from a wound to his side, and the chapter concludes with the often-mentioned and much revised line, "The red sun was pasted in the sky like a fierce wafer."²⁷ The placement of the passage near the mid-point of the novel, traditionally the point of central crisis wherein the major character arrives at some significant realization, also supports the validity of symbolically interpreting the tall soldier as a Christ figure. But if he is a Christ figure, it seems that Crane distorts his purpose. Unlike the Biblical Christ who proclaims the value of life and offers salvation, Crane's war Christ would appear to echo the insanity and senselessness of battle. It is as though Jim Conklin, by some mysterious combat-inspired transfiguration, has become a member of a perverse sect. "And there was a resemblance in him to a devotee of a mad religion, blood-sucking,

muscle-wrenching, bone-crushing."²⁸

Even if we accept the Christ reference, Crane distances the battle Christ from the Biblical Christ. Whereas Christ did not discourage a public execution, the war Christ yearns to die a solitary death like a wounded animal. Like battle, his death is grotesque, not poignant. His chest "heaves with a strained motion," "the tremor of his legs caused him to dance a mysterious hornpipe," his side looks "as if it had been chewed by wolves." The death leaves a strong impression, but neither Henry nor the tattered man seem capable of comprehending it. It has no saving quality. Perhaps by couching Jim Conklin's death in Christ-like terms Crane paradoxically depicts the pointlessness of battle.

But this, or any such symbolic interpretation, seems to go too far. It must be remembered that at this point in the novel, character is articulating the event. Henry Fleming is the lens through which we view the incident of Jim Conklin's death. At this moment Crane employs the youth as the character that defines the stream of action, and the language would seem to be largely derivative of his mind. Thus to endow the death scene with far-reaching symbolism would be to rely rather heavily on an unreliable mind. The moment of death seems so extraordinary that it is best deemed the product of sensationalistic thought. Consider the following excessive expression:

The youth had watched, spellbound, this ceremony at the place of meeting. His face had twisted into an expression of every agony he had imagined for his friend.

He now sprang to his feet and, going close, gazed upon the pastelike face. The mouth was open and the teeth showed in a laugh.

As the flap of the blue jacket fell away from the body, he could see that the side looked as if it had been chewed by wolves."²⁹

The perception of the physical activity is overwrought and the verb "imagined" informs the passage. Henry seems too eager, too anticipatory,

almost as if he morbidly relishes viewing the man die. He watched "spellbound" in some kind of wide-eyed amazement, he "sprang" to his feet to get a better view, he "gazed" upon the dying man's face, his observation is so detailed that it includes recording Jim Conklin's teeth, and the description of the soldier's side is sickening. Rather than being repulsed, the youth seems fascinated.

Immediately following we learn that

The youth turned, with sudden livid rage toward the battlefield. He shook his fist. He seemed about to deliver a philippic.

"Hell—"

The red sun was pasted in the sky like a fierce wafer.³⁰

His reaction to Jim Conklin's death is bitter, angry, again too much so. With his protesting turn towards the battlefield and the shaking of the fist it is plainly melodramatic. Just as he has exaggerated Jim Conklin's death, so he exaggerates his response. With Henry's verbal response his inarticulate mental process is confirmed. Crane's language shows character as incapable of adequate expression. It reveals a dim-witted mind, unable to articulate what it so burningly wishes to voice. We expect a philippic, but instead Henry merely mumbles a single, ineffectual utterance: "Hell—". Crane greatly diminishes character with this incongruous juxtaposition of expectation and outcome. Character exaggerates observation and cannot formulate response. With the inexplicable and forever unknowable "fierce wafer," the chapter comes to a close. Though it is not clear if this concluding line is Henry's perception, the fact that he is a seminary student hints that it emanates from the character's mind. Like the wafer, Henry's experience and interpretation has been seemingly significant, but ultimately purposeless.

"In his walk through the valley of the shadow of death," one critic

has stated, "Henry's education advances."³¹ It is the apparent springboard injected near the middle of the novel from which character can leap to full maturity. But it is more an illusory springboard, conceived to fulfill our expectations of the novel, but undercut fatally by incoherency and meaninglessness. If the character of Henry has learned anything, he does not demonstrate it. Soon after witnessing Jim Conklin's death he abandons the desperately wounded tattered man, leaving him to wander helplessly about a field. In the forest Henry saw the dead, in Jim Conklin he sees the dying, now, when he might be able to prevent death, he leaves the tattered man to die. All of the quickly flowing images of death have meant nothing.

Henry's ensuing stumblings about the fringes of battle are filled with despair. In the aimless plodding the character's self-perception is depicted as plummeting to its lowest depths—"He was a slang phrase."³² The youth becomes no more than the language that is used to describe him. Character is merely a thoughtlessly construed piece of vocabulary.

Through no willed action, Henry soon finds himself amidst a group of feverishly retreating soldiers. In the melee of insanely panicky soldiers (or is this just Henry's exaggerated perception?), he momentarily verges on a strong-willed response, but finally the language renders character ridiculously incapable of such action. "He had the impulse to make a rallying speech, to sing a battle hymn, but he could only get his tongue to call into the air: why—why—what—what's the matter?"³³ Henry's desire to deliver a "battle hymn," a grandiose statement that recalls the "philippic," never begins to materialize. He is so helpless that the cryptic question emanates from his tongue, not his mind, and it is directed to no one or nothing, only empty space. The youth grabs hold of one of the passing soldiers demanding of him "why—why—". Henry has to turn to

someone else, for to him the universe is incomprehensible. The answer to his desperate request is the thundering blow of a rifle butt upon his head. In utter confusion and from the hands of an ally soldier, Henry receives his "red badge of courage." Now the irony of the title and the action of character within the novel cannot be mistaken.

Not of his own accord but through the assistance of a character only known as "the man of the cheery voice," Henry rejoins his regiment. At this point precisely midway through the novel the youth's isolation concludes and he returns to the friendly comfort provided within "the box" of his fellow soldiers. The wound on his head is the ticket that admits him into "the box," and the lie of omission gains him the regiment's acceptance. In isolation the major character's impressionable mind made a great deal of events, but resolved little, leaving him desperate for meaning. Back in the community of soldiers Henry regains his personal sense of confidence: "His self-pride was now entirely restored."³⁴ With him back inside "the box" the action of the novel proceeds, through a rapid succession of encounters, to depict the apparent fulfilment of character.

Many of the acts and thoughts of the later chapters, however, would discourage this notion of the major character's fulfilment. Henry makes many interpretations, but they are not authoritative and fail to convince. Before the regiment ever returns to battle, presumably the only place where he can become "a man," he feels that he has "license to be pompous and veteran-like." In contrast to Henry, Wilson does change significantly. He helps Henry with his wound, quells a fight amongst some squabbling soldiers, and suggests that the generals should not receive total blame for the regiment's losses. The youth shares no comparable sentiments. Among other things he retains the loud soldier's worrisome note of impending

death as a weapon through which he "could laugh and shoot shafts of derision," he convinces himself that he fled with "discretion and dignity," and when Wilson selflessly seeks water for the regiment the youth accompanies him to "throw his heated body into the stream and, soaking there, drink quarts."

Similar instances can be selected at length, yet it will be more productive and enlightening to focus on the verbal arrangement of the final chapters. As noted, words, the elemental components of fiction, seem the most reliable means of assessing character, since incidents in a fictional character's life may be variously selected and construed. While incidents may be a primary means by which the novel progresses—"In prose fiction the unit is not, as in poetry, the word, but the event."³⁵ it will be helpful, and indeed more objective, if we examine the language comprising the incidents; for if events are the "unit" of fiction, then language is still the substance of that "unit." Life is not the medium of the novelist; language is. When the events of the novel's last chapters are given a close and sensitive reading, the language depicts a diminished self consistently assessing experience improperly.

It will be useful to examine those passages from the later chapters which appear to substantiate the existence of a developed character. Ostensibly these patterned events suggest, at times even insist, that character has grown from doubt to an inner self-confidence; however, Crane's vocabulary refuses to ascribe value to the character's experience. In Henry's first battle experience since deserting and when he is fully unified with the regiment, the language still describes an event devoid of sense. With odd diction that reminds us of the powerlessness conveyed in the "moving box" image, Crane tells us that, "He [the youth] did not know the direction of the ground."³⁶ The word choice in this sentence surprises

us. "Direction" keys us to some particular referent, but Crane concludes the sentence with "ground," an irrelevant directional consideration given the circumstance. Henry's mind, despite his renewed sense of identity, seems unfit to record experience.

Though the content of this sentence clearly minimizes character, some passages would insist that the youth has undergone considerable growth. Where before he could see little—the enemy is "the blurred and agitated form of troops"—towards the novel's end his sight improves remarkably.

It seemed to the youth that he saw everything. Each blade of the green grass was bold and clear. He thought that he was aware of every change in the thin transparent vapor that floated idly in sheets. The brown or gray trunks of the trees showed each roughness of their surfaces.³⁷

Henry celebrates his new vision, yet Crane's irony indicates that it is not as good as he would have us believe. The youth appears to have altered into some super-sensitive state wherein his sight has expanded to register visual experience with astonishing breadth and detail. However, it cannot be forgotten that these are the sole impressions of character, and the phrase "seemed to the youth" must qualify our discussion. That these impressions may be exaggerated is suggested strongly by the all-inclusive implications of the final words of the first sentence: "he saw everything." We doubt the likelihood of this and Henry's following list of received impressions confirms our suspicion that he is probably making too much of his new-found perceptive abilities. It is not enough that he believes he can make out blades of grass, but "each" blade can be distinguished, and with incredible clarity as the words "bold" and "clear" inform us. To emphasize that this is the character's perception and to enhance the notion that the interpretation may be faulty, Crane tells us that the youth "thought that he was aware." With the word "thought" we know that the

interpretation is filtered through the youth's mind and that we might question the validity of the visual experience. Our doubt rises to disbelief when we learn that he can see "every change" in something as indiscernable as "vapor." It is barely visible, "thin," or invisible, "transparent"; nonetheless, he sees that it "floated idly in sheets." In the following sentence we can believe that the tree trunks were "brown or gray," but as with the grass and the vapor his vision becomes too acute. He sees, or rather in a syntactic arrangement keyed by the verb "showed" which gives the trees an active quality, he is shown "each roughness of their surface." The fact that he now does see things such as grass, vapor, and trees does indicate that he may be more engaged in circumstance, yet his interpretation is so compromised by the author's irony that we doubt if we can rely on his perception.

At the end of the paragraph that the preceding passage introduces Crane makes it clear, again by irony, but this time situational rather than verbal, that Henry's visual experience has meant little. ". . . afterward everything was pictured and explained to him, save why he was there."³⁸ Where we question the authenticity of his sight, we know his interpretive ability is absent. Despite the heightened, and likely exaggerated sensory event, it has finally meant very little to him.

Another event seeming to substantiate the notion that character has developed is Henry's rise to the position of color bearer. Yet when we look at the language describing the event we are not so sure that the major character exhibits the traits required of a complete character.

Within him, as he hurled himself forward, was born a love, a despairing fondness for this flag which was near to him. It was a creation of beauty and invulnerability. It was a goddess, radiant, that bended its form with an imperious gesture to him. It was a woman, red and white, hating and loving, that called him with the voice of his hopes. Because no harm could come to it he endowed it with power.³⁹

Crane arranges the entire passage to focus intensely upon the flag and the emotions that it evokes. The curiously constructed first sentence suggests that Henry is responsible for his motion, but not his emotion. Though reckless—"he hurled himself forward"—the youth makes himself proceed. The sentence, however, through its inverted formation emphasizes his emotions, and these are seen as beyond his control. The verb "was born" signals an involuntary persuasion to feel "love" and "fondness." It is a process that he cannot stop. As the next three sentences show, his mental processes are utterly consumed by uncontrolled emotion. The flag is successively conceived as being "a creation," "a goddess," "a woman." Its attractive force, stressed by the repetition of sentence structure and image, is too great for him to resist, and his over-eager mind personifies the flag. It is a seductive enchantress with its "imperious gesture" and "voice of his hopes," and being both "red and white" this enchantress has the capability to invoke evil. Few women, literally or figuratively, appear in The Red Badge, and as Milne Holton has pointed out, those that have appeared, be they Henry's mother, the girl at the outset who mocks him, or Nature which he "conceived . . . to be a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy.", have all disappointed him.⁴⁰ The final complicated sentence of the passage reveals a mind enthralled to the point of complete irrationality. In the first clause he realizes that the flag is an inanimate thing, "no harm could come to it," yet paradoxically it is for this reason that he "endowed it with power." His logic surprises us and by implication we can assume Henry feels that those things capable of being harmed (i.e. people) are not worthy of a power association. Thus the significance of people is lessened, while the importance of things is enhanced.

The youth and Wilson finally get the flag by wrenching it grotesquely from a corpse that "would not relinquish its trust." After

tugging it from the dead man's grasp they fight amongst themselves for possession of the flag, and it is Henry who wins. "The youth roughly pushed his friend away."⁴¹ He becomes the color bearer, the symbol of the regiment's corporate emotional state, by mad desire, by prying the flag from the clutches of a dead man, by greedily contesting for ownership.

Chapter Twenty-three, the only chapter where Henry and the regiment assert any conclusive action against the enemy, is much favored by those who contend that the novel is a traditional boy-becomes-man fiction. "The climax of The Red Badge," says Eric Solomon, "comes as the regiment and its flagbearer, without regard to vanities, charge once more and successfully overrun the enemy's position. They have all passed the test."⁴² In this chapter the major character does, for perhaps the first time in the novel, undeniably comprehend experience. "He made vague calculations. He saw that to be firm soldiers they must go forward. It would be death to stay in the present place, and with all the circumstances to go backward would exalt too many others."⁴³ Though Crane never lends his character brilliant insight, where at the beginning of the novel Henry "admitted that he could not sit still and with a mental slate and pencil derive an answer," he can now make "vague calculations." Rather than thinking entirely of himself, he thinks in terms of the regiment—"to be firm soldiers"—and with the word "must" his decision to attack is definite. This decision is based on a fairly thorough understanding of the situation as he considers both the regiment's position and the enemy's morale. If the regiment remains, "it would be death," while if they retreat it "would exalt too many others." With a degree of complexity the character decides that charging is the only solution.

The language that follows throughout the rest of Chapter Twenty-

three, however, ironically undermines this fleeting moment of genuine comprehension. Perhaps more so than any other chapter, the language here is absolutely wild, suggesting that the apparent battle heroics are nothing more than reckless, impulsive actions beyond the control of character. Virtually any passage in the chapter contains similar language to the two sentences that follow:

The men scampered in insane fever of haste, racing as if to achieve a sudden success before an exhilarating fluid should leave them. It was a blind and despairing rush by the collection of men in dusty and tattered blue, over a green sward and under a sapphire sky, toward a fence, dimly outlined in smoke, from behind which spluttered the fierce rifles of enemies.⁴⁴

The opening sentence unmistakably informs us of frenzied motion and thoughtless activity. The verbs "scampered" and "racing" alert us to hurried, excited action, and should we have any doubts Crane adds "in insane fever of haste" and "to achieve a sudden success." The regiment proceeds madly "before an exhilarating fluid should leave them," or before they regain some semblance of rational thought required of willed action. In the next sentence the "rush" is "blind," thus denying the remarkable sight that Henry would have seemed to possess, and "despairing," thus opposing the decisive, calculating formulation he had just made. As if an assortment of things, the regiment is a "collection," and being covered in "dusty and tattered blue," they are not even appealing things. A succession of prepositional phrases follows, expanding the sense of distance and diminishing the regiment's physical presence. The first two prepositions, "over" and "under," indicate that the regiment is confined between something much more substantial than themselves. Their movements are bound by the constraints of the contrasting and clearly depicted "green sward" and "sapphire sky." That their direction of advance is not precise is implied by "toward" and the indefinite article in

"a fence" instead of "the fence." To reduce the certainty of their destination further the fence is "dimly outlined in smoke." Crane inserts the verb "spluttered" to imply that the rifles are engaged in a furious process. It is the rifles, though, not the men behind the wall, that are emphasized. Because motion flows furiously Crane posits a wealth of information into two long, quickly proceeding sentences, and by applying techniques within these sentences that reduce willed action Crane dismisses the heroism of character.

If, even after considering words like "savage," "catapultian," and "fierce" that characterize the action throughout this chapter, we are unsure of Crane's intent, the ironic concluding sentences of the chapter convince us that the event cannot be thought heroic. "His friend [Wilson] jubilant and glorified, holding his treasure [the enemy's standard] with vanity, came to him there. They sat side by side and congratulated each other."⁴⁵ Wilson's vain, self-laudatory repose and mannerisms contradict his apparent recent growth to maturity. In our last view of them at the end of the skirmish both appear unheroic and silly in their indulgent self-praise.

In the final chapter Henry reflects upon his battle experience. Ostensibly it appears that he has grown, but we cannot be certain, and the critical dispute as to the meaning of this chapter rages. Indisputably the youth has participated in an initiation process and gone from untried soldier to veteran, yet whether the character has actually changed is difficult to determine. If Crane has dropped the irony that has informed the novel thus far, then Henry has grown. It would seem, however, that in this chapter the character's thoughts are expressed too obtusely to be accepted without question. To suddenly deem the youth a reliable narrator would be wholly inconsistent with the subtle ironical art that

Crane persistently employs. Incidents in the final chapter suggest that the major character's perceptions are the subject of irony. We learn that "the regiment received orders to retrace its way." Despite all the feverish activity the youth goes back to where he began, insinuating that he has really gone nowhere. As they make their way back Henry says to his friend, "Well, it's all over."⁴⁶ In actual fact, though, it is not. They have only participated in two days of battle and surely the war will continue. His comment again reveals a fallible mind that has an astonishing capacity to exaggerate.

Our perception of Henry seems to come into sharper focus when we consider the authorial tone of the final chapter. Crane's emphasis on Henry's egotistical preponderance discourages a sympathetic response to character. By overtly drawing attention to his "growth" and by using trite phrases to describe his "growth," Crane causes us to suspect the major character's supposed maturity. Henry is convinced that he is "good" and that "He was a man."⁴⁷ He appears too sure of his own worth as Crane invests his character with a simplistic assuredness that fails to endear, but that mocks Henry in particular, and the human tendency to assert meaning more generally.

Finally, however, we must turn to the language of the pivotal last chapter to make any concluding determinations about character. R. W. Stallman, through an exhaustive study of Crane's revisions of The Red Badge, provides an invaluable tool for determining the authorial treatment of character. It is at the end of the novel that Stallman's research is most informative. Before the novel was printed Crane changed the conclusion three times, and his additions indicate a good deal about the final interpretation of character. In the original manuscript the novel finished with a sentence that now appears a little further than midway

through the second to last paragraph. It reads, "Yet the youth smiled, for he saw that the world was a world for him, though many discovered it to be made of oaths and walking sticks."⁴⁸ Had the novel ended here, the youth might more easily be seen a developed character. In the midst of a miserable rain, to which he attaches no symbolic worth, Henry thinks he belongs in the world; perhaps he is no longer an "unknown quantity." He does not need to rely upon "oaths and walking sticks" (religion?, the assurance of others?), the creeds of the world, and can stand on his own. Even at this, though, he may be thought vain and pretentious just as he was at the beginning. But Crane chose not to leave the character in discrete depiction, and with his additions the sentence concluding the first manuscript assumes a definite ironic tone. In the second manuscript the novel ends with the sentence, "He turned now with a lover's thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks—an existence of soft and eternal peace."⁴⁹ With this romanticized perception of nature Henry resorts to the same "oaths and walking sticks" that he seemed to have just discounted. This ending strongly suggests that character has not changed. Just as Henry grossly sentimentalized war before his induction to battle, so he now excessively sentimentalizes his response to war. With such words as "lover's thirst," "tranquil skies," "fresh meadows," "cool brooks," and "soft and eternal peace," his response to circumstance is plainly overwrought and cliché-ridden, leaving Henry with the same excessive mind that is prone to assess reality improperly. In the final printing Crane added one sentence, this time more ambiguous. "Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds."⁵⁰ We do not know if it is the unnamed narrator or Henry who perceives this, and we cannot be convinced of its intent. It would seem likely, though, that it is a subversive conclusion, appearing to impose meaning where there is

none. The sentence has a send-the-audience-home-feeling-good quality; however, in the context of the novel its apparent positive implications become deceptively misleading. In the ironic hands of Crane we immediately suspect the trite finish. Perhaps a "golden ray of sunshine" piercing "the hosts of leaden rain clouds" might elsewhere imply a sense of fulfillment, of completion, but again and again throughout the novel Crane has shown us a Nature incapable of offering lessons, devoid of any reconciliatory properties. Appealing to the forces of Crane's Nature is a futile gesture. Henry, or maybe it is the unwary reader, attaches too much significance to an unremarkable event. Since the clouds are "over the river," we are back where we began, and still in danger of ascribing meaning to situations that do not lend themselves to a meaningful interpretation.

With its patterned plot and apparent significant symbolism The Red Badge, like other war fiction, almost necessarily implies meaning. Henry has gone into battle untried, survived, and even fought fiercely. He has successfully confronted the fearsome enemy that had made him flee initially, and been labelled a hero. Ultimately, though, Crane's war fiction strays from convention by refraining from presenting an effectual character. Henry Fleming has participated in a number of events of great tacit import, yet the language suggests that any value associations are construed falsely. Character articulates, dimly and with exaggeration, purpose, but Crane's vocabulary bursts the human egotistical bent, attacking the mind's propensity to lend experience meaning. By novel's end Henry is an untrustworthy character, prone to find meaning in a world that resists any meaningful interpretations.

¹Eric Solomon, Stephen Crane: From Parody to Realism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 73.

²William M. Gibson, ed., The Red Badge of Courage and Selected Prose and Poetry (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 417.

³R. W. Stallman, Stephen Crane: An Omnibus (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1953), p. 175.

⁴Thomas A. Gullason, ed., Stephen Crane's Career: Perspectives and Evaluations (New York: New York University Press, 1972), p. 345.

⁵Milne Holton, Cylinder of Vision (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), p. 119.

⁶Richard M. Weatherford, ed., Stephen Crane: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 113.

⁷William M. Gibson, ed., Op. cit. p. 413.

⁸Ibid. p. 449.

⁹Ibid. p. 503.

¹⁰Ibid. p. 534.

¹¹E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (London: William Clowes and Sons Ltd., 1974), p. 54.

¹²William M. Gibson, ed., Op. cit. p. 415.

¹³Ibid. p. 428.

¹⁴Ibid. p. 431.

¹⁵Ibid. p. 431.

¹⁶Ibid. p. 431.

¹⁷Ibid. p. 434.

¹⁸Ibid. p. 443.

¹⁹Ibid. p. 447.

²⁰Ibid. p. 452.

²¹Ibid. p. 454.

- ²²Ibid. p. 455.
- ²³Ibid. p. 455.
- ²⁴Ibid. p. 455.
- ²⁵Ibid. p. 447.
- ²⁶R. W. Stallman, Op. cit. p.199.
- ²⁷William M. Gibson, ed., Op. cit. p. 466.
- ²⁸Ibid. p. 465.
- ²⁹Ibid. p. 466.
- ³⁰Ibid. p. 466.
- ³¹Eric Solomon, Op. cit. p. 29.
- ³²William M. Gibson, ed., Op. cit. p. 475.
- ³³Ibid. p. 476.
- ³⁴Ibid. p. 492.
- ³⁵David Lodge, Language of Fiction (Reading: Cox and Wyman Ltd., 1984), p. 26.
- ³⁶William M. Gibson, ed., Op. cit. p. 502.
- ³⁷Ibid. p. 510.
- ³⁸Ibid. p. 510.
- ³⁹Ibid. p. 513.
- ⁴⁰Milne Holton, Op. cit. p. 109.
- ⁴¹William M. Gibson, ed., Op. cit. p. 514.
- ⁴²Eric Solomon, Op. cit. p. 96.
- ⁴³William M. Gibson, ed., Op. cit. p. 528.
- ⁴⁴Ibid. p. 529.
- ⁴⁵Ibid. p. 532.
- ⁴⁶Ibid. p. 534.
- ⁴⁷Ibid. p. 538.
- ⁴⁸Ibid. p. 538.

⁴⁹Ibid. p. 538.

⁵⁰Ibid. p. 538.

VI. Theodore Dreiser and Character: Sister Carrie

Published in the year that Stephen Crane died (1900), Theodore Dreiser's first novel Sister Carrie continued the process of character minimization exhibited by Crane. But with Dreiser the methods changed. Though the treatment of character with either author serves the same thematic end, the means of communication differs substantially. Crane has an intense, focused interest in words and his diction is sparse; Dreiser's overriding concern is with the narrative "mass" and his diction is verbose. For one it is the selection of vocabulary that predominates theme; for the other it is the story itself. "Like Stephen Crane," Donald Pizer says, "Dreiser translated an uneasy mixture of iconoclasm and unconventional belief into a structural principle. But whereas for Crane this principle was a subtle and complex modulation in authorial tone, imagery, and diction, for Dreiser it was an equally sophisticated ordering of events within an extended narrative."¹ One's language is intensive, the other's is expansive. Perhaps Dreiser unintentionally identifies his style best when in Sister Carrie he states, "How true it is that words are but vague shadows of the volumes we mean. Little audible links, they are, chaining together great inaudible feelings and purposes."²

A second significant difference between Crane and Dreiser is the matter of authorial voice. While Crane limits authorial intrusion to a minimum, Dreiser intrudes freely upon the narrative. In Sister Carrie the author comments upon the action unreservedly, analyzing and explaining at length. As an omniscient storyteller Dreiser frequently enters the page

directly, attempting to substantiate man's underlying motives. "Dreiser's role as philosophical commentator in his novels arises out of his acceptance of the nineteenth-century convention of the novelist as an epic narrator who not only represents but also discusses the underlying truths of society and human nature."³ The general pattern in Sister Carrie is to begin each chapter with a proclamation on the nature of man's existence and then to divulge the action of character in a manner consistent with the introductory proposition. He proceeds from the general to the specific, guiding his characters so as to validate his abstract truths.

Though sometimes cumbersome and rarely original, the authorial voice in Sister Carrie is authoritative in tone. The omniscient presentation affords Dreiser much flexibility, allowing him the opportunity to offer a number of disparate ideas. He utilizes this panoramic point of view to traverse the obstacles of setting, time, and topic, to explore the recesses of the human spirit, and to present perspectives from the scientific to the poetic. But, of course, there is a cost. Dreiser's looming authorial presence tends to distract from the flow of the story. We do not have the sense of immediacy, of being thrust into the events of the story that we have with Crane.

The fiction of Crane and Dreiser frequently exhibits a different emphasis in other ways. Dreiser's fiction is more precise in detail, more particular in setting, more immersed in history, and more instructive in chronology. He is also more apt to include social protest in his fiction. Crane's collar-and-cuff factory is anonymous, whereas Dreiser's shoe factory is depicted in detail as lacking the amenities necessary for comfortable labor. Nonetheless, Dreiser's description is largely objective and his protest hardly compares to, say, Upton Sinclair's protest in The



Jungle.

Maybe most significantly, their use of irony differs. Crane's irony is pervasive, so that we always attend to his language, always doubt the face value of his words. Dreiser, while often referring to irony, uses it as a device to inform situation, not as a medium of expression. We can rely upon him as a narrator. In Sister Carrie irony is utilized most frequently in a dramatic sense to show the shallowness of character. When playing cards Hurstwood says to Carrie "Now I'll show you how to trounce your husband,"⁴ and Drouet replies, ". . . if you two are going to scheme together, I won't stand a ghost of a show."⁵ The irony is evident, as it is so frequently when Hurstwood outmaneuvers the heedless Drouet. Similarly at the conclusion of the play "The Covenant" Drouet ironically criticizes the inattentiveness of an actor towards his lover. Then while leaving the theatre "a gaunt faced man" begs for money, but Hurstwood ignores the warning as he "scarcely noticed" this man that prefigures his final condition.

The most obvious and extended use of irony occurs during the Avery Hall theatrical. Unlike Crane's irony which is derived primarily from a conscientious verbal arrangement, the irony of the theatre scene, as is true of almost all of the irony in Sister Carrie, is dependent upon manipulating situation. With its ridiculous circumstance, melodramatic language, and misconstrued communication, Chapter Nineteen—"An Hour in Elf Land: A Clamour Half Heard"—is comical. "Dreiser's theatre scene," says Ellen Moers, "is an ironic juxtaposition of vulgarity with pretension, of ludicrous reality with artificial sentiment."⁶ It is a chapter almost over-burdened with irony. Carrie, contrary to her opportunistic nature, plays the part of a pure, virtuous maiden forever extolling the sanctity of love. Though unconsciously performed and not patterned for

such an effect, her romantic idealism works Hurstwood and Drouet into a froth of sexual excitement. At the play's conclusion, Carrie, as the stereotypical maiden in distress, presents a highly sentimental speech about the glory of love. She is actually bereft of love, yet the speech draws the two suitors to a climax of attraction. "Drouet pounded his hands until they ached.",⁷ and Hurstwood feels, "By the Lord he would have that lovely girl if it took his all."⁸ It does, of course, in the end take his all. Through situational irony the play scene reveals the inability of the participants to communicate with purpose and comprehend situation.

Even more than Crane, whose word choice has been questioned frequently, Dreiser's language has been the subject of repeated criticism. Stylistically one of the most berated American authors, his vocabulary is hackneyed and cliché-ridden. It has been suggested, notably by Ellen Moers in Two Driesers, that his language is intentionally flat so that the reader can go through the language to the described events more easily. If so, then the power of Dreiser's abstract truths seems diluted. Despite his penchant for attempting to posit a philosophical interpretation of the universe—in fact of the authors considered here Dreiser is the most apt to try to explain—the resultant thoughts are neither original nor readily identifiable. Dreiser himself partially alludes to this muddled form of expression. When comparing himself to his literary associate Arthur Henry he says, "I was the realist in thought and the sentimentalist in action."⁹ The truth is both elements play heavily upon his writing. In Dreiser's novels there is a curious blend of sympathy and detachment, of great emotional musing and adherence to strict and unchangeable laws, of pathos and indifference. His language presents a confusing, sometimes incomprehensible jumble of the definite and the unknowable.

After publishing his first novel Dreiser felt compelled to revise it. Originally it ended with Hurstwood's suicide, but Dreiser added the significant final scene with Carrie staring wonderingly out of her luxurious hotel room. "When I finished it," commented Dreiser in a 1907 interview, "I felt that it was not done. It was a continuous strip of life to me that seemed to be driven onward by those logical forces that had impelled the book to motion. The narrative, I felt, was finished, but not completed."¹⁰ Thus the revised edition of Sister Carrie is the author's preferred edition, the text most referred to for critical purposes, and the one used in this discussion.

The basis for Sister Carrie is steeped in personal and historical fact. The characters have their origin in the Dreiser household and acquaintances of the family. Emma, one of Theodore's sisters, fled from the Dreisers' small town existence in Terre Haute, Indiana to Chicago and found refuge in an illicit relationship with L. A. Hopkins, a moderately wealthy saloon manager. The two, being found out, removed themselves to New York. Consequently the inspiration for Carrie Meeber and George Hurstwood is clear; however, as several critics have stated the actual people and their fictionalized counterparts have little in common beyond shared circumstance. Dreiser is a creative artist, not merely a reporter of actual incidents; he "did not merely retell the story of Hopkins and Emma" ¹¹ In a similar manner the author borrows directly from history to tell significant events in the tale. Carrie's first play, as Dreiser tells us, is Augustine Daly's "Under the Gaslight," a popular drama at the end of the nineteenth century. The lines are extracted from it verbatim, though selected from the most serious portions of the play. Likewise the street car strike finds its origins in the Brooklyn street car strike of 1894. In this instance Dreiser again utilizes a verbatim account,

this time of a circular from The New York Times advertising employment opportunities. But his use of such incidents is carefully considered and artistically stimulated. He fuses the incidents to the novel, instead of altering his novel to match the incidents. The historical occurrences "fit" into the structure of the novel, lending it an added dimension of plausibility.

Sister Carrie begins with a provocative paragraph.

When Caroline Meeber boarded the afternoon train for Chicago, her total outfit consisted of a small trunk, a cheap imitation alligator-skin satchel, a small lunch in a paper box, and a yellow leather snap purse, containing her ticket, a scrap of paper with her sister's address in Van Buren Street, and four dollars in money. It was in August, 1889. She was eighteen years of age, bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth. Whatever touch of regret at parting characterized her thoughts, it was certainly not for advantages now being given up. A gush of tears at her mother's farewell kiss, a touch in her throat when the cars clacked by the flour mill where her father worked by the day, a pathetic sigh as the familiar green environs passed in review, and the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken.¹²

In this opening paragraph Dreiser reveals a great deal, prompting Ellen Moers to call it "remarkably efficient." Immediately apparent is the realistic tone. Through a detailed and objective portrayal of Carrie's appearance and brief reference to the environment she has just left we learn of the character's class, her small town existence, her poverty, her family, the time period, her age, and her unsettled demeanor.

In broader terms the content of the paragraph is suggestive of a major social phenomenon of the end of the nineteenth century. Carrie's journey from rural to urban America is representative of the transformation of society as the industrialized city beckoned thousands of laborers. Like Carrie, multitudes were departing from the innocence and tranquillity of "familiar green environs" to seek employment in the bustling city. Her trip is the trip of countless youths going from the comfort and

reassurance of the small, known community to the excitement and intimidation of the big, unknown metropolis. She is, in part, a microcosm of America's transition from an agrarian economy to an industrial economy.

While her condition is representative of economic realities, Carrie also participates in the world of myth. She is the innocent country girl venturing to the wondrous city. Dreiser unmistakably binds his primary character to myth in the first paragraph with his sentimental language. His verbal expression has many of the stock images of the heroine leaving family and village for the unknown. "A gush of tears at her mother's farewell kiss, a touch in her throat when the cars clacked by the flour mill where her father worked by the day, a pathetic sigh as the familiar green environs passed in review," With such language the author makes Carrie a representative figure.

But it is mainly the journey of a particular character, one that is "bright, timid, and full of the ignorance and illusions of youth." In the language and the situation of the paragraph we are immediately introduced to an essential characteristic of Carrie: she is in motion. Always moving away from something that she dimly perceives and towards something appealing but beyond her comprehension, she is forever seeking. It is an important trait of Carrie that nothing ties her in place; no sense of obligation compels her to remain in a fixed station in life. ". . . and the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken." While yet on the train she has already severed the chains of her past.

In this mixture of reality, myth, and a particular character's propensity to drift a structure begins that is familiar, but that finally lacks the moral constraints of the familiar story. Just as Crane upset the

themes of the traditional war fiction, so Dreiser rejects the conventional morality of the oft-told story of the girl leaving the rural home for the city. In Sister Carrie he refers to a romance structure, but not to traditional romance conclusions. Donald Pizer has noted characteristics of Sister Carrie such as the mock wedding which "bring the novel close to such best sellers of the day as Bertha M. Clay's Dora Thorne (1893) and A True Magdalen (1896), E. P. Roe's Barriers Burned Away (1872), and Laura Jean Libbey's A Fatal Wooing (1883) and Only a Mechanic's Daughter (1892)."¹³ Despite shared traits, Dreiser's novel disregards traditional cultural assumptions and cause and effect do not operate by moral determinants. We suspect this when he begins the third paragraph of the novel with a seemingly righteous declaration, but one that is really stated in neutral terms. "When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse."¹⁴ He immediately proceeds to speak of the "large forces that allure" in the city, yet refrains from couching his language in moral terms. It is not so much a world of good and evil as a baffling world of attraction and repulsion. "Life is to me," Dreiser once stated, "too much a welter and play of inscrutable forces",¹⁵ and so it is with Sister Carrie.

Of the novels considered in this thesis Sister Carrie has the most highly patterned structure. The novel has a chiasmic composition. One of the principal structural features is built about the character of Carrie and this "plank" ascends from poverty to riches, discomfort to comfort, drudgery to pleasure, while the other principal structural feature is built about the character of Hurstwood and this "plank" descends from wealth to mendicancy, popularity to anonymity, assuredness to helplessness.

These structural features cross at the mid-point of the novel when the safe door clicks shut on Hurstwood. From this point of mergence the lines that trace the dominant structural features diverge, one leading up to success the other down to failure.

Of course the novel contains many subtleties that are not accounted for in this stark structural scheme, but Sister Carrie's overriding construction does seem centered on the opposing ascent of Carrie and descent of Hurstwood. As their fates diverge and the structural irony becomes clear, we appreciate just how tenuous social position is. Yet the geometric perfection of the chiasmic structure is somewhat misleading as a pervasive underlying "graphic" irony undermines the apparent linear progress. In one sense characters are tracing a linear path—Carrie advances from a compromising reliance on others to independent artistic fame; Hurstwood retreats from genial comfort to bitter despair—but underneath this structure of each character's career is a more profound sense of the lack of progress. Lying just beneath the pattern that suggests directional movement is a "pattern" that goes nowhere. ". . . the characters believe they are pushing forward but they are really moving in a circle."¹⁶ Hurstwood's behavior preceding his suicidal death powerfully captures this sense of the futility of action. After turning the gas on, then off, then back on, he hesitates once more, pondering the advisability of leaving the situation as it stands. Finally in an utterance that recalls the Bowery epithet in Maggie "What d'hell!", Hurstwood mumbles "What's the use?". In his last fatal gesture he acknowledges his inability to affect change.

This appearance of individual motion and the reality of a senseless stasis informs the novel, and nowhere is this more strongly evidenced than in Dreiser's use of symbol and metaphor. In Sister Carrie as with Maggie

and The Red Badge of Courage the imagery greatly minimizes character. However, with Dreiser, unlike Crane, the use of symbol is outwardly consistent with theme, not misleading. Since they mesh with the narrative and do not reinforce the theme through irony, Dreiserian symbols call little attention to themselves. Crane's insistence on symbol indicates the foolishness of endowing events with meaning, whereas Dreiser's quiet reference to symbol suggests that incidents purport little meaning.

Nonetheless, Dreiser incorporates a couple of images in Sister Carrie that clearly function as symbols. One of these dominant and repetitive symbols is the rocking chair; an ideal image for depicting static motion. Always moving but never going anywhere, the rocking chair typifies the action in Dreiser's first novel.

The characters most strongly associated with the rocking chair are Carrie and to a lesser extent Hurstwood, though Drouet and Mrs. Hurstwood are also depicted in rocking chairs. For the characters the chair serves as some sort of refuge; a means of temporarily escaping the "inscrutable forces" that play upon them. But the rocking action finally reveals the ineffectiveness of their momentary release. Carrie's trance-like, contemplative state while in the rocking chair is hopelessly inconclusive—she rocks at the beginning and end of the novel, groping for answers in vain. Hurstwood's rocking only amounts to a few moments of oblivion. His last comfortable niche is only realized by the retreat into the chair. The characters do have the capability to muse and hope—"Her [Carrie's] dreamy nature and her rocking are intended to signify her discontent with the present and her hope for the future."¹⁷but their condition remains essentially the same. It is almost as if the rocking chair becomes an image of the Spencerian notion of the persistence of force. Carrying on in its to and fro motion, the chair represents a universe that

gives no heed to the thoughts of its occupants.

Another image that plainly manifests itself as symbol is the theatre. Like the rocking chair it too first functions merely as a reprieve from a problematic world. Carrie's first visits to the theatre and even her role in "Under the Gaslight" operate as a distraction from a worrisome predicament. However, as her unconscious talents become more apparent in New York, the theatre assumes a heightened artistic value. "And there is also the important symbolic role of the theatre as an ascending form of illusion for Carrie, from merely an escape from a troubled sea of life to a source of material plenty and therefore happiness to the highest kind of illusion, the practice of an art."¹⁸ It seems, however, that Carrie does not so much "practice an art" as she unwittingly gives the impression of art, and the theatre experience symbolically traces an ascendant realization of Carrie's innate inclination to act.

A more discreet symbol is seen in Dreiser's use of "inside" and "outside" which reveals an essential quality of the central characters. Carrie is never content, but always desirous of some condition removed from her station in life. While newly arrived in Chicago and still residing with Minnie and Hanson, she frequently goes to the bottom of the flat's stairs and peers out of the door window and on to the street. She longs to get beyond the door and the mundane existence in the flat and out on to the street filled with merry people. When she finally bursts through the barrier of the door it is to lead a sequestered life with Drouet. Longing for more, Carrie, while accompanying Mrs. Hale on a carriage ride through one of Chicago's luxurious neighborhoods, is enthralled by the great houses. "Across the broad lawns, now first freshening into green, she saw lamps faintly glowing upon rich interiors She imagined that across these richly carved entrance-ways, where the globed and crystallized

lamps shone upon panelled doors set with stained and designed panes of glass, was neither care nor unsatisfied desire. She was perfectly certain that here was happiness."¹⁹ Now Carrie wants in, not out. By novel's end she transcends a barrier once more and enters the opulent interiors that she witnessed on her ride with Mrs. Hale. "Ah, she was in the walled city now! Its splendid gates had opened, admitting her from a cold, dreary outside."²⁰ Yet the happiness she seemed so certain to find in such quarters eludes her once more. She sits in her rocking chair gazing out on to the street, much as she did at the beginning of the novel. Chance and a fortuitous nature lead the character of Carrie to a more favorable exterior existence, but her interior condition of unfulfilled longing remains unchanged.

Hurstwood also fits into this inside-outside symbolism, but his desire is less complex. It is not the play of emotion and a vague sense of possible self-realization that compels Hurstwood to move, but rather it is the need to escape immediate circumstance. His need to love Carrie leads him out of Chicago and into New York, cold weather leads him out of the streets and into the warmth of a room, hunger leads him out of his dingy rooms and to the bread line. It is the inability to find employment that leaves him permanently out. "He began to see as one sees a city with a wall about it. Men were posted at the gates. You could not get in. Those inside did not care to come out to see who you were. They were so merry inside that all those outside were forgotten, and he was on the outside."²¹ For a man that had been previously solidly "in," Hurstwood has been relegated to the barren wastes of the outside. While Carrie has passed through the wall, Hurstwood has gone irreversibly out.

In Sister Carrie, as in other Dreiser novels, material goods attain symbolic status. It is in the ability of material matter to attract or repel

that we find symbolic value. By doing so, such matter contributes conspicuously to thematic effect. We become aware of the sway of things in the first chapter when Drouet displays his "fat purse" loaded with "slips of paper, some mileage books, a roll of greenbacks"²² for Carrie's viewing. It has immediate appeal. This "roll of greenbacks" is a precursor to the two ten-dollar bills that symbolically connote Drouet's usurpation of Carrie. By accepting the "two, soft, green, handsome ten-dollar bills," sumptuous in their description, she has been purchased by Drouet and shortly thereafter gives herself wholly to him. Clothes serve the same thematic end. In the language that surrounds clothes they come to connote social status: "Along Broadway men picked their way in ulsters and umbrellas. Along the Bowery, men slouched through it with collars and hats pulled over their ears."²³ Clothes distinguish slight individual differences: "Hurstwood's shoes were of soft, black calf, polished only to a dull shine. Drouet wore patent leather, but Carrie could not help feeling that there was a distinction in favour of the soft leather, where all else was so rich."²⁴ And clothes seem to become animate in their sensuous allure: "As he [Drouet] cut the meal his rings almost spoke."²⁵ Like money and clothes, eating and drinking establishments also serve a seductive function. Fitzgerald and Moy's, Sherry's, and Delmonico's exert a powerful force that attracts people to their doors. With their ornate construction, exotic menus, and cultured customers, they have an aura that pulls people from the streets and into their plush chambers. Their attraction is so great that it eliminates choice: ". . . Drouet drifted into his [Hurstwood's] polished resort, from which he could not stay away."²⁶ Things such as money, clothes, and saloons all strongly influence the characters of Sister Carrie, yet the characters never understand the basis of their attraction.

Should we doubt the intent of the novel's symbolism Dreiser's use of metaphor solidly establishes the inability of character to comprehend the world through which it drifts. Led by vague compulsions and affected by random and determined events, Dreiser's metaphors describe a largely helpless self. Though his repetitive use of metaphor becomes tiresome in its unimaginativeness, we are convinced of its implications. Frequently referred to clichéd images include character as a "lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea," as a "little soldier of fortune," as a "harp in the wind," as a "fly . . . caught in the net." Dreiser's metaphors make it clear that character is either trapped in a world of overwhelming influence or a world of reckless chance. They affirm his own assessment of the novel. In a letter to Walter H. Page he wrote that Sister Carrie "deals with the firm insistence of law, the elements of chance and sub-conscious direction."²⁷ If ugly, his cliché-filled language reduces character to a shallow, simplistic, thoughtless existence.

Though symbolism and metaphor reveal a great deal about character, to understand the function of character we must focus upon its essential nature as promoted by the author's language. For it is when we look behind the symbolic and metaphorical exterior which Dreiser has created that character becomes most interesting.

To understand the essential nature of character we might start with the character's names. It has been suggested that Dreiser's naming process is reflective of the basic quality of his characters. Through phonetic word association the names of the characters indicate an appropriate corollary. Carrie's surname Meeber calls to mind the word "amoeba." It is such an apt analogue that the connection would not seem merely coincidental. Like an amoeba Carrie is drawn mindlessly towards a condition that proves satisfying. And as the amoeba utilizes water as

a means of transport, so Carrie uses the people about her as a means of propulsion.

Even the same forces that dictate the motion of an amoeba directly influence Carrie. Dreiser's language stresses the appeal of light and temperature: two tropisms that determine the suitability of the amoeba's environment. Carrie, as would an amoeba, shows a preference for light and warmth. "In the night or the gloomy chambers of the day fears and misgivings wax, but out in the sunlight there is, for a time, cessation even of the terror of death."²⁸ She drifts unconsciously toward elemental attractions. When talking to Drouet he "fairly shone in the matter of serving," when talking to Hurstwood "she only basked in the warmth of his feeling, which was as a grateful blaze to one who is cold,"²⁹ when talking to Ames "the red glow on his head gave it a sandy tinge and put a bright glint in his eye."³⁰ They all act as a stimulus, and she responds mindlessly by drawing near to their appealing force.

Just as Meeber may well connote amoeba, by the same process Drouet recalls the word "roué." Again the phonetic similarity and the appropriateness of the analogue seem too substantial to be coincidental. Like a roué, Drouet is interested solely in pursuing a life of sensual pleasure. This character is consumed entirely by carnal pursuits. "He could not see clearly enough to wish to do differently. He was drawn by his innate desire to act the old pursuing part. He would need to delight himself with Carrie as surely as he would need to eat his heavy breakfast."³¹ Drouet's need to satisfy urges, both of a biological basis and of social position, utterly conditions his behavior.

With George Hurstwood the implications of the naming process are not dependent on word resemblance, but are wholly phonetic. Having deep, low vowel sounds, George Hurstwood is a sluggish sounding name,

and because of the dominance of the "r" sound, the name assumes a sort of unchanging permanence. The combination of vowel and consonant creates a simplistic, almost guttural sound, while suggesting an underlying brittleness. Thus the overall pronunciation of George Hurstwood seems consistent with the character. We are introduced to him as a man of position, but Hurstwood receives his income by complying with social niceties, not by hard work or a particular brilliance, and when in New York we realize how hollow his appearance truly is. His talent rests in thoughtlessly understanding and conforming to the nuances of the social game.

If the naming process is not intended to imply so much meaning, then certainly the alteration of names throughout the course of the novel reflects significantly upon the characters. From Meeber, to Madenda, to Wheeler, and back to Madenda, Carrie changes her name several times. In this casual succession of names we can see the ease with which she adopts a new identity. As simply as she acquires a new name, she acquires a new role. For Carrie it is an effortless transition from name to name, from role to role. If at first she encounters difficulty with a new name, she changes it, or adjusts to it. At Hurstwood's suggestion of the strong sounding name Murdock, Carrie refuses, but she agrees to the softer sounding name of Wheeler. Before long she accepts the new identity. "It sounded exceedingly odd to be called Mrs. Wheeler by the janitor, but in time she became used to it and looked upon the name as her own."³² Her easy, almost thoughtless acceptance of names hints at her inherent ability to adjust to new circumstance in a manner most favorable for her immediate prospects.

"Dreiser's characters, moreover," says the critic Arthur Edelstein, "internalize their environment, unconsciously adopt an ethics of energy."³³

They seek the best medium through which their urges might be transmitted and satiated. It is in the two major characters—Carrie and Hurstwood—that this consuming attraction to the most appropriate "objective correlative" is seen in the greatest detail. With Carrie the attraction to the most beneficial medium informs all of her thoughts and actions, severely diminishing character. She drifts with the never understood purpose of situating herself such that she makes the most of circumstance. ". . . for Carrie had little power of initiative; but, nevertheless, she seemed ever capable of getting herself into the tide of change where she would be easily borne along."³⁴ It is an intuitive motion toward pleasure and happiness. This sense of purposeful but unconscious motion dominates her existence so much that the vocabulary referring to Carrie frequently contains conspicuous words: "The constant drag to something better was not to be denied,"³⁵ or "Hurstwood seemed a drag in the direction of honour."³⁶

As she goes from one relationship to the next she seeks to fulfill her own interests and desires. From Drouet, to Hurstwood, to Ames the patterned and hierarchical relationships bring her, ironically, closer to fulfilling her desires, but ultimately nowhere. The characters whom she contacts serve as "rungs in a ladder"—an image to which Dreiser frequently refers—but if they function as a ladder, Carrie never gets to the top. She is left suspended in a world that provides pleasure, but not any satisfying conclusions to her vaguely formulated longings. It is a world without significant meaning.

Rootless, malleable, and dreamy, Carrie's most identifiable characteristic is her unceasing urge to drift in the direction of pleasure. "Naturally timid in all things that related to her own advancement, and especially so when without power or resource, her craving for pleasure

was so strong that it was the one stay of her nature."³⁷ Accompanying this consuming desire for pleasure is a more refined quest for happiness. This happiness, never intellectualized, is "felt" by Carrie through some vague intuitive process. Because her desire for happiness is so ethereal, so dimly comprehended, it adds little to her character, but blurs it in mysterious emotive feeling that is never explained and probably inexplicable. It is a constant though never fulfilled longing, at the end even superseding her obsession with pleasure.

Her quest for happiness is always disappointed. After obtaining a job in the shoe factory and before actually working Carrie feels that "She would have a better time than she ever had before—she would be happy."³⁸ Such an exaggerated and unwarranted appraisal reminds us of Henry Fleming's easily-affected mind. Where Henry imagines "Greeklike struggles," Carrie imagines a comfortable income and much happiness. But the job, as did Henry's first exposure to the army, proves disappointing. Happiness eludes her and though her fortunes continually wax, it continues to elude her for her entire life.

At one point, just after her successful performance in "Under the Gaslight," Carrie does feel a qualified happiness, "She was, all in all, exceedingly happy."³⁹ Yet the condition is fleeting. Never content, never capable of experiencing a vaguely comprehended happiness fully, Carrie always moves, but never finds. She bounces from Drouet to Hurstwood and briefly towards Ames, but finally despairs at the futility of her search. In the end she can only stare out upon the streets and muse inconclusively. "In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel."⁴⁰ When we leave Carrie she is trapped in the two modes of activity—rocking and peering out on to the

streets—that have informed her behavior from the start. She has obtained "creature comforts," but nothing to lend her character depth.

It is the pleasure motivation that first impels her to act. Before being introduced to the attractive force of Drouet and Hurstwood, Carrie senses that she must go to the city. A dominant force in many Dreiser novels, Sister Carrie shows the beginning of his fascination with the city. The city is the ground on which the ladder of Carrie's fortune must be set. It is a perplexing mix of emotions, aspirations, and fortune all infused with brilliant energy. In its massiveness it appeals and repels. It offers conspicuous wealth and degrading poverty, fame and anonymity, fulfillment and disappointment. For the ambitious it is a great seducer, beckoning hopeful souls with irresistible appeal to partake of its plenteous offerings. For Carrie Meeber the attraction of the city is so great that it all but necessitates leaving the limited possibilities of the small town. "Columbia City, what was there for her? She knew its dull, little round by heart. Here was the great, mysterious city which was still a magnet for her."⁴¹ She does not so much decide to go to the city as she feels an overwhelming compulsion to get into the city and avail herself of its opportunities. "She was again the victim," says Dreiser, "of the city's hypnotic influence."⁴² The lure of the city is depicted so powerfully that it absolves Carrie from moral responsibility. Pizer compares Carrie to Eve, the city to the apple, and states that "the apple is beyond resistance in its temptation."⁴³ It certainly is, but if Dreiser's city is the apple, then it is removed from Biblical experience as no system of rewards and punishments accompanies Carrie's submission to the temptations of the city.

At times, however, Dreiser's language does not present the city as a sensual enchantress, but instead it records information in a factual,

report-like manner. In this sense Sister Carrie can be read occasionally as an historical account of two American cities: "It was the characteristic of Chicago, then, and one not generally shared by other cities, that individual firms of any pretention occupied individual buildings. The presence of ample ground made this possible.",⁴⁴ while "In New York the roads to distinction were any one of a half-hundred, and each had been diligently pursued by hundreds, so that celebrities were numerous."⁴⁵ More often, though, his language describes the city as an irresistible mass. Early on in Chapter One he sets the tone for his city. "The city has its cunning wiles, no less than the infinitely smaller and more human tempter. There are large forces which allure with all the soulfulness of expression in the most cultured human."⁴⁶ A corrupter of the innocent, an animate persuader, a deceiving "tempter," the city possesses multiple, never exhausted means of conditioning its occupants.

At first the city is not appealing. Initially exposed to the dreary grind of metropolitan life, Carrie's life with Minnie and Hanson clashes with all of her dim anticipations of enjoyment, and consequently repels her. It is the indifferent, cold city. Despising her toil and lacking adequate clothes for winter, Carrie quits her job and finds herself in dire financial straits. Yet all about she can see abundant wealth and merriment. Clearly the city provides ample nourishment for those in search of pleasure. Carrie just needs a mechanism to allow her to remain in the city.

A combination of the lack of initiative, an opportunistic nature, and a chance occurrence provides that mechanism. While walking through the streets searching for employment, an objective already too distasteful for her to move towards, Carrie encounters Charles Drouet. Opposed to the dreariness of the Hanson household and the drudgery of work, Dreiser's

language makes it clear that his presence stimulates Carrie towards a favorable response. "He [Drouet] was not only rosy-cheeked, but radiant. He was the essence of sunshine and good humor."⁴⁷ Drouet's robust physique and dominant presence exudes an intoxicating energy. He "is" heat, light, and light-heartedness, and Carrie, sensing the power of his attraction, cannot help but submit to "his irresistible flood of geniality." Without effort or thought she drifts towards the source of pleasure.

It is significant that the two things Drouet immediately offers her are food and money, for he is only capable of providing tangible materials. He is primarily appearance with little substance. "Good clothes, of course, were the first essential, the things without which he was nothing."⁴⁸ And his kindness is offered as a means to an end. "His method was simple. Its principle element was daring, backed, of course by an intense desire and admiration for the opposite sex."⁴⁹ Though more wealthy and more urbane, Drouet reminds us of Maggie's Pete.

Despite brief moral qualms, Carrie, in almost decisionless agreement, takes the path of least resistance, and accepts Drouet's housing arrangement. Drouet's nature, however, is not compatible with Carrie's inner longing. His singular, though not in any way vindictive, intent of housing Carrie for convenience sake precludes him from appreciating her vague need for self-fulfillment. "He loved to make advances to women, to have them succumb to his charms, not because he was a cold-blooded, dark, scheming villain, but because his inborn desire urged him to that as a chief delight."⁵⁰ Drouet is an "unthinking moth of the lamp" drawn irrevocably towards femininity. But he underestimates the scope of emotional attention that Carrie requires. His consuming interest in corporeal delights does not mesh with Carrie's dimly articulated need for intrinsic satisfaction. As a character with parasitic inclinations she finds

the host of Drouet incomplete.

By now it is becoming increasingly clear that Dreiser has created an opportunistic character guided by a powerful desire to satisfy innate urges. Carrie drifts towards the city, momentarily towards employment, then towards a more comfortable existence with Drouet. The pattern is repeated when Carrie encounters Hurstwood. With his refined looks, apparent sophistication, and seemingly crisp intellect, Carrie is drawn to him. He will be the next rung. "When Hurstwood called, she met a man who was more clever than Drouet in a thousand ways. He paid that peculiar deference to women which every member of the sex appreciates. He was not overawed, he was not overbold. His great charm was attentiveness."⁵¹ Carrie draws near the more pleasing alternative.

Like her decisionless acceptance of Drouet's functional lodging arrangement, Carrie's separation from the salesman and integration with Hurstwood is accomplished by indeterminacy. She is tricked, rather easily it seems, into boarding a train, and though outraged by the deception, she cannot act. "She was drifting mentally, unable to say to herself what to do."⁵² Instead of rebelling, she lets the situation resolve itself. As the train moves unwaveringly towards its destination, Carrie is a powerless passenger resigned to going where it will. The train experience becomes an extended metaphor for her life. "Carrie hung in a quandary, balancing between decision and helplessness. Now the train stopped and she was listening to its plea."⁵³ She thoughtlessly agrees to be swept along with its momentum rather than make a conscious decision and get off.

In New York Hurstwood is stripped of his alluring qualities. He has sacrificed his position of notoriety but retains the habitual and narrowly perceived modes of thought and action required of his old position.

Incapable of adjusting to the unfamiliar environment, Hurstwood is overwhelmed, and his once congenial attitude dwindles to indifference. He has lost his attractive force; Carrie requires a new rung to orientate her transient soul towards. Ames represents that rung. Unlike Drouet and Hurstwood, Ames is a young intellectual that can roam in the world of wealth, but that senses a shallowness in this world of material plenty. He is a self of ideals. As he suggests some basis for happiness, Ames seems the logical objective for Carrie's wandering constitution, but ultimately she can only appreciate this rung, she cannot ascend to it. For Carrie's feeble, under-developed mind the world that he inhabits is beyond reach, as is the accompanying happiness.

With Ames, Dreiser implies that character is capable of consequential thought and action. Dreiser would seem to sever the naturalistic chain of diminished selves. In the context of the novel, however, Ames is too thinly portrayed to be taken seriously. His sole identity is as the teacher of Carrie. He is merely a spokesman for the author's ideas; a mechanism for Dreiser to transmit thoughts. Ames represents a higher plane of existence rather than being a fully realized fictional character, and his single dimension conflicts with his pretentious notions of completeness. "In short, he is too much the prig."⁵⁴ Because he is so unconvincing, so contrived, Ames too belongs to the realm of the diminished self.

Outwardly Carrie's life is a success. She ascends to theatrical heights as an actress on Broadway and secures a modest amount of fame. But as Henry Fleming's "heroism" is not consciously motivated or realized, so Carrie Meeber's success as an actress has little to do with individual choice and self-dictated action.

Carrie is associated with the theatre almost at once. While on the

train to Chicago Dreiser tells us that "She could not help smiling as he [Drouet] told her of some popular actress of whom she reminded him."⁵⁵ Ellen Moers has pointed out that much of the language of Sister Carrie has a theatrical source.⁵⁶ It has chapters constructed like scenes, it includes repeated reference to light, it has characters that play roles, it has carefully rendered settings, and it alludes to music that recalls the orchestra music present at the theatres of the time. Often Dreiser enters the narrative like a chorus to comment on the action and to speculate on underlying motives. He presents postulates and verifies them through action. In this sense the characters are participating in a drama that Dreiser ostentatiously directs.

From the outset we are told that Carrie has an inherent ability to act. Indeed whether engaged in the theatre or life her existence is spent playing a role. "Carrie is hardly aware of any difference between the city and the theatre lights, between the drama on and the drama off the stage."⁵⁷ She does not choose to assume various roles, but being naturally inclined to do so, she cannot quell her dramatic tendencies. ". . . Carrie was naturally imitative. She began to get the hang of things which the pretty woman who has vanity naturally adopts."⁵⁸ Her essential nature determines her fate. It is Carrie's ultra-sensitive and keenly intuitive disposition that allows her to duplicate experience so powerfully. Though she has little mental process—"It was only an average little conscience, a thing which represented the world, her past environment, habit, convention, in a confused way."⁵⁹—she has the innate ability to absorb information passively and completely and relay it unself-consciously in a realistic manner.

We first learn of Carrie's innate acting ability during her Avery Hall performance of "Under the Gaslight." Though this is largely a play

adopted for ironic effect, it clearly reveals Carrie's fascination with the theatre. After an inauspicious start she renders a highly effective and moving performance. She imparts profound effect on the audience, and feels the corresponding flow of invigorating energy return from the crowd. It is a brilliant, if fleeting, moment that hints at the success to come.

Though Hurstwood and Drouet sense that Carrie performs "exceedingly well," it is Ames who finally identifies her "greatness." "Most people," says Ames, "are not capable of voicing their own feelings. That is what genius is for."⁶⁰ His claims of Carrie's "genius" are qualified. He tells us that Carrie's accomplishments result from natural ability, not personal choice. "It so happens that you have this thing. It is no credit to you—that is, I mean, you might not have had it. You paid nothing to get it."⁶¹ Like the plant that flowers beautifully, Carrie acts well.

We must, then, refrain from assigning her too much credit. One critic says, "But if one has to have a single 'handle' by which to interpret Carrie, perhaps she is above all the artist."⁶² Yet she is the unthinking artist, not knowingly creating, but duplicating expression naturally. Her "art" lies in reproducing a moment or a feeling, not in developing through conscious thought something wholly her own. By exempting choice from her ability Dreiser substantially minimizes character.

Because she imitates experience rather than "being" experience, Carrie presents the appearance of significant emotion, but actually tends towards emotional sterility. Like the effective models in Henry James' "The Real Thing," her flexible, Proteus-like nature gives her the ability to give the impression of "reality" without actually being "real." As she cannot fuse "real" experience with "real" emotion, she lacks passionate feeling and expression. Her love, for instance, is like love, it is not actually love. Thus with Hurstwood, Carrie's greatest emotional pull, she

feels that "Here was a man sufficient almost to delude her into the belief that she was possessed of a lively passion for him."⁶³ Dreiser informs us that Carrie is capable of being attracted and persuaded, but finally incapable of intense feeling. As her emotions are externally generated they can only be "sufficient almost to delude her into a belief"; she cannot "be" the feeling.

Dreiser reinforces this idea of incomplete emotional experience later and more conclusively when, just prior to Carrie's "marriage," he says, "There was no great passion in her, but the drift of things and this man's proximity created a semblance of affection . . . true love she had never felt for him."⁶⁴ Unable to comprehend the basis of her impulses, Carrie assimilates emotion for her advantage, but does not entirely feel nor appreciate the life that she can never be fully engaged in.

The predominant attractive force in Carrie's life—George Hurstwood—is not so profoundly trapped in this perplexing mire of desire and the lack of comprehension. Because Hurstwood is not encumbered with Carrie's complex yet uneventful play of multiple impulses and can be depicted sharply, he "is one of Dreiser's most effective portraits."⁶⁵ Dreiser tells us that the idea for this character originated from a visit to a New York park:

About me on the benches of the park was, even in this gray, chill December weather, that large company of bums, loafers, tramps, idlers, the flotsam and jetsam of the great city's whirl and strife to be seen there today. I presume I looked at them and then considered myself and these great offices, and it was then that the idea of Hurstwood was born. The city seemed so huge and cruel⁶⁶

As Crane had been attracted to the bums of the Bowery, so these bedraggled souls that epitomize failure in America appealed to Dreiser. But where Crane never leaves the squalor of the slums, Dreiser traces a path from means to destitution.

Ostensibly Carrie and Hurstwood share much in common. As the manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's the character of Hurstwood is essentially an actor. His responsibilities have no financial or purely pragmatic functions, and he is employed only to impart an impression. "Like any front man or wardheeler, head waiter or handshaker on Broadway . . . Hurstwood has to be adept at 'The Use of a Name'—the title of Chapter 5, which introduces Hurstwood at work in the saloon, practicing his 'finely graduated scale of informality and friendship.'"⁶⁷ He assumes the role of the thoughtful host, patronizing and deferring as the situation calls; however, he is without power.

Like Carrie, Hurstwood exhibits little imagination. Dreiser's mention of the saloon manager's home life affirms this. The actual Hurstwood residence, though pleasing, lacks "home spirit" or any personal distinction, but rather it is the banal "perfectly appointed house." His family is vain, pretentious, and self-seeking, but Hurstwood prefers to avoid confronting any such unpleasant matters. Should a problem arise he would, like Carrie, abstain from addressing it and let the situation resolve itself. "He would not argue, he would not talk freely. In his manner was something of the dogmatist. What he could not correct, he would ignore."⁶⁸ Through indifference he avoids undesirable situations.

But as characters Carrie and Hurstwood are hardly the same. Whereas Carrie's nature is malleable and easily adjusted, Hurstwood's nature, being formed by habit and convention, is set and determined. As such he is much more easily identified than Carrie: "Hurstwood was an interesting character after his type."⁶⁹ He represents the solid, bland, and unthinking gentleman of the American middle class.

His stolid, settled existence is shattered by the introduction of Carrie into his environment. Upon coming into contact with her, a

dormant passion is aroused. Beneath his docile exterior, Carrie provokes a rage of emotion in him, a rage absolutely foreign to her being. His rapture is particularly strong on their coach ride along the outskirts of the city and during the Avery Hall performance.

With Dreiser's reference to light, heat, the sensual quality of the intonation of voice and body language, the carriage ride along the outskirts of Chicago is strongly suggestive of Hurstwood's capacity for peaked emotional experience. Unlike Carrie, Hurstwood is capable of "strong feelings—often poetic ones—and under a stress of desire, such as at present, he waxed eloquent."⁷⁰ Here Hurstwood is the aggressor passionately pressing for her submission. But Dreiser's vocabulary hints that his emotional outburst, though it attracts Carrie, ultimately has no permanence or perhaps even relevance. The Boulevard on which they travel is "nothing more than a neatly made road."⁷¹ Dreiser's emphasis on the verb suggests that the entire episode occurs on something like a stage, with each participant fulfilling their role. The clichéd speeches that follow belong to the stereotypical enthralled suitor and the coy, but permissive belle. He heightens this separation from ordinary experience by stressing their physical isolation: "There was not a house to be encountered anywhere along the route"⁷² And the "route," like Hurstwood's emotions, is being traversed mindlessly, without regard to consequence. "The horse paced leisurely on, unguided."⁷³ Though a powerful and seemingly "real" exchange of emotion takes place, Dreiser's allusion to artifice, isolation, and the lack of control indicates that the characters do not truly understand the implications of the "old illusion" that they unwittingly perpetrate.

Later on at the Avery Hall production their roles have been reversed. Now Carrie unknowingly performs for Hurstwood, only this time

the division between illusion and reality is more readily determined. However, because Carrie's acting is so like "the real thing," it imparts a great response upon the audience, particularly Hurstwood and Drouet. "The two men were in the most harrowed state of affection."⁷⁴ The pathos she duplicates so provocatively on the stage incites Hurstwood into frenzied longing, as her impression of reality powerfully appeals to his passions. "He could have leapt out of the box to enfold her."⁷⁵ The illusion has driven him to a state of desperate desire. His egotistical, exaggeratory mind has been so deeply affected that he completely misinterprets the meaning of an event that, if rationally considered, would bespeak the foolishness of wanton lust.

Consumed by passion for Carrie, Hurstwood's never strong mental process is greatly compromised. A reliance on convention, on a structured position with a set role, which had dictated his action before meeting Carrie, is thrown asunder. The person who was first and foremost the manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's becomes a person predominately infatuated with another. "Hitherto," says Donald Pizer, "he had been borne effortlessly forward in life by deep grooves of habit and position. His new role, however, requires that he be fresh and innovative."⁷⁶ With the absence of sophistication in both Drouet and Carrie, his seduction is initially successful, but it can never be resolved satisfactorily because of Hurstwood's marriage in which his wife has financial control. Even in his personal life Hurstwood lacks the potency of strong recourse.

His "solution" to the predicament comes not through individual initiative, but chance. After an uncharacteristic evening of drinking, Hurstwood, while closing the saloon in an habitual manner, discovers, for the first time ever, the safe door unlocked. Never having done so before, he inexplicably pulls out the money drawers, finding a substantial amount

of cash. In the midst of great indecision—"Hurstwood could not bring himself to act definitely."⁷⁷—the safe lock clicks shut. It is a random event wholly disassociated from human responsibility, yet it determines the character's fate. Ironically Dreiser tells us that "At once he became the man of action."⁷⁸ But his action was dictated by an incident over which he had no control. Just as Clyde swam from Roberta Alden after the boat capsized, so Hurstwood is compelled to leave the situation as it stands so that his interests might best be met. By complying with the incident rather than resisting it, the character remains consistent with his indecisive and nonassertive nature.

Now able to travel, he deceives Carrie into accompanying him to New York. Here the character's essential nature comes unmistakably to the fore. His successful wooing of Carrie might suggest that he possesses a mind capable of beneficially resolving problematic circumstance; however, Hurstwood's seeming decisiveness, never brilliantly formulated, has been spurred by the "necessity" of satisfying a desperate and hitherto unknown passion, and temporarily masks his dominant unimaginative and disingenuous disposition. Previously buoyed up by the support derived from his role, Hurstwood must now rely on raw ability. Stripped of the facade of significance, the character cannot cope with an unfamiliar mode of existence as his identity is confined to the narrow parameters prescribed by his role. All of his thoughts and actions are habitually and rigidly formulated.

Dreiser's expansive language, deriving its force from the cumulative effect of incident piled upon incident, from the sheer power of the narrative as a whole, is particularly effective in portraying the fate of Hurstwood in New York. Sister Carrie, says the author, "is the tragedy of a man's life."⁷⁹ Dreiser has prepared us for the saloon manager's

failure by emphasizing the character's lack of creativity and foresight and the delicate veneer of appearance that accounted for his success in Chicago.

When arriving in New York he immediately thinks of establishing himself in the bar business, and for a time he generates a moderate income. But eventually, and not surprisingly given his previous role at Fitzgerald and Moy's which required no business knowledge, his business deal goes sour. Losing his investment he finds himself with limited means. Now Hurstwood must be something he has never been, "fresh and innovative"; individually responsible for providing an income. But he lacks the ambition, mental resources, and the breadth of perspective necessary to begin anew. Instead, unable to accept new modes of thought, he clings to his old social habits with a self-defeating tenacity. Hurstwood can only seriously consider working as a manager of a reputable establishment and his refusal to seek other alternatives, or to advance once again through industry and loyal labor, ensures his demise.

In a final pathetic gesture Hurstwood does seek work as a scab laborer during a Brooklyn street car strike. Instead of revealing strength and depth of character, this action reveals the helplessness of his condition. It is a brutal situation that shows the magnitude of his fall. Where before his contacts were well-dressed, amiable, and of enviable social position, the people of the street car strike are grimy, hostile, and common; where before the workplace was conspicuously comfortable, it is now squalid; where before Hurstwood's job entailed attracting people by attending to their desires, he now must ignore all whom he sees. He remains the same but his environment has changed.

Of course a scientific interpretation becomes apparent. Hurstwood's failure as well as Carrie's success lacks moral determinants and conforms

to a system of natural laws. Dreiser's prolonged, often stilted reference to science insists on such an interpretation. Throughout Sister Carrie he sincerely, but almost oppressively notes processes that suggest the inappropriateness of cultural assumptions. "Dreiser's repeated affirmation of the fact of scientific proof of the cosmic mystery was something of a bore, but in his case it was a genuine obsession, not a mere cliché."⁸⁰

Man, Dreiser tells us, is not an autonomous creature capable of free choice, but an organism conditioned by circumstance. Sometimes his referral to this conditioning process is undisguised and excessive: "Now it has been shown experimentally that a constantly subdued frame of mind produces certain poisons in the blood, called katastates, just as virtuous feelings of pleasure and delight produce helpful chemicals called anastates."⁸¹ Other times it is revealed less plainly: "Here were these two [Drouet and Carrie] bandying little phrases, drawing purses, looking at cards, and both unconscious of how inarticulate all their real feelings were."⁸² For all their action, signalled by the verbs "bandying," "drawing," and "looking," they do not comprehend effect. True to her nature Carrie does "yield" to Drouet's attractive force, yet it is not consciously accomplished, appreciated, or understood.

Dreiser's use of a language with scientific overtones is informed especially by Herbert Spencer. Deeply influenced by Spencer's philosophy as delineated in First Principles, Dreiser refers to him by name in Sister Carrie and utilizes many of his ideas. In particular the affirmations that all religious truths are "unknowable" while all scientific truths are "knowable" affected Dreiser greatly. We can see the Spencerian influence repeatedly, either in Dreiser's commentary on over-reliance on morals, "We must remember that it may not be a knowledge of right, for no knowledge of right is predicated of the animal's instinctive recoil at evil.

Men are still led by instinct before they are regulated by knowledge.",⁸³ or in his reference to the savage competitiveness of our race, "Have you ever heard of Siberian wolves? When one of the pack falls through weakness, the others devour him. It is not an elegant comparison, but there is something wolfish in society."⁸⁴

This preoccupation with scientific substantiation is evidenced primarily with the two major characters. Hurstwood's inevitable progression to miserable poverty is the result of his nonadaptive nature. Like any other organism, Dreiser seems to be saying, man simply responds, advantageously or disadvantageously, to the powerful and indifferent forces that play upon it. In this monistic system the self has little control or effective action, but must respond, without a moral basis, to the dictates of an unconcerned universe. The environment of Chicago is conducive to Hurstwood's morphology, while New York's environment requires an adjustment of the self that Hurstwood is incapable of making. "It was apathy with Hurstwood, resulting from his inability to see his way out."⁸⁵ Without the inherent means to adapt to his environment, Hurstwood perishes.

On the other hand Carrie flourishes in New York. While for Hurstwood ". . . opportunities were not numerous," Carrie, because of her flexible, indeterminate nature, finds abundant opportunity. ". . . her life moves in the direction of the exposure of her essential strength while his moves in the direction of the exposure of his essential weakness."⁸⁶ She adapts favorably to the new environment, and the contrast between her success and his failure enhances the heights and depths that each discovers.

When speaking about the revision of Sister Carrie Dreiser says, "I wanted the final picture to suggest the continuation of Carrie's fate along

the lines of established truths."⁸⁷ Had Dreiser ended the novel with Hurstwood's suicide, Carrie could be seen much more easily as a character that has developed, that has participated in meaningful experience. When we leave her in the original edition she is reading Balzac's Père Goriot and disparaging the "silly and worthless" literature she had read previously. In this edition we might assume that as Carrie now reads literature with profound implications, so her life has become more purposeful. With his revision, though, we discount any notion of the character's progress from innocence and naïveté to comprehension. The revised edition with Carrie's inconclusive and muddled pondering, though cliché strewn to the point of annoyance, affirms that character has learned nothing. Life remains a senseless mix of blind chance, attraction and repulsion, and adherence to natural laws. With this conclusion Dreiser confirms the novel's "established truths."

To the finish Sister Carrie is morally mute. It is not irreverent, it does not attack. It simply ignores the moral system of rewards and punishments so ingrained in our cultural assumptions. After her initial exposure to the city Carrie bounces casually from relationship to relationship but does not suffer the conventional consequences of the kept woman. Instead she succeeds magnificently. Hurstwood's wretched failure is not tied to any morally aberrant behavior, but rather it conforms to the laws of an indifferent, scientific universe. Dreiser's account of the small town girl going to the big city and the man falling desperately in love offers no lesson; rather it depicts a world without purpose, without the stuff from which we might learn. This world of overwhelming force deprives character of any significant substance.

¹Donald Pizer, Novels of Theodore Dreiser (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), p. 27.

²Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, Introd. Arthur Edelstein (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965), p. 9.

³Donald Pizer, Op. cit. p. 86.

⁴Theodore Dreiser, Op. cit. p. 91.

⁵Ibid. p. 91.

⁶Ellen Moers, Two Dreisers (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), p. 109.

⁷Theodore Dreiser, Op. cit. p. 174.

⁸Ibid. p. 174.

⁹Donald Pizer, Op. cit. p. 116.

¹⁰Ibid. p. 46.

¹¹Ibid. p. 35.

¹²Theodore Dreiser, Op. cit. p. 3.

¹³Donald Pizer, Op. cit. p. 38.

¹⁴Theodore Dreiser, Op. cit. pp. 3-4.

¹⁵Ellen Moers, Op. cit. p. 139.

¹⁶Donald Pizer, Op. cit. p. 25.

¹⁷Ibid. p. 66.

¹⁸Ibid. p. 91.

¹⁹Theodore Dreiser, Op. cit. p. 107.

²⁰Ibid. p. 407.

²¹Ibid. p. 299.

²²Ibid. p. 8.

²³Ibid. p. 451.

²⁴Ibid. p. 90.

²⁵Ibid. p. 56.

- ²⁶Ibid. p. 100.
- ²⁷Donald Pizer, Op. cit. p. 75.
- ²⁸Theodore Dreiser, Op. cit. p. 33.
- ²⁹Ibid. p. 119.
- ³⁰Ibid. p. 295.
- ³¹Ibid. p. 72.
- ³²Ibid. p. 269.
- ³³Ibid. p. xv.
- ³⁴Ibid. p. 280.
- ³⁵Ibid. p. 96.
- ³⁶Ibid. p. 122.
- ³⁷Ibid. p. 31.
- ³⁸Ibid. p. 28.
- ³⁹Ibid. p. 178.
- ⁴⁰Ibid. p. 458.
- ⁴¹Ibid. p. 62.
- ⁴²Ibid. p. 75.
- ⁴³Donald Pizer, Op. cit. p. 53.
- ⁴⁴Theodore Dreiser, Op. cit. p. 16.
- ⁴⁵Ibid. p. 266.
- ⁴⁶Ibid. p. 4.
- ⁴⁷Ibid. p. 54.
- ⁴⁸Ibid. p. 6.
- ⁴⁹Ibid. p. 6.
- ⁵⁰Ibid. p. 60.
- ⁵¹Ibid. p. 89.
- ⁵²Ibid. p. 252.
- ⁵³Ibid. p. 250.

- ⁵⁴Donald Pizer, Op. cit. p. 69.
- ⁵⁵Theodore Dreiser, Op. cit. p. 7.
- ⁵⁶Ellen Moers, Op. cit. pp. 100-111.
- ⁵⁷Ibid. p. 102.
- ⁵⁸Theodore Dreiser, Op. cit. p. 97.
- ⁵⁹Ibid. p. 87.
- ⁶⁰Ibid. p. 441.
- ⁶¹Ibid. p. 441.
- ⁶²Donald Pizer, Op. cit. p. 72.
- ⁶³Theodore Dreiser, Op. cit. p. 85.
- ⁶⁴Ibid. p. 263.
- ⁶⁵Donald Pizer, Op. cit. p. 36.
- ⁶⁶Ibid. p. 35.
- ⁶⁷Ellen Moers, Op. cit. p. 103.
- ⁶⁸Theodore Dreiser, Op. cit. pp. 78-79.
- ⁶⁹Ibid. p. 42.
- ⁷⁰Ibid. p. 118.
- ⁷¹Ibid. p. 117.
- ⁷²Ibid. p. 117.
- ⁷³Ibid. p. 120.
- ⁷⁴Ibid. p. 173.
- ⁷⁵Ibid. p. 174.
- ⁷⁶Donald Pizer, Op. cit. p. 77.
- ⁷⁷Theodore Dreiser, Op. cit. p. 240.
- ⁷⁸Ibid. p. 241.
- ⁷⁹Donald Pizer, Op. cit. p. 80.
- ⁸⁰Ellen Moers, Op. cit. p. 139.
- ⁸¹Theodore Dreiser, Op. cit. p. 299.

⁸²Ibid. p. 9.

⁸³Ibid. p. 239.

⁸⁴Ibid. p. 167.

⁸⁵Ibid. p. 373.

⁸⁶Donald Pizer, Op. cit. p. 75.

⁸⁷Ibid. p. 46.

VII. Frank Norris and Character: McTeague

"What pleased me most in your review of McTeague," wrote Norris in an 1899 letter to the critic Isaac F. Marcosson, "was the 'disdaining all pretensions to style.' It is precisely what I try most to avoid. I detest 'fine writing,' 'rhetoric,' 'elegant English'—tommyrot. Who cares for fine style. Tell your yarn and let your style go to the devil. We don't want literature, we want life."¹ Thus Norris discounts, or so it would seem, a highly selective and conscientious verbal arrangement, preferring to tell his tale without a highly-wrought vocabulary. It is this sympathy that places him stylistically closer to Dreiser than to Crane. In fact, if the three authors could be placed on a continuum based on their preoccupation with the manipulation of language to transmit a "message," it seems that Norris' use of language would be regarded as the least selective. While Crane's writing exhibits a keen interest in word choice and Dreiser's in the highly-patterned regulation of incident, Norris' writing seems more concerned with getting the story told, with "spinning a yarn." Norris' character, therefore, is not caught up in "a subtle and complex modulation in authorial tone, imagery and diction," or in the "sophisticated ordering of events within an extended narrative." As his written word might be accepted without much reserve, so might his character.

Because Norris resists a studied application of language, it is tempting to feel that his character becomes less complex than the character of the other authors considered in this study. While it is true

that Norris' character is largely free of the strict verbal design and irony employed by Crane and to a lesser extent by Dreiser, the characters of McTeague are complicated by the author's attitude towards them and towards literature in general. Consequently Norris' character differs partially from the character we have seen in the fiction of Crane and Dreiser. Norris condescends to his characters, yet he validates their struggle to assert themselves in a baffling world. To distinguish his naturalistic self further, Norris stresses the significance of the "romantic" variable in naturalism. His tendency to belittle character, his refusal to deny or to affirm the self's autonomy, and his desire to infuse the fictive world with power complicates Norris' character. Depending upon the angle that we view the characters of McTeague, they vary from seeming trivial to seeming significant.

It would appear that Norris attempted to strip "fine writing" from his style so that he could appeal to the reader's emotional faculties more strongly. He felt that an intense focus on verbal arrangement diluted the power of his writing. Instead of careful consideration of the written word, Norris seeks to achieve a powerful effect by rendering vivid images. It is not an intellectual, but a sensory invocation. ". . . the great story of the whole novel," said Norris, "is told thus as it were a series of pictures" ² In this sense both Norris and Crane utilize episodic images, but where Crane's images are constructed neatly and conceived sharply, Norris' images are hewn roughly. This he felt a positive attribute, "for in roughness there is strength," ³ and his language never strives for precision, but for power.

And in McTeague there is much that would suggest power. The daily life of Polk Street, the characters' actions, and the desolate reaches of California are all infused with a great deal of energy. But the power does

not run unchecked (with the possible exception of the melodramatic conclusion) as it is restrained within a controlled plot. McTeague initially proceeds slowly, with considerable documentation of the dentist's world and much background information. Here Norris is the naturalist supplying all the necessary data for the action that ensues. When Trina wins the lottery the pace quickens, and it intensifies when McTeague loses his dental practice. Now the action proceeds irrevocably and hastily to the climactic murder of Trina. Norris terms this moment "the pivotal event" that if done properly "fairly leaps from the pages with a rush of action that leaves you stunned, breathless and overwhelmed with the sheer power of its presentation."⁴

Though he might emphasize the importance of emotional effect to an unusual degree, Norris' novel is conceived from a traditional standpoint. It refers to a common format consisting of the introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and conclusion. On the basis of structure, then, McTeague subscribes to a conventional form.

A few factors in particular make it a naturalistic work. First he offers a primarily realistic presentation. Though Norris played down the value of realism, his writing has many realistic elements. He discusses the commonplace, records events with great detail, and describes in a plausible manner. Norris' zeal to present experience accurately, to be true to life, can be seen in his painstaking documentation of dentistry. By referring to Thomas Fillebrown's A Textbook of Operative Dentistry, which Norris borrowed from freely, he was able to provide technical details. Similarly, though here he did not require a textbook, Norris' comprehensive and celebrated depiction of Polk Street resulted from regular visits to the working-class San Franciscan thoroughfare. As he stated, "the story writer must go to real life for his story."⁵ He would rely

on "real life" again when depicting the murder of Trina, which had its basis in an actual murder at a San Franciscan kindergarten. Like Dreiser, Norris incorporated fact into his fiction repeatedly.

Like other naturalistic authors, Norris remains detached from his subject matter. As an omniscient narrator he reminds us of Dreiser. Though Norris' narration is not as authoritative nor as intrusive as Dreiser's, he still reveals a tendency to tell rather than show, he can be relied upon, and his authorial presence is frequently noticeable. Nonetheless, he exhibits a distinct tone. He is more than detached from the subject, he is above it. As McTeague looks down from his "Dental Parlors" on to the bustle of Polk Street, so Norris looks down on the tawdry world he has created. In particular he seems to condescend to his characters. Norris does not share the world of his lower class characters. In McTeague he assumes a superior position by merely making "his characters sound ignorant, without catching the flavor and quality of what they say that would do so much to admit the reader to their lives,"⁶ and by mocking his characters unnecessarily—McTeague purchases the steel engraving of the court of Lorenzo de' Medici "because there were a great many figures in it for the money."⁷ As C. C. Walcutt says, "Norris treats his characters as if they were exhibits in a side show, ridiculous monsters, or conversation pieces. He seems to delight in exhibiting their follies, to be grimacing at the reader over their shoulders, to be saying that these freaks from the grubby levels of society are at least as funny as they are pathetic."⁸

Because Norris relishes in his characters' outlandish peculiarities instead of associating with their own perspective, however humble, they have little interiority. Where Crane and Dreiser occasionally share their characters' viewpoint, in McTeague Norris always examines character

from the outside. We never know the characters' motivations as they see them, instead their action is discussed by a God-like observer who seems content to show us a husk of the self. The persons of Polk Street come to us in a hobbled state.

If character is hobbled by his superior point of view, then Norris' attempts to abolish free will compromise the obtrusive self greatly. As with Crane and Dreiser, character in McTeague is diminished by abundant reference to animal imagery, inadequate mental process, and the animation of things. In the latter case Polk Street is presented in an active voice while its occupants are presented in a passive voice. But it is Norris' mention of external forces that most thoroughly crushes character. The self as an autonomous entity is deflated by his attention to such naturalistic sentiments as the daunting force of environment, heredity, atavistic urges, and chance, eclipsing the identity of the individual. Norris binds his characters so strongly to the dictates of biology, ethnic origin, and class that they become stereotyped figures. McTeague is a brute with a tendency towards alcoholism because his father was just such a man and his nature was forged in the rough mining camp; Trina is obsessed with money and works diligently because she comes from immigrant stock and is German; Old Grannis is exceptionally reserved because of his English upbringing. Though various characters might be termed stupid or greedy or reticent, they cannot be held accountable for their dominant traits as forces greater than they determine action. Sexual urges, a hoarding instinct, and the unthinking search for pleasure play strongly upon character and submerge it in a morass of personal insignificance. They can only assert their existence feebly in a world that remains ambivalent to their presence.

Norris' considerable use of symbolism suggests further that

character possesses little meaningful recourse in a universe at once horribly persuasive and thoroughly unknowable. Sometimes, however, it seems that he goes too far. His symbolism at times merely embroiders the novel without contributing significantly to thematic effect. Such overt and extraneous symbols include the mousetrap that springs shut violently and the toy boat that Mr. Sieppe is unable to keep afloat. But at other times his symbolism adds fruitfully to our appreciation of the complexity of forces that play ceaselessly upon character. His allusion to man-made barriers that thwart a natural and spontaneous exchange, for instance, elucidates our understanding of the undesirable effect of man's creation of the artificial. The fence that segregates the two dogs suggests that our creations frequently stultify a natural and beneficial flow of events.

It appears, though, that Norris is not ready to say that all is well with the wholly "natural" self. Gold, one of nature's purest, unblemished metals, appeals intoxicatingly to the characters' deepest-seated desires. The appeal is two-pronged. For Trina and Zerkow gold as gold forms the basis of their obsession, whereas for McTeague, Maria, and Marcus gold as a symbol of purchasing power becomes their obsession. As we will see, these two differing perspectives are at the heart of much of the antagonism in McTeague. Where one seeks the metal to retain it, the other seeks the metal to spend it.

On another level gold does not represent omnipresent desires that condition behavior, but rather it is an image of the particular longings originating within the self. We can witness this most conclusively in the immense golden tooth that McTeague desperately craves; a tooth so pregnant with intimation that Norris at one point considered calling his novel The Golden Tooth. The tooth becomes a symbol of McTeague's idealized vision of the future: a successful practice, the stabilizing

ingredient in his life. Appropriately for the lethargic, giant-like McTeague, the molar, hence the dream, has a sort of gigantic and warped sensuality. "It was his ambition, his dream, to have projecting from that corner window a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive."⁹ At the peak of his profession, though not a very lofty pinnacle, the dentist receives the golden tooth. When Marcus Schouler exposes McTeague's inadequate dental training he accordingly loses the great golden molar. It rests for a time in the apartment like the unfulfilled dream that it is, hauntingly reminding McTeague of his failed pursuit. "However, in one corner of the room, next to the window, monstrous, distorted, brilliant, shining with a light of its own, stood the dentist's sign, the enormous golden tooth, the tooth of a Brobdingnag."¹⁰ Finally, to signify the total abandonment of the dream, the tooth is sold to McTeague's despised competitor, the flashy, pretentious dentist.

A countervailing golden symbol, the gilt bird cage, suggests the inappropriateness of intrinsic desire. The cage indicates that the self is ultimately unable to assert itself. Fate, in the form of positivistic determinism and blind chance, has trapped the individual within its "gilt prison." Man's aspirations become irrelevant, if not silly, in the reality of the unbreachable shackles that always dictate the final result, regardless of intentions. As the half-dead canary will perish on the scorched desert floor in the confines of its gilt cage, so man is a defenseless creature never able to transcend the mighty bars of an indifferent universe.

Yet we cannot discount Norris' character so easily. Oddly, for all of Norris' superficial treatment of character, his patterned and easily deducible reference to naturalistic elements, and emasculating symbolism,

the self in McTeague seems to hang on to the vestiges of a meaningful existence. A sort of dichotomy of character emerges. On the one hand indifferent and powerful forces condition the self utterly, yet on the other characters strive to do the best they can. In the face of overwhelming force the self often fights for a sense of personal dignity. Beneath the drone of the irrelevance of the individual can be heard a murmur of affirmative humanity.

Since the characters of McTeague participate in a world of oppressive and debilitating squalor, we are tempted immediately to devalue the self that Norris presents. Particularly from the vantage point of the close of the nineteenth century McTeague is sordid. It is replete with semi-demented characters, base desires, and perverse longings. The novel's contents have provoked much deprecating criticism. Many reviewers of the Gilded Age attacked the book, rather shallowly it seems, saying "we trust that Mr. Norris' next plot will fall in more pleasant places,"¹¹ or that the book "is a monotony of brutality from beginning to end,"¹² or that the author is "searching out the degraded side of humanity."¹³ Even William Dean Howells, an admirer of McTeague, felt that Norris focused too intensely on that part of life which is "squalid and cruel and vile," while exempting that part of life which is "noble and tender and pure and lovely."¹⁴ Clearly the novel presents a base world occupied by adulterated characters, but in this novel it would be overly simplistic to discount the characters as diminished because of the effects of the social milieu, biological determinants, and chance. Instead we should reconsider Norris' perception of literature and more particularly of naturalism. For when we do a paradox emerges. The self that in McTeague appears to be a mere pawn of fate, though still largely minimized, becomes the most fully realized self in the novels of this

study.

But we must proceed with caution. As Norris has a highly personalized and at times inconsistent perception of literature, discussing his artistic viewpoint is a dangerous task because it confuses traditional notions of literary modes. Nonetheless, his assessment of literature provides invaluable insight into his handling of character.

As we have seen Norris' style is geared primarily to appeal to the reader's emotions. All of his literary observations seem to stem from his supposition that "life, not literature" should dictate the author's treatment of subject. Vitality should supersede intellectualization. The instincts and emotions should supplant "culture, overeducation, refinement, and excessive spirituality."¹⁵ Literature, Norris contended, ought to be bold and raw instead of calculating and ornate. It ought to be expressed sincerely and forcefully instead of retreating within the impotent realm of the overactive mind. His anti-intellectualism and appeal to primitivism would have us believe that literature should be felt before it is reasoned. Reading is not a complacent but a participatory event.

Norris' emphasis on "life, not literature" prepares us for his own interpretation of literary modes. As he saw it, realism was an exercise in triviality. It was nothing more than "the smaller details of everyday life, things that are likely to happen between lunch and supper, small passions, restricted emotions, dramas of the reception-room, tragedies of an afternoon call, crises involving cups of tea."¹⁶ The literary mode that really appealed to Norris was romanticism. He termed romanticism "the kind of fiction that takes cognizance of variations from the type of normal life."¹⁷ It is a fictional mode, he stated, capable of roaming where the realist cannot go, and consequently better suited to rendering an emotional response. Though subject matter has little to do with

distinguishing literary modes, Norris made much of the fact that romanticism belonged to "the castles of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance chateaux" as well as "the tenements of the East Side of New York."¹⁸ And it could venture clear to "the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man."¹⁹ Thus, we might argue in response to those critics offended by the selection of subject in McTeague, Norris does not depict filth for filth's sake, he does not seek "shock value," rather his choice of material would seem to be guided by a desire to relay the underlying condition of man in the most powerful manner.

But Norris goes further. He does something that is surprising and particularly relevant to the study of character in McTeague. "Naturalism," he says, "is a form of romanticism, not an inner-circle of realism."²⁰ As evidenced in the introduction he would later refine this contention by stating that naturalism rests somewhere between realism and romanticism; however, Norris consistently and vehemently held that romanticism was a vital, if not a dominant, component of naturalism. Zola's works, which had a great effect on Norris, provided the basis for his claims. The Frenchman's writing, Norris felt, was far too big, bold, and overpowering for realism's "teacup tragedies." In Zola's novels and in naturalism in general he professed, "Everything is extraordinary, imaginative, grotesque even, with a vague note of terror quivering throughout like the vibration of an ominous and low-pitch diapason."²¹

So the author of McTeague has a distinct approach to naturalism that distinguishes him from Crane and Dreiser. Norris is the only one who consciously aims at what he calls naturalistic effects. Though he remains consistent with Crane's and Dreiser's sympathies by maintaining a detailed

and largely objective presentation, and a strong interest in the environment, biological force, and chance, the romantic variable in his naturalistic equation is unusually impassioned. Norris appeals to his brand of romanticism primarily for emotional effect, while Crane and Dreiser refer to their brand of romance primarily to translate the inappropriateness of cultural assumptions. While Maggie might be seen as a parody of the prostitute novel, The Red Badge of Courage of the war novel, and Sister Carrie of the city novel, McTeague lacks any equivalent inversion of "message." Though to a certain extent McTeague represents a near-legendary figure—Nietzsche's Blond Beast reduced to a painful sluggishness—Norris does not use this quasi-mythic character to turn our cultural assumptions completely on end. He begins to illustrate the inappropriateness of traditional values by submerging character in the indifferent machinery of determinism and chance, but does not finally reveal the absolute irrelevance of a dualistic universe. "Norris expresses no teleology; yet he does not deny one."²² In Mrs. Johnson's sentimental display of Maggie's shoes, or Henry's self-congratulatory attitude after winning the skirmish, or Carrie's rocking and looking on to the streets from her opulent hotel room, we sense just how completely indeterminate the human condition is. McTeague's melodramatic death on the parched desert floor, however, simply complies with the forces that Norris has set in motion, it does not in addition show that man's conventional perception of the world is hopelessly mistaken.

Because McTeague's characters do not participate in parody, they do have some recourse, however small. The things that characters do attain some value. Though they are caught up in a world of incomprehensible power, Norris' characters carry on a brave little fight against this indifferent universe.

It is the author's attraction to Zola's passionate writing that affects his conception of style and naturalism so strongly. If Norris' understanding of naturalism is misguided, and W. M. Frohock suggests that it is—"Norris simply mistakes Zola's idiosyncratic penchant toward melodrama for the characterizing trait of naturalism as a whole."²³—it still forms the basis of his perception of character. Norris held that

The naturalist takes no note of common people, common in so far as their interests, their lives, and the things that occur in them are common, are ordinary. Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale. They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched out from the quiet, uneventful round of every-day life, and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood, and in sudden death.²⁴

Though much of his characterization adheres to such a perception, it seems that he ultimately belies his own simplistic and sensationalistic formulation of what a naturalistic character "must" be. For in addition to the alarming and the awful, the characters of McTeague do participate in "the uneventful round of every-day life," and it is here that they discover some value.

Norris' characters are depicted distinctly in their daily existence. Unlike the anonymity or homogeneity of Maggie, The Red Badge of Courage, and to a lesser extent Sister Carrie, the characters of Polk Street each have a singular and idiosyncratic means of coping with their brutal world. And in so doing they attain some identity. McTeague prepares his simple dental materials, Trina carves and paints wooden animals, Mrs. Baker prepares tea, Old Grannis binds magazines, and Maria Macapa speaks of the glorious golden service. Though some of these activities fulfill a practical function, they all operate as diversions from an indifferent universe. Each character attempts to affirm its individual worth, or at least to maintain a sense of purpose in an

incomprehensible world, by engaging in their elementary tasks. It is an effort to validate their existence as unique beings.

Norris enhances his characters' identities by the use of Homeric-like epithets. If tedious, his repetitive reference to character by alluding to unique physical qualities or mannerisms lends character a particular identity. We are told again and again that McTeague's head is "square-cut, angular" and that his jaw is "salient," that Trina's hair is "a royal crown of swarthy bands," that Zerkow has "claw-like" fingers, and that Maria Macapa puts her chin in the air "as though . . . she knew a long story that if she had a mind to talk." While Crane's use of similar designations, because they are so pervasive and unvarying as to actually subsume character, confines the self within an unchanging mode of existence, Norris' designations are used to highlight character and thus lend them a distinct identity. Their peculiarities give them a stamp of individuality.

But more than anything else it is the characters' dim realization of the helplessness of the human condition that ironically suggests a significant self. The people in the rooms of Polk Street form a community that struggles against the deterministic forces that hold them in thrall. If the world does not care, the characters seem to imply, then the human element can still combine to combat the indifferent universe. By vaguely recognizing that they participate in a miserable affair, they can relieve the burden of their hapless state. Though their efforts to demonstrate that they can make a difference are not sustained and are rarely successful, they seem to sense an almost heroic desire to cooperate as compassionate, caring human beings, instead of succumbing to the meaningless modes of existence that linger just beneath the civilized self. Thus Marcus Schouler surrenders his loved one to his friend, Miss Baker

and Old Grannis forfeit their valued belongings to the scavenging Maria, Trina offers McTeague the great golden tooth, and the Sieppes provide a magnificent feast for the wedding. Perhaps the best illustration of the presence of an affirmative self can be seen just after Trina encounters the mangled body of Maria. A delirious Trina runs into the street to find another soul with which to share her agony. But the people of Polk Street, like the universe she finds herself in, are indifferent to her anguished pleas. As no one cares about her condition, she cannot escape her consummate grief. Then Trina strikes upon Heise, a familiar character who offers her assistance. By abetting her fears when in need, Heise testifies to the significance of the self. He is a buffer between Trina and the terrible world, showing us that the self can participate in meaningful experience.

Yet the struggle is finally too great for the characters. Their efforts to assert individual worth crumble under forces too great for them to support. But because they fight, if feebly, as individuals desperately trying to ward off unknown compulsions, the characters retain the remnants of a significant self. Walcutt says of Norris' characters,

instead of robbing them of the personalities, the deterministic forces direct us to feel the pathos of their inability to cope with the pressures which overcome them. It is a feeling for the desperation of human, or subhuman, impotence that the book communicates. The humanity of the characters is minimized somewhat by Norris' facetious tone, but nevertheless it comes through, sometimes forcefully, almost in spite of the author.²⁵

They are not only puppets but people searching for and perhaps even partially discovering some sense of value.

This tension between determinism and humanism informs the entire novel. It is resolved first in the two subplots. One of these subplots leads to dementia and death, the other to unity and love. They contribute

to the novel's themes by showing that determinism and chance do not combine with known effect. Though character in the end has little control, forces can lead character to both desirable and reprehensible ends. As Dreiser illustrates in Sister Carrie, outcome is not known.

Zerkow and Maria represent the downside of naturalism's pessimistic equation. It is these two mentally-imbalanced characters' warped fascination with things that draws them together. In their distorted relationship Maria becomes a female provider, bringing junk and bits of stolen gold to the desiring male and exciting his insane attraction to riches by sensually relating the story of the fictitious golden service. As she tells her tale Zerkow becomes exceedingly engrossed. "It was as if some hungry beast of prey had scented a quarry."²⁶ She is the active figure in a perverse love, perpetually stimulating Zerkow's extraordinary lust by offering things and conversation about things. When she can no longer provide that stimulation she is killed.

Neither character exhibits any conclusive mental process or valuable function in the Polk Street life, though Maria does cook the wedding feast and occasionally assuages Trina's loneliness. Yet even Maria's worthy role as conversationalist deteriorates quickly. Their communication consists of depraved comparisons of wounds received from their respective husbands, and they engage in a perverse competition in which a terrible wound is accorded great admiration. Zerkow and Maria, even more than the other characters, it seems, are simply the product of circumstance over which they have no control or understanding. With a somewhat deprecating tone Norris restrains them within stereotypical roles. Maria Macapa is the lying, conniving Hispanic and Zerkow is the grovelling, material starved Polish-Jew. They cannot conceive of any alternate existences and their instincts cause them to play out a bizarre and

repulsive relationship.

This subplot contributes to the main plot by informing the forces that play upon McTeague and Trina. In their lust for possessing things, particularly gold, Zerkow and Trina are very much alike. It is not the purchasing power of the gold, but its mere physical presence that attracts them so. Upon receiving "three pellets" of gold from Maria, Zerkow does not consider the metal's cash value, but revels in its allure. "There it was, the virgin metal, the pure unalloyed ore, his dream, his consuming desire. His fingers twitched and hooked themselves into his palms, his thin lips drew tight across his teeth."²⁷ Likewise, Trina, in a financially reckless gesture, withdraws the lottery money from her uncle's toy store so that she can fondle it. Her attraction to the physicality of the gold is so strong that she places the coins upon her bed and squirms about in them in symbolic sexual union. "One evening she had even spread all the gold pieces between the sheets, and had then gone to bed, stripping herself, and had slept all night upon the money, taking a strange and ecstatic pleasure in the touch of the smooth flat pieces the length of her entire body."²⁸ Even McTeague notes the similarity between Zerkow and Trina. He yells at his wife, "Miser, you're worse than old Zerkow."²⁹ but we doubt that he understands just why.

Maria and McTeague, however, share no such consuming attractions to the gold, but only desire it to make purchases. Maria wants money to buy skirts like the shopgirls own and McTeague to obtain food, drink, good tobacco, and nice clothes. Both couples exhibit an incompatible perception of money, and in either case these disparate interpretations propel the male to kill.

The characters of the novel's other subplot seem somewhat complex; oddly out of place in the milieu of Polk Street. Old Grannis and Miss

Baker have a gentility and sensitivity foreign to McTeague's other characters. Unlike their neighbors, they appear to understand one another intimately, particularly when engaged in their ritualistic forms of communication performed in their separate rooms. Miss Baker's tea preparation and Old Grannis' binding activities are sacred duties that attest to the love they feel for one another. Such nuance of communication is beyond the other characters. Norris distinguishes the old couple from the Polk Street milieu further by using especially sentimental language to describe their behavior. "They walked hand in hand," Norris tells us, "in a delicious garden where it was always autumn" ³⁰ And though, like the other characters, Mr. Grannis and the dressmaker are unable to come to terms with their world, the underlying reasons for their condition seem distinct. Where the others are led by vague external forces that impel them to act, the old people's predicament seems to be of their own making.

Because the subplot involving Old Grannis and Miss Baker appears to contribute little to the naturalistic themes of McTeague, it has been criticized frequently. Richard Chase discounts the pair as "absurd," ³¹ Clarence Gohdes contends that they add to the novel in "a small way" by providing "humorous relief and romance," ³² and William Dean Howells felt that "The one folly of McTeague is the insistence of the love-making of those silly elders which is apparently introduced as an offset to the misery of the other love-making." ³³ However, as William B. Dillingham has argued convincingly in his study "The Old Folks of McTeague," the story of the old people is not a silly sidelight designed simply to amuse and entertain, but it is consistent with the book's naturalistic themes. Mr. Howells is correct to note that the "love-making" of Old Grannis and Miss Baker "offsets" that of Trina and McTeague, but it seems he fails to note that

the very same factors play upon both couples. In one case these factors lower character into an abyss of hate and violence, in the other they raise character to a pedestal of happiness and love.

Like McTeague and Trina, Old Grannis and Miss Baker are subjected to the powerful influences of instinct and chance. Through an instinctual process they can ascertain accurately the other's motion and feeling beyond the barrier of the wall. But their unnatural timidity prevents them from fulfilling their instinctual desire to be with one another. It is the element of chance that unites them; the same chance that destroys McTeague and Trina. While the freak lottery prize that Trina collects initiates the demise of the McTeagues, at the same time it draws the old couple together to greet the winner. This pattern is repeated when Trina and the dentist marry. Again Old Grannis and Miss Baker are brought together at an event that furthers the ruin of the primary characters, and this time they take a definite step towards their mutual happiness when the dressmaker, though not through her own volition, finds herself initiating a conversation with Old Grannis. They are to be brought together once more when Marcus Schouler, the same agent that united Trina and McTeague, intervenes after Old Grannis accidentally knocks Miss Baker's grocery bag from her grasp. The same character that draws people together will soon contribute significantly to the undoing of the McTeagues when he informs the authorities of the dentist's sham credentials. "Marcus Schouler, then," says Dillingham, "is the unconscious agent of what Norris half-humorously calls a 'malicious fate,' bringing both couples together, then at the same time helping to save one relationship while aiding in the destruction of the other."³⁴ The diverging fates of the McTeagues and the old folks touch on one final shared circumstance. Old Grannis, just like Trina, receives an unexpected large

sum of money, in his case for his binding apparatus. But where Trina's unexpected cash windfall caused her to cling to her prize with excessive tenacity, Old Grannis can only feel emptiness at the loss of a pastime, and more particularly at his inability to perform the sacred duty of their unvoiced love. Yet it is only after the chance event has deprived him of his binding apparatus that Miss Baker can enter Old Grannis' room so that they might be wholly joined.

Thus, Norris' treatment of character in both subplots consistently and effectively informs the complex of forces that affect character in the primary plot. The author's modulation of incident translates early on the subtle difference in Zerkow's and Maria's strong avaricious tendencies, and then dramatizes the profundity of their ever-diverging urges. It is an apt backdrop for McTeague's and Trina's relationship, enhancing our appreciation of the mighty forces that mock man's claims to mental and spiritual independence. But Norris is not content to reduce the machinery of relentless cause and effect to a simple statement. Old Grannis and Miss Baker suggest that outcome cannot be known, that the destiny of the self cannot be placed into a neat formula. Instead the combination of vague and powerful forces and blind chance indifferently propels the self to mysterious ends, leaving it to us to assign qualitative labels.

Of course the primary characters of McTeague cannot be explored adequately by a brief analysis of the novel's subplots. They live in a world at once shared by the denizens of Polk Street and peculiar to themselves. Though McTeague and Trina share the same lower-middle class background, they have little else in common. While McTeague finds contentment in the most rudimentary of human activities, Trina seeks the excitement of a visit to the park or theatre. While McTeague tends towards the gross, Trina tends towards the refined.

Initially these differences keep them apart. When they first meet Norris tells us that McTeague dislikes any young girl like Trina, and that Trina is flatly indifferent to McTeague or any man. But Norris' conception of these characters causes their fates to merge inextricably. McTeague and Trina, while being two particular characters adrift in the life of fictionalized Polk Street, also become the very forces of primordial masculine and feminine sexuality. In a sense Norris' atavistic language turns these two characters into less representatives of the human self and more representatives of the unrestrained Male and Female. With his constant reference to "the animal in man," "evil instincts," and "the intuitive feminine fear of the male," we are reminded continually of the great and uncontrollable sexual desire that throbs just beneath man's affected civility. More than anything else, it is the persuasiveness of this fecund sexuality that robs these characters of autonomy.

When we first meet Trina she is yet sexually chaste; free of an obtrusive male influence. "On the other hand, she was perfectly at her ease; doubtless the woman in her was not yet awakened; she was yet, as one might say, without sex. She was almost like a boy, frank, candid, unreserved."³⁵ However, her sexual innocence will soon be compromised as she sits prone and defenseless in McTeague's dental chair. Norris must have been pleased with the possibilities of this arrangement. She is the passive and cooperative female exposed to the active and manipulative male. When McTeague eventually anesthetizes Trina the male-female relationship reaches a barbarous extreme; she absolutely vulnerable, he absolutely in control. The dentist gravitates helplessly towards the lure of the female and kisses her indelicately, thus violating her untarnished sexual state. Upon awakening she vomits, not, it seems, because of the anesthesia, but because she has just sacrificed, in a base manner, her pure

existence, and will now be in the clutches of a virile sexuality. "After that unhappy sitting, Trina was no longer frank and straightforward. Now she was circumspect, reserved, distant."³⁶ Her dormant sexuality has been awakened.

After she has become aroused Trina participates involuntarily in the sexual event. Norris' language informs us that Trina as Female cannot escape the stirrings of desire and has no choice but to acquiesce to McTeague's advances. "Then Trina gave up, all in an instant, turning her head to his. They kissed each other, grossly, full in the mouth."³⁷

Like the animal that savors only the hunt and the kill, after giving herself to McTeague, he becomes increasingly indifferent. "And he? The very act of submission that bound the woman to him forever had made her seem less desirable in his eyes. Their undoing had already begun."³⁸ At the same time her physical longing for the dentist waxes. Trina reverts to some primitive state of needing the dominant male. "McTeague had awakened the woman, and, whether she would or no, she was his now irrevocably; struggle against it as she would, she belonged to him, body and soul, for life or for death."³⁹ As this atavistic hunger for the male is not satisfied by a loving, compassionate mate, she substitutes her need for love into other aspects of her nature so that her idiosyncratic behavior is pushed to its furthest limit. Her innate fondness for money becomes a lust-filled obsession, and she permits and even enjoys a sadistic love. The sway of sexuality has restricted and intensified her behavior so much that she can only express herself in very finite and unwholesome ways. "They [her emotions] reduced themselves at last to but two, her passion for money, and her perverted love for her husband when he was brutal."⁴⁰ She is a debased female caught up in internal and external proddings beyond her understanding and control.

McTeague, the man that "never went to the bottom of things," is also very much caught in the web of inscrutable forces. Norris patterns his narrative with careful reference to heredity and the character's youth in a mining camp. The same coarse blood that flowed through his dim-witted and powerful father and bedraggled mother throbs through McTeague. As the father had become furious while drinking, so does the son. "It was curious to note the effect of the alcohol upon the dentist. It did not make him drunk, it made him vicious."⁴¹ And his conception of money finds its basis in the mining camp. "The old-time miner's idea of wealth easily gained and quickly spent persisted in his mind."⁴² At times he seems to shake free from the promptings of heredity and the past, but when things go awry he thoughtlessly returns to instinctive modes of behavior. "In the stress of his misfortune McTeague was lapsing back to his early state."⁴³ His thoughts and actions are finally conditioned by family and personal history.

The character becomes a sort of archetypal figure signifying the brutality that underlies the human species. As Norris' descriptive language makes evident, the dentist has a Neanderthal appearance. He has a "thick mane of yellow hair," "big red ears," "thick eyebrows," a "heavy yellow mustache," a "protruding chin like that of the carnivora," and veins that "were swollen and throbbing on his thick red neck." With such vivid language McTeague becomes the epitomy of raw masculinity. As a self he has little dimension and almost no mental process, but is trapped within the strict role that Norris has conceived for him.

But McTeague cannot be characterized so easily. W. M. Frohock contends, perhaps too strongly, that "the influence of heredity and environment play only a small role in McTeague"⁴⁴ It seems that Norris refers to McTeague more as a device to project the condition of

the individual and less as a receptacle of deterministic forces.

It takes some time for the brutal self to be realized fully as the naturalistic tension of the novel is muted for a good while by a humanistic tension. In the civilization of Polk Street the beast is kept at bay. All of the characters frequently participate in habitual and programmed behavior that disassociates the self from its primal source. Norris emphasizes routine in McTeague. We can see this in the methodical and orderly operation of Polk Street as each hour of each day conforms to a recurring design. Within the larger circle of Polk Street the characters that reside above the branch post office form their own highly-organized network of activity, gathering socially, turning to one another for aid, and acting in prescribed modes. In a yet smaller circle they each maintain their own inalterable schedule.

It is the dentist that is tied especially to this habitual behavior as the novel's first sentence would indicate. "It was Sunday, and, according to his custom on that day, McTeague took his dinner at two in the afternoon at the car conductor's coffee-joint on Polk Street."⁴⁵ His other customary acts include playing his "six lugubrious airs" on the concertina and singing the same song every time he shaves. The regulated and systematized activity preoccupies the self in "the uneventful round of every-day life," thus checking the primitive strain in the man.

When this world of order and precision crumbles the primal self comes to the fore. McTeague loses his job and with it a set existence, and the battle tips in the favor of the beast. With the veneer of civilization deteriorated, McTeague reverts to the behavior founded in his brutal childhood existence as man's animalistic side dictates action. The ever-burgeoning power of uncouth, unrestrained man leads McTeague through a descending spiral of increasingly debased behavior that finally

reaches its nadir in the murder of Trina. Circumstance combines so that the human struggle for a dimly conceived notion of right is overwhelmed by the irrepressible brute within.

Consistent with his unconscious alienation from civilization, after killing Trina, McTeague flees to the wild reaches of California. Norris' long conclusion reinforces the notion of compelling atavistic force as character responds strictly by instinct, but it does little to enhance the themes of the book. In fact, Norris' penchant for "romanticism" in this final section detracts from the novel's naturalistic sentiments. The anticlimactic conclusion is so overly melodramatic and improbable that it compromises the novel's realistic properties. And the death of McTeague might seem just atonement for the murder of Trina. By vindicating human action we might surmise that the universe operates by a meaningful mechanism.

For the first time in this study a naturalistic author has, through the manipulation of language, event, and form, suggested the presence of a meaningful human element. Even if the characters of McTeague do not succeed as autonomous individuals, we have a sense of the explicit existence of the self which is absent in Maggie, The Red Badge of Courage, and Sister Carrie. In these other novels the self not only participates helplessly in life, but also the characters' actions are conceived as purposeless. Although "the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer" always influences McTeague, Norris tells us that there is still some "good in him,"⁴⁶ as there is "good" in almost every character of Polk Street. Here the self is not so inconsequential, but it has the potential to affect the universe. With Norris' strong shift towards the romantic, we can relate to the characters of McTeague as the subjects of force and chance and as human beings trying to make their way through

a damnably influential world in the best manner they know how.

¹Frank Norris, McTeague, ed. Kevin Starr (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1985), p. xxiv.

²Donald Pizer, ed., McTeague (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1977), p. 322.

³Ibid. p. 318.

⁴Ibid. p. 321.

⁵Ibid. p. 317.

⁶C. C. Walcutt, ed., Seven Novelists in the American Naturalist Tradition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), p. 58.

⁷Frank Norris, Op. cit. p. 4.

⁸Donald Pizer, ed., Op. cit. p. 338.

⁹Frank Norris, Op. cit. p. 4.

¹⁰Ibid. p. 288.

¹¹Donald Pizer, ed., Op. cit. p. 328.

¹²Ibid. p. 328.

¹³Ibid. p. 328.

¹⁴Ibid. p. 327.

¹⁵Ibid. p. 306.

¹⁶Ibid. p. 309.

¹⁷Ibid. p. 314.

¹⁸Ibid. p. 315.

¹⁹Ibid. p. 316.

²⁰Ibid. p. 310.

²¹Ibid. p. 310.

²²Ibid. p. 340.

²³C. C. Walcutt, ed., Op. cit. p. 58.

²⁴Donald Pizer ed., Op. cit. pp. 309-310.

²⁵Ibid. p. 340.

- ²⁶Frank Norris, Op. cit. p. 45.
- ²⁷Ibid. p. 44.
- ²⁸Ibid. pp. 360-361.
- ²⁹Ibid. p. 207.
- ³⁰Ibid. p. 172.
- ³¹Richard Chase, The American Novel and its Tradition (Garden City, New York, 1957), p. 191.
- ³²Clarence Gohdes, "The Later Nineteenth Century", The Literature of the American People, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (New York, 1951), p. 752.
- ³³Donald Pizer, ed., Op. cit. p. 327.
- ³⁴Ibid. p. 347.
- ³⁵Frank Norris, Op. cit. p. 23.
- ³⁶Ibid. p. 39.
- ³⁷Ibid. p. 84.
- ³⁸Ibid. p. 89.
- ³⁹Ibid. p. 89.
- ⁴⁰Ibid. p. 283.
- ⁴¹Ibid. p. 305.
- ⁴²Ibid. p. 132.
- ⁴³Ibid. p. 334.
- ⁴⁴C. C. Walcutt, ed., Op. cit. p. 58.
- ⁴⁵Frank Norris, Op. cit. p. 1.
- ⁴⁶Ibid. p. 32.

VIII. Conclusion

Crane, Dreiser, and Norris exhibit differing styles. They each "encode" their "message" in a peculiar manner. For Crane words are tied to theme intimately, for Dreiser words are a means of structuring events, for Norris words are a means of getting the story told. With Crane words and idea are one, with Dreiser words give idea form, and with Norris words serve as a necessary device to "spin a yarn." Crane uses words meticulously to invert and disappoint, Dreiser prolifically to explain and elaborate, Norris vigorously to modulate and excite. For each it seems language contributes to theme in a unique way.

And even the themes of the works, though quite similar, appear to arise from a different philosophical basis. Where the writing of Dreiser and Norris is derivative of science, that is of deterministic and evolutionary thought, Crane's writing focuses first on human behavior. Dreiser and Norris seem to start from a scientific foundation and arrive at abstract truths, whereas Crane seems to start with the "reality" of human existence and juxtaposes it against conventional truths. Crane remains largely outside the system of traditional beliefs, viewing Western man's cultural assumptions from askance with a skeptical, disconcerted, or irreverent eye. Dreiser, however, appears to struggle within Western cultural assumptions, wallowing between dualism and monism, the spiritual and the material, responsibility and irrelevance. And Norris, despite his efforts to do away with "fine writing," retains an air of superiority that partially elevates him above our system of cultural assumptions, as if

conventional beliefs were a bothersome hindrance to the creation of bold, powerful prose.

Yet for all their differences in the application of language and approach to theme, their works clearly have a unifying "message." Each author attempts to depict a world that defies meaning. And it is the self that is so vital to their "argument," for in order to describe a world devoid of sense and purpose, it is necessary to disassociate the self from traditional modes of perception. Thus these authors devalue human action and stress internal and external forces which condition human behavior absolutely. Thus they rob cause and effect of moral determinants. Thus they utilize a fictional mode originally intended to confirm meaning, but resist traditional outcomes to magnify the inappropriateness of a dualistic universe. Thus they construct a world where things happen "regardless," no matter the motivations and intentions of character.

Particularly for American authors this diminishment of character seems an unlikely occurrence. In the early nineteenth century Alexis de Tocqueville noted that "Americans acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands."¹ But as the nineteenth century wore on the country that fostered "the cult of the individual" had much to reconsider as physical realities and intellectual postulates began to push the self into a position of greater obscurity.

Crane, Dreiser, and Norris, being unusually sensitive to the implications of the rapidly changing society, perceived the self in the same light. Their self does not affirm the strength of the individual, but it becomes a superfluous addition to a world that evades understanding. Though Norris did not complete the minimization process, each author employs a language that undermines the traditional perception of man as

a sovereign being capable of determining outcome through mental process and effective action. Maggie, The Red Badge of Courage, Sister Carrie, and to a large extent McTeague, all carefully refrain from using a vocabulary that presupposes man can act and think independently.

What seems most remarkable about these novels is that though the authors diminish character thoroughly, they still keep the reader engaged. They would seem to belie Edmund Wilson's sentiment that no book based on the humiliation of its central character can be of the highest rank.² Here character is not boring or trivial in its insignificance, but it jars us from preconceived notions of expected outcome. If the characters of Crane, Dreiser, and Norris remain "flat," they are rarely tedious. Indeed it is because they remain "flat" that they are interesting and memorable. Through this self we learn that experience does not lead to growth or understanding, that rewards and punishments have no moral basis, that meaningful lessons cannot be gleaned from the human condition. By keeping character unchanged or incapable of affecting change through the patterning of words and incidents, these three authors confront the basic assumption that the human life necessarily connotes meaning. They open up a vista that leads away from a providential universe; a vista where the self exists incidentally.

¹Alfred Kazin, An American Procession (New York: Random House Inc., 1984), p. xiv.

²Frank Norris, McTeague, ed. Kevin Starr (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1985), p. xxxii.

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