

THE ROMANCE OF LITERARY LABOR AND THE WORK OF GILDED
AGE AUTHORSHIP

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by
Kellen H. Graham
July 2015

Examining Committee Members:
Dr. Miles Orvell, Advisory Chair, English
Dr. James Salazar, English
Dr. Eli Goldblatt, English
Dr. Hilary Lowe, External Member, History

©
Copyright
2015

by

Kellen Graham
All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

Several literary historians have discussed how literary authorship became a profession in America. The act of imaginative writing evolved, by the middle of the nineteenth century, from an amateur pursuit into a big business. The rapid commercial growth of letters after the Civil War meant that American writers could realize themselves precisely as literary professionals who often performed no other sorts of work and who were publically respected for their “writerly” work. However, our historiography glosses over the widespread cultural confusion and skepticism in Gilded Age America over the legitimacy of literary work and the rightful status of literary authors as workers in the nineteenth century’s newly emergent social hierarchy of labor. Scholars have not accounted for one of the central tensions of late-nineteenth century American literature: as fiction writing evolved into a professional, commercial activity, and, thus, a potentially viable way to earn a living, many of America’s most successful and otherwise significant writers struggled against pervasive public assumptions that challenged the notion of writing as “real” work.

My dissertation is essentially a study of ideas about the work of writing in America from the Civil War to World War I, when American authors were thinking about literary authorship increasingly in vocational terms. In particular, my study explores how professional writers understood the nature and meaning of their literary endeavors in a culture that often refused to recognize those endeavors as work. I demonstrate how Gilded Age authors, operating within a fully professionalized business of letters, conceived of the nature of their work and its relation to the work performed by others.

My project responds to the gap outlined above by offering a new account of postbellum authorship, one that foregrounds the influence of what might be called “vocational anxieties” on the careers of three representative Gilded Age writers: William

Dean Howells, Charles Chesnutt, and Jack London. The term “vocational anxieties” describes the acute sense of worry shared by countless American writers who faced the cultural assumption that writing was not work and, therefore, writers were not actual workers. My dissertation also looks at the inherent conflicts created for professional writers by the mass literary marketplace, the commercial conditions of which thrust literary artists into the new and, often times, uneasy role of literary businessmen and businesswomen. My project explores the nature of these problems and, in particular, the ways in which Howells, Chesnutt, and London responded to them.

The heart of my argument is that cultural suspicions about the literary enterprise caused a transition of authorial consciousness, whereby an array of American authors tried to define themselves, foremost, as laborers, and the act of imaginative writing as an authentic form of work. Each chapter in my dissertation explores the respective attempts made by Howells, Chesnutt, and London to rhetorically reconstruct his own literary work by linking it to and, in some cases, mediating it through various modes of socially, ethically purposive work or, in other cases, often simultaneously, through physically strenuous labor, such as industrial work, artisanal work, craft production, factory work, and agricultural work. Ultimately, my account of Gilded Age authorship suggests that the story of American letters from the Civil War to the First World War amounts to a romance with literary labor.

My project is both a work of literary history and a limited cultural history of ideas about authorship, as practiced by Howells, Chesnutt, and London. Much of my study features a sustained analysis of “non-literary” and some literary sources, many of which have previously gone unexamined, usually composed by the authors themselves.

Combining historicist and new historicist insights, I make my case with the help of source materials, including private letters, public speeches, journal entries, newspaper and magazine articles, theoretical tracts, and travel accounts.

Chapter One, “Introduction,” elaborates on the research problem sketched above. I contextualize my dissertation within the existing field of authorship studies; furthermore, I lay out my methodologies and provide a brief history of ideas about literary authorship, work and the work ethic in American culture prior to the Civil War.

Chapter Two, “‘Merely a Working Man’: William Dean Howells and the Aesthetics of Vocational Anxiety,” redirects our attention to the ways in which Howells’s development as a novelist and critic was shaped by cultural and personal doubts about the work of writing. His longstanding image as a complaisant literary aristocrat ignores the fact that he was tormented throughout his life by deeply rooted vocational anxieties. The chapter argues that Howellsian Realism was a response to and an expression of these doubts. It traces the key strategies underlying Howells’s career-long campaign to revalorize the vocation of literary authorship, strategies which included recasting writers and literary texts along socially purposive lines. Redefining himself and other writers as laborers, and the writing process as strenuous work, was the other part of that campaign.

In Chapter Three, “‘I would gladly devote my life to the work’: Charles Waddell Chesnutt and the Limits of Literary Reform,” I argue that his artistic aspirations diverged from his political concerns shortly after the press deemed him one of America’s most promising *black* authors. Chesnutt desired recognition as a literary artist untethered from his reputation as a famous Race Man. As his authorial career advanced, he found it increasingly difficult to square his artistic ambitions with the social expectations placed

on him as a public black intellectual. Chesnutt strove to release himself from the entrenched literary expectations and cultural designations imposed on fin de siècle black authors. Put another way, he fought to create an artistic identity--for he and other black writers--beyond the boundaries of the African American literary tradition he inherited. African American writers would take up his dilemma, which amounted to the question of whether to write “for his race” and for his own artistic ambitions, in every subsequent generation.

Chapter Four, “Not afraid to work, work, work”: Labor, Craft, and the Literary Career of Jack London, reframes London as a disciple of Howells, insofar as he adopted the Howellsian writing as labor ideology, recasting postbellum writers at once as laborers and skilled artisans. But unlike Howells, whose genteel image and lifestyle separated him from the workaday world, London used his personal life to collapse the boundaries between the distinct worlds of art and labor. He created the model for the man of letters as a man of action. Throughout his literary career, London played up his “anti-literary” public persona, posing as an adventuresome man of the world who chanced to earn his living by his pen. The chapter highlights the unresolved tension between London’s evolving notions of literary artistry and craft and his vocational and masculine anxieties, which compelled him to publicly endorse the notion of writing as industrial labor long after he considered himself a careful literary craftsman.

Chapter Five, “Epilogue: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and the Problems of Modern Authorship” reiterates the study’s main claims and articulates its broader significance within the fields of literary and work studies.

To my mother, Nancy Graham, who taught me what work is, and to my father, Edward Graham, who taught me how to pay the price.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A graduate professor of mine once compared writing a dissertation to being stranded in a canoe in the middle of the ocean. “Only you can paddle yourself safely to shore,” he said. My dissertation-writing experience ultimately proved him wrong. In the years I spent working on this study, I learned that no one writes alone. Writing is a collaborative effort. Therefore, it is with pleasure and gratitude that I acknowledge the following people for the guidance, support, and love they gave me throughout this process.

During my time in Temple University’s Graduate English program, I was fortunate to work with many exceptional graduate students, some of whom became close friends. My special thanks go to Richard Gienopie, Kara Clevinger, Jessica-Lewis Turner, and Laurie Lahey for their conversation, their sympathies, and their wicked senses of humor.

Temple University’s Writing Center was my unofficial home from 2006 to 2011. I am indebted to Writing Center Director Dr. Lori Salem for the lessons she taught me about teaching academic writing and the job market. I would not have found my way into high school teaching without her advocacy.

I wrote the bulk of my dissertation while working full-time as an upper school English teacher at The Haverford School. My English department colleagues, including Matt Green, Tom Stambaugh, Rebecca Smedley, Dan Keefe, Luqman Kolade, Rachael Jennings, Becca Davis, Dan Slack, and Delia Turner have provided me emotional support and well wishes along the way. I thank them for their fellowship and for showing me so much about the craft of classroom teaching.

I was lucky to collaborate with a supportive and brilliant dissertation committee. Studying under Dr. Miles Orvell has been my great honor and pleasure. His gifts as a scholar and a teacher are staggering. In short, he is one of the most remarkable men I

have ever met. He has been my ideal reader, and I have always tried to make him proud. Dr. James Salazar arrived at Temple as a new professor the same year I arrived as a new graduate student. His intellect and professionalism make him a joy to work with. His graduate seminars stoked my interest in nineteenth-century literature and culture, and his incisive comments on the drafts of my dissertation transformed the final product. Dr. Eli Goldblatt has, above all, had a profound impact on my identity as a teacher. He showed me that the best teachers allow their students to take center stage in the classroom. For all of his sage advice and assistance, I thank him. Dr. Hilary Lowe from Temple's History Department joined my committee relatively late in the game. She brought an invaluable historical perspective along with a keen editorial eye to my project in its final stages.

Many close friends and mentors have aided me in this and other journeys. I want to thank Joe Goodwill for being my best friend and, quite simply, an incredible guy. To Zach Pratt and Abigail Mallin go my sincere thanks for their persistent friendship. Without the guidance of Dr. Bryan R. Washington, my English professor and thesis director at Lafayette College, I may not have been accepted to graduate school. He has remained my mentor—and a dear friend—for all of these years. For Sunday lunches, sundry walks around Philadelphia, and the many reminders that “the good life” does, indeed, exist, I thank him. Mr. Steve Baker has devoted his life to teaching math to students at Camden Central High School in upstate New York. “Bake” has been my role model and close friend for twenty years. His commitment to his craft and to forging relationships with students are standards I aspire to as a teacher.

I can never repay the debt I owe to my family; their emotional and financial support sustained me during the many years I spent pursuing my degree. My scholarly interest in the subject of work can be traced back to my mother, Nancy Graham, who is the hardest working person I know. As the story goes in our family, her longstanding

professional success makes her not someone who might be, but rather someone who is! I am grateful to her for never losing faith in me, even when it seemed that I might never get out of graduate school. My father, Edward Graham, taught me that one must pay a remarkable price to achieve remarkable results. His belief in my potential means a great deal to me. As I worked on my project, I was often reminded of my brother, Kyle Graham. He gets things done, and he spurred me to cross the finish line.

Finally, I want to thank Eileen Owens, to whom I owe so much. By showing interest in but never judgment of the project, she encouraged me to clarify my ideas. At other times, she gave me the space I needed not to talk about my work. Her intellect, sense of humor, warm heart, and adventurous spirit makes life together a little bit better each day.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	vii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	viii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. “MERELY A WORKING MAN”: WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS AND THE AESTHETICS OF VOCATIONAL ANXIETY.....	31
3. “I WOULD GLADLY DEVOTE MY LIFE TO THE WORK”: CHARLES WADDELL CHESNUTT AND THE LIMITS OF LITERARY REFORM	88
4. “NOT AFRAID TO WORK, WORK, WORK”: LABOR, CRAFT, AND THE LITERARY CAREER OF JACK LONDON	163
5. EPILOGUE: HEMINGWAY, FITZGERALD AND THE PROBLEMS OF MODERN AUTHORSHIP	244
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	253

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The story of how literary authorship became a profession in America has been widely discussed.¹ Following the seminal work of William Charvat, countless literary scholars and historians have confirmed that imaginative writing became a veritable business during the antebellum period. The business of letters marked a rejection of the ethic of amateurism that had previously governed the literary field. Most American writers in the Early National Period adhered to an idealized version of the British aristocratic tradition, which cast authorship as a socially elite hobby, usually an adjunct to one's larger career. Charvat traced the elevated social status and meaning of authorship in Gilded Age America back to Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, two early nineteenth-century writers who successfully negotiated the growing literary marketplace and who were, in the process of their efforts, transformed from genteel amateurs into hard-working professionals.² The Charvatian paradigm of authorial professionalism has defined our critical historiography for more than a generation. Virtually all of today's nineteenth-century literary historians and critics agree that, by or shortly after mid-century, an American writer could have realized herself or himself precisely as a professional who often performed no other sorts of work and who was respected, in public terms, primarily for the "writerly" work he or she produced.³

My dissertation is essentially a cultural study of ideas about this work, that is, the work of writing, in America, from roughly the Civil War to World War I, an historical period in which American writers thought of and practiced literary authorship

increasingly in vocational terms. In particular, my project attempts to understand in finer detail how Gilded Age authors, who operated within a fully professionalized business of letters, conceived of the nature of their work and its relation to the work performed by others. I take as a starting point Charvat's account, which has created a historiography that has, largely, overlooked widespread cultural confusion and contestations in late nineteenth-century America over the legitimacy of literary work and the rightful status of literary authors as workers in the nineteenth century's newly emergent social hierarchy of labor.

My project points out and responds to an important, yet often overlooked, contradiction of American literature around the turn of the twentieth century: as fiction writing evolved into a professional, commercial activity, and, thus, a potentially viable way to earn a living, many of America's most successful and otherwise significant writers struggled against lingering, pervasive public assumptions that challenged the notion of writing as "real" work. Longstanding associations between literary endeavors and leisure fueled their struggles. The earlier "gentleman amateur" ideal of authorship outlined by Charvat and other scholars counterpoised the inherent uselessness and idleness of literary pursuits, especially when those pursuits were compared to "industry" and other modes of productive labor.⁴ In her study of women's literary professionalism during the nineteenth century, Susan Coultrap-McQuin has shown that the ideal of the leisured writer persisted in America's collective consciousness long after the big business of authorship turned so many writers into diligent, calculating literary professionals.⁵ Several critics have also demonstrated that literature and culture were often viewed during this period as part of an exalted sphere that was above or detached from, and

therefore not essential to, the “real work” of society.⁶ The result is a critical gap in our understanding of how, exactly, professional writers operated in an occupation whose work was at once valorized and degraded.

My dissertation fills in this gap by offering a new account of late nineteenth-century authorship, one that foregrounds the influence of what might be called “vocational anxieties” on the careers of three major late-nineteenth-century American writers: William Dean Howells, Charles Chesnutt, and Jack London. These men are uniquely representative of the problems and trends investigated by this study. I use the term “vocational anxieties” to describe the acute sense of worry shared by so many American writers, who faced two related and inescapable problems. My project explores the nature of these problems and, in particular, the ways in which Howells, Chesnutt, and London responded to them.

The first problem emerged thanks to longstanding cultural doubts about the legitimacy of imaginative writing as a form of work. In 1985 the literary critic Christopher Wilson reminded us that literary authorship, as late as the 1880s, retained its connections to elite social status, leisure, and creative genius. The “gentleman amateur” ideal revered in the Early National period cemented the nation’s collective image of the writer as a genteel dabbler in the arts.⁷ Most Americans felt that, especially when compared to other professional fields, and when juxtaposed to the workers and practitioners in those fields, the act of writing was not work, nor were writers themselves actual workers. Such public skepticism begs the following question: how did writers understand the nature and meaning of their literary endeavors in a culture that often refused to recognize those endeavors as work? This question frames my investigation.

As we shall see, the problem of literary work provoked in many writers intense feelings, ranging from fear, shame, and guilt, to hostility, confusion, and denial. Each chapter ahead charts the efforts of one of my featured authors to counteract the assumption that imaginative writing does not count as, or is somehow less than, real work.

The second problem taken up by my study is related to the inherent conflicts created for professional writers by the invention of the mass literary marketplace. Charvat defined a professional writer as one who earns a living exclusively, or at least primarily, by his or her pen. Professional writers produce works of art with hopes of their successful sale in the open market. Once a novel or a poem appears in the open market, it becomes a commodity, like any other salable product. The commercial conditions of the late-nineteenth century literary marketplace thrust literary artists into a new and, often times, uneasy role as businessmen and businesswomen. The term “literary artist” is used throughout my project to identify those professional writers who also held serious artistic ambitions. Literary artists wrote for more than just money; unlike the Grub Street scribblers, they were reluctant to churn out formulaic, unoriginal hackwork. By the dawn of the twentieth century, earning a living by one’s pen required a writer to come to terms with the market; he or she had to negotiate with and, ultimately, win the favor of literary consumers: editors, publishing houses, and, of course, the reading public.

I see my dissertation as a valuable exploration of American ideals about the nature and meaning of literary work. It is motivated by an important, yet under-theorized tension between mental and manual modes of work in our culture. Specifically, my study asks why our culture has for so long been reluctant to recognize the act of writing as work and the writer as a worker. The scope of my project, which spans the nearly fifty-

year period after the Civil War, belies the extent of the problem. After all, writers in this country have always been anxious about the social value and public perceptions of their writing efforts. This project narrowly considers how Gilded Age writers tried to make intelligible to the general public the purposes of their own literary endeavors. But the fact is that a stunning range of nineteenth and twentieth century writers were deeply affected by the cultural skepticism of imaginative writing. Among them we might include Harriet Beecher Stowe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott, Fanny Fern, Henry James, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Frank Norris, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and Scott Fitzgerald, to name only a few. All of these writers theorized and attempted to justify their vocation in society at large. The pages ahead highlight a shared impulse among writers to explain their work. This impulse has had an influence not only on the writings of individual authors, but also on the general direction of American letters since the Civil War. As my project stops short of articulating that larger influence, I hope that scholars will extend my project by filling in its gaps and expanding it forwards and backwards in time.

Ultimately, my argument is that the story of American authorship from the Civil War to the First World War amounts to a romance with literary labor. Cultural suspicions about the social utility of the literary enterprise caused a transition of authorial consciousness. Most American writers of the previous generations had refrained from publicly challenging the “writing-as-leisure” paradigm, rarely equating their literary efforts to actual labor. On the contrary, an array of Gilded Age authors defined and, indeed, romanticized themselves foremost as laborers and the act of imaginative writing as an authentic form of work. My dissertation brings to light the attempts made by three

representative late nineteenth-century authors, each of whom were preoccupied with personally and publicly proving and making visible the nature of literary labor and the impact or the “work” of literature or literary “products” in the culture at large. I also explain why my featured writers, in step with other writers of the era, adopted a “writing as labor” ideology at precisely a historical moment in which the nature and meaning of labor, especially industrial modes of labor, were being denigrated and questioned in the culture at large.

My dissertation diverges from the majority of authorial professionalism studies insofar as it is concerned, above all, with how writers of the period conceptualized what it meant, personally and socially, to engage in, or to do, the work of writing. This study reconstructs and theorizes the personal, social, historical, and psychological factors that underpinned the dramatic transformation of writers into workers. The dominant historicism of the last twenty-five years has focused almost exclusively on the conditions of economic exchange that shaped the antebellum and late nineteenth-century literary marketplaces and made professional authorship possible.⁸ However, scholars have been far less interested in the subject of work, particularly in the very activity most vital to generating a reading audience and a moneymaking market: authorial work. My project is, in this regard, distinct from and builds upon both these recent scholarship traditions of marketplace and professionalization studies. In addition, a large body of existing scholarship looks at the ways nineteenth-century authors participated in broad cultural debates about the changing nature and meaning of work. But these studies generally focus on literary representations of industrial labor, as the mode of work most visibly affected by the spreading market economy.⁹

This project owes a considerable debt to Christopher Wilson and Daniel Borus, scholars whose work inspired my earliest interest in and thoughts about Gilded Age literary authorship. Wilson and Borus provide impressive accounts of the impact of the “writer as worker” ideology on a handful of late nineteenth-century authors. Both scholars demonstrate how certain writers operating within the realistic and naturalistic genres embraced and promulgated the notion that writing was first and foremost work.¹⁰ Their studies link the problem of writing as work to what some historians have identified as a crisis in white male masculinities around the turn of the century.¹¹ My project follows and ultimately extends their work. Like Wilson and Borus, I am keenly interested in the masculine panic that caused my featured authors to adopt the writing-as-labor ideology. But I also explore how race as well as biographical, historical, and economic concerns factored into the equation for my featured writers.

Women writers are conspicuously absent from my study. However, their absence does not mean that women who attempted to write professionally were somehow exempt from the problems sketched above. Nothing could be further from the truth. I want to stress the fact that women authors played a vital role in creating and reinforcing the writing-as-work concept in the late nineteenth century. This project is currently incomplete insofar as it focuses exclusively on male authors. I look forward to expanding it by adding the stories of how women writers helped transform writing into work.

The subject matter and chronological parameters within which I work will be familiar to literary historians, and my dissertation is, in part, a work of literary history. It is also a limited cultural history of ideas about authorship and, more specifically, a

“personalized” historical account of authorship as practiced, or, I should say as “lived” by William Dean Howells, Charles Chesnutt, and Jack London. With a few notable exceptions, I have been less concerned with the ways in which authorial work was depicted *in* works of literature, and more interested in how these writers personally dealt with the problems sketched above. In other words, the authors themselves emerge as the primary “texts” of my inquiry. This does not mean, however, that my project is devoid of textual interpretation. A large portion of my study features sustained analyses of “non-literary” and some literary sources, many of which have previously gone unexamined, usually composed by the authors themselves. My source material includes private letters, public speeches, journal entries, newspaper and magazine articles, theoretical tracts, and travel accounts. These documents represent a kind of work theory—a space in which each writer reflected on the nature, meaning, and particular problems attendant to his authorial practice. Historicist and new historicist insights inform my methodological approach in the following pages. For example, I situate my discussion of literary work within the broader context of changing ideals about, and material realities of, various non-literary work processes in Gilded Age America, such as industrial labor in the cases of Howells and London and the socially minded work of racial reform in Chesnutt’s case. Several labor historians and theorists play a prominent role in my narrative. Their insights help us to see how people living in turn-of-the-century America thought about and performed their work. These theories are useful not as a master key that unlocks the meaning of work in late-nineteenth-century America, but as a stimulus to thought and as a reminder that work is a multifaceted, complex category of human thought and experience. Moreover, Richard Brodhead’s claims that “every work of writing is

produced within a historically specific definition of such work's conditions of possibility" and that "no one writes except within a concrete cultural context" have helped me frame my overarching theoretical approach. My project tries to combine the traditional field of literary studies and a field that the literary critic Nicholas Bromell has called "work studies," which is distinct from labor history, as it views work as an important subject of cultural criticism.¹²

Why, one might ask, given the sprawling reach of my subject, do I begin when and with whom I do? American writers have, after all, struggled to define and to earn a living by their work since the country's inception. I could have started farther back; or I could have moved ahead in time. Had my dissertation taken a longer perspective, had I started, say, in the antebellum period and extended my research beyond the First World War, my emphasis might have changed, but my argument, I suspect, would have stayed much the same. The chronological parameters of my project are, in part, a reflection of my scholarly training. I am a scholar of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century literature, so I have focused on cultural ideas about writing in the period I know best. There are some very real advantages, however, to examining the roughly fifty-year span between the Civil War and World War I. Factors such as the birth of the modern publishing industry, the growth of transportation, the protection of intellectual property under copyright laws, the surging popularity of periodicals and serial magazines, and the rise of leisure, coalesced to create unprecedented opportunities for aspiring professional writers at the end of the nineteenth century. In addition, American enterprise and capitalism reached their ascendancy in this era. Supporting oneself through the sale of written words had, just decades earlier, struck many genteel authors and unlettered

citizens alike as odd or vulgar. However, the Gilded Age business of letters eclipsed the earlier system of private patronage, which had protected writers who were wary of the open market. For any writer willing, as London once put it, “to crank out what the capitalist editors want,” the business of letters also mitigated the oddness and vulgarity of peddling one’s literary wares.¹³

Casting a backwards glance at the authorial careers of earlier American writers provides us with valuable historical context for the problems my project explores. For example, the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne reminds us that antebellum writers were no less worried about the social value of literary work and the literary artist’s rightful relationship to the mass literary marketplace. These concerns, it bears repeating, did not originate after the Civil War. In “The Custom House,” the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* published in 1850, Hawthorne laments the public perception of his profession as a “worthless, if not positively disgraceful” career choice.¹⁴ He hears generations of his ancestors sneering through history at his chosen calling: “What is he? A writer of story-books! What kind of business in life,--what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,--may that be?”¹⁵ His co-workers at the Salem custom house have taught him something:

It is a good lesson--though it may often be a hard one--for a man who has dreamed of literary fame, and of making for himself a rank among the world’s dignitaries by such means, to step aside out of the narrow circle in which his claims are recognized, and to find how utterly devoid of significance, beyond that circle, is all he achieves, and all he aims at.¹⁶

“The Custom House” reflects the American presumption that writing fiction was neither a business nor a calling. Hawthorne concedes that his literary efforts are a waste of time because they earn him a pittance. Furthermore, he admits that his “years of toil”

as a man of letters render him socially obscure and inconsequential, especially compared to those “prompt, acute, clear-minded” men of business he met while serving his office at the custom house.¹⁷ As the critic Michael Newbury has noted, in this and other self-deprecations that punctuate Hawthorne’s literary career, he “reveals a sense that authorship is less than a fully desirable or secure profession, even as he practices it as a form of self-definition.”¹⁸ Put another way, Hawthorne grasped, a full generation before Howells, Chesnutt, and London, the cultural illegitimacy of writing as a form of work. But unlike those writers, he did little to revise public opinion. Instead, he cultivated, perhaps with some degree of irony, a public image as a fanciful idler, one woefully, if not charmingly, out of touch with the era’s spirit of industry.

Recent literary historians have confirmed that numerous antebellum authors responded ambivalently to the pressures of selling their writings in the newly commercialized literary marketplace. Taken together, Hawthorne’s prefaces to his romances and volumes of tales can be read as an extended meditation on his fraught position in the marketplace. Michael Gilmore once noted that Hawthorne was frightened and frustrated while, at the same time, desirous of widespread popularity. His faith in and care for the mass reading public diminished as his career failed to yield him the kind of monetary returns he had hoped for when he first took up his pen.¹⁹ Hawthorne never earned a living solely as a writer, which is to say he never solved the problem of the literary marketplace. In “The Custom House,” he idealizes writing outside of the mass market, away from and uninfluenced by what he describes as “the mighty flood of commerce,” for a coterie of friends and gentle readers who possess more sympathy and taste than the vulgar public.²⁰ When *The Marble Faun*, his last major romance, appeared

nearly a decade later, Hawthorne expressed his “sad foreboding” that, “except in very rare instances,” the fickle reading public peremptorily abandons writers before they can find their footing.²¹

Herman Melville was no less alert or articulate about the emergent marketplace’s implications than his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. He felt that the pressures of the literary marketplace inevitably compromised literary works. In “Hawthorne and His Moses,” written in praise of Hawthorne and published in 1850, he asserted that authors must conceal from the public the truth of their artistic intentions. Melville conveyed the strain he felt, a strain shared by other writers, between composing from his heart rather than from his pocketbook. In an oft-cited letter addressed to Hawthorne in June of 1851, he exclaims that, “Dollars damn me,” adding that “What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay.”²² Two years earlier, describing *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* in a letter to his father-in-law, Melville equated himself to a workman compelled to tailor his fiction to the demands of buyers. He admitted that those novels were concessions to public taste, and he tried to separate himself from them, insisting that they did not register his genuine artistic ambitions and talents: “No reputation that is gratifying to me, can possibly be achieved by either of these books. They are two *jobs*, which I have done for money--being forced to do it, as other men are to sawing wood...I have felt obliged to refrain from writing the kind of book I would wish.”²³ Melville’s professional quandary would be shared, as we shall see, by the subsequent writers featured in the pages ahead.

Several Gilded Age writers not mentioned in the pages ahead could have been subjects of my dissertation. Henry James would, by himself, make for a fascinating study. Many of his autobiographical writings, combined with a great deal of criticism

devoted to his work, have created a portrait of James as the superlative literary artist who wrote exclusively and imperiously from within the ivory tower. But James wrestled at the outset of his career with questions about the social meaning and utility of his chosen vocation. In his survey of Hawthorne's literary career, James noted that the Salem writer took up his pen at a time when little interest existed in literature. "It is not too much to say," James added, "that even to the present day it is a considerable discomfort in the United States not to be 'in business.'"²⁴ Clearly, James grasped his culture's perceived disconnect between the business of letters and other socially sanctioned business enterprises. Moreover, recent critics have shown that he was continually engaged in a disquieted dialogue with the public, and that his fictions were shaped not merely by his imagination alone, but by his considerations of the literary marketplace. As Michael Anesko put it some time ago in his groundbreaking study of The Master's relationship to the market, James "anxiously desired to reach a mass audience at the same time that he remained suspicious of it."²⁵ While he remained devoted to what Anesko has called "a more private artistic religion" throughout his career, James also clamored for prestige and public understanding of his artistic intentions. He sought the tangible rewards of the literary marketplace, while he bristled at the thought of sacrificing his artistic integrity, or, as he explained to his brother William, at the thought of behaving like a "grasping businessman."²⁶

Given the range of writers this study could have focused on, why are Howells, Chesnutt, and London worthy of our consideration? My project's scope is admittedly limited. The historical outline above reinforces the fact that I have omitted several important and relevant nineteenth century literary artists from the conversation. My

concern in this study has been more illustrative than exhaustive. I have singled out for examination three authors whose importance is undeniably major, signaled by the ongoing scholarly discourse devoted to their lives and literary works, and by their regular inclusion on undergraduate and graduate reading lists. Their individual popularity notwithstanding, Howells, Chesnutt, and London are seldom discussed in direct relation to one another. The following chapters call attention to some striking similarities and points of connection between three writers who appear, at first, to have little to do with one another. Those connections are worth outlining before we go any further.

Each writer featured in my study was profoundly influenced by the problems that came with trying to define and justify his literary work at the turn of the twentieth century. The longstanding image of Howells as a complaisant literary aristocrat ignores the fact that he was tormented throughout his life by deeply rooted vocational anxieties. Howellsian Realism, I argue, was a response to and an expression of these doubts. He embarked on a career-long campaign to revalorize the vocation of literary authorship by reframing literary artists and texts along socially purposive, instrumental lines. He also attempted to redefine the writing process as strenuous work and to realign writers with manual laborers, including mechanics, day laborers, and farmers. His efforts, as I make clear in Chapter One, laid the groundwork for both Chesnutt and London.

The years before he entered the literary field found Charles Chesnutt consumed by similar career uncertainties and fears of professional failure. When he decided to try authorship as a full-time vocation, he adopted the Howellsian model of writing as a tool for the social and ethical transformation of his audience. Chesnutt's career arc was shaped by his early enthusiasm for and eventual disavowal of the writing as socio-ethical

work ideology. Compelled by the notion of fiction writing as a form of racial advocacy and black literary artists as putative race workers, Chesnutt promoted himself as a “racial writer,” which led, not long after he emerged as one of America’s most promising new African American writers, to his traumatic sense of artistic entrapment and his subsequent rejection of literature as a form of race work.

Jack London also followed Howells by creating a model of literary authorship designed to bridge the gap in Gilded Age America between the disparate worlds of culture and labor, which separated workers from manual laborers. London’s version of authorship blended elements of industrial labor with elements of craftwork as it reimagined writers as both hardworking manual laborers and highly skilled craftsmen. His competing ideals of literary craft and labor led to the unresolved tensions he faced when he attempted to sell his fiction in the marketplace.

As self-identifying literary artists, Howells, Chesnutt, and London struggled to reconcile their respective positions in the commercial marketplace. Howells’s devotion to the idea of the writing process as hard work and authors as laborers reflects his concerns, which deepened as his career progressed, about the fate of literary artists in capitalist societies. He felt that the modern business of authorship turned writers into vulgar peddlers who exercised little control over the final product of their efforts. Furthermore, he was disturbed by the extent to which success in the mass marketplace boiled down to sheer chance. Chesnutt became an author at a time when American publishers, editors, and readers expected black writers to serve as representatives or champions for their race. His status as a literary artist has always been authorized, one might say, and overshadowed by his public reputation as an African American political

spokesman. Chesnutt's inability to find a market for his so-called "white life" novels brought home to him the impossibility of breaking away from the category of "racial writer." Like Howells and Chesnutt, London resented that nineteenth-century literary workers did not determine the value of their wares in the market nor their own occupational standing. He knew that those things, which amount to a writer's lifeblood, were decided by the literary industry, which he likened to a "soulless machine," a network of greedy editors, publishers, and readers for whom business interests trumped artistic concerns.

My selection of writers reflects my argument that Howells, Chesnutt, and London, each in his own unique ways, represent the larger feelings of and problems faced by American writers of their own and subsequent generations. One could make the case that no author had any greater impact on the Gilded Age literary field than did Howells. His far-reaching influence makes him an ideal subject for this study. He was the purveyor of one of the dominant aesthetic modes (Howellsian Realism) after the Civil War; he was also America's leading novelist and critic, meaning that literary-minded Americans listened to what Howells had to say. Regardless of what some modern critics might think about the value of his fiction, we cannot deny that he was the era's primary arbiter of literary taste. I contend that, taken together, his body of writings represents a sustained, uneasy attempt to disclose the nature and meaning of the vocation of letters in America. American writers of various backgrounds and significance, from Edith Wharton to Henry James to Mark Twain to Paul Dunbar to Frank Norris, were exposed to Howells's ideas about the work of writing, the writer's status as a laborer, and the relationship between literary artists and the marketplace.

Charles Chesnutt appears in my project as a prescient paradigm study. One of my contentions is that he was never, as most scholarship has held, content merely as a political, or “racial” writer. His ideal version of literary authorship transcended the polemic. I argue in Chapter Two that his artistic aspirations diverged from his political concerns shortly after the press tabbed him one of America’s most promising *black* authors. Chesnutt desired recognition as a literary artist untethered from his reputation as a famous Race Man. As his authorial career advanced, he found it increasingly difficult to square his artistic ambitions with the social expectations placed on him as a public black intellectual. Chesnutt strove to release himself from the entrenched literary expectations and cultural designations imposed on fin de siècle black authors. Put another way, he fought to create an artistic identity--for himself and other black writers--beyond the boundaries of the African American literary tradition he inherited. African American writers would take up his dilemma, which amounted to the question of whether to write “for his race” or for his own artistic ambitions, in every subsequent generation. Charting Chesnutt’s course, specifically his sense of artistic entrapment, helps us understand the professional artistic constraints faced by Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison.

Chapter Three frames Jack London, in one sense, as a disciple of Howells. With unmatched rhetorical gusto, London adopted the Howellsian writing-as-labor ideology, recasting Gilded Age writers at once as laborers and skilled artisans. But unlike Howells, whose genteel image and lifestyle separated him from the workaday world, London used his personal life to collapse the boundaries between the distinct realms of art and labor. He created the model for the man of letters as a man of action. Throughout his literary

career, London played up his “anti-literary” public persona, posing as an adventuresome man of the world who chanced to earn his living by his pen. Numerous subsequent writers would adopt that persona, perhaps most famously Ernest Hemingway. Chapter Three explores the link between London’s literary theories and his masculine and vocational anxieties. In addition, London’s unprecedented commercial popularity gives his career documentary significance. He was a pioneer in the world of newly emergent commercial magazine fiction and one of the first American writers to earn a fortune from his writing alone. I argue that London represents the last vestiges of an earlier nineteenth-century ideal of the literary marketplace, one in which the writer could reasonably expect to write for a profit and with artistic purpose. After London, many American authors began to bifurcate their work between the popular and the artistic.

Each chapter ahead explores the particular efforts of each one of my featured writers to rhetorically reconstruct his own literary work by linking it to and, in some cases, mediating it through various modes of socially, ethically purposive work or, in other cases, often simultaneously, through physically strenuous labor, such as industrial work, artisanal work, craft production, factory work, and agricultural work.

In addition, my particular focus in each chapter is on the predicament caused by the modern business of literature for literary artists, a predicament London referred to as “the howling paradox” of professional authorship.²⁷ London was one of several authors working during this period who perceived an inherent tension between the making and selling of art, and a fundamental incompatibility between the writer’s status as an artist and as a businessperson. Howells, the era’s consummate and most highly paid professional writer, shared London’s concerns. “I do not think any man ought to live by

an art. A man's art should be his privilege," Howells proclaimed in his 1893 essay, "The Man of Letters as a Man of Business."²⁸ Howells's business savvy notwithstanding, he was, like London (and Chesnutt) deeply troubled by the commercial side of letters. Howells concludes in his essay that "there is something profane, something impious" in the exchange of art for money," and he holds that no literary artist can escape from "the instinctive sense of the dishonor" that comes with selling one's work.²⁹

But the changing economics of authorship were, of course, part of an inevitable and irreversible process of market economy growth in the United States. Howells and London understood this, despite their ethical reservations, which is to say they knew that, in a capitalist economy, an artist's career was defined by how his or her work fared in the marketplace. In his 1902 essay, "Again the Literary Aspirant," London urged would-be writers not to lose sight of this fact. "The deepest values of life are today expressed in terms of cash," London affirmed, adding, "That which is most significant today is the making of money."³⁰ Howells struck a similar note, asserting that, "At present business is the only human solidarity; we are all bound together with that chain."³¹ Their remarks illustrate that selling one's work in the capitalist marketplace was, in many cases, a necessary evil for them and other artists whose pen was their primary means of support. Meeting the market's demands, as we shall see, required Howells, London, and Chesnutt to sacrifice or restrain their artistic self-expression, to ignore what London called "the promptings of [the] heart," in favor of the "mandate[s] of the business department."³² One of the premises of my project is that the invention of the business of letters did not align the ethics of art with the ethics of business, a point Howells confirms with his final and utterly despairing assessment that business itself is "the opprobrium of Literature."³³

One thread that binds my featured writers is that each one tried, with varying results, to solve the problems of the commercial marketplace. In the pages that follow, I track their respective efforts to reconcile their own unique literary ambitions with their livelihoods; moreover, I examine each author's attempts to validate his standing as a businessman in a country Howells conceded had, by the end of the nineteenth century, turned into "a nation of business men."³⁴

Any effort to understand popular ideas about literary work in Gilded Age America must first consider the cultural connotations and historical meanings of non-authorial forms of work. Therefore, let me close my introduction with a brief cultural history of work in the years prior to the Civil War. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the mythology of work and the work ethic in nineteenth-century America. Touring the United States in 1831-32, cultural commentator Alexis de Tocqueville observed, "to work is the necessary, natural, and honest condition of all men."³⁵ Juxtaposing the American scene to his native France, he concluded that "not only is no dishonor associated with work, but...it is regarded as positively honorable; the prejudice is for, not against, it."³⁶ De Tocqueville's comments underscore the fact that America has always been a nation defined by its collective devotion to work. His observation dramatizes a process labor historian Daniel T. Rodgers has called the "transvaluation of work," whereby traditional attitudes about work as a necessary evil were utterly transformed.³⁷

No longer deemed a curse or a meaningless chore to be finished as soon as possible, work in early America was reconceived as both the vital center of living and the core of a moral life.³⁸ As Cindy Weinstein has noted, the belief in the primacy of work and the correlation between labor and virtue regulated any number of cultural activities

and structured the definition of human personality and its relation to society.³⁹ The work ethic gave people both an ontological and epistemological status, meaning that citizens of antebellum America were often thought to be, or were known primarily by, the work they did.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the dignity of labor and the moral preeminence of those who toiled were asserted by religious leaders, poets, and pundits throughout America's preindustrial years. Myriad factors led to the cultural reorientation of work; perhaps none were as influential as the forces of Protestantism and Northern industrial capitalism.

Protestant religious beliefs played a key role in the transformation of attitudes toward work in nineteenth-century America. Sociologist Max Weber famously located the origin of America's moral preoccupation with work within Protestant theology. According to Weber, Puritans and Calvinists were tormented and psychologically isolated under the weight of the enduring crisis of proof.⁴¹ In short, believers in early America felt perpetually condemned, as they could not for certain know if they were one of God's elect. Life in Puritan America, as a result, was regulated by ascetic efforts to prove—publically and privately—one's state of grace. As a means of coping with this crisis, the notion that tireless labor could demonstrate one's elect status gained popularity.⁴² Sustained dedication to work over the course of one's life was considered the best way to provide visible and convincing evidence of one's predestination. Moreover, willful abstention from systematic, purposeful labor signaled one's depravity. The idea of the "Protestant ethic"—which has had a lasting impact in American culture and society—ensured that work was no longer thought of simply as a means to satisfying material needs or of attaining future worldly comforts; instead, it was redefined as a vital and transcendent end unto itself.

In addition, the Protestant doctrine of the calling extended beyond clerical and religious modes of work to include all ordinary occupations, which, in turn, sanctified every sort of honest labor.⁴³ As work theorist Russell Muirhead points out, callings “involve a fit between individuals and their work that not only links individual aptitudes with specific occupations but also connects work, however ordinary, with the highest purposes individuals can serve.”⁴⁴ The concept of the calling invited people to see themselves as particularly suited for their chosen line of work. It presumed that, without exception, everyone was meant to enter and exert him or herself within a particular field or vocation. By reconceiving most productive endeavors as callings, Protestantism revised traditional notions of labor as a curse, elevating it to a moral duty rather than merely a material or instrumental necessity.⁴⁵

In Early America, diligent work in any calling was seen as highly pleasing to God and figured as its own reward insofar as it offered the surest way of approaching divine status. Perhaps more crucially, the doctrine of the calling established work as the primary mode through which adult identity was constructed. More than any other basic human activity, it enabled individuals to achieve social status and self-esteem. Consequently, the question “what shall I do for a living” became an inescapable and often vexing one. Being able to answer it was a spiritual, social, and personal responsibility of the highest order. Despite the eventual rise of secularism and the attenuation of several major denominations, the Protestant injunction to work and the urgency of the calling continued to pervade the nation’s thinking, especially in the North, well into the nineteenth century.

The rise of industrial capitalism during the antebellum period also radically changed the ways Americans thought about and performed their work. Weber argued

that Protestantism and its perspectives on work were also the ideological precursors for capitalism and its work ethic. His insights into the logic of capitalism are helpful in the context of my dissertation. The Protestant ethic stressed work as part of a lifelong program of asceticism, and profit as a sign of the blessings of God.⁴⁶ Cultural anthropologist Herbert Applebaum has noted that capital wealth was not to exceed certain limits, as work and profit were not intended for purely personal interest; indeed, the pursuit of money and goods for pleasurable ends was condemned.⁴⁷ Traditional ideas about economic behavior and work were often tempered by the desire to earn just enough money in order to live in one's accustomed manner. Guided by the idea that earning too much money was spiritually damning or that labor had no intrinsic value, workers in pre-capitalist societies would often methodically pace their efforts and cease their exertions once their needs were met.

But as Weber has shown, the emerging capitalist economy emphasized "the idea of the *duty* of the individual to work toward the increase of his wealth, which is assumed to be an end in itself."⁴⁸ With the deepening of the capitalist ethic in America during the second half of the nineteenth century, the pursuit of profit for its own sake gained unprecedented significance. Accumulating money became an essential condition of the postbellum economy and the social order, as it was viewed both as the result and expression of one's character and commitment to and success within one's calling. Central to that ethic was the belief in the moral responsibility and reward of pursuing a secular occupation or professional activity.⁴⁹ The capitalist economic order dramatically reoriented American society by developing and quickly normalizing a "live to work" mentality that ran counter to traditional notions about work.

The capitalist imperative to make money recast compulsive productivity, work, and usefulness as the highest goals of life by the mid-nineteenth century. An explosion of conduct guides, success manuals, magazine fillers, and popular fiction exalted the idea of work and testified to the notion that, in a fluid market economy, hard work paved the way to personal success and social progress.⁵⁰ Workers of all sorts were urged to treat their endeavors as the sine qua non of human life. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it in *Nature* (1836), “A man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work.”⁵¹ Sparked by the idea of economic activity as an end in itself, the ways in which work was approached and performed in many cases changed drastically. Many laborers stopped seeking ways of earning their usual wage with the maximum ease and the minimum effort and took up their tasks with newfound vigor and speed. Furthermore, the onus placed on productivity and the pursuit of wealth invited—and eventually demanded—increased efficiency and methodical management of on the job behavior. The development of industrial modes of production and the concomitant changes to the nature of work for many Americans during the period has been well documented by labor historians and need not be rehearsed.⁵² But it is worth pointing out that the capitalist ethic and its attitudes about work helped to move America toward industrialization in the second half of the nineteenth century. The advent of the factory and the use of machines may have been inevitable to the extent that these innovations promised to raise profits by bolstering productivity.

Several commentators have observed that the spirit of the capitalist ethic spawned a system of industrial labor, which, ironically, overturned familiar patterns of craftwork and changed the way people thought about their labor. Rodgers noted that, “the

transformation of labor undercut virtually all the mid-nineteenth-century assumptions about the moral preeminence of work.”⁵³ The belief that self-reliance and hard work translated to economic success was called into question by systems of wage labor which usually required ceaseless work in exchange for meager pay and little hope of upward mobility. In addition, machine manufacture along with an intensive division of labor stripped many industrial work processes of creativity and vitality, alienating factory and plant workers from their daily tasks. The result was a growing recognition within late nineteenth-century America that work was undergoing a rapid and crucial degradation.⁵⁴ In his study of industrial alienation during the period, James Gilbert describes the situation, saying, “by 1900 the work ethic seemed to describe another era, a time of more perfect harmony between man, society, ethics, and religion.”⁵⁵

The literary careers of William Dean Howells, Charles Chesnutt, and Jack London testify to the fact that the idea of work remained a powerful part of American ideology well into the twentieth century. Each writer internalized the mythologies of work and the work ethic; each writer correlated his literary endeavors with his personal identity; and each writer embraced the gospel of work. Howells and Chesnutt saw entering a vocation as a social obligation and a vital step toward fulfilling one’s selfhood. Driven by personal and cultural doubts, neither man ever entirely overcame his fears about the vocational legitimacy of literary authorship. As we shall see in the first two chapters, all aspects of their writing lives were informed by doubts about imaginative writing’s status as valid work. These anxieties motivated Howells and Chesnutt respectively to adopt a socio-ethical model of authorship that figured the writer as a potent social reformer and his or her literary works as vehicles for reform. At his core,

Jack London craved public recognition as a working-class literary professional. Chapter Three examines how London's writing process and his adventurous personal exploits were meant to reinforce his image as a man of labor first and a man of letters second.

¹ The following studies offer excellent accounts of the birth of literary professionalism in America: Michael Davitt Bell, *Culture, Genre, and Literary Vocation: Selected Essays On American Literature*; Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century*; William G. Rowland, Jr., *Literature and the Marketplace: Romantic Writers and Their Audiences in Great Britain and the United States*; Leon Jackson, *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America*.

² See Charvat's, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870*. Charvat's work on the history of antebellum authorship remains the starting point and cornerstone for scholars in the field. His book maps the evolution of literature and literary writing from its inception as a genteel, amateur pastime to a commercialized, professional pursuit.

³ Fanny Fern, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne all pursued careers as professional authors.

⁴ Charvat, *Profession*, 6-7.

⁵ Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business*, 13-14.

⁶ I'm thinking of Raymond Williams's definition of culture, which he defines as "the independent and abstract noun that describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" and he explains that, "culture is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film" (90). See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. In addition, Richard Brodhead has discussed several nineteenth century institutions, including publishing houses, magazines, advertising agencies, which contributed to a vision of literature and a sphere of serious, high literary writing that was considered a special form of expression and distinctly removed from the category of general human doing and making" (62, 80). See Richard Brodhead, *The School of Hawthorne*.

⁷ Wilson, *Labor of Words*, 6.

⁸ For example, see Jackson's *The Business of Letters*.

⁹ See Wendy Weinstein, *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature: Allegory in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*; Martha Banta, *Taylored Lives: Narrative Productions in the Age of Taylor, Veblen, and Ford*; David Meakin, *Man and Work: Literature and Culture in Industrial Society*, David Herreshoff, *Labor Into Art: The Theme of Work in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*.

¹⁰ Christopher P. Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era*; Daniel H. Borus, *Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market*. Wilson considers the literary careers of Jack London, Upton Sinclair,

David Graham Phillips, and Lincoln Steffens. As indicated by his title, Borus focuses on W.D. Howells, Henry James, and Frank Norris.

¹¹ See Gail Bederman's book, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*.

¹² See Bromell, *By The Sweat of the Brow*, 2. Bromell positions his own project within this field. In the broadest sense, I follow him, as I believe the concept of work as a field of study is vital because, after all, work often structures the way we live, how we make contact our material and social realities, and how we achieve self-esteem.

¹³ London qtd. in Perry, *Jack London: An American Myth*, 296.

¹⁴ Hawthorne, "The Custom House," 9-10.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, 21.

¹⁷ Ibid, 22, 19.

¹⁸ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship*, 2.

¹⁹ Gilmore, *American Romanticism*, 96-112.

²⁰ Ibid, 6.

²¹ Hawthorne, Preface to *The Marble Faun*, 91.

²² Melville qtd. in Gilmore, *American Romanticism*, 124.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ James, *Hawthorne*, 30.

²⁵ Anesko, Preface to *Friction with the Market*, ix.

²⁶ James qtd. in Anesko, *Friction with the Market*, 50.

²⁷ London, "Again the Literary Aspirant," 49

²⁸ Howells, *Literature and Life*, 1.

²⁹ Ibid, 1, 3.

-
- ³⁰ London, "Again the Literary Aspirant," 49.
- ³¹ Howells, *Literature and Life*, 4.
- ³² London, "The Question of a Name," 19.
- ³³ Howells, *Literature and Life*, 2.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, 5.
- ³⁵ De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 550.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, 550.
- ³⁷ Rodgers, *The Work Ethic*, xi.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, xi.
- ³⁹ Cindy Weinstein, *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature: Allegory in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*, 15.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 16.
- ⁴¹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 73-78. Weber described the consequences of the doctrine of predestination as follows: "it engendered, for each individual, a feeling of tremendous inner loneliness. In what was for the people of the Reformation age the most crucial concern of life, their eternal salvation, man was obliged to tread his path alone, toward a destiny which had been decreed from all eternity. No one and nothing could help him" (73, italics Weber).
- ⁴² *Ibid*, 77.
- ⁴³ For an excellent summary of the Protestant Work Ethic and doctrine of the calling, see Russell Muirhead, *Just Work*, 101-113.
- ⁴⁴ Muirhead, *Work*, 106.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.
- ⁴⁶ See Herbert Applebaum, *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 328.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 328.
- ⁴⁸ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 11.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 11-12, 29.

⁵⁰ Applebaum, *Concept of Work*, 452.

⁵¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, 1114.

⁵² For example, see Laurie, *Artisans into Workers* and Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*.

⁵³ Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 28.

⁵⁴ See James Gilbert, *Work Without Salvation: America's Intellectuals and Industrial Alienation, 1880-1910*, vii.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 5.

CHAPTER TWO

“MERELY A WORKING MAN”: WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS AND THE AESTHETICS OF VOCATIONAL ANXIETY

For nearly half a century, literary scholars have revised the narrative of failure that defined William Dean Howells's place in American literary history since his death in 1920. Modern critics, many of whom felt that Howells refused to confront real social problems, wrote this narrative. Blasting him as “a placid conformist,” and for abiding by a code of “evasive gentility,” H.L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, and others cemented Howells's reputation as a writer whose aristocratic pretensions undermined his literary ambitions.¹ Howells's status as one of the first truly professional and most successful authors in post-Civil War America was, in fact, tied to his skillful manipulation of the persona of the genteel man of letters. Playing up the role of cultivated writer spiritually descended from old New England, he became an arbiter of national literary tastes and by popular estimates the quintessential author and critic of the period. Although no longer the target of such overt critical hostility, an air of failure still surrounds Howells insofar as he remains largely understood in relation to what he was not. He is often figured as the artistic inferior of close friends and contemporaries, Henry James and Mark Twain. And despite the renewed attention to Howellsian Realism in recent years, his efforts to represent life truthfully are thought to have fallen woefully short in comparison to subsequent writers. The image of the complaisant, patrician dean continues to inform the critical conversation on Howells.

But scholars who have defended his reputation against these earlier attacks have challenged this image in the past several years. Prompted by the appearance in 1956 of Edwin H. Cady's sympathetic biography, a growing body of scholarship has sought to overturn the conventional view of Howells as hopelessly optimistic and socially aloof.² These so called defender critics rebuke the notion that Howells was unwilling or unable to confront the problems of Gilded Age America. They point out that he underwent a radical personal transformation after a series of family tragedies and an increasing awareness of the economic and social injustices around him. By the mid-1880s, as these critics would have it, Howells's initial faith in the fate of post war America gave way to disenchantment and frustration incited by, among other factors, his discovery of Tolstoy, an incipient interest in socialism, anger over the handling of the Haymarket Affair, and a mounting sense of personal failure.³ A letter Howells wrote to James in 1888 outlines his dilemma and also underscores the current shape of Howellsian scholarship. In it, he admits that "I'm not in a very good humor with America," adding that "after fifty years of optimistic content with "civilization" and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end."⁴ These remarks reflect his struggles to reconcile the romantic worldview of his earlier years with the increasing pessimism of his later ones. With few exceptions, recent literary historians and critics agree with James P. Simpson that these tensions represented the "personal moral trauma" of Howells's life.⁵ As a result, a far more complicated and nuanced version of Howells exists today. He has been largely recast as a writer with a pressing social and political conscience whose outlook on life was, as biographer Kenneth Lynn put it, "rooted in radical doubt and anxiety."⁶

One of this chapter's goals is to bring to light a compelling source of conflict and anxiety for Howells that his adversarial and defender critics alike generally overlook. As a writer, he came of age around the same time that the concept of authorial professionalism took shape in America. Scholars of antebellum authorship maintain that by or shortly after the middle of the nineteenth century, writers could realize themselves precisely as professionals who often performed no other sorts of work and who were respected, in public terms, primarily for the "writerly" work they performed.⁷ Until then, literary authorship had been based on a model of genteel amateurism: writers had been considered well-to-do amateurs who wrote for their own enjoyment without serious concern for money or fame.⁸ As a teenager, Howells routinely worked long hours in his father's printing office to help his family make ends meet, leaving him with little time to devote to literary pursuits.⁹ He fully expected to pursue literature as an avocation. In his memoir *My Literary Passions* (1895), he recounted his earliest interest in becoming an author, saying "I did not see how it was to yield me a living, for I knew that almost all the literary men in the country had other professions...there was not then one who earned his bread solely by his pen in fiction."¹⁰ The young Howells had no way of knowing just how lucrative his pen would eventually be. By the end of the century, he became a symbol of literary success and a writer whose career inspired other would-be writers who hoped to enter the newly commercialized, professional field of literature.

While the professionalization of the literary marketplace did indeed make authorship a potentially viable way of earning a living, it did not erase widespread cultural confusion and skepticism regarding the nature and legitimacy of literary work and the status of literary authors as workers in the era's emerging social hierarchy of

labor. Despite the fact that authorship was being reconceived in occupational terms, Gilded Age writers often struggled against pervasive assumptions that challenged the notion of writing as rightful work. The preceding gentleman amateur phase of authorship had highlighted the inherent uselessness of literature and forged a longstanding image of the writer as an idler detached from the realm of necessity in which most readers lived and worked.¹¹ This amounted to an important paradox in late nineteenth-century American letters: the act of writing remained, in large measure, culturally unintelligible as a valid form of work well after literary authorship assumed its modern professional dimensions.

The lasting portrait of Howells as a contented literary aristocrat ignores the fact that he was tormented throughout his life by deeply rooted vocational anxieties. Keenly aware of the tenuous social status of literary work, he publicly theorized the meaning of the vocation of authorship at practically every given opportunity. In novels, critical essays, book reviews, magazine columns, letters, and speeches, Howells took up the following questions: what does it mean to be a writer in America? And what is the nature of the literary occupation in relation to other modes of work? As several critics have pointed out, these questions were intensely personal for a man who wrestled with self-contempt and guilt in regards to his own career even at the heights of his popularity and financial success.¹²

The recent critical trend of focusing primarily on Howells's socially and politically motivated "moral traumas" has obscured the foundational impact of these vocational concerns on his literary career. Taken together, his enormous oeuvre represents a sustained, uneasy attempt to disclose the nature of the vocation of letters. As

Lewis P. Simpson has shown, Howells was compulsively drawn toward—yet ultimately unable— to reconcile his original, idealized notion of literary authorship with lingering public and encroaching personal doubts about the social value of literary work.¹³

In what follows, I enrich our understanding of Howells by drawing attention to the important ways in which his development as a novelist and critic was shaped by these cultural and personal doubts about the work of writing. In particular, I discuss the key strategies underlying Howells's career-long campaign to revalorize the vocation of literary authorship. One of the core arguments advanced here is that Howellsian aesthetics may be understood both as a response to and as an expression of these doubts.¹⁴ Well aware of the diminishing social status and waning cultural authority of the writer in post-Civil War America, Howells sought to remake the role of authorship and literary texts along instrumental lines. He asserted the social utility of authors by framing them as professionals who could provide a unique ethical, moral, and civic service to American readers. Whereas several scholars have traced the contours of his literary aesthetics, my focus is on its initial formation in relation to a complex host of vocational fears.

In addition, this chapter will explore both the ideological and psychological functions of Howells's attempts to redefine himself and other writers foremost as laborers, and the writing of literature as strenuous work. Consulting a variety of Howellsian texts, including columns published in the *Editor's Study* (1886-1892), the influential essay "The Man of Letters as a Man of Business" (1893), the novel *The World of Chance* (1893), as well as a handful of interviews and letters ranging the course of his career, this chapter reconstructs his efforts to make visible the nature of literary work and

to align it with various working-class occupations. And as this dissertation seeks to make clear, the reformulation of writing as work had an enormous impact not only on Howells's authorial self-understanding, but also on an array of important late nineteenth-century authors as well as the postbellum literary field at large.

The Early American mythologies of work and the work ethic outlined in my introduction had an enormous influence on Howells. As were many middle-class men around the middle of the nineteenth-century, he was consumed by the question of his rightful vocation. Howells felt that entering a vocation was a social obligation and a vital step toward fulfilling one's selfhood. In a letter to his sister, Victoria, a twenty-year-old Howells expressed the typical overhanging sense of anxiety when he explained, "the present question with me, for instance, is, how am I to make a living? I bore myself continually about it, conjuring up possible unpleasant predicaments, and give myself no rest."¹⁵ Although here he envisions an uncertain and possibly "unpleasant" vocational future, it must be pointed out that Howells steadfastly embraced the gospel of work, as evidenced, for example, in an interview he gave toward the end of his life in which he proclaimed work "our only salvation" and maintained that "it makes character...makes life real, and crowds out the artificial and the trivial."¹⁶

Echoing Early Republican and antebellum commentators who upheld the glory of the working life, these remarks illustrate his propensity for and belief in the myth of work. Howells's conception of authorship was tied to an unwavering faith in the work ethic. His biographers attest that he was a "chronic worker," usually spending several hours a day at his desk writing or preparing to write, a process he would keep up for over fifty years and sixty-odd books.¹⁷ But Howells's efforts to be recognized as a

hardworking professional were complicated by popular ideas about the meaning of literary authorship in late nineteenth-century America.

Although the years leading up to the Civil War marked a general shift of authorship from the avocational to the professional, or as Michael Newbury puts it, from “a genteel and financially irrelevant hobby” to “a career organized by increasingly complicated market mediations,” creative writing in the late nineteenth century continued, for the most part, to be perceived in the culture at large in avocational terms.¹⁸ As William Charvat noted years ago in his foundational study of the origins of literary professionalism, when American literature fully emerged in the early nineteenth century, it inherited from the English aristocratic tradition its ideas about the social status of literature and authorship.¹⁹ Literature was considered a class commodity written by and for members of the elite. Authors might take pride in their craft, but rarely were they beholden to commercial pressures or swayed by money markets.²⁰ Devoting substantial amounts of time to reading and writing presupposed that a person could afford to abstain from productive modes of work; in fact, during the colonial and republican periods literary endeavors were often thought of as a sign of elite status.²¹ Moreover, Christopher P. Wilson has noted that this model of authorship was based on the idea that writing could not be conceived as labor, but only as something derived from inspiration or romantic genius.²² Because authors were rarely compelled by economic necessity it was assumed that they could afford to wait patiently until moved by the muse. As late as the 1880s, authorship in America retained many of these genteel associations. Despite the expanded vocational possibilities made possible by the commercial conditions of

professional authorship, the act of writing was most often considered outside the realm of productive labor.

That authorship was conceived as separate from or less than real work was due partly to the growing demarcation of cultural production from the more general kinds of doing and making. As Raymond Williams has shown, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the concept of culture was “often invoked to distinguish works and practices of intellectual and artistic activities, including literature, music, painting, and sculpture.”²³ Cultural and literary historians have demonstrated the ways the realms of “Culture” and intellect were exalted and figured as removed or absent from the practical social realm of most other human functions.²⁴ Paradoxically, literature derived much of its cachet from its “perceived uselessness” in relation to workaday pursuits.²⁵ However, not everyone agreed upon its merits. In fact, for as long as fiction had circulated in America, commentators had condemned it precisely for its lack of utility. Jonathan Edwards, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson were among the notable critics who railed against the social and moral effects of reading fiction.²⁶ Novels and other fictional forms were believed to threaten the established social order by diverting individual citizens’ interests away from their civic duties. Nevertheless, Richard Brodhead has demonstrated that the emergence of authorial professionalism along with a new set of literary institutions (such as publishing houses and magazines) around mid-century reinforced the idea of literature as an elevated and valuable form of expression, building for certain “serious” writers “a greatly augmented stature, as transcendent achievers and national treasures.”²⁷ Indeed, the field of literature and a select number of writers within it gained a remarkable amount of social prestige during the antebellum years.

The prestige attached to literature in the years after the Civil War rarely extended to the actual producers of literary texts: the writers. As Daniel H. Borus has pointed out, although many Americans “continued to pay homage in rhetoric to the glories and worth of literature,” by the end of the century it was widely reproached as unproductive or wasteful.²⁸ The central role of productivity in bourgeois ideology in addition to the growing importance of business endeavors led to a general sense that most writers were socially irrelevant in Gilded Age America. The situation recalls Nathaniel Hawthorne’s lamentation on the diminishing status of antebellum writers in his “Custom House” preface to *The Scarlet Letter* (1850):

It is a good lesson—though it may often be a hard one—for a man who has dreamed of literary fame, and of making himself a rank among the world’s dignitaries by such means, to step aside out of the narrow circle in which his claims are recognized, and to find how utterly devoid of significance, beyond that circle, is all he achieves, and all he aims at²⁹.

Hawthorne’s remarks signal a passing era in which letters and the literary vocation were thought to constitute a more solid moral and spiritual order.³⁰

Perhaps no one felt the impact of this transition as fully as William Dean Howells. In the memoir, *Literary Friends and Acquaintances* (1900), he recalls growing up in rural Ohio at a time when literature and the literary life were regarded highly enough for him to consider authorship “the noblest calling in the world.”³¹ This sense of nobility was reinforced during his formative visit to Boston in 1860, then the literary center of America, where as an aspiring young poet, he met with and was favorably received by Hawthorne, Lowell, Longfellow, Emerson, and other luminaries.³² The experience thrilled Howells and cemented his notion of authorship as a supreme and redeeming pursuit. However, by the time he resigned as editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* in order to

devote himself to novel-writing nearly two decades later, the idea of the writer as a misguided dreamer, out of touch with the pace and quality of daily life had gained cultural currency. The rise of industrial and commercial capitalism created an atmosphere in which literary authorship was viewed as a “deviant” pursuit because of the perceived uselessness relative to the business realm.³³ So long as their endeavors were considered fundamentally different from and unimportant in relation to everyday modes of production, fiction writers could not fit easily into a burgeoning capitalist society.

In addition, the occupational legitimacy of authorship was complicated by the professional reorganization of a number of fields in the years following the Civil War, including medicine, social sciences, law, and higher education. Historian Burton J. Bledstein has demonstrated that the concept of professionalism had a profound impact on middle-class thinking during the period and focused on the idea of providing a valuable service based on a skill.³⁴ Practitioners in these (and other) disciplines were considered experts who had, through a rigorous training process, acquired privileged access to an esoteric but useful body of knowledge and skills. Accredited professionals embraced an ethic of service while a growingly dependent public relied on them for information and assistance.³⁵ According to Bledstein, rather than viewing work as a random series of jobs, projects, or business ventures, individuals in the middle and late nineteenth century’s expanding “culture of professionalism” grew more and more career-minded.³⁶ Committing to and advancing within a career in a sanctioned professional field became the best way to get ahead in America.³⁷ The concept of a career also strengthened the correlation between one’s work and one’s outward identity, self-image, and material

prospects in society.³⁸ As Bledstein aptly suggested, the inevitable questions about one's career prospects were nothing less than questions about one's potential identity.³⁹

Compared to doctors, lawyers, and engineers, imaginative writers held a professionally anomalous role insofar as the social value or the utility of their endeavors was disputed or dismissed outright. In an increasingly utilitarian culture that glorified labor, literary authorship was no longer guaranteed prominent status. The widely granted uselessness of literature (a writer's "product" or "service") along with the conventional belief in creative writing as an amateur pursuit reserved mainly for the well-to-do put several writers in the new and disconcerting position of having to establish for themselves and their pursuits a purposeful social context. Put another way, they were forced to confront the following questions: what is the value of literary work?

This question was of vital concern for Howells, who for much of his life wrestled with personal doubts about the usefulness of his own literary career. He was born the son of a perpetually broke and itinerant newspaper printer, and his father's professional failures forced the teenaged Howells to subordinate his intensifying literary aspirations to long days spent working in various printing shops.⁴⁰ Years later, Howells would describe living a "kind of double life" throughout adolescence and early adulthood, whereby his outward life was consumed with everyday tasks that contributed to his family's survival, while his inward being was directed toward his "literary hopes and labors."⁴¹ In a study of Howells's childhood, Rodney D. Olsen has discussed the extent to which his family's financial situation along with his father's religious convictions sparked in Howells a deep ambivalence towards his literary ambitions.⁴² As his family struggled to secure and

maintain middle-class status, Howells worried that his literary plans were egoistic because they failed to serve his family's urgent material needs.

These feelings were exacerbated by the fact that his father reared him to believe in the Swedenborgian concept of usefulness that equated social utility with moral purpose.⁴³ William Cooper Howells avidly promoted his son's literary interests, but insisted that William Dean's personal success would be inadequate in itself. Impelled by a passion for literature so strong that it induced in him, at times, a kind of delirium, Howells devoted the bulk of his free time to an arduous and self-imposed literary apprenticeship with hopes of one day achieving "overpowering magnificence and undying celebrity."⁴⁴ But his commitment to authorship and his dreams of literary grandeur were tempered by his Swedenborgian conscience, which "required a moral, communal context for the vocation of letters."⁴⁵ Coming of age in the years leading up to the Civil War, Howells was fully aware of the extent to which a career in fields such as abolitionism, law, or politics, would provide clearer chances to serve a greater good. Summing up Howells's dilemma, Olsen noted that, "unless [Howells] believed the literary vocation offered the greatest possible usefulness to others, he could not escape terrible feelings of selfishness."⁴⁶

He reconciled his inner conflict by "consecrating" himself to a vision of literature and novel writing as the transcendent purpose of his life.⁴⁷ In a letter brimming with excitement, Howells reassured his father of his future, saying "I see clear before me a path in literature which no one else has tried, and which I believe I can make most distinctly my own."⁴⁸ Bolstered by a powerful sense of postwar optimism, he plotted what he perceived would be a new kind of writing based on the faithful study of American society. Abiding by a method rooted in the truthful depiction, through fiction,

of the ordinary world of physical experience, he would take as his subject segments of quotidian life and the lives of average Americans. Howells intended to elucidate the nature of humanity in order that people might know each other better and, as a result, improve their relationships. As biographer Everett Carter has made clear, the “whole structure of [Howells’s] belief depended on a real world which was fundamentally moral.”⁴⁹ Although he disdained expressly didactic fiction, he convinced himself of literature’s ability to impart subtle, but powerful, moral and ethical lessons. An expanding literary market and swelling readership gave Howells reasons to hope that he might entertain and influence readers across the nation. Committed to establishing the social utility of his chosen field, and spurred on by dreams of literary greatness, he embarked on a career as a novelist beginning in the 1870s.

Notwithstanding the warm reception of his early novels, Howells was soon overcome by fears about the value of his literary output. After nearly a decade of writing fiction while juggling his position as chief editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, a host of personal and cultural factors triggered a career crisis that rerouted both his professional and personal lives. Among them was his introduction to the Russian novelists Ivan Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy, which amounted to a watershed moment in terms of his aesthetic and ethical thinking. Lynn has shown that by the mid 1880s, having measured his own output against the Russians’ “unremitting seriousness, [their] deep engagement with the moral implications of [their] fiction, [and their] tragic awareness of the disorientation and maladjustment of modern people,” Howells was doubtful about the weight of his own literary output up to that point.⁵⁰ As he would later explain, in the work of those writers life “showed itself to me in different colors...it became more

serious, more awful” and revealed “mystical responsibilities I had not known before.”⁵¹ His own work, when compared to the scope of Turgenev and Tolstoy, felt trivial and woefully misguided. Novels such as *Their Wedding Journey* (1872) and *A Chance Acquaintance* (1873) had attended mostly to the picturesque realities of genteel life at the exclusion of the “awful,” commonplace ones. For the most part, Howells had eschewed any meaningful exploration of serious social problems or ethical issues in favor of comedic treatments of middle-class manners and courtship rituals. As Cady pointed out, his talent as a “delightful and innocuous” observer of polite society had established for Howells a favorable reputation as an “idyllist.”⁵²

While his fiction may have reflected a hopeful, idyllic worldview during the 1870s, recent scholarship affirms that the 1880s found Howells undergoing a “protracted and complex change of outlook and values.”⁵³ Like many members of his generation, his longstanding assurance in the inevitable triumph of Emersonian individualism and the progressive course of American civilization was eroded by the economic strife and social upheavals of the Gilded Age. Dismayed by what he called the “grotesque confusion” caused by industrial capitalism, Howells worried that the inherently righteous and coherent world which he felt he had grown up in—and had staked his career as a novelist on— was fast disappearing.⁵⁴

Howells’s transition from an optimistic believer to an agonized doubter is clear in another letter, this one written to his father in the summer of 1884. Shortly after buying a new house on one of Boston’s most venerable streets, he describes living in it alone while most of his affluent neighbors are away on vacation:

There is not only nobody else in the house, but nobody else I know sleeps in town. Altogether the effect is queer. There are miles of empty houses all round me. And how unequally things are divided in this world. While these beautiful, airy, wholesome houses are uninhabited, thousands upon thousands of poor creatures are stifling in wretched barracks in the city here, whole families in one room. I wonder that men are so patient with society as they are.⁵⁵

Here Howells is clearly troubled by his evolving social conscience. For years, he had been content with the ability of American institutions to provide a reasonably comfortable, “good” life for anyone willing to work for one. However, as indicated above, that complaisance was undermined by an uneasy awareness of the escalating economic and social inequities around him. James P. Simpson has made the excellent point that the last line perhaps marks Howells’s own self-censure for being “so patient with society” for so many years.⁵⁶ Correspondences throughout the period support this interpretation and reveal Howells nervously meditating on his country’s state of affairs, including the disparity between rich and poor, the warring between capital and labor, and the nefarious impact of capitalism on human relations. Although the exact occasion or date of his transformation is impossible to pinpoint, his faith in society and human virtue appears to have eroded by the time he wrote this letter.

At this point Howells found himself at a crossroads in his career as a novelist. Along with his sharp social conscience arose the conviction that any writer committed to telling the truth about American life would have to address the country’s myriad problems. As it were, he knew that his reputation as a novelist was tied to his pleasant depiction of life’s “smiling aspects.” In spite of his steadily rising popularity and financial prosperity throughout the 1880s, Howells struggled to reconcile the fact that his literary work had not achieved the kind of social impact he originally hoped for. He

could not escape the sense that his work had little practical bearing, a point dramatized in a letter to his father in which he self-identified as a theoretical socialist and a practical aristocrat.⁵⁷ Indeed, the wealth and luxurious lifestyle afforded by his writing also provoked the awkward recognition of and painful guilt over the gap between his own comfortable life and the lives of those less fortunate. Worried about social injustice and painfully aware of his privileged circumstances, Howells felt, more than ever, the need to recommit to socially useful work. Although he remained convinced that authorship was his rightful calling, his literary performance and reputation compelled him to reexamine and justify his reasons for being a writer. Even with the appearance of socially minded novels such as *A Modern Instance* (1881) and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), Howells remained uncertain about the import of his literary work.

Adding to this uncertainty was his acute sense that literature in the later nineteenth-century had lost much of its social allure. Entrenched for nearly four decades (as an editor, critic, and novelist) at the heart of the literary establishment, Howells was enormously influential in terms of shaping, and also gauging, the literary tastes of middle-class Americans. His memoirs are littered with nostalgic references to the pre-Civil War cultural scene, an era in which “all talents had more or less a literary coloring, and the greatest talents were literary.”⁵⁸ These moments underscore the important point that Howells was drawn toward and initiated into the field of literature when it was still widely revered. Growing up, he was encouraged in and admired for his literary ambitions; as a young man, he could take for granted that friends, neighbors, and co-workers would be eager to talk about the most recent books and popular authors. And as assistant editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* immediately after the war, he saw firsthand the

tremendous public influence of and veneration for writers such as Emerson and Lowell. For Howells, the decision to pursue a literary career was in tied to the promise of prestige that came along with it.

But his own literary success was tempered by the painful realization that literature had lost a great deal of its cultural cachet. Especially troubling was his perception of a kind of widening “cultural split” during the postbellum years by which the field of letters was often considered a diversionary realm suitable mainly for women.⁵⁹ Howells’s editorial experience had brought home to him the fact that growing numbers of male readers considered fiction unrelated to the course of everyday life and, accordingly, often preferred articles on social, political, and economic issues rather than literary fare. While long aware of and generally pleased by the fact that women comprised his core audience, Howells worried about the decline in the number of men interested in fiction, as it seemed to suggest the writer’s diminishing cultural authority, or, in Lynn’s words, it reinforced the idea that the man of letters “no longer counted for much in the power centers of American life.”⁶⁰

At the heart of the matter were questions of utility. By the time Howells established himself as the unofficial leader of American letters, literary pursuits were often thought to be socially suspect in comparison to other professional activities because they lacked, as he put it, a “positive and obvious necessity.”⁶¹ Although his own professional status was unassailable by the end of century, Howells felt strongly that public misgivings about the meaning and purpose of literature threatened the professional integrity of American letters. This was an unexpected and traumatic development for a man who had since his youth taken for granted that a career in literature was a venerable

one. Even more devastating, though, was the dilemma he found himself in by the early 1880s: namely, trying to perform a useful social office in a field largely defined by its detachment from the material world. He held himself at once responsible for the vitality of the field and for making comprehensible to the public the merits of literature and, by extension, the social value of literary authorship. Howells would spend the remainder of his life making a case for literature's usefulness.

The uncertainty over his career culminated during the same period in which he fully formed and expressed his famous aesthetic principles. Americanist literary scholars have long considered Howells the central definer and practitioner of American realism in the late nineteenth century.⁶² Rejecting the exaggerated stories and outlandish characters of romantic fiction, he advocated instead a "simple, natural, and honest" writing style rooted in verisimilitude, the goal of which was to "mimetically represent all levels of society and all manners of social issues."⁶³ During these years, his novels and especially his editorial work were incredibly influential in steering the course of American fiction. Consequently, an enormous body of scholarship has commented on his aesthetic thinking and practice. Most of it, though, has focused predominately on the "how" of Howellsian aesthetics at the expense of the "why." In other words, much has already been said about what Howells's brand of fiction looks like; however, not so generally known are the factors that inspired his aesthetic theories. As Geordie Hamilton pointed out recently, critics who have attempted such explanations usually view Howells's aesthetic program in relation to, or, as a direct result of, his growing social and political unrest.⁶⁴ But overlooked by generations of scholars is the primary connection between his literary aesthetics and his aforementioned vocational crisis.

My position is that any attempt to understand the evolution of his literary aesthetics must first take into account the depth of Howells's career-related anxieties. By the time he agreed to write the Editor's Study column for *Harper's Monthly* in the fall of 1885, he "found it impossible to satisfactorily define the nature of his vocation, or to establish securely his concept of himself as an American man of letters."⁶⁵ The column appeared in monthly installments from January 1886 through March 1892. *Harper's* permitted Howells to treat the column as an open forum for his literary and political agendas. From the Editor's Study, which most often took the form of a letter to or an invented dialogue with readers, he reviewed newly published books by American as well as European writers, discussed issues of literary and political importance, and most notably, filled the columns with an evolving and, at times, confrontational theory of literary realism. Viewed collectively, the ES represents not only his own most sustained and explicit argument for literary realism, but also one the most comprehensive aesthetic treatises ever written in American letters. Not surprisingly, critical accounts of the ES have focused overwhelmingly on its status as a realist polemic.

The following section redirects our attention to the fundamental ways in which the ES is a meditation on the nature of the literary vocation, a space in which Howells voiced anxieties about the writer's occupational standing and social role in America. Such anxieties underpin his aesthetic argument and act as a governing impulse not only for the ES but also for much of his writing during the 1880s and 1890s, widely considered the most pivotal period of his career. My contention is that these concerns, which were both personal and public, had a far greater impact on the development of Howellsian aesthetics than we have acknowledged previously. Recent scholarship holds

that his conception of literature was as a “socially and ethically purposive activity,” and notes that his central aesthetic principle “derive[s] not from what literature is, in and of itself, but rather from what literature does.”⁶⁶ In other words, Howells conceived of literature in terms of work, specifically in terms of its positive impact on the lives of individual Americans and in society at large. My rereading of the ES will make clearer exactly *why* Howells reformulated literature along instrumental lines by uncovering and exploring in greater detail the nature of his vocational concerns and how those concerns inform the aesthetic theory. Also, I demonstrate the extent to which Howells’s brand of realism was integral to his larger project: to revalorize the vocation of literary authorship and elevate the social status of literary authors. At the heart of this strategy of revalorization was an argument about the usefulness of literary authors and texts.

The Aesthetics of Vocational Anxiety:

The ES is everywhere preoccupied with the perceived gulf separating the literary realm from the everyday world. Tellingly, Howells opens the inaugural January 1886 column with a physical depiction of an idealized study that dramatizes this distinction. Admitting that the dark, stifling office where he actually performs his editorial duties is not at all what readers might expect, Howells plays up to their expectations, inviting them to imagine an environment more suitable for a venerable man of letters. He describes in evocative detail a lavish room adorned by “heavy rugs,” a “richly carved mahogany table,” and walls hung with “the costliest masterpieces.”⁶⁷ This is a luxurious and serene space, one designated exclusively for literary and other “cultivated pursuits.”⁶⁸

Moreover, this imagined study offers an escape as it is cloistered away from—literally figured far above—the outside world. Its “vast windows of flawless plate” are said to offer occupants a panoramic view of an expanse stretching from the Hudson River all the way to the Golden Gate Bridge.⁶⁹

Stationed within this study is a fictional editor, “quite another character” compared to Howells, one obviously modeled after the conventional genteel man of letters.⁷⁰ The imaginary editor bears little resemblance to the real editor, whose day-to-day editorial routine involved a frenetic cycle of arduous tasks, including editing manuscripts, examining proofs, and reviewing books. For the unreal editor, literary pursuits are apparently a matter of leisure. Spending his idle time pouring over the “best of the old literatures,” there is evidence to suggest that he faces any of the aforementioned editorial responsibilities.⁷¹ Isolated from the world outside his window, the imaginary editor appears unconcerned about making a living; in fact, he does virtually nothing other than inhabit the room like an “airy, elusive abstraction.”⁷² Howells’s brief invocation of this unreal editor and the imaginary study underscores the frequent distinctions made between literature and life in late nineteenth-century America.

Appearing at various turns frustrated, confused, and resigned, Howells spotlighted in subsequent issues the growing lack of interest in late nineteenth-century America in all things literary, a trend he attributed to this ingrained boundary between literature and life. Commenting incisively on the problem, he granted that most people view literature as unrelated to their everyday lives. Reading fiction, he pointed out, was usually thought of as little more than “an amusement, a distraction, a decoration” something to be “taken up for a moment, an hour, a day, and then wholly dropped out of sight, out of mind, out of

life.”⁷³ Elsewhere, he noted that it was the notion of literature as “something apart from life, superfinely aloof, which makes it really unimportant to the great mass of mankind.”⁷⁴ While such distinctions are pointed out in nearly every installment of the *ES*, the April 1887 column takes up the issue with notable urgency. In it, Howells features a handful of letters submitted by readers of the magazine who dispute his long-running claims about fiction’s positive impact on society. These readers point out that the vast majority of popular fiction is unconnected to the “serious business of life” as well as corruptive of moral and civic virtues.⁷⁵ One such writer claims that novel reading leads invariably to “high-strung and supersensitive ideas of life,” and insists that literature creates in American citizens an aversion to “plain industry and plodding perseverance.”⁷⁶

In characteristic fashion, Howells agreed forthrightly, seizing the chance to condemn romantic fiction, which he held responsible for such views. He condemned the popular romances of the day of featuring idealized subject matter and titillating readers at the expense of veracity. This type of fiction, as he saw it, leaves readers with nothing but the “emptiest dissipation,” as it begets “idle lies about human nature and the social fabric” and gives rise to a “distorted and misleading” vision of life.⁷⁷ Moreover, he felt that the widely accepted notion that fiction is “false in its portrayal of causes and effects” which “makes literary art contemptible even to those whom it amuses.”⁷⁸ By this logic, fiction is either not taken seriously or is dismissed altogether by the general public because it is disconnected from the ordinary world.

Yet it has been widely overlooked that Howells’s recurrent critiques of romanticism and of fictionality itself grew out of interrelated concerns about the value of

writing *as work* and the occupational validity of literary authorship. In his view, the perceived gap between literature and life was the main reason for the uncertainty and skepticism surrounding both of these issues in the later nineteenth century. The apparent disconnect casted doubts about the writer's claims to professional legitimacy and called into question the nature and merits of literary work. If literature had little bearing in or on the real world, could not the same be said about the writer? After all, many Americans wondered, what kinds of tangible services or functions did a novelist or poet actually provide for readers? Such questions consumed Howells throughout the study and in much of his writing during this period. Take, for instance, the following comment which appears later in the same column. Conceding the common view of literature as separate from and unimportant to society at large, he issues this clarion call to his fellow writers:

Refuse it as we may, it is still the feeling of the vast majority of people for whom life is earnest, and who find only a distorted and misleading likeness of it in our books. We may fold ourselves in our scholars' gowns, and close up the doors of our studies, and affect to despise this rude voice; but we cannot shut it out. It comes to us from wherever men are at work, from wherever they are truly living, and accuses us of unfaithfulness, of triviality, of mere stage-play; and none of us can escape the conviction except he prove himself worthy of his time...⁷⁹

The binary he establishes between writers and workers actually denigrates the literary realm while it simultaneously celebrates the ordinary world of work. For his part, Howells rejects the notion that literary pursuits are nobler than workaday ones, as demonstrated by the contemptuous, mocking allusion to writers who would don ostentatious robes and hole themselves up in their studies presumably far, far away from the "vast majority of people."

In setting apart writers from “real” workers the passage reinforces the prevailing notion that literary activities fall short of and, as a result, are less important in relation to authentic modes of labor. The passage also suggests that Gilded Age writers were somehow excluded from the vital center of productive society, which although it is vaguely defined here, is hailed as a domain where (“real”) men are unquestionably “at work” and thus “truly living.” Most importantly, the passage underscores Howells’s tendency to extol the world of work and those who labor in it; it marks one of several instances (in the Study and elsewhere) in which he allies writers and the writing process to this authentic realm of work, a point we will return to later. For now, my main objective is to draw attention to Howells’s awareness of and restlessness over the writer’s perceived uselessness. As the passage makes clear, Howells believed that in order to reverse the prevailing idea that literature has little practical value in society at large writers must forcefully assert their own purpose. Such an assertion of purpose was embedded in his aesthetic thinking and practice.

The literary aesthetic advanced in the ES was an essential strategy in his fight to revalorize the vocation of authorship and the cultural status of literary authors. Based on the principle of verisimilitude, Howellsian realism was at once inspired by and designed to overturn popular distinctions between literature and life by “collapsing the literary sphere back into the sphere of social reality,” rendering the boundary between fiction and life “so permeable as to yield an absolute contiguity of art and life.”⁸⁰ Perusing the ES, one notices in its aesthetic discussions the recurrence of words such as “truth,” “verity,” “fidelity,” “actual,” and “real.” Indeed, Howells maintained that a work of fiction should offer a “faithful, almost photographic delineation of actual life,” and famously defined

realism as “nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material.”⁸¹ He implored writers to deal with subject matter that ordinary readers could recognize and relate to. Howells also argued that fiction should be judged, finally, on whether or not it is “true to the motives, the impulses, [and] the principles that shape the life of actual men and women.”⁸² Several critics have drawn attention to the limitations and contradictions inherent in Howells’s aesthetic program insofar as it posed a radical opposition between literary style, which he referred to as “literosity,” and human truths.⁸³ In short, Howells sought to transcend representation altogether. Throughout the ES, he cautioned against the use of elaborate forms and grandiose language, claiming that these things merely drew attention to the artificiality of fiction and thus highlighted its distinctness from real life. The best fiction, he argued, adheres to a kind of anti-style in the sense that it would eschew formal literary conventions and language.

With its rejection of style and emphasis on empirical reality, Howellsian aesthetics challenged the notion of the writer as an artist in the traditional sense. As Michael Davitt Bell has observed, in addition to attacking the conventional notions of “art” and the “artistic,” Howells went to great lengths in the ES (and elsewhere as we shall see later) to refigure the writer as “anything *but* an artist.”⁸⁴ His review of Ulysses S. Grant’s autobiography, which appeared in the August 1886 column, makes this clear. In a glowing account of the book, Howells praises its absence of what he refers to as a “literary consciousness,” commending Grant by explaining, “[his] one end and aim is to get the facts out in words.”⁸⁵ He does not cast about for phrases, but takes the word, whatever it is, that will best give his meaning,” and Howells also notes that “there is not a moment wasted in preening and prettifying, after the fashion of literary men; there is no

thought of style.”⁸⁶ Howells recommends Grant’s “plebian” prose as a model for fiction writers.⁸⁷ The review illustrates Howells’s investment in a fiction derived from the straightforward transmission of tangible experiences (“the facts”), as well as his efforts to denigrate and suppress conventional literary style. To the extent that the artist’s work depends, to some degree, on his or her imaginative impressions and inventive modes of representation, the Howellsian writer appears not as an artist as much as a kind of scientific or historical observer.

The review epitomizes Howell’s broader efforts to redefine the role of literature and literary aesthetic excellence in terms of the mimetic, unmediated expression of life. It is one of many instances in which he drew comparisons between fiction writers and scientists as well as chroniclers of history. He maintained that literary authors, like scientists, should operate within a prescribed (realist) methodology, striving for empirical accuracy and precision in their work. And in a column from the same year, Howells looked forward to a future in which the gap between fiction and reality would narrow to the point where the novelist would not “add anything new to reality” and would thus become a kind of historian.⁸⁸ As he imagined it, the novel would eventually provide a definitive historical record. For Howells, artistic merit depended more on the experiential observations of the artist rather than his or her inventive (creative) powers.

Much has already been said about the extent to which Howellsian Realism was predicated on an appreciation of the commonplace, as well as a commitment to inclusive literary representation. Criticizing fiction of the past for nurturing a fascination with “the bizarre, the heroic, [and] the distinguished,” Howells, like his contemporary Walt Whitman, located the beauty and grandeur of America in the ordinary; he urged writers

and other artists to take as their subject the “everyday world,” arguing that the best art would necessarily “catch the charm of its work-worn, care-worn, brave, kindly face.”⁸⁹ Furthermore, throughout the ES he insisted that literature must depict all kinds of people— it must no longer privilege aristocrats, nobles, and other extraordinary characters at the exclusion of the “mass of men.”⁹⁰ He felt that the most popular fiction had for too long “consent[ed] to know [common people] only in some conventionalized and artificial guise.”⁹¹ Again and again he advocated for a more democratic literature, one that “wishe[d] to know and tell the truth” and “[did] not care to paint the marvelous and impossible for the vulgar many, or to sentimentalize and falsify for the vulgar few.”⁹² Notwithstanding his fears of the Gilded Age’s intensifying social class divisions and inequities, Howells always celebrated the spirit of American democracy and insisted that a democratic nation deserved and demanded democratic art.

The democratic impulse at the heart of his aesthetic program was meant to subvert the longstanding notion of the writer as a cloistered aristocrat unrelated to or simply unconcerned with society at large. We have already seen that since its inception in America, a model of genteel amateurism that fostered the notion that writers were, more often than not, wealthy elites with access to the leisure time necessary to avoid the trials of the workaday world had defined literary authorship. Despite the mid-nineteenth century emergence of authorship as a viable occupational field, the sphere of artistic (cultural) production remained largely demarcated from the sphere of material production by the turn of the century. As a result, most postbellum Americans considered literary artists outside the realm of necessity and therefore deviant in relation to those who held culturally authorized occupations, or who were known to engage in hard, “honest” work.

Claudia Stokes pointed out recently that Howells was sensitive to the “belief in authorship as an aristocratic prerogative” and vexed by the “patrician pretensions of fellow writers.”⁹³ It was precisely the popular distinction between the world of art, a realm of ideas and abstraction, and the world of work, a realm of action and materiality, that he found so hard to reconcile. For instance, a letter written to Edward Everett Hale in 1888 included an almost frantic moment in which Howells wondered “Words, words, words! How to make them, deeds...with me they only breed more words.”⁹⁴ The point here is that his commitment to a “commonplace” aesthetic and to the widening (or democratization) of literary representation arose from an intense wish to divorce the literary vocation from its socially remote, elite origins. Put another way, by advocating a literary aesthetic that required writers to look closely at the commonplace world—the realm of productive pursuits—Howells tried to reposition them squarely within that world.

More importantly, this integration reflected Howells’s primary goal, which was to establish the social utility of literary authors and the literary field in general. Doing so would restore the status and cultural influence of literary authors and the literary field in general. Underlying Howellsian aesthetics, as I have suggested, is a plea for the usefulness of literature—an argument about the essential services performed by literary authors and provided, in the form of literary texts, to readers. Motivated by public charges of elitism and irrelevancy, as well as a deeply embedded, life-long personal desire to perform a socially impactful office, Howells sought to restore the vocation of authorship by re-grounding it as a socially and morally purposive activity. Central to his

project of authorial revalorization was the remaking of the writer as a valid professional dutifully engaged in a unique program of morally, socially, and civically valuable work.

The concept of literary authorship as a socially minded form of work rested on a utilitarian view of art. As Petrie points out, it required literary artists and the public at large to reconsider the role and function of literature “not as mere entertainment, nor as exercises in harmless escapism or personal moral idealism, nor as self-validating aesthetic activity” but rather “as a socially and ethically purposive communication” between the writer and American citizens.⁹⁵ Howells rejected outright the notion of art for art’s sake; he argued that “literary merit,” by which he basically meant style, was always the “least merit” of a book.⁹⁶ Instead, he forged an aesthetic that measured artistic success by the edification, or the ethical and moral work, fiction could do in terms of shaping the public discourse about the era’s massive social, political, and material changes as well as in terms of its ability to positively influence the lives of individual Americans.

The absolute necessity for a morally and ethically purposeful literary art is one of the dominant themes of the ES and of many of Howells’s most important contemporaneous writings and public speeches. In the opening column of the Study, for example, he famously insisted that literary art must possess a “conscience and purpose”; elsewhere he claimed that “[a]ll arts decay when they begin to exist for themselves alone, or merely for the pleasure they can give, since truth beyond and beside them must be their incentive.”⁹⁷ And in a notable speech, Howells wondered if fiction “shall the novel have no purpose? Shall it not try to do good? Shall...[it]...do nothing to better men and uplift them? Shall it only a muse them” before exclaiming “No, and a thousand times,

no!”⁹⁸ Such a utility-driven model of literature enabled him to revalue literary authorship as a social office of decisive importance.

At its core, Howellsian realism was a matter of vision: it demanded that the writer be a perspicacious observer and faithful reporter of American life. A glance at the existing scholarship on Howells reveals that the scope of his artistic social vision has been a divisive issue for over a century. Until fairly recently, he had been roundly condemned for what many critics considered an impermissible shortsightedness with regard to his treatment of late nineteenth-century American society. It was said that he focused too narrowly on comfortable members of polite society in a superficial and politically conservative way. In a famous rebuke, Frank Norris derided Howellsian fiction for featuring “well-behaved,” “bourgeois” characters embroiled in petty reception room dramas and minor “teacup” tragedies.⁹⁹ Norris’s position reflects the popular notion that Howells turned a blind eye to the era’s social and political problems and that tried to maintain the status quo. However, a number of recent scholars have maintained that Howells’s brand of realism showed great depth in terms of its attention to the profound social turbulence of the late nineteenth century. These scholars assert that social change was in fact at the heart of Howellsian narrative structure. Rather than enter this ongoing debate, I want to reroute our focus to Howells’s intentions, that is, to his blueprint for literary authors and the vocation of authorship as spelled out in the ES.

Howells conceived the services provided—or the work performed—by literary authors as a corrective to the momentous social changes of the period. The scope of the economic, industrial, and political transformations of the Gilded Age and their impact on those who lived through them has been well documented by historians and cultural

commentators. America's evolution in the years following the Civil War from a "mostly agricultural, rural, isolated, localized, and traditional society to one that was increasingly industrialized, urban, integrated, national, and modern" led to what Alan Trachtenberg has called a "period of trauma," both psychological and spiritual in nature, caused by alterations "so swift and thorough that many Americans seemed unable to fathom the extent of the upheaval."¹⁰⁰ In short, the world no longer appeared nor was it experienced as it had been only a generation or two earlier. Many people struggled to fathom and fit into a social order that felt dangerously in flux and more and more incoherent. As Jackson Lears has shown, the advent of modern culture in all its dimensions (industrial, technological, economic, material, etc) produced a far-reaching sense that life had quite suddenly become "curiously unreal."¹⁰¹

Howells's most famous literary character, Silas Lapham, symbolizes these feelings of social dislocation and the unreality of modern existence. A Vermont-bred paint manufacturer, Lapham is unable to comprehend and adapt to the pace and mores of contemporary Boston. In the opening scene of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), Lapham describes to a reporter in a newspaper interview the mentally jarring experience of returning home from the Civil War to find life inescapably and inscrutably different: "I found that I had got back to another world. The day of small things was past, and I don't suppose it will ever come again in this country."¹⁰² Lapham's wistful evocation of a simpler, idealized past intimates a deeply felt national apprehension over the course and very nature of post-war society. Many Americans who feared that such rapid and dramatic changes signaled the descent of civilization into chaos shared Lapham's concerns.

Howells insisted that literary authors were well positioned to mitigate the collective unease and confusion caused by the era's social upheavals. More precisely, he entrusted to them the tasks of cultural interpretation and moral stewardship. As he theorized it, the vocation of authorship hinged on a penetrating social vision, an expert skill acquired after and honed by years of social inspection and personal introspection; such critical vision was the cornerstone upon which Howellsian realism was built. A professional asset, it legitimated the social utility of the literary vocation, as it enabled the writer to perform the services of cultural interpretation and moral stewardship. Amy Kaplan's influential reading of American literary realism offers a helpful frame for understanding both the contours of and the motivations behind these tasks. Kaplan has argued persuasively that the genre reflected the shared commitment of a diverse group of writers who sought to capture in narrative form the unstable modern world in hopes of elucidating and coming to terms with it. Thus realism served as a strategy for "imagining and managing" social disturbances.¹⁰³

By the mid-1880s, Howells thought about fiction along the same lines; he saw it as a vehicle through which the literary author could draw attention to urgent social problems. But he believed that mimetic representation was only one part of the writer's responsibility. The other part entailed an interpretation (or mediation) of such problems and a critical examination of society in general. In a stock lecture delivered to audiences across the East and Midwest in 1899, Howells outlined the writer's objective when he proclaimed that "the business of the [writer] is to make you understand the real world through [a] faithful effigy of it; or...to arrange a perspective for you with everything in its proper relation and proportion to everything else."¹⁰⁴ These remarks highlight the

Howellsian writer's status as a social visionary in the sense of being able to see and render visible what may not be readily visible for others. The emphasis on a well-ordered, well-proportioned fictive world calls to mind Kaplan's claim that realism attempted to combat the apparent disorder of modern life by reconstructing a unified social order.¹⁰⁵

For Howells, the unique service of authorship involved a similar kind of reconstruction, or restoration. Scholars have pointed out that his own thinking about the real world was governed by a belief in an essentially moral universe and in an underlying human harmony or "solidarity" as he referred to it. Although Gilded Age American society was in fact sharply divided along any number of lines (social-class, racial, gendered, ethnic, political, to name but a few), Howells maintained that social accord and human solidarity were the natural order of things. And he asserted that the writer was uniquely suited to reaffirm such a coherent, integrated vision of American life. Doing so required the writer to plumb the apparent divisions and uncertainty of modern life. Under this model of literary authorship, the writer could combat the pervasive cultural and personal disorientation of the era by creating an alternative (fictive) reality: a socially coherent, virtuous world in which the basic interconnectedness, or what he referred to as "the unity of men," and goodwill of humanity is revealed.¹⁰⁶ According to Howells, literature written in this vein "could speak...frankly... brotherly... [and] helpfully" to Americans who were struggling to reconcile personal and social turbulence.¹⁰⁷

In these ways Howells reframed literary authorship as a useful form of moral stewardship. By revealing the underlying morality of the universe, the Howellsian writer reinforced for individual readers the importance and the reward of benevolence while

also imparting subtle yet forceful lessons about the inevitable consequences of immoral (greedy, corrupt, egoistic) behavior. On a larger scale, by accurately depicting a broad assortment of persons and social groups—especially those once considered unfit as subjects for artistic treatment—the writer’s work could convey the idea of human complicity, the notion, as Howells put it, that “Men are more alike than unlike one other.”¹⁰⁸ Ever mindful of the “risk of over-moralizing,” however, Howells insisted that such moral and social guidance must occur subtly and indirectly; heavy-handedness and overt didacticism were to be avoided at all costs. As he saw it, literary texts could “make [people] know one another better, that they may be humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity.”¹⁰⁹ As literary scholar William Alexander described it, Howells’s aesthetic program was intended to make readers “more respectful, kindly, compassionate, and humane, more united with others in common brotherhood.”¹¹⁰ Howells wrote enthusiastically about fiction’s ability to “stir in [individuals] the wish to be a little truer” as well as its potential to contribute to a “better and kinder” society.¹¹¹ And he sought to convert in the collective mind of the American public the act of fiction reading from an idle diversion to a form of work, so that taking up a novel or a short story would be seen as a morally and socially edifying activity, an exercise in character-building. Reestablishing the usefulness of literary texts by foregrounding them as vehicles for personal as well as social improvement was a major component in his efforts to re-exalt the status of literature and literary authors. Such a strategy created a social justification for writers who were operating within the newly professionalized literary field. However, regardless of the perceived utility of literary texts, the idea of literary authorship as an avocational pursuit and the notion of the writer as a kind of aristocratic

idler persisted well into the later nineteenth century. As we will see in the following section, Howells's second key strategy responded to these problems and involved the reshaping of popular perceptions about the nature of literary production (the act of writing) and the status of literary producers (authors).

“Merely a Working Man”: The Work of Writing and the Laboring Writer:

Our well-to-do classes are at present engaged in keeping their eyes shut to the facts of toil... [a]s for the people who are still sunk in the life of toil...they know that in a nation which honors toil, the toiler is socially nothing, and that he is going from bad to worse quite as if the body politic had no interest in him.

—W.D Howells, ES November 1891¹¹²

This nation professes to honor labor—there never was a greater farce.

—W.D. Howells, from “The Writer and the Rest of the World” (interview) (1894)¹¹³

...the author is, in the last analysis, merely a working-man...I wish I could make all my fellow-artists realize that economically they are the same as mechanics, farmers, [and] day laborers. It ought to be our glory that we produce something, that we bring into the world something that was not choately there before; that we fashion or shape something anew; and we ought to feel the tie that binds us to all the toilers of the shop and field, not as a galling chain, but as a mystic bond also uniting us to Him who works hitherto and evermore.

—W.D. Howells, from “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business” (1893, 1902)¹¹⁴

Appearing in his seminal essay “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” the final passage above dramatizes the second strategy Howells employed in order to re-extol the vocation of authorship: namely, he reframed the writing process as a physically rigorous form of labor and redefined the professional writer as a species of worker. The passage typifies his efforts to overturn the popular notions of letters as a realm that existed outside the workaday world and the writer as a gentile idler. Refiguring (albeit

rhetorically) authorial professionalization as a *downward*—rather than an upward—shift in social standing, Howells emphasized the writer’s position as a skilled producer akin to various members of the working class. Such a connection would have struck most Gilded Age Americans as unusual and perhaps misguided due to inveterate distinctions between the natures of, and relations between, the mind and body that defined mental and manual forms of work in opposition to one another. While the mental-manual work dichotomy was inherently imprecise (either form of work necessarily involves the other) and increasingly unstable during the years following the Civil War, it helped preserve boundaries between thinking and doing and between “brain” workers and “manual” workers that tempered how the nature of work in general was understood.¹¹⁵

Despite the contemporaneous emergence of other white-collar professions whose was perceived as mentally oriented, literary labor remained, to a large degree, culturally unintelligible even after the full-fledged professionalization of letters. The problem of literary labor was a problem of visibility. Writers were generally thought to ply within an immaterial world of ideas as opposed to the concrete world of things. And because the act of writing did not inscribe or engage the body as noticeably as most modes of manual labor during the era, the writer’s methods of work along with the products of his or her intellectual labor were often invisible and difficult to measure. Put simply, writing did not look like real work. Howells stands as a precursor to a generation of subsequent writers, including Jack London, the featured writer of my third chapter, who were preoccupied with articulating the mechanics of authorship.

His strategy of establishing solidarity between literary artists and workers relied upon the entrenched national mythologies of work and the work ethic. It took for granted

that, as he put it in the ES, “the American life *is* the life of toil,” and, consequently, that the necessity and the merits of work would be recognized in the culture at large. As we have seen, Howells upheld a strong personal belief in the dignity and virtues of hard, honest work. In fact, the passage above only hints at the extent to which he glorified labor and those who earned their livelihood from their own exertions. Both his fiction and non-fiction writings contain countless tributes to labor similar to the one above; in addition, one finds in his private letters to friends and family recurrent pangs of remorse over the fact that his position in letters left him unaccustomed to any sort of “bodily labor.”¹¹⁶ “The writer and every other brain-worker ought to have the chance to work with his hands as well as with his head...supposing we all did a little of that sort of work each day...how much better off we all should be” he told an interviewer in 1894.¹¹⁷

However, as the two preceding quotes above make clear, Howells recognized the comprehensive erosion of faith in the mythologies of work that had structured American life since its inception and that had seemed unassailable just years earlier. As labor historians have made clear, the rapidly changing (often deteriorating) conditions of industrial and other modes of labor—the mechanization, routinization, and deskilling of any number of work processes—and the growing economic disparity between working-class people and affluent, upper-class citizens meant that cultural ideas about and material realities of work also changed: for many Americans, going to work no longer provided a sense of dignity or redemptive power. By the turn of the century, work was being transformed in many cases into a kind of subjugation.

It is important to note that Howells romanticized manual modes of work and blue-collar workers during a historical moment in which American labor was being called into

question and denigrated as never before. In a discussion of national reading habits in the ES, he anticipated one of Thorstein Veblen's central arguments in *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) (a book Howells favorably reviewed) when he noted that most turn-of-the-century Americans had grown disillusioned by work and were in fact seeking to "escape the life and toil," which had once been accepted and often admired.¹¹⁸ According to Howells, most aspiring middle-class Americans—whom he mockingly condemned in this instance for "trying to be ladies and gentleman of elegant leisure as fast as they can"—were weary of the hopeless circumstances of most workers, and preferred instead to read about the lives of "noblemen" and "millionaires."¹¹⁹ In his own words, "if our writers were to begin telling us on any extended scale of how mill hands, or miners, or farmers, or iron-puddlers really live" the public would "soon let them know that [they] did not care to meet such vulgar and commonplace people."¹²⁰ Clearly, he understood the complicated, often contradictory ways in which work was being reconceived during the period, acknowledging "there is something in the very reverence we have for it that renders the notion of it repulsive to us."¹²¹ The obvious question, then, is *why* in an attempt to revalorize the status of literary authorship would he align writers to manual workers considering the nation's growing revulsion with regard to work?

The remaining portion of this chapter will take up this question. In addition, it will outline Howells's compulsive efforts to reconstruct literary authorship as a demanding form of labor as well as his campaign, waged in a variety of fiction and non-fiction writings, public speeches, and interviews around the turn of the century, to make the nature of literary labor conspicuous to the public. Because the assertion that writers are "merely" workers ignores important differences between the conditions of late

nineteenth-century literary labor compared to various modes of manual work during the period, and because it tends to downplay the social and economic differences between most professional writers (Howells included) and laborers, the link between writing and laboring (and writers and workers) must be understood ideologically.¹²²

As such, I will explore the extent to which the writer as laborer concept concealed Howells's fears about the dis-individuating effects of the new literary marketplace on the writer's work, and, more generally, his uncertainty about the rightful position of literary artists in capitalist society. One of my overarching goals of this chapter and my dissertation is to extend the critical discussion on the impact of the writing-as-labor ideology by highlighting its wide-ranging, structuring impact across the late nineteenth and early-twentieth century literary fields.

Howells rejected the popular notion of literary production as a result of genius or metaphysical inspiration, re-inscribing instead a vision of literary authorship as a form of strenuous, systemic labor available to anyone with some talent and a strong work ethic. While earlier authors such as Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville did not deny that writing required effort, they understood and explained their creation in terms of inspiration and indwelling artistic prowess, or genius. As Borus has noted, what mattered most to these and other antebellum authors was not the physical process of or the work of writing itself, but the writer's special, "quasi-divine" insight.¹²³ Influenced by the vestiges of the British aristocratic tradition, they were hesitant to see writing as an activity as ordinary as human labor. Such a view contributed to the prevailing "image of the nonchalant author"; and, as Weinstein has pointed out, it cemented the belief that "writing was not supposed to look like work," but rather it was supposed to appear

“effortless, natural, and easy.”¹²⁴ In many cases, writers opted to gloss over or render invisible the toil inherent in their own writing process.

Breaking from Romantic ideals of authorship, Howells reconstituted the writing process as a mode of work not unlike other everyday pursuits that demanded dedication and persistent exertion. As Claudia Stokes recently noted, he reimaged literary success as “chiefly dependent upon the writer’s own toil,” a point illustrated by an 1886 interview in which he declared that “novel-writing is always labor—hard, unremitting work” before adding that “success, I think, depends on labor!”¹²⁵ As his most recent biographers pointed out, Howells disapproved of the idea of artistic genius because it minimized the role of craftsmanship and hard work, reducing the writer to a freak of nature, rather than a product of his/her own efforts and will.¹²⁶ It is also important to note that his vision of authorship essentially democratized the literary playing field; it discredited the longstanding notion that writers depended upon endowed intellectual and cultural gifts that resulted from elite social status. Such efforts are made clear in his declaration that “there is no genius” but “only the mastery that comes to natural aptitude from the hardest study of any art or science”; he considered the literary field best suited for those willing to “put their whole life into [it] and work, work, work!”¹²⁷

Howells drew a great deal of attention to his own methods of literary production and his status as a literary workman to reinforce the notion of writing as labor. In response to an interviewer’s question about his own writing habits, Howells had this to say: “I don’t believe in inspiration, nor do I wait for the mood...I find it a perfectly practicable thing to sit down at my desk and go to work as regularly as if I were in a mercantile or banking office. More, I think, can be accomplished in this way than is

possible by sporadic effort. I believe in the inspiration of hard work. If the thing is in you, you can work it out by patient and methodical application.”¹²⁸ With these remarks, Howells positioned himself—and, by extension, other literary artists—amongst an army of Gilded Age productive workers for whom consistent effort and technical proficiency mattered more than innate creativity or genius. By spurning the concepts of genius and inspiration, Howells played a pivotal role in the expansion of the late nineteenth-century literary field. The writing-as-work concept directly challenged the commonly held idea of literature as a class-coded pursuit available only to elites who possessed unlimited financial resources and ample free time. It fed the hopes of countless would-be writers who dreamed of making their mark in literature by reinforcing the correlation between hard, honest work and literary success.

The notion of writing as a form of labor and of writers as veritable workers must be understood in relation to Howells’s deepening concerns about the fate of literary artists in capitalist society. In particular, he worried that the forces attendant to the newly commercialized literary marketplace and the modern business of authorship corrupted the output of literary artists and obstructed their rightful status as autonomous workers. Notwithstanding his own status as a shrewdly successful literary businessman, Howells was dismayed by the logic of the literary marketplace, which he believed not only debased works of literary art by reducing them to saleable commodities but also transformed writers into vulgar peddlers. Even at the heights of his own popular and commercial success, he regretted his own position within such a marketplace, and he was skeptical about its viability for and impact upon those countless aspirants who hoped to land literary careers. These concerns animated much of Howells’s writing and thinking

during this period and are enacted perhaps nowhere as explicitly as in the aforementioned and well-known essay “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” which is one of the era’s most incisive explorations of the artist’s relation to the marketplace, as well as in his much lesser known novel, *The World of Chance* (1893). Written around the same time, both texts will be central to our remaining discussion as they embody (literally and fictively) Howells’s market-related anxieties and shed light on the rationale behind the writing-as-labor concept.

Contrary to his calculated public image as the quintessential professional man of letters, Howells was never entirely comfortable with the idea of earning a living through the sale of literary art. This uneasiness was evident in a number of contradictory public statements he made with respect to the literary artist’s position within the world of business. Responding in an 1889 interview, for instance, to a question about whether or not literature was a suitable professional pursuit, he was quoted as saying “I don’t see why it cannot be...in the case of one who has the necessary adaptation to the work, with the same energy and zeal expended as in any other pursuit, I do not see why authorship may not be a profession or business the same as anything else. It is simply a matter of fitness and persistency.”¹²⁹ But a few years later he vacillated when he told a different interviewer that authorship “is not a business,” and that “it is almost always best that the writer should stick to some safe calling, and make literary work one of the pleasures of his leisure.”¹³⁰ Published during the emergence of the new commercialized, mass literary marketplace, “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business” is largely responsible for the critical oversight of such glaring contradictions. Generally speaking, Howellsian scholars have considered the essay an endorsement of the merger of art and commerce as well as

an insightful professional manual for literary upstarts. Although its title seems to affirm the writer's role in business, the essay, in total, stands as a dire reflection on the inherent pitfalls facing the literary artist in the marketplace.

Throughout the essay, Howells outlines the new business model of authorship while he appears simultaneously to condemn and revert from it. He begins by announcing his doubts about the fitness of literary art as a commercial pursuit, writing, "I do not think any man ought to live by an art. A man's art should be his privilege, when he has proven his fitness to exercise it, and has otherwise earned his daily bread."¹³¹ For Howells, part of the problem was that art (literary or otherwise) was a problematic commodity, as its value could not be objectively priced in terms of money. To try and do so necessarily perverted the art as well as the artist. Although he eventually concedes that "literature is a business as well as an art, and almost as soon," he does so reluctantly, referring to business at one point as the "opprobrium" of literature.¹³² Howells recognized that the literary artist in Gilded-Age America could not escape the conditions of the expanding capitalist economy and therefore had to put his or her work on the market in order to survive. Before dispensing with advice about how to navigate the business side of letters, he first goes to extraordinary lengths in documenting the "instinctive" sense of guilt and dishonor felt by any artist who takes money in exchange for their work.¹³³ As he puts it, "the sin and the shame remain" for the literary artist even when he or she successfully negotiates the market.¹³⁴ Furthermore, Howells maintains that the public recognizes the artist's role in business as "false" and "vulgar," acknowledging that in a "nation of businessmen" the literary author "must still have a

low rank among practical people” insofar as he “will be regarded by the great mass of Americans as perhaps a little off, a little funny, a little soft!”¹³⁵

Howells recognized that the writer was at a productive disadvantage compared to workers involved in other business pursuits. Despite his insistence that literary output resulted primarily from systematic, sedulous effort, he conceded that the matter was, for a number of reasons, far more complicated and unstable. For example, he believed that as an artist, the writer’s earning capacity was linked inextricably to his/her creative well, which would invariably run dry on occasion. He cited writer’s block, a lack of fresh ideas, and the “anxious and endless” process of revision as factors that slow down and inevitably prevent a writer from being able to make money.¹³⁶ In addition, Howells saw the solitary nature of authorial work as a potential liability. He explains in the essay that, “if [the writer] is sick or sad, and cannot work, if he is lazy or tipsy, and will not, then he earns nothing. He cannot delegate his business to a clerk or a manager; it will not go on while his is sleeping. The wage he can command depends entirely on his skill and diligence.”¹³⁷ For these and other reasons, according to Howells, even the most dedicated and talented literary worker is bound to encounter work stoppages beyond his or her immediate control.

But even more disturbing for Howells was the extent to which success in the commercial marketplace came down to an inexplicable matter of chance—a point illustrated by his mostly forgotten novel, *The World of Chance*, which dramatizes many of the problems which faced literary artists as spelled out in “The Man of Letters.” While the dearth of existing scholarship on the novel frames it as a clumsy (pro-socialist) social critique, it is also vitally concerned with the problems that await the writer who enters the

literary marketplace; specifically, these problems are tied to literary labor. A thinly veiled commentary on the conditions of the turn-of-the-century literary marketplace, the novel explores the consequences of those conditions for literary workers. The story features Percy Ray, a young Midwestern journalist who, when the novel opens, travels by train to New York in hopes of establishing a literary career. Having recently completed a novel, Ray plans to visit as many of New York's publishing houses as necessary to make his mark. Although not as young, he resembles at first one of Horatio Alger's boy heroes in terms of his extraordinary level of determination and enthusiasm for reaching his goal. When he is not making rounds to publishers, Ray spends his days relentlessly editing his manuscript and honing his literary craft. During his time in New York, literature is the singular pursuit of his life; it is the dream of becoming a well-known author that sustains him. However, Ray's idealism and positive outlook are undercut by a series of frustratingly unsuccessful attempts to sell his novel. What he eventually realizes after several face-to-face visits with and mail correspondences to various publishers is that no amount of self-will can ensure success in a marketplace which one publisher describes as a "perfect lottery."¹³⁸

To the extent that the narrative focuses primarily on Ray's futile efforts, Howells's novel dramatizes the writer's lack of autonomy within the modern business of authorship. In particular, the example of Percy Ray points to the fact that becoming a certified literary professional in Gilded Age America depended on forces and people outside the realm of a writer's control. Ray learns quickly that he must assent to the parasitic machinery of the literary business which includes publishers, editors, and marketers, all of whom rely on the writer for their own livelihoods, yet they dictate his

very status as a writer as well as the terms of his career by determining whether or not his work will find a market. Ray has no choice but to operate within this system. Despite the countless hours he devotes to various kinds of literary work (honing his manuscript, writing and revising, talking with other writers) his standing as a “real” writer capable of earning a living by his pen hinges on whether or not his book gets accepted by a publisher and recognized favorably by a reading public whose literary tastes are, as one of his more sympathetic publishers admits, wildly unpredictable. In a scene that foreshadows the almost identical predicament facing the title character in Jack London’s novel, *Martin Eden* (1909), a novel I will return to in Chapter Three, Ray loses an immeasurable amount of time and labor while his manuscript circulates for several weeks among publishers who hardly glance at it before rejecting it. For his part, Howells urged aspiring writers to avoid considering the publisher or the public. He issued this direct appeal in “The Man of Letters”: “The best that you can do is to write the book that it gives you the most pleasure to write, to put as much heart and soul as you have about you into it.”¹³⁹ But no matter their intentions or the degree to which they disavowed these external pressures, literary authors were, as Ray’s case is intended to make clear, alienated from the fruits of their own labor, which are either completely ignored or wrested away from them and flung into the chance market.

The dislocating effects of the modern literary marketplace on literary artists are brought into focus at the conclusion of *The World of Chance* when Ray’s novel is finally accepted for publication. Far from the transformative moment he had imaged it would be, he finds himself strangely unaffected by H. C. Chapley & Co’s decision to publish his book; only months earlier this decision would have marked the fruition of his dreams and

a kind of rebirth. As it stands, he confides to a friend his disappointment and explains that the news “isn’t like a triumph; it’s like—nothing. I’ve looked forward to this so long—I’ve counted on it so much—I’ve expected it to be like having the world in my hand. But if I shut my hand, it’s empty.”¹⁴⁰ Ray feels empty and “curiously cold” after learning of his newfound success because he realizes the whimsical nature of literary success.¹⁴¹ He believes that his sudden good fortune is unconnected to the actual work he performed—work he had been so fiercely proud and protective of, and that had for so long gone unacknowledged by the literary machine—and rather the product of forces beyond either his control or his (full) comprehension. The novel ends with Ray left to ponder the inscrutability of the mass literary marketplace and his fit within it.

These alienating aspects of the modern literary business were in part responsible for Howells’s reformulation of literary authorship as a form of physical work. By affiliating literary artists with sundry manual workers such as farmers and mechanics, whom he romanticized for “[eating] their bread in the sweat of their own brows, and not the sweat of other men’s brows,” he tried to reassert the writer’s cultural authority by resituating him or her as an autonomous producer worthy of fair and dependable compensation, social admiration, and the personal sense of dignity that comes from honest work.¹⁴² Reframing the writer as a worker also helped Howells assuage his lifelong vocational anxieties. In my view, we should see his rhetorical reconstruction of writers as manual laborers as a nostalgic invocation of a simpler pre-capitalist way of life, one in which value was determined by labor rather than market forces. However, as he concluded in “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” no amount of nostalgia could stop the progress of the mass literary marketplace.

The next two chapters demonstrate the ideological power of Howells's campaign to revalorize the vocation of authorship by reframing literary authors and texts along socially purposive and physically rigorous lines. Chapter Two explores how Charles W. Chesnutt, the first critically esteemed African American author in Gilded Age America, adopted Howells's notion of writing as socio-ethical work at the outset of his literary career. Chapter Three resituates Jack London, America's most popular writer in the first two decades of the twentieth century, as a kind of Howellsian acolyte insofar as he created a model of literary authorship based on the idea of writing as strenuous physical labor and careful craftwork.

¹ See H.L. Mencken, *Prejudices: First Series* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919), 52-58. Mencken called Howells “a contriver of pretty things” and maintained, “The truth about Howells is that he really has nothing to say, for all the charm he gets into saying it” (53-54). In addition, he argued that a “critical examination” of Howells as an artist reveals that he is unworthy of reverence (53). Also, see Sinclair Lewis, in *The Man From Main Street: The Man From Main Street And Other Writings, 1904-1950* (New York: Random House, 1953), 3-17. Lewis’s Nobel Prize speech is arguably the most famous assault on Howells. In it, he praised Dreiser for rescuing American literature from “Howellsian timidity and gentility” (7). Lewis went on to say “Mr. Howells was one of the gentlest, sweetest, and most honest of men, but he had the code of a pious old maid whose greatest delight was to have tea at the vicarage...in his fantastic vision of life, which he innocently conceived to be realistic, farmers and seamen and factory-hands might exist, but the farmer must never be covered with muck, the seaman must never roll out bawdy chanteys, the factory-hand must be thankful to his good employer, and all of them must long for the opportunity to visit Florence and smile gently at the quaintness of beggars” (15).

² Cady’s exhaustive two-volume biography remains a good starting point for scholars interested in Howells’s life and development as a writer. See Edwin H. Cady, *The Road To Realism: The Early Years 1837-1885 of William Dean Howells* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1956) and *The Realist at War: The Mature Years 1885-1920 of William Dean Howells* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1958). For a concise overview of the critical reassessment of Howells in the roughly three decades after Cady’s biography, see John W. Crowley, *The Mask of Fiction: Essays on W.D. Howells* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 1-13.

³ For a discussion of Tolstoy’s impact on Howells’s aesthetics and politics, see William Alexander, *William Dean Howells: The Realist as Humanist* (New York: Burt Franklin & Company, 1981), 61-110, also Carl Dawson and Susan Goodman, *William Dean Howells: A Writer’s Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 85. For a discussion of Howells’s growing interest in socialism, see Cady, “*The Realist at War*,” 147-154. For a discussion of Howells’s response to the Haymarket Affair and his public stand in support of the Haymarket anarchists, see Kenneth S. Lynn, *William Dean Howells: An American Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 282-304. For a discussion of Howells’s growing sense of professional failure, see Lynn, *Howells* 190-240 (esp. 226).

⁴ William Dean Howells to Henry James, 1888, in *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells: Volume One*, ed. Mildred Howells (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928), 417.

⁵ James W. Simpson, “Introduction” in *Editor’s Study* (Troy, NY: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983), v-xliv (especially vi-vii). According to Simpson, a series of historical events and cultural forces, including Westward expansion, the Gilded Age, the

labor movement, and the Civil War, led to a “drastic change in outlook in American literature” (vi). Focusing especially on Howells, James, and Twain, Simpson contended that writers who came of age in the years immediately after the Civil War struggled to reconcile antebellum optimism with the “newer more pessimistic” outlook adopted by writers of the following generation such as Norris, Crane, and Dreiser.

⁶ Lynn, *Howells*, 12.

⁷ Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 5.

⁸ See Nelson Lichtenstein, “Authorial Professionalism and the Literary Marketplace, 1885-1900,” *American Studies* 19, no. 1 (1978): 35.

⁹ For a retrospective account of Howells’s childhood and adolescent experiences working for his father, see Howells, *My Literary Passions* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1895), 28-29.

¹⁰ Howells, *Literary Passions*, 92.

¹¹ See William Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1968), 25, 94.

¹² See Lynn, *Howells*, 225-226. Of the several Howells biographies, Lynn’s provides the most in depth discussion of Howells’s personal and professional anxieties, especially in the 1880s and 1890s.

¹³ Lewis P. Simpson, *The Man of Letters in New England and the South: Essays on the History of the Literary Vocation in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 91-92.

¹⁴ My argument is informed in part by Claudia Stokes’s assertion that Howellsian Realism must be understood as a response and expression of Howells’s “lifelong class sensitivity.” See Stokes, “In Defense of Literary Genius: Howells and the Limits of Literary History,” *American Literary Realism* 40, no. 3 (2008), 199.

¹⁵ Howells to Victoria M. Howells, 1857, in *Life in Letters*, 14.

¹⁶ Howells, *Interviews With William Dean Howells*, ed. Ulrich Halfmann (Arlington, TX: The University of Texas at Arlington, 1973), 50.

¹⁷ Dawson and Goodman, *Howells: A Writer’s Life*, 183.

¹⁸ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship*, 2-3.

¹⁹ Charvat, *Profession*, 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ Daniel H. Borus, *Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 140.

²² Christopher P. Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), 9.

²³ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 90.

²⁴ See Richard Brodhead, *The School of Hawthorne* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 80; William G. Rowland, Jr., *Literature and the Marketplace: Romantic Writers and Their Audiences in Great Britain and the United States* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 3.

²⁵ Rowland, Jr., *Literature and the Marketplace*, 3.

²⁶ For a good introductory discussion of the various censures of fiction in early America, see Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 101-120.

²⁷ Brodhead. *School of Hawthorne*, 70.

²⁸ Borus, *Writing Realism*, 150.

²⁹ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 21.

³⁰ Simpson, *The Man of Letters*, 94.

³¹ Howells, *Literary Friends and Acquaintances*, ed. David F. Hiatt and Edwin H. Cady (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), 39.

³² For a discussion of Howells's formative trip to Boston, see Lynn, *Howells: An American Life*, 89-109.

³³ Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 14.

³⁴ See Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), ix, 34.

³⁵ Cite Bledstein.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 87

³⁷ *Ibid.*, x, 172.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁰ In *My Literary Passions*, Howells described a typical day as follows: “My own hours in the printing-office began at seven and ended at six, with an hour at noon for dinner, which I often used for putting down such verses as had come to me during the morning. As soon as supper was over at night I got out my manuscripts, which I kept in great disorder, and written in several different hands on several different kinds of paper, and sawed, and filed, and hammered away at my blessed Popean heroics till nine, when I went regularly to bed, to rise again at five” (44).

⁴¹ William Dean Howells, *A Boy's Town* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1890), 171, quoted in Rodney D. Olsen, *Dancing in Chains: The Youth of William Dean Howells* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 37; Howells, *Years of My Youth and Three Essays*, ed. Don L. Cook and David J. Nordloh (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975), 111.

⁴² See Olsen, *Dancing in Chains*, 27-28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁴ Howells, *My Literary Passions*, 36.

⁴⁵ Olsen, *Dancing in Chains*, 89.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁴⁷ Simpson, *The Man of Letters*, 92.

⁴⁸ William Dean Howells to William Cooper Howells, 1871, in *Life in Letters*, 162.

⁴⁹ Everett Carter, *Howells and the Age of Realism* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1954), 163.

-
- ⁵⁰ Lynn, *Howells*, 226.
- ⁵¹ Howells, *My Literary Passions*, 170.
- ⁵² Cady, *The Road to Realism*, 194.
- ⁵³ Simpson, "Introduction" in *Editor's Study*, xvii.
- ⁵⁴ Howells, "The Man of Letters as a Man of Business," in *Literature & Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1902), 1.
- ⁵⁵ Howells, *Life in Letters*, 363-64.
- ⁵⁶ Simpson, "Introduction," xxii.
- ⁵⁷ Howells, *Life in Letters*, 1.
- ⁵⁸ Howells, *LFA*, 101.
- ⁵⁹ Here I am borrowing the term "cultural split" from Lynn. See Howells, *An American Life*, 226.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Howells, "The Man of Letters," 32.
- ⁶² Geordie Hamilton, "Rethinking the Politics of American Realism Through the Narrative Form and Moral Rhetoric of W.D. Howells," *American Literary Realism* 42, no. 1 (2009), 1.
- ⁶³ Howells, *Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays*, ed. Clara and Rudolph Kirk (New York: New York University Press, 1959), 13; Hamilton, "Rethinking the Politics of American Realism," 1.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid, 1-2.
- ⁶⁵ Simpson, "The Treason of William Dean Howells," 91-92.
- ⁶⁶ Petrie, *Conscience and Purpose*, x, 3.
- ⁶⁷ William Dean Howells, *Editor's Study*, ed. James W. Simpson (Troy, NY: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983), 1.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid, 164.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 74.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 73.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 74-75.

⁸⁰ Brodhead, *Hawthorne*, 82; Petrie, *Conscience and Purpose*, 19.

⁸¹ Howells, *ES*, 266, 225.

⁸² Ibid, 81.

⁸³ For example, see Michael Davitt Bell, *The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 17-38.

⁸⁴ Bell, *Problem of American Realism*, 22.

⁸⁵ Howells, *ES*, 34.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 225.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 146.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 96.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Claudia Stokes. "In Defense of Genius: Howells and the Limits of Literary History." *American Literary Realism* 40, no. 3 (2008): 199.

⁹⁴ Howells, *Life in Letters*, 419.

⁹⁵ Petrie, *Conscience and Purpose*, 5.

⁹⁶ Howells, *ES*, 118.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 3, 186.

⁹⁸ William Dean Howells, "Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading" in *Selected Literary Criticism*, vol. 30, *Selected Literary Criticism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 222.

⁹⁹ Frank Norris, "Zola as a Romantic Writer" in *Novels and Essays*, ed. Donald Pizer (New York, NY: Library of America, 1986), 1106.

¹⁰⁰ Charles W. Calhoun, "Introduction" in *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America*, ed. Charles W. Calhoun (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 1; Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 5.

¹⁰¹ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, 2nd edition (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 5.

¹⁰² William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, 3rd edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 16.

¹⁰³ Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 10. See also, 11-14.

¹⁰⁴ Howells, *Novel-Writing*, 231.

¹⁰⁵ See Kaplan, *Social Construction*, 20.

¹⁰⁶ Howells, *ES*, 22.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 164.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 96.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, *Ibid*, 22.

¹¹⁰ Alexander, *Realist as Humanist*, 5-6.

¹¹¹ Howells, *ES*, 3.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 344.

¹¹³ Howells, *Interviews with William Dean Howells*, ed. Ulrich Halfmann (Arlington, TX: University of Texas at Arlington Press, 1973), 35-36.

¹¹⁴ William Dean Howells, *Literature and Life*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1902), 34.

¹¹⁵ Here I am drawing from Nicholas K. Bromell's work which explores the impact of the mental versus manual work dichotomy on antebellum society and culture. See Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 7, 15-39.

¹¹⁶ Howells, *Life in Letters*, 163.

¹¹⁷ Howells, *Interviews*, 35-36.

¹¹⁸ Howells, *ES*, 344.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*.

¹²¹ *Ibid*.

¹²² I am indebted to John Crowley who made this point in his book, *The Dean of American Letters: The Late Career of William Dean Howells* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 40.

¹²³ Borus, *Writing Realism*, 66.

-
- ¹²⁴ Ibid, 69; Weinstein, *Literature of Labor*, 13.
- ¹²⁵ Stokes, "In Defense of Genius," 200; Howells, *Interviews*, 1-2.
- ¹²⁶ Goodman and Dawson, *Howells: A Writer's Life*, 4-5.
- ¹²⁷ Howells, *ES*, 15; Howells, *Interviews*, 14.
- ¹²⁸ Howells, *Interviews*, 57.
- ¹²⁹ Ibid, 11.
- ¹³⁰ Ibid, 35-36.
- ¹³¹ Howells, "The Man of Letters," 1.
- ¹³² Ibid, 4, 2.
- ¹³³ Ibid, 1.
- ¹³⁴ Ibid, 2.
- ¹³⁵ Ibid, 5-6.
- ¹³⁶ Ibid.
- ¹³⁷ Ibid, 33-34.
- ¹³⁸ Howells, *The World of Chance* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1893), 260.
- ¹³⁹ Howells, "The Man of Letters," 20.
- ¹⁴⁰ Howells, *World of Chance*, 317.
- ¹⁴¹ Ibid, 313.
- ¹⁴² Howells, "The Man of Letters," 34.

CHAPTER THREE

“I WOULD GLADLY DEVOTE MY LIFE TO THE WORK”: CHARLES WADDELL

CHESNUTT AND THE LIMITS OF LITERARY REFORM

If I do write, I shall write for a purpose, a high, holy purpose...the object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites, —for I consider the unjust spirit of caste...a barrier to the moral progress of the American people; and I would be one of the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it...[t]he Negro’s part is to prepare himself for social recognition and equality; and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it...if I can do anything to further this work, and can see any kind of likelihood of obtaining success in it, I would gladly devote my life to the work.¹

--Charles W. Chesnutt, 1880

The prevailing weakness of Negro writings, from the viewpoint of art, is that they are too subjective. The colored writer, generally speaking, has not yet passed the point of thinking about himself first as a Negro, burdened with the responsibility of defending and uplifting his race. Such a frame of mind, however praiseworthy from a moral standpoint, is bad for art.²

--Charles W. Chesnutt, 1931

The quotes above bookend the literary career of Charles Waddell Chesnutt, one of the first critically acclaimed African American writers of fiction and the subject of an explosion of literary and cultural scholarship of late. Chesnutt feverishly scribbled the first quote in his private journal on May 8th, 1880. He was at that point an energetic, twenty-two year old schoolteacher living in the South. Often cited by Chesnutt’s critics, the journal entry accurately predicted his literary and political futures. Although he was often mistaken for a white man due to his fair skin, Chesnutt proudly identified as a black man and, as a key member of the emerging social group later known as the “talented

tenth,” he spent his adult life committed to the social, political, and material progress of his fellow African Americans. As a teenager, he fortified that commitment by teaching and eventually becoming the principal of a normal school in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Chesnutt later wrote essays and delivered lectures in which he provided national audiences with an insider’s view of the “Negro Problem” as he advocated for racial equality.³ A founding member of the NAACP, Chesnutt corresponded with race leaders, including Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on a range of legislative and political problems facing black Americans. In 1928 the NAACP recognized him for his longstanding efforts on behalf of African Americans, awarding him with the prestigious Spingarn Medal for his pioneering work as a literary artist and racial spokesman. The award, which came nearly five years before his death, cemented Chesnutt’s legacy as one of his era’s most influential Race Men.⁴

The first journal entry also indicates that Chesnutt’s earliest ideas about literary authorship were inextricably tied to his goals of racial reform. Literary historians have pointed out that few American writers have approached the world of letters with as clear a sense of and commitment to a particular set of social and political goals as Chesnutt.⁵ Here, in what marks one of his first known meditations on his literary career, Chesnutt adopts a Howellsian conception of writing as a tool for the social and ethical transformation of his audience. He felt it his “high, holy purpose” to morally instruct his readers, the majority of whom Chesnutt realized were white; specifically, he sought to compel them to re-imagine their collective sense of black Americans. By transforming the attitudes and ideas of individual members of the body politic, Chesnutt believed he

could not only empower African Americans but also incite a nationwide moral revolution. He embarked upon a literary career guided by and committed to a conception of literary authorship as a potent and potentially lucrative mode of race work.

The fact that Chesnutt scholars have, with few exceptions, taken for granted that his literary pursuits were ancillary to his political agenda is not surprising, considering that he enthusiastically promoted himself as a “racial writer” in the traditional sense. Literary critics have been mostly unwilling or unable to talk about Chesnutt the literary artist independent of Chesnutt the Race Man, fact that can be traced back to the political activism and social dissent at the heart of the African American literary tradition into which he Chesnutt entered at the end of the nineteenth century. Literary historians have demonstrated that black writing in the postbellum years was unequivocally political.⁶ Chesnutt was among a handful of aspiring black writers, including Paul Dunbar, Francis Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and Sutton Griggs, each of whom took up their pens during an era of unprecedented racial strife in an attempt to alter prevailing stereotypes and to ameliorate living conditions for African Americans. In short, the most influential publishers, editors, and readers at the time—almost all of them white—presumed that black writers would serve willingly as representatives of or champions for their race. It was taken for granted that Chesnutt, or any other black author of his age, would eagerly engage in the work of racial uplift.

To the extent that black authorship in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century America was defined by political engagement, Chesnutt is known today as an emblematic black writer for the explicit ways in which his politics animate his art. The first wave of scholarship devoted to Chesnutt’s fiction, ignited by the critical rediscovery of his work

in the 1960s, cast him as a “racial crusader” whose literary status cannot be measured properly by his writings because Chesnutt was, as one of his biographers put it, “less interested in literature as art than in literature as a means of attaining social justice.”⁷ Thus critical discussions of Chesnutt’s work have routinely focused more on the author’s political and social ideas than on his aesthetic concerns or the merits of his literary production.⁸

In fact, literary historians and critics have, until recently, all but conceded Chesnutt’s aesthetic shortcomings and ultimate artistic failures. Generally speaking, he is viewed as a second-rate literary artist, a writer whose work, especially his longer fictions, has been condemned by critics for its aesthetic clumsiness and overt didacticism. Chesnutt’s fervid political goals are said to have undermined and eventually overwhelmed his artistic sensibilities. Scholars concede that, as the sociopolitical fortunes for black Americans deteriorated in the decades after Reconstruction, Chesnutt became more and more openly confrontational in his fictional critiques of Southern (white) prejudices. Many of his contemporaneous critics and readers who knew and enjoyed the light humor and veiled irony of his first cycle of Uncle Julius dialect stories and sketches were deeply dismayed and, in some cases, outraged by what they felt was Chesnutt’s blatant racial hostility and antagonism towards Southern whites in *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and *The Colonial’s Dream* (1905), the last novels Chesnutt published during his nearly five year stint as a full-time, professional author. That Howells, who had less than two years earlier praised Chesnutt’s short story collections *The Wife of His Youth, and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899) and *The Conjure Woman* (1899), could offer no more than a regretful review of *Marrow* as a “bitter,

bitter” book reinforced the popular image of Chesnutt as a misguided polemicist whose early talents were undermined by his own political devotions.⁹

What, then, are we to make of the second quote above? Juxtaposed with the journal entry, it dramatizes what I will argue was the central and ultimately unresolved tension in Chesnutt’s literary career. These remarks first appeared in an essay published in 1931, just a year prior to his death, called “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?” Chesnutt wrote the piece in response to a series of questions asked of him by the NAACP’s magazine, *The Crisis*, with regard to the artistic legacy of African American writers and, more broadly, the nature of literary depictions of black Americans. What makes the quote so striking is that it marks an almost diametric shift in Chesnutt’s thinking about literary authorship. He appears to rescind his earlier ideas about the rightful role and responsibilities of black writers.

As we shall see, these comments are hardly aberrant: they reflect a decided shift in his thinking that our existing scholarly narrative on Chesnutt either glosses over or misses entirely. The fact that critics and literary historians have focused narrowly on Chesnutt’s politics has created a longstanding gap in our understanding of his artistry. The sharp contrast in the content and tone of the quotes above—the stark distinction Chesnutt draws in the latter quote between literary racial reform (or uplift) and authentic literary art—signals his aversion to precisely the authorial identity and the particular mode of “race fiction” for which he was known during his lifetime and celebrated for today. It must be noted that a handful of recent critics have begun to revise the narrative of aesthetic failure that surrounds Chesnutt; however, his artistic identity remains under-examined and fundamentally misunderstood.¹⁰

Consequently, one of the goals of this chapter is to chart the compelling points of divergence between Chesnutt's politics and his art in order to establish a richer understanding of Chesnutt the literary artist. My project diverges from the majority of existing scholarship on Chesnutt insofar as it seeks, above all, to delineate his authorial self-identity. In other words, I am interested in how Chesnutt thought about his status as a literary artist and, most importantly, how that thinking changed over time. Scholars and critics have focused predominately on Chesnutt's fiction, reading it, in most cases, as a primer for his social and political ideas. But as the critic Henry B. Wonham pointed out in a recent review of Chesnutt studies, such an approach creates the almost exclusive impression of Chesnutt as a "neglected black author" whose talents were unacknowledged by the white literary industry.¹¹ That most critics have considered Chesnutt's literary career in this way stems from a tendency referred to by Ross Posnock as "reflex racializing."¹² According to Posnock, critics tend to consider Chesnutt and other postbellum black writers, artists, and intellectuals narrowly in terms of their commitment to or status as spokesmen for African Americans.

There is no doubt that Chesnutt was marginalized and repeatedly passed over by the American literati because of his racial identity. But, as I hope to make clear, reading him only in this way neglects the complexity of his artistic identity, his ideas about race, and the lasting merits of his literary career. My methodology moves us beyond these typically reductive readings of Chesnutt's work. I should note up front that I have comparatively little to say about his most well known works of fiction. Instead, I treat his remarkable and lesser known body of non-fiction writings, including a number of journal entries, letters, and speeches, in addition to some of his virtually unknown longer fictions,

as these writings often contain Chesnutt's most powerful and sustained meditations on authorship. These writings deserve our renewed attention because they lay bear Chesnutt's struggles to reconcile his conflicting and, at times, contradictory ideas about the intersections of politics and art, as well as his ideas about the rightful cultural work of black authors.

The argument advanced here is that the course of Chesnutt's literary career—including his first inklings of authorship as a young man, his full-time entry into the professional field of letters, his aesthetic trajectory, his critical and commercial reception, his untimely departure from letters, and his literary legacy—was profoundly shaped by his conception and eventual disavowal of the writing-as-racial-work ideology. He was not, as most scholarship would have it, merely a politically intractable, artistically ambivalent writer. On the contrary, his artistic aspirations always counterbalanced his political concerns. Literary authorship was not simply for Chesnutt a means through which to enact social change; rather, he cared deeply about his status as an artist, and as his career progressed, he struggled to reconcile his growing artistic ambitions with the expectations placed on him as a renowned and representative black author. Scholarship on Chesnutt hardly registers the fact that he constantly recalibrated his ideas about authorship and the nexus of art and politics. However, my contention is that Chesnutt's artistic identity and ideals evolved dramatically over the course of his career in letters, as illustrated by the opening quotes above.

Shortly after Chesnutt devoted his full professional energies to a career in letters, at precisely the moment when he reached the height of his success and notoriety as one of America's premier and most promising black authors, he underwent a protracted and

traumatic shift in his thinking about and commitment to the literary reform agenda that had guided and defined his authorial pursuits and his artistic identity for more than two decades. The opening quotes underscore the extent to which Chesnutt renounced his earlier ideas about the correlation between literary authorship and racial reform. By the time his first major novel, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) appeared in print, he began to seriously doubt literature's ability to enact the kind of social and ethical changes he had originally expected. Driven by the poor critical and commercial reception of his next novel, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Chesnutt abandoned his belief in the racial reform capacity of literary authors and texts. In addition, the outright rejection by publishers and editors of his so-called "white life" fictions, works that have remained virtually unknown and untreated by critics until recently, added to his artistic dilemma. His inability to find a market for them confirmed for him the impossibility of breaking away from or moving beyond the category of "racial writer." These events triggered in Chesnutt a confounding sense of artistic entrapment, the precise terms of which I outline later in the chapter.

For now, I would point out that his reversal of thinking has been obscured by the ironic fact that his major novels do not, on their surface, register his turmoil. The incendiary political messages articulated in both *Marrow* and *The Colonial's Dream* have generally been thought to reflect Chesnutt's dogged commitment to literary racial reform. On the contrary, the aesthetic choices Chesnutt made in these works, choices that have puzzled generations of readers and critics, actually signal his growing artistic conflict. My argument is that the aesthetic confusion and clumsiness of his later fictions has more

to do with the extraordinary weight of social expectations placed on Chesnutt as a black author than with his own artistic faults.

In what follows, I trace the personal, cultural, and historical factors that led Chesnutt to initially embrace the writing-as-racial-work ideology. Drawing on a number of rare primary documents, including letters, speeches, and essays, I explore the reasons for Chesnutt's sudden and dramatic shift in thinking and discuss its impact on the course of his literary career, his aesthetic choices, and his literary and cultural legacy.

A second major goal of this chapter is to bring to light Chesnutt's efforts to re-imagine and expand the limits of black authorship in postbellum America. I close the chapter by reconstructing his little known efforts to reposition himself and other black authors beyond the political problems and aesthetic constraints associated with racial uplift. As I hope to make clear, Chesnutt strove to release himself from the entrenched literary expectations and cultural designations imposed on fin-de-siècle black writers and artists. Ironically, while he fought valiantly throughout his life on behalf of African Americans in his role as a political activist, Chesnutt simultaneously fought in his role as a literary artist to untether black writers from their reputed status as race workers.

This chapter redirects our attention to the surprising turn in the final, mostly forgotten, years of Chesnutt's life when he was at war with established ideas about the rightful duties—that is to say, the rightful work—of black authorship in America. It attempts to elucidate the final phase of his career, which we can date from the publication of *The Colonial's Dream* in 1905 to his Spingarn Medal acceptance speech in 1928. This portion of Chesnutt's life has received relatively little attention from critics, as his literary writings fell quickly out of public favor during these years. Chesnutt retreated from the

literary field, resuming his stenography business and rededicating himself to the political advocacy of black Americans as an essayist and lecturer. But as the opening quotes above demonstrate, he never stopped wrestling with his status as a literary artist and his ideas about authorship. This chapter charts his struggles through a prolonged period of self-doubt, frustration, confusion, bitterness and self-delusion as he tried at the end of his life to formulate an artistic identity—for himself and for other black writers— outside the sanctioned realm of Afro-American fiction. And it makes the case, finally, that we must rethink Chesnutt’s literary contributions as well as his literary and cultural legacies.

The Youthful Striver

Charles Chesnutt’s initial ideas about and inclinations toward literary authorship stemmed from his dual personal and social interests, which first took shape during his formative years as an adolescent and a young man in the postbellum South. These interests would, as we shall see, profoundly shape the course of his literary career and his adult life. On one hand, Chesnutt from an early age possessed extraordinary personal aspirations reinforced by his family background and comparatively high level of education. As a boy living with his family in Fayetteville, North Carolina, after the Civil War, Chesnutt dreamed of an inchoate future filled with financial prosperity, social prestige, and personal happiness. Indeed, he had many reasons to be optimistic about his personal and professional prospects. His parents were members of antebellum North Carolina’s free Negro class; a mostly middle class group made up of several mixed-race individuals.¹³ His father’s position as a grocery store owner afforded the Chesnutt family

middle class respectability and nearly a decade of financial security before business troubles in 1871 hurled the Chesnutts into economic decline.¹⁴ Furthermore, Chesnutts' light skin (he was at least seven-eighths white) allowed him to pass and often led folks around Fayetteville to mistake him for a white man. He managed to escape the overt racism directed towards darker-skinned African Americans. As an adolescent, Chesnutts' parents sent him to public school when he was not needed in his father's store. In short, he enjoyed a social position more favorable than the majority of Southern blacks and many of the local whites at the time.

These advantages contributed to Chesnutts' idealism and bolstered his sense of his own eminence and future greatness. The private journal he kept intermittently between 1874 and his departure from the South in 1883 reflects these feelings and reveals that aspiration and alienation were the dominant themes of Chesnutts' life as a young adult. He spent a great deal of time speculating about and planning for a prodigious future beyond North Carolina, as he simply refused to accept the notion that his racial identity might preclude him from realizing his personal goals. Chesnutts remained privately convinced during these years that he would transcend his racial and material circumstances in rural North Carolina. He yearned to eventually join the ranks of the American elite, a group the majority of whose members, he felt, just happened to be white. Despite the fact that he established himself as an upstanding community member, Chesnutts felt out of place and disconnected from his neighbors, or as he put it in a journal entry written in 1881, "cast...among a people, or in a place whose people do not enter into my trains of thought and who indeed [I] cannot understand or sympathize with."¹⁵ As a prize pupil and later as a teacher at The Howard School, he adhered wholeheartedly

to a vision of American Individualism and Emersonian self-reliance in order to fulfill his potential. As Richard Brodhead has noted, Chesnutt's identification as a black man inverted the popular mythologies of individualism and self-making that had originally applied only to white Americans.¹⁶

Spurred on by uncertain dreams of greatness, Chesnutt devoted himself during his teenage years and early twenties to a strict program of self-making, which he hoped would translate to personal fame and fortune. It was a version of self-improvement well known and widely available to Americans living in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, disseminated in character manuals, school textbooks, and street pamphlets, one touted by religious, educational, and political leaders alike. Chesnutt's journal lays bare his extraordinary and, at times, compulsive drive to remake himself in his grand image. While employed prior to his twentieth birthday as a teacher, first in South Carolina and later in North Carolina in the 1870s, Chesnutt structured his life around the ideology of the Protestant work ethic. Journal entries from these years confirm his belief in the inherent nobility of labor and the correlation between his own hard work and his future success. For example, in an entry from 1879 in which he contemplates his career prospects, Chesnutt writes with confidence that "when a young man starts out in life with a purpose, and works for that purpose he is more than apt to accomplish it."¹⁷

Elsewhere in the journal Chesnutt romanticizes the virtues of labor and looks forward to "long years of hard work and patient plodding" in a personally rewarding and prestigious career.¹⁸ Although he was a rising star at Howard, having taken a position as a teacher in 1872 before being promoted to principal in 1880, Chesnutt strove for a life more exciting and lucrative than that of an educator in the postbellum rural south. He

had one eye cast towards the future during these years. And while he remained unsure of where he would end up, his assertion that “every man is fitted by nature for some certain pursuit in life, or at least has the power of excelling in some one thing” underscores the important point that he believed in the notion of a calling and was committed to pursuing personally rewarding, ennobling work.¹⁹

Convinced that he needed to engage in what he referred to as “constant employment of the mind and purpose toward some good end,” in order to realize his personal potential, Chesnutt obsessively pursued any and all available modes of intellectual, moral, and spiritual edification during these years.²⁰ His first known journal entry, recorded in July of 1874, finds Chesnutt, then just sixteen years old, gravely copying rules of personal hygiene from a popular self-help manual, a move that places him squarely within what historians have referred to as the nineteenth’s century’s “culture of character.”²¹ He attempted to strengthen his character and reinvent himself in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin and his hero, Frederick Douglass, by dedicating himself to a procession of “useful” behaviors, such as taking daily baths, reciting daily prayers, and acting charitably to others. Conversely, Chesnutt tried and often failed during these years to eschew idle time and abstain from behaviors generally thought to be corruptive, including masturbation, gossiping with neighbors, and excessive drinking and gambling. Conceiving of his early life as a training ground for the future, Chesnutt prized future attainment over instant gratification and the pleasures of youth. He lived what we would consider today an almost monastic existence, as he poured his energies outside of school into reading, writing, and studying. Aware of the political and cultural

circumstances standing in the way of his potential future success, Chesnutt sought to transcend said circumstances through sheer force of will and incessant work.

Leafing through the pages of his journal, one is struck by Chesnutt's appetite for learning and the great lengths he went to furnish himself with an education equal to or beyond that received by most college graduates at the time. He delighted, more than anything, in the life of the mind and viewed education as the key to his success. However, his formal schooling ended abruptly at the age of 14 when his father's suddenly failing business prompted Chesnutt to take a teaching post to help his family's finances.²² Chesnutt found his work with local impoverished African American children morally rewarding but mentally boring. Consequently, he committed his life outside of school to a self-imposed intellectual apprenticeship; Chesnutt spent most of his free time reading, writing and studying voraciously. He read widely in classic literatures, pouring through works by Shakespeare, Hegel, and Dumas, among others, he taught himself multiple languages, and he studied music.

Most important in shaping his future was the fact that he developed a love of writing in these years. By the age of 16, he was penning poems and sketches in his journal. A journal entry from July 1875 outlines a typical day and underscores Chesnutt's determination and self-discipline: "I rise at six, read till breakfast, if it is not ready; eat, read till school time, [half] past eight. Go to school[,] let out at about three o'clock[,] come home and read till dark[.] Then I...sit and sing, and recite pieces I have learned, think over what I have read."²³ His pursuit of knowledge and his relentless course of study largely defined Chesnutt's sense of personal identity. Although he

remained unsure of where his future would lead, he knew that he craved intellectual stimulation and growth.

His personal aspirations and the fervent methods by which he tried to achieve them created several conflicts for Chesnut. Chief among them was the fact that while his reading and studying stoked his knowledge of and enthusiasm for the world at large, he felt increasingly cloistered within and detached from his Southern milieu. Chesnut's extraordinary intellectual growth in these years made him feel that he was, to borrow Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous phrase, "a citizen of somewhere else," living a double life among people who were skeptical of the notion that anyone would feel most at home in the boundless, immaterial world of books and ideas.²⁴ Fayetteville was stuck in a post-war economic rut and did not offer Chesnut, a young family man by 1878, the kind of cultural opportunities he and his wife longed for. His unbridled sense of individualism and desire to transcend his material and social circumstances in the South placed him philosophically at odds with his neighbors, many of whom were either content or resigned to their existing lots in life. He felt a closer kinship with the classic writers he read than with the majority of people he interacted on a daily basis. As Chesnut biographer William L. Andrews has shown, Chesnut's "studious bent, his introspective turn of mind, and his rigorous dedication to self-culture...isolated him from the only 'society' he could expect in the South, that of Afro-Americans."²⁵ A number of scholars have followed Andrews in acknowledging that Chesnut's intelligence and his intellectual appetite sparked in him a "genteel sense of superiority and elitism."²⁶

Such feelings are on display throughout his journal, perhaps most tellingly in an otherwise pleasant recollection of a trip Chesnut took to Washington, D.C in the summer

of 1879. He interrupts his description of the bucolic scenery he glimpses from the window of his train car in order to condemn a group of “about fifty darkies” who board his train at Norfolk, Virginia on the ride home.²⁷ With a mixture of repugnance and embarrassment, Chesnutt recalls them being “rather dirty” and laments the fact that their unsavory body odor and unruly behavior ruined the rest of his and his fellow travelers’ ride.²⁸ This incident underscores one of the awkward and undeniable tensions in Chesnutt’s adult life: on a personal level, he was, at best, reluctant towards and, at worst, averse to African American folk culture. A number of literary scholars have acknowledged Chesnutt’s ambivalence about black culture and have branded him a racial accommodationist.²⁹ SallyAnn H. Ferguson is perhaps the most vocal critic in this camp; she argues that Chesnutt routinely ignored the problems of darker skinned African Americans in favor of working primarily to open up white society for “color-line blacks,” a minority group who “culturally and, more importantly, genetically could straddle America’s racial divide.”³⁰ That he spent a great deal of time teaching and interacting with rural black children in his role as a teacher appeared to widen—rather than bridge—the gap Chesnutt felt between himself and the majority of his African American neighbors.

And his relationship with local whites merely compounded Chesnutt’s feelings of isolation and his desire to relocate. With state-sanctioned prejudice on the rise following the end of Reconstruction, Chesnutt was well aware that, despite his intellectual gifts and professional accomplishments, he was still a “nigger” by most Southern standards.³¹ His mounting frustrations over his liminal social position are clear in an 1881 journal entry in which Chesnutt grieves, “I occupy here a position similar to that of Mahomet’s Coffin. I

am neither fish[,] flesh, nor fowl—neither “nigger,” poor white, nor “buckrah. Too “stuck up” for the colored folks, and, of course, not recognized by the whites.”³²

Surveying Chesnut’s life during these years, African-American historian Joel Williamson has noted that, while Chesnut maintained his determination to succeed in his struggle to rise in American culture, he was aware by the early 1880s that the kind of personal success he had in mind was unlikely in Fayetteville, North Carolina.³³ To find it, Chesnut knew that he would need to leave the South.

In order to understand Chesnut’s earliest ideas about the potential work of literature, as well as his sense of himself as a literary author, it must be pointed out that his self-interests were counterbalanced by his abiding social concerns. That he simultaneously pursued his personal interests and sought to work for a larger social cause makes Chesnut’s life a fascinating study of competing and, at times, contradictory attitudes. Notwithstanding his intense personal ambitions and his ambivalence toward black folk culture, Chesnut developed at an early age what would prove to be an enduring sense of social obligation towards downtrodden African Americans. That feeling of obligation was forged by the social and political conditions in the post-Reconstruction South. He grew up in North Carolina alongside newly emancipated black slaves, many of whom optimistically pursued freedom in the years immediately after the Civil War, especially in the form of education, economic independence, and full citizenship. Chesnut understood these freedoms as fundamental civil rights, and he was all too aware of the myriad barriers that blocked his neighbors from attaining these and other freedoms.

Chesnutt came of age at the historical moment often referred to as the “nadir” of United States race relations, a period in which such freedoms for black Americans—and, indeed, the entire future of African American progress—were imperiled by virulent assaults on black citizenship and humanity.³⁴ State and local legislation along with entrenched racist social practices led to a systematic repeal of the newly acquired rights of African Americans in what amounted to a kind of political and civil re-enslavement. During these years the potential and rightful place of African Americans in the United States loomed in the national consciousness, endlessly invoked and debated in public discourse. The question was reduced to the alienating and pejorative phrase “the Negro problem.” Historians of the era have shown that most Southern whites assumed that emancipated slaves were unprepared for the responsibilities of freedom and therefore better off under the preexisting system of chattel slavery.³⁵ Against a backdrop of explicit legal racism and widening social repression, African Americans, especially in the South, struggled to move beyond slavery’s harmful legacy and to combat prevailing racism by creating a positive black identity both as individuals and as a collective social group.

Historians refer to the prominent response to the assault on the civil and political rights of African Americans from roughly the 1880s to WWI as the ideology of racial uplift. Racial uplift was, as historian Kevin Gaines has illustrated, a movement spearheaded by educated African Americans, including black ministers, intellectuals, journalists, reformers, and teachers, meant to overturn widespread views of African American inferiority. Although it was always a hotly contested term, at its core, racial uplift involved, in Gaines’s words, “the struggle for a positive black identity in a deeply

racist society,” and it pivoted on “turning the pejorative designation of race into a source of dignity and self-affirmation.”³⁶ Given the prevalence of racial and sexist stereotypes that accused all blacks of criminality and immorality, black middle and upper class leaders sought to defend and ameliorate white public perceptions of blacks. Generally speaking, the immediate goal was collective inclusion of African Americans into mainstream American society. For many black elites, that meant upholding the “respectable” tenets of nineteenth-century white middle-class (bourgeois) culture, including self-help, racial solidarity, social purity, the accumulation of wealth, thrift, charity, temperance, and patriarchal authority.³⁷ As one of the less than two percent of formally educated African Americans at the time, Chesnutt was in a prime position to join the fight for racial uplift. He had, in fact, been schooled for the job.

Chesnutt’s sense of social obligation, specifically, his devotion to improving the material and political lives of African Americans, was forged during his educational career, first as a student and later as a teacher and principal in the Southern black education system. The availability of the Howard School and his involvement in it were, as Richard Brodhead has noted, “the most decisive fact[s] of Charles Chesnutt’s early life.”³⁸ Indeed, it would be difficult to overstate the school’s influence on the course of his life and literary career. Founded with support from nongovernmental philanthropies, including the Peabody Educational Fund, The Howard School was a free public grade school for black children in postbellum Fayetteville, NC. Howard had a progressive pedagogical plan and political mission; it considered the education of former slaves an essential, almost sacred, task for the eventual equality and prosperity of blacks. Chesnutt graduated from the school as a prize pupil and he followed in the footsteps of the teachers

he loved like family by becoming an assistant teacher at The Peabody School at Charlotte, the other black North Carolina school heavily funded by the Peabody Educational Fund.³⁹ At Peabody, he worked under Cicero Harris, the brother of his teacher at Fayetteville, Robert Harris. From there, Chesnutt was appointed Robert Harris's assistant in the State Colored Normal School when it was founded in 1877.⁴⁰ Capping his meteoric rise to the top ranks of black educators in the state, he became the principal of the normal school in 1880, at the age of twenty-two.

The Southern black education system inculcated in Chesnutt the imperative of racial uplift and reared him to become a race leader. The Howard School identified and cultivated as race leaders an elite group of African Americans whom Du Bois would refer to in 1903 as “the talented tenth.”⁴¹ Reflecting on his time at Howard in an essay published at the turn of the twentieth century called “The White and the Black,” Chesnutt noted that the thinking at Howard and other postbellum black schools was that “picked men and women, in whose training special stress has been laid upon the highest ideals of manhood and womanhood, upon culture of mind, character and manners”; in other words, the most intellectually gifted and culturally literate African Americans would save the collective Negro race.⁴²

Drawing heavily on the discourses of American individualism and self-making, Du Bois and other black political leaders at the turn of the century argued that the educational training of an elite class of blacks was the key to material and social prosperity for the whole of African Americans. These exceptional black men and women would serve as racial exemplars; through their demonstrated high degree of mental intelligence and moral character, they would dispel longstanding racist assumptions about

African American inferiority and primitivism. They would compete for and earn positions of social and civic leadership and it was thought that, in time, the individual accomplishments of the “better” class would open such doors for all blacks. At Howard, Chesnutt was apart of the first coterie of “talented tenth” African Americans urged to represent and thus uplift the race at large.

Two crucial things happened to Chesnutt during his time in the Southern black educational system, both of which would directly impact his decision to pursue a literary career and would define the terms of that career. First, the school endowed him with an excellent education and fostered his intellectual pursuits. At Howard, Chesnutt was encouraged to and rewarded for exploring his academic interests and for living the life of the mind. At the time, conventional thinking, especially in the South, held that blacks lacked intellectual capabilities compared to whites. Popular opinion held that most blacks were dull and therefore best suited for lives devoted to manual labor. As Posnock has noted in his study of the rise of black intellectuals, the notion of a black intellectual was an oxymoron during this period. Chesnutt took advantage of the opportunities available to him during these years to break away from this mold.

Secondly, the school trained and incentivized Chesnutt toward racial uplift. The Howard School framed the uplifting of politically and socially marginalized blacks as the duty of its “talented tenth” pupils. The school’s progressive rhetoric and mission of uplift heavily influenced Chesnutt. In his formative years as a student and later as a young teacher, he latched onto the idea of a racial uplift as a calling. The prospect of devoting his life to socially purposive work gave him a sense of direction and confidence. The school unlocked and cultivated his sense of concern for the welfare of those black

Americans who were less fortunate than he. It also broadened his perspective on the world, redirecting his focus away from self-interests. The Howard School put Chesnutt in rhythm with the spirit of reform and incipient Progressivism that characterized the late nineteenth century. Chesnutt would embody that Progressive spirit for the rest of his life; indeed, he is well known today as a progressive reformer.⁴³

Invested by the Howard School with an ennobling sense of purpose, Chesnutt eagerly identified as a progressive racial worker committed to advancing the rights of African Americans. It is important to note that this commitment predated and eventually informed his initial move toward and ideas about literary authorship. His journal entries during these years reveal the contradictory impulses at the heart of his personal identity. In addition to his quest to make good on his self-interests, Chesnutt was determined to play a direct part in what he anticipated would be a full-scale social revolution. His focus clearly shifted away from exclusively personal concerns to wide-ranging social issues. One sees in the journal entries recorded in the late 1870s and early 1880s a growing feeling of social and ethical obligation on Chesnutt's part, a hunger to confront race-related problems. He believed that dedicated individuals could change the world for the better. He exemplified the reform spirit of the late nineteenth century, as he looked forward to the time when blacks would be granted full social and political equality. He saw these changes as a matter of destiny, and he believed he could play an active role in securing them.

Bolstered by the optimistic spirit of progressive reform and the ideology of the talented tenth, Chesnutt was by his twentieth birthday determined to serve as living proof

of all that could be accomplished by African Americans. His sense of virtuous duty is made clear in the following excerpt from an October 1881 journal entry:

I will go North, where, although the prejudice sticks, like a foul blot on the fair scutcheon of American liberty, yet a man may enjoy these privileges if he has the money to pay for them. I will live down the prejudice, I will crush it out. I will show to the world that a man may spring from a race of slaves, and yet far exceed many of the boasted ruling class. If I can exalt my race, if I can gain the applause of the good, and the approbation of God, the thoughts of the ignorant and prejudiced will not concern me. If a man be too proud, too selfconceited, or so blind by prejudice as not to recognize and honor true merit wherever discovered, I want not his good opinion. Let him reserve it for those whom it will please or displease!⁴⁴

This passage highlights just how much the talented tenth ideology informed Chesnutt's worldview during the 1870s and 1880s and entwined his longstanding personal interests with broader social concerns. Here Chesnutt envisions a potential future in the North dedicated to both the pursuit of his personal interests and the fight for racial equality. He envisions achieving personal success, which will serve as a model for the collective race. Elsewhere in his journal and letters from the Howard years, it is clear that Chesnutt was highly motivated to serve as a racial exemplar and to reach for the personal success that he had long hoped and planned for; doing so, he believed, would usher other blacks toward their own personal successes.

But it would be a mistake to suggest that Chesnutt's personal aspirations diminished due to his exposure to racial uplift ideology at Howard. His training as a race leader actually accelerated his drive to realize his personal aspirations, as it provided him with both a socially and psychologically suitable context in which to pursue those aspirations. His efforts were favorably received by the majority of black Americans along with many white Americans who were sympathetic to the plight of postbellum

African Americans. Perhaps more importantly, his merger of self-interests and social concerns was psychologically vital. As his biographers have pointed out, Chesnut worried during his early life in the South about his relationship to those African Americans in lower socioeconomic positions than him.⁴⁵ He was especially concerned about being perceived by his black neighbors as a self-important racial deserter. By the time he returned to Howard as a teacher, Chesnut's sense of social alienation had grown considerably. By accepting the unofficial position of racial exemplar, Chesnut felt free and, in fact, morally justified—in the name of social progress—to pursue his dreams of fame and fortune.

Chesnut soon turned his private convictions about racial reform into public action. In the 1880s and 1890s he began writing essays and delivering speeches on a range of race-related topics, including the necessity of black suffrage, the inevitability of racial amalgamation, and the faulty logic of racial categorization. Several of his most politically incendiary essays, including “What is a White Man?” (1889), “An Inside View of the Negro Question” (1889), and “A Plea for the American Negro,” (1900) appeared in well-known publications, earning him national notoriety as an outspoken racial reformer and making him a coveted racial spokesman. Again, it must be noted that he engaged in this work prior to, during, and after his literary career. We see Chesnut's devotion to race work in one of his earliest known speeches, which he delivered around 1882, called “The Future of the Negro.” In it, he commemorated the nearly twenty years since the Emancipation Proclamation in front of a mostly black audience in Fayetteville. The purpose of the speech, he explained to his audience, was to “celebrate the emancipation of a people from bondage; to rejoice in the progress which this people have made in their

freedom; and to forecast the future—to look forward and see with prophetic vision those future triumphs which the stern and resistless logic of events is slowly, but surely bringing into focus.”⁴⁶

The speech highlighted Chesnut’s faith in and dedication to ensuring an equitable political future for African Americans. In this speech and others like it, he self-identified as a racial worker and urged other blacks to enlist in the fight for the collective advancement of the race; he repeatedly implored his audience to do their part. His concluding remarks underscored his devotion to racial uplift: “let no one think that we have finished our work. We have scarce begun it, and the greater part is yet to do.”⁴⁷ Chesnut looked ahead and understood that race would continue to be a defining social problem in twentieth-century America. The speech left little doubt that Chesnut was ready for the fight. What no one in the audience that day could have known, though, was his weapon of choice: a pen. Chesnut believed that his greatest contribution to the struggle for racial equality, not to mention his best chance at realizing the dreams of his youth, would come in the field of literary authorship.

The Work of Writing

Chesnut’s earliest interest in literature as a possible career field was preceded by a prolonged bout of vocational anxieties. While vocational fears were common for young men his age, Chesnut’s extraordinary belief in his own greatness coupled with his commitment to the ideology of the self-made man exacerbated his concerns. Chesnut placed a great deal of pressure on himself to succeed, and was by the mid-1870s beset by

growing fears about his professional future. As we have seen, he compulsively trained himself over a span of several years for a prodigious future, but his marriage in 1878 to his colleague Susan Perry tempered his lofty personal aspirations. Chesnutt was suddenly pressed to figure out how to reconcile the obligation to support his family with his longstanding dreams of personal grandeur.

The years immediately preceding his entry into the literary field were consumed by feelings of career uncertainty and fears of professional failure. After teaching for nearly a decade, his academic post no longer appealed to him as it once had. Realizing that he would never make the money nor gain the social prestige he sought as a teacher, Chesnutt felt, as early as the middle of the 1870s, compelled to make a career move. He dreamed of pursuing more lucrative, prestigious work away from the South. He felt increasingly restless and alone in North Carolina. Furthermore, he worried about the amount of money he spent relative to the little he was saving; he notes in his journal on July 6, 1874 that “I’ve got to make my living somehow, and I am not making anything but spending all the time.”⁴⁸ While his journal entries reveal that he dreamed of rising to the top of any number of prestigious fields, including law and medicine, Chesnutt’s professional focus appears to have shifted directly to the field of letters by 1875. That summer he penned a short sketch titled “Lost in a Swamp,” which he called “my first real attempt at literature.”⁴⁹ It would be the first of many literary attempts he would make in his journal.

Chesnutt’s original interest in the profession of authorship must be understood in the context of his intensifying sense of personal and social frustrations. He was by the early 1880s despondent over the regression of African American social and political

rights in the wake of Reconstruction. He looked on with increasing anger and skepticism as the country, especially in the South, withdrew from the social and political ideals of Reconstruction and marched steadily into the Jim Crow era. His journal entries reinforce the important point that he initially viewed literature as a potentially powerful mode of racial work. By the early 1880s Chesnutt had become disheartened over the lack of African American political progress in the years following Reconstruction.

Furthermore, his decision to pursue a literary career was prompted, in part, by his growing personal frustrations with regard to the political, social, and intellectual limitations in the post-Reconstruction South. He resented the political restrictions placed on African Americans, and he began to seriously doubt the likelihood of full reform in the South. As a result, Chesnutt's focus shifted to a potential future in the North. A train trip he took to Washington D.C. in the early summer of 1879 introduced him to what he perceived was a new world in the north, marked by black mobility and professional and cultural opportunities.⁵⁰ In retrospect, the trip was revelatory insofar as it reinforced for him the shocking disparity between life in the rural south and the possibilities available to him in the North. He saw blacks enjoying civil liberties and political freedoms nearly unimaginable in North Carolina. He found himself in a world less afflicted—or so it seemed—by racial prejudice. Chesnutt envied the younger, middle-class blacks in Washington, most of whom seemed to have an easier time both personally and professionally. He returned from the trip feeling that he was trapped in his Southern environment.

Indeed, Chesnutt's final journal entries, written in the years just prior to his departure from the South, reveal his anguish and anxious aspiration for a life beyond the

one he was living. In one particularly telling entry, for instance, Chesnutt divulges the following:

I get more and more tired of the South. I pine for civilization, and 'equality.' I sometimes hesitate about deciding to go, because I am engaged in a good work, and have been doing, I fondly hope, some little good. But many reasons urge me the other way; and I think I could serve my race better in some more congenial occupation. And I shudder to think of exposing my children to the social and intellectual proscription to which I have been a victim.⁵¹

There was, by this point, no turning back for Chesnutt. While he could take solace in his track record as an educator, he felt strongly that he must leave the South and move to the North in order to have a real chance to achieve his personal ambitions and to provide greater opportunities for his family. His remarks also suggest that he was no longer so sure of his—or of any other individual black American's—ability to transcend, through sheer grit and determination, systemic white racism.

The chance both to realize his personal ambitions and engage in socially purposeful work led Chesnutt to become a literary author. At first he developed a model of authorship that he believed would allow him to fulfill his dual desires: to write for a social purpose and a personal profit. He outlined his literary philosophy and authorial intentions in a series of formative journal entries in the spring of 1880. Referring to a career in literature as his “cherished dream,” the 22 year old Chesnutt felt compelled by an irresistible force which “call[ed] [him] to the task” of writing a book.⁵² As the literary critic Paul R. Petrie has recently pointed out, few American writers have specified so minutely, before the fact, their intentions for undertaking a career in letters, as did Charles Chesnutt.⁵³ Although he worried about his lack of literary experience, Chesnutt felt emboldened and guided by a moral mission. His earliest musings on a potential

literary career confirm that he was drawn to literary authorship precisely as a vehicle for racial reform. To put it another way, his literary aspirations were inseparable from and in service to his commitment to racial uplift.

At the heart of Chesnutt's literary philosophy was the Howellsian belief in the ability of writers to socially, ethically, and morally transform their audiences—conceived as individual members of the body politic. The first prefatory quote to this chapter underscores the point that Chesnutt set out to deploy his fiction as a weapon in the “crusade” against the intensifying post-Reconstruction trend toward civil re-enslavement for black freedmen and women.⁵⁴ His goal was to alter the attitudes and ideas of white Gilded Age readers in order to persuade them to revise their personal, social, and political behavior toward their fellow African American citizens.⁵⁵ As Petrie has rightfully noted, Chesnutt, much like Howells, defined literature “in terms that exceed[ed] entertainment, commodity, or high-cultural art”; the literary enterprise was for Chesnutt primarily a “moral and communicative project” the end result of which would be, he hoped, a “moral revolution” in the United States.⁵⁶

Jane Tompkins's notion of the “cultural work” performed by literary authors and texts provides us with a useful way of understanding Chesnutt's model of authorship. In her famous study of antebellum American fiction, Tompkins argued that many of the era's aesthetically maligned literary texts must be reconceived as “attempts to redefine the social order,” noting that eighteen and nineteenth century novelists often had moral and social “designs” that transcended aesthetics.⁵⁷ Writers such as Harriet Beecher and Frederick Douglass tried to affect the ways their readers thought and acted.⁵⁸ According to Tompkins, a text such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* should be judged by the extent to which

it “engaged in solving a problem or a set of problems specific to the time in which it was written.”⁵⁹ Although Tompkins does not treat his work directly, her point about the ability of literary texts to express and shape social realities resembles Chesnutt’s theories about literature. Like Howells, Chesnutt conceived of the literary author as a kind of cultural broker and a mediator of social problems. And while he lacked a fully formed aesthetic plan, Chesnutt did have some concrete ideas about the form and style his writing would take.

From the outset of his writing career, Chesnutt viewed himself as a literary realist seeking to transform his first-hand experiences and recollections as a black man into socially minded fiction. He wanted to eschew the prevailing stereotypical black characters and scenes; instead Chesnutt would, as he put it, “come down to hard facts,” meaning that he would depict authentic black characters and life as he knew them.⁶⁰ He felt confident that he could draw from his stockpile of experiences in order to write fiction that would humanize African Americans for white readers, that would, to borrow Petrie’s phrase, “enable white audiences to experience the lives of culturally alien black others, subtly mediating across deeply inscribed racial boundaries on the assumption that sympathetic literary representation would lead to a social or moral revolution.”⁶¹

It’s important to note that Chesnutt immediately distinguished the mode in which he would work relative to previous black American writers. The difference boiled down to a matter of tone. The “abolitionist” writers, Chesnutt’s term to describe earlier generations of black and white writers whose work dealt with racial issues, usually wrote polemically in support of African American rights; according to Chesnutt, they “appeal[ed]” in trumpet tones” and “appealed to force.”⁶² However, the social and

political conditions of the day, in his view, demanded a different approach. Chesnut believed that moral suasion would provide writers with the best chance to overturn or combat the “subtle almost indefinable repulsion” most whites felt towards blacks in the late nineteenth century.⁶³ He understood that overt moralizing and “fierce indiscriminate onslaughts” on the part of writers, no matter how well meaning they might be, would not change these peoples’ minds.⁶⁴ Instead, he intended to enact a subtle process the end result of which would be moral edification or clarity for readers. Chesnut intended to “lead [readers] on imperceptibly, unconsciously step by step to the desired state of feeling.”⁶⁵ Although he did not, at this point, outline an explicit aesthetic program, he leaves little doubt that storytelling and aesthetics are crucial. In other words, he makes it clear that the writing must be pleasurable to read; the writer should not be overtly didactic or heavy-handed. For Chesnut, writing realistic, narrative-driven fictions would be the key to providing turn-of-the-century American society with a means of thinking critically about itself.

In addition, the African American literary tradition of Chesnut’s day paved the way for and, in some senses, sanctioned his ideas about the capacity of literary authors and texts to engage in the work of racial reform. As Brodhead has rightly pointed out, “every writer must first construct from the existing cultural materials or traditions a practice-governing idea of what writing ‘is’ and ‘does.’”⁶⁶ Literary historians have shown that the origins of African American writing in the nineteenth century are inextricably political in nature, forged “in the political urgencies of the antislavery crusade and subsequently in the attempts to preserve the emancipationist vision” of the Civil War.⁶⁷ The first generation of black writers, including Douglass and William Wells

Brown, worked primarily in the slave narrative genre in which factuality (real or fabricated) and truth telling were valued above fictive stories. Generally speaking, these authors wrote to advance or affirm the abolitionist cause. The artistic or aesthetic elements of their work were often played down or ignored altogether.⁶⁸ In short, the artistry of black writing was considered to be less important than its political and social components and consequences. The first generation of black writers helped establish the notion that black writing was inherently political in nature.

The main currents of African American writing remained expressly political throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. Literary historians agree that the worsening social and political conditions, especially in the South, defined the development of the African American literary tradition.⁶⁹ Chesnut was part of a second generation of African American writers, including Pauline Hopkins, Sutton Griggs, Iola Leroy, and Booker T. Washington, most of whom were known primarily as political activists in the fight for black rights. These writers, each with varying levels of commitment, literary skill, and success, entered the field of imaginative literature in order to “strike a blow against white prejudice,” as literary historian Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. put it in his important study of African American writing after the Civil War.⁷⁰ Furthermore, literary scholar Charles Duncan has drawn attention to the ways in which black writing during this period reflects the struggles of African Americans to construct and articulate an identity for themselves in an increasingly restrictive social milieu. The majority of black writers during this era took up their pens with the explicit purpose to dispel longstanding white racist ideologies and to establish social recognition and equality for black citizens.⁷¹

By the time Chesnutt entertained the idea of a career in letters, black writers were expected to serve as representatives or champions of their race. In his important book on the origins of black intellectualism in nineteenth-century America, Ross Posnock has noted that America's obsession with race and racial categorization in the years following the Civil War meant created the impression that black intellectuals and artists of the day would take up the mantle of race work or engage directly with the "race problem."⁷² As putative "race workers" black artists were saddled with a number of entrenched cultural expectations and aesthetic categorizations placed on them by predominately white publishers, reviewers, and readers. Chief among those expectations for black authors was the imperative not to cross the literary color line. That is, black writers were encouraged and often required to represent a narrow version of African American experience, almost always construed as rural and Southern. Furthermore, as Matthew Wilson has pointed out, black writers at the turn of the twentieth century were expected to avoid any critical treatment of white life. According to Wilson, neither critics nor publishers nor white audiences were willing to listen to the voice of an African American who had stepped outside of his or her "proper" role.⁷³

As Posnock has pointed out, black artists were judged on these criteria and tended to lose visibility and suffer backlash if they attempted to untether themselves from the race work that typically defined them.⁷⁴ One can only imagine the burden such expectations and restrictive categories created for black artists. Indeed, the situation facing Chesnutt and other postbellum black authors calls to mind Toni Morrison's unsettling rhetorical question in the preface to *Playing in the Dark* (1992): "What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level always

conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be 'universal' or race-free?"⁷⁵ Morrison's question apparently did not haunt Chesnutt, at least not at first. He positioned himself squarely within the existing African American literary tradition insofar as he created an authorial identity that satisfied (white) cultural expectations of black writing.

Chesnutt's self-interests explain his initial willingness to carry the mantle of race work. In charting his path to letters, we must bear in mind that his personal interests were inseparable from his political and social concerns. Scholarship on Chesnutt often overlooks the extent to which both his commitment to authorship and the authorial identity he crafted were calculated to garner prestige and financial fortune. These were crucial considerations for him from the outset of his writing career. However, the focus on his "racial crusade" has shifted our attention away from the full range of reasons that compelled him to become the author he did. He chose to pursue a literary career, in large measure, because he thought it offered him as good a chance as any profession to achieve instant wealth and distinction, things he had always wanted but which had eluded him during his time as a Southern schoolteacher. In the same journal entries in which he spells out his literary agenda, Chesnutt lays bare his self-interests, admitting in a candid moment that:

I want fame; I want money; I want to raise my children in a different rank of life from that I sprang from. In my present vocation, I would never accumulate a competency, with all the economy and prudence, and parsimony in the world...but literature pays—the successful. There is a fascination about this calling that draws a scribbler irresistibly toward his doom. He knows that the chance of success is hardly one out of a hundred; but he is foolish enough to believe, or sanguine enough to hope, that he will be the successful one.⁷⁶

His remarks underscore the fact that Chesnutt came of age at the same time that fiction writing evolved in the United States into a professional, commercial activity, and a potentially viable way of earning a living. The journal entry also shows that he understood how perilous a career in letters would be relative to other fields. Confident in his writing talent and buoyed by a remarkable sense of determination, Chesnutt decided that the potential high rewards of authorship were worth the potential risks.

However, his dreams of literary greatness were beset during the 1880s and 1890s by the more immediate matters of establishing a social standing and earning enough money to support his family. After the Chesnutts moved to Cleveland, Ohio in 1883, Charles spent the next several years struggling to carve time out of his busy professional schedule for writing. He worked hard by day, first as a clerk for the Nickel Plate Railroad Company in the accounting and legal offices, and, after 1890, as an attorney and owner of a lucrative stenography business, which would be his principal occupation through the rest of his life.⁷⁷ While routinely working 15 and 16 hour days in his office in downtown Cleveland, Chesnutt somehow mustered the energy, usually at night and on the weekends, to keep his literary hopes alive; specifically, he worked on a number of short stories and sketches, as well as a longer piece that would evolve into his first novel.

His correspondences during these years confirm that Chesnutt longed to commit himself entirely to literary work. He explained to Albion W. Tourgee in a letter written in 1891 that, "I am simply biding my time, and hope in the near future to devote the greater part of my time to literary production. But as I have large and pressing family obligations, I have felt it best to do first the duty nearest to me, and to provide for any peradventure of failure or tardy success in the literary life before I undertook it."⁷⁸ The

letter demonstrates that Chesnut felt obligated to provide for his family. Also, he was reluctant to pursue a full-time writing career if doing so meant surrendering the social respectability and comfortable middle-class lifestyle he had established for his family. Although he had several short stories published during the 1880s and 1890s, writing remained for Chesnut a hobby during this period. He worked and waited. By the time he finally pursued a full-fledged literary career around 1899, he had, for nearly 20 years, carefully plotted and crafted an authorial identity based on his understanding of the literary market available to him. Few writers of any period in our literary history have anticipated or scouted the literary marketplace as thoroughly as Chesnut did. He took the leap into the field of letters confident about his literary prospects for several reasons.

For one thing, he was convinced of his ability to forge a critically and commercially successful career in letters by extending the existing African American literary tradition. Chesnut found major shortcomings within the canon of black American writing; most glaringly, he perceived that the literary conversation about race and the legacy of slavery had been dominated by white (albeit well-meaning) writers, such as Stowe in the early 1850s and Tourgee and George Washington Cable in the 1860s through the 1880s. Repeatedly in letters to friends and literary associates, Chesnut affirmed the notion that his “insider” status, as a black man, would increase the demand for his literary work. “I am under the impression that a colored writer of literature is something that editors and the public would be glad to recognize and encourage,” is how he phrased it in a letter written to George Washington Cable in January of 1889.⁷⁹ After all, only a handful of black Americans had taken up the pen and actually spoken for themselves; those who had published had done so mainly in the form

of autobiography or slave narrative. In his estimation there simply had not been any significant contributions made by black writers to the realm of purely imaginative fiction.

Playing up to the novelty and apparent paradox of black belletristic performance in the post-Civil War era, Chesnutt touted himself as the creator of a new black literary tradition. While his political goals were in line with many black writers from previous generations, his aesthetic and artistic goals ranged wider. Chesnutt would become, along with Dunbar, one of the first African American writers to conceive and, as Charles Duncan put it recently, “aggressively call attention to himself” primarily as an imaginative literary artist, thereby locating or establishing himself outside the black literary tradition of truth-telling developed through more than a century of slave narratives.⁸⁰ He saw himself taking up the black tradition of literary social protest from a wholly new, fictional angle. The novelist, he believed, could perform socio-political work on par with the authors of slave narratives and other nonfiction texts. According to Chesnutt, the key distinction was that fiction held greater appeal for readers, as it could entertain without lacerating quite as much.

Although Dunbar actually beat him to it, and other writers such as Griggs, Hopkins, and Leroy were also writing and publishing fiction during in the final decades of the nineteenth century, Chesnutt proclaimed the lack of a true black literary tradition. For example, In a letter written to Alice S. Haldeman in 1896, in response to Haldeman’s question “What has the Negro done in science and literature?,” Chesnutt surveyed black American writing from the Revolutionary era to the end of the nineteenth century and concluded that, while there had been many admirable “efforts in the right direction” by writers such as Phyllis Wheatley and James M. Trotter, these nor other productions by

African Americans “[could] be classed as literature in the higher and finer sense of the term.”⁸¹ The fact that Chesnutt readily dismissed such a rich body of work spanning nearly 150 years says a great deal about his intense wish to be a literary innovator.

In addition, Chesnutt decided to pursue a full-time career as a writer of race fictions based on the assumption that Gilded Age Americans were eager to read and discourse publicly and privately on the Negro question. The turbulent social and political scene in the aftermath of Reconstruction seemed to invite—if not demand—such fictional treatment. “It seems to me that there is a growing demand in literature dealing with the Negro, and for information concerning subjects with which he is in any manner connected...in these subjects there is a vast field for literary work,” is how he put it to Cable in a letter written in January of 1889.⁸² The success of Albion Tourgee’s novel *A Fool’s Errand, by One of the Fools*, published in 1879, seemed to confirm Chesnutt’s notion that American readers were hungry for stories about African American life. A white Ohioan who relocated to the South after the Civil War, Tourgee wrote his best-selling novel about racial turmoil during Reconstruction in North Carolina after serving as an advocate of Negro suffrage and a superior court judge.⁸³ *A Fool’s Errand* both inspired Chesnutt and provided him with a working model. Reflecting in his journal on the novel’s immense popularity, Chesnutt noted, “There is something romantic, to the Northern mind, about the Southern negro,” before adding that “if Judge Tourgee, with his necessarily limited intercourse with colored people, and his limited stay in the South, can write such interesting descriptions, such vivid pictures of Southern life and character as to make himself rich and famous, why could not a colored man...write a far better book about the South than Judge Tourgee or Mrs. Stowe has written?”⁸⁴ Tourgee’s novel

offered proof of a large and essentially untapped literary market comprised of sympathetic Northern readers who sought realistic depictions of African American experience. Chesnutt was convinced that his firsthand knowledge of what he called “the whole moral and social condition” of black Americans would enable him to write as well as—if not better than—Tourgee and Stowe.⁸⁵

Furthermore, the relationship he established with George Washington Cable, who served as his mentor during his years of literary apprenticeship, pushed him toward the realm of race fiction. His connection with Cable was pivotal in terms of Chesnutt’s early development as a writer. In December of 1888, he met Cable, a writer of fiction with a broad national reputation and a well-known “liberal” on the question of race in the United States, at the Congregational Club meeting in Cleveland on December 21, 1888.⁸⁶

Chesnutt approached him for advice on how to break into the literary field. Although his short story, “The Goophered Grapevine” had appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* the previous year, Chesnutt was still a literary neophyte, and he looked up to Cable as an experienced, morally courageous writer with extensive knowledge of the publishing industry. Right away, Cable saw in Chesnutt an intelligent, passionate man in a position to make a valuable contribution to the “Open Letter Club,” which Cable had recently formed to generate national discussions of race-related topics.⁸⁷

Throughout the nearly ten-year period in which the two were in regular correspondence, Cable urged Chesnutt to become an expressly political writer and prompted him to write political essays on the race question, the first of which was titled “An Inside View of the Negro Question,” which was written less than a month after their first meeting. Joseph R. McElrath and his coeditors of Chesnutt’s letters point out that

his writings had been, prior to his meeting Cable, “literary rather than political, wholly unconcerned with the need for social change.”⁸⁸ Cable sold his protégé on the idea that literary profitability and critical distinction were possible *if* Chesnutt were willing to embrace the role of racial spokesman; he persuaded Chesnutt to write ideologically, both in nonfiction and fiction. Cable’s advice guided Chesnutt’s early course in letters, and it is crucial to bear in mind that Cable’s instructions conflicted with Chesnutt’s original artistic ideals, which were founded on political subtlety and nuance—that is, on avoiding precisely the kind of polemical treatment of the race question that Cable called for. Ultimately, Cable’s connections in the publishing world did not benefit Chesnutt, and by the mid-1890s Chesnutt was no longer under Cable’s tutelage. However, Cable’s enthusiasm for the younger writer’s work, and Cable’s endorsement of him as a racial writer, bolstered Chesnutt’s confidence and moved him closer to literary racial reform.⁸⁹

His sense of the gaps in the black literary tradition, combined with the advice he received from Cable and other literary mentors and the racially-charged sociopolitical climate at the end of the nineteenth century, convinced Chesnutt that becoming a racial writer offered him the best chance for a financially and critically successful literary career. As Andrews has noted in his biography, Chesnutt at first saw no apparent conflict between writing for a purpose and writing for a profit in the realm of imaginative literature. Instead, he believed that his social and political convictions would inspire, rather than inhibit, his artistic development and public reception.⁹⁰ Still, Chesnutt at concealed his status as an African American when his tales and short stories were first published in newspapers and small magazines in the 1880s. Aware of the fact that

literary works written by black authors often received less serious consideration by white audiences, he kept quiet to insure that his work would be considered entirely on merit.⁹¹

Unlike almost every African American writer before or contemporary with him, Chesnutt's earliest literary successes had little to do with the fact that he was black. He earned his initial fame without referencing either his own racial identity or the current racial issues of his day. Chesnutt at first presented himself to readers less as a "race author" and more as a literary craftsman. His familiarity with and mastery of the accepted modes and traditions of the American short story at the turn of the twentieth century charmed critics and general readers alike.⁹² With his series of "conjure stories," featuring the narrator Uncle Julius McAdoo, an elderly, mixed-race ex-slave and gifted raconteur who tells his stories in a heavy Southern African American dialect, Chesnutt adhered to the local color tradition, the predominant mode of the American short story during the 1880s and 1890s.⁹³ Local colorists "offered American readers essentially sympathetic descriptions of unfamiliar people whose quaint and often outdated mode of living had survived only in out-of-the-way places and cultural backwaters of America, or in the memories of American writers."⁹⁴ Readers of local color and regional fiction "expected a realistic treatment of subject from their favorite authors, but the type of realism they preferred did not take long looks at tragic or pessimistic features of American life."⁹⁵ Rather, "local colorists satisfied their readers with superficial renditions of the life, manners, and environment of people whose day-to-day experience seemed simpler and less trying than that of the reader or the writer himself."⁹⁶

Chesnutt first earned notoriety as a literary author by working within and, in the process, subtly subverting the local color mode to satisfy the expectations of white

publishers and readers. Andrews has noted that his series of Uncle Julius dialect stories appeared at a time when African American characters and “Negro dialect” were gaining popularity in the local color market, as writers, including Irwin Russell, Sherwood Bonner, and Thomas Nelson Page, created a literary medium in which “unfamiliar and picturesque aspects of Afro-American life before and after the war were treated with a mixture of sentiment and humor to produce a popular new subject for fiction.”⁹⁷ Drawing heavily on authentic black folk traditions, Chesnut’s early stories fed his audiences’ appetite for consumable, “safe” otherness while they simultaneously pushed back against the plantation tradition, introducing white readers to aspects of antebellum African American life that had rarely made their way into belles-lettres. Published in August of 1887 in the *Atlantic Monthly*, “The Goophered Grapevine” was one of Chesnut’s first and most important conjure stories. Inspired by a voodoo tale told by his father-in-law’s black gardener in Fayetteville, the story features a weird and wonderful folktale, set in the pre-Civil War South and delivered in Negro dialect embedded within a framing story from the present day. While contemporary critics have reappraised this story, along with the handful of others he published in the 1880s, as “coy” social and political commentaries on postbellum Southern racism, these works were received warmly by reviewers and readers precisely because they appeared, at first glance, as highly realistic, nostalgic tales in the plantation vein. As a young and essentially unknown writer hoping to forge a career in letters, Chesnut knew that he needed to approach his readers carefully; he understood, as demonstrated by his earliest fictional works, that he could win his place in American authorship only if he conformed to the habits and tastes of the white literary establishment. Hoping to attract the widest possible audience, Chesnut

capitalized on his first-hand knowledge of African American life, establishing a favorable critical reputation as the author of a handful of realistic dialect stories written in the style of the era's most popular local color fiction.

A letter he wrote in 1891 to the influential publishing company, Houghton Mifflin, marked a key step in the evolution of Chesnutt's authorial identity. As late as 1889, Chesnutt's publishers chose to delete any mention of the young author's racial identity in an effort to allow him to escape the reductive expectations imposed on black authors.⁹⁸ Although Chesnutt at first appreciated the omission, he soon changed his mind. In the letter he pitches for publication a new batch of short stories that would, nine years later, comprise *The Conjure Woman*, only this time Chesnutt invited Houghton, Mifflin to publicly disclose his racial identity as a way to bolster interest in his work. He offers his rationale in the following excerpt:

There is one fact which would give this volume distinction...It is the first contribution by an American with acknowledged African descent to purely imaginative literature. In this case, the infusion of African blood is very small...but it is enough, combined with the fact that the writer was practically brought up in the South, to give him a knowledge of the people whose description is attempted. These people have never been treated from a closely sympathetic standpoint, they have not had their day in court...this is, so far as I know, the first instance where a writer with any of their own blood has attempted a literary portrayal of them. If these stories have any merit, I think it is more owing to this new point of view than any other being.⁹⁹

Encouraged by the warm reception his dialect stories had received, Chesnutt apparently saw no conflict between his desire to write for a profit and a social purpose. In fact, he believed that revealing his racial identity and writing for a more expressly political purpose would inspire him to greater efforts. These comments demonstrate that Chesnutt's unique path to letters was motivated both by a genuine feeling of social

obligation, as evidenced by his remark that disempowered African Americans had yet to have their “day in court,” and also by a powerful personal incentive toward fame and fortune. This is one of several letters he wrote in the 1890s—after bursting onto the literary scene as a local color writer—in which he emphasized the potential profitability and prestige available to him as a black writer working in the realm of imaginative literature. Hungry for recognition and financial reward, Chesnutt tried to create fiction that would appeal to the general reader while earning the praise of critics and reviewers in the literary press.

1899 was a momentous year for Chesnutt, as it marked the highpoint of his critical acclaim and popular appeal as a literary author. That year saw three of his books solicited, marketed, and published by some of the most prestigious publishing firms in the United States. Walter Hines Page, a senior member of Houghton Mifflin, brought out *The Conjure Woman*, a collection of Chesnutt’s dialect stories, and it was favorably received as “a dialect book with a difference.”¹⁰⁰ The major difference boiled down to the collection’s unsympathetic portrayal of slavery and slaveholders in the Old South. *The Conjure Woman*, as Andrews has pointed out, quietly launched Chesnutt’s campaign to challenge the social and aesthetic premises on which genteel literary realism rested.¹⁰¹ Chesnutt followed it up with a second short story collection, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*. Compared to *The Conjure Woman*, the stories that made up TWOHY were more politically provocative and contemporary; only one of the nine stories in the collection is set in the antebellum era. The fundamental theme that united the stories was miscegenation in the United States, a topic that some readers and reviewers found too controversial for popular literature. In addition to these short story

collections, Chesnutt also wrote a schoolroom biography of Frederick Douglass for the Beacon Biography series.¹⁰² He also sent two novel manuscripts to Houghton Mifflin for consideration toward the end of the year. While none of these books earned Chesnutt the kind of windfall profits he hoped for, they gave him reason to be optimistic about his literary future. On September 30, 1899, Chesnutt made a decisive move: after nearly 20 years of working and waiting to do so, he closed his stenography business to pursue his lifelong dream of becoming a full-time author.

William Dean Howells's glowing literary review of Chesnutt's work signaled the new writer's successful entry into the literary mainstream. In "Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories," which appeared in the May 1900 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Howells surveyed Chesnutt's short story collections and predicted that he would enjoy a bright future in letters. Evaluating the stories in *TWOHY*, Howells remarks that, "It is not from their racial interest that we could first wish to speak of them...It is much more simply and directly, as works of art, that they make their appeal, and we must allow the force of this quite independently of this other interest."¹⁰³ Not surprisingly, "The Dean" celebrates Chesnutt's realistic depiction of mixed-race Americans; Howells links Chesnutt to what he calls "the good school" of realist practitioners, which included Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Henry James. Howells also praises the title story, "The Wife of His Youth," as a "passionless" and "almost ironical" treatment of a little known segment of African American life, which was "tense with potential tragedy" yet previously unrepresented in our literature.¹⁰⁴ For Howells, *TWOHY* is "altogether a remarkable piece of work" because it offers readers a clear view of the problems that face the "paler shades" of black Americans without passing moral judgments or making

explicitly political statements.¹⁰⁵ He commends “the quiet self-restraint of [Chesnutt’s] performance,” and attempts to pay him a compliment by noting that readers unfamiliar with Chesnutt’s biography would likely guess him to be white man, “wholly from the outside,” as he put it, or a detached “observer” of African American life.¹⁰⁶

The impact of Howells’s review on Chesnutt’s confidence and his public literary standing is hard to overstate. As we saw in the last chapter, Howells was the most influential arbiter of literary taste in America; as such, his positive evaluation of Chesnutt’s work was, as the editors of Chesnutt’s letters have noted, the most significant benchmark of his success to date.¹⁰⁷ Shortly after the review appeared in print, Chesnutt sent Howells an appreciative letter in which he admitted that the review made him feel “that I can safely subscribe myself a man of letters and hope for a worthy career in that field of effort.”¹⁰⁸ Perhaps most importantly, Howells’s encouragement reinforced Chesnutt’s decision to become a full-time author. That America’s preeminent man of letters had called national attention to the literary artistry of his work must have made Chesnutt’s heart swell with pride. Furthermore, Chesnutt was undoubtedly thrilled by the fact that Howells validated his pursuit of any number of literary paths. On one hand, Howells suggested that Chesnutt’s mimetic portrayal of the peculiar problems of mixed-race Americans connected him to Dunbar, who was, at that point, the most recognizable and successful race writer. On the other hand, Howells ended the review by asserting that there is no color line in literature, and, consequently, he seemed to invite Chesnutt to take his writing career in any direction the younger author wished. Although he had no way of knowing it at the time, Howells’s comment about the lack of a literary color line would soon come back to haunt Chesnutt.

The Limits of Literary Racial Reform

1901 proved to be a pivotal year for Chesnutt as a literary artist. As soon as his first major novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*, appeared in print the previous year, he eagerly turned his attention to his next project, hoping to cash in on the buzz generated by *Cedars* and his earlier collections of short stories. While Chesnutt had, by the turn of the century, established a solid reputation as a writer, he had not yet reached a widespread national audience nor had he earned the kind of astronomical money and prestige he dreamed about. He knew that he would need to be a remunerative writer in order to support his family and justify his decision to quit his stenography business, and Chestnutt hoped his next book would change his fortunes. He conceived of *The Marrow of Tradition* as a “purpose” novel that would capture the attention of the American reading public and catapult his literary sales and critical reputation. It would be a significant departure from *Cedars*, a book whose modest success with white readers was due to its restrained and judicious treatment of the often-sensationalized social questions surrounding miscegenation and mixed-race Americans. Chesnutt’s biographers have noted that critics and readers warmed to his first novel precisely because it was subdued and un-polemical. Set, as many of his most well received early short stories were, in the antebellum South, the novel depicts in conventional romantic fashion the tragic consequences of its heroine, Rena Walden’s, attempt to pass for white. According to Andrews, the concessions *Cedars* made to literary clichés and popular sentiment,

especially in its conclusion, were the price Chesnutt had to pay to get his story before the American reading public.¹⁰⁹

With *Marrow*, Chesnutt sought to create a far greater social stir, as he believed the time was ripe for a problem novel on a major racial issue of immediate concern. Turning away from the more distant past, he focused on a recent and urgent historical event: the Wilmington, North Carolina race “riots” of 1898.¹¹⁰ For more than two years Chesnutt gathered information and studied the causes and consequences of the riots; in February of 1901 he visited Wilmington and the Cape Fear region of North Carolina on a kind of fact-finding mission.¹¹¹ Morally shocked and artistically inspired by what he called “an outbreak of pure, malignant and altogether indefensible race prejudice” in his home state, Chesnutt began in late 1900 to develop an outline for *Marrow*.¹¹² He revealed his intentions for the novel in a series of correspondences he kept as he worked on it. To his cousin, John P. Green, Chesnutt explained that the novel would be “of broader scope,” compared to his earlier fictions, insofar as it would attempt “to sketch in vivid though simple lines the whole race situation.”¹¹³ “It is by far the best thing I have done, and is a comprehensive study of racial conditions in the South, in the shape of what is said to be a very dramatic novel, which my publishers boldly compare with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” is how he described the book to Booker T. Washington.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, he framed his new project in a letter to Isaiah B. Scott, the president of Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, as “both a novel and a political and sociological tract—a tremendous sort of combination if the author can but find the formula for mixing them.”¹¹⁵

These and other letters written in the months leading up to its release demonstrate that Chesnutt envisioned his new novel as a potential best-seller and a critical favorite,

for it offered what he felt was the ideal blend of the artistic and the political. As the critic Matthew Wilson recently noted, Chesnutt sought in *Marrow* to provide American readers with a counter history which he hoped would help them remember what they had been invited to forget in terms of the legacy of slavery and brutal realities of Jim Crow-sanctioned racial discrimination. The novel would be at once “dramatic” and politically urgent, and he imagined that it would redefine the historical narrative on the post-Reconstruction years. Chesnutt was convinced, both prior to and in the years following the novel’s publication, that *Marrow* was his masterpiece. And his letter to Washington demonstrates that he conceived of the novel as his response to and the legitimate successor of Stowe’s most famous protest novel. He expected that the book would, as he put it in a letter to his publisher, “become lodged in the popular mind” of American readers and make him a financial and critical fortune.¹¹⁶

The reception of the novel was not what Chesnutt expected. Its sales were disappointing by nearly any standard and indicative of the fact that the public basically ignored it. Wilson has noted, by comparison, that six novels published in the United States in 1901 sold 150, 000 copies while nine others sold 100, 000, whereas only 3, 276 copies of *The Marrow of Tradition* were sold in the same year.¹¹⁷ Reviews were generally unfavorable, and Southern reviews were especially harsh. Readers and critics objected to the novel’s messy plot lines and blatant didacticism. *Marrow* was generally condemned as a literary invective—even Howells found it to be a “bitter, bitter book”—and its author was criticized for allowing what many readers felt was a dangerous and absurd political agenda to overwhelm his once nuanced artistry.¹¹⁸ As many of his critics have pointed out, Chesnutt clearly miscalculated the attitudes and preferences of his

white readers. The novel appeared at a time when widespread curiosity and sympathy toward Afro Americans was on the decline, which is to say that many white Americans were worn out by the “Negro problem.” Literary and cultural tastes had shifted, as demonstrated by the rise in popularity of re-visionary historical romances which catered to the white public’s desire for nostalgia and safe escapism through the re-imagining of an idyllic South marked by halcyon relations between slaves and slave owners. There was virtually no market for a book that drew attention to and denounced the cruel legacy of slavery and the contentious state of postbellum race relations. Chesnut’s earnings from his first two novels proved inadequate to support the financial needs of his family; consequently, in 1902 he reopened the stenography firm he had closed two years earlier.¹¹⁹

The critical and commercial failure of *Marrow* undermined Chesnut’s artistic confidence and triggered in him feelings of frustration, anger, self-doubt and confusion as he struggled to figure out how to proceed in his literary career. His ultimate goal of writing for a profit and a purpose now seemed hopelessly out of reach, a point exemplified by a letter he wrote to Houghton Mifflin on December 30, 1901. In the letter Chesnut reiterates that he had expected to earn a significant amount of money from his books before conceding that he has drastically misjudged the nation’s reading preferences, saying, “I am beginning to suspect that the public as a rule does not care for books in which the principal characters are colored people, or with a striking sympathy with that race as contrasted with the white race.”¹²⁰ Reading the letter, one notices a stark shift in Chesnut’s tone compared to his previous correspondences with his publishers. Gone is his trademark faith in his work and its marketability; in its place is a palpable

sense of anxiety and uncertainty. Genuinely confounded by the public's lack of interest in what he felt was his greatest literary achievement, Chesnutt could only imagine that "[t]here must be something radically wrong somewhere" with the subject of the book.¹²¹ More tellingly, he shared with his publishers that he was, following the advice of several friends and literary associates, writing "along an entirely different line," by which he meant writing about something other than the topic of race.¹²²

What this and similar letters written around this period demonstrate is that his experiences with *Marrow* brought home to Chesnutt the artistic constraints he faced as a turn-of-the-century black writer. By then it was clear to him that any realistic chance of commercial and critical literary success would be possible only if he conformed to the conventional, often implicit, codes of black authorship. He could not, for example, be too politically controversial; moreover, his depictions of African American life would need to conform to popular white perceptions. The message was clear: writing fiction as inflammatory and subversive as *Marrow* was prohibited. However, Chesnutt was no longer satisfied to wage the kind of veiled social and political critiques he had in his earlier work. Unsure of how to reach white audiences without alienating them, he felt caught in an artistic bind. On one hand, Chesnutt faced literary and cultural expectations to be a "racial" writer; on the other hand, as his latest novel proved, he would be criticized and ultimately ignored if he were not the "right" kind of black writer. The publication of *Marrow* branded Chesnutt as an artist too politically incendiary for white mainstream readers. To reach the mainstream, he knew he needed to try a different approach.

And so he did. Matthew Wilson has recently shown that Chesnutt was also quietly working in an altogether different fictional genre during the years he wrote some of his most well-known race fictions.¹²³ From roughly 1897 to 1903, the period of his greatest productivity and notoriety as a racial writer, he worked in the relatively new genre of the white-life novel, “in which African Americans write exclusively about white experience.”¹²⁴ Chesnutt wrote the first two of his white novels, *A Business Career* and *The Rainbow Chasers*, during the same period in which he composed *Cedars*. According to Wilson, the third novel, *Evelyn’s Husband*, was likely written shortly after *Marrow*. In terms of their thematic preoccupations, these books stand apart from the rest of Chesnutt’s oeuvre insofar as they play down and, in some cases, ignore the presence of African Americans and the race question. Wilson and Andrews have pointed out that Chesnutt’s aim in his white-life novels was not the same as in his race fictions; he conceived of and wrote them with the primary expectation that they would please a mass audience.¹²⁵ All of Chesnutt’s white-life novels are romances, as during the late nineteenth century “the romance became almost synonymous with the novel in the public mind and was the most popular form of reading matter.”¹²⁶ Much to his disappointment, however, publishers accepted none of his white novels during his lifetime.¹²⁷

The challenges Chesnutt faced in placing these books calls to mind James Weldon Johnson’s essay, “The Dilemma of the Negro Artist,” which was published nearly 30 years after Chesnutt wrote his white-life fictions, and in which Johnson maintained that “White America has a strong feeling that Negro artists should refrain from making use of white subject matter...in plain words, white America does not welcome seeing the Negro competing with the white man on what it considers the white man’s own ground.”¹²⁸

Chesnutt's bid to cash in by portraying so-called white subject matter crashed and burned, and his white fictions would remain unknown to the public for over 100 years.

The white-life novels underscore one of the under-examined ironies of and mark a crucial moment in Chesnutt's literary career. He tried to move beyond the conventions of nineteenth-century black authorship at precisely the moment when his reputation as a racial writer made it practically impossible to do so. While these fictions have received scant attention from literary scholars, they are important insofar as they embody Chesnutt's desire and earliest efforts to be released from the imperative of literary racial representation. Like Wilson, I read these novels as attempts by Chesnutt to "escap[e] the burden of being representative" and as part of his little-known campaign to grow his literary repertoire beyond the realm of race fiction, or, in other words, to realize a new authorial position unencumbered by race.¹²⁹ We should not forget that it was risky for him to pour his time and energy into these works, especially considering his literary reputation and the aforementioned expectations of publishers, editors, and readers. Chesnutt must have known that his safest bet was to adhere to the formal and thematic conventions of his earliest short fiction. However, he held onto the notion that he could cross the literary color line and garner widespread acclaim. Furthermore, Chesnutt felt comfortable and entitled to write about white society from an insider's perspective; after all, he had inhabited middle-class white culture both in North Carolina and Ohio. The rejection of the white-life novels by publishers was a harrowing blow for him, as it reinforced his artistic dilemma. Scholarship on Chesnutt maintains that it was his inexorable commitment to being a racial writer that cut short his career as a professional writer. But critics remain slow to acknowledge the full scope of his literary ambitions.

The white-life fictions dramatize Chesnutt's desire to move beyond the category—with all of its attendant aesthetic and political expectations—of racial writer.

The dismal reception and sales of *Marrow* coupled with the outright rejection by publishers of his white life novels must be understood, I argue, as pivotal events in Chesnutt's brief career in letters. Together, these experiences accelerated a shift in his thinking about himself as a literary author and about the potential impact of his work. By 1902 he had lost faith in the idea of writers and literary texts as agents of social, moral, and political change. This was a major departure in thinking for a man who had for nearly two decades built his artistic identity around the notion of literary reform. The negative reaction to *Marrow* and the dismissal of his white life novels convinced Chesnutt that racism in American society was simply too entrenched for any writer—black, white, or otherwise—to topple. But he did not merely change his literary course as a result of these experiences. The private correspondences he composed around the turn of the century reveal Chesnutt's incipient misgivings about literary racial reform and indicate that he was reformulating his authorial identity and aesthetic goals while he was enjoying his highest levels of prestige as a racial writer. As early as 1899, he disavowed the kind of overt politicizing and edifying he aimed for in *Marrow*. In a letter written to a representative at Houghton Mifflin shortly after the publication of *Cedars*, for example, Chesnutt hopes that the novel will sell “in spite of its subject, or rather, because of its dramatic value apart from the race problem involved.”¹³⁰ Later in the letter he asserts, “I was trying to write, primarily, an interesting and artistic story, rather than a contribution to a polemical discussion.”¹³¹

What his comments suggest is that he began to imagine new possibilities for himself and for other African American writers almost as soon as he appeared in the national spotlight. When in early 1902 he agreed to help his friend, William W. Trotter, by publicly disagreeing with Booker T. Washington in the pages of in a nationally-known magazine, Chesnutt insisted that he not appear to American readers as polemical, as, “I am to be a literary artist,” he explained, before declaring that, “acrimonious personalities are the death of art.”¹³² Chesnutt appeared, to some degree, to internalize the fact that his artistic reputation had suffered from the controversy surrounding *Marrow*. And the controversy surrounding his failed novel fueled his evolving authorial ideas. Just a few years later, Chesnutt would turn away entirely from his earliest ideas about authorship and literary art, guiltily admitting to Walter Hines Page in June of 1904 that, “I realize that preaching is not art.”¹³³ These and other remarks he made around the same period signal the early stages of what would become a remarkable shift in Chesnutt’s ideas about literature and his role as an author. He was working out a new authorial identity, one that would be less entwined with (or beholden to) the realm of politics.

The evolution of Chesnutt’s thoughts about race shaped his new artistic goals, and we must understand those thoughts in order to grasp his artistic dilemma. The point I want to stress is that Chesnutt eventually rejected the cultural expectation that the work of black American artists (literary or otherwise) should champion or represent the entire African American race. And this change in his perspective can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that his ideas about race changed significantly since his early days in Fayetteville. Although he remained a steadfast advocate for the rights of African Americans, by the first decade of the twentieth century Chesnutt thought the concept of

race, insofar as it served as a primary marker of personal identity, to be an arbitrary and invidious distinction. “I do not believe that the current notion of race has any logical or scientific ground, or that it is, in its essence, a matter of very much importance” is how he phrased it in a speech given to the Boston Literary and Historical Association in the summer of 1905.¹³⁴ By the time he established his reputation as a race writer, Chesnutt rejected the idea of an inherent racialized identity and condemned the era’s nascent Afrocentric movement. Until the publication of his letters and speeches in 1999, most critics considered his fiction as a clear window into Chesnutt’s political beliefs; indeed, they glossed over the fact that he published his major race fictions during the same period in which he championed a social doctrine of racial assimilation. In a three-part essay published in the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1900 titled “The Future American,” Chesnutt happily predicted the absorption of the black race into the white race.¹³⁵ He forecasted a not-so-distant future in which black and white races would mingle to the point where traditional racial distinctions would disappear. While steering clear of the ongoing critical debate over his apparently prejudiced racial politics, I want to draw attention to his changing ideas about race to highlight the fact that, in his social and political life—and as a literary artist—, Chesnutt sought to move beyond binary ways of thinking about race and into what is sometimes (often naively) referred to today as a “post-racial” world.

The sense of artistic entrapment he felt when he realized how difficult it would be to cast off cultural expectations of black authorship and write beyond race had a major impact on all of Chesnutt’s subsequent work. In particular, I want to suggest that understanding his artistic dilemma helps us to make sense of the curious aesthetic

trajectory of his major race novels, a trajectory that frustrated and alienated the majority of Chesnutt's contemporaneous readers and critics, and one that has elicited a wide range of responses from subsequent scholars. Scholarship on Chesnutt takes for granted that his literary career was unraveled by his intensifying political commitments. With the disappointment of *Marrow* still fresh in his mind, he must have known that critics and the reading public alike would either pan or ignore his next novel, *The Colonial's Dream*, the purpose of which was, as Chesnutt inscribed in its dedication, "to bring the forces of enlightenment to bear upon the vexed problems which harass the South."¹³⁶ The final novel Chesnutt published before he ended his brief stint as a full-time literary author, *The Colonial's Dream* tells the story of Colonial French, a wealthy, Northern business man who returns to his Southern home and shortly thereafter sets out to reform the social ills he discovers there, including a convict leasing system that essentially recreates antebellum slavery for local blacks. Critics usually point to the pessimistic political trajectory in *Marrow* and especially in *The Colonial's Dream* as evidence of his devotion to an uncompromising, polemical program of racial reform.

But these critics have overlooked one of the great contradictions of Chesnutt's writing career: his major novels do not explicitly register his shifting authorial ideals. Mindful of his artistic constraints, Chesnutt opted to keep working within the genre of race fiction, as he had built his literary reputation in that area and knew it afforded him the best chance to earn a living as a writer. In fact, Petrie and Dean McWilliams have argued convincingly that Chesnutt wrote *The Colonial's Dream* as a means of confronting "the paradox of his own literary career" and the defeat of his socio-ethical literary ambitions.¹³⁷ French's dream of regenerating the South ends abruptly and

unceremoniously when he finds the body of his family's former servant disinterred and left on his porch by some local racists. Shocked and defeated, French abandons his efforts and returns to the North. Likewise, the novel's failures upon its publication left Chesnutt dispirited and marked the end of his belief in and commitment to literary reform.

Scholarship holds that Chesnutt spent the final years of his life resigned to his literary shortcomings and largely removed from the field of letters. He returned to his stenography business in order to recoup his literary losses and restore his life's routine. Furthermore, he is said to have shifted his attention away from commercial literature and back to the political arena. During the final three decades of his life, Chesnutt distanced himself from his literary ambitions and recommitted to his role as a political advocate for African Americans, joining the Committee of Twelve, founded by Booker T. Washington for "the purpose of preparing speeches and circulating printed matter that treated black people sympathetically in order to correct public misinterpretation of their cause."¹³⁸ Various social and political activities drew Chesnutt's attention away from literature; he devoted much of his time to writing speeches, position papers, and argumentative prose intended to secure civil rights of black Americans and expose the atrocities and hypocrisies of Jim Crow culture. And while Chesnutt did not stop writing fiction altogether, his expectations changed: he no longer aspired to literary grandeur and no longer tried to earn his living by his pen. Chesnutt's reputation as a writer of fiction plummeted in the years following *The Colonial's Dream*, a point that critics have attributed to the fact that he was socially and aesthetically out of touch with the Harlem-era writers who ascended to literary prominence in the 1920s. Chesnutt published only

three short stories after the publication of *The Colonial's Dream* and the end of World War I. As Andrews has pointed out, the publishers who rejected *Paul Marchand, F.M.C* in 1921, the last novel Chesnutt attempted to publish in his lifetime, judged the story “foreign in setting, characterization, and theme to the social realities of Jazz Age America.”¹³⁹ Chesnutt was considered by the end of his life as an inconsequential writer out of step with contemporary literary trends.

Contrary to the existing critical narrative, these were years of significant artistic exploration and achievement for Chesnutt. While he did spend most of his time as a political advocate, Chesnutt never actually left the literary world. Until his death in 1932, he meditated on the rightful role of black writers, pursuing questions that had preoccupied him since his arrival on the literary scene. Less concerned with his actual literary productions, I wish instead to end this chapter by redirecting our attention to Chesnutt’s thinking about authorship and literary art during his final and mostly forgotten years. His ideas during this period are crucial to our understanding of both his literary and cultural legacies, and those ideas, I would argue, have made a remarkable and permanent impact on the African American literary tradition. It was during the final stage of his life that he settled on and promulgated a redefinition of black authorship, one based upon a reversion of his earlier ideas about the aims of black writing and the artistic pursuit of what James Weldon Johnson referred to as “something that rises above race.”¹⁴⁰

In a campaign that spanned roughly the last 25 years of his life, one that played out in private correspondences as well as in several public speeches and essays, Chesnutt fought to expand the artistic possibilities available to and to abolish the limitations

imposed upon black writers. Perhaps smarting from the beating his novels had taken in the literary marketplace, he rebuked the notion that a writer's racial identity should, in any significant way, determine his or her artistic choices or public reception. Chesnutt highlighted his revised notions of authorship during the aforementioned speech, "Race Prejudice." He opened that speech by drawing his audience's attention to a recent editorial written by Thomas Fortune, the well-known African American civil rights activist and founder of the *New York Age*, in which, as Chesnutt put it, Fortune "expressed his disgust with the race subject" and asserted "his wish that the thought of the colored people might be set free to seek expression along other lines of intellectual effort and achievement."¹⁴¹ Chesnutt admitted to those members of the Boston Literary and Historical Association in attendance, most of who had attended the lecture to hear him talk about race, that he "often felt the same regret."¹⁴² Perhaps more tellingly, in a note written 22 years later to Carl Van Vechten, the promoter of many black artists of the Harlem Renaissance and the author of the controversial novel, *Nigger Heaven* (1926), which included a tribute to Chesnutt's literary greatness, Chesnutt confided his wish that he had pursued a literary career outside of the United States, in a genuinely "civilized" country in which his racial status "would have [had] no bearing whatever on [his] life or career, except perhaps as an interesting personal item."¹⁴³ These and other remarks Chesnutt made during his final years reflect his desire to release black writers from the cultural imperative to write narrowly about the subject of race.

He broke from his original literary reform agenda, as he was disillusioned and no doubt frustrated by the continued primacy of racial identification and rigid racial categories in early twentieth-century America. Having spent most of his adult life

engaged in the uphill fight for the advancement of African American political and social rights, Chesnut's experiences led him to believe that the country's binary thinking about race would perpetuate a cycle of white privilege and power and black exclusion and disadvantage along political, social, and economic lines. Abolishing the concept of race altogether was, in Chesnut's estimation, the only way to break the cycle. Consequently, in his public and private discourses during these years, he tried to reframe the nation's thinking about race. He repudiated the notion that there is a direct correlation between one's racial status and one's personal identity; instead, Chesnut argued that all Americans, by virtue of their common citizenship and humanity, belong to an inclusive—and conspicuously “race-less”—national identity. While addressing students at the predominately black Wilberforce University in 1913, for example, Chesnut expressed to them his wish “to avoid the beaten path of addresses to colored audiences by speaking to you simply as men and women, interested, in the same way, in the same things in which other people are interested.”¹⁴⁴ He then asserted that “the matter of race is too much emphasized” in the United States before going on to say, “I am not interested in American Negroes primarily as a race; I am interested in them as men. I should like to see their race lost sight of...and only their humanity and their citizenship borne in mind.”¹⁴⁵ Chesnut's remarks here signal his desire to collapse the artistic boundaries between the black and white worlds of Jim Crow America. His colorless conception of culture calls to mind Du Bois's famous imperative for African Americans to be genuine participants, or “to be co-workers” in a fully integrated “kingdom of culture.”¹⁴⁶ Viewing the idea of race as a fallacy, Chesnut hoped that the two distinct cultures would blend to form a single (and far greater) cultural entity.

Near the end of his life, Chesnutt repeatedly invoked his own short-lived literary career as a means of promoting his new authorial ideas. In letters and speeches he offered revisionist accounts of his authorial intentions as a model for aspiring black writers and also, perhaps, as a way of coming to grips with his shortcomings. In the aforementioned letter to Van Vechten, for instance, Chesnutt spurns the notion that “race pride” had any affect on his writing career. He wanted to be remembered not as an African American writer but simply as an *American* writer chronicling the lives of African Americans from an ethnographic perspective. He confides in Van Vechten, saying, “I never had any Negro complex...I wrote as an American studying a certain group, which...happened to be my own, from the standpoint of a student of life and psychology, and not primarily as a propagandist.”¹⁴⁷ He echoes these sentiments in another letter written roughly four years later to John Chamberlain, in which he insists, “I never wrote or tried to write as a Negro, but, merely, as nearly as possible in the American atmosphere, from an impersonal point of view, seeking truth without malice, with of course a friendly slant toward my Negro cousins.”¹⁴⁸ And in his Spingarn Medal acceptance speech, a speech in which he was expected to reflect on his longstanding career as a racial spokesman, Chesnutt told those members of the NAACP in the audience that, in writing about the lives of African Americans, he “tried to write of them not primarily as a Negro writing about Negroes but as a human being writing about other human beings” and he added that, “whenever I let my feelings get the better of me and became dogmatic and argumentative in a book, I found that its artistic quality suffered, and its success accordingly.”¹⁴⁹

These statements underscore the dramatic and final shift in Chesnutt's thinking about literary authorship at the end of his life. He settled on and earnestly preached what Posnock has referred to as an "antirace" aesthetics built on a notion of literary production unfettered from race.¹⁵⁰ Chesnutt warned black writers against overly politicizing or "racializing" their work, as he believed doing so was necessarily "bad for art."¹⁵¹ Are we to take Chesnutt, the author of some of the most politically and racially charged fictions in turn-of-the-century America, at his word when he asserts that he was actually divorced from the political realm during the years in which he penned *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonial's Dream*? While it may be impossible to know for sure, I would argue the likelihood that his apolitical declarations signal Chesnutt's efforts to retroactively release himself from the cultural and literary expectations attached to nineteenth-century black writers. No doubt regretful over the extent to which his racial identity dictated and ultimately extinguished his literary career, Chesnutt re-imagined—and tried to situate himself within—a literary realm unmarked by race.

In fact, Chesnutt's final public discourses suggest that he felt a combination of regret, frustration, and failed opportunity with regard to his career in letters. These sentiments are captured in his Spingarn Medal speech and also in "Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem," the last essay he published in his lifetime. Chesnutt used the speech and his final essay as opportunities to survey the course of his writing life. "My books were written, from one point of view, a generation too soon," he told his NAACP audience.¹⁵² He points out that his first book, *The Conjure Woman*, was published at a time when "a literary work by an American of acknowledged color was a doubtful experiment," and he outlined the variety of factors that undermined his bid for literary success, including the

virtual absence of an African American imaginative literary tradition, little public demand “for books by and about colored people,” and few black book buyers.¹⁵³ While reflecting on the current black literary scene, Chesnutt enthusiastically notes “a marked change in the attitude of publishers and the reading public” in favor of African American writers and black subject matter. He cites “the development of Harlem” and the writers associated with the so-called Harlem Renaissance as proof of “new field[s] for literary exploration” for black and white writers alike.¹⁵⁴ Although he laments what he feels are the licentious sensibilities of the Harlem writers, Chesnutt is proud and optimistic about the progress of black authorship in the years following his unofficial retirement from letters; he closes the essay by proclaiming that black writers should no longer feel “restricted for subjects to their own particular group” (548).

Of course, there was no way for Charles Chesnutt to know the full extent of his literary and cultural impact prior to his death on November 15, 1932. He likely would be pleased by the critical revival of his vast body of writings in the last two decades or so. Today Chesnutt is rightfully recognized for his vital role in establishing a truly African-American tradition in the short story and the novel. However, I would argue that his position in our literary history should be expanded insofar as modern readers and critics continue to tag his fiction as clumsy and old-fashioned when compared to the Harlem-era black writers. Chesnutt stands as a modernist forerunner, as he was the first popular black writer in American to know and to articulate the complex pressures and forces that confronted black artists in America. He wrestled throughout and after his career in letters with questions about the work of writing, specifically with regard to the link between

racial and authorial identity as well as the responsibilities and limitations inherent in the literary authorship as racial advocacy model.

His pioneering efforts to ensure full artistic freedom for black artists presaged the intellectual and artistic goals of the Harlem writers and paved the way for their successful entry into letters. In addition, we can see Chesnut's influence on any number of later twentieth-century black writers and intellectuals, including James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison, to name only a few. Chesnut fought for black writers and artists to be released from the mantle of race work. It was a fight that put him at odds with the interests and expectations of postbellum publishers, readers, and critics, and one that ultimately derailed his literary career. That he is read, taught, and talked about today primarily as a representative "race" writer despite his attempts to abandon such categories tells us more about our own propensities for racial categorization than it tells us about Chesnut's work.

¹ Chesnutt, *Journals*, 139-140.

² Chesnutt, "Negro in Art," 492.

³ For example, Chesnutt's essays "An Insider's View of the Negro Question," written around January 1889, and "What is a White Man?," published in the *Independent* on May 30, 1889, are a solid starting point for understanding his political ideas and his thoughts about race and postbellum race relations.

⁴ I use the term "Race Man" here and elsewhere to mean any person who commits his or her self to the improvement or advocacy of the racial group to which they identify themselves. My thinking about this term is informed by Ross Posnock's term "race champion."

⁵ In his book, *Conscience and Purpose: Fiction and Social Consciousness in Howells, Jewett, Chesnutt, and Cather*, Paul R. Petrie has written what I consider to be the most cogent analysis of the ways in which Chesnutt conceived of his writing as an instrument of Progressive racial reform.

⁶ Consult the following books for an overview of the political roots of the African American literary tradition: Blyden Jackson, *A History of Afro-American Letters: Volume I*; Donald B. Gibson, *The Politics of Literary Expression: A Study of Major Black Writers*; Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877-1915*.

⁷ Keller, *An American Crusade*, 287. Keller concludes that Chesnutt's career was ultimately a failure because in none of his novels did he "marshal the literary skills" to persuade American readers of the damage wrought on society as a result of racial injustice (197).

⁸ For example, see SallyAnn H. Ferguson's essay, "Charles W. Chesnutt: An American Signifier," in *Chesnutt: Selected Writings*, in which Ferguson condemns Chesnutt for being ambivalent about actually changing the limits of white racist society. According to

Ferguson, Chesnutt cared only about the political lives of light-skinned African Americans.

⁹ Howells, "Psychological," (82-83).

¹⁰ For example, see Dean McWilliams' book, *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race*, along with Charles Duncan's book, *The Absent Man: The Narrative Craft of Charles W. Chesnutt* for fairly recent treatments of Chesnutt's aesthetic innovations.

¹¹ Wonham, "Black Author," 832.

¹² Posnock, *Color and Culture*, 31.

¹³ Andrews, "Charles W(addell) Chesnutt."

¹⁴ Lyons, "Charles W(addell) Chesnutt."

¹⁵ Chesnutt, *Journal*, 157.

¹⁶ Brodhead, *Cultures*, 182.

¹⁷ Chesnutt, *Journals*, 106.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

²¹ Two insightful studies of the nineteenth century's culture of character are Warren Susman's essay, "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture" and Karen Halttunen's book, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*. James Salazar's recent book, *Bodies of Reform: The Rhetoric of Character in Gilded Age America*, is another excellent resource.

²² Andrews, *Career*, 3.

²³ Chesnutt, *Journals*, 72.

²⁴ Hawthorne, *Scarlet Letter*, 34.

²⁵ Andrews, *Career*, 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁷ Chesnutt, *Journals*, 112.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁹ Sundquist, *Wake the Nations*, 391. His call for more scholarly attention directed toward Chesnutt's "obvious ambivalence about color and class" is still relevant today.

³⁰ Ferguson, "Introduction," 4-5.

³¹ Chesnutt, *Journals*, 160-161. Chesnutt recounts in his journal a story told to him by Robert Hill, a black neighbor whom Chesnutt held in high regard. Hill described to Chesnutt a conversation he was involved in with a poor, white store clerk in which the clerk inquired, "What kind of fellow is this Chesnutt?" After listening to Hill praise Chesnutt for his intelligence and moral character, the store clerk declared, "Well he's a nigger; and with me a nigger is a nigger, and nothing in the world can make him anything else but a nigger" (160-161). This is one of several examples of bigoted thinking on the part of his neighbors that Chesnutt refers to in his journal. It underscores his awareness of how bleak his circumstances and potential prospects in the South.

³² Chesnutt, *Journals*, 158.

³³ Williamson, *Crucible*, 66.

³⁴ Logan, *Betrayal*, 52.

³⁵ Historian Eric Foner provides an excellent account of the real and imagined obstacles facing newly freed African Americans in the years following emancipation in his book, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. See especially Chapter 3: The Meaning of Freedom.

³⁶ Gains, *Uplifting*, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁸ Brodhead, "Introduction," 8.

³⁹ Andrews, "Charles W(addell) Chesnutt."

⁴⁰ Brodhead, "Introduction," 17.

⁴¹ Du Bois opens his essay, "The Talented Tenth" by arguing that, "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of

developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races” (33).

⁴² Chesnutt, “The White and the Black,” 140.

⁴³ Ernestine Williams Pickens makes the strongest case for understanding Chesnutt as a Progressive reformer in her biography titled, *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Progressive Moment*.

⁴⁴ Chesnutt, *Journals*, 93.

⁴⁵ Williams argued that Chesnutt intended his writing as a “bond of commonality” between himself and lower class black Americans with whom he struggled to relate (14).

⁴⁶ Chesnutt, “Future,” 24.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 29.

⁴⁸ Chesnutt, *Journals*, 42.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

⁵⁰ Chesnutt provides in his journal a formal account of his trip beginning on page 108.

⁵¹ Chesnutt, *Journals*, 172.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵³ Petrie, *Conscience*, 111.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 112, 140.

⁵⁷ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, xi.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶⁰ Chesnutt, *Journals*, 126.

⁶¹ Petrie, *Conscience*, 118.

⁶² Chesnutt, *Journals*, 140.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁶⁶ Brodhead, *Cultures*, 195.

⁶⁷ Wilson, *Whiteness*, x.

⁶⁸ William Lloyd Garrison's Preface to the first edition of Frederick Douglass's autobiography demonstrates this point. Garrison goes to great lengths to convince white readers of the authenticity of Douglass's account. Garrison explains, "Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ some one else. It is, therefore, entirely his own production" (6). Later in the Preface he returns to the question of the veracity of Douglass's autobiography, insisting, "I am confident that it is essentially true in all its statements; that nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination; that it comes short of the reality, rather than overstates a single fact in regard SLAVERY AS IT IS" (7, capitalization Garrison's). Garrison thus established the terms by which contemporary readers understood Douglass's narrative. Such white sponsorship of slave narratives penned by African American writers was common in the nineteenth century.

⁶⁹ Bruce, *Black American Writing*, 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁷¹ Duncan, *Absent Man*, 9.

⁷² Posnock, *Color and Culture*, 7.

⁷³ Wilson, *Whiteness*, v-vi.

⁷⁴ Posnock, *Color and Culture*, 26.

⁷⁵ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, xii.

⁷⁶ Chesnutt, *Journals*, 154.

⁷⁷ Scruggs, "Charles W(addell) Chesnutt."

⁷⁸ Chesnutt, *To be an Author*, 78.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁰ Duncan, *Absent Man*, 6.

⁸¹ Chesnutt, *To be an Author*, 88.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 36. One of the interesting things about this particular letter is how Chesnutt conceives of literary authorship as a form of labor that can be mastered through sedulous care and effort. After asking Cable to assess his chances for success in the literary marketplace, Chesnutt makes a nervous inventory of his literary skills, noting that “I can turn my hand to several kinds of literary work—can write a story, a funny skit, can turn a verse, or write a serious essay, and I have heretofore been able to dispose of most that I have written, at prices which fairly compensated me for the time spent in writing them, as compared with what I could have earned in the same time at something else” (36). His insistence in the direct correlation between a writer’s hard work and his or her level of success would be taken up by Jack London, Frank Norris, and many other turn-of-the-century American writers.

⁸³ Brodhead, “Introduction,” 124.

⁸⁴ Chesnutt, *Journals*, 125.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 125

⁸⁶ Wilson, “Letters,” 9.

⁸⁷ Chesnutt, *To be an Author*, 21.

⁸⁸ McElrath, Jr. and Leitz, III, “Introduction,” in *To be an Author*, 21.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁰ Andrews, *Career*, 13.

⁹¹ Render, “Introduction,” in *The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt*, 10.

⁹² Andrews, “Significance.”

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Chesnutt, *To be an Author*, 75.

¹⁰⁰ Andrews, "Charles W(addell) Chesnutt."

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Howells, "Mr. Charles Chesnutt's Stories," 233.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 232.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 232, 234.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 232.

¹⁰⁷ Chesnutt, *To be an Author*, 146.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 146

¹⁰⁹ Andrews, "Charles Chesnutt."

¹¹⁰ Sundquist, "Introduction," vii.

¹¹¹ Andrews, "Charles Chesnutt."

¹¹² For more information on the Wilmington Race riots, see David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson's book, *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and its Legacy*.

¹¹³ Chesnutt, *To be an Author*, 156

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 159-160

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 167

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 162

¹¹⁷ Wilson, *Whiteness*, 101.

¹¹⁸ McElrath, "W.D. Howells and Race," 475.

¹¹⁹ Andrews, "Charles W(addell) Chesnutt."

¹²⁰ Chesnutt, *To Be an Author*, 171

¹²¹ Ibid., 171

¹²² Ibid., 171

¹²³ Wilson, *Whiteness*, 20

¹²⁴ Wilson, "Introduction," v.

¹²⁵ Ibid., viii.

¹²⁶ Hart, quoted in Wilson, "Introduction," ix.

¹²⁷ Wilson, *Whiteness*, 20-21. Wilson points out that Chesnutt's publishers believed in the commercial viability of *The Rainbow Chasers* and *A Business Career*; however, they concluded that neither novel would work in serialization. After rejecting the novel for publication, Walter Hines Page, representing Houghton Mifflin, tried to reassure Chesnutt that he have no trouble finding a publisher.

¹²⁸ Weldon Johnson, "Dilemma," 205. Elsewhere in the essay Johnson describes what he refers to as "the problem of the double audience," a problem unique to African American writers. Johnson explains the problem by explaining that the black writer's audience "is always both white America and black America. The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter he is immediately called upon to solve, consciously or unconsciously, this problem of the double audience. To whom shall he address himself, to his own black group or to white America? Many a Negro writer has fallen down, as it were, between these two stools." Chesnutt made it clear throughout his life that he intended his work primarily for white audiences.

¹²⁹ Wilson, "Introduction", xiii.

¹³⁰ Chesnutt, *To be an Author*, 150.

¹³¹ Ibid., 150.

¹³² Ibid., 173.

¹³³ Ibid., 213.

¹³⁴ Chesnutt, "Race Prejudice," 214-215.

¹³⁵ Chesnutt lays out his theories of racial amalgamation in the first of the three essays titled, "The Future American: What the Race is Likely to Become in the Process of Time," asserting, "Proceeding then upon the firm basis laid down by science and the historic parallel, it ought to be quite clear that the future American race—the future American ethnic type—will be formed of a mingling, in a yet to be ascertained proportion, of the various racial varieties which make up the present population of the United States" (122). He elaborates in the second essay called, "The Future American: A Complete Race-Amalgamation Likely to Occur," arguing that "the time shall come when distinctions of color shall lose their importance, which will be but the prelude to a complete racial fusion" (135).

¹³⁶ Chesnutt, *Dream*, i.

¹³⁷ Petrie, *Conscience*, 147.

¹³⁸ Andrews, "Charles W(addell) Chesnutt."

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Johnson, "Dilemma," 208.

¹⁴¹ Chesnutt, "Race Prejudice," 214.

¹⁴² Ibid., 214

¹⁴³ Chesnutt, *To be an Author*, 218.

¹⁴⁴ Chesnutt, "Race Ideals," 331.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 336.

¹⁴⁶ Du Bois, *Souls*, 11.

¹⁴⁷ Chesnutt, *To be an Author*, 218.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 258.

¹⁴⁹ Chesnutt, "Spingarn Medal," 514.

¹⁵⁰ I am borrowing the concept “antirace man” from Posnock. In his study of the origin and evolution of black intellectuals in America, he draws attention to the dilemma many black artists and intellectuals faced as they were expected to serve as racial representatives. His sheds light on figures such as Chesnutt, Du Bois, and Pauline Hopkins who “devised ways...to make black intellectual mean more than race man or woman.” He then explains his use of the term “antirace man,” saying, “To escape the pressure to conform to the familiar and recognizable, to stereotypes, is to be free to delete the first word or to accent the second in the phrase black intellectual or to vary one’s inflections at will or as circumstance dictates. To impart something of this lability and this ambition to interrogate the very category of race, I use the term antirace race man or woman” (*Color and Culture*, 5).

¹⁵¹ Chesnutt, “Negro in Art,” 492-93.

¹⁵² Chesnutt, Spingarn Medal, 514.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 514.

¹⁵⁴ Chesnutt, “Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem,” 547.

CHAPTER FOUR

“NOT AFRAID TO WORK, WORK, WORK”: LABOR, CRAFT, AND THE LITERARY CAREER OF JACK LONDON

Jack London remains one of America’s most misunderstood authors. Our confusion stems from the ingrained assumption that the spectacle of his storied personal life is more valuable to our literary and cultural histories than anything he actually wrote. A generation after London’s death in 1916, the literary critic Alfred Kazin cemented this idea when he insisted of London that, “the greatest story he ever wrote was the story he lived.”¹ Earle Labor, today’s preeminent London expert, reinforced this position recently by characterizing London as “a man of action first, and a man of letters second.”² Such thinking has defined the field of London studies for decades. Most scholars continue to show more interest in London’s biography than in his writings. He is known today as a Representative Man of pre-WWI America, a writer whose life merits our attention, the critic Christopher P. Wilson reminds us, for the ways in which it symbolized the cultural and literary shifts of those tumultuous years.³ In particular, London’s “rags-to-riches” ascent from working-class origins to world famous author mirrors the popular American dream of success and the corollary ideal of the Self-Made Man.

The image of London as a man of action, a model of masculinity in the Strenuous Age, has fueled our misconceptions about his rightful place in American letters. We frequently think of him as a paragon of manhood, an author whose “red-blooded” fictions, including *The Call of the Wild* (1903), *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), and “To Build a Fire” (1908), made him synonymous for American readers of his era (and ours) with

rugged individualism and romantic adventure. Realizing that he could exploit this image, London played up the romance of his personal life to his reading public. He distanced himself from his culture's connotations of literary authorship, which included aristocracy, leisure, and effeminacy; London sold publishing houses on the idea that his lack of formal education and literary training were virtues. Also, he publicly acknowledged the fact that he spent his childhood and adolescence supporting his destitute family as a manual laborer in a string of physically grueling jobs. London maintained a kind of anti-literary public persona throughout his nearly twenty-year writing career, posing--even at the height of his authorial success-- as a venturesome man of the world who merely happened to earn his living by his pen. Indeed, he often insisted that he was better suited for and happier with life outside the realm of letters, be it as a sailor, socialist, hobo, war correspondent, farmer, cultural anthropologist, or physical fitness devotee.⁴

Moreover, we still think of London as a hack writer who, on the strength of a handful of dog and children's stories, achieved far more success than he deserved and who, therefore, should be dismissed by intelligent readers and serious critics. Scholar Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin has noted that much of the critical disdain for London's work stems from his frequent and often brash admissions that he was writing for money and without regard for artistic quality.⁵ London appears to confirm as much in a letter he wrote in 1900 to his friend and aspiring author, Cloudesley Johns. While fantasizing about landing a publishing deal, London declared that, "if [publishers] wish to buy me, body and soul, they are welcome--if they pay the price. I am writing for money; if I procure fame, that means more money. More money means more life to me."⁶ London's commitment to cashing in apparently grew over time. Consider, for example, the

following remarks he made thirteen years later in an interview with the socialist magazine *Western Comrade*:

I detest the profession I have chosen...I assure you that I do not write because I love the game. I loathe it. I cannot find words to express my disgust. The only reason I write is because I am well paid for my labor...I get lots of money for my books and stories. I tell you I would be glad to dig ditches for twice as many hours as I devote to writing if only I would get as much money...Every story I write is for the money that will come to me. I always write what the editors want, not what I'd like to write. I grind out what the capitalist editors want...⁷

London's comments reinforce his reputation as a mercenary writer, one who defied his profession's longstanding ethic of amateurism, which governed literary endeavors well into the twentieth century. These remarks appear to confirm H.L. Mencken's critique of London as a writer ultimately "too willing to exalt money over his art."⁸ Furthermore, London's words corroborate the common impression that he was a sham artist. Whatever artistic aspirations he held seem to have been eclipsed by his blatant desire to "get lots of money" in exchange for his literary work. And, as it evokes the "grinding" mechanization of the factory floor, London's self-described work process is antithetical to the popular notion of the writer as a highly creative artist. Here and elsewhere London portrayed himself more like a well-programmed machine, a kind of one-man fiction factory, rather than an autonomous artist.

This chapter presupposes that such comments do not tell the real story of Jack London's writing life. It posits that, combined with the critical assumptions sketched above, comments like these have obscured that story for almost a century. I proceed from the conviction, shared by a growing number of recent scholars, that our literary history fails to capture the complexity, contradictions and ambitions of London the literary artist. My primary goal in this chapter is to shed light on the scope of Jack

London's artistic ideals. I take as a starting point the idea that London was an adept and deliberate literary artist. Notwithstanding his remarks above, he regretted that his persistent financial straits often forced him to "grind" out what the literary market demanded of him.

That London's artistic aims remain unclear is due, in part, to the fact that it can be difficult to separate the myths from the realities of his writing career.⁹ An expert self-promoter, he pioneered in the art of manipulating the media to project calculated images of himself as a writer and public celebrity. By routinely taking London's most provocative statements about his writing career at face value, scholars have overlooked the extent to which remarks like the ones above represent London's careful authorial posturing.¹⁰ To put it simply, his public assertions about his work often belied his actual artistic intentions.

Critics, who focus only on one aspect of or, in some cases, one phase in London's protean writing career, have also concealed his literary artistry. The first two decades of the twentieth century saw him evolve into one of this country's most multidimensional writers. In those years London produced two hundred short stories, twenty novels, three full-length plays, and over one hundred essays. He wrote on a staggering range of subjects, including agronomy, alcoholism, human and animal psychology, ecology, economics, folklore, hobbing, political corruption, prizefighting, racial exploitation, revolution, science, seafaring, socialism, war, wildlife, and the profession of letters. Despite such a prolific and diverse body of work, London remains linked to a handful of misleading and reductive categories. The trouble is that even his most sympathetic critics usually treat one aspect of his work at the expense of the others. For instance, they invite

us to know London the Alaskan wilderness writer, or London the literary naturalist, or London the socialist revolutionary writer.¹¹ Such studies (often unwittingly) oversimplify our view of his literary career and personal life by implying that any one of his many dimensions unlocks his artistic identity or somehow represents his “real” self. He was, in fact, all of these things and more--and often simultaneously. This chapter submits that Jack London the literary artist, to borrow Whitman’s famous phrase, “contain[ed] multitudes,” and thus he cannot be pigeonholed.¹²

In what follows, I advance an account of London’s theories about and practice of literary authorship in order to deepen our understanding of his artistry. The chapter attempts to untangle some of the mythology surrounding London’s authorial identity from the reality of his experience as one of America’s first and most “professionalized” writers. As this dissertation is a study of ideas about the work of writing in late nineteenth-century America, I am concerned with the following questions: how, exactly, did London understand the vocation of literary authorship? And how did he conceive of both his status as a professional writer and the nature of his literary work in relation to the status of and work performed by other Gilded Age professionals? I should point out that my interest in Jack London is both particular and general in nature. A fascination with the London mystique made me want to know more about the particulars of his life and works. However, I soon realized, and I will demonstrate in the pages ahead, that London is an essential case study for any literary scholars interested in Gilded Age authorship. The problems he faced in his career as a professional writer, which I will outline shortly, are the same problems faced by countless American writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The chapter uncovers compelling answers to these questions in London's prodigious body of nonfiction writings, especially in the private letters he penned to other authors, editors and publishers, both at home and abroad. It also examines essays he wrote for aspiring writers on a wide range of issues related to the literary profession, which he referred to simply as "the writing game."¹³ Many of these texts first appeared in popular literary trade magazines such as *The Editor* and *The Writer*, although some of them have been unknown to most of London's readers until recently. Taken together, these nonfiction writings represent a kind of work theory—that is, a space in which London meditated on the nature and meaning of his authorial work. These writings were crucial to his development as a writer insofar as they provided him an opportunity to define and re-calibrate his literary ideals. The chapter's methodology reflects my belief that these texts grant us a finer-grained sense of his authorial self-understanding and the precise terms of his writing life.

We must not forget that London forged his identity as a writer in the crucible of an important, yet often overlooked, contradiction of late nineteenth-century American letters: as fiction writing evolved into a professional, commercial activity, and a potentially viable way of earning a living, many writers, including London, struggled against lingering, pervasive cultural assumptions which challenged the notion of writing as rightful work. The popular perception of Gilded-Age writers as elite amateurs overlooked the fact that American writers had been working as professionals since at least the 1850s. Fanny Fern, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and several other women earned decent livings as authors. And London was preceded by Howells, James, Crane, Norris, Frederick, and Dreiser, all of whom tried to write earn their livelihoods by their pens.

Furthermore, the explosion of serial magazine fiction in the 1880s and 1890s created new chances for anyone to try his or her luck as a professional writer. Longstanding associations between literary endeavors and leisure created the gap between the perception of literary authorship and the reality. The “gentleman amateur” notion of authorship popularized in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries counterpoised the inherent uselessness and idleness of literary pursuits against “industry” and other modes of productive labor.¹⁴

Furthermore, several critics have discussed the extent to which nineteenth-century literature and culture were often figured as part of an exalted sphere that was above or detached from, and therefore unessential to, the “real work” of society¹⁵. Labor historians have also confirmed that assumed differences between mental and manual labor structured Americans’ thinking about work, including the work of writing.¹⁶ Such factors combined to mean that, although London could realize a lucrative writing career, he could not as easily reconcile doubts about the social value of his work relative to other professional fields.

My chief argument in the first section of the chapter is that Jack London’s literary career, including his literary ideals, his methods of composition, his literary professionalism, his relationship to the literary marketplace, and his efforts at authorial self-promotion, must be understood in terms of the tensions between culture and labor and between mental and manual modes of work. London created a model of literary authorship designed to bridge the gap in Gilded Age America between the disparate worlds of culture and labor, which essentially separated intellectual workers from manual laborers. Like many Americans living at the turn of the twentieth century, he understood

the world of culture as a socially elite realm inhabited by well-off citizens along with artists and intellectuals, many of whom prized and pursued intellectual and aesthetic endeavors. Culture was viewed in binary opposition to the world of labor, which encompassed the ordinary province of people who worked, often with their hands or their entire bodies, to earn their living. Whereas culture was underpinned by social privilege and leisure, labor sprang from financial urgency and utility.

London arrived on the literary scene at a time when imaginative writing had become a less “natural” act and, as such, writers struggled to define the social purpose of their enterprise. Hannah Arendt has pointed out that the conditions of modern capitalism demand that every occupation must prove its usefulness for society at large.¹⁷ And the literary historian Daniel Borus has shown that the 1880s and 1890s “saw the reemergence of the figure of the writer as impractical and out of touch with the pace and quality of American life at the time.”¹⁸ Amidst the backdrop of corporate capitalism, literature, and its producers, held a socially ambiguous role: many business-minded people felt that they held little practical value and considered them unproductive and wasteful. In short, imaginative writers found themselves on the fringe of a Gilded Age culture that celebrated professional training and expertise. Writing was thought of as an amateur pursuit, usually an adjunct to one’s larger career. What valuable expertise, many Americans wondered, could a novelist or a poet lay claim to in comparison to, say, an engineer or a doctor? I will argue that our literary history glosses over the extent to which London and other late nineteenth-century writers faced widespread cultural confusion and contestations over the legitimacy of their work and their status as “real” workers in the newly emergent social hierarchy of labor.

The first and second sections of the chapter chart London's career-long campaign to legitimate and revalorize the vocation of authorship by rhetorically recasting Gilded Age writers as both hardworking manual laborers and highly skilled craftsmen. One of his ultimate goals was to realign cultural (artistic) production with material production. London often insisted that a writer's work is akin to the work of a factory hand or a blacksmith. Drawing from his letters and essays, the chapter traces and elucidates London's unique model of authorship, which, as I will argue, blended elements of industrial labor with elements of craftwork. That labor ethic is what London is most often known for. We see it reflected in his interview comments above, and it laid the foundation for what he called his "hack-work," pot boiling fictions he churned out quickly and, in most cases, for fast and easy money.¹⁹ These writings kept London's name in the public eye and, more importantly, kept him financially afloat. London's initial theories about and actual practice of literary authorship were defined by his labor ethic, that is, by the notion of writing as an industrialized form of labor. "I keep plugging away at my daily quota of hard fiction-work," London explained to his publisher in a letter written in the summer of 1906.²⁰ It was one of several instances in which he positioned himself as a manual worker toiling in the field, or the factory, of literary fiction.

What I am calling London's craft ethic was directly at odds with his ideals about literary labor. That craft ethic, it should be noted, has received far less attention from critics. While he practiced and publicly endorsed the writing-as-labor ideology early in his career, London privately viewed the act of writing as an artistic pursuit antithetical to industrial work insofar as it required the patience, mental dexterity, and expertise of

artisanal or craft work. His craft ethic was born, in large part, from his desire to pursue his artistic impulses without having to worry about the literary marketplace. In “On The Writer’s Philosophy Of Life,” an essay intended for aspiring writers and published in 1899 on the eve of his first great literary triumph, London spurned “the literary hack, the one who is satisfied to turn out ‘pot boilers’ for the rest of his or her life,” and extolled those real literary artists, who “no matter how much hack-work he [or she] is turning out just now...cherishes ambitions and ideals.”²¹ London placed himself in this category, which is to say that he saw himself as a highly adept literary craftsman.

The second section of the chapter reveals one of the central tensions of Jack London’s writing life and one of my core claims: throughout his authorial career, he was torn between his conflicting ideals of authorial labor and craft. Shortly after he burst onto the American literary scene in 1899, London’s thinking about authorship began to shift dramatically. While the concept of writing-as-Taylorized labor had guided his earliest literary endeavors, he slowly and steadily retreated from it during the last decade or so of his writing life. In other words, as his writing career progressed, London operated less and less as a literary laborer. Eventually, his craft mentality came to dominate his thinking about writing; he began to conceive of himself as a meticulous, expert “craftsman” of words, a literary artist on the order of, say, Henry James or Edith Wharton. As we shall see, key changes in his daily work routine along with his private comments about the craft of writing highlight the evolution of his authorial thinking and practice.

The crux of my argument in the second and final sections of the chapter is that London was driven by financial imperatives along with masculine anxieties to publically

uphold the notion of writing as a form of strenuous industrial labor long after he had jettisoned the idea in favor of an authorial model that resembled craft production. His constant shortage of money tethered him to the writing-as-labor ideology for his entire career. London found it nearly impossible to balance his urgent need to turn a profit with his growing desire to craft literary masterpieces, which he (and his publishers) knew lacked the commercial appeal of his formulaic potboilers. Despite his desire to break from hackwork altogether, London felt that he had no choice but to keep it up, as his hack stories were his primary source of literary income during the final phase of his life.

A letter written by London to his second wife Charmian Kittredge in 1903 tells us something about how his imperiled sense of manhood informed his ideas about authorship. “Ask people who know me today, what I am,” he wrote:

A rough, savage fellow, they will say, who likes prizefights and brutalities, who has a clever turn of the pen, a charlatan’s smattering of art, and the inevitable deficiencies of the untrained, unrefined, self-made man which he strives with a fair measure of success to hide beneath an attitude of roughness and unconventionality. Do I endeavor to unconvince them? It’s so much easier to leave their conviction alone.²²

Clearly, London knew that his literary success depended on his public image as a “Tough Guy.”²³ Gilded Age Americans read and admired London, in many cases, precisely because he defied the conventional standards of genteel literature. He was a roughneck, an athlete, and a sort of accidental literary artist. In short, he was a “manly” man before he was a man of letters.

But his comments above create the false impression that he was embarrassed by the chasm between that public image and his private self. What he does not tell Kittredge, at least not in this letter, is that he worked tirelessly to promote his own image

as the premier masculine icon of the Strenuous Age. My contention is that London desperately wanted to be known as an “anti-literary” writer, that is, a real tough guy. Motivated by personal insecurities and cultural doubts about the vocational legitimacy of his chosen profession, London never stopped trying to convince himself and the public that writing was, after all, honest work. He never let go of the writing-as-industrial-labor ideology, as it was vital to his sense of his own manhood. Towards the end of his career, London confided in friends and literary associates that he hardly worked at all, conceding that he devoted no more than two hours each morning to his writing. Yet until he died, he called obsessive attention to his indefatigable work ethic; he boasted to friends and strangers alike about his nineteen-hour stints of grueling, factory-style literary production, even though he had not worked such long hours in years. Of course, countless American writers before and after London have worked hard, but few, I would argue, have so craved public validation for their efforts.

In the final section of the chapter, I reread *Martin Eden* (1909), London’s most autobiographical novel and arguably his most important work of fiction. My contention is that the novel dramatizes the unresolved tension in London’s writing career triggered by his competing ideals about labor and craft, which is to say ideals about writing for money versus artistic integrity. As we shall see, *Martin Eden* raises questions about the nature and social value of literary labor and the writer’s status as an artist and a businessman or businesswoman in the modern literary marketplace.

“From a Work Beast to a Man of Letters”

Literary authorship in nineteenth-century America was widely perceived as an avocational activity long after it had evolved into a full-fledged vocation. Literary historians have shown that the evolution of the market economy in antebellum America transformed fiction writing from “a genteel and financially irrelevant hobby” to a potentially remunerative job and, in some cases, a primary occupation.²⁴ The professional evolution of authorship was accelerated by the rise of general circulation literary magazines in the 1880s and 1890s. As the dominant cultural medium, periodicals, such as *Collier’s Weekly*, *McClure’s Magazine*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*, helped to create and sustain a national hunger for fiction of all sorts. Editors of these publications encouraged would-be scribblers to submit his or her work, as monthly or weekly print deadlines demanded a steady stream of new material and fresh voices. When Jack London returned from the Klondike Gold Rush to his home in Oakland, California in 1898, he was determined to become a professional writer. He came home to find his father physically unable to work, which left the family in financial straits and compelled him towards his dream of authorship. By the time his first published story, “To The Man on the Trail,” appeared in *Overland Monthly* the following year, imaginative writing had already evolved from a casual amateur activity to a big business enterprise in which he and other hopeful writers could forge, or at least imagine, an authorial career.

Despite the growing business of letters, cultural perceptions of both the writing process and the professional legitimacy of Gilded-Age authors were slow to change. London emerged onto the literary scene at a time when most Americans still viewed authorship in terms of the earlier British Romantic tradition in which literature was a

class commodity, produced and consumed by the elite. In his seminal study on the rise of professional writing in America, William Charvat noted that this tradition presumed that most authors were gentleman amateurs who had little interest in or need to support themselves through the sale of their written words. Furthermore, writing was viewed as a specially endowed activity, thought to derive not from labor, but from a kind of romantic inspiration and metaphysical genius. Indeed, the notion of literary genius separated writing in the cultural imagination from other modes of productive work, as imaginative creation stood in stark contrast to the increasingly alienated labor of the market.

London chose to pursue a literary career at a time when, as literary historian Daniel Borus reminds us, writers were increasingly thought of as “impractical and out of touch with the pace and quality of American life.”²⁵ Of course, this sentiment was nothing new. Hawthorne had conceded as much a generation earlier in his “Custom House” preface to *The Scarlet Letter* when he lamented the public perception of authorship as a “worthless, if not positively disgraceful” career choice.²⁶ Hawthorne dramatized his society’s contempt for literary artists by imagining a conversation among his elders in the Salem Custom House, some of whom mockingly inquire of his career status, “What is he?” A writer of story-books! What kind of business in life,--what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,--may that be?”²⁷ Such doubts about the productivity and usefulness of writing persisted through the turn of the century. Consequently, literary authors held a curious social position in late nineteenth-century America: the product of their efforts, known as literature, continued to be celebrated and consumed as a vital cultural form; however, their actual literary endeavors were often scorned, considered an idle diversion “sealed off from the world of

action and from the normal, everyday practices of social life.”²⁸ While no one denied the fact that writing was technically a vocation, many Americans did refuse to recognize writers as “real” workers, seeing them instead as dabblers in an aristocratic tradition.

When Jack London started an intensive regimen to become a professional writer in 1898, he built a literary philosophy based, in part, on the ethics of industrial labor he learned in his youth. A “work beast,” by the age of 14, London had lived a life of hard labor long before he dedicated himself to authorship. Looking back on his childhood experiences in a letter to one of his first publishers, he insisted that, “My life has been one of toil,” and he claimed elsewhere in the same letter that, “It is worthless to give the long sordid list of occupations, none of them trades, all heavy manual labor.”²⁹ That long list of occupations included a litany of odd jobs along with low-paying and physically grueling stints working in a cannery, a laundry, a jute mill, and an electric power plant. London’s desire to financially assist his poverty-stricken family compelled him towards such dead end jobs and limited the amount of time he spent in school.

As an adult, London spoke and wrote publicly about his earliest work experiences, and his comments reveal his complex and contradictory relationship to manual labor throughout his life. I want to consider those comments and his childhood and adolescent work experiences in some detail here, for they help us understand his ideals about literary authorship. He had, like so many Americans before him, grown up embracing the Puritan work ethic. In a posthumously published essay called, “Eight Factors of Literary Success,” London confirmed that he had romanticized work as a boy, saying, “I had been impressed by the dignity of labor” before adding that, “Work was everything; it was sanctification and salvation.”³⁰ Yet by the time he turned 18, he had

grown physically tired of and disenchanted by the harsh economic and material conditions of labor. Recalling his frustrations in his 1906 essay, “What Life Means to Me,” in which he outlined his reasons for joining the socialist party, London blamed what he and others in the party believed were the inherent flaws of American capitalism, a system which, as they saw it, conspired against workers and ensured that he and his fellow laborers “never got the full product of [his] toil.”³¹ The late nineteenth century’s expanding culture of consumption and commercialism forced him to accept that, “All things were commodities, all people bought and sold” and that “The honor of labor” he had grown up believing in, “had no price in the market-place.”³²

We can see London’s shift in thinking about manual labor dramatized in his short story, “The Apostate,” which he published in the same year. The story features a factory hand named Johnny, a fifteen year-old boy whose physical, intellectual, and spiritual plight mirrors London’s own at that age. Described by the omniscient narrator as “the perfect worker,” Johnny achieves a “machine-like perfection” at his job of bobbin winding in a jute mill.³³ However, his work exacts a heavy bodily and emotional toll. Before long, Johnny resembles a human machine for whom, the narrator points out, “There was no joyousness” nor any sort of mental life nor goals to look forward to outside of the mill.³⁴ Motivated by the fear of spending the rest of his life trapped in an unending and crippling cycle of toil, and impelled by “an inordinate hunger for rest,” Johnny quits his job, telling his mother that, “I ain’t never goin’ to work again.”³⁵ He escapes the factory and his mother’s home to pursue a vagabond life as a hobo. The end of the story sees Johnny climb into a boxcar for an overnight ride that will transport him away from his menial life of labor. The engine whistles its departure from the station, as

he smiles in triumph, realizing that he barely made it out alive.

Like his protagonist, the young London also felt “sickened” by too much work, which prompted him to leave his job in the power plant of the Oakland, San Leandro, and Haywards Electric Railway in 1894 and tramp east across the United States, as a member of Coxe’s Industrial Army of the Unemployed, in its march on Washington to protest economic conditions.³⁶ London’s time with Coxe’s Army cemented his aversion to work. He was dismayed to find competent and able-bodied men who had spent years searching in vain for steady, well-paying jobs. But he was even more alarmed to see scores of unhealthy and weak men eaten up and discarded by the labor market. London reached the conclusion that his once cherished gospel of work was nonsense, merely a lie that served to maintain social inequity. He abruptly left Coxe’s Army less than two months after he joined the group. Later he summed up his feelings at the time, saying, “I did not wish to ever see work again. I fled from work.”³⁷ That summer he tramped around the east coast, begging his way from door to door, determined to avoid the plight of the laborers he had met while on the road. London was arrested on June 29th in Buffalo, New York on charges of vagrancy, a sentence for which he served 30 days in jail. When he returned to Oakland the following year, he enrolled in the local high school; he was convinced, by then, that education would be his best defense against a life of menial labor. He resolved to make his living as a “brain merchant,” by which he meant a person who earns a living by intellectual or artistic rather than manual work.³⁸

London’s private letters penned around the turn of the century, when he was still an aspirant writer, reveal that he conceived of his prospective literary career as an escape from a life of toil. One such letter, addressed to Mabel Applegarth on November 30,

1898 merits our attention, as it illustrates London's reluctance towards manual labor as a young man, as well as his wish to transcend his social status. He had befriended Mabel's brother, Ted, a neophyte writer from Oakland, in their high school debate club. English-born and wealthy, Ted introduced London to his sister around 1895, when Mabel was a student at the University of California at Berkeley. London fell quickly in love with her, charmed by her intellect and cultural refinement; a decade later, Mabel would become the model for Ruth Morse in *Martin Eden*. In his letter, London's usual affection for her sours in response to her suggestion that he terminate his literary apprenticeship to pursue a safer career. He was irate at both Mabel and his sister, Eliza London Shepard, for implying that he was shirking his familial duty by trying to become a writer. London accuses Mabel in his letter of being "positively ignorant" of his ambitions, before bitterly defending his decision "to be something more than a laborer, a dummy," and asserting that he is "different," or more intelligent and ambitious, than most men in his station.³⁹

His fiery defense of his decision to pursue a writing career, which spans more than four pages, demonstrates that London thought of his early life as a fight for Family and Duty and, above all, as a perilous struggle against the drudgery of manual labor. He sneers at Mabel's allusion to "duty" and points out that he dutifully surrendered his childhood to work in support of his poor family. London's biographers have called attention to the punishing work schedule he held as a boy: when he was ten years old he was often up at three in the morning to deliver papers before he went to school, and he delivered evening papers when he came home. On Saturdays he worked on an ice wagon, and on Sundays he set up pins at a bowling alley.⁴⁰ London reflects on those years in his letter, telling Mabel that, "I had no childhood...My body and soul were

starved when I was a child.”⁴¹

His resentment of her expectation that he should be content as a workingman, an expectation shared by virtually all of London’s family and friends, bleeds through the letter. He describes to Mabel his yearlong spell as a machine operator for the R. Hickmott Canning Company of Oakland in 1891, emphasizing that, “I...worked in that hell hole for thirty-six straight hours, at a machine, and I was only a child.”⁴²

Furthermore, London claimed that he learned how to “absolutely [do] without all pleasure,” as his mother forced him to hand over his wages to her each month.⁴³ This cycle of “deadening” work with practically no monetary reward left him intellectually and spiritually “hungry,” a word that recurs throughout London’s many accounts of his childhood.⁴⁴ As a result, he felt not only entitled but also obligated to pursue his writing, which he described to Mabel as a “higher” calling, because it would allow him to earn a living with his brain instead of his brawn.⁴⁵ The letter illustrates London’s conviction that his early life was a work-induced hell, and that his burgeoning literary career offered the only way out, a means of economic and mental salvation.

Yet London never let go of his working-class sympathies. In fact, he idealized the very same working-class ties that he had insisted to Mabel Applegarth and others he would sever. And he continued to identify himself as a member of the working-class long after the prestige and financial prosperity he earned as an elite author had launched him out of the lower-class “pit” and into the bourgeois middle-class world of letters.⁴⁶ In order to understand Jack London, I contend that we must realize that he celebrated and tried to inhabit both the working-class “abyss” from which he emerged and the middle-class world of culture he found himself in after his authorial career took off.

London's correspondences with his editors and publishers show us that, especially early in his career, he marketed himself as a hardened workman with a desire to write as opposed to a writer whose financial circumstances forced him to work. In 1902, for instance, he wrote to George P. Brett, then the president of the Macmillan Company and London's chief American publisher, to negotiate terms for a new contract. The fact that Brett already knew his client's background did not stop London from rehearsing his life of labor:

When I was ten years of age I was selling papers on the street. From then on, I worked for my living. At fifteen I left home to shift for myself. I worked with my hands at many things. I grew up to a[n] early manhood without any education to speak of. When I first began to write I had no art-concepts whatever. So I have mainly educated myself in the last several years while at the same time I was learning to write, and on top of it all, trying to get a living from my writing.⁴⁷

These remarks remind us of Earle Labor's observation that London loved to dramatize his life of toil.⁴⁸ This particular account of his early life suggests that his experiences as a laborer, while physically demanding and emotionally demeaning, structured both his personal and artistic identities.

London's words also underscore late nineteenth-century cultural distinctions between mental and manual forms of work, distinctions that shaped the way Americans thought about their occupations. His insistence that he "worked with [his] hands at many things," and therefore "had no art-concepts" would have held for then-contemporary readers a kind of tautological truth, which is to say, no one would have expected a manual laborer to seek a writing career. It is also worth noting that London posits his lack of formal education and knowledge of artistic forms as unique virtues; he implies that his propensity for manual labor not only makes up for these deficiencies, but gives

him a decided advantage in the literary marketplace because, as we shall see, he believed that a writer's chances of literary success depended on the strength of his or her manual work ethic. His comments highlight his belief in authorship as a job not unlike those he had known in his youth. London assured Brett that, with enough time and practice, he would "do big work," by which he meant write steadily enough--and well enough--to justify the lucrative contract he sought. Later we shall see, more precisely, how London correlated manual work with the work of writing in numerous letters and public speeches and essays.

For now, a closer look at London's essay, "What Life Means to Me," reveals the reasons for his working-class loyalties and hints at the turmoil caused by his dual identification as a worker and an artist. Echoing the letter he wrote to Mabel Applegarth, London framed his early life as one of poverty and degradation. Such circumstances created in him a burning desire to climb the socioeconomic ladder. The essay opens with this stark announcement:

I was born in the working-class. Early I discovered enthusiasm, ambition, and ideals; and to satisfy these became the problem of my child-life. My environment was crude and rough and raw. I had no outlook, but an uplook rather. My place in society was at the bottom. Here life offered nothing but sordidness and wretchedness, both of the flesh and the spirit; for here flesh and the spirit were alike starved and tormented. Above me towered the colossal edifice of society, and to my mind the only out was up. Into this edifice I early resolved to climb.⁴⁹

London portrays himself here as the archetypal American striver, a boy unfairly cast into a "crude and rough and raw" social environment, which could not support his material nor his intellectual aspirations. Perhaps intentionally, his origin story resembles the "rags-to-riches" journey of the boy protagonists in the novels of Horatio Alger, novels London loved as a boy. He then explains that, at first, he embraced the social hierarchy,

believing it to be a fair game winnable, as it were in Alger's world, by pluck and hard work. He trusted that his work ethic would vault him into elite society.

However, his faith in the game faded after he was "mercilessly exploited" as a child and then as a teenager by employers who "worked [him] nearly to death."⁵⁰

London recounts his breaking point, which came at the hands of a ruthless employer at the Oakland, San Leandro power plant, who spoiled his attempt to become an electrician. While London thought he was hired to learn a trade, in fact, he was brought on as a cheap replacement for two retiring coal heavers. The eighteen-year-old London was duped into doing their combined work for only thirty dollars per month, hardly enough money with which to climb out of "the cellar of society."⁵¹ This experience led to his traumatic realization that he was stuck in the lower class, trapped, as he put it, "down in the subterranean depths of misery about which it is neither nice nor proper to speak."⁵²

Certain that he could not achieve economic nor intellectual fulfillment as a lower-class laborer, London set his sights on intellectual work, "brain work," as he called it, which he believed would expand his earning potential and spark his upward social mobility. London recollects his transition of consciousness from a manual to an intellectual worker this way: "I was scared into thinking...I learned...that the brain was likewise a commodity...So I resolved to sell no more muscle, and to become a vender of brains."⁵³ The problem with manual labor, as London saw it, was that a worker's commodity, his "stock of muscle," was finite. The more he worked, the more his muscle depleted, until he eventually became a "muscle bankrupt," no longer able to find work and thus relegated to the lower-class cellar. By contrast, the earning potential of a "brain merchant," say, a novelist or a painter, often increased over the span of his or her

lifetime.⁵⁴ London believed that, as a writer, he could work until, say, sixty years of age, before he reached his earning ceiling. This notion propelled him on his “frantic pursuit of knowledge,” a legendary period, lasting nearly five years, which began shortly after London returned home from the Klondike in 1898. During that time, he studied, read, and wrote with monomaniacal devotion to his goal of becoming a successful writer and ascending to the middle class, where life, London had long sensed, was “clean, noble, and alive.”⁵⁵ By the end of 1903, he had achieved both of his goals: the publication of seven books, including his masterpiece, *The Call of the Wild*, established his reputation as a critical and commercial literary success. That success brought with it the middle-class status he had coveted for so long.

However, London’s interactions with various members of the American middle-and-upper classes fell radically short of his expectations. His literary fame allowed him, for the first time, to keep company with “the masters of society,” a sundry group which included politicians, university professors, clergymen, businessmen, and members of the literati, many of whom admired London’s work and were eager to meet him. With few exceptions, he found these people to be grossly “materialistic,” “monstrous[ly] selfish,” and “not alive”; he was dismayed by how much wealth and gentility had dulled their intellectual vitality and left them ethically bankrupt.⁵⁶ He sums up his findings by saying, “I discovered that I did not like to live on the parlor floor of society. Intellectually I was bored. Morally and spiritually I was sickened.”⁵⁷ In short, London was disillusioned to learn that life in elite society lacked the “glowing idealism,” “sweetnesses of unselfishness,” and “great souls” he had known in the working-class.⁵⁸ He ends the essay by pointing out that he abandoned the upper-class world of moral hypocrisy and

intellectual artifice, returning to his working-class roots, a world London repeatedly valorized as one full of “unselfish adventure and ethical romance,” in which, regardless of his economic prosperity, he would be “content to labor, crowbar in hand, shoulder to shoulder with intellectuals, idealists, and class-conscious workingmen.”⁵⁹

Of course, London’s melodramatic account (“crowbar in hand!”) of his working-class homecoming belies the fact that he adopted many of the American bourgeois’ materialistic values, especially near the end of his life. He railed against American capitalism while he indulged in its creature comforts. More than a few members of the socialist party were annoyed by London’s lavish lifestyle: he employed a personal servant; he dined in the finest restaurants; he stayed in the grandest hotels; and he built more than one palatial house. The disparity between his socialist rhetoric and his capitalist lifestyle has been well documented by his critics. I simply want to make a case for the importance of London’s enduring theoretical devotion to and personal identification with the working-class; it was a lifelong romance. “What Life Means to Me” confirms that he felt as one with the workers and tramps of his youth; London believed that the spiritual and intellectual nobility of life in the bottom social rung made up for its deprivation. As we shall see later, a variety of factors made it difficult for him to abandon his working-class roots. The overview of London’s early life above suggests that his work experiences had a profound psychological and emotional impact on the rest of his life. In the next section, I will examine how and why his involvement with and love for labor inspired both his authorial identity and his writing practice. Considering London’s stated distaste for manual work, it is perhaps ironic that he created a model of writing based on the logic and ingrained practices of industrial labor. Let’s take a closer

look now at the terms of London's ethics of literary labor.

Conspicuous Production: The Laboring Writer

From the outset of his writing career, London tried to restore vocational legitimacy and honor to literary authorship by rejecting the author-as-gentleman-amateur ideal and, instead, reframing the writer as a diligent laborer. We find him honing his theories of writing in his correspondences with friends and literary acquaintances around the turn of the century, as his career was about to take off. At the heart of London's literary program was the conviction that writing is a veritable form of labor, an enterprise that requires of an author plodding effort, dogged persistence, and lengthy training. In a letter dated in February of 1900, he advised Anna Strunsky, his friend and eventual co-author of *The Kempton-Wace Letters* (1903), against a literary career, insisting that she follow a different path, "unless," as London put it, "[she was] not afraid to work, work, work, to work early and late, unremittingly and always."⁶⁰ Embedded in this suggestion is the belief that a writer's chances of success depend more upon his or her capacity for toil, that is, by the strength of his or her work ethic, than on one's innate talent.

Furthermore, London rebuked the well-established link between literary endeavors and leisure. Over the course of his authorial career, he wrote several essays and articles in which he offered advice to aspiring writers and, in the process, spurned the popular notion of the writer as an idler. One such piece called, "Getting Into Print," first appeared in *The Editor* in March of 1903; London opens it by acknowledging his early struggles to gain a foothold in the competitive literary marketplace. From there, he notes

that his work ethic alone enabled his success, and he urges all would-be authors not to wait around until they are moved by the muse: “Don’t loaf and invite inspiration; light out after it with a club, and if you don’t get it you will nonetheless get something that looks remarkably like it.”⁶¹

London’s remarks are meant to dismantle the British Romantic and Early Republican models of authorship described above. His instructions, perhaps intentionally, contrast with the indolent speaker in Whitman’s, “Song of Myself,” one of the era’s most influential poems. The second stanza of that poem features the speaker “lean[ing] and loaf[ing] at [his] ease while observing a spear of summer grass, happily lounging about, admiring nature while, one presumes, the workaday world passes him by.”⁶² Whitman’s speaker is an emblem of the imaginative writer-as-fanciful-idler, a figure woefully out of step with London’s advice, which reflects the era’s spirit of industry. The nonchalant pose of the poem’s speaker belies the fact that Whitman himself was a hardworking professional writer. He served as a newspaper editor, and his notebooks suggest that he was a meticulous literary craftsman. While Whitman had no problem being identified with and, perhaps, at times mistakenly recognized as the loafing speaker of his poem, London needed to make hard work an inextricable part of his public persona as a writer.

London’s recommendation also evokes and takes aim at another well-known literary antecedent: Washington Irving, America’s first true international man of letters. Writing in the preface to one of the revised editions of *The Sketch Book* in 1849, Irving outlines his own moral character flaws, defects in his “very constitution and habits of mind,” and he speculates on their impact on his professional path.⁶³ “My whole course of

life,” he explains:

has been desultory, and I am unfitted for any periodically recurring task, or any stipulated labor of body or mind. I have no command of my talents, such as they are, and have to watch the varyings of my mind as I would those of a weather-cock. Practice and training may bring me more into rule, but at present I am as useless for regular service as one of my own country Indians or a Don Cossack. I must, therefore, keep on pretty much writing as I have begun; writing when I can, not when I would.⁶⁴

Here Irving plays the role of the gentlemanly author to near perfection. His admission reinforces his culture’s perception of the gap between imaginative writing and real work, as he concedes his own inability to muster the consistent application and accountability called for by most occupations. Like the speaker in Whitman’s poem, Irving positions himself as a wayward artist, by turns unable and unwilling to commit to a steady writing regimen, even though he knows that regular “practice and training” would bolster his literary success. Not only does his account foreground his character faults, but it implies that those faults qualify him for a career in letters. The implication is that literary authorship is suitable only for those people unfit for a conventional employment. One senses in the passage above a whiff of self-condemnation, however feigned it might be, born from Irving’s regret over his “useless[ness] for regular service.” He acknowledges the dishonor inherent in a profession that allows for such a casual and erratic work routine.

To be clear, I am suggesting that we understand London’s advice to would-be writers, advice he shared countless times during his professional writing career, as an attack against the prevailing ideals of Gilded Age authorship, ideals embodied, in this case, by Whitman’s poem and Irving’s preface. London’s contempt for them is obvious enough in the startling counter-image presented in his essay: he supplants Whitman’s

reposing writer and Irving's aimless one with an assertive and combative author, one armed with a weapon and poised to club his way to literary success. Later we will consider London's rationale for the masculine rhetoric that underpins this image and so much of his literary program. Suffice it to say that the image illustrates his disapproval of the assumption that writing entails passivity and leisure. Here and elsewhere he stressed that self-determination and hard work are the key ingredients for successful authors.

London also repudiated both the idea of authorial genius and the act of writing as a product of ethereal inspiration. Consider, for instance, the letter he sent to Cloudesley Johns on March 30, 1899. An aspiring socialist writer and one of London's earliest fans, Johns wrote to London to express his frustrations over his own lack of literary success despite his constant efforts. "A strong will can accomplish anything," his friend responded assuredly, adding that, for aspiring authors, "There is no such thing as inspiration, and very little of genius...Dig is a wonderful thing, and will move more mountains than faith ever dreamed of. In fact, dig should be the legitimate father of all self-faith."⁶⁵ The concept of authorship expressed here thus is quite different from the literary tradition London inherited. This example illustrates the extent to which he downplayed the role of intellectual and creative powers in the writing process; London advocated that a literary career was attainable for anyone willing to "dig," or toil, incessantly at the craft. Such an egalitarian model of authorship, in which the writer's exertions counted for more than his or her own social-class standing, helped him assuage his anxieties about pursuing his literary ambitions despite his modest means.

Aware of the cultural dichotomy between mental and manual labor in nineteenth-

century America, a division rooted in widely recognized differences between “thinking” and “doing,” London reconstituted the act of writing as, foremost, a form of physical work. Labor historians have acknowledged that the “problem” of intellectual work then (and now) boiled down to visibility: intellectual labor, or “brain work,” as London called it, was often difficult to see or wholly invisible, making it unintelligible compared to the most common forms of bodily work, such as agricultural, domestic, industrial, or even artisanal tasks (see prospectus footnote). As the literary critic Nicholas Bromell has pointed out, “most of the things [mental work] produced could neither be seen nor touched.”⁶⁶ Because one cannot see the brain thinking, from the vantage point of nineteenth-century manual workers, mental labor and its products “[were] at best a kind of magic and at worst a sham.”⁶⁷ Moreover, the critic Cindy Weinstein reminds us that the very notion of literary labor was antithetical to the American literary tradition prior to the Civil War. The act of imaginative writing was “supposed to appear effortless, natural, and easy,” simply put, it was “not supposed to look like work, especially of the unnatural and artificial variety.”⁶⁸ This taken-for-granted split between the mind (and soul) and the body, and between writers, considered “thinkers,” and material workers, known as “doers,” thus complicated London’s wish to redefine writing as physical work.

This perceived split between writers and laborers was widened by the radical transformation and eventual degradation of manual work in the second half of the nineteenth century. In his definitive study of ideas about work in late nineteenth-century America, Daniel T. Rodgers has shown how the forces of industrialization and the creation of the factory system combined to transmute work processes and alter how Americans conceived of work. The belief in work as the core of and the means to moral

and economic prosperity was, as Rodgers makes clear, central to the foundation of American society.⁶⁹ One hears the gospel of work affirmed in countless Early American literary texts. French-American writer J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur insists upon and celebrates the correlation between one's work and one's financial prosperity and social status in his utopian account of life in Revolutionary-era America. Having spent several years as a farmer in upstate New York after immigrating from France, Crevecoeur marvels at how work unlocks for all citizens what would become known as the American Dream: the ability to raise one's socioeconomic status through one's hard work. In his letter, "What is an American," he reports to his European audience, many of whom coveted news from the new republic, that their American counterparts "receive ample rewards for their labors" and, furthermore, that "these accumulated rewards procure them lands; those lands confer on them the title of freeman," to which title "every benefit is affixed which man can possibly require."⁷⁰ Writing around the same time as Crevecoeur, Benjamin Franklin set forth his own life as indisputable proof of the transformative power of the work ethic. Franklin's autobiography encouraged Americans to follow his lead in seeing "Industry as a Means of obtaining Wealth and Distinction," and it posited diligence and self-determination as the righteous pillars upon which any American could remake his or her life.⁷¹

America's obsessive devotion to work and the work ethic extended into the nineteenth century, far beyond the point when the nature and meaning of labor were being contested as never before. Lecturing to a group of mechanics in 1840, William Ellery Channing, the chief apostle of New England Unitarianism, reflected this devotion in his speech, as he exhorted the workers not to view their labors as a "sentence of

degradation,” but rather as “a great good,” both for themselves and for society at large.⁷²

Manual labor, Channing argued, created for all men “the condition of all outward comforts and improvements” as it “minister[s] to the vigor and growth of the soul.”⁷³

Less than a year later, public intellectual and former Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson would strike a similar note in his essay, “Self-Reliance.” “Do your work,” Emerson calls upon his fellow Americans, “and you shall reinforce yourself.”⁷⁴

Emerson’s directive underscores Rodgers’s point that work in pre-industrial America was understood as both a source of creation and autonomy, a way to impress part of oneself onto the material world.⁷⁵ Roughly a decade later, fellow New Englander Henry David Thoreau affirmed the transcendental aspects of physical work; Thoreau commences *Walden* by declaring that he achieved spiritual enlightenment during his sojourn in the woods by “living by the labor of [his] hands only.”⁷⁶ What unites these examples is a deeply abiding faith in the moral and economic primacy of work, a faith that held steady in the United States for nearly two hundred and fifty years.

However, the steady march of industrialization and the expansion of the factory system after the Civil War changed the face of and the feelings most Americans held towards manual labor: in short, as any number of labor historians have demonstrated, the degradation of work in nearly all of its facets eroded public faith in the dignity of work and the work ethic.⁷⁷ The rise of industrial capitalism ushered in the Efficiency Movement, which undermined the notion of disciplined labor as the core of a civilized life and the sine qua non of personal success.⁷⁸ The writings of Frederick Winslow Taylor, a Philadelphia-born mechanical engineer, embody the era’s efficiency craze most clearly and perhaps most frighteningly. Taylor eschewed the Early Republican craft

ethos in favor of a systematic and ever-scrutinized mode of industrial production. Guided by the conviction that businesses must, above all, secure “maximum prosperity” for employers, Taylor argued in his labor treatise, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), that analyzing workers at work could increase industrial productivity. His system of scientific management was based on the idea that any task could be streamlined through scientific study. Taylor’s contention that “every single act of every workman can be reduced to a science” captures the core of his program as it signals the death of the earlier craft ethic.⁷⁹

The detrimental effect of Taylorism on workers, especially industrial laborers, has been well documented. Rodgers points out that the explosion of the industrial economy and the factory system in the second half of the nineteenth century upset the certainty that hard work would bring economic success.⁸⁰ Most factories operated through a system of wage earning, which forced workers to compete for low-paying, temporary jobs, few of which yielded the kinds of “ample rewards” promised by Crevecoeur. The factory system also denied workers a level of autonomy and creativity taken for granted before the industrial revolution in workplaces such as farms, counting houses, and artisans’ shops. Backed by Taylor and other so-called management consultants, many late nineteenth-century manufacturers controlled the pace of workers’ production, commanding, in most cases, that employees speed up their efforts to increase profits. Machine labor began to augment and, eventually, to replace human labor.

Furthermore, the subdivision of formerly complex work process into menial ones stripped many jobs of their inherent creativity and skill, which turned the men (and women and children) on factory production lines into machines. Hugh Wolfe, the Welsh

iron puddler and protagonist of Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron-Mills*, is a good example of one such man machine. Published on the eve of the Civil War, Harding Davis's text offers a prescient account and critique of the new system of wage slavery. Hugh's work is described as pure drudgery: it does not stimulate his intellectual and artistic impulses, nor does it afford him the financial freedom to move beyond the mill. That Wolfe creates korl sculptures while on the job testifies to the shortcomings of his work. Despite his reverence for labor, Channing was compelled to acknowledge in his lecture that the division of labor in New England's factories constrained workmen like Hugh Wolfe to a "monotonous, stupefying round of unthinking toil."⁸¹ Taylor's claim that mandated efficiency makes workers happier and more virtuous was simply not consistent with the actual work experiences of the majority of the era's laborers, many of whom suffered physical, emotional, and spiritual trauma while on the job.

This overview of late nineteenth-century labor begs the following questions: why would Jack London adopt a "writing as labor" ideology at a historical moment when the nature and meaning of labor was being denigrated and held under suspicion by the culture at large? Furthermore, considering his express wish to escape a life of labor by becoming a "brain merchant," why, then, would he create a model of literary authorship which drew so heavily on the logic and ingrained practices of industrial work? Before addressing these questions, we must first examine how, exactly, London tried to realign writers with laborers and to redefine the act of writing as a form of labor.

In an effort to shift the cultural conversation around literary authorship, a conversation based on the assumption that writing was a product of leisure, London celebrated and compulsively called attention to the labor of writing. As Christopher

Wilson aptly put it, London “transposed the terms of physical labor to “brain work.”⁸² In other words, his model of authorship valorized the concrete and work-intensive production of words while it glossed over the abstract roles played by a writer’s intellect and imagination during the writing process. London’s background as a child and adolescent laborer meant that he understood and, to some degree, shared the public’s skepticism about the legitimacy of intellectual work, as he realized that the perceived invisibility and intangibility of writing separated it from the sorts of jobs he held in his youth.

While earlier American authors refrained, for the most part, from publicly challenging the “writing as leisure” paradigm, rarely equating their literary efforts to actual labor, London foregrounded the material essence, or the sheer physical nature, of the writing process. Throughout his professional career, in articles penned for aspiring writers, in interviews with literary magazines, and in private letters written to friends, fellow authors, and publishers, he promulgated the primacy of sitting down at one’s desk and turning out words. To put it a different way, he argued that material production was the defining feature, or the essential element, of authorship. The physical composition of words was, in London’s view, more important to a writer than his or her imaginative process. His insistence that literary composition could be divorced from creative invention, that a writer could produce words by the sheer force of his or her will, challenged the popular distinctions between the work of the body versus the work of the mind.

In order to recast authorship as a rightful vocation, London created a daily writing routine that, with its reliance on and fetishization of hard work, recast writing as

labor. The terms of this long-standing routine are legendary, thanks to the many biographers who have highlighted his prolific work ethic and output. Most recently, citing London's "thoroughly professional" attitude towards writing, Earle Labor notes that he "maintained the discipline of steady application of his time and energies to his vocation."⁸³ Labor's point can hardly be overstated, which is to say that London's approach to writing was, in many ways, the polar opposite of the gentleman amateur model embodied above by Irving. This was especially true during London's self-imposed literary "apprenticeship," which lasted from roughly 1895 to 1900, during which time he honed his craft, trying feverishly to publish in any magazine that would have him. It was not uncommon then for London to write all day, sometimes for upwards of 19 consecutive hours.⁸⁴ When he was not scribbling away at his desk, he read extensively, devouring both classic and contemporary literature. Convinced that writers should be versed in myriad branches of knowledge, London supplemented his reading with an independent, wide-ranging course of study. He spent countless hours, nestled inside the Oakland Public Library and in a bedroom in his mother's home, pouring over books on political philosophy, economics, biology, and conceptual mathematics. At night, London paid forensic attention to the latest literary magazines, taking careful notes of and mimicking the fiction that editors saw fit to publish.

Driven by what one biographer has described as a feeling of "creative ecstasy," London focused on his work at the expense of nearly everything else in his life: he isolated himself from friends and family, leaving the bedroom in which he wrote only for meals, bouts of exercise, and library visits.⁸⁵ After experimenting for years with reducing the number of hours he slept each night, London eventually settled on five, which helped

him maximize his productivity during his waking hours. At the outset of his writing career, London consecrated all of his energies to writing because he trusted that the field of letters, like any other skilled line of work, could be learned and eventually mastered with sedulous training. This principle guided him throughout his writing life.

The extent to which he ascribed to authorship, generally seen as an artistic pastime, qualities typically associated with industrial labor was remarkable and without precedent in turn-of-the-century America. This industrial mentality formed the basis for London's most sacred writing tenet: his daily writing quota. From the outset of his career, he required himself to churn out at least 1000 words per day, which he managed to do, with few exceptions, for nearly 20 years. Fulfilling his daily quota quickly became the basis upon which he measured his professional success and renewed his artistic confidence. In an early letter written to Johns, London announced with pride and relief that, "[I] am now doing a thousand words per day, six days per week. Last week I finished 1100 words ahead of the required amount. To-day (Tuesday), I am 172 ahead of my stint. I have made it a rule to make up next day what I fall behind."⁸⁶ With the demanding precision of a factory foreman, London monitored his own productivity while "on the job" at his desk. Biographer Russ Kingman has suggested that few American authors wrote more steadily than London did in 1899, when he sold over one hundred new stories, poems, jokes, triolets, and newspaper articles.⁸⁷ His diligence and efficiency made him a sort of one-man fiction factory, an image London himself reinforced by insisting that he never revised his work. "On the day I finish the [manuscript]," he explained to the writers Ida M. Strobridge and Elwyn Hoffman, "I fold it up and send it off without once going back to see what all the previous pages were like...I don't go back,

I think it pays.”⁸⁸ His refusal to edit his prose mirrors industrial production insofar as it confirmed that he prized the rapid rate of production above a craftsman’s concern for quality.

London carefully chose the words and metaphors he used to describe the writing process, as an intentional way of reinforcing the rhetorical link between writers and an array of bona fide laborers and between the act of writing and socially-sanctioned modes of work, including occupations like blacksmithing, bricklaying, welding, and farming. Consider the following advice he shared in a letter written in 1913 to Louise Jessie Dorman, then an unknown would-be writer who had written him for advice on how to commence her literary career:

If you think you can jump in right now, without any apprenticeship, and lay bricks as well as a four, five, or six years’ apprenticed bricklayer; if you think you can jump in on the floor and nail on shoes on ten horses as well as a man who has served a three, four, or five years’ apprenticeship at shoeing horses on the floor; if you think you can jump in and nail laths, or spread plaster, or do concrete work, without previous experience, better or as well as the men who have served their three, four, and five years of apprenticeship;--in short, if you think that a vastly better-paid trade than that, namely, the writing game, can be achieved in your first short story not yet written, or long story not yet written, why go ahead my boy and jump to it...the world will crush you in for the great genius you are if you can do such a thing. In the meantime have a little patience and learn the trade.⁸⁹

London’s advice underscores his belief that writing is the result of hard, unrelenting work. More importantly, he equates literary authorship to a wide range of manual occupations, thus dramatizing his vision of authorship as a physical form of work. And as we shall see in the next section of this chapter, London’s emphasis on apprenticeship training for all new writers signals his evolving ideas about the crucial role of craft in the writer’s work or writing process.

What should be clear by now is the fact that London’s ethics of literary labor

played a major role in his subsequent professional writing career, as is plain in his methods of composition and in his publicly-stated ideas about authorship. What are not so clear are the reasons that compelled him to create this model of authorship in the first place.

His social-class position prompted London to embrace the notion of writing as hard labor. London's biographers maintain that London wished to escape from a life of toil, but rarely do they acknowledge the anxiety this decision caused London. He doubted his ability to bridge the gap between the world of labor he had grown up in and accustomed to, and the elite, rarefied world of culture he would ascend to after earning literary success. As we saw above, he felt at turns embarrassed by and disillusioned with the upper class society to which most members of the American literati belonged. Forging a model of writing as manual labor, London managed to assuage his fears triggered by his precipitous climb up the social ladder. It allowed him to preserve, at least in his own mind, his identification with the working people he had befriended and lived alongside before he became a famous writer. Near the end of "What Life Means to Me," London framed his choice as a kind of triumph homecoming, affirming that after being exposed to America's upper crust, "I went back to the working-class, in which I had been born and where I belonged. I care no longer to climb."⁹⁰

The writing-as-labor ideology also served for London an important psychological function during his professional writing career. London admitted that he always struggled with what he called "invention," meaning creating storylines for his fictions. He felt that his strength as a writer sprang from his capacity to consistently churn out words, a process he referred to as "creation." My contention is that his efforts to

linguistically and rhetorically link the writing process to manual modes of work helped London overcome his own creative deficiencies. Reframing writing as labor boosted London's confidence in his ability to "get the job done," as he prided himself on his capacity for physical work. A letter he wrote to Johns on August 10, 1899 displays this phenomenon. "I have very little out right now. And it's growing less all the time," London reports nervously to his friend.⁹¹ "It will soon catch up with me, I'm afraid, if I don't get down and dig."⁹² Only by equating his writing to manual labor, more specifically, by reinforcing the correlation between arduous work ("get[ting] down and dig[ging]") and literary success, as he does here, did he trust in his ability to produce new work, to meet deadlines, in short, to keep his career afloat. London's repeated and, at times, obsessive comparisons between writing and laborious tasks such as "grinding," "hammering," and "plugging," reinforce the idea that writing springs from physical labor, which in turn boosted his confidence.⁹³

Launched during a period historians sometimes call the Strenuous Age, London's agenda to reframe writing as physical work, and writers as "real" workers," was informed by pervasive turn-of-the-century cultural anxieties about manhood. Historian Gail Bederman has noted that this period witnessed many middle and upper-class American men who were "unusually obsessed with manhood," that is, with reestablishing forms of white racial power and male dominance which, for reasons that extend beyond the scope of our discussion, were diminishing.⁹⁴ Popular thinking held that the increasingly over-civilized and effeminate nature of modern life corrupted individual men and, by extension, impeded social and national progress. Many feared that the surge in opportunities for commercial leisure, along with the effete rules that governed public and

private life robbed men of their primordial strength and virility. These concerns triggered a renewed interest in and passionate calls for what Theodore Roosevelt deemed “The Strenuous Life,” which entailed rugged, adventurous activities, often held outdoors, such as foreign exploration and warfare. Physically vigorous pursuits, things like team sports, bodybuilding, and scouting were also considered admirable parts of a strenuous life.

A closer look at Roosevelt’s famous speech called, “The Strenuous Life,” reveals both the perceived threat of and the “manly” response to the “problems” facing Gilded-Age men. A symbol of powerful American manhood, Roosevelt delivered his speech to a men’s club in 1899, just two years before he became our nation’s twenty-sixth president, and the same year Jack London published his first short story. He declared to the assembled members of Chicago’s Hamilton Club that, “I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life...the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife; to preach that the highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shirk from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph.”⁹⁵ Later he insisted that every man “must be glad to do a man’s work; to dare and endure and to labor.”⁹⁶

These remarks illustrate Roosevelt’s efforts to restore the imperiled sense of manhood for thousands of white middle and upper-class men. To that end, he made strenuousness a virtue, and he romanticized noble effort--in any worthy field of endeavor--as an essential condition of manhood. Roosevelt urged his fellow citizens to honor the dignity and manliness of those men who earned their living with their hands, despite the fact that labor was, as we noted earlier, on public trial. His speech served as a personal

challenge to the legions of American men who heard it, or some version of it, a challenge to take up, rather than to avoid, this kind of work. A contemporary of Roosevelt's, London most likely heard the call. London's authorial program appealed to and, perhaps, in some senses, responded directly to the era's cult of the strenuous life, as it moved literary authorship beyond the decadent aestheticism of the *fin de siècle* and reframed it as an occupation of the workaday world, one that demanded ennobling, arduous effort. Juxtaposing London's literary ideals and practice with Roosevelt's speech calls to mind the literary critic Charles Watson's assertion that London, more than most writers of the era, "felt a need to convince himself and others that he was no sissy."⁹⁷

In fact, I would argue that the masculinist rhetoric that underpinned London's comments about the occupation of literary authorship served as a carefully calibrated defense mechanism, a reaction against the prevailing culture's skepticism towards professional artists and, specifically, those who worked in the newly professionalized field of letters. Reared on the Early American ideals of hard work, discipline, and self-restraint, London bristled at the conventional wisdom which said that writers were lazy, effeminate, and undisciplined, especially compared to those employed in business fields. As a result, he tried to convince himself and the public at large that the vocation of authorship served as a test of one's manhood; he argued that his success as a literary author proved his status as a real man. Near the end of his life and literary career, London boiled down for aspiring writers the question of literary success to a simple and often blustering question of one's manhood. Consider, for example, the following portion of his letter addressed to Iowa-native and neophyte writer, Ivan T. Dowell, who had in 1913 solicited London's feedback on four of his poems. Here is part of London's

response:

You've got to lick yourself into shape. Nobody can do it for you. The man who dreams of artistry, and yet thinks it is necessary for somebody else to lick him into shape, is a man whose art is doomed to be mediocre...If you are going to deliver the real goods, you've got to do your own licking into shape...Buck up! Kick in! Get onto yourself! Don't squeal...Stiffen your upper lip. Don't let it quiver. Be a man. Kick in. Kick out. Go through. Do it yourself.⁹⁸

The message here is that earning a living in the competitive literary marketplace requires, above all, that one be a certain kind of man. London's description of the ideal author reminds us, perhaps, of Marlboro cigarettes' wildly popular advertising figure, the Marlboro Man, a stoic, rugged, loner cowboy figure who would, nearly forty one years after this letter, help define a conventional kind of masculinity, one rooted in self-sufficiency, courage, and dogged persistence. A writer's career commences, as London would have it, with a manly assertion of power, that is, by "licking [one]self into shape." We must also see that embedded in these remarks is an element of self-reassurance. Although some critics have dismissed this comment, citing it as evidence that London morphed into a petulant blowhard later in life, the fact is that he made such comments throughout his career. Perhaps because he made his living in a field long viewed as the province of women, London constantly tried to reaffirm his status as a real man.

Although he remained outwardly faithful to a strenuous, industrial-style writing program long after a string of successful short story collections and novels had sealed his literary reputation, his own work routine and ideas about writing changed dramatically over the course of his career. Those changes will be the focus of the next section.

“You'll Have to Work at Your Trade”: The Writer as Skilled Craftsman

London's literary thinking and practice were neither as simple nor as static as the discussion above suggests. His hyperbolic campaign to redefine imaginative writing as manual labor has led generations of critics and readers to conclude that he was merely a hack writer, one who sacrificed his own artistic integrity for commercial success. For over one hundred years, London scholarship has mostly overlooked the full scope of his artistic identity. My argument is that we cannot understand Jack London the writer without taking into account the impact of what I am calling his "craft ethic," an orientation towards the work of writing that shaped all phases of his authorial career. At the core of this "craft ethic," which grew stronger as his career progressed, was the conviction that the act of writing is a craft, or artisanal, enterprise. By the time his short stories began appearing in print, London was already shifting his authorial philosophy, approaching all aspects of the literary profession with a craft mindset, the precise terms of which I will outline below. Most critical accounts of his career take for granted that he was unconcerned with artistry, or style, or aesthetics. As one influential scholar put it, London "had no interest in craftsmanship for its own sake," as he saw himself primarily as "a truth-seeker and a public educator" and secondarily as an artist.⁹⁹ His brash public comments about the labor of writing that we saw above have, in some senses, sanctioned such opinions. The reality, though, is that London wanted to be taken seriously as an artist.

His evolving notions about the craft of writing were directly at odds with his writing as labor ideology, and this inherent conflict was, I argue, a pivotal and ultimately unresolved tension in his professional writing career. London's nonfiction writings, especially his private letters and essays about the occupation of authorship, reflect his

struggle to reconcile his twin authorial goals of making money and adhering to his artistic principles. One of my chief objectives here is to shed light on this crucial part of London's artistic identity, which, despite the efforts of a handful of recent critics, has not yet garnered enough attention. By tracing his craft ethic, we enhance our understanding of his artistic identity. The discussion ahead will outline London's evolving literary craft ethic and, hopefully, dispel some of the myths that continue to define his literary legacy: namely, that money making was his only motivation for writing; that he was a sham literary artist; that he wrote at a frenzied pace. And as the chapter's final section makes clear, London's career dramatizes both the growing incompatibility of modern art and commerce and the artist's uneasy position in the commercial marketplace.

London believed that all literary authors fall into two basic categories: those who write for money and, on the contrary, those who write for the sake of art. In "First Aid to Rising Authors," an essay published in *The Junior Munsey Magazine* in 1900, London expounded on the first category distinction, setting apart those high-minded literary artists "who have, or think they have, a message the world needs to hear or would be glad to hear," from those cash-strapped writers "whose lives have been cast out on hard ground or in barren places, striving to make the belly need."¹⁰⁰ He empathized with this group of poverty-stricken artists who, perforce, cater to popular tastes. However, London recognized and condemned a third category of writers: vulgar scribblers who conceive of imaginative writing strictly as a business venture, who care only about "make[ing] commodities of their written thoughts, and...send[ing] them forth, like turnips and cabbages, to be bought and sold."¹⁰¹ Of course, London's career coincided with the commercialization of the literary marketplace and the transformation of authorship from

a rarefied pastime to a viable professional pursuit. As such, the literary field was flooded with people who simply wanted to strike it rich.

The critical narrative on London suggests that he was one of the vulgar scribblers, as his public statements about his career intentions suggest that he wrote purely for monetary return. “It’s money I want, or rather, the things money will buy,” he announced to Johns in a letter written in 1899.¹⁰² Elsewhere, he insisted to his friend that, “If cash comes with fame, come cash; if cash comes without fame, come cash.”¹⁰³ These sorts of remarks leave no doubt that London wrote for materialistic reasons. However, his desire to make money never eclipsed his artistic ambitions. In order to ease his family’s financial burdens, he commenced his career by cranking out formulaic tales of adventure, set in Alaska and other exotic locales, which his publishers and readers enjoyed and soon came to expect. However, London never identified himself with “the confirmed hacks,” which was his term for writers who merely pandered to public taste.¹⁰⁴ Instead, he thought of his magazine hackwork as a financially necessary and temporary phase, “a training school,” as he put it, rather than a long-term modus operandi. From the moment he first picked up a pen, London aligned himself with those “true poet[s]” who “sing for the song’s sake,” as opposed to the literary hucksters of Grub Street.¹⁰⁵

Saddled with perpetual financial problems, London was forced to set aside his artistic ideals to earn his living. His literary career, including his artistic choices and ideals, must be viewed through the prism of his longstanding financial hardship. As critics, we have misperceived his financial imperatives for his artistic indifference. Earlier, we noted that he was born into a financially insecure family, and that he spent much of his childhood and adolescence working to support his parents, neither of whom

held steady jobs. London's biographers have shown that his financial troubles persisted for the rest of his life: he spent his money lavishly, often faster than he earned it; he kept spotty financial records; he also financed several extended family members.¹⁰⁶ The important point here is that London's finances dictated his literary practice and ideals. Simply put, he could not afford to put his craft ethic into practice. His urgent need to earn money compelled him to adopt the writing as labor model discussed above, for it enabled him to quickly churn out commercially viable work, which, in turn, temporarily alleviated his money troubles. London's financial situation made it nearly impossible for him to pursue his artistic ambitions; consequently, those ambitions have been obscured from our view. I contend that his devotion to the writing as labor ideology had more to do with his financial circumstances than his actual artistic proclivities. If given his way, he likely would have enacted his craft ethic right away.

Letters written to publishers throughout his career confirm my point insofar as they reveal London's combined sense of financial duty and thwarted artistic aspirations. In particular, his correspondences with George P. Brett, London's chief publisher and president of the Macmillan Company, confirm that, less than two years into his writing career, London was primed to abandon hackwork to pursue his artistic dreams. "In the first place," he declared in a career-shifting letter composed on November 21, 1902, "I want to get away from the Klondike. I have served my apprenticeship at writing in that field, and I feel that I am better fitted now to attempt a larger and more generally interesting field...I believe I can write a novel now."¹⁰⁷ No longer content to crank out "stock[s] of magazine articles and stories," London set his sights on becoming a serious novelist. He wrote Brett to solicit a monthly salary of one hundred and fifty dollars, a

sum he believed would grant him both the time and financial freedom to do “larger and ambitious work.”¹⁰⁸ Elsewhere in the letter, London laments the gap between his works up to that point, which he dismisses as “the sort of [stuff] magazines buy,” and the “big work” he dreamed of composing.¹⁰⁹ He also confronts one of the most common criticisms leveled against him: that he wrote hastily, without concern for style. “My hope, once I am on my feet,” he explained to Brett:

is not to write prolifically, but to turn out one book, and a good book, a year...I am not a prolific writer. I write very slowly. The reason I have turned out so much is because I have worked constantly, day in and day out, without taking a rest. Once I am in a position, where I do not have to depend upon each day's work to keep the pot boiling for the next day, where I do not have to dissipate my energy on all kinds of hack, where I can slowly and deliberately ponder and shape the best that is in me, then, at that time, I am confident that I shall do big work.¹¹⁰

London's remarks dramatize the gap between the ways he wished to write versus the way he felt he had to earn in living. Here we see the conflict between London's financial obligations and his artistic impulses. Although he wants to, he knows that he can ill afford to stop turning out hackwork, as it provides his only source of stable income. The letter also provides us with a finer-grained sense of London's craft ethics. As he describes it, his ideal writing process is akin to artisanal work, rooted in deliberate craftsmanship and removed from the commercial, routinized ethos of the serial magazines.

As soon as London earned a reliable income from writing, he put his craft ethic into practice, making a number of striking changes to his daily writing routine, which, we recall, had originally resembled a version of industrial labor. London started to blend his craft ideals into his writing process, beginning around 1900. While he once extolled the virtues of plodding effort and rapid production, from that point forward, he took pride in

being a meticulous and unhurried literary artist. He moved his daily operations out of the fiction factory and into the artisan's shop, which is to say that he reprioritized the quality over the quantity of his daily output. He embraced, and he encouraged other writers to embrace, an intentional, slower pace of writing. Published in *The Writer* in 1900, his essay, "The Question of a Name," broadcasts his new theories: "Let [any writer] do a thousand words a day; but, they must be good words, the very best he has in him. If he writes more, the chances are large that they will deteriorate to second-best and to third-best. A thousand words a day is splendid speed...that's not hard work."¹¹¹ Warning writers against the dangers of overworking, London insisted that it takes time to marshal the creative skill necessary to write well. "Take your time. Spend a day on a paragraph, or on ten paragraphs," he advised H.A. Hanner, a literary aspirant who reached out for advice in 1911.¹¹² Turning out one thousand words per day had once been London's baseline goal; soon, though, he refused to exceed that limit, a point driven home in a letter written to Johns earlier that year, in which he says, "I insist that good work can not be done at the rate of three or four thousand [words] a day. Good work is not strung out from the inkwell. It is built like a wall, every brick carefully selected."¹¹³ Elsewhere he advised Johns to "write intensively, not exhaustively or lengthily," an unofficial mantra for much of his professional writing career.¹¹⁴

His comments above magnify a key shift in the language he used to describe his own writing process and, by extension, the work of authorship. For example, when London asserts, as he does above, that good writing is "built like a wall" with "every brick carefully selected," he consciously employs what I would call a distinctive craft language: carefully chosen verbs and metaphors designed to cement the notion of writing

as a craft pursuit. Here is part of his advice to Hanner in the aforementioned letter: “Take your time; elaborate; omit; draw; develop, Paint--paint pictures and characters and emotions--but paint, paint, draw, draw.”¹¹⁵ Notice that London has replaced the metaphors of manual labor with which he had described his work process earlier in his career (“hammering,” “grinding,” “digging,” “cranking”) with verbs that denote that writing is a fine art activity, one predicated on great skill and artistic nuance. Shortly after he embarked on his writing career, London stopped comparing writers to laborers. Instead, he tried to elevate the profession of literary authorship by making rhetorical connections between writers and an array of artisans, artists, craftsmen, and tradesmen. London routinely compared himself and his fellow writers to, among others, painters, musicians, singers, welders, horseshoe makers, mechanics, farmers, blacksmiths, and bakers, stressing, in each case, the similarities between the work processes of these workers and literary authors.

These comparisons squashed the notion of writers as aristocratic dabblers. Arguing that an author’s value resulted from his or her productivity, London recast writers as key members of the American workforce, that is, as highly-skilled word producers whose output, he argued, justified a dignified social standing and guaranteed payment for their investments. As Howells had once proclaimed the inherent bond between literary authors and “working-men,” including “mechanics, farmers, [and] day-laborers” who “produce something,” by “bring[ing] into the world something that was not choately there before,” so too did London celebrate the productivity of writers.¹¹⁶ London embraced what historians sometimes refer to as the era’s “producerist ethos,” a belief in the economic value and moral righteousness of productive labor.¹¹⁷ Reflecting

on his efforts at the end of a busy workweek, for instance, London likened himself in a letter written to Anna Strunsky in 1900 to “any other honest artisan [working] by the sweat of my brow.”¹¹⁸ This association underscores London’s efforts to dignify the vocation of authorship by repositioning writers as productive cogs in America’s economy, essentially offsetting the idea of writers as useless and out-of-step with commercial industry.

London’s public feud with the literary critic Philo M. Buck, Jr. sheds additional light on his producerist thinking. Responding to Buck’s negative review of his fiction, London attempts to discredit him by insisting that the critic’s work, by nature, is unproductive and acquisitive. He taunts Buck, suggesting that he, like other critics, is “too occupied with thinking about things to do anything.”¹¹⁹ In a malicious effort to shame the critic, he predicts that Buck will be remembered after his death as a man who thought much but accomplished nothing.¹²⁰ As London’s career progressed, he aired similar grievances against critics, editors, and publishing houses: in short, against anyone in the business of letters whom he felt benefited unfairly from the work of real literary artists.

London reinforced the bond between writers and craft workers by insisting that a writer, like so many skilled craftsmen and artisans, must undergo a lengthy apprenticeship before starting his or her literary career. The notion that writing demanded rigorous, apprentice-style training was at the core of London’s craft ethic. He believed that writing entailed a complex set of skills that require years of practice to understand and master. “You’ve got years of apprenticeship before you,” London wrote to a would-be writer named Merrill C. Meade on April 5, 1915.¹²¹ Meade sought

London's advice on how to break into the literary field, submitting one of her own stories for his review. He did not hide the fact that he disliked her story; however, he encouraged her to stay hopeful, as the story represented what he described as her "first day's work as an apprenticeship in the writing shop."¹²²

Another letter, this one dated October 26, 1914 and addressed to an aspiring writer named Max Feckler, highlights London's ideas about literary apprenticeships. Just twenty years old, Feckler wrote to London to vent his frustration over not being published yet, as he felt publishers were overlooking his talents. London responds with a combination of frustration and hostility, writing, "Heavens on earth, boy, it would take you five years to serve your apprenticeship and become a skilled blacksmith. Will you dare to say that you have spent, not five years as much as five months of unimpeachable, unremitting toil in trying to learn the artisan's tools of a professional writer who can sell his stuff to the magazines and receive hard cash for the same?"¹²³ What angers London is the notion that Feckler, or anyone else, for that matter, would expect to achieve literary success without first undergoing an exhaustive training program. Viewing such training as a prerequisite to one's writing career, London asks of Feckler, "If it takes five years work to become a skilled blacksmith, how many years of work...how many years of such work, studying medium and form, art and artisanship, do you think a man, with native talent and something to say, requires in order to reach a place in the world of letters where he received a thousand dollars cash iron money per week?"¹²⁴ And he concludes by maintaining that, "If you are going to write for success and money, you must deliver to the market marketable goods...In the meantime, if you want to succeed at a well-paid game, prepare yourself to do the work."¹²⁵

London's investment in apprenticeship training must be understood, in part, as a means of self-preservation, a professional safeguard against the swarms of literary aspirants who tried their luck at imaginative writing around the turn of the century. A number of factors, including advancements in America's publishing industry, the rise of middle-and-upper-class leisure, and the popularity of serial and trade magazines, promoted the idea that anyone could pick up a pen and earn a living. By mandating lengthy, rigorous apprenticeship training for new writers, London essentially tried to weed out unqualified or otherwise misguided candidates. His commitment to training for writers also reflected his awareness of the era's culture of professionalism. London insisted that writers, like other esteemed professionals, including doctors, lawyers, and engineers, must go through hyper-specialized training and practice prior to their full-time entry into the literary field, which he hoped would raise the occupational prestige to the level of those professions. Writers become, according to London, skilled practitioners whose years of practice, training, and observations made them specialists of human nature.

London's attitude toward the final products of his literary work changed significantly as a result of his evolving craft ethic. Earlier in his career, his relationship to his work bore a striking resemblance to that of an alienated factory worker on an assembly line: he professed to be emotionally detached from his writings; he purportedly never revised; he gave little thought to pieces once he completed them, granting editors free rein to amend his work as they saw fit. However, London's move to craft production altered his thinking, as evidenced by the anger he directed at editors and publishers, many of whom he accused of inappropriately and excessively revising his work.

The letter he wrote to the editorial board of *Cosmopolitan* shortly after that magazine published his article, “The Voyage of the Snark” in its Christmas edition of 1906 is a good example. Rebuking the notion that an editor could properly revise “the work of a professional author,” he accuses the magazine of “cutting the heart out [his] work.”¹²⁶ For London, the problem boiled down to professional expertise and experience. “I WEAVE my stuff,” he insists, noting that while “you can cut out a whole piece of it, but you can’t cut out parts of it, and leave mutilated parts behind.”¹²⁷ “Do you think for one moment,” he continues, “that I’ll write my heart (my skilled, professional heart, if you please) into my work to have you fellows slaughtering it to suit your journalistic tastes?”¹²⁸ “Who in the dickens are you, any of you, to think that you can better my work!”¹²⁹ The implication is that the editors lack the professional expertise and artistry to rightfully revise an author’s work. London’s confidence in his own craftsmanship and in his ability to “deliver the goods,” meaning to write fictions that would attract a large market, increased as did his years of writing experience.¹³⁰ As a result, he grew ever more frustrated when he turned in his work to people he felt lacked artistic skill and integrity. That London regularly berated his publishers for mutilating his work demonstrates that, like most dedicated artisans, he considered himself inside of or a part of the work he produced.

London’s literary craft ethos can also be represented as an escape from his earlier life of labor. Earlier, we noted that he wished to transcend the kind of punishing manual labor he endured throughout his childhood and adolescence. He had not forgotten the time he spent working low-skilled, low-paying jobs when he began to formulate his own model of authorship. Creating a writing routine based on craft ideals allowed him to reclaim

what had been denied to him in his youth, or, as Wilson puts it, to build a theory and practice of writing “in terms the outer world had often denied him.”¹³¹ London was, as Wilson notes, “drawn to a conception of writing as a self-directed, individual craft training as an alternative to the factory existence; he envisioned his own hours, his own pace--in sum, his own terms.”¹³² A self-reputed literary craftsman, London loved the self-sufficiency afforded by his work schedule. Having once worked in factories for upwards of sixteen hours per day, during the prime of his writing career he could boast to friends that he spent only a few hours each day at work.¹³³ Also, as another critic has noted, London “cherished the consolations of his craft,” the total absorption in creative work, ” a point corroborated by Martin Eden, who explains to Ruth Morse his decision to persist in writing even though he makes no money, saying, “The creative joy in its noblest form! That was compensation for everything.”¹³⁴

Notwithstanding such perks, London’s competing ideals of craft and labor contributed to what I am arguing was the defining source of tension in his career as a professional career. A final look at *Martin Eden* will draw that tension into sharper focus.

“Work Performed”: Martin Eden (Jack London) & The Problems of Literary Labor”

The literary historian Christopher Wilson once said that, “No account of Jack London’s vocation can avoid dealing with *Martin Eden*.”¹³⁵ London scholars have unanimously agreed, calling the novel his “most intensely personal,” “the central

document of his life as an artist,” and a “rather significant cultural development...[that]...zeroed in on his profession’s change of heart.”¹³⁶ This chapter ends with a discussion of *Martin Eden* because the novel, more comprehensively than any of his fictions, embodies London’s ideals and anxieties about what it means to be a writer and to engage in literary work. As Wilson and other critics have noted, the novel embodies London’s theories about his vocation. It also explores many of the problems, which I have outlined above, that London and other professional writers faced at the turn of the twentieth century. *Martin Eden* captures the era’s widespread public skepticism and hostility over the social utility of literary authors and their work. The novel also exposes the cultural rift between art and labor and between mental and manual modes of work and workers in Gilded Age America. And it illustrates the conflicts created by the mass literary marketplace for London and other literary artists who tried to sell their art for a living.

Although we cannot be certain, London most likely came up with the idea for *Martin Eden* in 1907, while he was at work on *The Iron Heel*, his socialist dystopian novel. At that point, he was preparing, along with his wife and a small crew, to set sail for a highly publicized, ill-fated world-wide voyage aboard his schooner, The Snark, which he intended to last seven years. London promoted the trip as both the greatest adventure of his life and an unprecedented literary event. “[T]here never has been anything like this done in the history of the writing world,” he exclaimed to the editor of *Cosmopolitan* before the voyage.¹³⁷ London and crew departed from San Francisco for the first leg of their journey in April 1907. Charmian Kittredge’s journal indicates that her husband started working on *Martin Eden*, which he originally planned to call *Success*,

while they were at sea, probably in October of the same year.¹³⁸ He completed *Martin Eden* in the winter of 1908, and it was serialized in *The Pacific Monthly* from September 1908 to September 1909 before Macmillan published it in book form in 1909.¹³⁹

Martin Eden appeared at a pivotal moment in London's writing career. The success of his adventure tales along with his best-selling novel, *The Call of the Wild* (1903), had established his reputation as one of America's most bankable writers. "I might as well say that it is granted, always, that I deliver the goods," London boasted in a letter written to a publisher the year before he began working on *Martin Eden*.¹⁴⁰ He comments underscore the fact that he realized the kind of output his publishers and the reading public expected of him, and London was glad, especially early in his career, to "deliver the goods" in order to stay financially afloat. On the other hand, he wanted to break new artistic ground. By around 1903, he had grown tired of penning pot boiling short stories; he felt that he had served his literary apprenticeship long enough by writing hackwork about his experiences in the Klondike and at sea. London turned his attention to novel writing. His plan was to write one artistically ambitious novel each year, which he hoped would generate enough revenue to pay for his swelling expenses.¹⁴¹ Much to his dismay, the commercial and critical failures of *The Iron Heel*, which he finished just before he began working on *Martin Eden*, made him and his publishers doubtful of his ability to make good chiefly as a novelist.

Reeling from the disappointment of *The Iron Heel* and eager to quell his mounting financial debts, London considered *Martin Eden* as his last chance to marry his artistic and commercial ambitions, that is, as a final opportunity to craft artistically complex novels with mass-market appeal. When the novel garnered only tepid sales and

mixed reviews, London's confidence was dealt a major blow. As I noted earlier, he thought of himself as a literary artist and craftsman during and after his work on the novel. But after *Martin Eden*, London relinquished his dream of earning serious money as a literary artist. He still cared deeply about his artistry, but he returned to the hackwork he had hoped to leave behind. These years found London cranking out several pot boiling adventure tales, the majority of which, he admitted, were formulaic knock offs of his best early work. The arc of his career after *Martin Eden* was radically altered by the shortcomings of his "artistic" novels and his worsening financial situation. His expectations for the subsequent novels he wrote were more modest. In fact, the disappointments of *Martin Eden* contributed to London's "anti-literary" public posturing in his final years. As we saw earlier, London made in the last five years of his life frequent public pronouncements about his distaste for the vocation of authorship. Part of my argument is that he disavowed his artistic goals because he realized how unlikely it was that he would achieve them.

Before I comment on the novel itself, let me briefly summarize its story, which features Martin Eden, a destitute, twenty-year old sailor from the working class whose life and literary career London modeled on his own experiences. The novel opens with Eden's visit to the home of his well-to-do friend, Arthur Morse, where he spends an evening with the entire Morse family. The visit exposes Eden, an uncouth and barely educated young man, to a new and seductive world of wealth, artistic refinement, and higher education. He falls instantly in love with and wishes to marry Arthur's sister, Ruth Morse, a college-trained, urbane woman who is a few years older than Eden. However, he knows that their union would be impossible unless he climbs into Ruth's

social class. He determines to do just that. Through an intense pursuit of self-education that evokes Benjamin Franklin, Eden rises above his destitution. Emboldened by his intellectual and moral growth, he soon sets his sights on becoming a literary author. He hopes that a writing career will earn him the money and social prestige necessary to marry Ruth and please her family.

The bulk of the novel tracks Martin Eden's efforts over the next two years as he struggles unsuccessfully to achieve literary fame. He spends these years undergoing an exhaustive literary apprenticeship. It is not unusual during this time for Eden to spend upwards of nineteen hours a day at work, usually in seclusion; he reads the writings of literary masters; he studies complex branches of knowledge, including biology, physics, and sociology; he scours literary magazines to learn the secrets of published authors; and he hones his writing skills by writing in a variety of genres, including essays, short stories, poems, and travel accounts. Eden and Ruth are engaged in the midst of his apprenticeship on her condition that he will either soon reach literary success or give up writing altogether. However, Ruth, her family, and Eden's own family eventually loses patience with him and his literary endeavors, which everyone views as misguided and selfish.

The problem is that Eden's writing earns him no money, which prevents him from providing for his future wife and leads Ruth's parents to think of him as an idler. While he continues to write, Eden's financial situation grows dire. Rejection notices from magazine publishers pile up in his apartment, and he is eventually forced to pawn his belongings in order to pay his creditors. He nears the point of starvation, for he is too poor to pay the grocer and too proud to ask anyone for a handout. Ruth finally breaks off

their engagement, frustrated by Martin's refusal to settle down and land a steady, paying job.

Ironically, Martin Eden attains literary fame and financial fortune shortly after he terminates his writing career. Countless rejections by editors and publishers and the contempt of friends and family erode Eden's confidence and drive him out of the literary field. A few days after he quits, a major press publishes one of his critical essays, which launches him into a realm of success he can hardly grasp. But the newfound critical acclaim and wealth do not bring him the happiness, as he had imagined. Instead, they provoke in him an existential crisis caused by his feeling that people do not value him for himself or for his work, but only for his fame. The novel ends with Martin Eden committing suicide by drowning.

The parallels between the fictional life of Martin Eden and the real life of his creator, Jack London, should be clear from the plot sketch above. Many of the problems Eden faces in his quest to become a professional writer are similar to the ones London confronted during his own career. I have argued that London created a model of literary authorship intended to collapse the cultural boundaries between the worlds of art and labor in Gilded Age America. Hailing from a poor family with no connections to the elite realm of letters, London dealt with the assumption that he was unsuited for a literary career, destined instead for a life of manual toil. His protagonist encounters identical social-class struggles and presumptions. Through the character of Martin Eden, London calls our attention to the dissonance between his own working-class origins and his eventual de facto position as a member of the American elite. And that dissonance, I argue, helps us understand why London formulated his particular brand of literary

authorship.

The attention paid to Martin Eden's physicality in the novel's opening scene sets up the intellectual and cultural divides between the worlds of labor and art that Jack London inhabited throughout his life. When Martin arrives at the Morse home for dinner, the narrator immediately directs our attention to his body. Eden's "broad shoulders," "heavy arms," and "bulging bicep muscles," affirm his status as a manual laborer.¹⁴² By comparison, Ruth is characterized as a "pale, ethereal creature," while her family members are described strictly in terms of their intellects.¹⁴³ The text also makes repeated references to Eden's hands, hands being the body part most often associated with manual work. At one point, Ruth notices Eden's "lacerated hands," which we learn are "grimed by toil so that the very dirt of life was ingrained in the flesh itself, by that red chafe of the collar and those bulging muscles."¹⁴⁴ A little later she "noticed that the hand he waved was covered with fresh abrasions."¹⁴⁵ On the contrary, Eden marvels at the softness of Ruth's hands, a softness that, he realizes, marks her abstention from physical work.

London reinforces the rift between the worlds of art and labor by juxtaposing the Morse family's cultivation and taste against Eden's cultural and artistic naiveté. Eden feels like—and is described as—an imposter from the moment he walks through the door. He has no cultural or artistic points of reference for the genteel society he finds in the Morse home. Eden has, in other words, no vocabulary for their discussions of paintings and poetry; no dinner decorum, which forces him to mimic the people around him; furthermore, he is unaccustomed to the logic of bourgeois values. Eden appears over the course of the evening "apprehensive of what might happen, ignorant of what he

should do, [and] aware that he walked and bore himself awkwardly.”¹⁴⁶ As Ruth entertains everyone after dinner by playing the piano, Eden ponders “the impassableness of the [cultural] gulf that separated them.”¹⁴⁷ His thoughts and his behavior suggest that he is overwhelmed by her cultural refinement, signaled not only by her piano playing, but also by her family’s extensive library, fashionable clothing, and elaborate dinner ceremony. During their next encounter a few weeks later, Eden ponders the difference between Ruth’s soft hands and the “harsh callousness” of the hands of the factory girls and workingwomen of his class.¹⁴⁸ “He was appalled,” the narrator tells us, “at the problem confronting him, weighed down by the incubus of his working-class station.”¹⁴⁹ His exposure to Ruth and her family sparks Eden’s desire to improve the material and intellectual terms of his life. The time he spends with her also triggers in him intense feelings of shame. Not long after their first encounter, Eden wishes “to purge himself of the ignoble that had soiled all his days, and to rise to that sublimated realm where dwelt the upper classes.”¹⁵⁰ He is suddenly convinced that his sordid life as a seaman is no longer good enough, certainly not if he intends to marry Ruth Morse.

As London was in his youth, Martin Eden is both shocked and inspired by the stark differences between life in the working-class compared to life in the upper class. Ashamed of his own cultural and material impoverishment, Eden makes it his mission to ascend into Ruth’s social class. He asks her to tutor him in speech and personal etiquette. In one of the novel’s key scenes, Eden reveals to Ruth his ambitions:

I ain’t never had no advantages. I’ve worked pretty hard ever since I was a kid, an’ since I’ve ben to the library, lookin’ with new eyes at books—an’ lookin’ at new books, too...I’ve ben different from the people I’ve hearded with... When I come a week ago, an’ saw all this, an’ you, an’ your mother, an’ brothers, an’ everything—well, I liked it...but the thing I’m after is I liked it. I wanted it. I

want it now. I want to breathe air like you get in this house—air that is filled with books, and pictures, and beautiful things, where people talk in low voices an' are clean, an' their thoughts are clean... I want to make my way to the kind of life you have in this house. There's more to life than booze, an' hard work, an' knockin' about. Now, how am I goin' to get it? Where do I take hold an' begin? I'm willing to work my passage, you know, an' I can make most men sick when it comes to hard work. Once I get started, I'll work night an' day.¹⁵¹

Eden realizes the disadvantages of his low socioeconomic position, and he pledges to make up for them. It is important to note that, at this point, he views Ruth's life as entirely opposite and better than his own. "This girl is all that I ain't, an' I ain't anything that she is," he tells a friend during a visit to the Oakland Public Library.¹⁵² Eden's view of Ruth's world is obviously romanticized; he believes that it is filled with noble intellectuals and material comforts, things that are at once foreign and attractive to him. His conversation with Ruth commences his exhaustive program of intellectual, cultural, and moral training.

In ways strikingly similar to Jack London, Martin Eden embraces the mythology of the self-made man, which is to say that he envisions his own social mobility as the uncomplicated and inevitable result of hard work. Eden also shares the reverence London initially felt for both life in and the members of the American upper class. His aforementioned remarks to Ruth demonstrate that he envisions living in her world as paradise, as a means to intellectual, spiritual, and economic fulfillment. This conviction propels Eden to pour all of his energies into his studies, which he perceives as his ticket to a better life. Before long, his hard work begins to pay off: his newfound knowledge bridges the intellectual gap between he and Ruth. Eden quickly becomes her intellectual superior. Furthermore, the refinements to his manner of speech, dress, and behavior close the social gap between he and Ruth, at least ostensibly. Eden's mental and physical

transformations allow him to mingle with the people in Ruth's social circle. His eventual literary success completes his metamorphosis from working-class vagrant to genteel author.

However, his experiences among the members of the upper crust falls short of his expectations and lurches Eden into a depression from which he never recovers. Ruth, her family, and the assortment of people Eden meets in their social circle shatter his original faith that "all well-groomed persons above the working class were persons with power of intellect and vigor of beauty."¹⁵³ While visiting the Morse home one evening, Eden is aghast when he realizes that "the books on [Mr. Morse's] shelves, the paintings on the walls, the music on the piano—all was just so much meretricious display. To real literature, real painting, real music, the Morses and their kind, were dead."¹⁵⁴ Virtually all of the well-to-do people Eden meets are, in his estimation, "numskulls, ninnies, superficial, dogmatic, and ignorant."¹⁵⁵ He is deeply disappointed and disgusted by the extent to which they valorize wealth above art. He is also angered to learn that most of them are devoid of genuine intellectual passions. Although Ruth and the members of her set celebrate his literary fame, Eden spurns them, preferring to resume his life in the social cellar rather than spend another day living superficially among the elites.

But Martin's return to his working-class roots places him in an unnerving social limbo. He feels alienated from his friends and family, as his intellectual growth has altered his worldview, making it harder for him to relate with them. His values and ambitions isolate him from the very people he tries to reconnect with. As we saw earlier, Jack London wound up with the same dilemma. Eden's and, by extension, London's own feelings of social dislocation are evident everywhere in the novel. For example,

Martin Eden is overcome by “a sudden spiritual nausea” when two lower-class women try to flirt with him on his way home from the theater.¹⁵⁶ Eden’s discomfort in this moment stems from his conviction that “life meant more to him than it meant to these two girls,” and that they cannot understand his thoughts.¹⁵⁷ Later, when he meets Joe Dawson, a laundry operator with whom he will work for six months in the laundry room of the Shelly Hot Springs Resort, Eden immediately notices “the enormous gulf between” them, due to their educational disparity.¹⁵⁸ At first, Eden moves back and forth between the working-class world of his friends and family and the Morse’s upper-class world; however, over time he finds it nearly impossible to interact with people in the lower class. After Eden turns his back on Ruth and the upper classes, he makes a few half-hearted attempts to return to the working-class and reintegrate with old friends. Before long, though, he gives up, certain that he is a social-class exile, at home neither in the working-class nor the upper class. Another way to put it is that Martin Eden ends up trapped by the same social boundaries between art and culture that he originally tried to overturn. This feeling of entrapment leads him to commit suicide.

London’s response to his own social-class alienation was less drastic. Despite his earning, at one point, an astounding 10,000 dollars per month from his writings, he publicly repudiated his upper-class status at least a year before he started writing *Martin Eden*. London referred to himself as a proletarian writer for the rest of his life. In 1903, he published *The People of the Abyss*, a first-hand account of the brutalities of life among the lowly in London, England’s notorious East End. He considered it his best book, and the one he was most proud of writing. London was also a well-known champion of America’s social underdogs: he caroused with hobos; he employed former criminals in

his homes; and he rarely turned down a chance to share a drink or a story with one of the rowdy seaman of his youth. He built his public persona, especially in the post-*Eden* years, on his repulsion from the upper classes and his love for the working-class.

My contention is that this repulsion-attraction helps us understand why London created his unique brand of authorship. By recasting writing as a form of industrial labor, he situated himself among the manual toilers he had known and worked along side in his youth. A combination of class loyalty, nostalgia, and masculine anxieties made London reluctant to sever his ties these people and this world. Notwithstanding his aversion to manual labor, London also romanticized the years he spent as a child and adolescent laborer. He idealized the strenuous work of writing in order to stay connected to this world. Despite its hardships, the working-class fields of manual labor provided him with an appealing model of manhood, one based on physical strength and toughness. Furthermore, his writing-as-craft ideology allowed him, at least in rhetorical terms, to join America's venerable union of independent tradesmen and artisans who earned their living with their hands. London liked the idea of aligning himself with authentic workers who, unlike most industrial workers, controlled their own processes of production. Finally, I am arguing that we should read the "anti-literary" pose of his final years, a pose demonstrated by his insistence that he preferred farming to writing, as part of London's attempt to stay connected to the world of work.

I have also claimed that London's unique brand of literary authorship responded directly to culturally entrenched doubts about the status of imaginative writing as legitimate work and literary authors as real workers. *Martin Eden* dramatizes the public skepticism over the work of writing at the turn of the twentieth century. Eden adopts the

same thoroughly professional approach to and attitude about his literary endeavors, as did Jack London. Martin Eden deliberately chooses writing as the sole means of making his livelihood. He undergoes exhaustive training to acquire the special expertise of his chosen field. He maintains the discipline of steady application of his time and energies to his vocation. And once he becomes secure in his skills, he regards those skills with a confidence that borders on contempt. Eden writes with the full expectation of being paid well for his investment. He tells Ruth that his decision to write is a “cold, prosaic, matter-of-fact business proposition,” an easier way to earn a living than sailing or unskilled labor.¹⁵⁹

However, money is not the only thing driving Eden to write, nor was it Jack London’s sole reason for writing. Eden is motivated by what one of London’s biographers, when explaining his prolific work habits, has called a feeling of “creative ecstasy” that London felt when he was absorbed in the artistic process.¹⁶⁰ Martin Eden enjoys the same sort of creative ecstasy. The intense pleasure Eden gets from writing compensates him for the endless hours he spends at plugging away at his desk. Consider, for example, the following passage, in which the narrator describes Eden’s intense writing regimen:

He wrote prolifically, intensely, from morning till night, except when he broke off to go to the reading-room...The joy of creation that is supposed to belong to the gods was his...He could joyfully have spent all his waking hours upon any one of his pursuits. It was with regret that he ceased from writing to study, that he ceased from study to go to the library, that he tore himself away from the magazines in the reading-room that were filled with the secrets of writers who succeeded in selling their wares.¹⁶¹

Eden’s motivation for writing evolves almost as soon as he starts his literary apprenticeship. At first, he is compelled mainly by financial imperatives: specifically, he

hopes to earn enough money to marry Ruth. But the passage suggests that Eden cares as much, if not more, about aesthetics than he does about earning money. The value of literary work, as Eden sees it, cannot be accurately measured in dollars and cents. He believes that his passion for writing combined with his prodigious “work performed, confirms his status as a real writer (cite).

Martin Eden attempts at once to write for commercial appeal and artistic prestige. “Hack-work and income first, masterpieces afterward,” is how he sums up his authorial plans for Ruth.¹⁶² He expects to earn a handsome living by “mov[ing] to Grub Street” and doing hackwork, which he defines as “jokes, paragraphs, feature articles, humorous verse, and society verse—all the rot for which there seems so much demand.”¹⁶³ Although this kind of work violates his self-respect and sense of beauty, Eden sees it as a necessary evil, as a means to becoming a lucrative literary artist. Producing saleable hackwork will afford him the time and financial freedom needed to craft literary masterpieces. As Eden explains to Ruth, “I’ll have my spare time for study and for real work. In between the grind I’ll try my hand at masterpieces, and I’ll study and prepare myself for the writing of masterpieces.”¹⁶⁴ His approach to writing mirrors London’s approach insofar as Eden conceives of his pot boiling hackwork as a temporary phase, a gateway to “real work,” and in no way indicative of his authentic artistic identity. Like London, Eden agrees to sell out in order to cement his reputation with publishers and readers, a move that he predicts will create a large market for his literary masterpieces. He eventually achieves literary success, although not by his original plan. After publishers roundly reject his hackwork for over two years, a major house finally agrees to publish one of Eden’s “masterpieces,” which is described vaguely as “a critical

philosophic essay.”¹⁶⁵ The essay’s commercial and critical success makes the same publishers who had snubbed Eden’s earlier work eager to purchase it.

Prior to his breakout success, Ruth and her family object to Martin’s literary pursuits on the grounds that literary authorship is an unreasonable career choice. They refuse to recognize Martin as an actual writer because his writing earns him no money. Ruth’s mother’s points out that Eden “has no place in the world. He has neither position nor salary. He is impractical...He does not take to responsibility and a man’s work in the world...I am afraid...[he]...will never be a money-earner.”¹⁶⁶ Mr. Morse’s critique cuts along the same lines. The narrator tells us that he “did not like the laziness and the disinclination for sober, legitimate work” of his prospective son-in-law.¹⁶⁷ His objections reflect the American cultural conviction that writing is not real work. Eventually siding with her parents, Ruth views Eden’s attempts at authorship as impractical, selfish, and lazy; she urges him to take a remunerative position as a journalist or as a clerk in her father’s law firm. She constantly reminds her fiancé that writing is a worthwhile pursuit only if one’s writings sell in the marketplace. The Morse family’s message is clear: remuneration is the only rightful reason to write.

Furthermore, the Morse family’s rejection of Eden’s literary career reinforces the belief that artistic endeavors are less valuable than business pursuits. The story of Mr. Charles Butler, which recurs throughout the novel, reinforces the primacy of business and, by contrast, the supposed foolishness of letters in Gilded Age America. Early in their courtship, Ruth shares with Martin the story of Mr. Charles Butler. She explains that Butler was a friend of her father, a man who began life, like Eden, with “comparatively no advantages.”¹⁶⁸ However, when he was a young man, Butler took a

modest job in a printing office. According to Ruth, he was “always eager to work”; Butler was “honest, and faithful, and industrious, and economical,” which allowed him to rise in the world.¹⁶⁹ Eventually, Ruth’s father’s law firm recognized Butler and employed him as a clerk. Before long, Charles Butler rose to a position as one of America’s richest, most powerful lawyers. It is important to note that Ruth retells the story on several occasions, as she tries to dissuade Martin from following his literary dreams. London probably modeled Butler’s life on the lives of the juvenile heroes in the rags-to-riches novels written by Horatio Alger Jr. As a young boy, London read Alger’s novels and internalized their myths of success and upward social mobility. A deep belief in those myths undergirds Ruth’s maudlin declaration to Eden that Butler’s life “is an inspiration to all of us,” and that, “It shows us that a man with will many rise superior to his environment.”¹⁷⁰

I would argue that the recurrence of Charles Butler’s story in *Martin Eden* serves two key purposes. First, it implies that a business career is the only suitable career choice for “great” men in Gilded Age America. Ruth and her parents implore Martin to pursue fields like law, finance, or journalism because they offer a greater chance of economic security and social distinction for him and for Ruth. Imaginative writing for serial magazines is a misguided gamble, hardly an honorable profession. Second, and more importantly, Butler’s story suggests that literary authorship falls outside the practical realm of American industry. Compared to Charles Butler, Martin Eden appears to Ruth and her parents as both selfish and lazy. Butler’s life promises that Martin could rise in the world if only he were willing to work.

Ultimately, Eden cannot reconcile the fact his sedulous literary labors, by which

he wrote hundreds of pages of material over thousands of hours, go unrecognized until his sudden publication. He is driven mad by incessant thoughts of his “work performed,” an expression that recurs in his mind several times in the novel’s final chapters and that tells us something about London’s own reservations with regard to the turn-of-the-century literary system.¹⁷¹ By “work performed,” Eden refers to the work he did anonymously and without financial reward before his breakout. He resents the logic of the modern literary marketplace, which he believes arbitrarily confers money and official status as “real” authors to a limited number of writers. The system ignores the vast majority of hardworking writers and forces them to toil away in obscurity. Pondering his sudden literary success, Eden wonders, “What made the difference? The fact that the stuff he had written had appeared inside the covers of books? But it was work performed. It was not something he had done since. It was achievement accomplished at the very time...[others sneered at him]. Therefore [his literary success was] not for any real value, but for purely fictitious value.”¹⁷² His thoughts “went ever around and around in a circle. The center of that circle was “work performed”: it ate at his brain like a deathless maggot. He awoke to it in the morning. It tormented his dreams at night. Every affair of life around him that penetrated through his senses immediately related itself to “work performed.”¹⁷³ Dismayed by what he sees as the arbitrary, unjust nature of his success, Eden boards a ship bound for the Tahitian Islands and commits suicide by jumping into the ocean.

Eden’s demise underscores a professional reality that London struggled with throughout his career. The problem boiled down to the fact that, as Eden eventually learns, literary workers in America, or in any capitalist economy, do not determine the

value of their own work and thus have no control over their occupational standing. An industry London likened to “a soulless machine,” a network of greedy editors, publishers, and readers for whom business interests trumped artistic concerns, decides the writer’s income and occupational status literary.¹⁷⁴ The conventional image of London as a mercenary literary hack overlooks his fears about the corruptive influences of the marketplace on literary artists. While he conceded the “frankly commercial” nature of Gilded Age literary authorship, he refused to accept that sales alone legitimated his (or anyone’s) status as a “real” writer.¹⁷⁵ His craft and labor ethics outlined earlier in this chapter were built upon the ideal that a writer should be able to earn a decent living and a respectable social rank by virtue of his or her hard work. I would argue that Eden’s suicide reflects London’s critique of a business model that denies artists such fundamental control over their work.

Six years before he published *Martin Eden*, Jack London pointed out what he called “the howling paradox” of his vocation in an essay intended for would-be writers.¹⁷⁶ He argued that literary artists who wish to write for a living “cannot pour [their] artist-soul into [their] work and exchange that work for bread and meat.”¹⁷⁷ Reframing the problem in slightly different terms, he noted that, “The world is strangely and coldly averse to [the writer] exchanging the joy of his heart for the solace of his stomach.”¹⁷⁸ He concluded that any writer with artistic ambitions must realize that, “what the world prized most it demands least, and that what it clamors the loudest after it does not prize at all.”¹⁷⁹

London wrote from personal experience. These remarks highlight what I contend was the greatest unresolved tension in his writing career. London wanted to be a literary

artist and a lucrative one at that. But readers and publishers alike were “strangely and coldly averse” to his most artistically ambitious works, a fact that haunted him. When London posed in public, as he so often did, as an artless, money-driven hack writer, he defied “the promptings of his heart,” as he put in in a different essay, which is to say that he sacrificed his artistic dreams in order to earn a living. Until his death on November 22, 1916, he believed he had no other choice.

¹ Kazin, *On Native Ground*, 111.

² Labor, *Jack London: An American Life*, xiii.

³ Wilson, *The Labor of Words*, 93.

⁴ London, *Letters*, 549. In a letter written to Bailey Millard in shortly before his sailing voyage around the world, London mentions that, “We expect lots of action, and my strong point as a writer is that I am a writer of action” later pointing out that, “while I am a writer, I am also a sailor” (549).

⁵ Tavernier-Courbin, Introduction, 2.

⁶ London, *Letters*, 164.

⁷ London qtd. In Perry, *Jack London: An American Myth*, 296.

⁸ Mencken, *Prejudices*, 237.

⁹ Published in 1938, Irving Stone biographical novel, *Jack London: Sailor on Horseback*, played a major role in the formation of the London mythology. Irving claimed, and has since been disputed, that London committed suicide and that he wrote only for money.

¹⁰ For example, see Russ Kingman's biography, *A Pictorial Life of Jack London* and Philip Foner's biography, *Jack London: American Rebel*. Kingman has argued that London "could not stoop to pretend that he was following art for art's sake and was not writing for money, while Foner maintains that, for London, "Writing was a means of making money, and the more he wrote the more money poured in. The quality no longer mattered" (Kingman, *Pictorial Life*, 103. Foner, *Jack London: American Rebel*, 110).

¹¹ See Raskin, *The Radical Jack London*, and Walker (2008), *Jack London and the Klondike* (1966). Raskin argues that London's socialism defines his literary career, while Walker posits that London's stint in Alaska had the greatest impact on his writing career.

¹² Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 85.

¹³ London, *Letters*, 41.

¹⁴ Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business*, 13-14.

¹⁵ In *The School of Hawthorne*, Richard Brodhead, for instance, discusses how several nineteenth century institutions (publishing houses, magazines, advertising agencies) contributed to a vision of literature and a sphere of serious, high literary writing that was considered a special form of expression and distinctly removed from the category of general human doing and making" 62, 80). And in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams defines culture as "the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" and he explains that "culture is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film" (90).

¹⁶ Nicholas Bromell points out that, "the distinction between mental and manual labor... was the paradigm that structured virtually all antebellum thinking about work, including the work of writing" (*By the Sweat of the Brow* 11).

¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 92.

¹⁸ Borus, *Writing Realism*, 150

¹⁹ London, "On The Writer's Philosophy of Life," 7.

²⁰ London, *Letters*, 592.

-
- ²¹ London, "On The Writer's Philosophy," 7
- ²² London, *Letters*, 366.
- ²³ Labor, *Jack London: An American Life*, xii.
- ²⁴ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship*, 3-4.
- ²⁵ Borus, *Writing Realism*, 150.
- ²⁶ Hawthorne, "The Custom-House," 9-10.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Borus, *Writing Realism*, 151.
- ²⁹ London, *Letters*, 149.
- ³⁰ London, "Eight Factors of Literary Success," 163.
- ³¹ London, "What Life Means to Me," 89.
- ³² Ibid, 90.
- ³³ London, "The Apostate," 236, 242.
- ³⁴ Ibid, 242.
- ³⁵ Ibid, 248, 247.
- ³⁶ Labor, Leitz, Shepard, Introduction, xxxiii.
- ³⁷ London, "What Life Means to Me," 90.
- ³⁸ Ibid, 91.
- ³⁹ London, *Letters*, 23.
- ⁴⁰ Hedrick, *Solitary Comrade*, 6.
- ⁴¹ London, *Letters*, 24-25.
- ⁴² Ibid, 25.

-
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, 26.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ London, "What Life Means to Me," 90.
- ⁴⁷ London, *Letters*, 319.
- ⁴⁸ Labor, *London: An American Life*, 21.
- ⁴⁹ London, "What Life Means to Me," 87.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, 90.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Ibid, 90-91.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid, 92.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid, 93.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid, 91.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid, 94.
- ⁶⁰ London, *Letters*, 162.
- ⁶¹ London, "Getting Into Print," 57.
- ⁶² Whitman, "Song of Myself," 25.
- ⁶³ Irving, Introduction, viii.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ London, *Letters*, 59.

-
- ⁶⁶ Bromell, *Sweat of the Brow*, 27.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Weinstein, *Literature of Labor*, 13.
- ⁶⁹ Rodgers, *The Work Ethic*, xi.
- ⁷⁰ Crevecoeur, "What is an American," 598.
- ⁷¹ Franklin, *Autobiography*, 532.
- ⁷² Channing, "Laboring Classes," 42.
- ⁷³ Ibid, 46.
- ⁷⁴ Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 136-137.
- ⁷⁵ Rodgers, *The Work Ethic*, 13.
- ⁷⁶ Thoreau, *Walden*, 258.
- ⁷⁷ Gilbert, *Work Without Salvation*, 6.
- ⁷⁸ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 73.
- ⁷⁹ Taylor, *Scientific Management*, 31.
- ⁸⁰ Rodgers, *The Industrial Revolution*, 28.
- ⁸¹ Channing, "Laboring Classes," 36.
- ⁸² Wilson, *Labor of Words*, 98.
- ⁸³ Labor, *JL: An American Life*, 50-51.
- ⁸⁴ London, *Letters*, 318-321. London describes his rigorous daily work routine to George P. Brett.
- ⁸⁵ Watson, *Novels of Jack London*, 7.
- ⁸⁶ London, *Letters*, 117.

⁸⁷ Kingman, *A Pictorial Life*, 87. Kingman points out that London's surviving records indicate that he "went to the post office at least once on each of 140 days during the year to send one or more manuscripts on their way. [London made] A total of 287 mailings...in 1899" (87).

⁸⁸ London, *Letters*, 194. Without access to London's original manuscripts, I cannot confirm whether or not he actually revised his work. Several of his friends and literary associates corroborate his point. In his most recent biography of London, Earle Labor quotes George Martin, the original captain of London's voyage around the world on his schooner, *The Snark*, who insisted that London "writes it just once, and never goes over it to change it" (Martin qtd. in Labor 250).

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 1239.

⁹⁰ London, "What Life Means to Me," 93-94.

⁹¹ London, *Letters*, 104.

⁹² *Ibid*.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 10, 97, 1239.

⁹⁴ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 11.

⁹⁵ Roosevelt, "Strenuous Life," 1.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 2.

⁹⁷ Watson, *Novels of Jack London*, 4.

⁹⁸ London, *Letters*, 1113.

⁹⁹ McClintock, *Strong Truths*, 57.

¹⁰⁰ London, "First Aid to Rising Authors," 25.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 24.

¹⁰² London, *Letters*, 112.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 129.

¹⁰⁴ London, "Question of a Name," 21.

-
- ¹⁰⁵ London, "First Aid to Rising Authors," 24.
- ¹⁰⁶ See Foner, *JL: American Rebel*, 110.
- ¹⁰⁷ London, *Letters*, 318.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 319.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 321, 320.
- ¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 320.
- ¹¹¹ London, "Question of a Name," 20.
- ¹¹² London, *Letters*, 976.
- ¹¹³ *Ibid*, 160.
- ¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 192.
- ¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 976.
- ¹¹⁶ "The Man of Letters as a Man of Business," 34.
- ¹¹⁷ See Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 74-75.
- ¹¹⁸ London, *Letters*, 151.
- ¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 1210.
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid*.
- ¹²¹ London, *Letters*, 1442.
- ¹²² *Ibid*.
- ¹²³ *Ibid*, 1379.
- ¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 1379-1380.
- ¹²⁵ *Ibid*.
- ¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 640.

-
- ¹²⁷ Ibid.
- ¹²⁸ Ibid.
- ¹²⁹ Ibid.
- ¹³⁰ Ibid, 548.
- ¹³¹ Wilson, *Labor of Words*, 97.
- ¹³² Ibid.
- ¹³³ Ibid, 581-582.
- ¹³⁴ Howard Lachtman qtd in Walker and Reeseaman, Introduction, xviii. London, *Eden*, 321
- ¹³⁵ Wilson, *Labor of Words*, 105.
- ¹³⁶ Labor, *JL: An American Life*, 262. Watson, *Novels*, 164. Wilson, *Labor of Words*, 109.
- ¹³⁷ London, *Letters*, 549.
- ¹³⁸ Labor, *JL: An American Life*, 262.
- ¹³⁹ Ibid, 282.
- ¹⁴⁰ London, *Letters*, 548.
- ¹⁴¹ Ibid, 318.
- ¹⁴² London, *Eden*, 31.
- ¹⁴³ Ibid, 35.
- ¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 53.
- ¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 36.
- ¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 32.
- ¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 54.
- ¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 70.

-
- ¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 76-77.
- ¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 103.
- ¹⁵¹ Ibid, 96-97.
- ¹⁵² Ibid, 92.
- ¹⁵³ Ibid, 310.
- ¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 310-11.
- ¹⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 87.
- ¹⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 187.
- ¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 235.
- ¹⁶⁰ Watson, *Novels*, 7.
- ¹⁶¹ London, *Eden*, 132-33.
- ¹⁶² Ibid, 237.
- ¹⁶³ Ibid, 236.
- ¹⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 432.
- ¹⁶⁶ London, *Martin Eden*, 213.
- ¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 385.
- ¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 108.
- ¹⁶⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 111.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 437.

¹⁷² London, *Martin Eden*, 437.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 453-45.

¹⁷⁴ London, "Getting Into Print," 55.

¹⁷⁵ London, "Again The Literary Aspirant," 49.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 48-49.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 49.

CHAPTER FIVE

EPILOGUE: HEMINGWAY, FITZGERALD, AND THE PROBLEMS OF MODERN AUTHORSHIP

I have argued in this dissertation that authors in Gilded Age America struggled to overcome their own deeply rooted vocational anxieties, which sprang from two related and ineluctable problems. The first problem was caused by prevailing cultural doubts about the rightful status of imaginative writing as a vocation. Simply put, the act of writing was not considered actual work, nor were writers thought of as real workers. The individual cases of Howells, Chesnutt, and London illustrate the collective predicament of the era's professional authors, many of whom struggled to define the nature and social meaning of their literary endeavors in a culture that refused to recognize those endeavors as real work.

The rise of the mass literary marketplace in the late nineteenth century created the second problem for writers featured in my study and, by extension, American writers at large. The rapidly expanding business of letters forced any literary artists who wished to earn their living by his or her pen to assume the role of literary businessmen and businesswomen. My dissertation has demonstrated some of the ways in which meeting the market's demands led Howells, Chesnutt, and London, in their respective ways, to compromise or betray their artistic ambitions. Especially for Chesnutt and London, those compromises were traumatic and career defining.

As I mentioned in my introduction, these problems did not simply disappear after the First World War. Moving ahead to the generation of writers who came after Jack

London illustrates the historical reach of the problems taken up by my project. I want to conclude, then, by looking briefly at the authorial careers of two of the most celebrated American writers of the first half of the twentieth century: Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. The connections between them have been well documented: both writers grew up in the Midwest; both writers published their most commercially and critically acclaimed works of fiction in the 1920s and 1930s; both writers suffered through periods of notorious artistic decline at the end of their careers; both writers shared a friendship in the mid-1920s; and both writers admired and were inspired by each other's work after that friendship soured in the 1930s.¹ And both writers were ensnared by authorial predicaments similar to those faced by Howells, Chesnutt, and London. Throughout his writing life, Hemingway became increasingly obsessed with validating his literary work, while Fitzgerald endeavored to write so as to achieve artistic integrity and earn enough money to support his luxurious lifestyle.

The radical split between Hemingway's private life as a literary artist and his public persona as a Man of Action signals the depths of his vocational anxieties. Critics have confirmed his lifelong dedication to the art of writing. For Hemingway, good writing flowed from a combination of innate talent and, more importantly, hard work. The legendary tales of his drinking and cavorting have overshadowed his work ethic, especially during his days as a reporter and novice writer in Paris in the early 1920s. As an apprentice writer of fiction, Hemingway held himself to a rigorous daily schedule, which he describes in the following letter written to his second wife, Pauline Pfeiffer: "When [I] am working as hard as [I] have been...the days all just blur together...[I] Wake about seven thirty, have breakfast and [I] am working by nine and usually work

straight through until two p.m. After that it's like living in a vacuum until working time next day."² His singular devotion to his craft is clear; he appears oblivious to the passage of time and to potential social distractions while he is at work. Unlike Fitzgerald and so many American writers who suffered from alcoholism, Hemingway never drank until he closed up shop for the day. Compelled by feelings of pride and creative ecstasy, he proudly counted the words he had produced before retiring for the day.

Hemingway's commitment to his artistry is also reflected in his private remarks about his relationship to the literary marketplace. "I don't think there is any question about artistic integrities. It has always been much more exciting to write than to be paid for it" he told Perkins shortly after the publication of his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises* in 1926.³ Although he was short on funds and had to support his family, he sensed the dangers of commercialism and strove to maintain his artistic integrity. As he explained to his father, "It is much more important for me to write in tranquility, trying to write as well as I can, with no eye on any market, nor any thought of what the stuff will bring, or even if it can ever be published—than to fall into the money making trap which handles American writers."⁴ These remarks make it clear that Hemingway was willing, at least in part, to write for literary posterity rather than for current popularity. Like London, he was suspicious of what he perceived as the market's corruptive influence over his work. Dorothy Parker's 1929 *New Yorker* profile of Hemingway titled, "The Artist's Reward," not only reinforced Hemingway's allegiance to his art, it also shows us the disparity between Hemingway's notions of art early in his career versus later in his career. Calling him "far and away the first American artist," Parker debunks many of the myths surrounding his personal life; she argues that Hemingway's reputation should be based on

his loyalty to his craft.⁵ “He works like hell, and through it,” Parker explains, adding that, “Nothing comes easily to him; he struggles, sets down a word, scratches it out, and begins all over. He regards his art as hard and dirty work, with no hope of better conditions.”⁶ Hemingway was nothing, in other words, if not an artist.

Which is precisely what makes his career trajectory so hard to reconcile. As his career progressed, Hemingway the storyteller and first-rate prose stylist faded from public view eclipsed by Hemingway the celebrity Man of Action. Ironically, his enduring fame as a writer is tied to his image as a tough guy who transcended the genteel and effeminate world of American letters. Like his predecessor Jack London, Hemingway tried to collapse the world of art and the world of action. He cultivated an “anti-literary” public persona, framing himself less as a writer and more, at various stages of his professional life, as a soldier, a sportsman, a world traveler, a big game hunter and deep-sea fisherman, a war correspondent, and an expert on bullfighting. He recast writing as a kind of fiercely competitive prizefight or athletic contest, in which a writer’s strength and fortitude mattered most of all. Biographer Jeffrey Meyers has accurately pointed out that “the real and most important of the many Hemingways was the reflective man who wrote books and concealed his innate sensitivity under the mask of the man of action.”⁷ Why, we must ask, would Hemingway suppress his “real and most important” artistic identity from the public? His decision to do so, I would argue, confirms the persistence of American skepticism of and hostility towards the vocation of literary authorship. Hemingway was never comfortable with being merely a writer, or with only performing a writer’s work, because he knew that his chosen line of work lacked the kind of cultural legitimacy given to other professional fields.

Unlike his friend Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald did not shy away from the potential spoils of the literary marketplace. What he wanted most of all was to be paid well enough for his artistically ambitious novels to support his lavish lifestyle. The sudden critical acclaim of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, meant that his short stories were accepted, after 1920, as fast as he could produce them by magazines including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Smart Set*, and *Scribner's*. For the next decade, which marked the peak of his commercial and financial success, American magazines paid him higher and higher fees for his stories. Fitzgerald's good fortune actually created the insoluble conflict of his authorial career: the conflict between money and art. He was, on one hand, driven to crank out formulaic, trivial short stories, as such work allowed him to support his enormous expenses. On the other hand, it diverted his energies and attention away from his serious novels, which he knew would earn him less money but would fulfill his sense of artistic obligation. One of Fitzgerald's biographers relates an incident in which he dashed off a story in less than a day in order to purchase a 600-dollar diamond wristwatch. The incident confirms that Fitzgerald could be, as the same biographer put it, "a hasty, superficially brilliant and calculating artist who controls the form as he dominates the commercial market."⁸

Fitzgerald never earned enough money as a novelist to break loose from the short story market. The release of *The Great Gatsby* brought home to him that he could no longer count on his novels to support his lifestyle. "Most writers," notes biographer Jeffrey Meyers, "could not devote themselves to great art and to popular trash at the same time."⁹ Fitzgerald did, and he condemned himself for doing so. Regretfully, he returned to writing hack stories until he could build up enough money to commence his novels.

He described his frustrations to friend John Bishop Peale this way: “I now get \$2,000 dollars a story and they grow worse and worse and my ambition is to get where I need write no more but only novels...I’ve done about ten pieces of horrible junk in the last year that I can never republish or bear to look at.”¹⁰ Many of Fitzgerald’s literary friends and associates, including Hemingway, Edmund Wilson, and John Dos Passos, believed that he had ruined his career by squandering his immense talents on stories for the magazines. Fitzgerald confessed as much in a 1929 letter to Hemingway in which he said, “The [*Saturday Evening*] *Post* now pays the old whore \$4000 dollars a screw.”¹¹

In a letter he wrote to his daughter in the final year of his life, Fitzgerald explained that, “I wish now I’d never relaxed or looked back—but said at the end of *The Great Gatsby*: I’ve found my line—from now on this comes first. This is my immediate duty—without this I am nothing.”¹² By “this,” he meant writing serious novels at the expense of everything else in his life. It is well known that Scott Fitzgerald died believing that he had failed as a professional author. When he suffered a fatal heart attack on December 21, 1940 at the age of 44, he had been working for nearly five years as an independent screenwriter in Hollywood. This final phase of his career was born out financial necessity. Mounting debts led him back to a town he despised and a job that lacked the romance and independence of novel writing. Despite his lack of success as a screenwriter, Fitzgerald earned enough money in only eighteen months to revive his career, support his family, pay off his debts, and save enough money to begin working on his last novel. One imagines that he would have been thrilled to know that he would one day ascend to the highest ranks of modern American writers. Yet, for all of his extraordinary talents and achievements, we remember him with a sort of wistful regret, a

sense of wonder about the work he might have produced had he “found his line” sooner and figured out how to negotiate the modern literary marketplace without undermining his prodigious artistic talents.

My dissertation has argued that the literary careers of many Gilded Age American writers and, by extension, the course of American letters during that period was significantly shaped by cultural skepticism about the legitimacy of imaginative writing as a vocation. A diverse range of writers romanticized themselves foremost as workers and reconceived the act of literary authorship as a valid form of work. Some writers, including Howells and Chesnutt, reimagined the work of the writer and the literary text along socially purposive, instrumental lines. The work of writing was fundamentally moral and ethical in nature. Other writers, London most notably, tried to redefine authors as hardworking manual laborer or, in other cases, as highly skilled craftsmen or craftswomen. The cases of Hemingway and Fitzgerald substantiate my earlier claim that my project is incomplete. The problem of justifying literary work and negating the mass literary marketplace affected writers beyond the turn of the twentieth century. My hope is that my project spurs other scholars to trace the problems I have outlined above through the twentieth century and into our contemporary moment.

I consider my dissertation a contribution, however modest, to the field of nineteenth-century literary studies. I hope that scholars of Howells, Chesnutt, and London will find my analyses of their respective personal and professional lives enlightening and compelling. In addition, I think of my project as an addition to the fledgling field of Work Studies. I embarked on my initial research for this project nearly six years ago because I have always been fascinated by what work means to people.

Specifically, I wanted to know how writers at the end of the nineteenth century, thought about their literary endeavors in light of our culture's longstanding reluctance to recognize writing and other modes of intellectual labor as real work. What I found is that the popular image of the effete and cloistered writer contradicted the featured writers of my study—and so many important American authors—for whom performing a socially useful work was a vital concern. Now that my project is finished, I am reminded of and encouraged by the words of the economist Robert Heilbroner who once said, “Work is the inescapable starting point for all social inquiry.”¹³ There is still fertile ground to till for any literary or cultural historian who wants to understand how the concept of work informs the American literary scene.

¹ Meyers, *Hemingway*, 152-171.

² Hemingway, *Selected Letters*, 491.

³ Ibid, 216.

⁴ Ibid, 244.

⁵ Parker, "Artist's Reward," 29.

⁶ Ibid, 30.

⁷ Meyers, *Hemingway*, 241.

⁸ Meyers, *Scott Fitzgerald*, 91.

⁹ Ibid, 131.

¹⁰ Fitzgerald, Dear Scott/Dear Max, 102.

¹¹ Fitzgerald, qtd. in Meyers, *Scott Fitzgerald*, 153.

¹² Fitzgerald, qtd. in Turnbull, *Fitzgerald*, 318.

¹³ Heilbroner, *Wordly Philosophers*, 9.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, William. *William Dean Howells: The Realist as Humanist*. New York: Burt Franklin & Company, 1981. Print.
- Andrews, William L. "Charles W(addell) Chesnutt." *Afro-American Writers Before the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Trudier Harris-Lopez and Thadious M. Davis. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986. Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 50. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. June 2013.
- Introduction. *The Portable Charles W. Chesnutt*. By Charles Chesnutt. New York: Penguin Books, 2008. Print.
- The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980. Print.
- The Significance of Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Conjure Stories.' *The Southern Literary Journal* 7 (1974): 78-99. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. April 2013.
- Anesko, Michael. "*Friction with the Market*": *Henry James and the Profession of Authorship*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Print.
- Applebaum, Herbert. *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 1958. 2nd Edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998. Print.
- Banta, Martha. *Taylored Lives: Narrative Productions in the Age of Taylor, Veblen, and Ford*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. Print.
- Baskett, Sam S., "*Martin Eden*: Jack London's 'Splendid Dream.'" *Critical Essays on Jack London*. Ed. Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin. Boston: G.K Hall & Co., 1983. 141-154. Print.
- Bederman, Gail. *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995. Print.
- Bell, Michael Davitt. *Culture, Genre, and Literary Vocation: Selected Essays on American Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001. Print.

- Bledstein, Burton J. *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978. Print.
- Brodhead, Richard. *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. Print.
- The School of Hawthorne*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Print.
- “Why Could Not a Colored Man?”: Chesnut and the Transaction of Authorship.” *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. 177-210. Print.
- Bromell, Nicholas K. *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. Print.
- Borus, Daniel H. *Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989. Print.
- Bruce, Jr., Dickson D. *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary Tradition, 1877-1915*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989. Print.
- Cady, Edwin H. *The Realist at War: The Mature Years 1885-1920 of William Dean Howells*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1958. Print.
- The Road to Realism: The Early Years 1837-1885 of William Dean Howells*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1956. Print.
- Calhoun, Charles W. Introduction. *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America*. Ed. Charles W. Calhoun. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007. Print.
- Calhoun, John Commons & Associates. *History of Labor in the United States*. New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1966. Print.
- Carter, Everett. *Howells and the Age of Realism*. New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1954. Print.

- Cassuto, Leonard and Reesman, Jeanne Campbell Reesman. Introduction: Jack London, a Representative Man. *Rereading Jack London*. By Leonard Cassuto and Jeanne Campbell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. 1-9. Print.
- Channing, William Ellery. "On the Elevation of the Laboring Classes." 1839. *The Works of William Ellery Channing*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1970. Print.
- Charvat, William. *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1968. Print.
- Chesnutt, Charles W. *A Business Career*. Ed. Matthew Wilson and Marjan A. Van Schaik. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. Print.
- "Address to the Medina Coterie." *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 308-321. Print.
- An Exemplary Citizen: Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1906-1932*. Ed. Jesse S. Crisler, Robert C. Leitz, III, Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. Print.
- "An Inside View of the Negro Question." *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 57-65. Print.
- "A Plea for the American Negro." *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 118-121. Print.
- Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. Print.
- Evelyn's Husband*. Ed. Matthew Wilson and Marjan A. Van Schaik. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. Print.
- Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* Ed. Dean McWilliams. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. Print.
- "Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem." *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford:

- Stanford University Press, 1999. 543-548. Print.
- “Race Ideals and Examples.” *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 331-348. Print.
- “Race Prejudice: Its Causes and Cures.” *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 214-237. Print.
- “Remarks of Charles Waddell Chesnutt, of Cleveland, in Accepting the Spingarn Medal at Los Angeles.” *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 510-515. Print.
- “Self-Made Men.” *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 33-36. Print.
- *The Colonial’s Dream*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River: The Gregg Press, 1968. Print.
- “The Future American: A Complete Race-Amalgamation Likely to Occur.” *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 131-135. Print.
- “The Future American: What the Race is Likely to Become in the Process of Time.” *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 121-125. Print.
- “The Future of the Negro.” *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 24-31. Print.
- The House Behind the Cedars*. 2nd ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. Print.
- The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Ed. Richard H. Brodhead. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. Print.
- The Marrow of Tradition*. 2nd ed. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. New York: Penguin Books,

1993. Print.
- “The Negro in Art: How Shall he be Portrayed?” *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 490-493. Print.
- The Portable Charles W. Chesnutt*. Ed. William L. Andrews. New York: Penguin Books, 2008. Print.
- The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Ed. Sylvia Lyons Render. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974. Print.
- “The White and the Black.” *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 139-144. Print.
- The Wife of His Youth And Other Stories of the Color Line*. 6th ed. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008.
- “To Be an Author”: *Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889-1905*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. and Robert C. Leitz, III. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. Print.
- “What is a White Man?” *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. 68-73. Print.
- Christopher, Remy. “Rags to Riches to Suicide: Unhappy Narratives of Upward Mobility: “Martin Eden, Bread Givers, Delia’s Song.” and Hunger of Memory.” *College Literature*. 29.4 (Fall, 2002) 79-108. Print.
- Conlon, Stephen. “Jack London and the Working Class.” *The Critical Response to Jack London*. Ed. Susan M. Nuernberg. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995. 225-238. Print.
- Coultrap-McQuin, Susan. *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990. Print.
- Crevecoeur, J. Hector St. John De. “Letter III. What is an American.” 1782. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Volume A: Beginnings to 1820*. Eds. Nina Baym and Robert S. Levine. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. Print.

- Crowley, John W. *The Dean of American Letters: The Late Career of William Dean Howells*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999. Print.
- The Mask of Fiction: Essays on W.D. Howells*. Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989. Print.
- Davidson, Cathy N. *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print.
- Davis, Rebecca Harding. *Life in the Iron Mills*. 1861. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1985. Print.
- Dawson, Carl and Susan Goodman. *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. Print.
- Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1998 and its Legacy*. Ed. David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. Print.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself*. Ed. William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. Print.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. "The Talented Tenth." *The Negro Problem*. Ed. Norm R. Allen Jr., Molefi Kete Asante, Toyin Falola. Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003. Print.
- The Souls of Black Folk*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. Print.
- Duncan, Charles. *The Absent Man: The Narrative Craft of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature*. 1836. The Norton Anthology of American Literature, ed. Nina Baym. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. 1114. Print.
- "Self-Reliance." 1841. *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Brooks Atkinson. New York: The Modern Library, 2000. Print.
- Ferguson, SallyAnn H. "Chesnutt's Genuine Blacks and Future Americans." *Selected Writings*. By Charles W. Chesnutt. Ed. Ferguson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. 428-439. Print.

- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Dear Scott/Dear Max: The Fitzgerald-Perkins Correspondence*. Eds. John Kuehl and Jackson Bryer. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971. Print.
- Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. New York: Perennial Classics: HarperCollins, 1988. Print.
- Foner, Philip S. *Jack London: American Rebel*. New York, The Citadel Press, 1947. Print.
- Franchere, Ruth. *Jack London: The Pursuit of a Dream*. Binghamton, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962. Print.
- Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. 1790. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume A: Beginnings to 1820*. Eds. Nina Baym and Robert S. Levine. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. Print.
- Gaines, Kevin K. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996. Print.
- Gair, Christopher. "'A trade, like anything else': 'Martin Eden' and the literary marketplace." *Essays in Literature* 19.2 (1992): 246+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 14 Feb. 2015.
- Gibson, Donald B. *The Politics of Literary Expression: A Study of Major Black Writers*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981. Print.
- Gilbert, James B. *Work Without Salvation: America's Intellectuals and Industrial Alienation, 1880-1910*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977. Print.
- Gilmore, Michael T. *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985. Print.
- Haley, James L. *Wolf: The Lives of Jack London*. New York, Basic Books, 2010. Print.
- Halttunen, Karen. *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.
- Hamilton, Geordie. "Rethinking the Politics of American Realism Through the Narrative Form and Moral Rhetoric of W.D. Howells." *American Literary Realism*. 42, no. 1 (2009). Print.

- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. Preface to *The Marble Faun*. *American Literature, American Culture*. Ed. Gordon Hutner. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.
- The Scarlet Letter*. 1850. 3rd. Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988. Print.
- Hedrick, Joan D. *Solitary Comrade: Jack London and His Work*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982. Print.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *Ernest Hemingway Selected Letters: 1917-1961*. 1981. Ed Carlos Baker. New York: Scribner Classics Edition, 2003. Print.
- Hodson, Sara S. Introduction. *Jack London: One Hundred Years a Writer*. Eds. Sara S. Hodson and Jeanne Campbell Reesman. San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 2002. 1-20. Print.
- Howells, William Dean. *A Boy's Town*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1890. Print.
- *Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays*. Eds. Clara and Rudolph Kirk. New York: New York University Press, 1959. Print.
- Editor's Study*. 1886-1892. Ed. James P. Simpson. Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing Company, 1983. Print.
- Interviews With William Dean Howells*. Ed. Ulrich Halfmann. Arlington, TX: The University of Texas at Arlington, 1973. Print.
- Life in Letters of William Dean Howells: Volume One*. Ed. Mildred Howells. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928. Print.
- *Literary Friends and Acquaintances*, Eds. David F. Hiatt and Edwin H. Cady. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968. Print.
- "Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading." *Selected Literary Criticism*, vol. 30. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993. Print.
- "The Man of Letters as a Man of Business." *Literature and Life*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1902. Print.
- "Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories." *Selected Literary Criticism: Volume III: 1898-1920*. Ed. David J. Nordloh. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. Print.
- My Literary Passions*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1895. Print.
- *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. 3rd edition. New York: Penguin Books, 1986. Print.

- *The World of Chance*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1893. Print.
- *Years of My Youth and Three Essays*. Eds. Don L. Cook and David J. Nordloh. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975. Print.
- Irving, Washington. *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent. 1819*. New York: The Heritage Press, 1939. Print.
- Jackson, Blyden. *A History of Afro-American Literature, Volume I: The Long Beginning, 1746-1895*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989. Print.
- Jackson, Leon. *The Business of Letters: Authorial Economies in Antebellum America*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008. Print.
- Johnson, James Weldon. "The Dilemma of the Negro Artist." *The Essential Writings of James Weldon Johnson*. Ed. Rudolph P. Byrd. New York: The Modern Library, 2008. Print.
- Johnston, Carolyn. *Jack London--An American Radical?* Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984. Print.
- Kaplan, Amy. *The Social Construction of American Realism*. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Kazin, Alfred. *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*. 1942. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995. Print.
- Keller, Frances Richardson. *An American Crusade: The Life of Charles Waddell Chesnut*. Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1978. Print.
- Kershaw, Alex. *Jack London: A Life*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997. Print.
- Kingman, Russ. *A Pictorial Life of Jack London*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1979. Print.
- Laurie, Bruce. *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America*. 1989. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. Print.
- Lears, Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture: 1880-1920*. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1981. Print.

---*Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009. Print.

Labor, Earle. *Jack London: Revised Edition*. Eds. Earle Labor and Jeanne Campbell Reesman. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994. Print.

---*Jack London: An American Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013. Print.

Lewis, Sinclair. *The Man From Main Street: The Man From Main Street And Other Writings, 1904-1950*. New York: Random House, 1953. Print.

Lichtenstein, Nelson. "Authorial Professionalism and the Literary Marketplace, 1885-1900." *American Studies* 19, no. 1 (1978): 35. Print.

Logan, Rayford W. *The Betrayal of the Negro: from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1997. Print.

London, Jack. "Again The Literary Aspirant." Walker and Reesman. 48-53.

---"Eight Factors of Literary Success." Walker and Reesman. 163-164.

---"First Aid to Rising Authors." Walker and Reesman. 23-29.

---"Getting Into Print." Walker and Reesman. 54-57.

---"On the Writer's Philosophy of Life." Walker and Reesman. 7-10.

---"The Question of a Name." Walker and Reesman. 18-22.

---*The Radical Jack London: Writings on War and Revolution*. Ed. Jonah Raskin. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2008. Print.

---"What Life Means to Me." Walker and Reesman. 87-94.

---"The Apostate." 1906. *Short Stories of Jack London*. Eds. Earle Labor and Robert C. Leitz III and I. Milo Shepard. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990. 233-249. Print.

---"How I Became a Socialist." 1905. *Jack London: Novels and Social Writings*. Ed. Donald

- Pizer. New York: The Library of America, 1982. 1117-1120. Print.
- John Barleycorn*. 1913. *Jack London: Novels and Social Writings*. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York: The Library of America, 1982. 933-1113. Print.
- The Letters of Jack London: Volume One: 1896-1905*. Eds. Earle Labor and Robert C. Leitz, III, and I. Milo Shepard. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988. Print.
- The Letters of Jack London: Volume Two: 1906-1912*. Eds. Earle Labor and Robert C. Leitz, III, and I. Milo Shepard. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988. Print.
- The Letters of Jack London: Volume Three: 1913-1916*. Eds. Earle Labor and Robert C. Leitz, III, and I. Milo Shepard. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988. Print.
- Martin Eden*. 1909. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. Print.
- London, Joan. *Jack London And His Times: An Unconventional Biography*. 1939. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968. Print.
- Lynn, Kenneth. *William Dean Howells: An American Life*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970. Print.
- The Dream of Success: A Study of the Modern American Imagination*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955. Print.
- McCaskill, Barbara and Gebhard, Caroline, editors. *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919*. New York, New York University Press, 2006. Print.
- McClintock, James I. *Jack London's Strong Truths*. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1997. Print.
- McElrath, Jr., Joseph, R. "W.D. Howells and Race: Charles W. Chesnutt's Disappointment of the Dean." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 51: 4 (1997): 474-499. JSTOR. Web. March 2013.
- McWilliams, Dean. *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2002. Print.
- Mencken, H.L. *Prejudices, First Series*. New York: Knopf, 1919. 236-39. Print.

- Meyers, Jeffrey. *Hemingway: A Biography*. 1985. New York: Da Capo Press, 1999. Print.
- Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography*. New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1994. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990. Print.
- Newbury, Michael. *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. Print.
- Norris, Frank. "Zola as a Romantic Writer." *Novels and Essays*. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York, NY: Library of America, 1986. Print.
- Nuernberg, Susan M. Ed. *The Critical Response to Jack London*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995. Print.
- Olsen, Rodney D. *Dancing in Chains: The Youth of William Dean Howells*. New York: New York University Press, 1991. Print.
- Parker, Dorothy. "The Artist's Reward." *New Yorker* (November 30, 1929): 28-31.
- Perry, John. *Jack London: An American Myth*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981. Print.
- Petrie, Paul R. *Conscience and Purpose: Fiction and Social Consciousness in Howells, Jewett, Chesnutt, and Cather*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005. Print.
- Pickens, Ernestine Williams. *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Progressive Moment*. New York: Pace University Press, 1994. Print.
- Posnock, Ross. *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. Print.
- Render, Sylvia Lyons. "Charles W(adding) Chesnutt." *American Short-Story Writers, 1880-1910*. Ed. Bobby Ellen Kimbel and William E. Grant. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989. Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 78. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. June 2013.
- Rodgers, Daniel T. *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920*. 1974. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979. Print.

Roosevelt, Theodore. "The Strenuous Life: Speech Before the Hamilton Club, Chicago, April 10, 1899." 1899. *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses*. Ed. Janet Baine Kopito. New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 2009. Print.

Rowland, William G. *Literature and the Marketplace: Romantic Writers and Their Audiences in Great Britain and the United States*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

Scruggs, Charles W. "Charles W(addell) Chesnutt." *American Realists and Naturalists*. Ed. Donald Pizer and Earl N. Harbert. Detroit: Gale Research, 1982. Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 12. Literary Research Center. Web. January 2013.

Simpson, James W. Introduction. *Editor's Study*. By William Dean Howells. 1886-1892. Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing Company, 1983. V-xliv. Print.

Simpson, Lewis P. *The Man of Letters in New England and the South: Essays on the History of the Literary Vocation in America*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973. Print.

Sinclair, Andrew. *Jack: A Biography of Jack London*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977. Print.

---Introduction. *Martin Eden*. By Jack London. 1909. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. 7-21. Print.

Spangler, George M. "Divided Self and World in *Martin Eden*." *Critical Essays on Jack London*. Ed. Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin. Boston: G.K Hall & Co., 1983. 155-165. Print.

Stokes, Claudia. "In Defense of Literary Genius: Howells and the Limits of Literary History." *American Literary Realism*. 40, no. 3 (2008), 199. Print.

Stone, Irving. *Jack London: Sailor on Horseback*. 1938. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969. Print.

Sundquist, Eric J. Introduction. *The Marrow of Tradition*. By Charles W. Chesnutt. 2nd ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. Print.

---*To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. Print.

- Susman, Warren I. ““Personality” and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture.”
Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century.
 2nd edition. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. Print.
- Tavernier-Courbin, Jacqueline. Introduction. *Critical Essays on Jack London*. Ed. Jacqueline
 Tavernier-Courbin. Boston: G.K Hall & Co., 1983. 1-21. Print.
- Taylor, Frederick Winslow. *The Principles of Scientific Management*. 1911. New York: Cosimo
 Classics, 2006. Print.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. 1854. *The Portable Thoreau*. Ed. Carl Bode. New York,
 Penguin Books, 1982. Print.
- Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-
 1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Print.
- Trachtenberg, Alan. *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded
 Age*, 2nd ed. New York: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007.
 Print.
- Turnbull, Andrew. *Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962. Print.
- Walker, Dale L., and Jeanne Campbell Reesman, eds. *No Mentor But Myself: Jack London on
 Writers and Writing*. 2nd ed. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. Print.
- Walker, Franklin D. *Jack London and The Klondike: The Genesis of an American Writer*. San
 Marino, California: The Huntington Library, 1966. Print.
- Watson, Charles N, Jr. *The Novels of Jack London: A Reappraisal*. Madison, Wisconsin: The
 University of Wisconsin Press, 1983. Print.
- Weber, Roland. *Hired Pens: Professional Writers in America’s Golden Age of Print*. Athens,
 Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1997. Print.
- Weinstein, Cindy. *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature*. New York: Cambridge
 University Press, 1995. Print.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. 1855. New York: Penguin Books, 1986. Print.
- Wilentz, Sean. *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American*

- Working Class, 1788-1850*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984. Print.
- Williams, James. "Commitment and Practice: The Authorship of Jack London." *Rereading Jack London*. Eds. Leonard Cassuto and Jeanne Campbell Reesman. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. 10-24. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Print.
- Williamson, Joel. *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984. Print.
- Wilson, Christopher P. *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era*. Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1985. Print.
- Wilson, Matthew. Introduction. *A Business Career*. By Charles Chesnutt. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. V-xviii. Print.
- "The Letters of George Washington Cable to Charles W. Chesnutt." *Modern Language Studies*, 36: 2 (2007): 8-41. JSTOR. Web. February 2013.
- Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004. Print.
- Wonham, Henry B. "What is a Black Author?: A Review of Recent Charles Chesnutt Studies." *American Literary History*, 18:4 (2006): 829-835. JSTOR. Web. December 2011.