



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

2019

Always Already Imprisoned: The Panoptic Power of Capitalism in American Literature, 1900-1940

Andrew Spencer
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Advertising and Promotion Management Commons](#), [American Literature Commons](#), [American Material Culture Commons](#), and the [Mass Communication Commons](#)

© The Author

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/5747>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

© Copyright Andrew B. Spencer 2019
All Rights Reserved

Always Already Imprisoned:
The Panoptic Power of Capitalism in American Literature, 1900-1940

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Andrew Blair Spencer
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Theatre Studies, The University of Texas, 1996
Bachelor of Arts, English, The University of Texas, 1996
Master of Arts, English, Baylor University, 2000

Director: Dr. Richard Fine
Professor, Department of English

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
April 3, 2019

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr. Richard Fine, whose knowledge and expertise in guiding me through the entire dissertation process was invaluable. I could not have asked for a better mentor, and I am eternally grateful. Additionally, my other committee members—Dr. Bryant Mangum, Dr. Hong Cheng, and Dr. Emilie Raymond—were all gracious enough to work with me and provided valuable feedback and insights from beginning to end. Collectively, they were the dissertation committee I could never have realistically hoped for, and I can never thank them enough for their service.

Dr. Eric Garberson served as so much more than an advisor from the time I applied to the MATX program to my final day as a Ph.D. candidate. He endured my endless questions and neurotic planning with a calm that the most enlightened among us would envy. Thank you, Eric. I promise to try and keep the questions to a minimum going forward.

The other members of my MATX cohort—Paula Alvarez, Dawn Johnson, Francis Longaker, Tracy Stonestreet, and Clare van Loenen—have been inspirations, friends, therapists, colleagues, and cheerleaders since we all met on our first day of new student orientation at VCU. They have encouraged me and driven me to be a better academic than I thought was possible, and I only hope that my contributions to their careers have been half as impactful as theirs have been to mine. Thank you all for getting me through; let's make sure this isn't the end of our coffee meet-ups.

Finally, I extend my deepest thanks and undying love to my wife Niki. Without her, none of this ever would have been possible, and there are no words that can adequately express how much she means to me and my gratitude for all that she does. We made it, darling! *Je t'aime*.

For Niki

O heaven, O earth, bear witness to this sound,
And crown what I profess with kind event
If I speak true; if hollowly, invert
What best is boded me to mischief! I,
Beyond all limit of what else i'th' world,
Do love, prize, honour you.

William Shakespeare
The Tempest, III, i, 68-73

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	vi
Chapter One	
<i>Always Already</i>	
Introduction.....	1
Consumer Capitalism.....	6
The Panopticon.....	7
The Discourse of Advertising.....	9
Commodity Fetishization.....	18
Voilà! An American Dream.....	23
Living in a Material World.....	28
The Creation of Social Truths.....	32
Conspicuous Consumption.....	34
The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.....	38
Chapter Two	
<i>Literature of the New Century: 1900-1918</i>	
Bright Lights, Big City: The New Urban Economy.....	40
<i>The Octopus: A Story of California</i>	45
<i>The Jungle</i>	68
<i>The Custom of the Country</i>	88
Chapter Three	
<i>Peace, Prosperity, and Profligacy: The 1920s</i>	
Let the Good Times Roll: In With a Roar.....	116
<i>Babbitt</i>	121
<i>A Lost Lady</i>	143
<i>An American Tragedy</i>	164
<i>Bread Givers</i>	195
<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	228
<i>Daughter of Earth</i>	251
Chapter Four	
<i>The Bubble Bursts: The 1930s</i>	
Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?: The Great Depression.....	281
<i>As I Lay Dying</i>	284
<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>	312

<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>	340
<i>The Day of the Locust</i>	374
<i>Native Son</i>	397
Chapter Five	
<i>Always Forever?</i>	433
Works Cited.....	443
Vita.....	457

Abstract

ALWAYS ALREADY IMPRISONED: THE PANOPTIC POWER OF CAPITALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE, 1900-1940

By Andrew Blair Spencer, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019

Director: Dr. Richard Fine, Professor, Department of English

By applying the theories of control that Michel Foucault outlines in *Discipline and Punish* to the capitalist system, I argue that capitalism functions in much the same way as Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon in that it perpetually imprisons individuals who live under its purview. As I see it, capitalism works on two different tracks to exploit the human condition in order to keep those living under its purview perpetually trapped within an endless cycle of working to acquire commodities, both for our personal survival and our personal indulgence.

Advertising assumes the role of Foucauldian discourse in this model. In the United States, advertising became a commercial force in the mid-nineteenth century; by the beginning of the twentieth century, it was a fully-fledged profession that worked to fuel the burgeoning commercial culture that was beginning to manifest itself in all areas of American life. By creating needs and desires in the minds of consumers, advertisers were able to dictate consumer behavior, thereby further locking Americans into the capitalist Panopticon.

This theoretical base becomes the foundation upon which I build my explication of fourteen representative American novels written during the period 1900-1940. I offer in-depth discussions of individual novels, paying particular attention to the ways in which authors interrogate the capitalist system in light of the image of the United States as a land of opportunity. The selection of works includes both male and female authors, as well as white and African-American writers. Characters range from very poor to exorbitantly wealthy, and include multiple examples of middle-class life, too; the collection of works I have chosen includes both native-born and immigrant populations, as well. This wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, races, and nationalities provides a comprehensive picture of how all-encompassing the capitalist Panopticon is in American society.

Chapter One
Always Already

“I only wish to point out that you and I are *always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable, and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects”

-Louis Althusser

Introduction

The advertisement has consistently been rated one of the greatest of the twentieth century, and it only aired once, during the telecast of Super Bowl XVIII on January 22, 1984. Known simply as “1984,” it is the advertisement that introduced the world to the Apple Macintosh computer, an advertisement that is steeped in the ethos of George Orwell’s novel that became a focal point of cultural and literary studies that same year. The spectators within the advertisement—Orwellian proles that listen mindlessly to the droning voice of Big Brother coming from a telescreen in front of them—are under the complete control of a single authority. The disembodied face speaks to this assembled group, a group that represents the status quo of personal computing; in this context, that status quo is the collective body of users of IBM personal computers, the brand that dominated the market at the time. Through this lens, the advertisement may be read as a sort of meta-discourse: It is simultaneously *about* controlling discourse while also existing *as* controlling discourse. It is that meta quality of the “1984” advertisement that triggered the thinking that lead to the formulation of the argument presented in the following pages.

The idea for this extended work was first planted in my brain in a seminar with Dr. Hong Cheng at Virginia Commonwealth University, during which I offered a semiotic analysis of the same “1984” Apple advertisement. I examined the advertisement against the backdrop of Orwell’s novel as a way of highlighting similar themes in both works. The more I thought about the ad in terms of novels other than *1984*, however, the more I realized that authors had been saying much the same thing in a variety of works. Especially in the case of American authors of the first half of the twentieth century, I found an assortment of social critiques that all brought to light the cultural prison that was created by the combination of consumer capitalism and the advertising discourse that fuels it. Advertising’s primary aim is that of controlling the behaviors of consumers, and consumers in the United States live under the omnipresent controlling tentacles of the capitalist system. Capitalism exhibits many of the same qualities as those present in Orwell’s dystopian Oceania; in both settings, citizens exist within the confines of a virtual prison of which they are seemingly unaware but which yet dictates the parameters of their every behavior.

The following study examines the ways in which American writers of the first half of the twentieth century grappled with the emergence and the subsequent consequences of consumer capitalism in the United States. The first section looks by Frank Norris’s *The Octopus: A Story of California*, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, and Edith Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country*. The following chapter examines Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*, Willa Cather’s *A Lost Lady*, Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and Agnes Smedley’s *Daughter of Earth*. The final chapter of analysis offers explications of William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Nathaniel West’s *The Day of the Locust*,

and Richard Wright's *Native Son*. These authors, I will argue, offered a variety of critical views of the American capitalist system, though less in terms of a Marxist perspective and more in terms of a Foucauldian perspective.

While it would be anachronistic to claim that these authors were aware of Foucault's application of the Panopticon to social institutions, it is clear that they were aware of the power capitalism wielded to control those living under its purview. The writers under consideration in this work saw in the capitalist system the potential for imprisonment of consumers trapped in an endless cycle of working to acquire the necessary funds needed to buy commodities, which I interpret as a manifestation of Foucault's theories of the Panopticon detailed in *Discipline and Punish*, first published in 1975. It is in this way that my argument distinctly diverges from the traditional Marxist approach so often applied to economic interpretations of works during this time period. Whereas Marx looked to the proletariat to rise up in revolution against the capitalists as a way to end their enslavement, I see *all* those living under capitalism's purview as not only imprisoned within the system, but forever sentenced to live under its power. There is no labor strike, no union negotiation, no proletarian revolution that can free those living in a capitalist system from their bondage. Capitalism is the perfect, inescapable Panopticon, and the following pages will examine how that reality is manifested and interrogated in the above-listed American novels.

There is sufficient critical analysis to lend support and credence to my argument regarding capitalism as a panoptic power (see, for example, Foucault, von Schrittz, Fuchs, and Versieren), but there is a discernible gap in the scholarship in regard to linking Foucault's theorization of the ultimate prison with the world's most prevalent economic system. Scholars have linked Foucault's theories of power and control to capitalism, but none have made the

connection from the perspective of the consumer, which I see as the entity trapped within the panoptic structure. Additionally, there have been no scholars of literary studies who have looked at this pairing in literary studies, and likewise none that have looked at advertising as a Foucauldian dominant discourse. Despite what I see as its foundational impact to the development of capitalism, advertising is essentially ignored by scholars who interrogate the economic system within the context of literary analysis.

Countless scholars have incorporated Marx's ideas to varying degrees as a way of interpreting literature from all regions and historical periods, and the literature from the United States during the first half of the twentieth century has proved to be fertile ground for those scholars. Despite the wealth of critical literature focused on the idea that the American capitalist system has historically shackled lower-class citizens to a life of perpetual labor, no critics have thus far examined capitalism as a panoptic social force that is powered by the discourse of advertising.

In regard to the foundational tenet of my argument that pairs Foucault with Marx in a single argument, there is a noticeable lack of critical literature that puts the two together. On one hand, there is an argument to be made that that connection goes without saying, given that Foucault's early academic training centered on Marxist philosophy and he was, for a period of time, a member of the Communist party. However, given the centrality of Marx's philosophy to much of the theory that informs the following argument, there is a need to address the dearth of scholarship on the subject. The most compelling piece of critical literature in this category – and the closest to the argument offered in the following pages – is an article by Karl von Schrittz, who posits the idea that the goals of capitalist production mimic those of the penal system as outlined by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. However, the author fails to make the connection

that it is consumers that assume the role of the docile bodies under the control of the Panopticon. Instead, the author limits his argument to the idea espoused by Marx that it is the laborers who work to enrich the bourgeoisie. Whereas von Schrittz only considers the panoptic control exercised over the laborers by the capitalists, my argument extends that arm of control beyond the laborers and out to the realm of the consumers, who are controlled from birth by the capitalist structure that enables and promotes the free-market economy.

Von Schrittz's limited line of thinking – one that focuses only on the labor aspect of capitalism – is one that repeats itself throughout much of the body of critical literature that concerns Foucault insofar as his work can be applied to the interrogation of capitalism. However, no scholar has yet illustrated the ways in which Foucault's theories about control may be applied to consumers. There is very little scholarship that puts Foucault together with capitalism, and there is no work that discusses the topic of control (a topic that is central to Foucault's work) as it is manifested within the capitalist system. While there is some scholarship that applies Foucault's theories to economic concerns, none uses the Panopticon as a metaphorical model representing capitalism, and none uses Foucault's theory of the docile body in any discussion of advertising rhetoric as a manipulative power that serves as the dominant discourse in capitalism.

Most of the remaining literature that puts Marx and Foucault together is confined to the realm of socio-political perspectives, as well as periodic writings about the law. For example, Christian Fuchs argues that Foucault and Marx may be linked when interrogating the economic implications of control via personal surveillance. Alternatively, Alan Hunt ends up pitting the two against one another, and finds that while both offer opportunities for application within legal studies, they don't (to his mind) work well together. Jelle Versieren focuses her study of Foucault on *The Order of Things* and Foucault's concept of the *épistème*. As such, she is more

concerned with the historical context within which labor is situated, specifically in relation to Marxist theories. Her study focuses on the argument of whether or not labor may be viewed as a representation of wealth, as Adam Smith argued in *The Wealth of Nations*.

Consumer Capitalism

Consumer capitalism is a relatively recent development in the economic history of the United States. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the majority of Americans were self-sufficient. They grew their own food, both crops and livestock. There were no grocery stores that stocked neatly-wrapped pre-cut steaks and freshly-picked vegetables. If you wanted those things, you had to provide them yourself. The same was true for clothing, which was made in-house and almost all of which valued function over style. Americans of that time period weren't as concerned with impressing anyone with their appearance; the idea of trying to "dress to impress" was not yet a mantra in the American psyche. These men and women—and children, for that matter—lived like their Puritan ancestors, books—oftentimes books with moral lessons—serving as their primary source of entertainment. And as Thaddeus Russell points out, most Americans lived their entire lives within a fifty-mile radius of their place of birth (207).¹ Life was about work; leisure was classified as laziness, and weekends were a non-existent concept.

But that outlook on life—and the enjoyment of commodity acquisition and display—changed over the years, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, the average American had seen a tectonic shift in the world around him. Food was available for purchase from a store, as were clothes and countless commodities that had never before existed. For those who lived too

¹ Russell is, by his own admission, something of a "renegade" historian. However, his focus on many of the subjects that I am discussing throughout this work make him a valuable source of information as it pertains to my arguments.

far from the newly-created department stores in the major cities, catalogs and mail-order shopping afforded the same opportunities to purchase those goods without making the trip to the city. A whole new culture of desire grew to maturity by the beginning of the twentieth century. People whose parents had worked every day of the week for as long as there was light to see were suddenly embracing an entirely new ethic, one that valued leisure-time and indulgence as a reward for their labors. People now worked hard and played hard. But this culture didn't simply appear out of the air; it took time and a radical change in personal values. As Russell argues, "Not a single consumer good would have been produced if people did not want them or did not allow themselves to seek them. Without desire there would have been no demand. Without demand there would have been no production" (208). The desire that fueled consumer demand—which itself fueled production—in American society was created and fostered by the nascent advertising industry that began to flourish in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those individual factors—consumer demand, production, and advertising—all worked in tandem to create a virtual prison-like structure.

The Panopticon

In his examination of social and political power and control, Michel Foucault focused on the built-in control mechanisms of the ultimate imagined prison conceived of by Jeremy Bentham, who named his institution the Panopticon. Foucault suggested that the Panopticon's all-seeing eye represented a microcosm of discipline in general:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this

constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism (*Discipline and Punish* 197).

Within an enclosed environment, then, the disciplinary instrument is capable of wielding its power over a collective body contained within that environment. In my argument, the enclosed environment is capitalism, and the collective body is represented by consumers.

An important consideration when discussing the idea of a body in Foucauldian terms is that the body is capable of being disciplined to perform a particular action. Foucault describes this body as docile; it is a body that, according to Foucault, “may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (*Discipline and Punish* 136). The docile body is one that may be controlled by an authority, and may be trained or manipulated into performing whatever action that authority wishes the docile body to carry out. Foucault contends that the docile body comes about as the result of repeated practices of a particular disciplined behavior:

Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an ‘aptitude,’ a ‘capacity,’ which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection (*Discipline and Punish* 138).

Foucault suggests that a sort of collective unity of action and belief manifests within a population upon which a repeated behavior modification has been exercised. In the case of those prisoners housed within the confines of the Panopticon, that behavior modification manifests itself in the collective body of prisoners acting within the scope of prison rules. They behave this way regardless of the physical presence or absence of a guard; they have been conditioned to behave according to the rules because of the omnipresent possibility that a guard is physically present and observing them at all times. The prisoners housed within the Panopticon are subjected to the same forces as any other disciplined group. As a result of their exposure to the panoptic schema

and its threat of perpetual surveillance, the prisoners have collectively become the docile body with which authorities may do as they please, because the docile body will do whatever it has been conditioned to do.

The theory that underpins the construction and operation of this ultimate method of incarceration has spread from the prison setting into other areas of society. Foucault writes of the overall philosophy behind the operation of the Panopticon, “The panoptic schema, without disappearing as such or losing any of its properties, was destined to spread throughout the social body; its vocation was to become a generalized function” (*Discipline and Punish* 207). One of the points of the social body into which the panoptic schema has infiltrated is the economic system. Capitalism serves as a panoptic structure into which individual consumers are “inserted,” to use Foucault’s term, and those who live under capitalism’s purview are prisoners to its power. Those living within a capitalist system are contained within an enclosed space, figuratively speaking, and human needs and desires—paired with the efforts of marketers and advertisers—serve as the ever-present watchful eyes of the Panopticon, determining consumer behavior and conditioning that behavior in such a way that they become docile bodies.

The Discourse of Advertising

Advertising creates consumer desire by acting as a controlling discourse in society, and in that role it abets the controlling nature of the panoptic power of the capitalist system. Foucault writes of discourse,

“Words and things” is the entirely serious title of a problem; it is the ironic title of a work that modifies its own form, displaces its own data and reveals at the end of the day, a quite different task. A task that consists of not—of no longer—treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 49).

When an authority figure defines a particular thing—in his work, Foucault uses the idea of church officials delineating between religious visions and insane hallucinations—the thing itself is essentially born into existence by the declaration of that definition. The authority establishes existence by declaring what it is. This is the controlling power contained within discourse, the power to speak into existence a new version of reality.

Advertising serves an identical purpose in capitalism as Foucault's discourse does in society. The purpose of any advertising campaign is, at the most basic level, to drive consumer sales. In order to accomplish that goal, the advertising message must explicitly say to consumers that the specific commodity in question is *the* commodity that will bring about some promised benefit that the consumer is seeking. Fennis and Stroebe explain, "Consumers buy goods in order to achieve some goal. They try to select certain goods based on the expectation that they will be the best *means* to reach that goal" (169, italics in original). Leis et al, invoking a Marxist approach, echo this idea, explaining that the process of instilling in the minds of consumers the superiority of a specific commodity "is referred to as 'reification,' which encourages people to satisfy their needs with things that can be bought and sold. Thus the capitalist marketplace controls the basic pattern and content of social interactions" (26). Reification is related to the Marxist idea of commodity fetishization in that both processes involve consumers investing commodities with powers those commodities can't possibly embody. Through the processes of reification (or commodity fetishization), consumers are primed to be the perfect docile body. Consumers are the equivalent of sponges, waiting to soak up the discourse that will work to condition them to spend their money in the capitalist marketplace.

By serving as the creator of markets for capitalism, advertising and its discursive messages work to manipulate consumers who are trapped within the system by creating needs in

the minds of consumers. Stuart Hall articulates Foucault's thoughts on the subject of discourse this way: "Discourse [...] constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge" ("The West and the Rest" 291). With repetition, a particular discourse and its accompanying knowledge become internalized in a docile body. In this way, the discourse serves a disciplining function as it manipulates an individual's thinking and beliefs. In this way, too, the discourse is elevated from a banal discursive action to the level of accepted and absolute truth. Chris Weedon explains, "Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (Weedon 108). Thus, as a particular discourse—or form of knowledge—becomes increasingly internalized and normalized, it becomes an accepted truth by members of a particular population. The docile bodies are conditioned and disciplined in such a way that they accept the discourse as truth, regardless of what it actually says. By constantly reinforcing its own message through a variety of ways, a dominant discourse manipulates the behavior of those at whom the discourse is directed. Discourse tells consumers what to do and what to believe, and in conditioning their behavior, advertising's discourse transforms the audience into a docile body. In turn, advertising fulfills the function of a dominant discourse that operates on that collective docile body, manipulating consumer actions by influencing personal tastes.

Because of the power of discourse—and because the audience has been disciplined to act on the discursive message—physical advertisements do not need to be overtly present in order to still be effective. We are bombarded with advertisements to such an extent that we collectively become a Foucauldian docile body. We are conditioned from birth to submit to the dominant discourse of advertising. We are thus always already imprisoned within the system from the

moment we are born, and we remain imprisoned within it until our death. It is in this sense that capitalism may be read as a cultural manifestation of the Panopticon, a prison that keeps consumers trapped within its confines.

Jennifer Wicke agrees with the assessment that advertising possesses all of the qualities associated with Foucauldian discourse:

In advertising, paradoxically, we are confronted with a non-transgressive and noncumulative yet utterly pervasive mode of writing that (1) gradually determines a path of circulation, through book, newspaper, poster, television, etc.; (2) possesses an institution of formalized controllers, the advertising agencies; and (3) defines a group of subjects, modern ‘consumers,’ who are articulated by their relationship to this discourse. Advertising answers all Foucault’s criteria for a discursive practice (58).

Wicke stops short, however, of linking this Foucauldian discursive practice to the idea of the docile body. It is that link that serves the purpose of moving the idea of advertising as discourse from the realm of advertising-specific theory to a more general and all-encompassing idea that brings the entire capitalist system under its umbrella. By linking the discourse (advertising) with the docile body that has been disciplined to internalize it (the consumer), it becomes clear that advertising serves the fundamental goal of fueling the capitalist system so that that system might better trap the consumers. Advertising works to foster the panoptic environment manifested in the capitalist system.

Something that Wicke also fails to mention is the constant bombardment of advertising that repeatedly drills into the minds of consumers the message, something that is not simply a contemporary product of today’s unimaginably broad variety of advertising venues. That seemingly omnipresent quality of advertising has been a factor for more than a hundred years. In fact, in the first decade of the twentieth century, social critics were already noting the pervasive nature of advertising’s seemingly endless reach. In 1909, Samuel Hopkins Adams, a New York-

based writer for *Collier's* magazine, noted, "There is no hour of waking life in which we are not besought, incited, or commanded to buy something by somebody" (qtd. in Fox 66). This constant bombardment of calls to action urging consumers to go out and buy served the function of disciplining the audience to listen to and accept as truth the discourse that they were hearing. Eventually that discourse established itself as undeniable truth in the minds of consumers, who went out and acted on those calls to action by buying the advertised commodities.

Beyond Wicke's linking of advertising with literary works, there are many instances of scholars linking the two. Michael Ross, for one, examines the intersection of advertising and literature, though he approaches that intersection from a Baudrillardian perspective. So while my approach differs from Ross's, his interpretive framework is a valuable pairing with the idea that advertising serves the function of controlling discourse because both approaches suggest a similar result arising from the acquisition of material goods. Through his incorporation of Baudrillard's theories regarding post-consumption disillusionment, Ross argues that specific literary works mirror the sense of banality that tends to follow material acquisition, a banality that lies in stark contrast to the expectations fueled by advertising. Thus, he and I are both suggesting that goods acquired by consumers oftentimes fail to deliver the expected benefits. In Ross's case, he links that disillusionment to Baudrillard's ideas; I, alternatively, link it to the aforementioned manipulative capabilities of advertising to make consumers believe impossible promises.

Works offering comprehensive overviews of the history of advertising are well represented in the existing scholarship (see works by Danziger, Ewen, Fox, Leach, Sivulka, and Leis et al). However, there are very few scholars of advertising that have linked Foucault in any capacity to advertising within their critical work. Of those that have, the vast majority of their

critical work supports my contention that advertising serves as a manipulative power that is exercised on a willing audience (or, in Foucauldian terms, a collective docile body). However, we again see a tendency on the part of scholars to stop short of linking advertising's manipulative powers to the Foucauldian concept of the docile body. Additionally, none have linked advertising to the Panoptic condition.

There is much scholarship that is focused specifically on the manipulative nature of advertising itself but which makes no attempt to apply that nature to literary works. Olena Olenyuk argues that the power of advertising in society extends far beyond merely an informational purpose. Echoing the arguments of both Stephen Fox and William Leiss, she suggests that advertising, in addition to influencing consumers, shapes the larger societal beliefs in regard to particular commodities. It accomplishes this, she argues, through the manipulation of language to create a belief in false realities and impossible expectations on the part of consumers. Victor Danciu argues that advertisers themselves have a tendency to bend and, at times, break the rules established by their own professional code of ethics in order to manipulate consumer thinking. Penny Powers invokes Foucault's theories of discourse to help explain attitudes towards commodities resulting from magazine advertisements. She breaks Foucault's ideas down along the lines of Mary Rawlinson's three-part triad of discourse analysis, but the focus is on Rawlinson rather than Foucault. Thus the impact of Foucault's work on the subject, especially in terms of how discourse serves a controlling function, is minimized.

Because discourse is such a powerful instrument of control—and because it is one of the foundational tenets of advertising as a discursive practice—it is vital to understand how it operates in society. If discourse is to achieve its goal of establishing truth, the intended message must be presented in such a way as to become internalized within the psyche of the population.

This goal is achieved, according to Foucault, through repetition and reinforcement of the intended message, a practice that he defines as commentary:

Commentary averts the chance element of discourse by giving it its due: it gives us the opportunity to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that it is the text itself which is uttered and, in some ways, finalised. The open multiplicity, the fortuitousness, is transferred, by the principle of commentary, from what is liable to be said to the number, the form, the masks and the circumstances of repetition. The novelty lies no longer in what is said, but in its reappearance (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 221).

This is the same principle that is at work in Foucault's theories of discipline and docile bodies.

Just as the soldier learns to behave in a particular way after exposure to a system of discipline or a prisoner held captive within the physical Panopticon believes he is under constant surveillance because he has been conditioned to believe so, a person hearing a repeated message (discourse) becomes conditioned to accept it as truth.

The importance of this sequence—the presentation of the discourse itself through to its reception by an audience and that audience's subsequent interpretation of the discursive action—is important in terms of Foucault's explanation of how material things acquire meaning. The end result of this process is reification, but there appears to be a gap between that terminus and the interpretation of a discourse. That gap is filled by Foucault's concept of meaning production and attachment, which results from the commentary. As Stuart Hall explains, "Foucault argues that since we can only have a knowledge of things if they have a meaning, it is discourse—not the things-in-themselves—which produces knowledge" ("The Work of Representation" 30).

Discourse and the attendant commentary work in tandem to create meaning in the minds of a docile body, and that meaning in turn creates the knowledge that leads to the accepted truth.

When an advertisement for a specific commodity is presented to an audience, knowledge is created about that commodity in the minds of the audience, which in turn attaches meaning to

the commodity through the process of interpretation. With repetition, that knowledge and meaning are reinforced in the audience's mind and, over time, become truth, regardless of how impossible the claims may be. The more times a person is told that a particular brand of athletic shoe will enable the wearer to run faster and jump higher, the closer that message comes to being accepted as absolute truth. As Daniel Boorstin explains, "A prudent advertiser or master of public relations takes advantage of the increasingly reckless use of superlatives to make his own hyperbole seem a conservative truth" (188). The end goal of the advertiser has been achieved when the consumer believes the promises made by the advertisement and, as a result, purchases the commodity in question.

This is also a prime example of semiotics, a field of study championed by Roland Barthes, who himself built on the work of Ferdinand De Saussure and others. Barthes detailed the ways in which a print advertisement could be examined as a system of individual signs that go in to the creation of meaning: "In advertising the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional; the signifieds of the advertising message are formed *a priori* by certain attributes of the product and these signifieds have to be transmitted as clearly as possible" ("Rhetoric of the Image" 33, italics in original). Images that we see in an advertisement carry with them specific connotations that have already been established in our minds, connotations that are based in part on our own personal experiences. For example, when we see a basket of fresh vegetables, as in the example Barthes uses in his essay, we think of nutritious food and how that food helps us lead a healthier life. The vegetables themselves are nothing more than produce; however, their connotations—the signs they represent—are much broader.

The signifier-signified relationship is a complex one, and Fiske and Hartley break it down into three orders of signification. In first-order signification, "the sign is self-contained" (Fiske

and Hartley 24). In this case, the image represents exactly what it is; a photograph of a car, to use their example, is just a car. Second-order signification involves the inclusion of “a whole range of cultural meanings that derive not from the sign itself, but from the way the society uses and values both the signifier and the signified (Fiske and Hartley 24). When these second-order significations are combined with one another, we reach the third-order of signification in which they form “a comprehensive, cultural picture of the world, a coherent and organized view of the reality with which we are faced” (Fiske and Hartley 24).

Signs often operate as metaphors in which a particular sign is allowed to represent something else. For example, the American flag may be seen to represent freedom. This is a common trope in advertising in both print and television. As Fiske and Hartley point out, “Clearly, then, *all* signifiers are by that token metaphorical” (Fiske and Hartley 31-32). They go on to state that advertisers are “particularly adept at exploiting [...] metaphoric [...] modes in order to cram as much meaning as possible into a thirty-second spot” (Fiske and Hartley 32).

Returning to the visual components of advertisements, Chan and Cheng explain the concept of the sign systems inherent in images: “The signifier is the material vehicle of meaning; the signified is its meaning. The signifier is its concrete dimension; the signified is its abstract side. While we can separate the two for analytical purposes, in reality they are inseparable” (65). Here Barthes suggests that an image plays both a literal (signifier) and connotational (signified) role. Or, as Judith Williamson states in her explanation of the ways in which sign systems work in advertising, “The signifiers of connotation [...] are made up of signs (signifiers and signifieds united) of the denoted system” (qtd. in Chan and Cheng 66).

Advertisements provide fertile ground for semiotic analysis due to the fact that as viewers we are bombarded with images in ads, and all of those images are sign systems that semiotics

helps to decode. As Leiss, et al, have said, “The semiological approach [...] suggests that the meaning of an ad does not float on the surface just waiting to be internalized by the viewer, but is built up out of the ways that different signs are organized and related to each other, both within the ad and through external references to wider belief systems” (Leiss, et al 201). Consumers who are exposed to an advertisement are able to view the message through the lens composed of their own life experiences. The consumer translates the advertisement into a message that fits with his or her particular world view. They become a Foucauldian docile body as a result of exposure to the discourse. As a result, even when the discourse is not immediately present in an overt form, the message’s power is still present due to its disciplining function.

Commodity Fetishization

As mentioned earlier, one of the foundational tenets of individuals’ desire for material acquisition within a capitalist system is the phenomenon known as reification, or what Karl Marx labeled commodity fetishization:

[T]he commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears [...] is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. [...] I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities (*Capital* 165).

According to Marx, consumers of commodities attach an arbitrary value to a specific good, a value that has no direct relation to that good’s actual material worth. The value attached to specific commodities is something of an arbitrary and fluid construct, given that it is consumers in a capitalist society who determine the actual value of a particular commodity, a value that can change from moment to moment. In attaching a value to a specific item, however, the consumer

relinquishes control over the market forces because once the value of a commodity has been attached, its market value (and hence its price) escalates:

The value character of the products of labour becomes firmly established only when they act as magnitudes of value. These magnitudes vary continually, independently of the will, foreknowledge and actions of the exchangers. Their own movement within society has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them (*Capital* 167-168).

In a shift in the power structure, consumers become beholden to their possessions. Commodities acquire the power to establish identity for a consumer, and commodities as a general class of consumer goods never relinquish this power. In fact, that power intensifies, as consumers continually search for newer, better, more socially-valuable commodities in an effort to further strengthen their position in society through conspicuous consumption.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, advertising messages leveraged consumers' tendencies to fetishize commodities in such a way that they created a controlling Foucauldian discourse that changed the way Americans saw themselves and the world around them, and in doing so created demand for products that fit into that modified world view. As a result, however, consumers are imprisoned within an omnipresent and all-encompassing prison that locks them into an eternal struggle of making enough money to buy things that will either enable survival (i.e. food, clothing, shelter) or fulfill a fantastical image they have of how life might be if only they could acquire a particular commodity. Regardless of the aim of consumption, the consumer is trapped in an endless cycle of working to make enough money to buy a particular commodity that will inevitably result in an anticlimax that leads back to the desire to acquire something else which requires more money. The consumer is perpetually stuck on a Möbius strip that always leads them back to the same starting place. This theoretical foundation underpinning

the argument that consumer capitalism fosters this prison-like existence in American culture may also be read as informing the works of various American authors.

Advertising's controlling discourse effects different parts of the human psyche, and American authors investigated those different elements of human behavior. For instance, in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, the controlling discourse is tapping into the innate human survival instinct. Humans as a species require food in order to sustain life, and the farmers displaced by the ravages of the Dust Bowl were facing starvation if they didn't find work. Thus, the advertisements promising plentiful work in California landed in a target-rich environment, and their discourse had the effect of a magnet pulling the Okies westward.

Advertising also works on the drive for consumers to acquire the newest and the best, especially when those around them have commodities that they personally covet. Theodore Dreiser, among others, highlights the dangers inherent in allowing oneself to be lured in by that siren song in *An American Tragedy*. Finally, advertisements prey on human dreams; consumers have a fantasy about how their lives will be if only they have a specific item, and advertisers manifest those dreams in their sales pitches. This latter instance is especially prevalent in the form of the so-called American Dream that became an entrenched mantra in American life in the first half of the twentieth century. Critiquing this pursuit is a central theme in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, as well as other representative American novels of the first half of the twentieth century.

One of the primary tenets that supports capitalism—a requirement that is fulfilled by advertising's discourse—is the creation of need and desire on the part of consumers. Adam Smith posited this truth in his explanation of the capitalist system when he wrote, "Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be

attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer” (1134). Sut Jhally echoes this point when he writes, “The ‘immense collection of commodities’ that capitalism produces also have to be *sold*. Without the consumption of these commodities, capitalism would be in a state of permanent depression and would quickly die” (221, italics in original). An overabundance of supply coupled with a lack of demand results in economic depression. When that happens, capitalists no longer require laborers to produce commodities, because they can’t sell the ones that have already been produced. As a result, those workers employed by that particular capitalist lose their jobs and their source of income, which further subtracts from potential consumers in the market, which in turn leads to an even greater surplus of unpurchased commodities. The system would eventually collapse under its own weight if there were not enough consumers inserting capital into the market through the purchase of commodities.

The bringing-together of consumers in need (or desire) of commodities with merchants in need of consumers is the job of advertising discourse. Although advertisements have existed since at least the first century CE (excavations at Pompeii have revealed notices from local merchants, for example), Americans (and the rest of the world) were introduced to the idea of an advertising agency, when Volney Palmer opened the first agency in 1843. Building on this, P. T. Barnum demonstrated the power of advertising to manipulate potential consumers through his flamboyant and often misleading sales pitches that made his name synonymous with all of the evils associated with the advertising industry. As advertising grew increasingly sophisticated, people began buying things as a way of meeting basic human needs, but also as a way of satisfying other more materialistic instincts. These desires were both created and fostered by

advertising, which helped to simultaneously create the demand for new products and maintain that demand once those products had entered the mainstream consumer world.

Capitalism's panoptic power runs along two parallel tracks. On the one hand, human beings are governed by instinctual needs. Hunger, for instance, drives us to acquire food; but in a capitalist system, acquiring food requires money, so we are forced to work in order to acquire the necessary means for acquiring it. Karl Marx identified this obvious reality as one of the inherently exploitative powers of the capitalist system: "Nobody [...] can live on the products of the future, or on use-values whose production has not yet been completed; just as on the first day of his appearance on the world's stage, man must still consume every day, before and while he produces" (*Capital* 272). Thus, most humans are trapped from birth in a system that requires them to make enough money from their labors in order to acquire the food that they need for their own survival. Alternatively, they must somehow attach themselves to an individual who is able to provide the necessary means for their survival. This survival instinct and its accompanying drive to acquire elements necessary to that end is paired with the previously-discussed drive to acquire those things that promise to improve our lives in some way or another. But despite this two-track structure, the same controlling force is at play in each instance. As Marx argues about commodities,

The commodity is first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference. Nor does it matter here how the thing satisfies man's need, whether directly as a means of subsistence, i.e. an object of consumption, or indirectly as a means of production (*Capital* 125).

Because there is little difference between those goods used for survival and those goods used for the satisfaction of desires more closely aligned with conspicuous consumption, both subsets of

items are classified as commodities, regardless of their purpose. With that classification comes their attachment to the exploitative, panoptic nature of the capitalist system.

Voilà! An American Dream

Perhaps nowhere in the world is the metaphorical capitalist prison more overt than in the United States, the country founded on the vision of the “land of opportunity.” In 1931, James Truslow Adams codified what he saw as the dream contained within the spirit of the United States: “[T]here has also been the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with the opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (374, italics in original). This image of the United States as a land of opportunity, according to historian Christopher Lasch, “rested on its claim that the destruction of hereditary obstacles to advancement had created conditions in which social mobility depended on initiative alone” (*The Culture of Narcissism* 52). Anyone who was willing to work hard and sacrifice when necessary could achieve essentially any goal. For many in the United States, that amorphous goal was manifested in material gain and acquisition, in climbing the socio-economic ladder. Horace Kallen posited much the same idea in 1936 when he wrote, “The American Dream is a vision of men as consumers, and the American story is the story of an inveterate struggle to embody this dream in the institutions of American life” (198).

Over the course of time, the American Dream came to be manifested in the prospect of social mobility, the supposed opportunity afforded by a free-market system for individuals to rise above their social and financial level through their own labors. As Scott and Leonhardt write, “Mobility is the promise that lies at the heart of the American dream. [...] There are poor and rich in the United States, of course, the argument goes; but as long as one can become the other,

as long as there is something close to equality of opportunity, the differences between them do not add up to class barriers” (2-3). That mobility—or at least the perceived prospect of it—was the driving force behind what came to be known as conspicuous consumption.

To that point Herbert Marcuse suggests, “The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed” (9). Consumers have been disciplined by outside forces to believe that specific commodities dictate to others who they are as individuals. And producers have been happy to oblige this commodity fetishism by making more and more goods, and in turn employing advertising agencies to market those goods to consumers.

The relationship between producers and advertisers has always been a symbiotic one, as they team up to invent artificial needs and stoke the fires of the human desire for newer and better commodities. These artificial needs suffuse a particular item with a perceived specific characteristic which, in the eyes of the consumer, contributes to the individual’s desired public persona. This construction of a person’s outward appearance, in turn, fosters a sense of class consciousness that infiltrates every level of the social ladder in a capitalist society. Indeed, concern for personal appearances lies at the core of Marx’s commodity fetishism.

The American Dream may be classified as a quest for material acquisition arising from commodity fetishization. Contained within this reality is an apparent paradox, one that Lendol Calder highlights, as he points out that “the American Dream is both fabulously expensive *and* generally affordable, and this well beyond the ranks of the affluent” (5). Achieving the American Dream takes a great deal of money, yet a vast number of Americans managed—and continue to manage—to achieve their version of it. But because the concept of the American Dream “is

inscribed so deeply in the everydayness of contemporary life” in American society, Calder argues that most Americans ignore the expense associated with achieving the Dream (5). But a closer inspection begs the question of how it was that so many Americans at the turn of the twentieth century were financially able to so heartily embrace and pursue that dream. How did Americans of that time afford their pursuit of the American Dream?

The answer to that question for many consumers was credit. Buying now and paying later became a way for some families to live more opulent lifestyles than they could otherwise afford; alternatively, it was a way for some families to simply survive one more week, or even just one more day. Regardless of status, however, those who took advantage of lines of credit became further trapped within the confines of the capitalist Panopticon through the use of the seemingly innocuous payment method.

Many of those Americans who moved to cities at the end of the nineteenth century were the children of farmers, and they had learned at an early age that credit was a path to personal destruction. Louis Hyman asserts that these migrants saw personal debt as “dangerous, illicit, and immoral” (28). But that illicit path of immorality was also the path to the American Dream, which to many who sought it looked a lot like a pile of material possessions. The suggestion one may read from that fact is that the image of America—the land of opportunity—was grounded on the idea that spending money and acquiring things was the key to happiness. In essence, the economic foundation for the American Dream and, by association, the philosophical foundation of the United States as a country, was predicated on imprisoning citizens within the Panopticon of capitalism, forever tying them to debt and a lifetime of trying to pay for possessions as they worked to achieve the goals that the society dictated were worth achieving. The American Dream is yet another thread of Foucauldian discourse woven into the country’s cultural fabric.

So much of the motivating force behind the quest for the American Dream is tied inexorably to class mobility, and humans possess an internal drive that propels them to want to own and display outward manifestations of their successes. We instinctively compare ourselves to others, classifying both ourselves and those around us in terms of how we rank against one another, an instinct that Bowker and Star argue is part of our nature: “To classify is human” (1). And just as classifying is human nature, so, too, is the desire to perceive oneself as somehow better than others. René Girard suggests that we as individuals begin to covet a particular item when we see another (an individual that Girard labels the mediator) possessing it: “From the mediator, a veritable artificial sun, descends a mysterious ray which makes the object shine with a false brilliance” (*Deceit* 18). We see an apparent aura that surrounds the user of the commodity, and we instinctively want to obtain that same aura. In order to achieve that goal, we seek out the commodity. This is the manifestation of what Stanley Resor, general manager of the J. Walter Thompson advertising firm from 1912-1955, called “the spirit of emulation.” According to Resor, “We want to copy those whom we deem superior in taste or knowledge or experience” (qtd. in Fox 90).

More than a century earlier, Adam Smith expressed much the same sentiment, a fact that suggests that Smith knew exactly what lay at the heart of capitalism’s life force. It suggests that Smith knew that without this human tendency, the economic system itself could never flourish:

The natural effort of every individual to better his own condition, when suffered to exert itself with freedom and security, is so powerful a principle, that it is alone, and without any assistance, not only capable of carrying on the society to wealth and prosperity, but of surmounting a hundred impertinent obstructions, with which the folly of human laws too often encumbers its operations (913).

Human nature and the inherent desire to improve one’s station in life point to the fact that humans will always have the drive to better themselves financially, regardless of what

hindrances might come between them and their goal. It is that strength of purpose that drives the capitalist system forward and perpetuates its existence, because that drive means a never-ending supply of willing buyers in the market.

One of the inevitable results of discourse's controlling power was the development of an American materialism and material culture that began to germinate in the mid-nineteenth century and blossomed in the twentieth century. For a working definition of "material culture," I would offer a definition provided by Julian Sivulka (who paraphrases the definition provided by anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits). Sivulka writes that Herskovits "suggests that material culture can be thought of as a totality of objects in a culture that are used by humankind to cope with the physical world, to facilitate social intercourse, to delight their fancy, and to create symbols of meaning" (*Stronger Than Dirt* 16). As this definition suggests, material culture is composed not only of those commodities consumers acquire in order to serve as outward manifestations of wealth (i.e. conspicuous consumption), but also of those things that humans need in order to survive. Michael Schudson says much the same thing when he writes of the American materialist culture that it is "taken to be a society in which human values have been grotesquely distorted so that commodities become more important than people; [...]" commodities become not ends in themselves but overvalued means for acquiring acceptable ends like love and friendship" (7).

These descriptions of the American culture of consumption capture the idea that advertisers create an artificial demand for a given product, luring in buyers with promises of improved lives, increased happiness, easier work, or any one of countless other implied benefits. Capitalism is predicated on this cultural phenomenon of demand, a phenomenon that is itself a by-product of advertising's influence on the perceived value of a particular commodity.

Consumers operating within a capitalist framework are convinced of the powers of a particular commodity to improve their existence, and dedicate a portion of their labors to acquiring that commodity. They are, in the words of Karl Marx, wage slaves, working to produce goods or services that enrich their employers, and subsequently use the proceeds they gain from that work to purchase goods that they have been convinced will make their lives better (and thereby further enriching the bourgeoisie). At that point, the laborer starts the process anew, focusing on a different commodity that will further (potentially) improve his life, and the cycle begins again.

Living in a Material World

Focusing for the time being on this idea of the more indulgent elements of American material culture, advertising scholar Pamela Danziger explains that the acquisition of objects in the quest for personal indulgence is predicated on a search for a fantasy. There is a suspension of disbelief on the part of consumers, who believe on some level that a particular commodity will provide them with some impossible benefit that will drastically improve their lives. At the moment of acquisition, the consumer feels a sense of utter and complete happiness, a condition fueled by the prospect of what the future will be like now that the commodity has been purchased. However, that initial excitement soon gives way to the realization that the promised results will never materialize. As a result, the initial euphoria of the purchase wears off, and the consumer is forced to create a new fantasy built around a new commodity. The process renews itself in a seemingly endless cycle:

People craft fantasies—sometimes very elaborate ones—about their purchases. They know what their purchases will feel like, what they will look like, how the acquisition of particular products will transform their lives and make them better, more successful, happier, more fulfilled people. That is what the anticipation cycle that precedes buying is all about. Fantasies about how the product will fill a missing aspect of one's life fire the imagination. This builds stress, 'positive

healthy stress,’ which is finally resolved in the act of purchase and initial excitement created by the acquisition. Then the cycle begins again, with new fantasies and new aspects of life that need satisfying (Danziger 30).

These fantastic beliefs about the power of specific products are established and nourished in the minds of consumers by a barrage of advertisements that are seemingly omnipresent in the lives of those living under a capitalist system.

Regarding this constant stream of messaging, consumers understand, on one level, the truth that advertising attempts to obscure; they know that what they see portrayed in an advertisement is not necessarily a mimetic representation of reality. But that aspirational ideal—even if it is nothing more than an illusion with only the most tangential of connections to reality—taps into an inherent human desire to mimic those whose lifestyle is deemed superior, even if that lifestyle doesn’t actually exist. And the primary route to that emulation is the never-ending acquisition of more and more commodities, all of them promising to make one’s life better, but all inevitably falling short of the imagined results in that regard.

Following on this idea of the cycle of acquisition, Jean Baudrillard illustrates the essential nature of the desires fostered by the capitalist system through a fable of a man meeting an anthropomorphized version of scarcity. The two walk together through the land of economics and go on to produce offspring that are the human manifestation of desire. The story’s message is that the economic system in which we live creates needs that we wouldn’t normally have in an endless cycle that forever chains us to the pursuit of an impossible goal:

The whole discourse on consumption, whether learned or lay, is articulated on the mythological sequence of the fable: a man, ‘endowed’ with needs which ‘direct’ him towards objects that ‘give’ him satisfaction. Since man is really never satisfied (for which, by the way, he is reproached), the same history is repeated indefinitely, since the time of the ancient fables (Baudrillard, “Consumer Society” 39).

Celia Lury offers a more commercial-centric discussion of advertising's power to manipulate consumers into buying things that they don't need: "Advertising is a tool whereby consumers are controlled and manipulated, by the producers of goods who deliver things for which consumers have no real need, through the use of specialist types of aesthetic knowledge and the attachment of cultural values to goods in the production and distribution of products" (60).

The question becomes one of why consumers repeatedly return to the marketplace in search of new commodities that they know can't possibly deliver on the promises that the associated marketing collateral make. If experience serves as any sort of teacher, then the typical American consumer is guilty of the oft-cited definition of insanity, specifically the act of doing the same thing over and over again, while expecting a different result. Lury answers that question, at least in part, by suggesting that consumers have a desire to be something other than what they are, what she calls a "romantic longing" to be someone else through the acts of acquisition and consumption of material goods:

Consumption expresses the romantic longing to become an *other*; however, whatever one becomes is never what one wants to be. This is because the actual consumption or use of goods becomes a disillusioning experience. The actuality of consumption fails to live up to the dream or the fantasy. This persistent cycle of pleasurable expectation and disappointment explains the never-ending, insatiable character of modern consumption, why people continue to shop until they drop (51, italics in original).

This dream of becoming someone else is more powerful than the knowledge that the promises contained within the discourse are false. Consumers continue to pursue the impossible because of a bottomless well of optimistic hope bordering on naïveté.

Consumer behavior that is predicated on the repeated engagement of futile consumption is *precisely* the behavior that lies at the core of capitalism's continued existence. Without the constant influx of money to keep the system running, the system starves:

Once the basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing are satisfied for most people, capitalism faces the problem of ‘realization,’ of making sure that the huge numbers of goods produced beyond this minimal level are consumed. If capitalism cannot overcome this, it will collapse, because if goods cannot be sold, there will be no further investment in production, resulting in a stagnant economy (Leiss et al. 18).

Specific commodities become the target of covetous behavior on the part of consumers through advertising, the engine that helps run the capitalist system: “Consumer demand is manipulated not only by subtle technologies but also by the obvious content of commercial messages, which show people how to use commodities” (Leiss et al. 21). Advertising tells consumers about the existence of products, explains how to use them, and posits those products as promising a litany of benefits for the consumer. The discourse of advertising creates in consumers an unconscious reaction. The disciplined body acts in the way that it has been disciplined to do: consumers go out and buy the things they see advertised, despite their knowledge that the promises made by the advertisements cannot possibly materialize.

Daniel Horowitz discusses the importance of advertising in the growth of material culture, declaring that advertising wrought a profound change to the social structure that had prevailed prior to 1900. He says of this change that “commodity consumption emerged as a way of life, a basic force that shaped American culture. People sought fulfillment through commercial goods and experiences” (Horowitz xxiii). Echoing Horowitz, William Leach writes, “American culture, therefore, became more democratic after 1880 in the sense that everybody – children as well as adults, men and women, black and white – would have the same right as individuals to desire, long for, and wish for whatever they pleased” (*Desire* 6). David Potter is more direct and specific in his classification of advertising as a force capable of shaping consumer behaviors: “We are dealing [...] with one of the very limited groups of institutions which can properly be called ‘instruments of social control.’ These institutions guide the life of the individual by

conceiving of him in a distinctive way and encouraging him to conform as far as possible to the subject” (37). Where Potter uses the phrase “instruments of control,” I would substitute “Foucauldian discourse.”

However phrased, the end result is the same: consumer behavior is controlled by the advertising message, and that control manifests itself in the realization of the ultimate goal of advertisers, namely driving sales of a given commodity. This ultimate goal aligns with Foucault’s theories on discipline and the docile body. In regard to the docile body, Foucault writes, “All the activity of the disciplined individual must be punctuated and sustained by injunctions whose efficacy rests on brevity and clarity; the order does not need to be explained or formulated; it must trigger off the required behavior and that is enough” (*Discipline and Punish* 166). Once an individual body has been disciplined to react in a predictable way, the command that is issued via the discourse—in the case of advertising, the call-to-action that urges the consumer to go out and buy the product—is understood and performed without need for explanation. The individual reacts in a robotic manner, according to Foucault, and does what is requested, even when the discourse is not immediately present. As Leis, et al. posit, “In the consumer society, marketing and advertising assumed the role once played by cultural traditions and became the privileged forum for the transmission of such social cues” (56). Advertising discourse, then, is a control mechanism that dictates to consumers what they *should* desire and, as a result, determines for them what they *do* desire.

The Creation of Social Truths

One of the more profound examples of advertising’s power—a manifestation of its “social control”—in American history may be found in that of P. T. Barnum’s marketing of a

then-unknown singer named Jenny Lind.² In 1850, Barnum publicized Lind's first American appearance through a concerted advertising campaign featuring a veritable blanket of marketing collateral throughout New York City. As a result of his efforts, a throng estimated to be as large as 40,000 individuals was on-hand when Lind's ship docked in New York Harbor (Applegate 51). In tandem with Lind's sudden rise in popularity, a new kind of symbiotic relationship developed between advertisers and merchants, that of branding commodities in order to capitalize on a particular celebrity's status. Soon after Lind's arrival in New York, store shelves were stocked with Jenny Lind-branded cigars, sewing stands, clothes, perfume, and other commodities (Applegate 52). In the minds of consumers, the appeal of using products associated with someone famous was grounded in much the same philosophy as the theory of class emulation frequently referred to today as the "one-step-up rule," which suggests that consumers respond best to advertisements featuring a commodity being used by members of the social class one rung higher on the social ladder than they are themselves. This class-consciousness and desire for class mobility is a component of human nature that advertisers have always leveraged to their own benefit.

But advertising's utility at the time wasn't limited to the promotion of celebrities or celebrity-themed products. By the end of the nineteenth century, advertising had morphed from the broadsides favored by Barnum to color inserts in magazines touting the benefits of more pedestrian and everyday products. Inserts proclaimed the benefits of everything from Ivory soap to Pabst beer in national magazines. Sears, Roebuck, & Co. tapped in to the powers of direct

² As testament to both the power of advertising in American culture and the fact that American authors were responding to this power, consider that in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Sarah Wilson tells Casy before she dies, "When I was a little girl I use' ta sing. Folks roun' about use' ta say I sung as nice as Jenny Lind" (219).

mail in 1892, when the company sent out eight-thousand postcards inviting customers to shop by mail; that campaign resulted in over two-thousand direct orders from the catalog. Clearly, then, advertising in its earliest days awakened a part of the human psyche that appears to have previously been dormant in consumers. It was, at least in part, tapping in to the psychological component inherent in humans discussed by Fennis and Stroebe. By accessing and manipulating that unconscious response in humans, advertisers were sentencing consumers to a lifetime of imprisonment within the Panopticon that is the capitalist system under which they lived. The discourse that helped to build the consumer culture also helped to sustain its existence.

Conspicuous Consumption

Thorstein Veblen was one of the earliest critics of this national consumer culture and was the first to use the term conspicuous consumption in his work *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Fennis and Stroebe point out, however, that conspicuous consumption, in Veblen's usage, applied to more than tangible success. It was, they suggest, a term that applied to those who wanted to appear more successful than they were:

[Thorstein Veblen] coined the term 'conspicuous consumption,' suggesting that some people (the leisure class) acquire expensive items not alone for their use but to display their wealth and to signal their economic status within society. [...] They use conspicuous consumption to appear higher in the societal hierarchy than they actually are (Fennis and Stroebe 170).

This points to one of the primary reasons for the longevity of capitalism's panoptic power. Because of the desire to appear successful—or, in another way of thinking about it, because of the shift in valuing of appearances over everything else—consumers are willingly exploited by the system. Indeed, they are active participants in their own exploitation. They believe the discourse and they follow its instructions. Veblen himself wrote of this phenomenon:

The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation; and the same motive of emulation continues active in the further development of the institution to which it has given rise and in the development of all those features of the social structure which this institution of ownership touches. The possession of wealth confers honour; it is an invidious distinction. Nothing equally cogent can be said for the consumption of goods, nor for any other conceivable incentive to acquisition, and especially not for any incentive to accumulation of wealth (19-20).

The essential message contained in this passage can be distilled down to the fact that consumers seek to emulate those that they admire. They see success as manifested in the acquisition of material goods and, in order to demonstrate that they are as successful as those they see around them, they, too, conspicuously consume. This is Marx's commodity fetishization in practice.

On the subject of Karl Marx, the prevalence of authors' concerns with class-consciousness may be linked to the publication of Marx's *Capital*. The work was a direct response to what Marx saw as the exploitive nature of the bourgeoisie-proletariat relationship, and all of the inherent inequalities contained within that pairing. The work was also a challenge to those whom Marx saw as exploited – specifically the proletariat working class – and a call to action, urging those laborers to rise up and overthrow the bourgeoisie capitalists. Marx writes of the economic system,

[W]ithin the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; that all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers (*Capital* 799).

This idea of capitalism providing members of the upper class (specifically those who controlled the means of production) with a dominating power over the laboring class was one that found fertile ground in the minds of many American writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and many scholars have focused on that idea as the foundation for their interpretations of those writers. The desire to emulate that is encapsulated within Marx's theories on commodity fetishization was—and continues to be—the *raison d'être* for advertisements since the beginning

of the twentieth century. The consumptive behaviors fostered by commodity fetishization, as the novels I will be discussing in the following pages suggest, was a concern that wove its way, to greater and lesser extents, through much of the American literature of the era.

Despite the fact that consumers may be read as victims of advertising's less-than-factual presentations of commodities or other exploitive practices, it is important to remember that consumers are complicit in this exploitation. The belief in a particular commodity's ability to transform our lives requires a suspension of disbelief on the part of consumers, and that suspension requires an active participation. And at the point of transaction when the consumer exchanges money for the commodity, there is a willingness to believe the impossible. Boorstin suggests as much when he writes, "We refuse to believe that advertising men are at most our collaborators, helping us make illusions for ourselves" (205). Consumers want to believe that what they see in advertisements is true, that the promises advertisements make are attainable.

And that desire is so strong that we are willing to suspend rational thinking in order to emulate what we see in others, or at least what we think we see in others. Because, just as advertisements themselves project an all-too-perfect image of what our lives might be like if we only acquire a particular commodity, so, too, is our vision of others that we seek to emulate. Perception of others and the desire to emulate them is fraught with the potential for disillusionment, just as is the practice of acquisition with the goal of being emulated. This quest for an exact mimetic emulation is inevitably doomed to failure, as Daniel Boorstin argues: "Our every effort to satisfy our extravagant expectations simply makes them more extravagant and makes our illusions more attractive" (5).

By performing their didactic function in educating consumers on what they "really" wanted in order to make their lives the way it "really" should be, advertisers and their creative

output helped to shape the material culture that enveloped the United States in the late nineteenth century, a culture that billowed and strengthened in the twentieth century. Americans were told by advertisements that they should buy particular commodities in order to better themselves, and the resulting snowball effect fostered intense growth of commercial capitalism in the United States. As Juliann Sivulka writes, “This change [in American culture around the turn of the twentieth century] amounted to nothing less than a major cultural transition that entailed new kinds of human needs which affected customs, ideas, attitudes, social organizations, and material resources—in short, the elements of culture” (*Stronger Than Dirt* 17). The messages of the discourse—those messages that told Americans that the key to happiness and success was conspicuous consumption—became so ingrained in the culture that Americans grew to act on that discourse without explicitly being told to do so. The cultural transition that Sivulka references was so powerful that consumption became part of the fabric of American culture; advertising’s discourse successfully disciplined the collective body of American consumers to the point that they consumed automatically and instinctively.

The historical period under examination in the following pages is one that witnessed profound changes in American business practices and, as a result, in consumer attitudes and behaviors. At the beginning of the twentieth century, transcontinental transportation became a reality, which opened up vast new consumer markets. Advertising was becoming a powerful discursive force, serving to both educate and influence consumers. As Stuart Ewen writes about this period in American history, “Much of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century social thought is premised on the coming of what historian Warren Susman termed ‘a newly emerging culture of abundance’” (*Images* 238). That “newly emerging culture of abundance” was a direct result of

the economic prosperity that resulted from advances in production, shipping, and marketing that were taking hold in American culture at the time.

The Revolution Will Not Be Televised

From the end of the nineteenth century through the end of World War II, the United States moved from an agrarian to a commercial culture, survived multiple economic booms and depressions, and endured two world wars. All of these events wrought immense changes on American society, and many of the country's writers used this changing tapestry of socio-economic events as the backdrop for their works, focusing their interrogations on the contemporary economic climate in order to investigate the ways in which that climate affected those living through the times. Regarding authors' reactions to such changes in society over the course of history, Daniel Aaron writes, "Usually in each literary period, economic or social events or 'causes' break through the artist's isolation [...]. For short periods, the engaged writer takes a stand on public issues" (4). The manifestation of that "stand on public issues," in the case of American authors, takes the form of oft-biting social commentaries that reflect the issues of the time. Many of the authors of the early twentieth century were aware of the trap that capitalism created for consumers and of the system's panoptic powers. They understood that the American financial system wielded the power to permanently ensnare consumers in an inescapable prison. However, they lacked the theoretical language to discuss it through that specific language. It would take the work of Michel Foucault to make that association possible.

The works that I have chosen to serve as representative of their particular historical time include both canonical and non-canonical novels (both admittedly troubling terms). They also represent a mix of gender and racial categorizations, including authors that are male and female,

white and African-American, Christian and Jewish. The early twentieth century in the United States was a time of explosive growth, growth fueled by immigration, and I have attempted to capture something of that diverse spirit in my selection of primary texts. Of these works, the vast majority have themselves been the subject of multiple iterations of Marxist interpretation. However, one of the defining characteristics of Marx's core philosophy is that the cycle of exploitation perpetuated by capitalists at the expense of the proletariat will inevitably result in a revolution resulting in the toppling of the capitalist elite and the destruction of class boundaries. This is one of the primary points in which this interpretation of these works differs sharply from traditional Marxist explications. There is no suggestion that these authors are calling for a proletariat revolt; in fact, such a revolt is a pointless endeavor. Because capitalism is the all-encompassing Panopticon, there is literally no escape from it. No revolution will overthrow the all-seeing eye that has for so long disciplined the body of those living under capitalism's purview. No amount of force will effect a change in the system that exploits both human beings and their instinctual needs and desires. The following work, unlike traditional Marxist criticism, is predicated on the fact that the system is firmly installed and the only way to truly escape it is through death. That is the reality of an always-already condition. There is no consent to begin on the part of those living within the system, and there is no end to the system's existence. It was here before our birth, and it will continue long after our death.

Chapter Two

Literature of the New Century: 1900-1918

Big City, Bright Lights: The New Urban Economy

During what Michael Lind terms “the second industrial revolution” in the United States, which corresponds roughly with the second half of the nineteenth century, inventions like the internal combustion engine and the electric motor spawned a growth in industrialism and a new perspective on labor. Lind writes of the effects of this wave of technological innovation, “By the first years of the twentieth century, the second industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century [...] was already outgrowing the structures of American economic life that had been inherited from the last wave of reform in the United States during the Civil War and Reconstruction” (213). This economic expansion manifested itself, in part, in the growth of cities: In 1865 at the end of the Civil War, less than twenty-five percent of Americans lived in cities; by 1911, more than half of the country’s population had moved to urban areas with populations of at least 2500 (Higgs 58). Link and Link point out that this growth of cities became symbolic of the country’s shift to an economy focused more on manufacturing than agriculture: “By the turn of the twentieth century, the city’s bright lights symbolized the aggressive modernity of urban America” (31).

James Norris discusses how this shift resulted in far-reaching changes to the economy, including sources of employment for those laborers trapped in the system that required them to work for wages in order to survive: “Not only did farming decline in comparison with other

sectors of the economy, but farm employment [...] peaked in 1910 and began a slow but steady secular decline” (10). With the decline of agriculture’s prominence within the American economy, laborers moved to the cities in search of work.

In conjunction with this shift from rural to urban settings, cultural attitudes regarding work and leisure began to change, too. The quasi-Puritanical attitudes toward labor that was the hallmark of the nineteenth century farmer gradually gave way to the idea that it was not only acceptable to balance work and play in one’s life, it was perhaps a goal towards which one might desire to strive, albeit secretly, as T. J. Jackson Lears explains:

By the early twentieth century that outlook had begun to give way to a new set of values sanctioning periodic leisure, compulsive spending, apolitical passivity, and an apparently permissive (but subtly coercive) morality of individual fulfillment. The older culture was suited to a production-oriented society of small entrepreneurs; the newer culture epitomized a consumption-oriented society dominated by bureaucratic corporations (3).

Thus, the economic changes wrought by the second industrial revolution changed the way in which Americans spent both their money and their time away from work, a change that would be reflected in the commodities that were available to consumers and the ways in which those commodities were marketed.

The change in Americans’ attitudes towards leisure time and spending habits opened an entirely new market for merchants who sought to capitalize on the economic expansion. The result was a snowball effect, as consumers began to desire more and better commodities.

Lawrence Glickman explains,

The market revolution of the early nineteenth century brought mass-produced goods first to the urban, middle-classes and eventually to small-town America. As America shifted economically (in an uneven process) from a rural, subsistence society to an urbanizing, market-based one, the meaning of what constituted ‘necessities’ changed. Rather than consuming only what was needed, Americans began to raise their standards of consumption (2).

Consumers of virtually all socio-economic classes got their first taste of mass-produced commodities, a taste that spurred the innate desire for increasingly better products. This continual process of raising standards fostered a culture of consumption within the United States that took root in the late nineteenth century, but truly blossomed during the early twentieth century. As more and more citizens began to move from the farms to the cities, an increasing number of consumers was exposed to the vast array of new commodities available to them. This exposure served as a catalyst to further grow the materialist mindset that underpins the capitalist system and its corresponding panoptic prison.

Despite the seemingly constant influx of migrants moving to cities, more than half of the United States population was still living in more rural settings at the turn of the century, a geographic juxtaposition that presented a challenge to merchants who wanted to reach both audiences. However, there was a common thread that united them both, and that thread was advertising. Frank Norris explains, “A booming economy with an expanding population and rising real per capita income was enough to encourage merchants and manufacturers to expand their production and stocks with the expectation of increased demand” (12). The economic boom that fueled the growth of cities was also helping to increase standards of living for those living on farms. As Robert Higgs points out, “The urban economy cannot be divorced from the rural economy. Unless the productivity of agricultural workers somewhere in the world is high enough to support both the farmers’ families and a substantial number of others, no large city can exist” (59). Both communities experienced the benefits of the expanding national economy, and both became prime targets for merchants. But again, in order to maximize the potential of those targets, merchants had to employ the tactics of advertisers, whose own importance had grown along with the growth of the economy.

The ways in which advertisers sought to reach those audiences depended on the specific location of the consumers. Those who were urban dwellers were in the position to actually see first-hand the commodities that a particular merchant had to offer; those in more rural settings, however, had only images and textual descriptions to go on. Both markets, however, were prime targets for advertising. As James Norris explains, “To serve these new markets two new institutions developed: the mail order houses to serve the expanding rural population and department stores to serve the burgeoning urban centers. Both depended on advertising to attract customers” (12).

For many consumers in today’s world, the idea of a catalog serving as a way of attracting customers is a familiar practice; the glossy photos of beautiful models featuring a wide array of products for sale are all too common in American households. These mail-order repositories of merchandise grew out of what were known as advertising cards, which ironically didn’t feature the commodity being sold at all. Instead, they presented images of exotic locations, familiar cartoon characters, or other scenes that evoked ideas of entertainment. While they didn’t actually illustrate a particular product, many of the cards “carried price lists on the back, and—most important—each attempted to associate its business with games, luxury, pleasure, fantasy, or faraway mystery” (Leach, *Desire* 44). These cards were a natural precursor to the more comprehensive mail-order catalogs, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, nearly 1200 different merchants across the country were advertising and selling their wares via mail-order catalog.

In late nineteenth century America, the fabulous shopping experiences offered by department stores were new and exciting to consumers, and the stores themselves served as massive advertising organs that helped to sell commodities—and their corresponding dreams of

better lives—to consumers. As William Leach writes, department stores “did not simply ‘sell’ commodities: they intervened with advertising skills to amplify the excitement of possibility inherent in the commodity form. They attempted to endow the goods with transformative messages and associations that the goods did not objectively possess” (“Transformations” 327).

Tracing their origins to the early nineteenth century in England, department stores in the United States became well-known by the 1840s, when Alexander Turney Stewart opened his Marble Palace in New York City. As Edd Applegate write, the Marble Palace was emblematic of the new culture of consumption that was permeating the United States at the time: “The department store, unlike the small, cramped dry goods shop of an earlier period, exemplified this culture. Department stores opened in major cities throughout the United States after the Civil War” (71). One of the Palace’s defining characteristics was the exterior plate glass windows that enabled passers-by to gaze longingly at the array of seemingly magical commodities on display inside. William Leach writes of this technique for attracting shoppers, “The result was a mingling of refusal and desire that must have greatly intensified desire, adding another level of cruelty. [...] There it is, you see it as big as life—you see it amplified everywhere, you see everything revealed—but you cannot reach it. Unless you shatter the window or go in and pay for it, you cannot have it” (*Desire* 63). By teasing consumers with the physical sight of the commodity, merchants were able to effectively advertise their wares. Consumers’ collective desires were piqued by the sight of the commodities, which merchants hoped would lead them inside to purchase those goods. Edd Applegate writes of these displays that they “became a major instrument of promotion. People walking on sidewalks invariably were attracted to what was displayed in the stores’ windows” (71). Thus, in the history of advertising, the department

store window played an important role in the promotion of goods and the promotion of commercial capitalism.

The Octopus: A Story of California

There is little question that the completion of the transcontinental railroad was the most powerful socio-economic force at work in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Richard Stone writes of this event, “No other form of transportation has had the effect on this country that the railroads had in the middle and late nineteenth century. Indeed, a good case could be made that no other industry has had as much impact” (1). Link and Link suggest, “It is impossible to comprehend the origins of the twentieth-century American economy without understanding the central importance of railroads” (5). Raymond Williams says of this period, “The half-century between 1880 and 1930, then, saw the full development of an organized system of commercial information and persuasion, as part of the modern distributive system in conditions of large-scale capitalism” (67). This new distribution system created opportunities for capitalists across the country. But as Karl Marx points out, an individual capitalist’s success requires the domination of multiple laborers. And this exploitation can lead to the ultimate destruction of those living under the system, a theme that is central to much of the literature of this period.

Against a backdrop of seemingly infinite progress and prosperity, the old specter of self-sufficiency continued to float. In the minds of Americans of this time – especially those adults who had established their own lives and looked askance at this mechanized progress – there was a question as to whether or not railroads and their commercial expansion were good for the country. Henry May points out, “A deadly fear of mechanistic materialism lay in back of the

intense doubts and hard-won affirmations of the great Victorian sages. This was the enemy that the young Americans [...] of the late nineteenth century had to wrestle with as their ancestors had wrestled with sin” (10). The newly-completed transcontinental railroad did far more than simply deliver commodities more efficiently. The railroad also brought a new kind of materialism, one saturated in rapid gratification and satiation of needs that consumers didn’t even know they possessed.

Tangential to that materialism was the fact that the railroad itself was a business; it was a vital part of the capitalist machine. As such, those who were involved with its operation – whether as shippers, operators, owners, or some other capacity – sought to maximize their own profit, oftentimes at the expense of others. Recalling the words of Karl Marx cited earlier, capitalism is predicated on exploitation: “[W]ithin the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker; that all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of the producers” (*Capital* 799). And while this particular passage points to the exploitation of working-class individuals by their employers, it is important to keep in mind the relationship between the interconnected components of the railroad operations. While not a traditional and direct worker-employer relationship, the railroad itself serves those for whom it ships commodities; thus, those shippers are in the same position as employers (and their employees), and they are subject to the same exploitation about which Marx wrote.

In response to the potentially unfettered power inherent in a single corporation’s ability to determine freight rates, the United States Congress passed the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887. The law created the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), a group whose duties included

oversight of the implementation of the individual components contained within the act itself³.

Among the Act's mandates were the prohibition against rates that were not deemed "reasonable and just," though it stopped short of empowering the federal government or the ICC to establish rates. The act also prohibited carriers from charging different rates for what were deemed short- and long-haul routes, a practice that had been most detrimental to those western farmers who wanted to ship freight to the east (or, alternatively, who wanted to purchase goods from eastern manufacturers). The exploitation of farmers who found themselves trapped in the economic panopticon created and perpetuated by the capitalist system was the subject of Frank Norris's *The Octopus: A Story of California*, one of the first major American novels of the twentieth century.

Frank Norris wrote about the early twentieth-century railroad and its powerfully destructive potential in *The Octopus: A Story of California*. The exploitation of the wheat farmers in Norris's story is well-documented in literary criticism concerning the novel, and scholars have echoed one another in their discussion of the anti-capitalist themes of the book.

Richard Chase says of Norris's novel,

The Wheat [...] might be the benignant nourishing force which in the end overcomes the inhuman and destructive force symbolized by the railroad. But in Norris's mind there is no differentiation of forces; there is only Force, and although *The Octopus* seems to be a liberal diatribe against capitalist reaction, the railroad and every injustice it brings with it, down to the last foreclosure on the most miserable property, are finally said to be as exempt from moral evaluation as the wheat itself. Both are irresistible manifestations of the "world-force" (198).

³ Many of the ICC's earliest rulings went in favor of the railroads, despite their federal mandate to ensure that those using the railroads were protected from unfair pricing structures. Oftentimes when these rulings were appealed, the courts upheld the ICC's decisions. Railroads prevailed in 15 of 16 Supreme Court cases involving ICC-related decisions from 1890-1920.

Here Chase illustrates what so many other scholars of this period have touched on: Norris condemns the destructive power of the railroad and the capitalist system that it represents and mourns the fact that this destruction is an inevitable by-product of the system.

Chase argues that the railroad system, the embodiment of capitalistic expansion and exploitation in the novel, is a destructive force that obliterates the agrarian way of life in favor of industrial capitalism. Donald Pizer echoes this sentiment in “Evolution and American Fiction: Three Paradigmatic Novels,” and goes further by suggesting that this destruction is the result of natural evolutionary forces that are inherent in the human desire for advancement. Daniel Mrozowski, while agreeing with other scholars who see Norris’s novel as criticizing the growth of industry at the turn of the century, goes beyond that by suggesting that Norris was attempting to show his readers a way around that corporate expansion. He suggests that S. Behrman’s death at the end of the novel is a “fantastic solution to the problems of corporate embodiment” (163).

But what these and other scholars of the novel fail to fully interrogate is the other components inherent in a capitalist environment that are at play in *The Octopus*—specifically, the prison that the system creates to trap those laboring within its purview and the controlling discourse inherent in the burgeoning advertising market—and instead have focused on the more historically-relevant theme of impending doom as a result of the progression of technology. It is my contention that Norris uses the railroad as a metaphorical representation of the capitalist system. Just as capitalism imprisons those living under it, so, too, does the railroad.

The farmers in the novel are perceived, at least by the Railroad Trust, as lacking in business savvy, thus making them prime targets for exploitation. It was a stereotype that many Americans of the time seemed to have held regarding those who worked in agriculture, and a stereotype that we will see reappearing in later novels. At the same time, the farmer was often

used as something of a propaganda tool, held up as the embodiment of the Jeffersonian ideal of the rugged individual who fought against the forces that sought to destroy his freedoms.

Historian Henry May writes of this amalgam of images,

In the early twentieth century, spokesmen of progressivism almost forced the farmer into a similarly ambiguous position. In political rhetoric he was a part of the progressive movement, marching beside the other good citizens to triumph over his old enemies, monopoly and usury. Often, at the same time, he was a representative of a kind of moral superiority, nearly destroyed by city bosses and tyrannical industrialists, badly needing restoration. Then again the farmer was sometimes portrayed as a hick—an ignorant, provincial objector to progress (124).

But it is the image of the farmer as being an ignorant hick, to use May's words, that Norris employed in *The Octopus* as a way of augmenting the novel's pathos, a technique that serves as a powerful condemnation of the capitalist system.

From the first chapter of the novel, the reader is immediately aware of the fact that the railroad is a harbinger of destruction. Vanamee's momentary lapse of attention in regard to the sheep leads to a brutal scene of destruction and death, as a train slams into the part of the herd that is straddling the railroad tracks:

In some way, the herd of sheep—Vanamee's herd—had found a breach in the wire fence by the right of way and had wandered out upon the tracks. A band had been crossing just at the moment of the engine's passage. [...] The iron monster had charged full into the midst, merciless, inexorable. To the right and left, all the width of the right of way, the little bodies had been flung; backs were snapped against the fence posts; brains knocked out (Book 1, 47).

This scene may be read as an overt metaphor for the idea that those who mindlessly follow the precepts of capitalism and labor for the sole purpose of enriching others (i.e. the sheep of the world) will inevitably be destroyed by those in power (i.e. the railroad). But as soon as one flock of sheep is wiped out, both figuratively and literally, there is another flock waiting for the chance

to replace them, and the cycle begins anew. This destruction may be read as the inevitable result of capitalism's power; it is only through death that we can escape the prison.

While there is a pretext of the potential of the American Dream embedded within the narrative – the idea that through hard work, one may rise up the socio-economic ladder – it is clear that the farmers and those who work for them are stuck inexorably in their position, and they will remain so forever. Yet they continue to work, futilely, to achieve the impossible carrot-on-the-end-of-the-stick that is the American Dream. Within the capitalist structure, one is never able to reach that carrot. And what's more, as Norris writes, the system—represented by the railroad—is omnipresent and immortal:

Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon; but saw it now as the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder all over the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus (Book 1, 48).

The “soulless Force” is capitalism, the economic system that has no human moral sensibilities. It is a system that operates independent of human controls, and that manages to reach into virtually every facet of human existence, forever imprisoning its subjects. In the final analysis, those subjects have no way of climbing out of this prison.

This idea that capitalism creates a situation in which advancement is seemingly impossible is one that repeats itself throughout much of the novel. The system as presented in the novel is structured in such a way as to permanently ensnare those living within it. There is no hope for escape, because the system controls every aspect of life. Capitalism as presented in *The Octopus* is the perfect panopticon. Richard Chase touches on this idea, writing, “In *The Octopus* we find a full use of the conspiracy theory of history—the theory that all would be well with

American life if only it were not for the machinations of the money power—the bankers, the railroad magnates, and their panoply of venal journalists and lawyers, suborned marshals, and hired assassins” (203). The catalog of conspiracists cited by Chase is on full display in *The Octopus*, and all serve their own specific function as perpetrators of the panoptic power inherent in capitalism’s structure. Each works to ensure the imprisonment of the wheat farmers within that prison, and each is in turn imprisoned by a force larger than themselves. As we will see, everyone from the lowest farmer to S. Behrman himself, the very personification of capitalism, is trapped within the system and unable to escape its clutches.

One component of the capitalist system that *The Octopus* highlights very well is the idea that any potential for upward mobility is stifled from the start by the system itself. The farmers themselves are expecting a banner crop for wheat, and they anticipate that they will be able to pay off mortgages and loans and other debts. However, the Railroad Trust is aware of the anticipated crop size, and the Trust adjusts the rates accordingly. Thus, any profits the farmers might realize on their wheat are immediately absorbed by the Railroad Trust through their higher tariffs. When the farmers fight this rate hike by electing their own members to the board of the Trust, they fall victim to the manipulation of prices, the capitalist practice that serves to preserve wealth at the upper level and drain wealth at the lower level. In the case of this specific situation, the rates were lowered in regions where there is little or no traffic; insofar as the San Joaquin Valley farmers are concerned, their own rates will still be higher. The average across the state, however, will be much lower, due to the cuts in those regions with lower traffic. Like the sheep, the farmers are destined to be wiped out by the Railroad Trust. The Railroad Trust serves as a sort of synecdoche, as it represents the larger system that it works to support; the Trust exerts the same panoptic power as capitalism itself.

This is a point that economic historian Robert Higgs makes when discussing the historical argument regarding shipping tariffs and agricultural profits. Many historians have suggested that railroad rates dropped considerably at the end of the nineteenth century, which would have translated to higher profits for farmers like those in Norris's novel. He posits the idea that the important figure is the freight charge in relation to the price realized by the farmer at the point of sale. Higgs writes regarding these scholars that they "failed to ask the right question. They asked whether railroad rates had fallen, but that question is really meaningless. They should have asked whether railroad rates fell faster or slower than the prices farmers received for their products" (88). Many historians have missed the fact that these farmers were essentially paying the same proportion of their profits to the railroad in freight charges, regardless of the actual figure they were charged. The end result was that they were imprisoned in the system that would not allow them to climb the socio-economic ladder, because such a huge portion of their gross earnings went to pay the exorbitant fees charged by the railroad.

The same holds true for Dyke, a former railroad engineer who has been laid off and now entertains the dream of raising hops. The Railroad Trust adjusts their rates according to the demand, and because the high demand results in a high price for his crop, Dyke is also forced to pay a higher rate for shipping them due to the demand and his plans for making a profit off his crop are destroyed. What's more, he discovers that he will actually lose money in the end. Thus, his goal of advancing his own status on the economic ladder results in his personal financial ruin:

In a second the whole affair, in all its bearings, went speeding before the eye of his imagination like the rapid unrolling of a panorama. Every cent of his earnings was sunk in this hop business of his. More than that, he had borrowed money to carry it on, certain of success—borrowed of S. Behrman, offering his crop and his little home as security. Once he failed to meet his obligations, S. Behrman would foreclose. Not only would the Railroad devour every morsel of his profits, but also it would take from him his home; at a blow he would be left penniless and without a home (Book 2, 64).

Norris goes on to describe Dyke's situation with language reminiscent of a Gothic horror novel: "He had been merely the object of a colossal trick, a sordid injustice, a victim of the insatiate greed of the monster, caught and choked by one of those millions of tentacles suddenly reaching up from below, from out the dark beneath his feet, coiling around his throat, throttling him, strangling him, sucking his blood" (Book 2, 67).

The above description magnifies the parasitic nature of capitalism through the image of a monstrous tick-like creature fattening itself off of Dyke's blood. The metaphor of capitalism as a parasitic tick sucking the life blood out of the working class is reflected in the description of the map of the railroad routes across the region. The map is described as showing the state of California being white, "and against this pallid background the red arteries of the monster stood out, swollen with life-blood, reaching out to infinity, gorged to bursting; an excrescence, a gigantic parasite fattening upon the life-blood of an entire commonwealth" (Book 2, 5). In addition to being a tick that sucks the lifeblood out of those living under its purview, the system is also the monster that has shackled Dyke to a life of futile labor; it is the prison to which he was sentenced at his birth, and in which he will remain until his death. As represented by the destruction of the flock of the sheep at the beginning of the novel, it is only through Dyke's own destruction that he will achieve his freedom. This is a primary point in which my analysis of the novel differs from a Marxist reading. There is no revolution that will save Dyke and those like him, no war that will free him from his bonds. The Panopticon into which he was born can only be escaped through one's own death.

Another element of the all-controlling and prison-like environment fostered by capitalism is present in Norris's explanation of one of the ways in which the Railroad Trust manipulates their own shipping practices in order to conform to the federal regulations in place at the time

while at the same time maximizing their profits at the expense of the farmers, those men who exist on the bottom rung of the economic ladder. The practice is highlighted by Harran's attempt to have new ploughs delivered to him in Bonneville. The ploughs in question are manufactured on the East Coast and shipped to points west via the railroad. Were the freight to come directly to Bonneville, the less lucrative long-haul rates would apply. But if the freight were shipped via a short-haul route, the Railroad Trust would stand to make much more money. The solution, from the Railroad Trust's perspective, is to implement a "common point" as a hub, with short-haul routes radiating outward from that hub: "'Well, you know, of course, the regulations,' answered S. Behrman. 'Freight of this kind coming from the Eastern points into the State must go first to one of our common points and be reshipped from there'" (Book 1, 67).

In the case of Harran's ploughs, that common point is San Francisco, with the Bonneville route being a spoke. However, the long-haul route to San Francisco stops first in Bonneville, but the Railroad Trust's regulations prohibit the freight from being unloaded there at that time. It is this practice that serves to illustrate the way in which the Railroad Trust manipulates the regulations in order to maximize their profits. As Harran says,

Here we bring our ploughs from the East over our lines, but you're not content with your long-haul rate between Eastern points and Bonneville. You want to get us under your ruinous short-haul rate between Bonneville and San Francisco, *and return*. Think of it! Here's a load of stuff for Bonneville that can't stop at Bonneville, where it is consigned, but has got to go up to San Francisco first *by way of* Bonneville, at forty cents per ton and then be reshipped from San Francisco back to Bonneville again at *fifty-one* cents per ton, the short-haul rate (Book 1, 67, italics in original).

This unscrupulous practice on the part of the Railroad Trust highlights one of the primary problems with the invisible hand of capitalism. Regulations like those laid out by laws like the Interstate Commerce Act were intended to protect people like Harran. But the drive for increased profits leads to thinking of ways around those regulations, to finding loopholes that allow the

Trust to extract as much money as is humanly possible from the farmers while still staying within the parameters of the law. The foundation of capitalism is predicated on ever-larger profit margins, as Marx discusses at length, and that foundation has the potential to destroy the workers and the consumers upon whom that foundation is built.

A similar sort of exploitation arises in the novel when Lyman, ostensibly working on behalf of the farmers, defends his contention that the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad has “rigidly adhered to the demands” of the farmers by implementing “an average ten per cent cut” in rates across all lines (Book 2, 152). Lyman cites various rates and the deep cuts in those rates: Mayfield to Oakland was reduced by twenty-five cents a ton; Lone to Marysville was cut by eighty cents a ton; the Salinas route was cut by seventy-five cents and the St. Helena rate was cut fifty cents (Book 2, 153). While on the surface this would seem to be an answer to the farmers’ concerns regarding the freight charges on their wheat, a closer examination reveals that the Railroad Trust is once again complying with the letter of the law, but not the spirit. Annixter is the first to notice that the San Joaquin rates—those that are most lucrative to the Railroad Trust due to the fact that they comprise the vast majority of the wheat shipped—haven’t been reduced: “‘Why, look here,’ exclaimed Annixter, looking up from the schedule, ‘where is there any reduction in rates in the San Joaquin—from Bonneville to Guadalajara, for instance? I don’t see as you’ve made any reduction at all’” (Book 2, 153).

The issue here is that the *average* rate cut across the state—what the Railroad Trust pledged to do in the first place—equates to ten percent. However, as Osterman is quick to point out to Lyman, “It’s an average of ten percent cut all right, but you’ve made it by cutting grain rates between points where practically no grain is shipped. We, the wheat-growers in san Joaquin, where all the wheat is grown, are right where we were before. The Railroad won’t lose a

nickel” (Book 2, 154). Again, the financial system proves to be rigged. Those in the position of making the decisions that could help the members of the lower class climb up the socio-economic ladder manipulate the rules, thereby keeping the farmers in their current financial position. And the suggestion is that they will forever remain in that position, shackled by the panoptic chains of capitalism.

Another, more blatant, example of the suppression of the farmers’ collective financial well-being by the railroad comes at the point when the land that the farmers have been occupying—land that is technically owned by the railroad but which has been promised to the farmers for a nominal price—is finally put up for sale. Norris details the situation for the reader:

Neither Magnus, Derrick, Broderson, Annixter, nor Osterman actually owned all the ranches which they worked. As yet, the vast majority of these wheat lands were the property of the P. and S. W. The explanation of this condition of affairs went back to the early history of the Pacific and Southwestern, when, as a bonus for the construction of the road, the national government had granted to the company the odd numbered sections of land on either side of the proposed line of route for a distance of twenty miles. Indisputably, these sections belonged to the P. and S.W. [...] the railroad sections, or, as they were called, the ‘alternate sections,’ would have to be purchased directly from the railroad itself. [...] Long before this the railroad had thrown open these lands, and, by means of circulars, distributed broadcast throughout the State, had expressly invited settlement thereon. At that time patents had not been issued to the railroad for their odd-numbered sections, but as soon as the land was patented the railroad would grade it in value and offer it for sale, the first occupants having the first chance of purchase. The price of these lands was to be fixed by the price the government put upon its own adjoining lands—about two dollars and a half per acre (Book 1, 91-92).

Thus, the farmers had been invited to settle on the land and to improve it through labor and construction. When the time came for the land to be sold by the railroad, the original occupants—specifically the wheat farmers, in this case—would have the right of first refusal in terms of buying it. The price they would be charged would be “about two dollars and a half per acre,” according to the written agreement.

In an ideal world, this agreement would ensure that the farmers would be justly rewarded for their hard work of cultivating the land, constructing buildings on the land, and maintaining the land through their labors. They would be able to finally own the land they'd been farming, which would give them an additional asset to help them improve their economic standing in the world. However, Norris has no interest in presenting to his readers an idealized version of the world. Rather, he wants to show us exactly what he sees in the world, especially in regard to the evils perpetrated on the working class by the capitalist system. As such, there is no happy ending to the story of the farmers' quest to acquire the land from the railroad at a fair price.

The first seeds of the financial exploitation that the railroad plans to effect are planted in the minds of the farmers during a conversation regarding a notice from the railroad management, one that promises to allow Magnus to buy the land for two-dollars-and-fifty-cents per acre. Or at least he believes that it does. The notice reads, "The conditions of settlement to which the railroad obligated itself are very explicit," he says, with a degree of certainty (Book 1, 113). Magnus goes on to narrate the text of the notice, which ends with, "The lands are not uniform in price, but are offered at various figures from \$2.50 upward per acre. [...] Most of it is for sale at \$2.50 and \$5.00" (Book 1, 113).

It is this final piece that alarms Broderson, who voices his concern: "When you come to read that carefully, [...] it—it's not so *very reassuring*. '*Most* is for sale at two-fifty an acre,' it says. That don't mean '*all*,' that only means *some*. I wish now that I had secured a more iron-clad agreement with the P. S. W. when I took up its sections on my ranch" (Book 1, 113-114). Annixter tries to reassure him by telling him that the improvements they've made to the land don't factor in to the valuation, so the farmers should be confident in expecting to pay \$2.50 per acre for the land. This confidence, as it turns out, is misplaced.

When it comes time to offer the land for sale to the farmers, each receives a letter indicating the price that the railroad will accept for purchase. Magnus is the first to open his, and it informs him that the land is officially for sale at a fixed price of \$27.00 per acre. His announcement of this news to the group of farmers is met with a “profound silence” (Book 1, 264). But gradually reality sets in, as each of the others opens their own letter and discovers that their offers are all similar to that of Magnus’s:

The silence widened, broken only by the sound of torn paper as Annixter, Osterman, old Broderson, Garnett, Keast, Gethings, Chattern, and Dabney opened and read their letters. They were all to the same effect, almost word for word like the Governor’s. Only the figures and the proper names varied. In some cases the price per acre was twenty-two dollars. In Annixter’s case it was thirty” (Book 1, 264).

The railroad is once again attempting to maximize its profits. Officials know that the farmers will be unable to pay this exorbitant price, but that is no longer their concern. They are only focused on making the most money possible, regardless of who loses in the process.

It bears repeating that the railroad has done nothing illegal in this action. There was never a promise to sell a specific parcel of land at a particular price; the language in the notice was ambiguous and the farmers made assumptions based on that language. But that language is indicative of a larger phenomenon that prevailed throughout many of the farming and other less-educated communities during the first half of the twentieth century, and it is a tactic that we will see again and again throughout much of the literature. That tactic is exploitation through the use of ambiguous or confusing language that preys on peoples’ hopes and fears, as well as on their lack of worldly experience and education. It is yet another example of the way in which the economic system ensnares those at the lowest rungs of the financial ladder and shackles them to that position forever.

In short, these men and their experiences are representative of an entire system that imprisons everyone who lives under its purview. They are collectively a synecdochic body that represents the entirety of the American working-class population at the time. As Norris writes,

They—these men around his table on that night of the first rain of a coming season—seemed to stand in his imagination for many others—all the farmers, ranchers, wheat growers of the great San Joaquin. Their words were the words of a whole community; their distress, the distress of an entire State, harried beyond the bounds of endurance, driven to the wall, coerced, exploited, harassed to the limits of exasperation (Book 1, 111-112).

One of the questions that Norris seems intent on answering in his novel is what happens when the harassment of those men *exceeds* the limits of exasperation. What happens when a generic man—in Norris's case, that generic man is represented by the synecdoche of the wheat farmers—is exploited beyond his breaking point? As Magnus articulates to the farmers, "How we wheat growers are exploited and trapped and deceived at every turn [...]. The courts, the capitalists, the railroads, each of them in turn hoodwinks us into some new and wonderful scheme, only to betray us in the end'" (Book 2, 12). As a population, the farmers are at the mercy of forces beyond their control, forces that conspire to keep them imprisoned. In regard to what happens when they are pushed beyond their emotional limits, the answer is, in short, that they break, as is the case with Dyke, whose dreams of making his fortune from growing barley are destroyed by the greed and exploitation of the Railroad Trust.

His answer to this inevitable implosion of his finances is to rob a train, the embodiment of capitalism itself in the novel. It is a futile gesture, we as readers understand, but it is nevertheless a necessary action on the part of Dyke, so that he can learn for himself—and, in so doing, reinforce to the reader—that there is no way to kill the capitalist machine. As Genslinger says during one of the farmers' meetings about what to do to combat the Railroad Trust's injustices, "When will you people realise that you can't buck against the Railroad? Why,

Magnus, it's like me going out in a paper boat and shooting peas at a battleship" (Book 2, 168). That is precisely what Dyke's actions represent; his attempts to escape the prison are equivalent to shooting peas at a battleship.

As the agent of the capitalist panopticon, S. Behrman makes it his personal mission to capture Dyke, which he eventually accomplishes with the assistance of a posse of armed men. Later in the novel, when S. Behrman and his posse show up to take possession of Annixter's ranch, they are greeted by an assortment of armed farmers. The scene harkens back to the American Revolution. It is a confrontation over economic grievances, just as was the Revolution at its core. In the case of the former, it is a matter of ownership of the land; the latter was fought, in part, over taxation and other financial issues. In both cases, however, the fight was between a controlling force and the group of imprisoned individuals living under the rule of that force. In the end, however, S. Behrman – the embodiment of the evils of capitalism – is unharmed by the forces controlled by men. He continually avoids injury in multiple violent encounters, including having a bomb thrown at his house and the search and eventual capture of Dyke, during which Dyke's pistol misfires when he is attempting to shoot S. Behrman, leaving the bullet's intended target unharmed. The farmers themselves have no power over the capitalist forces that rule their lives; they have no way of killing the beast that S. Behrman represents.

Embedded within this narrative of the exploitation of farmers by the capitalist system and its lieutenants is a story about the nascent commercial culture and personal materialism that had taken root within the United States at the turn of the century. Norris tangentially cites this emerging cultural shift by highlighting the seemingly ubiquitous nature of advertising in society at the time, suggesting that even in rural America at this time, advertising was able to reach its intended audiences. This inclusion creates something of a moral dilemma for the reader, because

it points to the fact that the farmers themselves—the otherwise naïve and innocent victims of the greed and exploitative power inherent in capitalism—are complicit in their own downfall because through their purchases. They are in effect helping to support the very system that seeks to destroy them.

What is interesting to note about so much of the commercial advertising as it is presented in the novel is the fact that so much of it is placed on otherwise utilitarian surfaces. The advertisers in the novel seem to be placing their messages in locations that the intended audience will most likely find them, as in the case of the advertisements for S. Behrman's services presented in the opening pages: "They were painting a sign—an advertisement. It was all but finished and read, 'S. Behrman, Real Estate, Mortgages, Main Street Bonneville, Opposite the Post Office.' On the horst-trough that stood in the shadow of the tank was another freshly painted inscription: 'S. Behrman Has Something To Say To You'" (Book 1, 2-3). There are two different ads described here, both of which are hand-painted signs. In the case of the first one, it is being painted on the side of a county watering tank, upon which Norris tells us, "Since the day of its completion, the storekeepers and retailers of Bonneville had painted their advertisements upon it" (2). The other advertisement is being painted on a watering trough for horses.

The point here is that both advertisements are being painted on surfaces that are already part of the landscape; there is no additional infrastructure required for spreading these commercial messages. This choice of venues is repeated with cigar advertisements painted on bike racks: "Here and there, on the edge of the sidewalk, were bicycles, wedged into bicycle racks painted with cigar advertisements" (Book 1, 184). Again, we see advertisers using pre-existing, utilitarian structures as the site of their communications. This suggests a conscious choice by merchants, in that they expect their audiences to gravitate to these particular structures

and, in so doing, to see the marketing messages painted thereon. This choice, in turn, suggests that the particular target audience for these messages is working-class farmers. Throughout the novel, that group of working-class farmers is also the population that is, not coincidentally, also the primary target of the panoptic forces exerted by those representing the capitalist system in the form of the railroad.

Before his marriage, Annixter's home is an additional site of advertising's reach. In the late nineteenth century, advertisers began creating ads that doubled as art intended to be displayed in homes. Pamela Laird explains, "Advertisers and printers even devised ways to encourage popular demand for the advertisements themselves, making them collectible items; observers referred to them as 'souvenirs' in a 'craze' that was 'absolute' in its intensity" (90). Norris uses this exact language in his description of Annixter's bedroom in the novel: "The room was barren, the walls of tongue-and-groove sheathing—alternate brown and yellow boards—like the walls of a stable, were adorned with two or three unframed lithographs, the Christmas 'souvenirs' of weekly periodicals" (Book 1, 155). By willingly participating in the commercial culture through his keeping of the magazine inserts, Annixter serves as proof of the power of advertising to reach virtually every segment of the population and to speak to that population with its controlling discourse. So strong is the power of advertising's message in general that Annixter—like countless other Americans—saves particular instances of marketing collateral and puts them on the walls of his bedroom, ensuring that they will be the last thing he sees before going to sleep and the first thing he sees upon waking. The message contained in those advertisements will be constantly reinforcing itself in his mind.

As if to punctuate this very idea, Annixter and Hilma go on a shopping spree following their marriage. This indulgence of materialism serves to illustrate to readers that even in the

wheat fields of the San Joaquin Valley, the needs and desires of the population are fueled by advertisements, many of which were featured in catalogs sent to rural homes in the hopes of catching the interest of those wives who dreamed of such luxuries. These catalogs, in the case of the novel, included some that featured furniture in San Francisco department stores. One of the most popular catalogs at the time, that for the Sears and Roebuck Company in Chicago, was something of a permanent fixture in many rural homes, serving as a reminder to so many of the things that once existed only in their dreams, but were now reality. As Leiss et al. posit, “The Sears catalog itself stood at the transition point between the industrial and the consumer age, promising to bring ‘luxuries to thousands who formerly enjoyed only the necessities’” (63).

Annixter and Hilma’s trip to San Francisco, a sort of materialist binge, is described in the novel as “a most delicious week, during which time the newlyweds “descended upon the department stores of the city, the carpet stores, the furniture stores” (Book 2, 120). The end result was emblematic of the new commercial culture that had been fostered, in part, by the catalogs that filled the dreams of so many rural families. Annixter and Hilma’s trip is the culmination of one such set of dreams, and is complete with a nod to the department store window displays that were such an important advertising venue for merchants at the time:

Nearly an entire car load of carpets, curtains, kitchen furniture, pictures, fixtures, lamps, straw matting, chairs, and the like were sent down to the ranch, Annixter making a point that their new home should be entirely equipped by San Francisco dealers. [...] The bed was a piece by itself [...]. They bought it complete, just as it stood in the window of the department store” (Book 2, 120).

This orgiastic buying spree in which the two engage is the result of their having seen images and descriptions in catalogs. On a personal level, there is no sense of connection between Annixter and Hilma and their new possessions. In fact, when Presley comes to meet with Annixter at the

latter's ranch, the description we get through his eyes is one that is simultaneously poetic and indicative of a sense of alienation insofar as the new furnishings themselves are concerned:

Presley looked at the marvelous department-store bed of brass, with its brave, gay canopy; the mill-made wash-stand, with its pitcher and bowl of blinding red and green china, the straw-framed lithographs of symbolic female figures against the multi-coloured, new wall-paper; the inadequate spindle chairs of white and gold; the sphere of tissue paper hanging from the gas fixture, and the plumes of pampas grass tacked to the wall at artistic angles, and overhanging two astonishing oil paintings, in dazzling golden frames (Book 2, 179).

The furniture the couple has procured is, without question, of the latest fashion and points to Annixter's financial success in its conspicuous consumption. However, it seems distinctly out of place on a ranch in the San Joaquin Valley; one would think it is better suited to a more urban (and formal) setting. Ironically, while Presley is admiring some paintings that Annixter bought in San Francisco, Annixter admits that he doesn't know "whether they're good or not" (Book 2, 179). It seems that Annixter was convinced to buy them by a salesperson who inevitably assured him that they were symbolic of the latest fashion. But he has no appreciation for them outside of that personal image-enhancing value; they seem to bring no tangible joy into his life, and they seem out of place on a ranch such as his.

In regard to the department stores like the ones in which Annixter and Hilma furnished their home, James Norris writes, "It is difficult to overestimate the role of these large and luxurious department stores in the cultivation of a consumer culture in the United States" (18). Part of why these retail behemoths were so effective in fostering that consumer culture was because they were able to tap into the part of the human psyche that identifies with possessions. Ownership, Fennis and Stroebe argue, is a dual-track experience: "People do not only buy goods to express their identity; owning these goods also helps them to be the kind of person they want to be" (Fennis and Stroebe 173). In essence, then, we as a species use commodities for a variety

of purposes, two of which are self-expression and personal image creation. Department stores simultaneously fueled and were fueled by this pair of goals associated with consumption. By displaying a variety of new and exciting products, stores gave consumers the opportunity to express themselves through their possessions. At the same time, by showing people how their lives could look if only they acquired specific items, these stores lured buyers to purchase those things that reflected the lifestyle they wanted to live. In the case of Annixter and Hilma, the couple wanted to exude the image of people who were financially successful and sociably fashionable. But the result was that they acquired a collection of things that served no actual functional purpose on the ranch, and because of that, those possessions looked comically and absurdly out of place.

Regardless of how the collection of home furnishings appears to an outside observer, those furnishings are what came to be part of the American Dream. In order to have those furnishings, one had to have a home in which to put them. Acquiring that home—and the accompanying furnishings—required a significant amount of disposable money, which itself is the key to climbing the socio-economic ladder. So Annixter and Hilma's acquisition of commodities, no matter how absurd the presence of those commodities on a ranch might seem, represents their achievement of the socio-economic advancement that is the embodiment of the American Dream.

However, the seemingly inappropriate nature of those commodities on the ranch is a condition that is made much more overt after the house is ransacked:

A vast, confused heap of household effects was there—chairs, sofas, pictures, fixtures, lamps. Hilma's little home had been gutted; everything had been taken from it and ruthlessly flung out upon the road, everything that she and her husband had bought during that wonderful week after their marriage. [...] To Hilma it was as though something of herself, of her person, had been thus exposed

and degraded; all that she held sacred pilloried, gibbeted, and exhibited to the world's derision (Book 2, 236).

The description of the debris field as being a representation of Hilma herself echoes the words of Fennis and Stroebe cited above, in the sense that these material possessions represent both who Hilma is and who she wants to be. The fact that that image has been “exposed and degraded” suggests that she was pursuing something negative.

Her pursuit of those material things was more than negative; the fact that everything is thrown out of the house in “a vast, confused heap” points to the futility of her quest. Hilma not only believed that these things would cause others to see her as belonging to a particular socio-economic level that was perhaps higher than her reality; she believed that they would elevate her to that level in reality. Advertisements and their controlling discourse convinced her that they would, but the reality—a pile of useless furnishings in her front yard—lies in stark contrast to that fantasy. She and Annixter both have been victims of the controlling nature of advertising's discourse, and they are trapped within the panoptic structure of the capitalist system. They can continue to try to elevate their socio-economic status through work, but will only see any increased profits consumed by the Railroad Trust. Alternatively, they can continue to try to acquire new material possessions that promise to improve their socio-economic level, but they will inevitably fall back to their original level once the promises represented by those commodities have been shown to be false. They are forever trapped, from birth, in the panopticon of capitalism. They possess no power that will enable them to kill the capitalist monster, represented in human form by S. Behrman.

However, ironically, it is the wheat itself—the fruit of the capitalist labor—that finally kills S. Behrman. He is imprisoned within and suffocated by an avalanche of wheat bound for India while checking on the ship's capacity. It is the wheat – the only thing that will remain long

after these capitalists are gone – that finally kills him, and this is representative of the power of capitalism to destroy lives. The common thread through all of the different social classes within this capitalist structure is wheat. The farmers grow it in the hopes that it will help them realize their fortunes. The laborers work in the fields tending to it in the hopes that doing so will enable them to rise in the professional ranks. The Railroad Trust transports it as a way of further enriching its already wealthy executives. Wheat, then, may be seen as capitalism itself. It is everywhere and it is everything. Without food, humans can't survive; wheat is one of the building blocks of bread, the Biblical food and one of the most basic forms of human sustenance. Without wheat, humans perish. The capitalists in the novel leverage that reality in order to make their own fortunes. Those on the lower rungs of the socio-economic scale suffer exploitation by those on the upper rungs.

But in the end, even those on the upper rungs are destroyed by the system they use to enrich themselves. As Norris writes, “BUT THE WHEAT REMAINED” (Book 2, 260, emphasis in original). In the end, the wheat is the downfall of the capitalist machine, which suffocates under its own rules. One of the foundational tenets of capitalism is the need for continual growth; without that growth, markets will become oversaturated with commodities, leading to the stagnation of the economy. Advertising has been used by manufacturers throughout history to introduce new products to markets, which is essentially market creation. If those at the top cease constantly working to create new markets—to feed the monster—then that monster will eventually turn on them.

The Jungle

Wheat farmers in the western United States weren't the only population subject to the panoptic power of capitalism at the beginning of the twentieth century. In much the same way that capitalists sought to leverage the perceived ignorance of the farmers into their own financial gain, so, too, did business owners seek to exploit the massive wave of newly-arrived immigrants to the United States. As Link and Link explain, "[Native-born Americans] believed that the new immigrants were an inferior people, incapable of understanding American ideals" (Link and Link 46). This belief in the ignorance and sub-human status of the new arrivals made them easy targets for those who sought to exploit them for their own financial gain.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, nearly nine million immigrants entered the United States from Europe in search of a better financial existence, a life they'd heard was possible through hard work in the United States (Yoder 30). Of that number, the vast majority of immigrants were from southern and eastern Europe; in the last decade of the nineteenth century, more than half of all immigrants to the United States were from that region, and that figure jumped to seventy-two percent in the next decade (Link and Link 43). This was the population that Upton Sinclair focused on in *The Jungle*, his exposé of the meat-packing industry in the early twentieth century.

By 1910, three-quarters of those living in several major American cities were either immigrants or the children of immigrants (Heale 18). One of those major cities to which newly-arrived immigrants flocked was Chicago. Many came to Chicago because they'd heard stories of opportunities and of the potential to make far more money than they could at home. It was also a site of plentiful labor for unskilled workers, and Vernon Briggs suggests that these immigrants were perfectly suited for that type of work: "There was no particular need to be English-speaking

or educated or skilled to meet hiring standards. In large numbers, laborers and operatives were needed to do primarily manual work, and these were what the third wave of immigrants provided” (55)⁴. However, those who immigrated to the United States in search of a better life more often than not discovered the harsh realities of life under a capitalist system. As Robert Higgs writes, “The people who left their European homes in search of better opportunities in the United States typically discovered something less than the Promised Land” (114-115).

In 1906, Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle*, and the horrors of the slum known as Packingtown in Chicago were brought to the public’s attention. Those horrors were the result of the panoptic power inherent in the capitalist system that immigrant labor helped to support and strengthen. Like his contemporary Frank Norris, Upton Sinclair was horrified at how the American population—especially the immigrant population—was being transformed by industrial capitalism, and he was one of the country’s most outspoken critics of what he saw as inherently unfair and inhumane treatment of the working class, who were forced into dire circumstances by the capitalist system.

Despite the obvious attack on the treatment of immigrants coming to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century that is contained within the novel, Jon Yoder suggests that while Sinclair is abandoning the idea of the so-called American Dream, he is also offering up an alternative to the capitalist system. Specifically, according to Yoder, Sinclair was calling for a new economic system that was free from the inhumanity and corruption that he saw as an inherent component of capitalism. In much the same vein, Jordan von Cannon highlights the fact

⁴ The influx of “third-wave immigrants” (circa 1897-1920) saw a spike in the number of immigrants from eastern European countries. The first-wave immigrants (circa 1830-1850) were primarily of German, Irish, and eastern Canadian descent. The second wave (circa 1860-1890) again saw a large number of German, British, Irish, and Canadian immigrants.

that the immigrants in Sinclair's novel are merely performing a role in order to disguise the corruption of the system that they are helping to maintain. No critical analysis of the novel, however, links the exploitative qualities of the capitalist system to Foucault's theories of the Panopticon.

The novel's protagonist, Jurgis Rudkus, discovers this in *The Jungle* after arriving in America, after it is too late to do anything about it: "Jurgis, too, had heard of America. That was a country where, they said, a man might earn three rubles a day; and Jurgis figured what three rubles a day would mean, with prices as they were where he lived" (Sinclair 19). He finds out, however, that three rubles a day in America doesn't buy what it did in Lithuania. Along with Jurgis, the other members of the Rudkus family also learn this lesson through their own harsh reality while living in the slum-like conditions of Packingtown outside Chicago's meat-packing yards: "A very days of practical experience in this land of high wages had been sufficient to make clear to them the cruel fact that it was also a land of high prices, and that in it the poor man was almost as poor as in any other corner of the earth" (22).

On the day before he starts work, Jurgis and his family take a tour of Packingtown and its various facilities with their friend Jokubas. During this tour, we as readers—together with Jurgis—discover the power of the commercial culture that is tightening its grip on Americans at this time, and specifically the appeal of the brand name as a selling strategy. Although the products being marketed under different brands were oftentimes identical, consumers developed loyalties to particular brands that they believed were somehow better. James Norris writes of the power wielded by brand names in the minds of consumers: "The implication was clear: if their grocer failed to stock [a particular brand name commodity that was being advertised], the customer should find a better grocer" (56). This attachment to brand-names on the part of

consumers suggests that the names themselves are powerful lures. Through the assurance they provide, consumers believe that the commodity in the package is of a specific quality. Of course, this confidence is the by-product of successful marketing campaigns, but as Norris's argument points out, the name imparts a sense of importance and lends an attractive quality to the commodity that it wouldn't otherwise possess in the minds of consumers.

One of the key components of any brand-name product is the packaging, which includes a prominent display of the brand name on it. After seeing the holding pens in the stockyards, the group makes their collective way to one of the Durham's buildings. On their way, they are literally bombarded by advertisements for brand-name products that are produced in Packingtown, signs of the importance of both advertising in this society and the power of brand-names that are supported by that advertising:

These buildings, made of brick and stained with innumerable layers of Packingtown smoke, were painted all over with advertising signs, from which the visitor realized suddenly that he had come to the home of many of the torments of his life. It was here that they made those products with the wonders of which they pestered him so—by placards that defaced the landscape when he traveled, and by staring advertisements in the newspapers and magazines—by silly little jingles that he could not get out of his mind, and gaudy pictures that lurked for him around every street corner. Here was where they made Brown's Imperial Hams and Bacon, Brown's Dressed Beef, Brown's Excelsior Sausages! Here was the headquarters of Durham's Pure Leaf Lard, of Durham's Breakfast Bacon, Durham's Canned Beef, Potted Ham, Deviled Chicken, Peerless Fertilizer! (28).

The sheer volume of advertising messages that are so omnipresent in Packingtown is indicative of the prevalence of those same messages throughout the rest of the country. And given that Sinclair's omniscient narrator describes them as "the torments of his life," it is apparent that these messages are finding fertile ground in the memories of consumers.

The power of advertising and its controlling discourse are directing consumers to buy specific brand-name products, and that discourse is so strong that it is both inescapable and

unforgettable for those consumers. The concept of a brand-name is rooted in assurances to the consumer, assurances that the commodity being sold to them is of a particular quality. However, the secret that those who actually work behind that label know is that the quality of the product is at best suspect in the case of Packingtown brand names. We are told that Durham canned goods have achieved the status of “national institution” (80); the company’s products are household staples across the country. However, the contents of those cans are a mystery to all but a select few. For instance,

They advertised ‘potted chicken’ [...]. Perhaps they had a secret process for making chickens chemically—who knows? Said Jurgis’ friend; the things that went into the mixture were tripe, and the fat of pork, and beef suet, and hearts of beef, and finally the waste ends of veal, when they had any. They put these up in several grades, and sold them as several prices; but the contents of the cans all came out of the same hopper (80-81).

The “potted chicken” seems to contain just about everything *except* chicken. But thanks to the power of advertising and brand-name recognition, consumers gladly buy and consume this meat-based concoction. The brand-name advertising messages are even being reinforced to those on the production lines, as countless men, women, and children shuffle by these signs daily on their way to and from work. The power of advertising is literally inescapable in Packingtown. Note that at the end of the wedding feast when Ona is exhausted and Jurgis is helping her inside, he uses the brand-name of the company rather than the generic “work” when he suggests that she will take a day off: “You shall not go to Brown’s today, little one” (17). Advertising’s power has infiltrated their very identities and their existences.

That advertising extends beyond the products that are produced within the various buildings that comprise Packingtown, as we see manifested in a brochure that Jurgis picks up on his way to work one morning. The brochure is written in English, which Jurgis is unable to read. He is, we are told, attracted simply by the pictures featured on the flyer. He has a co-worker read

its contents to him, and learns that it is advertising new houses for sale, and Jurgis “conceived a wild idea” as a result of that interaction (37). The “wild idea” is to purchase a new home, the pinnacle of the American Dream, and certainly a fantasy most immigrants in the Rudkus’s economic position at the time would never have dared to entertain in their imaginations. But the power contained within the advertising—the controlling discourse that manipulates Jurgis’s thinking—paired with the expertly-arranged artwork is too strong.

The piece of marketing collateral featuring the new homes is described as being “quite a work of art” and “nearly two feet long, printed on calendar paper, with a selection of colors so bright that they shone even in the moonlight” (37). The use of illustrations to supplement advertisements was not a new technique in the early twentieth century. In fact, it was a practice begun a century earlier, when Benjamin Franklin concluded that “illustrations could enhance an advertisement, so he used half-column and column cuts made especially for specific advertisers. By merely the illustration, readers could determine for whom or what the advertisement was” (Applegate 10). In the case of Jurgis and his family, the illustrations prove the value of Franklin’s idea. Because they can’t read the words, they rely on the pictures to tell them what they need to know about the commodity being advertised.

But the artwork featured in the brochure accomplishes much more than simply informing potential customers. It also manipulates their thinking. Daniel Boorstin writes of the power of images in advertising: “The ‘projection’ of an image is itself a way of touting reputed virtues. Both subject and object then will want to fit into the picture. Both will assume that a portrait so persuasive and so popular must be made from life. Once the image is there, it commonly becomes the more important reality” (188-189). The image reinforces the purported benefits of whatever it is that is featured in the advertisement and which the images themselves are

supporting As a result, the consumer internalizes the images and makes them part of his own worldview, at which point the images themselves become the consumer's new reality. In the case of the Rudkus family, they see themselves in the home that is featured in the pictures, and Boorstin's words are proven true. Ona, upon seeing the actual house that is for sale, is disappointed that it is not a mimetic copy of the picture she saw: "Ona's heart sank, for the house was not as it was shown in the picture; the color scheme was different, for one thing, and then it did not seem quite so big" (39). She had internalized the artwork as her new reality, and when the physical reality didn't match that image, she was disappointed.

These marketing images are manipulated by advertisers to engage consumers' brains in such a way as to attract attention and pique interest while, at the same time, dispelling any doubts that the promises those pictures make are impossibly spectacular. Boorstin explains,

An image is synthetic. It is planned: created especially to serve a purpose, to make a certain kind of impression. [...] An image is believable. It serves no purpose if people do not believe it. [...] Yet if an image is to be vivid and to succeed popularly in overshadowing its original, it must not outrage the ordinary rules of common sense (188, italics in original).

Boorstin describes here the artificiality of an advertising image, something that consumers know to be true on some level. Boorstin sums up this manipulative practice on the part of advertisers: "The most effective images are usually those which have been especially doctored for believability" (Boorstin 188). However, the image is only artificially enhanced to a point that we will still accept it as possibly real. It is there that the power of the image lies. Because it appears simultaneously better than what we find in our current existence and still a realistic possibility, we accept it as our new reality. Jurgis falls victim to this phenomenon, as they soon accept the pictures of the house as their own reality: "So it became eloquent, picturing the blissfulness of married life in a house with nothing to pay" (37).

The advertisement has tapped into a part of Jurgis's psyche, a component of human nature that crosses international boundaries. Specifically, the ad has preyed on his human desire for a better life. Jurgis and his family, like so many other immigrants who came to the United States in search of a better existence, see the manifestations of prosperity all around them: people who own homes, people who wear nice clothes, people who have enough to eat. They are blinded by this culture of excess – especially compared to the subsistence life they had left behind in Lithuania – and become enamored with the idea of owning their own home. This is a reflection of what Stuart Ewen means when he writes, “A given ad asked not only that an individual buy its product, but that he experience a self-conscious perspective that he had previously been socially and psychically denied. By that perspective, he could ameliorate social and personal frustrations through access to the marketplace” (*Images* 36). The ad for the new home is inviting Jurgis to join the ranks of those who own their own homes, something he'd been denied to that point. This invitation, part of the ad's controlling discourse, works to further influence Jurgis's decision to buy the house.

In both their viewing of the ad itself and their interaction with the sales agent, we see a manifestation of Pamela Danziger's contention cited earlier that consumers create fantasies based on the acquisition of particular commodities. In the case of the Rudkuses, they believe that a new home is the first step to lifelong financial well-being in America, to achieve a component of the American Dream. In their desire to achieve this goal, they fall prey to a real estate scam perpetrated by fast-talking salesmen and color brochures of the supposedly new home he is selling: “It was all brand-new, so the agent told them, but he talked so incessantly that they were quite confused and did not have time to ask many questions” (39). The agent speaks fluent

Lithuanian, which eases their fears enough that they don't worry too much about the specifics of what he is saying. The advertisement and the salesman work in tandem to close the sale.

Other immigrants try to warn them against buying a home: "It was all nothing but robbery, and there was no safety but in keeping out of it. And pay rent? Asked Jurgis. Ah, yes, to be sure, the other answered, that too was robbery. It was all robbery, for a poor man" (40). There is no safe haven for those of the working class, no escape from the capitalist prison in which they live. For these people, it is merely a matter of deciding whether they want to be robbed all at once or slowly over time. And while these voices of experience have seen the disastrous financial effects wrought by the exact home-buying scam into which the Rudkuses are walking and those voices try to convince Jurgis to opt out of it, the power of the discourse is too much for him to resist. In fact, Jurgis is blinded to the manipulative effects of the discourse so much so that he convinces himself that he will be able to succeed where others have failed: "Others might have failed at it, but he was the failing kind—he would show them how to do it. He would work all day, and all night, too, if need be; he would never rest until the house was paid for and his people had a home" (41). While the sentiment is admirable, the reality is that the capitalist prison will destroy him in the same way that it did all those who came before him.

The first sign that we get that this endeavor might end up destroying the family comes at the actual closing of the sale. Jurgis is unable to go himself—the laws of capitalism dictate that he must work in order to earn the money with which to pay for the house—so the female members of the family went in his stead. The women are immediately concerned by the fact that the contract states that they will only be renting the house for eight years and four months; they do not understand the concept of a mortgage, and simply assumed that they would own the house

outright from the time they closed the sale. This drives them to get a lawyer, so that they might be sure that the contract is legitimate:

She expected the agent to fly into a passion, but he was, to her bewilderment, as ever imperturbable; he even offered to go and get a lawyer for her, but she declined this. They went a long way, on purpose to find a man who would not be a confederate. Then let any one imagine their dismay, when, after half an hour, they came in with a lawyer, and heard him greet the agent by his first name! (42).

The immediate inference we are to make is that *every* lawyer in Packingtown is part of this conspiracy; *every* lawyer has the eventual opportunity to serve in this exact position, and given the regularity with which these houses come for re-sale, it stands to reason that they will all have multiple opportunities. The lawyer's familiarity with the agent supports the argument that the capitalist game is rigged in favor of those with the power and money. Those less fortunate, like newly-arrived immigrants, are at their mercy. Of course, the lawyer charges the women for their time, "which occasioned some debate, and more agony" (43). In the end, the family ignores the warning signs and purchases the "new" home.

When the family first acquires the house, they realize that they need furniture, at which point it seems that the entire population of Packingtown is part of the capitalist conspiracy.

Merchants line the streets that are littered with advertisements and their controlling discourse.

Ironically, Jurgis takes this to mean that others are looking out for his well-being, not their own:

A person who had such a task before him would not need to look very far in Packingtown—he had only to walk up the avenue and read the signs, or get into a streetcar, to obtain full information as to pretty much everything a human creature could need. It was quite touching, the zeal of people to see that his health and happiness were provided for (44-45).

The fact that Jurgis sees these advertisements as demonstrative of the larger system's concern for himself—much like he saw the corporate megalith of Brown's as shielding him from harm—speaks volumes in regard to his naivete in regard to marketing ploys. He is the perfect prisoner

within the capitalist panopticon because he doesn't yet realize that he is in prison in the first place.

While out shopping for home furnishings, Jurgis notices a number of advertisements for brand-name products, including Dr. Lanahan's Life Preservers and Goliath Bunion Care. But it is furniture that the family is seeking, and they find a particular store that will provide furniture for a four-room house "for the ludicrously small sum of seventy-five dollars" (45). An even stronger enticement for the family is the fact that "only a small part of the money need be had at once—the rest one might pay a few dollars every month" (45). This is the immigrant family's introduction to the credit trap against which P. T. Barnum and many others so vehemently warned Americans in the nineteenth century. To a degree, living in a capitalist system all but requires some form of credit usage. Whether that credit come in the form of a mortgage or a tab at a grocery store or, as in this case, buying furniture on an installment plan, the reality is that the consumer is always paying more in the end than the actual cost of the commodity in question. And when one is living on a margin as thin as the immigrants in *The Jungle*, there is little room for such extra expenditures, as the narrator explains: "They had no money to spend for the pleasure of spending, but there were a few absolutely necessary things" (46). The reality is that now that the family owned a home, various expenses that they previously didn't have are now "absolutely necessary." Those expenses will only strengthen the bonds of the prison that is holding them.

With the onset of winter in Packingtown, Jurgis learns first-hand about the concept of supply and demand as it pertains to labor:

During the early part of the winter the family had had money enough to live and a little over to pay their debts with; but when the earnings of Jurgis fell from nine or ten dollars a week to five or six, there was no longer anything to spare. The winter went, and the spring came, and found them still living thus from hand to mouth,

hanging on day by day, with literally not a month's wages between them and starvation (83).

Even when things are busier at work during the following summer, Jurgis discovers that his wages are lower due to the influx of new laborers:

During the summer the packing houses were in full activity again, and Jurgis made more money. He did not make so much, however, as had the previous summer, for the packers took on more hands. There were new men every week, it seemed—it was a regular system; and this number they would keep over to the next slack season, so that every one would have less than ever (91).

Despite the drop in wages, though, the expenses continue to come unabated and, as the family discovers, unplanned expenses also appear—including the required insurance that they have to purchase for the home—further tightening the capitalist shackles: “There seemed never to be an end to the things they had to buy and to the unforeseen contingencies” (83).

Ona feels the pressure that Jurgis is putting upon himself to make enough money for the family to survive and, in order to keep her position at her current job—were she to lose it, it would only increase the stress for her husband—she is forced to engage in sexual relations with Connor, her immediate supervisor at work. When Jurgis learns this, he goes into a rage and beats Connor nearly to death. He is arrested and sent to jail, leaving the family without his income which they need to survive. It is ironic to note that the relief organization that could have provided food and other assistance to the family “did not advertise their activities, having more calls than they could attend to without that” (130). The commercial culture that drives people to the relief bureau—a culture fueled by advertising—actually mitigates the need for the bureau to advertise its own services.

Jurgis begins to imagine the family's future without him: “And they would lose it all; they would be turned out into the streets, and have to hide in some icy garret, and live or die as best they could!” (129). This horrific vision of the future becomes reality when Jurgis is

sentenced to thirty days in prison. Due to the fact that he is unable to pay the court costs associated with his sentence, Jurgis actually has to spend an additional three days in jail to “pay” that fee in what is an ironic twist on the conflation of capitalism and prison. During his time in jail, Ona falls ill and the family is unable to pay the bills on the home. While Jurgis is incarcerated in a physical prison, the metaphorical prison that is capitalism engulfs and suffocates his family.

The full horror of the situation appears to Jurgis upon his release from jail. When he returns to the site of his home, he notices that the house is now painted a different color and various repairs have been made: “His knees were shaking beneath him, and his mind was in a whirl. New paint on the house, and new weatherboards, where the old had begun to rot off, and the agent had got after them! New shingles over the hole in the roof, too [...]. And the broken windowpane replaced! And curtains in the windows!” (145-146). He soon learns that his family was evicted when they were unable to pay the mortgage. The agent made the requisite repairs and repainted it, then sold it to another unsuspecting immigrant family as a new house that had never before been occupied. It is clear that the Rudkus family was not the first family to have occupied this “brand new house,” nor will they be the last. The process begins anew for yet another unwitting victim. In capitalistic terms, there will be a seemingly endless supply of potential buyers for houses like this one, which fosters the demand for those houses. Adam Smith’s invisible hand serves to secure equally invisible shackles to those unwitting and naïve consumers. And those consumers have no recourse, because the laws of capitalism keep them imprisoned, as Jurgis has now finally learned: “And they could do nothing, they were tied hand and foot—the law was against them, the whole machinery of society was at their oppressors’ command!” (148).

One of the central tenets of the socialist philosophy espoused by Marx and Engels was the idea that capitalism is an international system, and as such combatting its ills like those that befell Jurgis and his family requires that laborers around the globe come together in a unified show of force. The ultimate goal, in Marx's mind, was the worldwide class uprising that he believed was the only way to topple capitalism. This desire is echoed in the famous final words of *The Communist Manifesto*:

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE! (Marx and Engels 41, emphasis in original).

Marx and Engels' call for a united force bent on revolt is reflected in *The Jungle* as the laborers in Packingtown seek to form a union.

Historically, immigrants were often seen as a barrier to union organization due to that population's collective willingness to endure worse conditions and lower wages:

Throughout most of the history of American labor, unions were fighting merely to exist or to maintain any toeholds they could establish, and in concert with strong employer opposition, ongoing mass immigration was the most persistent threat to union organizing efforts. It provided employers with a source of strikebreakers and alternative supplies of workers (Briggs 173).

In many cases, immigrants couldn't afford to miss work, as was the case with Jurgis in *The Jungle*. Because of their precarious financial situation, immigrants were a favorite target of employers and a bane to those who sought to organize laborers.

Immigrants, then, are the unwitting tools of the capitalist machine. Due to their numbers and collective desire to improve their lives through hard work and what they perceived as generous pay, the presence of immigrant labor tended to result in lower wages for all employees, due to the natural laws of capitalism. Employers knew that if anyone left a job because of the

conditions or wages, there would inevitably be another immigrant who would be more than willing to do the work. As a result, both native-born American and immigrant laborers endured whatever conditions were present at the time. Vernon Briggs argues that because of that reality, “Mass immigration was a threat to the creation of a viable labor movement and an obstacle to the quest of existing unions to improve the standard of living for workers” (173). One of the reasons that immigrants were deemed a hindrance to union organization was their desire to work, regardless of circumstances.

Sinclair uses the story of Jurgis’s initial introduction to unions as a way of highlighting the protagonist’s ignorance as to the laws of capitalism. Jurgis unknowingly endorses the bourgeoisie point of view by suggesting that only those who were capable of doing the work should be paid for doing it. If the work was too difficult or too strenuous or too dangerous, those men should seek employment elsewhere. The narrator explains, “Jurgis had not studied the books, and he would not have known how to pronounce ‘laissez faire’; but he had been round the world enough to know that a man has to shift for himself in it, and that if he gets the worst of it, there is nobody to listen to him holler” (48). It is easy for Jurgis to adopt this perspective at this point in the narrative simply because he is one of the strong who is capable of doing the work for which he is paid. His time will come, however, when he will fall from that lofty position and is relegated instead to those struggling to find any employment whatsoever in order to survive.

One of the first components of the working world that Jurgis discovers as less-than-savory to his mind—the first “crack in the fine structure of Jurgis’ faith in things as they are” (49)—is the prevalence of corruption and graft among the bosses. Much like we saw in the situation with Ona’s supervisor taking sexual liberties with her while threatening with the loss of her job if she refused, Jurgis comes to learn that “the plants were simply honeycombed with

rotteness of that sort—the bosses grafted off the men, and they grafted off each other; and some day the superintendent would find out about the boss, and then he would graft off the boss” (49). This grafting extends to the unemployed seeking jobs, too, as Dede Antanas, Jurgis’s father, learns when he tries to find work. Given that he is described as “the meekest man God ever put on earth,” it stands to reason that Dede Antanas—especially at his advanced age—isn’t physically capable of doing the work that Jurgis does on the killing floor. He does find work, however, mopping the floor and cleaning the traps that catch the detritus from other operations in what is called the pickle room in the cellars of the Durham’s plant. This job, menial as it is, does not come for free. Dede Antanas had been approached by a man offering to get him a job in exchange for payment; he is so desperate for a job that he agrees to give the man one-third of his earnings for the privilege of working.

It is not only the elderly who are forced to pay for a job. Ona learns of a potential opening working at a job wrapping hams for Brown’s. The only condition of employment is payment to the forelady, because she “was the kind that takes presents—it was no use for any one to ask her for a place unless at the same time they slipped a ten-dollar bill into her hand” (59). All of this grafting is a by-product of the capitalist system; in fact, it is an intrinsic manifestation of the capitalist system itself. These corrupt employers are simply doing what capitalism tells them to do, namely reward the ones most capable of doing a particular task. In this instance, that task is the payment of a fee. If they are unable to pay it, the bosses will find someone who is able to pay. It is not appreciably different from Jurgis’s outlook on his own employment; whereas the inherent trait of strength is his advantage in the capitalist system, the ability to save ten dollars in order to buy a job is someone else’s advantage. Sinclair sums up the situation by likening it to American chattel slavery:

Here was a population, low-class and mostly foreign, hanging always on the verge of starvation, and dependent for its opportunities of life upon the whim of men every bit as brutal and unscrupulous as the old-time slave drivers; under such circumstances, immorality was exactly as inevitable, and as prevalent, as it was under the system of chattel slavery. Things that were quite unspeakable went on there in the packing houses all the time, and were taken for granted by everybody (89).

The unions, at least in theory, seek to protect workers from these unscrupulous actions on the part of their supervisors. They also claim to work on behalf of their members to protect them from the seemingly omnipresent unsafe working conditions in Packingtown, conditions that seem to eventually effect everyone who works there long enough.

Sinclair offers a catalog of medical conditions that afflict the men and women who work in Packingtown, each different job causing specific maladies. Those in the pickle rooms, like Jurgis's father Dede Antanas, find their joints eaten by acid; butchers routinely lose fingers, while those in the chilling rooms developed rheumatism; perhaps the most horrific fate is reserved for those men who work in the tank rooms, because when they fall into vats, "there was never enough of them left to be worth exhibiting" (82). One of the primary reasons for the prevalence of these hazards was the practice of what is called "speeding up the gang." This process is explained to the reader in contrast to the amazement that Jurgis initially felt as a spectator looking down on the men working on the killing floors. Now, from his perspective of the one on the floor who is being watched, he is better able to understand how it was that the process seemed to go so quickly. It is, perhaps predictably, just another manifestation of capitalism's invisible hand at work on the labor force:

Jurgis saw how they managed it; there were portions of the work which determined the pace of the rest, and for these they had picked men whom they paid high wages, and whom they changed frequently. You might easily pick out these pacemakers, for they worked under the eye of the bosses, and they worked

like men possessed. This was called “speeding up the gang,” and if any man could not keep up with the pace, there were hundreds outside begging to try (47).

Because the laborers are forced to work increasingly quickly, they oftentimes make mistakes that result in sickness, lost fingers, or even death. This is yet another manifestation of the laissez-faire system applied to the labor force as a commodity. The laws of capitalism that shackle its citizens within its prison dictate that the market will self-regulate; the market will only bear so much before the pendulum swings the other direction. In the case of the laborers, that market is jobs. So long as they are willing to endure a given situation at work, the market will continue to push further and further. The laborers are stuck in the prison of capitalism with no way of escaping:

The workers were dependent upon a job to exist from day to day, and so they bid against each other, and no man could get more than the lowest man would consent to work for. And thus the mass of the people were always in a life-and-death struggle with poverty. That was “competition,” so far as it concerned the wage-earner, the man who had only his labor to sell (261).

In the end, though, the primary driver in Jurgis’s decision to join the union is money. He can no longer reconcile in his own mind the company’s exploitative payment practices whereby partial hours are not paid. So if a worker arrives a minute late, the fifty-nine minutes he works for the rest of that hour are unpaid; if the end of the workday arrives before all of the work is finished, the labor required to finish out the day’s tasks is also unpaid. As a result of this practice, we are told, “Jurgis was no longer perplexed when he heard men talk of fighting for their rights” (74), and he joins the butcher-helper’s union. The other members of his family who are working follow suit, and join their respective unions, too. The appeal of unions soon wears off, however, when Maria loses her job due to the seasonal closing-down of the canning factory and the union has no power to help her.

The more experience Jurgis has with the union, the more he comes to believe in it as a sort of democratic utopia, where every man’s voice is equal. He says of the union, “It was a little

state, the union, a miniature republic; its affairs were every man's affairs, and every man had a real say about the" (76). Jurgis, then, sees the union in much the same way as he saw life in America and his job in Packingtown. And just as the image of those other utopias crumbled in his own mind after he experienced them, so, too, does that of the union. In his naivete, he allows himself to become a naturalized citizen under direction from one of the union bosses, and then he is paid two dollars to vote for a particular slate of candidates. After voting, he learns that Jonas was paid four dollars in exchange for casting the same ballot three times. The unions—like the republic they seem to represent in Jurgis's mind—are corrupt, and even the men who serve as elected representatives are bought and sold as commodities within the context of the capitalist marketplace.

After a brief hiatus, Jurgis returns to work in Packingtown, where his political connections secure him a position as a hog trimmer at Durham's. He has, by this point, climbed the socio-economic ladder and managed to build a relatively substantial savings, though that all came at the cost of his home and family. He campaigns inside the factory on behalf of the candidate his political backers want elected and, once the election comes to a successful end, he remains at his job. But when the union workers engage in what comes to be known as "the Great Beef Strike," he returns to see Mike Scully for assistance. Scully, however, explains that he can't help Jurgis, and advises him to go back to work as a strike-breaker. This is another in a continuing line of examples of the forces of capitalism aligning against the laborer. Because of the omnipresent chains of capitalism keeping him in prison, Jurgis is forced to choose between becoming a pariah in the eyes of his fellow laborers or starving to death. Given that he has no other option that will ensure his own survival, he has to become a strike-breaker. But his employment comes to an abrupt end when he once again encounters Connor, the man who had

coerced his wife into sex. That encounter results in Jurgis's attacking him again, and again getting arrested. His connections aren't enough to save him this time, however, and Jurgis has to spend the entirety of his savings in order to stay out of jail.

It is when Jurgis has lost everything—his home, his family, his job, his money—that he truly sees the reality of life under capitalism's commercial culture. On a strictly pragmatic level, he is unable to find a job anywhere in Chicago now, as his political connections have abandoned him and the factories in Packingtown have blacklisted him from any sort of employment. But more than that, he has grown used to a life lived with some financial advantages, and now he will be forced to resume his position at the bottom of the economic ladder:

And also he labored under another handicap now. He had acquired new standards of living, which were not easily to be altered. When he had been out of work before, he had been content if he could sleep in a doorway or under a truck out of the rain, and if he could get fifteen cents a day for saloon lunches. But now he desired all sorts of other things, and suffered because he had to do without them (234).

Jurgis was, for a moment, an embodiment of the American success story. He had come to a new country in search of a better life, and he achieved that better life through hard work. Of course, that hard work was tainted by corruption and graft, but that is part of the capitalist way. But now that the trappings of that success are denied him, Jurgis wanted them that much more strongly. It is the same force at work in humans who want to climb the ladder when they see what others have that they begin to covet themselves. That constant desire is the driving catalyst of the commercial culture that fuels the American Dream.

In the end, *The Jungle* may be read as a collection of metaphors for capitalism itself. The house that starts the avalanche of financial destruction is rotting from the inside, but looks new on the outside due to a veneer of new paint. The meat products described in the novel—things like potted chicken or deviled ham, for instance—are a hodge-podge of offal that can't otherwise

be sold that has been canned and branded with a name and a colorful label. The promise of a better life in America that drew the Rudkuses and countless immigrants just like them is, at its core, the same thing as those rotting and rancid commodities that have been covered with a veneer of quality. It is the product of marketing, stories told by those like the corporate bosses who stand to benefit the most from a flood of cheap immigrant labor. Rather than finding the land of opportunity that has been promised through those advertising messages, immigrants find a jungle, a capitalist jungle, where survival of the fittest is the rule of the land. And that capitalist system, like the American Dream it helps to support and perpetuate, is as rotten as the meat that advertisers would have us buy when it is marketed as Durham's Potted Ham.

The Custom of the Country

Just as those coming to the United States from foreign lands sought their own version of the American Dream, many American women at the time were searching for a source of financial security. And while the immigrants portrayed in *The Jungle* were willing to risk their own lives working in dangerous conditions, there was a subset of American women who preferred to make their personal fortunes in safer condition, specifically by marrying wealthy men. Indicative of the wide-spread nature of this phenomenon is the fact that there was at the time a popular Broadway play about working-class women marrying for money, which I would suggest is an indication of how ubiquitous the practice was.

The first recorded instance of the term “gold-digger” being used as a derogatory descriptor for a working-class woman who seeks to marry a wealthy man appeared in 1915, but use of the term didn't become wide-spread in the American lexicon until 1919, when Avery Hopwood's *The Gold Diggers* opened on Broadway. The story tells of a wealthy man, Stephen

Lee, whose nephew is engaged to a chorus girl. Fearing that the young woman is only after his nephew's money, Lee engages another chorus girl to break up the couple. She fails in that endeavor and, at the same time, ends up falling in love with Lee, and the two end up marrying. The play ran for two years before touring the United States, and was so successful that it spawned a host of film adaptations. It also popularized the term "gold-digger" to describe a woman who chooses a spouse based solely on that man's ability to provide for her financial comfort.

It is impossible to ascertain exact figures as to how many women engaged in this practice at the time. However, by the 1920s, according to Brian Donovan, the fear that wealthy men had in regard to being divorced by their financially-inclined wives "hit a fever pitch" (112). He goes on to say, "The targets of the 1920s alimony panic were 'gold diggers,' greedy women who married and divorced men for purely financial gain. A few of these women became the public face of the alimony problem and received an enormous degree of press coverage" (Donovan 112). Given the "enormous degree of press coverage" these cases received, it is clear that marriage for many of these women at this time in history was more than the culmination of a loving relationship. It was a way for these women to make money; it was a very lucrative source of employment, in a manner of speaking. Marriage for these woman had nothing to do with love in the traditional sense; rather, it was grounded solely in a love for money and the associated possessions that money can provide. In the burgeoning commercial culture of the time in the United States, these women were locked into the constant cycle of commodity acquisition and conspicuous consumption, and they needed the financial means with which to maintain their perceived status.

In the fiction of the period, one such woman may be found in the character of Undine Spragg, the loathsome heroine of Edith Wharton's *The Custom of Country*, written in 1913. Like so many other women of the day, Undine finds herself under the spell of the controlling discourse of advertising, and she comes to believe that it is only through an ever-increasingly expensive series of material acquisitions that she will ever achieve true happiness, a message that is ingrained in her psyche by the discourse. In Wharton's novel, the tangible presence of advertisements is essentially absent; however, the messages of those ads—the discourse encouraging consumption for the sake of improving one's social standing—runs throughout the entirety of the novel. Ironically, it is the lack of actual advertisements in the novel that speaks to the power of their discourse. Despite the fact that there are so few tangible of advertising in the novel, the characters—especially Undine—are still tightly shackled by the forces of the capitalist Panopticon that feeds off of advertising. The message of the discourse, like the wheat in *The Octopus*, remains, even when the vehicle of advertising is absent. And that discourse still wields the same power over the docile body even without the presence of advertisements.

Undine Spragg is a woman whose social-climbing ambitions manifest themselves in her marrying increasingly wealthier men in an attempt to elevate her own socio-economic status. In one sense, this novel is a story about the spending habits of different classes. To that end, it is a novel about the requisite financial activities in which one must engage in order to maintain a particular image; the higher one's status, the more money one has to spend in order to maintain the image. In another sense, however, the novel may be read as a dissemination of that group of women who are members of the “gold-digging” class, those whose socio-economic aspirations were the target of so much fear on the part of wealthy men during the so-called “alimony panic.”

The heroine of Wharton's novel is engaging in a series of relationships that have no foundation in love; her only goal is money. As Paul Ohler suggests, "Social progress is her career" (47).

Much of the scholarship about *The Custom of the Country* focuses on the ways in which Wharton targets primarily female-centric materialism and vanity that accompanied the upsurge in personal wealth of so many American industrialists. The argument put forth by Ariel Balter is one of many that highlight Wharton's critique of the culture of material acquisition that was beginning to take hold with the growth of industrial capitalism at this time. Her argument is that everyone in the novel desires something, but those desires are mediated through others. She posits that the novel is a harsh critique of the fact that individual desires are essentially the manifestation of sexual desire (something that she points out is noticeably absent from any of the marriages in the novel), and that sexual desire is a by-product of a quasi-marriage to the capitalist system. Ticien Marie Sassoubre echoes that argument, arguing that the novel is more of a critique focused on the ways in which individuals began to construct their identities based on their possessions. Alternatively, Elizabeth Ammons discusses the idea that Wharton treats personal relationships as a means to a social and financial climbing end. In so doing, she moves the target of criticism from the novel's heroine and affixes it securely to the institution of upper-class marriage. She contends that many women looked at marriage as a potential high-return investment, a view that mirrored the male-centric view of industrial capitalism as a whole. No scholars to date, however, have examined how Undine is a representation of those living under capitalism in that she is imprisoned by the system and forced to continually spend increasing amounts of money in order to satisfy her own vain social ambitions.

Undine is under the control of the discourse that has embedded itself within her brain, telling her that she must possess better and more expensive commodities; her social position

depends on it. In an argument that echoes much of my own argument about American society at the time, scholar Ariel Balter suggests the novel is concerned with a critique of consumer capitalism:

In *The Custom of the Country* both the author's and the characters' desire for consumer goods is mediated by a capitalist, commodity culture and consequently their passion is directed primarily toward what is in fashion. The novel both reflects and is itself the product of the turn-of-the-century American "culture of abundance," which created a society of wanters and wants (20).

Within this society, those who fall into the category of "wanters" are constantly at the mercy of the capitalist system. The discourse of the commercial culture that fuels their desires is, as Balter points out, a product of the time, and there is no escape from it.

As a woman, however, Undine's entrapment is further enforced by her gender. As a woman during this period, she had no realistic expectation of being able to have a lucrative career that would enable her to fulfill all of her materialistic desires, which left her the sole option of marrying her way into money, and then facing the consequences of her subsequent actions with as much aplomb as she could muster:

Since wages in respectable occupations were so low, the only culturally sanctioned means for a woman to attain wealth was through a rich husband. And since states in the nineteenth century granted few or no property rights to married women, even women who 'married well' owned little or nothing of their own. But women who chose to be bad could live well on their own (Russell 105).

Even the most generous reading of Undine Spragg points to her as a woman who "chose to be bad," given her tendency to marry increasingly wealthy men from whom she takes as much as she believes she can before divorcing them and moving up to the next stratum of the socio-economic ladder via another marriage. It is her way of making money in order to navigate the world of the capitalist Panopticon. She trades on her attractiveness and sexual allure in the same

way as a prostitute would, and the financial success she achieves—if not the happiness—suggests that she was quite successful as a prostitute.

From the opening pages of the novel, we are immediately immersed in a world that reflects the power of the advertising discourse that permeates so much of American society at this time. Mrs. Spragg is described as wearing “as complete an air of detachment as if she had been a wax figure in a show window. Her attire was fashionable enough to justify such a post” (3). She is dressed in a manner that one might see on a mannequin in a department store window display; the unspoken suggestion is that she has intentionally dressed in exactly that way, because it is what the controlling discourse has told her is a fashionable style of dressing. Mrs. Heeny, the hired aesthetician that tends to the Spragg women, serves as the foil to her employers. She is working-class, and her only aspirations to higher society are the clippings of news stories that she keeps in her purse. In comparison to Mrs. Spragg’s department store fashions, “Mrs. Heeny, in comparison, had a reassuring look of solidity and reality” (3). The message here is that Mrs. Spragg is somehow artificial in her appearance, whereas Mrs. Heeny is more natural and true-to-life in her working-class clothes. Immediately, then, we are led to understand that Mrs. Spragg is, at least in her appearance, something akin to a non-human reflection of the discourse. In this, she is part of the docile body that has been disciplined to respond to the discourse within the Panopticon of capitalism.

Mrs. Heeny is entranced by the society column clippings that she saves, and she accepts them as a guide to how to present oneself as a member of the upper class. However, as much as the Spragg women might wish to look down at Mrs. Heeny and her faith in those articles, they prove to be just as susceptible—if not more so—to the power contained within that controlling discourse. While those newspaper clippings are not specifically advertisements in the traditional

sense, they still accomplish for these ladies what early advertising pioneer John E. Kennedy called “salesmanship-on-paper.” Stephen Fox said of this technique, “Instead of merely drawing customers to the store, Kennedy now asserted, an ad should say in print precisely what a good salesman would say face-to-face to a customer. Instead of general claims, pretty pictures, or jingles, an ad should offer a concrete *reason why* the product was worth buying” (50, italics in original). The newspaper stories, then, may be read as advertisements, because they do present to these women a justification—a reason why—to dress and act in the manner that they see presented in these stories. Undine reads these articles as if they are the same sort of instructional manuals inherent in advertising and attempts to mimic the appearances that they describe. Again, the sequence of activities is exactly the same as if they were advertisements. As Paul Ohler says of Undine’s relationship with the tabloid culture that features so prominently in the novel, “Undine comes to interpret the media depictions of old-guard elite as factual. To participate in that class stratum one need only buy and consume the papers in which the Marvells and Dagonets figure then mimic the debased representations” (47). The newspapers’ depictions of upper-class society, then, may be interpreted semiologically using Roland Barthes’ approach in much the same way as more traditional visual advertisements. The newspaper stories themselves are advertisements for the society itself.

Prior to moving to New York City, where the novel begins, the Spragg family lived in the ironically-named midwestern town of Apex. Mr. Spragg has made a sizable amount of money by Apex standards, though the source of that income we later learn is questionable. In that small town and as a result of her family’s comparative wealth, Undine is perceived to be—and, as a result, begins to perceive herself to be—the embodiment of fashionable tastes and upper-class virtues. This self-image stems from her being called “The child bride” by the local newspaper,

the *Apex Eagle*, and that moment serves as the catalyst for what Paul Ohler calls “a lifelong interaction of media power and its mode and manner with Undine Spragg’s mutable personae” (37). She is the apex of the town’s social consciousness; she has achieved the highest level of social awareness and acceptance that one might hope for in a town such as Apex. But the lure of New York City as she sees it presented in those society columns—the veritable advertisements for New York society—dominates her thinking, and she cajoles her parents into moving to Manhattan so that she might further her own self-seeking ends.

Through what we learn of how she and her family came to be in New York, we can immediately see how easy a target Undine was for the discourse presented in the newspaper stories about the society events. She was, in essence, a docile body in training, already disciplined in the Foucauldian sense to take in whatever specific instructions the discourse sought to impart about what she should do. The first major element of her docility reveals itself during a moment of “bitter retrospection” (24). While in this period of recollection, we learn that Undine’s “first struggle—after she had ceased to scream for candy, or sulk for a new toy—had been to get away from Apex in summer” (24). This struggle is met, by her father, with trips first to Mealey House, a sojourn that “had, aside from the intrinsic elegance, the immense advantage of lifting the Spraggs high above the Frusks” (24). Even at an early age, then, Undine was preoccupied with comparing her own status with that of her friends.

It is this vain preoccupation that suddenly causes the Mealey House vacations to lose their luster because, when Undine goes off to boarding school, she “met other girls whose parents took them to the Great Lakes for August; some even went to California, others—oh bliss ineffable—went ‘east’” (24-25). Her parents again take her on another vacation to a different locale. However, this new venue has the same underwhelming effect, and we are told, “But here

again everything was spoiled by a peep through another door” (25). Every time Undine believes she has found the location that will make her the envy of others, she discovers that there is somewhere more special still that she has not been. It is this outlook on life—the idea that there is always somewhere else or something else, something that is somehow better than whatever it is that she has at a given moment—that will become Undine’s approach to marriage. She approaches her multiple marriages as a series of business decisions, investments designed to provide her with an increasingly high rate of return. Marriage for Undine Spragg is, as Ariel Balter argues, “nothing more than a calculated, profitable investment” (19).

In every sense of the word, Undine Spragg approaches the institution of marriage as a business decision, one geared towards enriching herself at the cost of others. Elizabeth Ammons likens Undine’s approach to marriage as akin to the work of a female financier making money on Wall Street:

In twentieth century America kingdoms are won on the Stock Exchange. Wall Street is the field of battle for the modern robber baron. Though his female counterpart, the modern “warrior Queen,” is denied that battleground, she is given her own stock exchange: the institution of marriage in which she herself is the stock exchanged. To create her empire, she invests herself in the right marriage. This enterprise Undine understands and embraces (331).

The mantra of the stock market dictates that to be successful requires buying low and selling high or, in layman’s terms, buying at reduced price and selling at an inflated price, thus maximizing profits. Wharton punctuates this idea, writing of Marvell Marvell, “The daughters of his own race sold themselves to the Invaders; the daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera-box. It all ought to have been transacted on the Stock Exchange” (35). Because Undine has no other profession with which to secure her status as required by the capitalist system, she sees no other way of climbing that ladder other than

marrying increasingly higher. Of course, in order to marry higher requires divorcing the “lower” component, something that ties back to the so-called alimony panic at the time.

Undine’s desire to climb the socio-economic ladder is fueled by the discourse of the media, the society pages in the newspapers that tell her what the “higher” people are doing. And part of living that life is the practice of conspicuous consumption. Thorstein Veblen describes the requisite acquisition of material goods by the upper class as an important signifier to others, due to the association of money with power:

In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence. And not only does the evidence of wealth serve to impress one's importance on others and to keep their sense of his importance alive and alert, but it is of scarcely less use in building up and preserving one's self-complacency. In all but the lowest stages of culture the normally constituted man is comforted and upheld in his self-respect by “decent surroundings” and by exemption from “menial offices” (Veblen 28).

Because of her father’s financial success and her own self-image as that of a woman of leisure, Undine is free to pursue her own conspicuous consumption-themed agenda. However, because of her limited exposure to such a class-conscious world, Undine is ignorant to the specifics of how a woman of her self-perceived status should carry herself in New York society.

That ignorance makes her all the more susceptible to the discourse, because she is looking for a teacher, a guide to show her how to live the life she believes to be the one for which she is destined. For a model, she turns to the papers, with their reports of the goings-on in the social circles she longs to join. Once she marries Marvell Marvell, she begins to attempt to mimic those of a higher social status with whom she socializes. In a moment of introspection, Marvell notes that Undine possesses an “instinct of adapting herself to whatever company she was in, of copying ‘the others’ in speech and gesture as closely as she reflected them in dress” (70). In these moments of first-hand observation of the people she has read about in the papers,

we see an example of the simulacrum and the reality unifying into a single, cohesive unit, as Undine begins to become the image that she has created around these people. Despite Undine's chameleon-like ability to replicate the styles and manners of those around her, Marvell admits that he "was disturbed by the thought of what her ignorance might expose her to" (70). That fear, as it turns out, is grounded in his experience with things she has said previously, words that foreshadow her actions later in the novel.

During their engagement, Undine is invited to dinner with Marvell's family and other invited guests. It is, in a sense, an attempt on the part of Mrs. Marvell to introduce Undine to those with whom she is close, in the hopes of bringing her into this world of the old-money upper class. While seated at the table, Undine notes "the sensations of interest and curiosity excited by everything about her, from the family portraits overhead to the old Dagonet silver on the table—which were to be hers too, after all" (41). She is, then, already positioning herself as an heiress-to-be; she seems far more concerned with her financial reward as a wife than she is with any feelings of love she may have for her fiancée.

Undine, however, denies that she is marrying Marvell because of what she perceives to be his wealthy financial status. Interestingly, in her own mind, she might actually believe that to be true, too. In what may be read as a sort of psychological defense mechanism, she has created a mental image in which she is marrying not for money, but rather for social connections. When her father suggests that she break off her engagement to Marvell when he discovers that he is not going to be receiving a substantial amount of money from his father once the two are married, Undine has to clarify that she is not marrying him for his wealth, at least not in her way of thinking: "Did he suppose she was marrying for MONEY? Didn't he see it was all a question, now and here, of the kind of people she wanted to 'go with'? Did he want to throw her straight

back into the Lipscomb set, to have her marry a dentist and live in a West Side flat?” (55, emphasis in original). Of course, earlier in the novel, “the Lipscomb set” was, to Undine’s mind, an admirable group of people with whom she was proud to associate. However, as is her habit, she has spied a higher level, and can no longer be satisfied without being an accepted member in good standing of that loftier club. It is a pattern that we will see repeated throughout the remainder of the novel, as her vanity and desire for increasingly more opulent possessions—the by-products of the commercial culture within which she is imprisoned—require increasingly wealthier husbands.

Elmer Moffatt’s sudden appearance in her life, however, threatens to upend Undine’s plans to marry Marvell and commence on this quest to climb the socio-economic ladder. Moffatt is the possessor of a secret—that he was once married to Undine when she lived in Apex. Undine is *already* a divorcee, then, which helps to explain her surprise at learning that a divorced woman was frequently seen as something of a pariah in New York society. It also helps to explain the confidence with which she goes into her marriage with Marvell, a marriage that she seems to know on some level is destined to end in divorce because of her social-climbing aspirations. The fact that she has already been through the marriage cycle and is still accepted in that society buoys her confidence and empowers her to go forward with her marriage plans, so long as she is able to trust Moffatt to keep his secret. In order to ensure that secret is kept, Moffatt requires a capital investment in his business from Undine’s father. Secrecy—which is, in this case, requisite for the heroine’s happiness, albeit a temporary happiness—is itself subject to capitalism’s tentacles. In this world dominated by capitalist operations, it seems that everything—up to and including a person’s loyalty—is for sale for enough money.

The agreement is made and Moffatt promises to keep his silence, and once she is safely married to Marvell, Undine immediately begins to indulge in the extravagant lifestyle to which she deems herself entitled: "If Undine, like the lilies of the field, took no care, it was not because her wants were as few but because she assumed that care would be taken for her by those whose privilege it was to enable her to unite floral insouciance with Sheban elegance" (65). She has no understanding of how much things cost; she is trapped by the Panopticon, a disciplined body that readily bends her actions to the discourse that tells her what she needs if she wants to be accepted by the members of the upper-class. Her own insecurities and vanity make her such a malleable consumer, and she absorbs the commercial discourse like a sponge. However, she quickly comes to realize that her expectations of Marvell's wealth and the realities of that wealth are distinctly different, and that he cannot possibly afford for her to live that lifestyle.

This inability becomes an issue on the newlyweds' honeymoon. After repeatedly changing locales and finally arriving St. Moritz at Undine's repeated begging to go there, Marvell begins to question how he will be able to "meet the cost of their ruinous suite at the Engadine Palace while he awaited Mr. Spragg's next remittance? And once the hotel bills were paid, what would be left for the journey back to Paris, the looming expenses there, the price of passage to America?" (68). Undine's selfishness in regard to his monetary concern appears soon after, when Marvell returns from a walk to find Undine in tears. She breaks the news to him that his fears regarding her parents' health are unfounded; rather, her "father's lost a lot of money. He's been speculating, and he can't send us anything for at least three months" (72). Her tears are not for the pain her father is inevitably feeling at his own financial losses; they are the result of her realizing that she won't be able to spend as much money on herself. This profound self-centeredness is only compounded by the fact that her father's loss is, most likely, directly tied to

his investment in Elmer Moffatt's business, an ill-fated "speculation" that was made in order to indulge Undine's desires in the first place. So strong are the bonds that hold her in this capitalist prison that she goes so far as to ask Marvell to request his sister send them money so that she can buy new clothes in which to travel home.

Marvell initially indulges her, wishing to see her as naïve as to the ways of money, something he assumes she will grow out of in time: "He told himself that there is always a Narcissus-element in youth, and that what Undine really enjoyed was the image of her own charm mirrored in the general admiration" (69). However, after her repeated refusals to curb her spending, he learns "that the only road to her reason lay through her vanity" (78). Spending money becomes something of an addiction for Undine, as Marvell notes that

He could not rouse in her any scruple about incurring fresh debts, yet he knew she was no longer unaware of the value of money. She had learned to bargain, pare down prices, evade fees, brow-beat the small tradespeople and wheedle concessions from the great—not, as Marvell perceived, from any effort to restrain her expenses, but only to prolong and intensify the pleasure of spending (79).

In this description, we can see a reflection of what Christopher Lasch, writing about early twentieth century American literature, refers to as "the discontented woman of leisure":

A literature of reproach and alarm sprang up around the discontented woman of leisure. For psychologists, called in when the symptoms defied medical explanation, she was an object of intense concern [...]. Students of society found a portent of disaster in the 'parasitism' of the educated woman of the leisure class [...]. To people already troubled by thoughts of overcivilization, the appearance of the female parasite seemed to herald an age of imperial decadence, a second Rome (*New Radicalism* 38-39).

Undine embodies this description, as she begins (or perhaps merely continues) her own life as a parasitic being in the sense that she feeds off a host, taking what she needs in order to survive while draining the life out of the host. Once that host has been used up, she will, like the parasite that she is, go on to another. It is her way of living within the panoptic influence of capitalism.

She is a legal prostitute, working her way through life in the only way that she feels can provide her with the lifestyle she deems her birthright.

An important consideration is the lack of any sort of love on her part for her partner. Whereas Marvell tends to her every wish and seems entirely devoted to his new bride, she is distant, even cold at times. In short, she shows nothing resembling love that we as readers see during her marriage. Wharton describes her as “remote,” writing, “She had never shown any repugnance to his tenderness, but such response as it evoked was remote and Ariel-like, suggesting, from the first, not so much of the recoil of ignorance as the coolness of the element from which she took her name” (66)⁵. Again, there is no sense of her love for her husband beyond her love of his ability to pay for her indulgences. Once that ability ceases to exist, so, too, does anything resembling affection for him.

In terms of her social interactions, however, Undine is covetous of the things that her acquaintances possess and she sees those individuals cloaked in the “veritable artificial sun” mentioned by René Girard (*Deceit* 18). She becomes, in Girard’s words, a *vaniteux*: “The *vaniteux*—vain person—cannot draw his desires from his own resources; he must borrow them from others” (*Deceit* 6). Because Undine was not born into this upper class of society, she has to learn about specific fashions, customs, and habits. Her desires, likewise, are rooted in what she knows. For example, she had previously believed that Mabel Lipscomb and her “set” were a social group to which she would be happy to belong. It was, at the time, what she knew, and in

⁵ Appearing in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, an undine was a water spirit, deriving its name from the Latin *unda*, meaning “wave.” However, in Undine Spragg’s case, her name was taken from a curling iron invented by her grandfather, called the Undine, which provides an ironic component when taken in terms of my argument. She is named for a commercial commodity that works to change female appearances; at the same time, the idea of her undulating and constantly-changing wants reflect the commercial culture of the early twentieth century.

her desire for social acceptance she was unaware that they were deemed inferior by those of the upper class. But now that she knows that that sentiment exists, she cannot, in her mind, reconcile ever going back to that social group. She has drawn her desires—borrowed them, as Girard says—from others, specifically Marvell Marvell’s family and friends, in this instance.

This mediated desire on the part of Undine suggests that the human body itself can serve as a form of advertisement for particular products. This is as true today as it was in the first decades of the twentieth century, and it is certainly a core idea in *The Custom of the Country*. Undine’s desire to fit in—to imitate those she deems members of the social class she wants to belong to at a particular moment—is grounded in this desire that is mediated by the true members of that particular class. And the best way that Undine can find to imitate them so as to better fit in is by acquiring material possessions similar to the ones they have. This reflects Girard’s analysis of why commodities help to impart a particular aura to a given individual. He writes, “The mediator’s prestige is imparted to the object of desire and confers upon it an illusory value” (*Deceit* 17). Thus, we associate an individual’s value as a person, in part, with what they conspicuously consume. And when we can see things—and, by seeing, come to know that they exist and thus desire to have them—the job of imitation is made much easier, because we are provided with a model to follow. The imitation of a given style, in turn, increases its visibility, which increases its popularity, and the cycle begins anew, as Jonah Berger contends: “Making things more observable makes them easier to imitate, which makes them more likely to become popular” (24).

This form of non-traditional advertising is one of the more frequent methods of marketing that exists in the world. Humans displaying commodities in public is equivalent to a living and mobile display window, one of the most effective methods of more traditional

advertising employed by department stores at the time. And the primary target audience for those department stores, as Edd Applegate points out, was oftentimes women like Undine Spragg: “By advertising, using displays and stocking particular brands of goods, the large department stores made people, especially women, fashion-conscious” (Applegate 72).

And that fashion-consciousness—what Jonah Berger terms “social currency” (22)— was spread, to a great extent, by word of mouth. Consumers telling other potential consumers about a given product is, according to Berger, a major consideration in consumers’ decision to buy a particular commodity: “But word of mouth is not just frequent, it’s also important. The things others tell us [...] have a significant impact on what we think, read, buy, and do. [...] Word of mouth is the primary factor behind 20 to 50 percent of all purchasing decisions” (Berger 7).

Returning again to Girard’s analysis of the vain person, we see the full power of word of mouth to influence others’ buying decisions. So long as someone believes that an object is desirable, it becomes so: “A *vaniteux* will desire any object so long as he is convinced that it is already desired by another person whom he admires. The mediator here is a *rival*, brought into existence as a rival by vanity, and that same vanity demands his defeat” (Girard, *Deceit* 7, italics in original). As Wharton writes of the heroine, “Undine always liked to know that what belonged to her was coveted by others” (99).

Undine’s social circle—and that group’s ability to influence her personal desires— becomes increasingly important to her, as she begins to sense that her in-laws are less than enamored with her as a daughter-in-law and she begins to question her decision to marry Marvell: “There were moments after Undine’s return to New York when she was tempted to class her marriage with the hateful early mistakes from the memories of which she had hoped it would free her. [...] She found a poignant pleasure, at this stage of her career, in the question:

‘What does a young girl know of life?’” (85). Wharton’s word choice is very telling in regard to what I see as Undine’s profession of marriage as a form of occupation. The author’s decision to use the word “career” to describe Undine’s marriage—not to mention the fact that this particular moment is merely a “stage” of that career—emphasizes that marriage is Undine’s way of making the money she needs to live within the confines of the capitalist Panopticon.

As she contemplates this “stage of her career,” Undine begins to find herself increasingly attracted to Peter Van Degen, who Undine admires, in part, because he speaks “in a tone that showed what a small matter money was to anyone who took the larger view of life” (89). He serves as a distraction for Undine, a momentary indulgence that she uses to satiate her fickle desires for something different. At the same time, however, he represents the next step up the socio-economic ladder for Undine, and his ability to better provide for her material desires makes him a target of her plans as a gold digger. Her present situation, she is convinced, will never afford her the opportunity to blossom into the image she has of how her life should be: “At last she had reached the envied situation of the pretty woman with whom society must reckon, and if she had only had the means to live up to her opportunities she would have been perfectly content with life, with herself and her husband” (99). It is yet another moment when she is convinced that, were just one more component to fall into place, her life would be perfect. It is her social-climbing ambition masquerading as a job that makes her feel, in her words, “trapped, deceived” by her husband (99). The reality, however, is that she is trapped by the capitalist system itself, the system that her conspicuous consumption and unfettered attempts at raising her position within the socio-economic hierarchy work to support and maintain.

Her feelings of being trapped in her marriage lead Undine to express her own misgivings about her husband’s lack of financial wherewithal to her father. She tells him, “If I can get away

soon—go straight over to Paris...there's someone there who'd do anything...who COULD do anything...if I was free..." (106, emphasis in original). The unnamed "someone" is Peter Van Degen, and by "free," she means, of course, if she were free (divorced) from Marvell. Ironically, at the very moment of this conversation, the face of Elmer Moffatt appears in Undine's sight, as he has arrived to discuss a business dealing with Mr. Spragg. His presence is a reminder both of her previous divorce and of the power of money in her life. Both of those components wield influence and control over her existence, oftentimes in overlapping ways.

When Undine is soon after diagnosed with general weakness that requires medically-prescribed "absence of worry" (112), her doctor suggests a trip to Europe as a way of letting her regain her strength. After a great deal of pleading with Marvell, she is finally allowed to go to Paris by herself, where she continues her attempts at mimicking those she wishes to emulate. Charles Bowen, a New Yorker living in Paris who serves as something of a one-man Greek chorus by commenting on the action he sees around him, describes the scene for readers: "During some forty years' perpetual exercise of his perceptions he had never come across anything that gave them the special titillation produced by the sight of the dinner-hour at the Nouveau Luxe: the same sense of putting his hand on human nature's passion for the factitious, its incorrigible habit of imitating the imitation" (119).

The irony is that all of these diners—typically Americans seeking some sort of French experience *en masse*—are attempting to impress one another by mimicking one another. By attempting to look and act identical, the hope is to set oneself apart from and above the rest of those assembled. Bowen calls this group of people "a phantom 'society,'" and we are told that "the instinct which had driven a new class of world-compellers to bind themselves to slavish imitation of the superseded, and their prompt and reverent faith in the reality of the sham they

had created, seemed to Bowen the most satisfying proof of human permanence” (120). The imitators, then, perpetuate their own existence through their imitation. As such, the repetition of the imitation serves to perpetuate the capitalist system as much as it perpetuates the society upon which Bowen is commenting; because this perpetual imitation requires the constant acquisition of newer and better commodities, the imitation is yet another manifestation of the panoptic power of capitalism.

Undine is pleased with life in Paris, feeling that “the life she was leading there must be going to last—it seemed so perfect an answer to all her wants” (123). Noting out of her window all of the various elements of the city scene laid out before her, she remarks that it is “her first real taste of life” (123). However, the constant worry of money that she left behind in New York with her husband has followed her via a letter informing her that “the drain on her letter of credit had been deep and constant” (124). During her time in Paris, Undine has begun a romantic affair—insofar as one can describe her relationship with any man as being romantic—with Peter Van Degen, whom she hopes to marry. She goes so far as to make a plan to travel to North Dakota to get a divorce, with the expectation that Van Degen will meet her in Reno and the two will, presumably, get married. Undine does travel to North Dakota and does secure a divorce—something that the society pages in the newspaper cover with a degree of voyeuristic enjoyment—but Van Degen never arrives as originally planned, thus leaving Undine as a divorced, single woman; worse, she has been labeled “an Immoral woman” by polite New York society (154). As a result, she is something of an outcast, unable, for the moment, to further her “career” as a serial bride for whom marriage is a business venture. The visiting card she now carries “bearing her Christian name in place of her husband’s, was like the coin of a debased currency testifying to her diminished trading capacity” (157). Even her own name is viewed as a

commodity and, following her divorce, that commodity has lost the luster that it once had in terms of her position in society.

The fact that she acted in short-sighted haste when she divorced Marvell begins to dawn on Undine, and her new reality as a divorced woman without a wealthy husband becomes manifest when she returns to New York to visit her parents and her son Paul. Her parents have paid for her divorce, leaving them in somewhat tenuous financial circumstances, meaning that they could do nothing to support Undine and her lavish lifestyle. That impecunious situation, paired with the fact that she sees her son “as an additional burden,” leads her to decide that Paul would be better off with his father. She manages to acquire a significant amount of money by selling a pearl necklace she’d received from Peter Van Degen, money that she uses to take herself and her parents to Europe. After a few weeks, they leave Undine in Paris to return to New York, and Undine embarks on a new plan to finance her lifestyle, specifically by marrying the Comte Raymond de Chelles, a French nobleman.

The idea of marrying into an aristocratic family is one that had occurred to her previously during her time in Paris, where she “had begun to hear about other American women, the women who had married into the French aristocracy, and who led, in the high-walled houses beyond the Seine which she had once thought so dull and dingy, a life that made her own seem as undistinguished as the social existence of the Mealey House” (125). It is another example of Girard’s idea of imitating that which others possess once we know that those things exist. Whereas Undine once thought that life in those homes was “dull and dingy,” she has since learned that it is, at least to a certain mind, the pinnacle of social success. Once she learns that, she sets out with a single-minded purpose of being able to mimic that lifestyle by marrying de Chelles. He will become the next client for Undine’s marriage career.

The only obstacle in the way of Undine's marrying de Chelles is her divorce. As Madame de Trezac explains to her, de Chelles is Catholic, and the Catholic Church won't permit her to be married in the Church as a divorcee. Undine believes that she has a way around this roadblock, however. She tells Madame de Trezac of her marrying de Chelles, "It won't be impossible when my marriage is annulled" (178). An annulment requires money, however, with which to "fix it all up right with the Pope," as Elmer Moffatt phrases it (180). This annulment—the requisite first step in Undine's achieving the next level of socio-economic advancement—is yet another commodity that can be bought for the right price.

In order to acquire the funds she thinks she needs to effect the annulment, Undine decides to enforce a custody clause buried in her divorce agreement that awards her full custody of Paul, taking him from Marvell. For his part, Marvell can't believe that her motives are strictly financial, but his cousin Clare tells him, "I don't believe Undine cares a straw for 'the appearance of respectability.' What she wants is the money for her annulment" (192). Still not willing to believe that even Undine could be so mercenary, Marvell instructs his lawyers to suggest a cash settlement in exchange for his retaining custody, resulting in "the confirmation of Clare's surmise, and it became clear that—for reasons swathed in all the ingenuities of legal verbiage—Undine might, in return for a substantial consideration, be prevailed on to admit that it was for her son's advantage to remain with his father" (193). Not only is the annulment itself a commodity, but now the child that was produced as a result of the marriage is also a commodity that is used as a bargaining chip for cash. Wharton writes of this bizarre situation, "That the reckoning between himself and Undine should be settled in dollars and cents seemed the last bitterest satire on his dreams" (193).

Marvell doesn't have enough money to buy off his ex-wife, so he turns to Moffatt, who is thought to be on the precipice of "permanent eminence among the rulers of Wall Street" (197). When the return that Moffatt promised him doesn't materialize, Marvell begins to worry. He goes to meet with Moffatt, who in turn tells him that the price of the stock in which he was invested had dropped to near-zero. He assures Marvell, however, that in time, the returns will come in and he'll make money on his investment. This doesn't help Marvell, though, who needs the money immediately in order to pay off Undine, which he explains to Moffatt. Moffatt then tells him that he had once been married to Undine, too: "Well, it was this way. Undine Spragg and I were made one at Opake, Nebraska, just nine years ago last month. [...] Nothing much had happened to her before but being engaged for a year or two to a soft called Millard Binch" (201). Thus, Marvell learns in the space of a very short time that not only was his ex-wife married and divorced prior to marrying him, she'd also broken off another engagement before her first marriage. It is at that moment that Undine Spragg's career crystalizes in Marvell's mind, "and the whole archaic structure of his rites and sanctions tumbled down about him" (202). Left with no money with which to pay Undine in order to keep his child, Marvell has been destroyed by the system. He goes home and avails himself of the only option for escaping the capitalist Panopticon, death.

With Marvell's suicide, Undine is declared a widow; because her first marriage to Elmer Moffatt had been unofficial, no license was ever issued and was therefore not recognized by the Catholic Church. As a result, Undine is free to marry Raymond de Chelles, as her marriage vows ended with Marvell's death and she is free to re-marry under Catholic Church doctrine. It stands to reason that being a countess would be sufficient for Undine, as de Chelles's money can buy her whatever commodities she might want. However, she finds that she is unable to socialize in

the way to which she was accustomed, and is thus unable to display the fruits of her labor:

“Agreeable as it was to Undine that an appeal to her discretion should be based on the ground of her youth and good-looks, she was dismayed to find herself cut off from the very circle she had meant them to establish her in” (207). She is unable to incite envy in others due to her being forced by her new husband to remain at home rather than going out and socializing. Undine seems also to resent her husband’s love, noting that “Raymond seemed to attach more importance to love, in all its manifestations, than was usual or convenient in a husband” (206). She, the professional prostitute who uses relationships in order to make money, has no interest in any kind of romantic love with her husband. It is only his money that she wants, not his love.

She comes to learn, however, that despite his lofty title and family wealth, Raymond does not have extensive reserves of cash to spend on Undine’s indulgent shopping excursions, even when his father dies and Raymond is elevated to the status of Marquise: “Worse still, she was presently to discover that Raymond’s accession of rank brought with it no financial advantages” (212). Despite that financial reality, Undine eventually gives in to her commodity-consumption addiction and goes on a shopping spree in Paris, despite knowing that she was spending too much money. She is unable to stop herself, despite the fact that the purchases don’t bring her joy in the way that they used to:

Nevertheless her dresses were more than ever her chief preoccupation: in Paris she spent hours at the dressmaker’s, and in the country the arrival of a box of new gowns was the chief event of the vacant days. But there was more bitterness than joy in the unpacking, and the dresses hung in her wardrobe like so many unfulfilled promises of pleasure, reminding her of the days at the Stentorian when she had reviewed other finery with the same cheated eyes. In spite of this, she multiplied her orders, writing up to the dress-makers for patterns, and to the milliners for boxes of hats which she tried on, and kept for days, without being able to make a choice (224).

When Raymond protests that she is spending too much money and that they will be unable to continue to live that lifestyle, she counters that the house is full of things that could be sold in order to pay for more dresses for her: “Why, there’s a fortune in this one room: you could get anything you chose for those tapestries. And you stand here and tell me you’re a pauper” (226). His response to this suggestion is simply that she doesn’t understand.

What Undine doesn’t understand is that she is asking him to sell family heirlooms that have generations’ worth of value to the de Chelles family in order for her to buy dresses that, by her own admission, bring her only bitterness. She is so fully trapped within the capitalist Panopticon that she cannot see her own selfishness. Undine goes so far as to advertise the aforementioned tapestries as being for sale, which attracts the attention of a wealthy American buyer who arrives to view the tapestries while Raymond is away in Beaune. The buyer turns out to be Elmer Moffatt, to whom Undine remarks, “I suppose you must be awfully rich” (230). She is already sizing up her next marital target. And while she makes an attempt at self-aggrandizement in order to create in him a sense of envy, she is constantly aware of the fact that he seems to be living a better life than she:

She tried to let him see that she had not sacrificed herself for nothing; she touched on the superiorities of her situation, she gilded the circumstances of which she called herself the victim, and let titles, offices and attributes shed their utmost lustre on her tale; but what she had to boast of seemed small and tinkling compared with the evidence of his power (231).

Her own title and the furnishings of her multiple homes—things that she never could have conceived of having living in Apex when she read the society pages with dreamy eyes—do not seem as important to her now that she has them, especially in light of the life that Moffatt seems to be living. Her pattern continues to repeat itself as the capitalist Panopticon forces her to acquire more commodities that will, to her mind, complete the image she has of the ideal life.

However, we as readers know from our experience with Undine that she will never be satisfied. Instead, she will continue this pattern, constantly looking for the next step up.

When de Chelles learns of what she attempted to do, he has to work to restrain his anger. He tells Undine for the first time in her life that she has been nothing but a mimic, a one-off copy that loses something in the translation from the original:

You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; aping our weaknesses, exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about [...] and we're fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for us" (234-235).

It is interesting to note that Raymond chastises himself as much as he does Undine, because he knows that he is guilty of letting her do what she has done. He, like the other men that came before him, has learned too late that Undine does not marry men for love. Rather, she is the epitome of the gold digger that featured so prominently in Avery Hopwood's play of the same title. Ironically, when she professes her love to Elmer, she tells him that it is the French who treat marriage as a business, and it's that outlook that pains her: "They think so differently about marriage over here: it's just a business contract. As long as a woman doesn't make a show of herself, no one cares" (245). Again, her selfishness clouds her vision, this time keeping her from seeing the depths of her own hypocrisy in regard to marriage.

In the end, as we as readers should expect, Undine divorces Raymond in order to marry Moffatt. The newspaper headlines screamed out, "American Marquise renounces ancient French title to wed Railroad King" (252). As it turns out, Moffatt has achieved the financial level of billionaire, which explains Undine's interest in him. Despite that, as is her nature, Undine continually finds fault with her current husband: "Now and then she caught herself thinking that his two predecessors—who were gradually becoming merged in her memory—would have said

this or that differently, behaved otherwise in such and such a case. And the comparison was almost always to Moffatt's disadvantage" (255). The novel ends with her learning that Jim Driscoll had been named Ambassador to England. While she thinks to herself that she doesn't think the Driscolls should qualify as worthy of being gifted with that honor, she "immediately had a great vague vision of the splendours they were going to—all the banquets and ceremonies and precedences" (255). She tells her husband that if he "had a spark of ambition," he, too, might aspire to being an ambassador. That is apparently the next title on her climb up the ladder of society. Unfortunately for her, it is a rung that is out of her reach, due to her status as divorcee, which Moffatt tells her. Her reaction is the sort of pouting that characterizes Undine throughout the novel: "She could never be an Ambassador's wife; and as she advanced to welcome her first guests she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for" (256). Marriage, for Undine, is a commodity that serves the purpose of advancing her own social purposes, and one is left with the feeling that she will, somehow, find a way to get that next level, the status of Ambassador's wife. From there, it is inevitable that another opportunity will present itself in the same way that a new commodity catches the eye of an unwitting consumer, convincing her that this is the one thing her life is lacking. And the cycle will repeat ad infinitum, because Undine is fully imprisoned within the Panopticon of capitalism.

* * *

By 1917, American President Woodrow Wilson began to fear that the Allied forces were on the brink of defeat in World War I, and the United States entered the war effort. Though the nation's collective experience with the war was one of disillusionment and horror, what didn't

change in the United States was the ever-growing idea that consumption was the key to happiness. The war brought with it an economic boom. The demand for goods skyrocketed following the war, a direct result of the controlling discourse of advertising that had been a continuous presence, growing to a half a billion dollar a year industry by 1918. That massive expenditure on discourse strengthened the American belief that acquisition of material possessions was the key to happiness. As James Norris notes, “Still, however much we may lament it, one must concede that by the end of World War I, advertising had sold the concept of consumption as the means to achieve social success. The sale may well have been too willing, even eager, customers, but it was complete” (168). This was in direct conflict with what many elected officials had hoped would be a period of introspective self-reflection that the American people would participate in during the war, as suggested by Thaddeus Russell: “A number of government officials and intellectuals saw the war as an opportunity for America to redeem itself by renouncing its desire for more stuff” (214). However, as the financial numbers from the day prove, the “desire for more stuff” grew at an unprecedented rate. Predictably, American authors—especially those whose sympathies tended to support the socialist cause—saw this consumerism as an erosion of all the good that they saw in American life. Many of them believed that consumerism meant greed and selfishness, and it would only lead to negative ends.

Chapter Three
Peace, Prosperity, and Profligacy: The 1920s

Let the Good Times Roll: In With a Roar

The economic boom that had accompanied the war harbored in what was for many Americans an entirely new way of looking at the world. Whereas the earlier years of the twentieth century had been about working and saving, the 1920s ushered in an era of consuming and spending. That new era was the beginning of what has come to be known as the American commercial culture, arguably one of the most profound cultural changes in American society during the twentieth century. Economist Ronald Seavoy suggests that, in the United States, this was “the first consumer culture to evolve from the industrial revolution” (267). The statistics he cites include the fact that industrial production increased approximately ninety percent from 1920 to 1929; at the same time, wages of industrial workers rose approximately seventeen percent. These increases equated, in part, to an increase in the disposable income on the part of consumers, which meant more money for conspicuous consumption. Henry May suggests that this increase in disposable income fed into an inherent human desire for pleasure that was in philosophical conflict with the residual belief systems left over from the nineteenth century:

[Economics] had inherited from the nineteenth century a particularly rigid kind of theory. The idea of the guiding hand, presumably Divine and clearly indifferent, had been gradually displaced by the idea of the built-in, all-sufficient natural force controlling economic behavior. This force was unalterable human nature, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain in a predictable, almost automatic manner (158).

With their extra money, Americans began to indulge that side of their nature that sought out pleasure and avoided pain. They began to purchase things that made them feel good simply because they made them feel good. They began, in short, to more fully embrace the burgeoning commercial culture.

One consumer good that apparently made Americans feel good was the radio. Consumers were entranced by the new technology which, at the time, cost approximately \$150. To put this price in perspective, consider the fact that in 1925, the price of a new Ford Model-T was less than \$300. Despite that seemingly prohibitive cost, consumers purchased the boxes in huge numbers; by the end of the decade, more than 12 million American homes had radios in them. By 1923, there were in excess of 500 radio stations across the country, an expansion that fueled the market for radios. The boxes were essentially magic to a 1920s audience, as Alice Marquis suggests: “Clearly, no medium has ever captured the imagination—not to mention the leisure time—of the public with the speed of radio” (Marquis 48). One of the most important elements of radio as an entertainment medium was the device’s ability to transmit everything from informative news reports to entertaining stories. This was the first time in history that human beings had so much in the way of information and entertainment available to them. And that wide audience was a docile body that had already been trained by the magic of the radio to focus on its message; they were ripe to be disciplined by the discourse of advertising. And advertisers were quick to respond to that condition. As Philip G. Payne writes, “The maturing advertising industry taught Americans how to transition to a consumer-driven economy” (33).

In an effort to reach as many potential consumers as possible, advertisers availed themselves of the reach afforded by radio, sponsoring programs on major networks and even on local stations. In 1927, a total of forty-three different companies sponsored programming.

Companies were oftentimes very creative in their use of sponsorship opportunities. For example, popular radio programs at the time included the A&P Gypsies proclaiming the superiority of the Andrews & Pierce grocery chain and the appropriately-named singers Paul Oliver and Olive Palmer who endorsed the wonders of Palmolive soap.

The effect of this corporatization of the radio reflected the commercial culture that was gaining strength in the United States at the time. Radio and advertising executives were initially concerned about a backlash that would result in consumers turning off the radio. They were, after all, tuning in for entertainment and news, not to be told what they should buy or where they should shop. Those fears, as it turned out, were unfounded: “As the broadcasters all too quickly discovered, the audience was far less finicky than had been thought and, far from objecting to the rising commercialism of the airwaves, enthusiastically embraced it” (Marquis 21). Those consumers were looking for ways to spend their excess money, and they wanted to be a part of the current trends. This embracing of commercial messaging on the radio by consumers—their embracing of the controlling discourse—provided yet another avenue for advertisers to manipulate consumer behavior.

In the minds of those advertisers, the new manipulative capabilities afforded by radio programming dovetailed perfectly with the economic conditions of the time. In general, Americans found themselves living better lives than any generation before them had, and they had access to technologies and products that had previously been inconceivable. Matthew Roberts writes of those authors who were active during this period, “Writers of the day [...] depicted Americans as being pulled in two different directions. America was searching for its moral compass and apparently discovered it in the frantic pursuit of material possessions and an ever-increasing standard of living” (34).

What began to become increasingly important to consumers in the early 1920s was comparing oneself to one's peers, and judging one's own place in society based on that comparison. The twenties saw consumers beginning to base their own self-image on what they saw others purchasing. In terms of commodity acquisition, this idea translates into consumers' buying things because they see how those things make others appear, and those consumers want to appear the same way. As Fennis and Stroebe explain, "People do not only buy goods to express their identity; owning these goods also helps them to be the kind of person they want to be" (173). This idea of becoming a particular person—or at least of putting forward the image of a particular person—through the acquisition of particular commodities was one that began to gain traction with consumers in the 1920s.

With the passage of time, the image that consumers believed was being constructed by particular commodities ceased being an image in their minds and began to cement itself as truth, a process known as the principle of social proof. According to Fennis and Stroebe, "The principle of social proof states that we turn to others for assessing the merits of a message, an offer, a point of view, or a behavior. In short, we view something as correct to the extent that we see others believing it or doing it" (305). Repeatedly seeing others whom we admire performing a particular action equates to that action becoming a component of admiration in our minds. If we see someone that we admire wearing a particular jacket enough times, for instance, we begin to equate the jacket itself with our level of admiration. We in turn desire to own the jacket so that others will see us as admirable, too.

Advertisers capitalized on this tendency, and leveraged it to their advantage by presenting to potential consumers the life they might be able to live if they'd only buy a particular item. Oftentimes, this strategy manifested itself in advertisers' presenting to their audience what is

called a reference group, defined as “a person or group of people that significantly influences an individual’s behavior” (qtd. in Fennis and Stroebe 303). In terms of a reference group’s power in a particular ad, these models of aspirational behaviors “act as agents of social proof because they communicate standards, norms, beliefs, and values that are shared by significant others and thus can act as a benchmark to determine what is right or wrong, what is good, what is valuable, and how one should behave” (Fennis and Stroebe 303). Consumers, then, have a tendency to view people in advertisements as models of behavior to which they should aspire, and those consumers attempt to emulate those models they see by purchasing whatever commodity it is that is being advertised and, by association, endowing the model with the aspirational aura to which the consumer is responding.

This concept is reminiscent of René Girard’s theory on mediated desire in regard to *The Custom of the Country*. In the case of the reference group, the consumer mediates their own desires through the models in the advertisements. The power of the image is undeniable, whether we call it a mediator (Girard), a reference group (Fennis and Stroebe), or something else entirely. What it is important to understand is that this is a practice in which advertisers were engaged during this period in American history: “Advertising agencies have created consuming fantasies for years. They carefully select models, images, settings, scenes, and story lines to evoke an image, a feeling, and a fantasy of how one’s life would be transformed through owning a product” (Danziger 205). Advertisers, then, are aware of the power they wield as the purveyors of discourse in our society, and that discourse finds its mark on the disciplined body that is the American consumer. And the discourse tells those consumers that specific products that they can purchase have the physical power to change the trajectory of their lives. More to the point, they

were also well aware of their power in the 1920s, when the American economy and the commercial culture that fueled it were both at the cusp of exponential growth.

Babbitt

One oft-created fantasy world used by advertisers in order to sell commodities is one of aspirational appearances. Consumers seek to emulate those they see as socially superior to themselves, as outlined by Thorstein Veblen and codified into advertising parlance as the social validation principle as discussed previously. That principle suggests that advertisements tend to emphasize the ways in which a particular commodity can enhance one's position in society. By acquiring a product, a consumer is granted entrance to a social position that had previously been closed to them. I return again to the words of Stuart Ewen, who writes, "A given ad asked not only that an individual buy its product, but that he experience a self-conscious perspective that he had previously been socially and psychically denied. By that perspective, he could ameliorate social and personal frustrations through access to the marketplace (*Images* 36). Rational consumers—something that certain advertisers might term an oxymoron—would likely consider themselves above the influence of fantasy worlds that they know are impossible to attain simply through the purchase of a particular commodity. However, these discretionary purchases require some sort of logic that justifies their purchase in the mind of the consumer. Here advertising's discourse begins to wield its power. While consumers understand, on some level, that the promises being made are impossible, they still point to those promises as their reason for making the purchase. As Pamela Danziger writes, "On the one hand, consumers are not logical, and what they want, desire, and dream of owning is not logical. On the other hand, they need logical

reasons to justify the purchase of products they don't need" (32). The discourse is strong enough to change the way a consumer thinks about the power inherent in a particular item.

This mentality found fertile soil in the emerging commercial culture of the 1920s, as individuals began to see others in their peer groups who were conspicuously consuming particular commodities. The mediation of desire—the envy felt by the observers—fuels the emotional value of the specific item for a consumer. Because others around them were envious, the suggestion was that the commodity was invested with an inherent power to elevate the consumer's existence; perhaps the promises made by the advertisements were true. This emotional gratification is, as Pamela Danziger suggests, "the reward that reinforces continued purchases of things desired, but not needed. Like Pavlov's dogs, they seek that same level of gratification repeatedly" (Danziger 23). That repeated quest for the same level of emotional gratification sends consumers back to the marketplace like addicts searching for their next fix. Because the reality is that once the initial euphoria of the purchase dissipates—or, alternatively, as soon as someone else in one's peer group gets a newer or better commodity—the original purchase no longer seems as special as it once did. So consumers return to the marketplace in what Danziger explains is the next step of what she calls the purchase cycle:

In shopping, the search for a desired item encourages consumers' fantasies, allowing them to create more complex tableaux in which to act out their dreams and desires. [...] Once the purchase cycle is completed, reality sets in. Inevitably though, a new shopping fantasy will begin to brew as the consumer starts a new cycle of anticipation and searching, leading to purchase, then followed by letdown (24).

The inevitable letdown helps to fuel the capitalist system because it results in more purchases of items that make impossible promises via the discourse of advertising. By constantly working to acquire new commodities in order to impress others who were doing the same thing, consumers

would perpetuate the capitalist system that held them in shackles and refused to allow them to escape.

Like a hamster constantly running on a wheel but still getting nowhere, the American consumer caught in this cycle found himself tirelessly working while still remaining in the same financial position. Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, published in 1922, critiques this phenomenon through the story of George Babbitt, a real estate salesman who is constantly working to impress others, all the while comparing himself to his peers and finding himself lacking. In his article "Sinclair Lewis and the Passing of Capitalism," Christopher Wilson argues that in *Babbitt*, Sinclair Lewis initially tried to redeem the image of capitalism, which he saw as a destructive and exploitative system, a redemption he sought to achieve through his fiction. However, the longer he worked at it, according to Wilson, the more Lewis came to realize the futility of his quest. Similarly, Clare Elby suggests that Babbitt's failure to fully realize the revolutionary changes that he seems to want to effect is a reflection of the philosophy put forward by Thorstein Veblen. The latter argued that societal and institutional power keeps intact the façade of the status quo. Finally, Michael Auspurger argues that Lewis directed his works to the professional middle class as a way of instructing that population about the dangers of embracing materialist consumption. The message, Auspurger argues, was that Lewis believed the middle class had the opportunity to change the burgeoning materialistic culture that accompanied the growth of industrial capitalism in the early twentieth century.

What all of these scholars fail to fully interrogate, however, is the ensnaring power of the economic system. It is, within the scope of a Foucauldian argument, pointless to suggest that Lewis is attempting to redeem capitalism's image or that he is calling for the middle class to change their ways. These are empty gestures because capitalism is a Panopticon. It cannot be

escaped, nor can it be modified. It is an all-encompassing and all-controlling prison that keeps consumers within its grasp from the moment of their birth until the moment of their death. It is this power that lies at the heart of the critique of American consumer capitalism that runs throughout *Babbitt*.

The novel opens with an immediate invocation of the metropolitan setting, and we as readers aren't afforded any thought that the simpler lifestyle to which so many Americans wanted to return is anywhere in this new modern world: "The towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist; austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods. They were neither citadels nor churches, but frankly and beautifully office-buildings" (1). From the novel's opening sentence, we are submerged in a world of commercialism and labor. What's more, those monuments to this new culture are compared to citadels and churches, protective fortresses and religious sanctuaries. These office buildings that represent the quest for money have supplanted security—both physical and spiritual—in the minds of these Americans.

The very name of this fictional metropolis—Zenith—suggests that it represents the pinnacle of achievement, and Lewis uses the name ironically to suggest that the city represents all that Americans held valuable in the 1920s. The single-minded pursuit of material acquisition permeates the novel. For example, George Babbitt is awoken every morning by his alarm clock, which is "the best of nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm-clocks [...]. Babbitt was proud of being awakened by a such a rich device. Socially it was as creditable as buying expensive cord tires" (3). He is equally proud of his front yard, which is described as "the neat yard of a successful business man of Zenith, that is, it was perfection, and made him also perfect" (3). Looking out at his yard, though, reminds him of the fact that he needs to upgrade his

current garage: “No class to that tin shack. Have to build me a frame garage. But by golly it’s the only thing on the place that isn’t up-to-date!” (4).

In these brief passages, we see a manifestation of the words of Herbert Marcuse cited earlier: “The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed” (9). Sinclair Lewis, writing in the 1920s, saw this change happening in Americans, and George Babbitt represents that change. He does see himself in his possessions, whether they be things he’s purchased (his alarm clock), things he’s worked to create (his lawn), or things he needs to acquire (his new garage). Babbitt, then, is the perfect representation of an individual imprisoned within the capitalist Panopticon. Because he sees himself in those things that he owns—things for which he had to pay money that required him to work in order to earn—he is constantly comparing himself to those around him. He is, in the words of Fennis and Stroebe, weighing his own self-image against that of his reference group, specifically those peers with whom he interacts on a daily basis. As a result, he is enchained by the economic prison that continually produces new and better things that he will need to buy in order to maintain his own image relative to his reference group.

Ironically, Babbitt himself has made a career out of shackling other individuals within the same prison; he makes a living by “selling houses for more than people could afford to pay” (2). In addition to being trapped himself, he serves his own captor by trapping others in the same way that the Rudkus family was trapped in *The Jungle*. And while he might not be selling crumbling houses covered up with new paint, it is clear that he is not adverse to manipulating the power of advertising’s controlling discourse to make a sale. He tailors his own advertising messages to the specific property; he is demonstrating his understanding of the target market that he hopes to

convince: “Course I believe in using poetry and humor and all that junk when it turns the trick, but with a high-class restricted development like the Glen we better stick to the more dignified approach” (30). He emphasizes this point when he admits that “I don’t mean to say that every ad I write is literally true or that I always believe everything I say when I give some buyer a good strong selling-spiel” (36). He acknowledges here that he is willing to exaggerate or, even worse, to lie to his clients when necessary in order to sell a house.

One of the paradoxical elements of life in Zenith is that in this never-ending quest to improve one’s own self-image through the acquisition of material goods, the end result is a uniformity of style that in essence prevents any sort of individual superiority. Case in point, Babbitt, himself the epitome of Zenith’s citizenry, is firmly established as a member of the city’s middle classes. He is very proud of his home, despite the fact that it looks almost identical (both inside and out) as many of his neighbors’ homes. The same binary exists for many of the elements of his life—his family, his car, his very existence. He is at once enmeshed in the fabric of his social status, while at the same time cognizant of how very similar everyone else in that status is.

Once again, capitalism’s imprisoning power becomes apparent. Given that no matter how hard a consumer might work to acquire the newest and best commodities on the market, those commodities are also available to others who are likewise working to acquire them. As soon as one person purchases a particular item, someone else will purchase an identical one. As a result, the original purchaser’s item is no longer unique and no longer elicits the same level of mediated desire on the part of others. Thus the purchaser returns to the market to buy an even newer and better version of the same commodity so as to elevate his status within his reference group. The image of the Ouroboros—the snake eating its own tail—is an appropriate metaphor for this

scenario. Because capitalism requires an endless supply of capital infusion on the part of consumers, there is a tangible enticement for producers to continually create new commodities, even if that means simply updating or modifying existing commodities already available to consumers. By injecting new products—or simply new versions of old products—into the market and advertising them as such, capitalists provide consumers with a never-ending stream of newly-created desires that are directed by the discourse of advertising and mediated through their collective reference group. So long as the production cycle continues, the chains that keep consumers shackled within the Panopticon grow stronger. Colin Campbell suggests much the same thing when he references “consumers’ almost magical ability to produce new wants immediately after old ones are satisfied. No sooner is one want satisfied than another appears, and subsequently another, in an apparently endless series” (22).

A prime example of this as manifested in the novel is the electric cigar lighter Babbitt purchases, the lighter which “he had coveted for a week” (42). We are told that the advertisement for the lighter declares that it is “a dandy little refinement, lending the last touch of class to a gentleman’s auto” (42). Babbitt believes it will be “a priceless time saver” that will assuredly “in a month or two easily save ten minutes” because of time freed from lighting matches (42). The logic Babbitt employs to convince himself reflects the idea of the consumer fantasy described by Danziger. He is giving himself what appears to be a logical reason for purchasing it. As readers, however, we are aware that he is under the control of the discourse telling him that the lighter will elevate his status in the eyes of his peers. Even if saving ten minutes every two months qualified as legitimate logic justifying the purchase, the fact that Babbitt has given up smoking—something he remembers immediately after buying the lighter—illustrates that the discourse of advertising controlled his actions. He was intent on acquiring the “dandy little refinement” that

the ad told him accompanied purchasing the lighter as a way of creating a loftier image of himself.

This is perfect example of the advice provided by economist Edwin Seligman: “Progress may be the process of converting superfluities into conveniences, and conveniences into necessities. The diversification of consumption lies at the root of human development” (qtd. in Leach, *Desire* 295). Consumerism is predicated on a process that changes things that are seen as unnecessary into things that are necessary. This process is facilitated by advertisers’ efforts, in which they utilize the controlling discourse of their medium to convince consumers of the necessity of ownership in regard to specific commodities. In the case of Babbitt’s lighter, the superfluous morphed into a necessity, despite the fact that, were he to stick to his promise to quit smoking, the lighter would be relegated to the status of superfluous once again.

There is an interesting parallel between the advertisements and the society that are represented in *Babbitt*, one that extends beyond the idea that advertisements have a tendency to reflect the social times during which they appear. Ocepek et al. suggest that advertisements serve as something of a window into a particular society, and they suggest that “if one had selected any five-year period from the middle of the twentieth century, one would have found an equally compelling cultural story to tell from the advertisements. The ads allow one to understand what was new and compelling in that period of time” (np). The suggestion here is that we may use our interpretations of advertisements to interpret the culture at the time of their appearance. In much the same way that we may read a novel such as *Babbitt* as a reflection of the commercial culture of the 1920s—and Lewis’s rejection of that culture—we may see an advertisement like the one that influenced Babbitt’s decision to purchase the lighter as reflecting the same society. The suggestion, then, is that Babbitt the man and the world in which he lives are both hyper-

concerned with personal image and aspirational ideals, themes that will reappear throughout the novel.

All of this self-consciousness in regard to self-image highlights the personal insecurity that is so evident within this commercial culture. The focus on self-image that accompanied the rise in the American commercial culture also fostered a sense of insecurity among members of the middle- and middle-upper classes, as they aspired to be seen by others as members of a higher socio-economic status than they were. It was the same concept upon which advertisers relied in their aspirational messages. When marketers seek to sell a particular commodity, it is standard practice for them to position the product as representative of a higher social class than the group being targeted. If an advertiser is trying to reach a middle-class audience, he will opt to present the product being advertised in the context of an upper-middle or even upper-class setting.

Juliann Sivulka explains how this technique of aspirational marketing was incorporated by companies selling bathtubs as early as the late nineteenth century: “By urging ordinary American people to imitate the lifestyles of the elite by buying bathtubs and creating specialized places for bathing, sanitary fixture manufacturers further validated personal cleanliness for a broad range of people” (*Stronger Than Dirt* 69). The same philosophy that helped to sell bathtubs to people who’d never before owned them in the 1890s was used in the 1920s to sell electric lighters to supposed non-smokers. Specifically, the message of the discourse was that if you want to be perceived in a certain light, there are specific products you’ll need to acquire.

Babbitt’s own insecurities become obvious through the course of the novel, as he is constantly either comparing himself to others in terms of social prominence, salary, and/or possessions. Case in point, while Babbitt is a member of the Zenith Athletic Club, he is, at least

inwardly, envious of the more upper-class Union Club. Despite his and his fellow club members' description of the Union Club as "a rotten, snobbish, dull, expensive old hole," we are told that "no member of the Athletic has ever refused election to the Union" and that the majority of those elected in turn resign their membership in the former and go on to describe it as being "a pretty good hotel, if it were more exclusive" (43). He is hyper-aware of his own shortcomings in terms of his social status, and that awareness is manifested in many of his behaviors. These insecurities come to a head during what might best be termed his midlife crisis resulting in a relationship with Tanis Judique, but Babbitt quickly realizes that he is not a part of that social world, no matter how hard he might wish to be or try to imitate it. He is, in fact, socially ostracized in part by his involvement with "The Bunch," as they come to be known, which further alienates him from the higher social status he so desires.

Judith Williamson posits the idea that advertising "creates structures of meaning by "[translating] statements from the world of things [...] into a form that means something in terms of people" (299). Consumers go through the process of semiotic translation—semiosis—in order to ascertain the specific meanings of an advertisement as they relate to the individual's life. Advertising takes a generic concept and presents it to consumers in such a way that they are able to filter it through their own life experiences and, as a result, position the ad's message into the context of their own lives. This is a manifestation of Danziger's idea of the way in which a consumer crafts a fantasy about a purchase. Advertisers offer a fantastical vision of how the world could be for consumers if they purchase a particular commodity, and consumers decode the visions through semiosis as they craft their fantasies.

Williamson's ideas tie into the semiological approach to advertisement decoding discussed earlier. Because viewers have different semiological experiences with different

images, an individual viewer's collective life experiences influence how he or she interprets a specific advertisement. However, in the case of a 1920s-era advertisement that suggests a particular commodity has the power to elevate the consumer's position within the social hierarchy, that message speaks to the consumer on the general level of cultural consumption in addition to any individually-specific levels. Any message of image-improvement tapped into the commercial culture that was so prevalent in America during the 1920s because the semiotic message spoke directly to consumers' desires.

A brief semiotic analysis of the advertisement for the cigar lighter that Babbitt buys will serve to illustrate this point. In this particular advertisement, the marketing placard announces that the lighter is "a dandy little refinement, lending the last touch of class to a gentleman's auto" (42). This text, which we may presume is only a snippet of the entirety of the advertisement, taps into three of Babbitt's own insecurities. First of all, it uses the word "refinement," suggesting that the lighter will improve the consumer's very existence. His own status in the eyes of those around him is something that is incredibly important to George Babbitt, and by suggesting that all he has to do is purchase this lighter in order to elevate that status, the advertisement allows him to immediately start crafting that fantasy for himself.

Related to personal refinement is the fact that this lighter is apparently intended for gentleman, meaning males who have already achieved a degree of social refining. The suggestion, then, is that any consumer who purchases the lighter is, by definition, a gentleman. Again, this discourse aims directly at one of Babbitt's many personal insecurities, specifically his standing in society and the perception others have of his standing. By purchasing this lighter, in his mind, Babbitt will elevate his social status to that of gentleman (or, alternatively, cement in his own mind that position on the social hierarchy).

Finally, the ad mentions that it will add “the last touch of class” to his car. We are told, “To George F. Babbitt, as to most prosperous citizens of Zenith, his motor car was poetry and tragedy, love and heroism” (19). Babbitt’s represents a manifestation of his success, it the key to his membership in the club of the “most prosperous citizens of Zenith.” The advertisers understand the importance of a car to people like Babbitt, and by suggesting that they will be able to set themselves apart from every other car owner—in essence they will be able to be the most prosperous members of the club of the most prosperous citizens of Zenith—the advertisers are leveraging the insecurities of the populace at the time to their own benefit.

The cigar lighter ad in its entirety utilizes semiotics in order to craft a fantasy of how the consumer’s future will look if he purchases this lighter. And because of the nature of the commercial culture that was so prevalent at the time and the associated insecurities it fostered within citizens like George Babbitt, the discourse of the ad is able to bend consumers’ actions to the will of the advertiser and to further strengthen the hold of the capitalist Panopticon on those consumers.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of semiotics within the arena of advertising discourse, especially as it relates to the emergent commercial culture associated with the early 1920s in the United States. As we have seen, the controlling discourse contained within a given advertisement has the power to prey upon an individual consumer’s insecurities and to leverage that consumer’s hopes and social aspirations in order to create a fantasy that results in the consumer’s buying the particular commodity. For instance, while driving, Babbitt sees “Billboards with crimson goddesses nine feet tall advertising cinema films, pipe tobacco and talcum powder” (24). The models have nothing to with the actual commodity being advertised; they are simply part of the social aspiration/fantasy component of the ad itself. However, once

that sale has been completed, there is something of a role reversal for the consumer. After the purchase has been completed, the consumer essentially turns into the advertiser and begins to utilize the same semiological strategies as employed by skilled advertising copywriters and graphic designers.

As such, the consumer begins to construct in his own mind the desired reactions on the part of his reference group; the consumer uses the newly-acquired commodity as its own sign that is endowed with a variety of semiological signifieds. This idea ties back to the cultural meanings associated with second-order signification discussed earlier. These cultural meanings are the point at which the individual who is interpreting the sign relies on his or her own past experiences with a particular item. Post-acquisition, a consumer's reference group becomes the audience employing second-order signification. Looking at the example of George Babbitt, we have a consumer who places a very high value on his personal possessions and associations, and believes that they convey a particular meaning to those around him. He crafts fantasies in his own mind of how those around him—his reference group—will be interpreting the things he has purchased. Case in point, he defends himself against a suggestion that he was embarrassed by not dressing appropriately for a dinner party by telling Myra, "Everybody knows I can put on as expensive a Tux as anybody else" (8). One of his primary concerns is how he is perceived by others, how they are interpreting the signs with which he adorns and surrounds himself. Babbitt is unknowingly (and perhaps even unconsciously) incorporating semiotics in his approach to life, because he is hoping to send a particular message to those around him.

One of the ironies associated with this desire to stand out from the crowd is that, in doing so, a consumer like George Babbitt is only solidifying his conformity to the social status quo that permeates so much of his life. Take, for example, his house, located in the neighborhood of

Floral Heights, a stereotypical American suburb. As J. John Palen points out, the rise in popularity of the automobile in the 1920s fostered suburban growth by enabling Americans to go to areas that were previously inaccessible. The result, according to Palen, was the rise of the American suburb and a middle-class housing boom (43). Lewis interrogates the consequences of this boom—itsself a consequence of the rapidly growing middle-class—and the accompanying conformity that suburbs tend to foster. Ironically, despite the quasi-forced uniform nature of life in suburbia, George Babbitt still strives to become the financial envy of his neighbors.

A noteworthy characteristic of 1920s-era suburbs was a uniformity of the residents to whom the houses in a particular neighborhood were marketed. Palen writes of these new housing developments, “Suburbs, whether upper or middle class, also sought to exclude not only less expensive homes, but also residents who did not match the racial, ethnic, and even religious makeup of existing residents” (Palen 44). This segregation was accomplished by brokers who would only bring “desirable” potential owners to see homes for sale in these areas. Alternatively, many suburbs imposed restrictive covenants on properties, which prevented resale of a property to any member of a group that was deemed unapproved.

What this homogenization of the population points to is a sense of security through uniformity. The cities that were becoming so important to the American commercial culture at the time were still viewed with a degree of skepticism by Americans. Cities were seen as the embodiment of capitalism and progress. They were a progression that led away from the nation’s foundational agrarian ideals and towards mechanization and industrialization. In a sense, then, cities could be seen as the embodiment of the evils of World War I, the experience of which had given many Americans a first-hand understanding of what unchecked progress—especially in

terms of mechanization—looked like: It looked a lot like a machine gun killing indiscriminately.

As Christopher Lasch explains,

At first the war in Europe seemed at one stroke to refute all the assumptions on which the social planners had built their elaborate design for orderly progress. Its unexpected scope, its unprecedented devastation, the rapidity with which it resolved itself into a deadlock which it seemed madness to pursue but to the terrible logic of which all the parties to the struggle seemed as in a nightmare bound—these things appeared to put an end, once and for all, to the hope that human societies could order their own advance (*New Radicalism* 181).

Suburbs and planned communities like the one in which Babbitt lives helped to alleviate the fears of many Americans in regard to the technological advancements like the machine gun. For many, technology was something to fear, a fear that was fostered by the experiences and stories of World War I's infamous trenches. By surrounding themselves with people who looked and acted just like them—and who owned commodities that those around them also owned—people were able to achieve some degree of self-assurance. Lasch points out that changes wrought by technological advancements were sources of anxiety for middle-class Americans: “The middle class feared not violence so much as a threat to the *status quo* (*New Radicalism* 169, italics in original). One thing these Americans could control was where they lived and, by association, who lived near them. By ensuring a homogenous population that looked and acted just like them, their anxieties were alleviated, at least to a degree.

The homogeneity of the Floral Heights neighborhood cannot be denied. For example, we are told, in regard to the Babbitts' bedroom, “Every second house in Floral Heights had a bedroom precisely like this” (12). Additionally, “Two out of every three houses in Floral Heights had before the fireplace a davenport, a mahogany table real or imitation, and a piano-lamp or a reading lamp with a shade of yellow or rose silk” (70). All of these rooms and accessories—and the ubiquity of them within the neighborhood—suggests that Floral Heights is, in fact, a suburb

in miniature. It has all of the elements of a more typical suburb, and represents the conformity that the consumer culture of the 1920s fostered. All of the requisite accoutrements that go into making a Floral Heights home a standard Floral Heights home are dictated by the discourse and purchased by the dutiful docile body within the capitalist system.

Even though he might like to think of himself as being outside of the capitalist prison—he seems to be living a comfortable life and enjoying all that comes with that lifestyle—Babbitt is fully imprisoned by both the culture and the discourse. Despite his apparent self-assurance in his own financial situation, Babbitt’s constant attention to the price of commodities and how much his family spends on those commodities suggests that he is experiencing a degree of financial insecurity. From starting his car—in regard to gasoline, he would “orally calculate how much each drop had cost him” (19)—to musing on household expenses—“Way expenses are—Family wasting gasoline, and always dressed liked millionaires, and sending that eighty a month to Mother” (42)—it is clear that Babbitt is concerned about money, suggesting his socio-economic status does not exclude him from the panoptic power of the economic system. This constant worrying about money has the effecting of making him feel “at once triumphantly wealthy and perilously poor” (42). He is also aware of the power of the advertising discourse that controls the populace, as he tells Ted, “But same time, Ted, you know how advertisers, I means [sic.] some advertisers, exaggerate” (65). However, as we have seen, Babbitt’s own power to resist the controlling discourse contained within those advertisements is limited. In both areas of the system, Babbitt is under the complete control of capitalism’s power. He is a prisoner to the commercial culture and a slave to the discourse.

In the overall analysis of his character, Babbitt’s biggest obstacle to elevating his own status is himself. Metaphorically, we may read this hurdle as a manifestation of capitalism’s

panoptic power. He is so much an integral part of the machine – again, he is one of the cogs that makes the system function the way it does – that he is unable to break free from it in order to affect real and lasting change. Babbitt believes, on some level, that thinking about changing his behaviors – whether it be quitting smoking or saving the poor or any other cause to which he pretends to dedicate himself – is the key to doing so. However, what he proves is the opposite. He demonstrates the futility of thinking about how to change the system, simply because nothing changes. Or, perhaps more appropriately, nothing *can* be changed. Babbitt continues to do what is expected of him as a good and upstanding citizen of Zenith, because to do otherwise would be to risk his own social status. This is yet another example of the conformity-inducing power of the capitalist Panopticon. Because of the importance of one's own appearance in the midst of such an over-arching commercial culture, Babbitt has a palpable fear of not conforming to the accepted norms of behavior. Whether it's his house, his clothes, or even the people with whom he socializes, the social reference groups that surround him serve as constant reminders that he needs to conform to the social standard.

In his role of conformist, Babbitt is a joiner, a follower. He is a static character who, despite his best efforts to the contrary, is never able to move out of his imprisoned state. Just as he is addicted to smoking cigars, so, too, is he addicted to preserving the status quo enforced by capitalism. As we are told at one point in the novel, "Men who had made five thousand, year before last, and ten thousand last year, were urging on nerve-yelping bodies and parched brains so that they might make twenty thousand this year" (117). This constant desire for more money (with which to buy more material possessions) is the message of the social discourse that has disciplined the body that is the residents of Zenith. All of these men have been disciplined to believe that monetary success and conspicuous consumption are the end-game goals of their very

existences, and as such, they are constantly working to earn ever more money so as to acquire an increasing number of possessions with which to demonstrate to their respective peer groups how successful they are. And this repeats itself endlessly, as the influx of discourse is constant and the prison of capitalism is inescapable.

Babbitt's moral malleability is also a direct result of the insecurities fostered by commercial culture. Because of the constant comparison to others that that environment fosters, Babbitt often criticizes others for things that he himself also does as a way of trying to elevate his own image. Babbitt's reaction to the strike that begins in September points to how his thinking tends towards a false pretense of virtuous behavior. He initially aligns himself with those who are opposed to the strike, but a crack in his oppositional façade appears when he reads, ironically, a broadside put out by the telephone operators explaining that operators were unable to buy enough to eat on their former wages. The irony here is that the operators are using the same discursive techniques—advertisements—that fuel the commercial culture in which they live. The power of the discourse is evident in the fact that, despite publicizing an agenda with which Babbitt claims to vehemently disagree, his own belief system is challenged by what he is reading.

Despite the picture Babbitt would paint of Zenith's economic situation, it is clear to the reader that his views are skewed by his own financial successes. Before the strike when we hear of telephone operators not making enough money to eat sufficiently, we are told of a suicide resulting from a lack of employment opportunities: "In the slum beyond the railroad tracks, a young man who for six months had sought work turned on the gas and killed himself and his wife" (78). From Babbitt's insulated sanctuary, this event doesn't register with him. It happened to a nameless family in a nameless neighborhood, one that is simply known as "the slum beyond

the railroad tracks.” Despite the anonymity of those affected by this event, it is indicative of the immense power inherent in the capitalist system. More than simply determining one’s position within the socio-economic hierarchy of Zenith, capitalism has, in this instance, assumed the God-like role of deciding the question of life and death. Because the unnamed man found himself unable to provide for himself and his wife, he turned to suicide, as death is the only true way to escape capitalism’s panoptic power. The strike itself is emblematic of how much power capitalism wields, as it has driven the collective body of workers to strike for better wages and working conditions.

Babbitt’s disdain for the strikers is apparent, as we are told, “He hated them, because they were poor, because they made him feel insecure” (240). The reason these men make Babbitt feel insecure is manifested in his condemnation of them: “Damn loafers! Wouldn’t be common workmen if they had any pep” (240-241). Babbitt’s insecurity is rooted in the fact that he knows that the fact that these are “common workmen” has nothing to do with any supposed lack of “pep.” In fact, he says soon after that the strikers “[l]ook just about like anybody else to me” (241). These sentiments boil over in a conversation with his wife when he admits, “They don’t understand the complications of merchandizing and profit, the way we business men do, but sometimes I think they’re about like the rest of us, and no more hogs for wages than we are for profits” (243). Babbitt is expressing views that his wife terms those of “a regular socialist” (243), but those views point to the fact that both the proletariat and bourgeoisie are equally susceptible to capitalism’s chains. In both instances, the groups are working for the same goal, the acquisition of money; the only difference between the two groups is the word used to describe their aims.

A further instance of Babbitt's flexible moral code is manifested in the manner of his financial advancement – advancement beyond his normal income – which occurs as a result of immoral and illegal activities. This is another reason why the strikers vest him with a sense of insecurity. He faults them for lacking pep, but all the while he is acquiring money through corruption and unscrupulous employment practices. He acknowledges to his wife that he believes it is acceptable to “con your office help” by paying them lower wages (55), which is itself one of the reasons for the strike to which he is initially so opposed. Additionally, we are told that one of Babbitt's business interests involves “the secret buying of real-estate options in Linton for certain street-traction officials, before the public announcement that the Linton Avenue Car Line would be extended” (79). This is only one of several similar deals in which he is involved, and only one of several that serve to enrich Babbitt through illegal means. Because of the presentation of the fictional Zenith (by its name alone, if nothing else) as the apex to which similar towns in America aspire, the suggestion is that the only way for a man not born into a family fortune to climb the financial ladder is through illegal means. The alternative – simply working for a standard salary and living a standard life – does not allow for true ascension, because the system is structured such that people are saddled with never-ending expenses that prevent them from advancing their own status by legal means. Herein we see a glaring example of Babbitt's hypocrisy, and the way in which Michael Ausperger suggests that “Lewis mocks the self-righteousness that keeps a character from recognizing his or her contradictions by juxtaposing clearly conflicting sentiments” (87).

Throughout the novel, it is clear to the reader that Lewis is advocating for a change in American culture. However, it is equally clear to the reader that change is an impossible dream, a dream destroyed by the shocking realities of World War I. The idea that things will not—and

cannot—change in this system is punctuated by the fact that Babbitt, in his role of synecdochic representation of the American population, is incapable of change himself. Consider the example of his fishing trip to Maine, which he ostensibly took as a way to recover from the stresses of his daily life: “But can’t you understand I’m shot to pieces? I’m all in! I got to take care of myself! I tell you, I got to—I’m sick of everything and everybody” (99). His condition is understandable; he simply wants to get away from the office for a short time to relax. It is a Thoreau-esque escape back to nature. However, given the nature of the culture at the time, this pastoral excursion requires that Babbitt outfit himself with a veritable catalog of new equipment: “He gloated on fly-rods and gorgeous rubber hip-boots, on tents with celluloid windows and folding chairs and ice-boxes. He simple-heartedly wanted to buy all of them” (104). From this brief description, the reader might believe that Babbitt is some sort of expert fly-fisherman, an image that is destroyed a few sentences later when we are told that Babbitt “knew very little about flies either wet or dry” (104). He is a caricature of the figure of the city-dweller who can buy all of the equipment—the things the discourse tells him he needs in order to be that fisherman he thinks he is—but who has no actual understanding of how to use that equipment.

By the end of the trip, there is a glimmer of hope that Babbitt has changed his ways and jettisoned the need for his materialist outlook:

All the way home from Maine, Babbitt was certain that he was a changed man. He was converted to serenity. He was going to cease worrying about business. He was going to have more ‘interests’—theaters, public affairs, reading. And suddenly, as he finished an especially heavy cigar, he was going to stop smoking (116).

From this passage, it sounds as if the goal of the trip—to relax and reassess his priorities—was achieved. He is committing himself to things of a less material nature. However, as we know Babbitt and his history of such promises, it comes as no surprise a few moments later when we

are told that he buys a cigar, a habit he'd given up quite some time prior: "At the next stop he went out and bought a cigar. Since it was to be his last before he reached Zenith, he finished it down to an inch stub. Four days later he again remembered that he had stopped smoking, but he was too busy catching up with his office-work to keep it remembered" (116). Gone is the hope for a changed Babbitt and, as a result, so too is any hope for a change in the materialistic outlook present at the time.

In the end, Babbitt returns to his old ways, indicative of the futility of trying to change the culture: "He felt a compulsion to go back to all the standards he had so vaguely yet so desperately been fleeing" (264). The power of the commercial culture and the discourse that controls the population is so strong that it literally compels consumers to bend to its will. There is, for Babbitt, a sense of security in the status quo. He admits that attempts to change his lifestyle and outlook have resulted in more stress in his life, and he reaches a breaking point: "He could not stand the strain. Before long he admitted that he would like to flee back to the security of conformity" (287). That conformity is the by-product of the prevailing culture of consumption, the end goal of the discourse that dictates the actions of the populace. Conformity is the manifestation of the panoptic power of capitalism.

The end of the novel suggests that the never-ending capitalist cycle of work and acquisition will continue for another generation. Ted, George Babbitt's son, has announced that he is dropping out of college to pursue a career as a factory worker. "There's a fellow that would give me twenty dollars a week in a factory right now," he assures his father (304). He is already showing the initial signs of being imprisoned by capitalism, as he plans to marry Eunice Littlefield, against her parents' wishes. Capitalism requires workers to produce and consumers to consume, and it is clear that Ted (like his father) will serve both functions throughout his life.

The further suggestion is that his own children will learn the same lessons from him, just as Ted learned them from his own father. The cycle will continue indefinitely, and the Panopticon that is capitalism will continue to imprison those living under the system.

As we have seen in the case of *George Babbitt*, that prison is one created by those who find themselves confined within it. As Christopher Wilson writes, “In the vacuum of enfeebled social will, Lewis crafted an idiom of entrapment: his businessman became a mildly appealing yet pathetic figure, both booster and disbeliever, spasmodically rebelling against a culture of his own making” (“Sinclair Lewis” 96). Americans, in essence, created their own prison by embracing the commercial culture that engulfed society in the early 1920s. Their collective dedication to pursuing the manifestations of success as dictated by that culture kept them imprisoned, as the discourse of advertising continually drove them to pursue more and more outward manifestations of their financial status. The result, as Lewis so directly demonstrated, is that consumers perpetuate their own imprisonment by passing on the same materialistic life lessons to their children, thus continuing the cycle.

A Lost Lady

Originally proposed by French author Édouard de Laboulaye, the Statue of Liberty was conceived of as a “monument to liberty and the independence of the United States [...] built as a collaborative effort by the two peoples [that] would celebrate their friendship and express the aspirations and ideals they shared (Khan 4). The statue itself was a gift to the United States from the people of France, but it was expected that the recipients would be gracious enough to offer financial support to assist in the costs associated with the construction of the monument. However, the United States was in the midst of an economic depression in 1873 and, as Yasmin

Khan writes, “The statue was not what ‘public-spirited capitalists’ considered a ‘safe aesthetic investment,’ a newspaper article explained. People were uncertain how a colossal female figure, prominently exhibited in the harbor, would look, and how it would reflect on its sponsors” (161).

However, by 1885, the statute itself was fully funded. But the pedestal upon which she would stand was still lacking the requisite money for completion. Without that pedestal, there would be no statue in New York Harbor. In March of that year, there was no more money, and on March 13, 1885, the America Committee, the group charged with the oversight of the statue’s construction in New York, announced that “work upon the pedestal at Bedloe’s Island is suspended for lack of funds to continue it” (qtd. in Khan 170).

This seeming indifference on the part of American towards the French was a rallying point for newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer:

When news of the crisis facing the American Committee surfaced in 1885, Pulitzer was alarmed by the situation and motivated by the cause. He zealously addressed his readers and predicted their success. “We must raise the money!” Pulitzer proclaimed in the *World*. “The \$250,000 that the making of the statue cost was paid in by the masses of the French people—by the working men, the tradesmen, the shopgirls, the artisans—by all.” This is the people’s statue, he reiterated. “It is . . . a gift of the whole people of France to the whole people of America” (Khan 172).

As a way of trying to raise the final \$100,000, Pulitzer offered to print the names of everyone who donated any amount of money towards the statue’s completion.

It was an act reminiscent of P. T. Barnum’s promotional efforts, and a peer of Pulitzer’s said of him, “There is no other stage-manager like him” (qtd. in Khan 172) The end result of Pulitzer’s efforts was that after five months of fundraising, more than 120,000 people had donated money. The statue had the necessary funds for completion, but that was not the only reward that resulted from Pulitzer’s plea. The *New York World*, which Pulitzer had acquired in 1883 and which carried his fundraising campaigns and in which were printed the names of those

who had given money, had been losing upwards of \$50,000 annually amidst declining circulation. With his successful efforts to ensure the completion of the Statue of Liberty, though, “Pulitzer was rewarded for his efforts with a dramatic rise in the circulation of his paper and the prestige of conducting a spectacularly successful campaign” (Khan 172).

Lady Liberty had been a fixture in New York Harbor for more than three decades when, in October of 1923, Willa Cather published *A Lost Lady*, the story of Marianne Forrester and her husband Captain Daniel Forrester as they watch the world around them succumb to the encroachment of the rapidly-advancing commercial culture that characterized the decade. In those areas of the United States that were still somewhat rural in the 1920s—towns on the edge of the westward expansion of the commercial and industrial economy that was increasingly coming to define American culture—there was a clash of ideals. Many residents of those western towns resisted the changes that the new culture brought with it; younger residents, however, tended to support the changes, as they recognized that it was the inevitable future to which the country was headed.

In Cather’s novel, we can see the Panopticon of capitalism manifested as a by-product of the corporatization of American businesses that accompanied the new commercial culture and the national economy that had replaced the more localized economies typical of previous decades. The conflict that ensues between those who would cling to the past and those who embrace the future is one that is reminiscent of the American Revolution, which was waged between an agrarian population and a more commercialized one. In the end, unlike in the American Revolution, the simpler way of life is usurped by the commercial culture, and Mrs. Forrester, a living manifestation of American liberty, marries an English nobleman, suggesting that if we allow the corporatization of the American economy to continue, we will return to the

same sort of imprisoned life that so many fought to end in the American Revolution. Liberty itself is the “lost lady” of the novel’s title. The deeper into the corporatized national economy that the country descends—a process that is facilitated by the material culture fostered by the advertising discourse permeating society—the tighter the bonds of the capitalist Panopticon become.

Willa Cather’s *A Lost Lady*, published in 1923, is set in the town of Sweet Water, situated along the Burlington Railroad somewhere between Omaha and Denver; the exact location is never specified in the novel, but given Sweet Water’s proximity to Omaha paired with Cather’s own time spent living in Nebraska (a state in which she set many of her novels), the town is most likely located in Nebraska. The setting is important to the novel’s overall message, because the town itself is a manifestation of the collision of past and present that is at the heart of that message. In Norris’s *The Octopus*, published at the beginning of the twentieth century, we saw how the railroad served as the harbinger of the new materialism that drives capitalism. By the time *A Lost Lady* begins, however, we are “thirty or forty years” into the future, looking back at a time when the men “who had to do with the railroad itself, or with one of the ‘land companies’ which were its by-products” (3) occupied the position of social aristocracy in a small town such as Sweet Water. When we encounter Sweet Water for the first time, however, it is described as “one of those grey towns along the Burlington railroad, which are so much greyer today than they were then” (3).

The clash of old and new cultures, especially in terms of economic changes happening across the nation, are the subject of Cather’s novel. Honor Wallace offers a compelling argument that Cather was offering up criticisms of the commercial culture of the 1920s through her depiction of both consumption and technology, specifically in her incorporation of the telephone,

which was a relatively new technology at the time of Cather's writing. James Bash is much more direct with his interpretation of Cather, of whom he says that she "voiced strong criticism of the materialistic aspects of society" throughout her life (157). Bash argues that much of Cather's fiction –especially *A Lost Lady* – concerns itself with the idea that it is pioneers who essentially pave the way for those who follow, and it those followers who eventually profit off the pioneer's efforts. These critical interpretations fall short of fully explaining the controlling power inherent in the materialism that permeated society; critics have yet to link the Foucauldian theories of the Panopticon to the encroaching capitalist society presented in Cather's work.

The first major character to make an appearance in the novel is Captain Forrester, a wealthy man who made his fortune working for the railroad. At the beginning of the story, however, his working days are behind him due to his having fallen from a horse, so he instead lives on a large parcel of land. He is described as being "well off for those times," and it is said that he "could afford to humour his fancies" (5). He enjoys the reaction of visitors to his ranch as they "admire his fine stock, grazing in the meadows on either side of his lane" (5). But his greatest pride is in the reaction other men have to his wife, Marian. She is described as being "attractive in dishabille, and she knew it" (6), and men fawn over her. Marian Forrester is on the same level of importance as the Captain's house, his land, and his cattle. She is another possession, albeit one that he holds in the highest of esteems. And Forrester is proud to the point of being haughty in regard to his ownership of all of these things. He is an upper-class aristocrat in this small town, and he relishes his position at the top of that social ladder.

Marian, as we soon learn, has been the impossible ideal of which Niel Herbert, the novel's protagonist, has been dreaming since he first encountered her as a young boy. The meeting occurs following Niel's falling out of a tree and being taken to the Forrester house to be

looked at by an adult. Drifting in and out of consciousness, Niel thinks to himself, “What soft fingers Mrs. Forrester had, and what a lovely lady she was” (20). The opulence and luxury of the Forrester home’s interior is a stark contrast to that of his own house, which we are told “was not a pleasant place to go to” (21). Niel’s home is “a frail egg-shell house, set off on the edge of the prairie where people of no consequence lived” (21). These are the two sides of the capitalist system—the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, in Marxist language—and in the case of Niel, he aspires to move from the latter to the former. And for him, Marian Forrester becomes the human manifestation of that lifestyle that he wants to lead; she is perfection in his eyes, “an excitement that came and went with summer” during his youth (23). In these formative years, Niel begins to associate Marian with his vision of an ideal lifestyle. She is, I would suggest, emblematic of that ideal in the same way that the Statue of Liberty represents the American ideal.

At the same time that Marian is cementing her status in Niel’s mind as the pinnacle of perfection, the town of Sweet Water is gradually losing its identity: “All this while the town of Sweet Water was changing. Its future no longer looked bright. Successive crop failures had broken the spirit of the farmers. George Adams and his family had gone back to Massachusetts, disillusioned about the West. One by one the other gentlemen ranchers followed their example” (24). For so many Americans at the time, “the West” had represented the edge of expansion, the frontier where anything was possible. It was, for Captain Forrester, the land in which he made his fortune before it had been fully settled. It was the last bastion of economic self-sufficiency in the United States, a land untouched by the materialist nature of commercial culture and capitalist exploitation. However, by this point in history, the frontier had been officially closed for some time, as American exploration had reached the Pacific Ocean, the westernmost boundary of the country. There is no more frontier, a loss that serves as the source of the conflict between the old

and the new that pervades the novel. Areas that have been, up to this point, primarily agricultural and rural are seeing a mass exodus on the part of those Americans who had originally settled the land.

These settlers are the last remaining representatives of what was widely known as the Jeffersonian ideal. William Dietrich explains the source of Jefferson's idealization of the American farmer: "Through one quality above all others, the American farmer appealed to Jefferson as the model democratic citizen: his independence" (154). Despite his desires to maintain that economic independence that he saw as characteristic of the American farmer, Jefferson was unable to stem the flow of industrial advancement. Regardless of the inherent truths of his beliefs, the economic realities of the country overpowered them: "Much of what Jefferson idealized about the moral primacy of the yeoman farmer was based on fact, but ominous storm clouds were on the horizon in the form of the dawning industrial age" (Dietrich 154). As we have seen in earlier examples from both the history and the literature of the time, this advancement of industrial capitalism began in the eastern United States and gradually spread west. As we will see in a future example, John Steinbeck highlights the ultimate destruction of the Jeffersonian ideal of the American farmer in *The Grapes of Wrath* by highlighting the ways in which even that industry, once thought to be the bastion of independence, was corporatized and corrupted. In the case of *A Lost Lady*, we are witness to the moment when the system is changing.

As part of that change in the economic system, small towns like Sweet Water begin to essentially disappear from the map, as they simply lose relevance to the national economy. Whereas a small farming town was once a self-contained unit that supported itself, with the rise in urban populations at the time and the growth of industrial centers in major cities, small towns

were no longer worthy of attention, in an economic sense. And that is exactly what happens to Sweet Water: “The Burlington was ‘drawing in its horns,’ as people said, and the railroad officials were not stopping off at Sweet Water so often,—were more inclined to hurry past a town where they had sunk money that would never come back” (24).

Despite the seeming inevitable nature of that change, Niel still holds fast to the ideal that he sees in Marian Forrester, the torch-bearing Lady Liberty of this small town. However, even her beauty and social position cannot save her from the same fate as that of others in the small town. She admits to Niel that she and her husband are “extraordinarily poor just now” (29), a situation that will not allow for their going away for the winter.

Regardless of how poor the couple might be, however, she still costumes herself in her jewelry. Seeing his wife wearing expensive accessories is a source of pride to Captain Forrester, who, even without being able to work due to his health, continues to be shackled by capitalism’s materialist qualities: “It gratified him to have his wife wear jewels; it meant something to him” (31). That unnamed “something” is the gratification it gives to his pride and his ego. It is a manifestation of what Thorstein Veblen meant when he wrote, “Tangible evidences of prowess—trophies—find a place in men's habits of thought as an essential feature of the paraphernalia of life” (12). Jewelry is a form of trophy for Captain Forrester, tangible proof of his financial success. Building on this, Cather tells us about a dinner party the Forresters host, again highlighting the fact that Captain Forrester views his wife’s appearance as a valuable reflection of himself and his success: “Her husband had archaic ideas about jewels; a man bought them for his wife in acknowledgement of things he could not gracefully utter. They must be costly; they must show that he was able to buy them, and that she was worthy to wear them” (41-

42). Clearly, though, that financial success—and the trophies it brings—is losing its mystique, according to the narrator.

Ironically, that waning power is the result of a sequence of events that Forrester himself helped to put in motion. As one of the men who had worked to build the railroad, Forrester helped bring about the rise of the corporatization of the American economic base that is serving as the death knell to his own fortunes. He says to his dinner guests, “All our great West has been developed from such dreams; the homesteader’s and the prospector’s and the contractor’s. We dreamed the railroads across the mountains, just as I dreamed my place on the Sweet Water. All these things will be everyday facts to the coming generation” (44-45). As he finishes this declaration, we are told that the tone of his voice changes: “Something forbidding had come into his voice, the lonely, defiant note that is so often heard in the voices of old Indians” (45). The narrator here points to the fact that the same thing that happened to the Native Americans—who resided in North America long before white men arrived but who were subsequently driven off their lands—is now happening to Captain Forrester. Those who champion economic advancement are driving him out of what he sees as his rightful place atop the Sweet Water socio-economic ladder. And that toppling is the next step in the economic advancement spawned by the railroad that he helped to build, labor that vaulted him to his lofty social position in the first place.

Soon after the dinner party at which this discussion took place, the reader comes to learn that Marian Forrester is not the emblem of purity and moral uprightness that Niel believes her to be, as she is engaged in an extramarital affair with local bachelor and womanizer Frank Ellinger. Interestingly, we get this revelation during a scene in which Adolph Blum, one of the sons of poor German immigrants. We are told that the Blum brothers view Marian as “one of the rich

and great of the world. They realized, more than their companions, that such a fortunate and privileged class was an axiomatic fact in the social order” (12-13). The brothers are keenly aware of the social hierarchy of Sweet Water, and equally aware of their family’s position at the bottom of that hierarchy.

Due to his low social rank, Adolph will not reveal the secret he unintentionally learns in regard to Marian. His opinion on the matter is that her rank in society imbues her with an inalienable right to engage in behaviors that he might not otherwise understand. Additionally, we are told that she has never treated Adolph as a lesser being due to his social caste, even though it seems that everyone else in the novel—including his own friends—ridicule him for his low standing. Cather writes of Adolph,

His mind was feudal; the rich and fortunate were also the privileged. These warm-blooded, quick-breathing people took chances,—followed impulses only dimly understandable to a boy who was wet and weather-chapped all the year; who waded in the mud fishing for cat, or lay in the marsh waiting for wild duck. Mrs. Forrester had never been too haughty to smile at him when he came to the back door with his fish. She never haggled about the price. She treated him like a human being. His little chats with her, her nod and smile when she passed him on the street, were among the pleasantest things he had to remember. She bought game of him in the closed season, and didn’t give him away (56).

Her affair, for the time being, is still secret, though the longer it takes for it to become public knowledge, the higher in Niel’s esteem Marian’s image climbs, and the further that image will fall once the news does come out. Before he learns of the affair, Niel remarks to himself that it is, in fact, Marian’s loyalty to her husband that is one of her most defining qualities that he admires most. The fact that she has stood by his side despite his health concerns and diminishing fortune is, to Niel’s mind, admirable: “Given her other charming attributes, her comprehension of a man like the railroad-builder, her loyalty to him, stamped her more than anything else. That, he felt, was quality; something that could never become worn or shabby; steel of Damascus” (65).

We learn that much of Niel's view of the world and the people around him comes from books that his uncle Judge Pomeroy brought with him from Virginia. For Judge Pomeroy, the books aren't necessarily things to be used, but rather accessories to be admired. They are, recalling Veblen's words, "Tangible evidences of prowess." As Cather tells us, "He had brought them West with him, not because he read them a great deal, but because, in his day, a gentleman had such books in his library, just as he had claret in his cellar" (66). These books become Niel's escape, as he reads voraciously. He avoids books on philosophy, favoring instead Byron's poetry and Ovid's collected works.⁶ His extensive reading "gave him a long perspective, influenced his conception of the people about him, made him know just what he wished his own relations with these people to be" (67). Niel was basing his expectations of human behavior in reality on the words of writers who were creating works of fiction. He will soon learn that humans in the world rarely, if ever, act exactly like they do in the works of the great authors that he so enjoys reading.

The event that precipitates Niel's discovery of Marian's affair is, appropriately for my argument, the failure of a savings bank in Denver. Captain Forrester is a principal in the bank, and he leaves Sweet Water to go and oversee the dismantling of the bank with Judge Pomeroy. As a result of the bank's failure, the Captain is, according to Judge Pomeroy, "bound to lose a good deal of money" (68). This news causes Niel to feel sympathy for Marian, who he believes "was one of the people who ought to always have money; any retrenchment of their generous way of living would be a hardship for her,—would be unfitting" (68). It is in this frame of mind that he decides to pay a visit to Mrs. Forrester while her husband is away. He stops on the way to pick some wild roses for her but, upon arriving at the Forrester home, he hears the voice of Frank

⁶ He is advised by his uncle to avoid Byron's *Don Juan*, presumably due to that epic's reversal of the traditional story of Don Juan by making the hero one who easily falls victim to the charms of various women.

Ellinger inside and knows that Marian is having an affair with him. The realization is crushing to Niel: “Before the dew dried, the morning had been wrecked for him; and all subsequent mornings, he told himself. This day saw the end of that admiration and loyalty that had been like a bloom on his existence. He could never recapture it” (72). He throws the flowers into the mud, uttering the final line of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 94: “Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds” (72). The choice of sonnets is fitting, given that the theme of Sonnet 94 is one of a lover putting forward a false façade to the public. There is also an undercurrent of looming destruction of happiness within the poem. The aura of perfection that surrounded Marian has been stripped away, and Niel is now left with the knowledge that she is a fallible human being who has human weaknesses and human faults.

The discovery that Marian is engaging in an affair with Frank Ellinger is more than just a realization that she has human faults. Marian had come to represent a near-impossible level of perfection in Niel’s eyes, and her fall from grace causes him more than just a loss of respect. Cather writes of Niel’s reaction to the revelation, “It was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal” (72). She did more than merely outrage an aesthetic ideal. The aesthetic ideal itself has been irrevocably destroyed, and there is no way to rebuild it. That destruction mirrors the destruction of the old way of life—the Jeffersonian ideal—that is being wrought by the encroachment of the new industrial capitalism into towns like Sweet Water, towns that had previously been immune from the effects of that system. But as we will see, once that system gets a foothold in an area, there is no way to return to the ideal that once was.

Niel then goes to Boston to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he plans to study architecture. Part Two of the novel opens with his return to Sweet Water, two years later. On his return trip, he encounters his childhood acquaintance Ivy Peters, and at that

moment the reader realizes how dramatically both men have changed in the time that has passed. Niel is wearing “a grey flannel suit, with a silk shirt of one shade of blue and a necktie of another” (87). The narrator describes him as an “urban figure,” (87), suggesting that his time in the city has altered Niel’s appearance to one associated with life in that setting. This is indicative of the effect that the city has on consumers, especially those consumers who are thrust into the materialism and commercialization of the urban environment from the much more simple environment of a small town.

More importantly, however, this encounter affords Ivy the opportunity to explain to Niel about how much things have changed in the town of Sweet Water, especially in the case of the Forresters and their land. He tells Niel, “I farm a little on the side. I rent that meadow-land on the Forrester place. I’ve drained the old marsh and put it into wheat. My brother John does the work, and I boss the job. It’s quite profitable. I pay them a good rent, and they need it” (88). Ivy is here serving as the manifestation of the new farmer, who is unlike Jefferson’s ideal but who is much more representative of the changing economic system. Ivy is not, as was the ideal Jeffersonian farmer, a landowner. Rather, he leases his farm land from an owner, an owner who is in such financial straits that he is said to need the money in order to survive. The whole situation is indicative of the fact that the economic foundation of Sweet Water has changed in Niel’s absence, and the suggestion is that they will continue to evolve as modern capitalism begins to take hold in the town. When Ivy leaves him to go to the smoking car, Niel muses to himself about these changes:

The Old West had been settled by dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence; a courteous brotherhood, strong in attack but weak in defence, who could conquer but would not hold. Now all the vast territory they had won was to be at the mercy of men like Ivy Peters, who had never dared anything, never risked anything. They would drink up the mirage, dispel the morning freshness, root out the great brooding spirit of freedom, the

generous, easy life of the great land-holders. The space, the colour, the princely carelessness of the pioneer they would destroy and cut up into profitable bits, as the match factory splinters the primeval forest. All the way from the Missouri to the mountains this generation of shrewd young men, trained to petty economies by hard times, would do exactly what Ivy Peters had done when he drained the Forrester marsh (89-90).

Whatever idealized image of his home town that Niel was expecting to find upon his return clearly no longer exists. It has disappeared as quickly and completely as the ideal image he had of Marian Forrester. It has been replaced by the new generation of capitalists, men who have no respect for the tradition or history of the place. Men whose only goal is to make as much profit for themselves as they possibly can, without any regard for who may be hurt in the process. They are confined within the capitalist prison, and they are trapping others as they work to support and perpetuate the economic system that keeps them imprisoned.

Captain Forrester, the representative of the past system that is rapidly being replaced by those like Ivy Peters, is described as having “grown heavier and weaker,” and he looks as if his “features were running into each other, as when a wax face melts in the heat” (91). He and the way of life he represents are both dying. As a way of illustrating this exact point, Captain Forrester fixates on a sun dial in his yard, an activity that Marian cannot understand. She asks rhetorically, “How can anybody like to see time visibly devoured? We are used to seeing clocks go round, but why does he want to see that shadow creep on that stone?” (94). Her attitude towards her husband—once one bordering on worship of him—has become much more embittered with the passage of time.

That bitterness of attitude is reflected in Marian’s realization about the true nature of capitalism as a prison, which she expresses when Niel mentions that his uncle has told him that she doesn’t come to visit as often as she used to. She begins by lamenting the fact that she has almost no help in keeping up the house, and then mentions the furniture: “We went all the way to

Chicago, Niel, to buy that walnut furniture, couldn't find anything at home big and heavy enough. If I'd known one day that I'd have to push it about, I would have been more easily satisfied" (95-96). The furnishings that went into making the Forrester home's interior so beautiful—yet another link in the chain of the couple's outward manifestations of success, their trophies—have now become a burden in what may be read as yet another manifestation of capitalism's power. Even though these pieces of furniture aren't costing the Forresters anything in terms of money, their very existence in the house is working in the same way. The furniture represents the material culture that was acquired as a result of the discourse telling them that they needed this specific furniture in order to be happy. But now that there is nobody left to impress with it, that same furniture is a burden to Marian, who admits she would have been "more easily satisfied" had she known what a burden the furniture would become.

Niel then inquires as to whether she misses the marsh that has since been drained to make way for Ivy Peters' wheat fields. Her response is a mixture of a critique of capitalism and a warning to Niel that he might avoid the pitfalls that will inevitably befall him as a result of his existence under the system's purview:

I would never have time to go there, and we need the money it pays us. And you haven't time to play any more, either, Niel. You must hurry and become a successful man. Your uncle is terribly involved. He has been so careless that he's not much better off than we are. Money is a very important thing. Realize that in the beginning: face it, and don't be ridiculous in the end, like so many of us (96).

Echoing her regret about the furniture she insisted on having, Marian has learned the truth about money in a capitalist society. It is, as she says, important, because it is necessary for survival. However, it is also very dangerous in that it can breed carelessness in those who think they don't need to worry about it. Such was the case for Niel's uncle as it was for the Forresters. They failed to realize that they, too, are trapped within the same Panopticon as the Blum boys who

were ridiculed as children for their family's poverty. The message is that regardless of one's station in life or position on the socio-economic ladder, one is still imprisoned from birth in the capitalist Panopticon.

Whether or not Niel will internalize this advice is unclear, but it is evident that Ivy Peters is travelling down a financial road that is exactly like the one described by Marian. As the tenant farmer, Ivy takes certain liberties with his appearances on the Forrester property, and "was likely to appear at any hour, his trousers stuffed into his top-boots, tramping along between the rows of trees with an air of proprietorship" (100). He has established himself as a quasi-owner of the land he is working, something that results from his having signed a five-year lease to the property. He has, in his new position of tenant, managed to twist his relationship with the Forresters to one in which he is the dominant force.

Marian explains to Niel that the Forresters "have to get along with Ivy Peters" because of terms of the lease: "He could make it very disagreeable for us, don't you see?" (104). She also tells Niel that Ivy has invested money for them in a land deal that she is convinced is illegal, something that she admits is probably the only way to actually make money in the current financial system: "Don't tell your uncle; I've no doubt it's crooked. But the Judge is like Mr. Forrester; his methods don't work nowadays. He will never get us out of debt, dear man! He can't get himself out. Ivy Peters is terribly smart, you know. He owns half the town already" (105). Niel counters this argument by telling her that "rascality isn't the only thing that succeeds in business," to which Marian tells him, "It succeeds faster than anything else, though" (106). In a sense, we may read this as Niel continuing to exist in his own naiveté, as he clings to the belief that hard work pays dividends in the end in a capitalist system. However, as Marian's response suggests, her experience with the system and its many potential traps—something with which

Niel has no experience whatsoever—has taught her a different lesson, and she can no longer believe in Niel’s fantasies. She explains the harsh reality to him by saying, “So that’s what I’m struggling for, to get out of this hole” (107). Unfortunately for her, though, there is no escape from that hole.

Despite the family’s radically diminished financial status and the Captain’s second stroke, the women of Sweet Water continue to visit Marian, and they continue to observe the social customs dictated by the discourse that has controlled their actions for so long that they have become a disciplined body, conditioned to do what the discourse tells them is expected regardless of the circumstances: “They still felt they must put on their best dress and carry a card-case when they went to the Forresters” (117). However, something has changed in this situation, namely the fact that Marian is no longer strong enough to ward off those women who want to see the interior of the house beyond the parlor, beyond which has always been closed territory. What they discover is that the images they had conjured of how the house must look were fantasies that had no bearing in reality:

They went over the house like ants, the house where they had never before got past the parlour; and they found they had been fooled all these years. There was nothing remarkable about the place at all! The kitchen was inconvenient, the sink was smelly. The carpets were worn, the curtains faded, the clumsy, old-fashioned furniture they wouldn’t have had for a gift, and the upstairs bed-rooms were full of dust and cobwebs (118).

The question is whether or not this was an image created by the Forresters themselves or one that the townspeople created on their own. Either way, the fact remains that the Forresters spent considerable sums of money in order to maintain the perception of wealth. This is further evidence that the Forresters were trapped by capitalism, as they felt the need to spend a great deal of money in order to impress their fellow residents of Sweet Water, and all of it was in vain

because their financial expenditures, in the end, were seen as unremarkable by those residents that were the target of the intended effect in the first place.

When Captain Forrester dies, it is one of the most newsworthy events to have occurred in Sweet Water, though we are told that “it happened that none of the Captain’s closest friends could come to his funeral” (123). One man who does put in an appearance, however, is Adolph Blum who, despite his lower-class status, is there to pay his last respects. He is dressed “in his old working clothes, the only clothes he had, probably, with a knitted comforter about his neck” (123). He declines the invitation to come inside, opting instead to depart and leave behind a white box containing “a great armful of yellow roses” that Niel believes “must have cost the price of many a dead rabbit” (124). The irony here is that arguably the most heart-felt outpouring of respect comes from a person who is least likely to be able to afford it. Despite the shackles that have as profound an effect on their lives as they do on the lives of those much more financially well-off, the Blums serve as an example of the more generous side of humanity in a world that otherwise seems to be infected by motivations that are far more self-serving.

One of those who is not present at the funeral is Ivy Peters, who, we are told, “had been in Wyoming at the time of Captain Forrester’s illness and death,—called away by a telegram which announced that oil had been discovered near his land-holdings” (131). The pursuit of even more money, the root of the capitalist system of imprisonment, is why Ivy was unable to attend the funeral. But following that event, he is quick to further cement his status as permanent fixture at the Forrester house:

As there was nothing to be done on his fields in the winter, he had amused himself by pulling down the old barn after office hours. One was likely to come upon him, smoking his cigar on the front porch as if he owned the place. He often spent the evening there, playing cards with Mrs. Forrester or talking about his business projects. He had not made his fortune yet, but he was on the way to it (131).

Ivy is working to establish himself as the heir to the Captain's position in the new Sweet Water society, despite the fact that he has yet to acquire the wealth one would expect of someone in that lofty social position. That deficiency doesn't deter Ivy, however, as he is content with putting forward the image of one who has achieved that financial goal. He is acting a role in a play, attempting to make people believe that he is higher on the socio-economic ladder than he really is. That dramatic behavior is a by-product of the materialism fostered by the commercial culture of industrial capitalism.

Just as importantly, Marian decides, near the end of the novel, to transfer all of her legal concerns into the hands of Ivy Peters, despite the fact that she believes him to be involved in unscrupulous business practices. She tells Niel that the primary reason that Ivy is spending so much time on the property is because he is going to sell it for her. She says of the property, "It's all I have, and if I leave it to tenants it will run down, and I can't sell it to advantage. That's why Ivy is here so much, he's trying to make the place presentable [...]. Unless I keep the place up, I can never get my price for it" (132). Her price is twenty-thousand dollars, a sum that Niel believes she will never get, "At least, not until times have greatly changed" (133). Judge Pomeroy believed the same, which is why Marian felt she had to abandon her loyalty to him and move on to Ivy, who Marian says "can get me twenty thousand, or if not, he will take it off my hands as soon as his investments begin to bring in returns" (133). It is reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty, the beacon that Marian represents in the story. The committee needed a final fundraising push in order to acquire the necessary funding to see the statue completed; Marian, too, needs a final fundraising push in order to continue her life. However, in doing so, she is turning her back on the principles of economic liberty that she should represent.

It is at this point that Marian becomes the lost lady of the novel's title. She has lost her principles, as she has abandoned her friend and legal adviser of two decades in favor of a potential income that may never materialize for her. Judge Pomeroy "had attended to all Captain Forrester's business for twenty years, and since the failure of the Denver bank had never deducted a penny for fees from the money entrusted to him" (134). But with the Captain's death, the old ways died, too. Marian, as the survivor, has to go forward, and she chooses to do so as a representative of the new capitalism. She has left behind the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer and instead become the secondary meaning of the word yeoman, namely a servant in a royal household. She has given herself over to the new economy, the new industrial capitalism, and all the materialist goals it promotes. Marian is imprisoned within the Panopticon, and she will live out her days doing as a servant doing the bidding of that master.

The final time Niel sees Marian is at a dinner party at her home to which she invites him. The first person he sees upon his arrival is Ivy Peters, acting the part of party host. He notices that the table is set with silver serving pieces, despite the fact that the assembled young men "would not know the difference [...] if she had furnished her table that morning, from the stock in Wernz's queensware store. Their conception of a really fine dinner service was one 'hand-painted by a sister or sweetheart'" (136). Traditional and valuable pieces like silver serving ware are lost on this new culture. They have no concept of the value inherent in antiques or heirlooms. The same attitude is reflected in their appreciation of the meal: "He sighed as he thought how much work it meant to cook a dinner like this for eight people,—and a beefsteak with potatoes would have pleased them better! They didn't really like this kind of food at all" (139). Again, there is no appreciation for what are considered to be the true signs of high-class society; these are boys who have no concept of what it is to be a part of the upper class.

They do know, however, that their appearance is a major consideration if they want to be viewed as members of the social elite. Ivy comments on this aspect of their collective behavior soon after Niel's arrival: "You fellows are like a bunch of girls,—always talking about what you are going to wear and how you can spend your money" (136-137). This is, then, a gathering of the disciples of the new economic system that has taken over Sweet Water and the rest of the nation. The capitalist prison into which they were born is tightening its grip on them.

That summer, Niel plans to return to Boston, and prior to his departure, he begins to muse on the changes he has witnessed. We are told, "He was in a fever of impatience to be gone, and yet he felt that was going away forever, and was making the final break with everything that had been dear to him in his boyhood. The people, the very country itself, were changing so fast that there would be nothing to come back to" (144). In one sense, Niel is absolutely correct. He will never be able to return to the Sweet Water of his youth, nor will he be able to find anywhere in the country that resembles that place and time. The entire country has changed with the new economic developments, and Americans have irrevocably chained themselves to the pursuit of material gains in the new style of capitalism. The economic ideals that defined a component of the country's founding have been abandoned in favor of this new pursuit; the Statue of Liberty is, in an economic sense, a lost lady at this point in time.

Niel comes to realize how misconstrued his own thoughts on the Forresters had been, and how much he regrets being so ignorant for so long. He comes to understand that the Captain represented the true spirit of economic liberty, and with his death, that spirit vanished from Sweet Water, just as it has vanished from the rest of the nation:

He had helped the Captain to die peacefully, he believed; and now it was the Captain who seemed the reality. All those years he thought it was Mrs. Forrester who made that house so different from any other. But ever since the Captain's death it was a house where old friends, like his uncle, were betrayed and cast off,

where common fellows behaved after their kind and knew a common woman when they saw her (146).

Marian's defection to the new economy from the old is manifested in the final story we are told about her. Niel encounters Ed Elliott, a childhood acquaintance from Sweet Water, who relays the story of Marian Forrester's last years. We learn from Ed that Marian married a "rich, cranky old Englishman" with whom she "lived on a big stock ranch" (148). Metaphorically speaking, the Statue of Liberty has ended up under the purview of the English, the very people against whom the American revolutionaries fought in the eighteenth century in order to secure their financial freedom. Lady Liberty is truly lost, as the emblem of all that was good about the old order has since been handed over to the original source of financial imprisonment.

While the materialist manifestations of the new economic culture were just beginning to appear in small Western towns like the fictional Sweet Water in the 1920s, that commercial culture was much more apparent in major metropolitan areas during the decade. Materialist desires fueled by the discourse of advertising had taken hold in the populace, and there were few segments of the population of those areas that were not directly affected by the changes. As we will see in the case of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, occasionally the effects of the new commercialism were far more serious than simple greed or envy. In some instances, consumers were driven to murder in order to achieve their materialist goals.

An American Tragedy

On the morning of July 12, 1906, the body of a young woman was found submerged near an over-turned rowboat on Big Moose Lake in upstate New York. According to reports, the body showed signs of physical trauma (Brandon 10). The woman was identified as the companion of a man who had rented the boat the day before; he was, however, nowhere to be found. Her name,

as taken from a hotel register where the couple had signed in, was Grace Brown; her missing companion, according to the same hotel register, was Carl Graham. By the following day, authorities had discovered that Grace Brown – “Billy” to her friends – was an employee at the Gillette Skirt Factory in Cortland, New York. When investigators inquired about her there, they were told by a manager that Grace’s boyfriend was a young man named Chester Gillette who had recently left Cortland for a vacation in the Adirondacks. Prosecutors later alleged that Chester Gillette had taken Grace Brown out on a row boat that he rented on the previous day, July 11. After allegedly striking her with a tennis racket multiple times, Gillette capsized the boat and allowed Grace to drown while he swam to shore. Once there, he changed into dry clothes that he’d left in a hidden suitcase, and proceeded to make his way to Inlet, New York.

At his trial, Gillette denied responsibility for Grace’s death. The jury didn’t believe his story and, in less than five hours, returned a guilty verdict against Gillette. He was sentenced to death and, after his appeals failed, he was moved to the state penitentiary in Albany, New York, to await his execution, which was carried out on March 30, 1908. The case was characterized, as Craig Brandon says, by a “universality of the archetype: the pregnant young woman and the selfish young man who drowns her rather than marrying her” (363). But a question plagued the millions of Americans who followed the trial: What would drive a man like Chester Gillette to murder Grace Brown, a woman he had once claimed to love and who was pregnant with Gillette’s child? A search for the answer to that question was one of the motivations driving Theodore Dreiser as he wrote *An American Tragedy*.

American author Theodore Dreiser was representative of early American naturalism. Of that literary movement, Donna Campbell writes, “Set frequently in urban slums or a savage wilderness, naturalistic stories forced readers to confront the indifference of nature, and, closer to

home, the indifference of human beings toward their fellow creatures” (499). Naturalists like Dreiser sought to better understand the forces that were at work in an individual’s life, and how those forces oftentimes served to bring about an individual’s personal downfall or destruction. As Donna Campbell says of naturalism, “With characters whose fates were the product of their heredity, their environment, and chance circumstances that rarely worked in their favor, naturalism was suffused with a deterministic philosophy that questioned the very concept of free will” (499). If one is unfortunate enough to be born into a less-than-ideal situation, then the future is bleak. There is, in the naturalist’s mind, little reason to hope for a better outcome, because fate has simply not smiled upon that individual.

However, Dreiser’s naturalism at the time of his writing *An American Tragedy* had evolved somewhat. He grew to believe that the determinist philosophy, which essentially negates any sense of human agency in a person’s life, was too limiting. In the case of the Gillette case, Dreiser saw an opportunity to explore what might have driven this young man who seemed to have so much working in his favor to murder a woman in cold blood. The true story had all of the trappings of a naturalist’s perfect story. It featured a protagonist born in to poverty and ended in a murder, an outcome that would perhaps point to the validity of the determinist viewpoint. But if it were that simple, Dreiser wouldn’t have needed to write the story; he could have simply directed people to the court proceedings to tell the story of what happened.

Dreiser, however, sought to present Chester and his life in explicit detail. Dreiser offers a veritable catalog of minutiae of his protagonist’s life, as the author believed that it was in those details that lay Gillette’s motivation for murder. From a structuralist perspective, these minutiae are examples of functions, defined by Roland Barthes as basic actions. Regarding these functions, Barthes writes, “The essence of a function is, so to speak, the seed that it sows in the

narrative, planting an element that will come to fruition later” (“Structural Analysis of Narratives” 89). Barthes here suggests that characters’ actions in a story work in conjunction with other actions to create a chain; one action leads into subsequent actions. Juxtaposed with functions and their action-related purposes is the concept of indices, which Barthes defines as psychological components of a character’s makeup: “Indices [...] refer to a signified, not to an ‘operation.’ The ratification of indices is ‘higher up,’ sometimes even remaining virtual, outside any explicit syntagm (the ‘character’ of a narrative agent may very well never be explicitly named while yet being constantly indexed)” (“Structural Analysis of Narratives” 93).

In the case of *An American Tragedy*, both the functions and the indices are of equal importance to the narrative, as the pair work in tandem with one another to develop and illustrate the character and the actions of Clyde Griffiths. If we were to read the story without the indices, the functions would seem to exist in a sort of moral vacuum; Griffiths would merely commit the murder out of a fear of being trapped in a loveless marriage. Alternatively, if we read the novel without the functions, the story is reduced to a simple character study of a tortured soul who longs for something better than what he has, but sees no way of ever getting it. In either case, although the story would end tragically either way, the full effect and true meaning of Dreiser’s story is only achieved when we read the full story, the narrative that places equal emphasis on both the functions and the indices in the narrative structure.

Dreiser must have known that something beyond a predetermined destiny arising from a young man’s being born to lower-class parents was at play in the case of Chester Gillette, and he sought to highlight that force for his readers. I believe that Chester Gillette was trapped by the capitalist Panopticon and influenced by the controlling discourse of the commercial culture, and that it was this situation that led him to murder Grace Brown. And that tragic ending was brought

about by a quest for the American Dream. As Roark Mulligan writes of the novel, “Dreiser traces the brief life of Clyde Griffiths, a young man not unlike himself, whose desperate chase of the American Dream (wealth, social success, and marriage) destroys him and his pregnant girlfriend” (92). What’s more, Dreiser saw this dominating force of the Panopticon at work in capitalism, and sought to bring to light the fact that, while Gillette was certainly guilty of murder, there is an argument to be made that he was only doing what anyone else in a similar circumstance might have also done.

While the climax of Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* is, of course, the murder of Grace Brown (renamed Roberta Scott in the novel), it is the preceding story of Chester Gillette (renamed Clyde Griffiths in the novel) that serves to explain the context of that eventual climax. This early part of the story is vital to Dreiser’s mission of explaining Gillette’s motives. That authorial mission was a reflection of what Dreiser saw as the darker side of American capitalism. As a man who was fully committed to the socialist cause, Dreiser was often critical of the capitalist economic system, and in the case of *An American Tragedy*, his critique of American capitalism is on full display. Clare Elby calls *An American Tragedy* a “macroeconomic view of pecuniary emulation and invidious comparison” and goes on to suggest that the novel “critiques the process” of that emulation and comparison (192). That critique of the process of capitalism includes highlighting the prison-like power that the system wields. Because he was caught in the endless cycle of acquisition and comparison, Chester Gillette was a man who seemingly lost control of his own existence, surrendering his physical ability to act of his own volition to the commercial culture that had engulfed him.

Much of the scholarship that critiques the novel focuses on economic factors. Michael Spindler writes of the novel that Clyde was the victim of social forces that had prevented him

from achieving financial success, and that his only option was a doomed criminal action. Alternatively, Walter Benn Michaels posits the idea that class distinctions are fluid and that individuals may exist in multiple apparent classes at the same time. He points to Clyde as an example of this liminal existence, highlighting that underneath that fluidity is the belief that everyone's status is itself a marketable commodity because of the class distinctions that are so important within a capitalist system. Nancy Donovan suggests that authors have incorporated the theme of murders centered on class distinctions like the one Dreiser wrote about in *An American Tragedy*. However, she argues that while there is the common theme of social climbing as an underlying motive in all of them, the perpetrator of the crime has shifted from being typically male in the early twentieth century to typically female in contemporary times.

In this body of criticism, the literature fails to take into account the perspective of the consumer who is trapped within the system. Additionally, it fails to interrogate the role of advertising and that practice's controlling discourse. There are numerous examinations of the exploitative tendencies of the system itself, along with plenty of criticism that contends with the issue of materialism. But there is no discussion about the consumer as a prisoner of the system, nor is there any discussion about the manipulation of consumers fostered by advertising.

The novel opens with an immediate acknowledgement of the materialist culture that was beginning to blossom in the United States in the 1920s: "Dusk—of a summer night. And the tall walls of the commercial heart of an American city of perhaps 400,000 inhabitants—such walls as in time by linger as a mere fable" (1). The city, we come to find out, is Kansas City, which is an important consideration. We are not in Chicago or New York or some other major financial center in the United States. We are, instead, in a relatively modest-sized city in the middle of the United States. It is not the sort of place that one might typically think of when considering

centers of materialism and greed, but the fact that Clyde Griffiths emerges from this place suggests that the chains of capitalism and its controlling discourse can reach into virtually any city in America and lay hold of virtually anyone within those cities. Dreiser is suggesting that we are all at risk of falling into the same trap as Clyde.

Clyde, like his non-fictional counterpart Chester Gillette, was raised by parents who were involved with a church mission, and his family holds religious services on the street. Clyde dislikes having to do this, as the text tells us that he “appeared indeed to resent and even to suffer from the position in which he found himself” (3). But it is in another description of his physical makeup that we are able to see the first indications of the fact that he is already imprisoned by the discourse of the commercial culture: “He was too young, his mind much too responsive to phases of beauty and pleasure which had little, if anything, to do with the remote and cloudy romance which swayed the minds of his mother and father” (3). Clyde’s personality is not geared towards the religious work which his parents want him to do; rather, he is more inclined to follow fashionable pursuits favored by the upper classes.

Ironically, despite the fact that his parents are said to be under the influence of a non-financial “remote and cloudy romance,” the time will come when they rely on Clyde for money, too. What’s more, when Clyde is unable to provide money due to his being in prison, his mother seeks out other sources of financing in order to visit him there. The prison of capitalism doesn’t recognize religious exemptions, nor does it donate alms to those in need. It forces those living under its rule to work and, when that fails, to beg for the financial means they need in order to live.

The sequence of events that leads to his being convicted of murder and sentenced to death begins with Clyde’s desire to improve his socio-economic condition. We are told that he

“brought a more vivid and intelligent imagination to things, and was constantly thinking of he might better himself, if he had a chance” (8). Clyde is, even as an adolescent, concerned with his own economic standing. That concern is based largely on the profession of his parents, which serves to damage Clyde’s own self-esteem because of the way that the public perceive them and, by association, their children: “The principal thing that troubled Clyde up to his fifteenth year, and for long after in retrospect, was that the calling or profession of his parents was the shabby thing that it appeared to be in the eyes of others” (8). This sense of self-consciousness that pervades his thinking so often leads Clyde to dream constantly about what he will do and where he will go once he is afforded the opportunity to leave his parents’ home: “And always he was thinking of what he could do, once he reached the place where he could get away” (9).

Human beings require certain things for their own survival, and one of those things is enough food to maintain life. This sustenance-level existence is one of the two prongs of the capitalist prison that I discussed previously. Because we require food and because acquiring food requires money, we are forced to work to ensure our own survival. That continued survival, on one level, simply means that we have to continue working so as to continue living. In the case of Clyde and his family, the sustenance level of the capitalist Panopticon frequently manifests its power through the family’s inability to acquire the requisite food they need to live: “And there were times, when, [...] they were quite without sufficient food or decent clothes, and the children could not go to school” (9). The complete picture of Clyde’s childhood existence, then, is composed of a hyper-self-conscious boy who is ashamed of the way others see him and his family because of his parents’ job, and who experiences times when he doesn’t have enough to eat or proper clothing. His was a psyche that was primed for the message of the commercial

discourse that aimed to discipline his thinking. His brain provided fertile ground for the roots of that discourse, and he was immediately confined within the capitalist Panopticon.

Clyde begins working odd jobs—assisting with the delivery of newspapers, unpacking boxes in stores, and other miscellaneous piecework—and through even that menial labor he considers himself financially superior to his parents. He uses his earnings—which total five dollars a week, “a sum which at the time seemed almost a fortune” (22)—to go to the movies or the theater, acts condemned by his parents as sinful. These forms of entertainment were also part of the new commercial culture of the 1920s, especially motion pictures. The rapid expansion in the popularity of films served to bolster the nation’s economy by generating profits that were, in turn, reinvested in other technologies. The power of movies to influence consumer behavior is well-known, and this strategy on the part of advertisers traces its roots back to the genre’s earliest years. In messages ranging from the subtle, such as actors wearing the latest fashions, to the more overt, such as direct advertising messages featuring particular products, movies have always been a way to convey particular commercial messages to an audience.

Clyde clearly spent time at the movies, time during which he was subjected to the commercial discourse of advertising. Given his salary of five dollars a week and the average price of a movie in 1925 (about twenty-five cents), Clyde had sufficient funds to spend a great deal of his free time being bombarded by commercial discourse. And in the course of spending that time in the theater, his sponge-like brain soaked up the images presented to him by the commercial discourse, fostering in his mind a collection of grand fantasies about how his life could be if he were able to achieve the financial status of those people he saw on the movie screen in front of him.

These fantasies lead him to seek out a job with more regular hours and, as we are told, one that that will teach him a trade in which he can advance. He gets a job working in a soda fountain inside a drug store, and he begins to dream about the day when he is no longer an assistant and will make a salary he imagines to be upwards of fifteen dollars a week. In this position Clyde is first exposed to current trends in fashion among people his own age when those young men and women come in to the soda fountain both before and after shows at the theater next door to the drug store. He is enchanted by the dresses and jewelry of the young women, but his true admiration is reserved for the evening wear of the boys, including bowties, white kid gloves, and highly-polished leather shoes. This manner of dress is, to Clyde's mind, "the last word in all true distinction, beauty, gallantry, and bliss" (24). The more he sees of this well-dressed crowd, the more power he bestows on them and their manner of dress. He begins to fantasize about the day when he, too, can dress like that: "All the joys of life would then most certainly be spread before him" (24). He is, in his young mind, equating fancy (and expensive) evening wear with a particular lifestyle, one that he sees at that time as the embodiment of all that is good in the world.

Fantastical visions of his future aside, Clyde is cognizant of the reality of his own financial situation, a situation that will not afford him such luxuries as he thinks will bring him true joy. However, that vision won't get out of his head, and the desire for those things keeps pressing him forward. That drive leads him to seek out a job as a bell-hop at the Green-Davidson Hotel, the interior of which initially suggests to him that "his ideas of luxury were in the main so extreme and mistaken and gauche—mere wanderings of a repressed and unsatisfied fancy which as yet had nothing but imaginings to feed it" (31). He learns with a sense of awe that he will be earning fifteen dollars a month along with meals at the hotel, with the additional benefit of tips

that might range as high as forty-two dollars a week. Along with the potential for that much money, this glimpse into an even higher level of luxury than the one suggested by the young people in their evening theater clothes had the effect of raising Clyde's own baseline for what qualifies as luxurious. And that raise in his standards will lead to a further strengthening of the bonds of capitalism that restrain him, because it will introduce him to a lifestyle that requires he spend ever-increasing amounts of money on both himself and others.

This spending begins with the requirement that he give the bell captain a dollar for every watch. This sum, however, strikes Clyde as a paltry one, and his belief that the Green-Davidson is "a realization of paradise" (35) remains intact. However, as he will soon discover, he will be pressured to spend increasingly large sums of money in order to assimilate with his new friends that he meets at the hotel, as well as in an attempt to ingratiate himself to a young woman who, much like Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*, leverages her appearance and sex appeal in order to get those commodities that she wants but can't afford herself.

In the hotel, he encounters people far different from anyone he'd known before, a fact that fuels his belief of what qualifies as a base standard of luxury and that further strengthens the capitalist bonds that constrain him. Perhaps more importantly than the effect of the various sources of social discourse working on his brain, however, is the conclusion that he comes to in regard to how a wealthy person behaves in the world: "This then, most certainly was what it meant to be rich, to be a person of consequence in the world—to have money. It meant that you did what you pleased. That other people, like himself, waited upon you. That you possessed all of these luxuries. That you went how, where and when you pleased" (43). In this single passage, the seeds for Clyde's future demise are planted. His experiences at the Green-Davidson teach him that being "a person of consequence in the world" is equated with having significant

financial resources. In order to be considered an important person in society, Clyde surmises, one must have money, and the level of power is directly proportional to the amount of money one has. Additionally, once one has achieved the position of superior status, one also acquires the right to do whatever one desires while those of lower rank work to make those desires into realities.

At one point during his observation of the hotel guests, Clyde wonders to himself what sort of divine blessing enables the men and women he sees to enjoy such success and luxury, while others struggle to simply survive: “Who were these people with money, and what had they done that they should enjoy so much luxury, where others as good seemingly as themselves had nothing? And wherein did these latter differ so greatly from the successful? Clyde could not see” (45). While this question has a huge number of potential answers, nineteenth century sociologist Herbert Spencer believed that human existence, much like the theory of human evolution proposed by Charles Darwin, was a contest. Spencer coined the phrase “survival of the fittest” that is often used to describe Darwin’s theories, and Spencer was one of the original sociologists to apply Darwin’s theories to society as a whole in a theory of what came to be known as Social Darwinism.

The basic premise of Social Darwinism is that there is competition amongst individuals for a limited supply of goods, and the strongest among a population are best suited to survive in that type of environment. If we accept the Social Darwinian perspective on the subject, then the successful businessmen that Clyde sees in the Green-Davidson Hotel are more evolutionarily advanced than others. The question then becomes one of whether or not Clyde himself will be able to successfully evolve into the man he seeks to become. In order for him to do so, he will

have to become stronger and more aloof; he will have to stop caring about those around him and instead focus on his own advancement.

Richard Hofstadter makes explicit the link between Social Darwinist theories and capitalism, and in so doing points to the fundamental truth that capitalism is a manifestation of the idea of survival of the fittest:

A parallel can be drawn between the patterns of natural selection and classical economics, suggesting that Darwinism involved an addition to the vocabulary rather than to the substance of conventional economic theory. Both assumed the fundamentally self-interested animal pursuing, in the classical pattern, pleasure or, in the Darwinian pattern, survival. Both assumed the normality of competition in the exercise of the hedonistic, or survival, impulse; and in both it was the “fittest,” usually in a eulogistic sense, who survived or prospered—either the organism most satisfactorily adapted to its environment, or the most efficient and economic producer, the most frugal and temperate worker (Hofstadter 144).

Despite the fact that he can’t seem to understand why these people deserve the wealth they have, in looking at the successful businessmen in the hotel, Clyde understands on a fundamental level that they did something—some form of work—in order to achieve that financial success.

Dreiser himself, perhaps because he was the child of lower-class parents, was intrigued by the theories of Social Darwinism as they related to economics, and much of his work shows influences of Spencer’s ideas, though filtered through the lens of naturalism’s determinism, as Donna Campbell points out: “Later works, including [...] *An American Tragedy* (1925), also contain themes of Social Darwinism, but in them Dreiser also explored the role of chance as a factor in an otherwise deterministic plot” (502). In the novel, then, we see a clash between two ideas, specifically the Social Darwin approach, in which life is a struggle for survival won inevitably by the strongest, and determinism, in which we as humans have no physical control over our universe and we are devoid of free will that enables us to choose our own path for ourselves. In the case of Clyde Griffiths, he is determined to exert his own will and effect his

own evolution into a financially successful individual and to acquire all of the trappings that serve as the outward manifestation of that success.

The first outward manifestation of financial success that Clyde adopts is his manner of dress. We are told that “so long had he been haunted by the desire to make himself as attractive looking as any other well-dressed boy that, now that he had the opportunity, he could not resist the temptation to equip himself first and as speedily as possible” (50). He goes on to purchase for himself the requisite uniform of a well-dressed boy of the day, an outfit that he models after the clothes worn by his friend Doyle, “whom he had studied most carefully and to great advantage” (52). The clothes apparently have the desired effect, as even his youngest siblings are “amazed by the change” they see in Clyde’s appearance (52).

This desire for clothes leads him to a selfish way of thinking, which may be read as a step in his evolutionary progression towards being the strong and cold individual he needs to be in order to climb the socio-economic ladder. Dreiser tells us, “The thing that most interested Clyde at first was how, if at all, he was to keep the major portion of this money he was making for himself. For ever since he had been working and earning money, it had been assumed that he would contribute a fair portion of all that he received [...] toward the upkeep of the home” (50). If he is forced to give over his money to his parents, then he will have less to spend on himself. Clyde is making a conscious decision to look out for his own selfish interests, valuing his appearance over the well-being of his family. This is a manifestation of the Social Darwinist philosophy of survival-of-the-fittest. He deems himself more fit due to his ability to earn more money. Because of his superior fitness, he feels entitled to surviving in a more comfortable—or at least in a better dressed—manner. This leads him to lie to his mother, as he tells her that the hotel requires him to be well-dressed when he’s off-duty.

Next on the list of the accoutrements that Clyde seeks to acquire is an attractive female companion with whom he may spend time. He meets Hortense Briggs, to whom he is immediately attracted despite the fact that she is “nothing more than a crude shop girl in one of the large stores” (70). Despite this shortcoming—Clyde is already in his own mind establishing his superiority to her based on his job at the hotel—he acknowledges that he finds her beautiful. His co-workers try to warn him against getting too close to her, telling him that she’s not “on the level with anybody. She’s got that fellow Gettler and others. She’ll only work you an’ you might not get anything, either” (75). Hortense has a reputation for accepting gifts from boys in exchange for promises of romantic interludes, promises she doesn’t always keep.

Pointing to this very quality, Dreiser describes her as “a girl who no more knew her own mind than a moth, and who was just reaching the stage where she was finding it convenient and profitable to use boys of her own years or a little older for whatever pleasures or clothes she desired” (75). Hortense herself acknowledges that she is interested in Clyde for the material things he can provide: “He was connected with the Green-Davidson, and he was well-dressed, and no doubt had all the money he said and would spend it on her. Some of those whom she liked best did not have much money to spend” (77).

Initially, Clyde spends excessive amounts of money on himself. When he arranges to take her out to dinner, he attempts to “show that he was worthy of her” by making “an almost exotic toilet—hair pomaded, a butterfly tie, new silk muffler and silk socks to emphasize his bright brown shoes, purchased especially for the occasion” (78). He is already updating his wardrobe for specific events; he is already fully immersed within the capitalist culture of commercial excess and indulgence. It is as if Clyde is simply playing a part in a movie that he saw, a movie

in which a character is dressed a particular way in one scene and then, as if by magic, is magically transformed in a different—but equally high-quality—outfit in the next scene.

For her part, Hortense has a list of things that she would like, too, and she is quick to mention them to Clyde. She begins her list with small things—makeup, perfume, a powder puff—and gradually segues into more expensive things like purses or clothing. And Clyde buys them for her, “in order to hold her favor and properly ingratiate himself” (85). He spends the money, despite the fact that familial money obligations weighed on him and made it difficult for him to make all of the purchases. He is falling deeper and deeper in to the capitalist Panopticon, helped along by the vague promises of potential physical contact from Hortense. He is falling victim to both Hortense’s way of navigating the capitalist Panopticon and to the Panopticon itself: “In short, he was conducting a feverish and almost painful pursuit without any definite promise of reward” (85).

Clyde’s fruitless pursuit comes to a head when Hortense asks him to purchase a relatively expensive coat for her. It is a coat that she saw displayed in a store window, and which the salesman assures her “is a special coat. It’s copied from one of the smartest coats that was in New York last summer before the season opened. It has class” (104). Her desire for the coat grows and she decides that she will get a boy to purchase it for her, as she is unable to afford it on her own. In trying to decide which boy she will choose, she says, “It must be some one she liked, or at least some one that was enslaved by her” (105). Here Hortense represents both sides of the Panopticon. On one hand, she is a consumer who is subjected to—enslaved by, to use her own words—the discourse of consumption that fuels capitalism. On the other hand, she is selling a commodity—herself—to someone who will be willing to buy her what she wants. Thus, she is simultaneously the slave and the enslaver.

Hortense decides that Clyde will be the boy to purchase the coat for her, who in turn wonders to himself “whether it might not advance his cause with her if he were to buy her a little jacket, since she needed it” (111). However, his financial position is not as strong as Hortense might believe it to be, given that Clyde has been placed in the position of assisting his sister Esta, who had run away from home with a boy and returned pregnant and alone. All of these situations—and a litany of other situations—are part of the panoptic force of capitalism. Because there is always something else, something new, on which to spend money, the cycle continues indefinitely, with the consumer constantly working to acquire new commodities. Despite the catalog of expenses with which he must contend, Clyde agrees to buy the coat because Hortense hints to him what she might do for him were he to buy it: “Oh, what wouldn’t I give for a coat like that” (112).

In order to make good on his promise, Clyde has to borrow money from friends, as he also has the ongoing financial obligations of his sister and mother. Esta is due to have her baby soon, which will require a doctor, which his mother tells him will cost fifty dollars. At the moment of her telling him this sum, he has fifty dollars in his pocket, which he denies having. It is further evidence of his increasingly selfish behavior, which will lead to his eventual downfall.

Clyde and his co-workers plan to take a trip out of town to Excelsior Springs in a borrowed Packard. As he had nearly finished paying for Hortense’s coat, Clyde expected her to pay particular affectionate attention to him, which Hortense failed to do. Clyde confronts her, “reciting almost verbatim the words and intonations even of the other boys at the hotel [...] who, having narrated the nature of such situations to him, and how girls occasionally lied out of pressing dilemmas in this way” (136). The end result of this verbal lashing of Hortense is that she is immediately aware that Clyde knows what she is doing in regard to the coat, which

requires her to show focused attention to him and him alone. She goes so far as to allow him to kiss her, which assuages any fears he might have in regard to the nature of his relationship with her.

Of course, it is clear that Hortense is willing to do or say whatever she needs to say at a given moment in order to get what she wants, and Clyde is naïve enough to believe whatever she says to him. It is understood that Hortense has not suddenly changed as a result of Clyde's protests; rather, she will continue to take full advantage of him for as long as he will allow it, getting as much from him as she possibly can. When—or perhaps if—he ever decides to give up his quest for her or runs out of money in the attempt, she will inevitably find another boy to take his place, one who has not already been chewed up by her machinations. However, the entire question is rendered moot when the boys, in a rush to get back to the hotel before their shift begins, run over a little girl, killing her. In the ensuing chaos, Clyde's selfish nature once again takes over, as he puts his own freedom over helping the people still stuck in the crashed car: “And now, Clyde, as suddenly sensing what capture would mean—how all his fine thoughts of pleasure would most certainly end in disgrace and probably prison, began running also” (145).

Clyde leaves Sparsen, who had been the one to use the car without permission, together with Laura Sipe still stuck in the car and flees the scene, assuming that those two will be blamed for the accident. He reasons that if he runs far enough and fast enough, then he will be able “to lose himself and so escape [...] the misery and the punishment and the unending dissatisfaction and disappointment which now, most definitely, it all represented to him” (146). Clyde's fear of going to jail is equal to his fear of “dissatisfaction and disappointment” with his own life, feelings that will inevitably arise when he is unable to realize his dream of financial success due to his having been involved in the death of a child and having spent time in jail. The importance

he attaches to his appearance and some mythical vision he has of how his life will be if he's only able to make enough money suggest how deeply entrenched he is within the capitalist system of commercialism and how truly impossible it would be for him to escape that system's clutches.

After running from city to city, Clyde ends up in Chicago, working as a bell-hop at the Union League Club. There he has a chance encounter with his uncle Samuel, a wealthy brother of Clyde's father, who owns a collar company in Lycurgus, New York. Samuel suggests to Clyde that, if he ever makes it to Lycurgus, that he'd be happy to see about putting him to work in the factory. This opportunity is, to Clyde's mind, ideal. He assumes that his last name will imbue him with immediate social cache in the town of Lycurgus, and that it will also afford him the opportunity to work in a setting above any position he might be able to find on his own. Clyde will finally have the opportunity to be in the position he has longed for. He will be the "person of consequence in the world" that he saw at the Davidson-Green Hotel. He will have people catering to him while he does whatever it is that wants to do. He will finally realize all of his fantasies about what it is to have money and authority in the world.

Before Clyde can get to Lycurgus, however, and begin his search for his version of a perfect world, we are introduced to what is called "the Lycurgus branch of the Griffiths," a family that embodies everything that Clyde Griffiths deems important in life, and everything that Clyde's Kansas City family is not. The Lycurgus Griffiths have money and social prestige. They are an important family in their city, and they are recognized by those around them as such. However, that status does not insulate them from the powers inherent in the capitalist Panopticon, as they, too, are imprisoned by the same forces as those holding anyone else living under the same system. However, the specific manifestation of those forces is decidedly different with the Lycurgus Griffiths than it is with their less affluent relations in Kansas City.

Whereas Asa Griffiths and his family are tied to the constant struggle of acquiring sufficient funds to survive on a day-to-day basis, Samuel and his family are members of the upper class and don't have such worries. However, they are still imprisoned within the Panopticon because they are keenly aware of their status and of how easily they can lose that status. As a result of this hyper-focused attention to how they measure against those in their own reference group, the family is continually working to acquire newer and better commodities. Upon our first introduction to this branch of the Griffiths we overhear Bella Griffiths discussing the fact that another family is changing the location of their summer residence, something that she deems to be an upward social move on their part: "The Finchleys are going to give up their place out at Greenwood Lake this coming summer and go up to Twelfth Lake near Pine Point. They're going to build a new bungalow up there. [...] It looks to me now as though nearly everybody that's worth anything down here is moving up there" (149-150). This concern for appearances is echoed by the thoughts of Samuel Griffiths who, upon hearing this news, "Was interested at the moment not so much by the thought that she wished to convey—that Twelfth Lake was more desirable, socially than Greenwood—as was by the fact that the Finchleys were able to make this sudden and rather heavy expenditure for social reasons only" (156).

Samuel Griffiths, though he might not care to admit it publicly, is as much a captive of the socio-economic forces as his daughter. He is equally concerned with his position on the socio-economic hierarchy, as Thorstein Veblen suggests is a characteristic of the upper class: "In any community where such an invidious comparison of persons is habitually made, visible success becomes an end sought for its own utility as a basis of esteem. Esteem is gained and dispraise is avoided by putting one's efficiency in evidence" (11). Everything about him—from what he wears to the house he owns to where he chooses to spend his summer vacation—is an

outward manifestation of his financial success. He wears those things as indications of his position on the socio-economic ladder, and any time that he perceives his position being usurped by someone else's acquisition of a newer, better outward manifestation of success, he is immediately put in a position of wondering how to reclaim what he sees as his rightful position at the top of the ladder.

Into this world of perpetual comparison and competition for acquisition enters Clyde Griffiths, whose alienation from this upper-class world is a powerful conditioning force on his psyche. He is indoctrinated into the world of comparison when he experiences his first visit to the Griffiths' home, the interior of which he compliments when talking with his aunt Elizabeth, who we are told takes "no end of satisfaction in the grace and rank of her own home in this street. She and her husband had been so long climbing up to it" (220). He is immediately aware of how little he has—both in terms of financial resources and experience in this level of luxury—an awareness that only intensifies the alienation he feels upon being ignored by this wealthy branch of his family tree.

Despite sharing a last name with the business owner, Clyde has no claim to any sort of financial stake in his uncle's fortune. He assumes that he will be left to his own devices, socially speaking. His social position in Lycurgus is equal to his position at the factory where, despite being the nephew of the owner, he is working in the shrinking room. He is realizing no benefit from being a Griffiths within the Griffiths business. His uncle tells him, "Not exactly a pleasant place, but not such a bad place to begin, either—at the bottom. The people start there sometimes" (221). Ironically, Clyde's cousin Gilbert didn't start at the bottom of anything, as he was born into the business, and will one day assume control of that same business. Upon Gilbert's departing after his introduction to Clyde, the latter thinks to himself,

How wonderful it must be to be a son who, without having had to earn all this, could still be so much, take oneself so seriously, exercise so much command and authority. It might be as it plainly was, that this youth was very superior and indifferent in tone toward him. But think of being such a youth, having so much power at one's command (223).

Clyde is duly impressed by Gilbert's display of indifference towards him, interpreting that indifference as the manifestation of some sort of social superiority. That lack of concern, which borders on disdain, is something Clyde will later mirror in his own behavior to a woman whom he deems socially below him.

Despite having met several of the wealthy young women who are the peers of his cousins in Lycurgus, Clyde is convinced that he will never be admitted to that world due to his own humble financial background. He has, by this time, been promoted, however, and is beginning to experience some semblance of financial success in his new job. Ironically, that promotion is itself a manifestation of the shackles of capitalism, as Samuel believes that Clyde is a reflection of him, and he is more concerned about his own social standing than he is of Clyde's deserving any assistance. In regard to Clyde's new salary, Samuel says, "Not enough, if he's to make the right sort of an appearance here. Better make it twenty-five. It's more than he's worth, I know, but it can't be helped now. He has to have enough to live on while he's here, and from now on, I'd rather pay him that than have any one think we were not treating him right" (232). In addition to a salary increase with this new position, he is also put in charge of several young women working in the factory as their manager. One of these women, Roberta Alden, develops into a romantic interest and, despite specific factory rules prohibiting it, Clyde begins a relationship with Roberta outside of work. Because he has convinced himself that his wealthy relations will never fully allow him to become one of them, he feels entitled to pursue a relationship with Roberta.

In fact, he feels himself entitled to more than just a relationship with her. In a sense, Clyde feels for the first time in his life superior to a woman he desires due to her status as working girl: “She was so pretty and cute. Yet she was a working girl, as he remembered now, too—a factory girl, as Gilbert would say, and he was her superior” (249). This sense of personal superiority, as we will see, is the source of his attitude towards her in regard to a sexual relationship, as that belief in his own power over her convinces Clyde that she is, on some level, a sort of concubine whose only purpose in life, outside of working at the factory, is to serve him and his own selfish desires.

Clyde begins to exert his influence over Roberta by preying on her insecurities, insecurities that he himself once had when he was also a working-class youth desperate for some form of companionship with a member of the opposite sex. Ironically, Roberta sees Clyde as her own source of financial support, as she hopes he will marry her, despite their apparent class differences: “Here was true and poignant love, and in youth true and poignant love is difficult to withstand. Besides it was coupled with the most stirring and grandiose illusions in regard to Clyde’s local material and social condition” (303). She fears that their relationship has progressed to a point that Clyde is “beginning to push too ardently toward those troublesome and no doubt dreadful liberties and familiarities which her morally trained conscience would not permit her to look upon as right” (303). Roberta has convinced herself that Clyde is wealthy and socially connected, and that he will begin to apply increasing pressure for her to have sex with him. She is herself trapped in the Panopticon, and sees Clyde as the source of alleviation from those bonds. That pressure manifests itself in the form of his veiled suggestion that he will be forced to leave her and find someone else if she won’t submit to his desires, something that she

cannot allow to happen: “But she had reached but one definite conclusion and that was that in some way she must arrange not to have Clyde leave her. That must not be” (305).

When Roberta has made her mind up to give in to Clyde’s desires to have sex, she attempts to justify the act in her own mind as a sort of safety line. She intends to use the act itself as leverage—in yet another example, albeit a socially-demanded one, given the circumstances at the time, of a woman using sex to get what she wants from a man—in order to keep Clyde from leaving her: “Yet, not without, before all this, an exaction on the part of Roberta to the effect that never—come what might (the natural consequences of so wild an intimacy strong in her thoughts) would he desert her, since without his aid, she would be helpless” (309). She is convinced that any sexual union will result in her getting pregnant, and she knows that the consequences—both financial and social—of being an unwed mother would be disastrous for her. Thus, any sexual act has to be preceded by his promise not to abandon her.

Clyde, for his part, willingly agrees to this promise, though he doesn’t necessarily understand the gravity of the promise he is making: “And he, so completely overcome and swayed by his desire, thoughtlessly protesting that he never would—never. She might depend on that, at least, although even then there was no thought in his mind of marriage” (310). Clyde has learned from his past experiences with women that manipulation is one of the keys to getting what he wants.

Roberta does submit to Clyde and, as she had feared would happen, becomes pregnant with his child, a development that adds another dimension to the financial prison in which she is imprisoned. Her dependence on Clyde’s keeping his word to her has become that much more intensified, due to the fact that she will now be forced to work in order to support not only herself but her child, too, if Clyde leaves her. Additionally, her potential for a future romantic

relationship will essentially cease to exist with the tangible evidence of what was considered at the time to be highly immoral behavior. However, Clyde not only has no intention of marrying Roberta, he is in the midst of pursuing a relationship with Sondra Finchley, the daughter of a wealthy manufacturer in Lycurgus. The analogies are clear: Clyde is to Sondra as Roberta is to Clyde. In both cases, a lower-class individual sees a member of a higher socio-economic class as a way out of their current financial straits. For Clyde, however, who is the common thread between the two women, Roberta's pregnancy has the power to destroy any dreams he has of achieving his version of the American Dream by marrying Sondra.

So powerful is Clyde's dream of the future with Sondra—he has, essentially, turned to treating her as a commodity, and fetishizing that commodity by crafting a fantasy of how his life will be once he possesses it—that he begins to feverishly search for a solution, including seeking out a doctor willing to perform an abortion. Clyde is unsuccessful in that search, and he is instead faced with the prospect of having to marry—at least for a period of time—Roberta, which will destroy any hope he might still have of marrying Sondra and achieving his financial dream: “All that he would see or feel was that this meant the loss of everything to him, and that he would have to away with her to some relatively near-by place and get work at anything he could, in order to support her as best he might. But the misery of such a change” (448).

It is then that a macabre sort of *deus ex machina* presents itself to Clyde in the form of a newspaper article. Ironically, he had purchased the newspaper in order to get his mind off of Roberta's problems by reading “the local news of all whom he knew” (456). The newspaper, one of the primary advertising venues of the day, serves up its own form of an advertisement for Clyde in a story about an overturned canoe and two drowned canoers. The story is an advertisement in the sense that it offers Clyde a service, a way to solve his problem. It does not

offer to sell him anything, though it does offer a subtextual promise of a path to what Clyde sees as the perfect life with Sondra, the American Dream made manifest. The only issue relates to the actual solution itself; specifically, he will have to actually commit murder in order to achieve the future promised by this advertisement.

Despite attempts to talk himself out of committing the heinous act, Clyde acknowledges that he is a slave to “his own mental and material weakness before pleasures and dreams which he could not bring himself to forego” (486). The power of the discourse—the message that by achieving a particular level of financial security, whether by effort or marriage, is the key to happiness—is so strong in Clyde’s thinking that he has no way to resist it. The thought of existing “with poverty, commonplace, hard and poor work as the alternative to all this” is more than he can stand (486). He steels himself to do what he sees as the only thing he can do, convincing himself on some level that Roberta is to blame for this whole sequence of events, as he says, “But no, she would not, and he would not marry her and that was all there was to it. She need not think that she could make him. No, no, no! At times, when in such moods, he felt that he could do anything—drown her easily enough, and she would only have herself to blame” (488). Clyde has become that which he idolized upon first meeting Gilbert. He has all of the power and none of the culpability, at least in his own mind.

After purposefully capsizing the boat in which they are rowing, leaving Roberta to drown, and making his escape to Twelfth Lake to be with his wealthy friends, Clyde is understandably nervous about his situation. However, he is with Sondra, whose presence seems to buoy his spirits, at least temporarily. He is once again in his impecunious situation, which highlights the power of the capitalist Panopticon, and further strengthens his dependence on Sondra. She senses his financial anxieties, and gives him a “handful of bills,” telling him, “Ssh!

Not a word, now!” (561). Clyde, grateful for the temporary respite from at least the financial component of his personal problems, immediately thinks of a potential use for the money that Sondra had given him so that he would be able to pay for their lunch: “And Clyde, feeling his pocket and realizing that she had given him much—plenty, no doubt, for all of his needs while here, as well as to escape if need be” (561). In an odd twist, then, the murder of Roberta, which was theoretically done in order to free him from the bonds of capitalism, has actually had the opposite effect, as he now may have to finance a life running from potential legal troubles. There is no escape from the Panopticon.

Clyde receives notice of the fact that the authorities found Roberta’s body from Sondra, and reads in the paper the next day of the full extent of the investigation. Adding to his anxiety is the fact that the story suggests that authorities believe her traveling companion was complicit in her death and fled the scene. Not long after he reads this news, Clyde is tracked down and arrested. For the Finchley family, the arrest is a social disaster, as everyone in their peer group seems to be “talking of Clyde and Sondra—this horrible crime and the probable social destruction of all those who had in any way been thus innocently defiled by it” (610). The family lacks any sense of concern or sympathy for the murdered girl; their primary—and sole—consideration is for their own social standing.

The same considerations are at the forefront of Samuel and Gilbert Griffiths’ minds, too, as both men ponder the potential ramifications of the situation, as Gilbert thinks to himself: “For was this not an ineradicable stain which was likely to defile all—himself, his fiancée, Bella, Myra, his parents—and perhaps cost them their position here in Lycurgus society? The tragedy! Maybe an execution! And in this family!” (615). Again, the concern is solely on the social consequences of Clyde’s actions, not on the fact that a young woman was killed, killed because

her father didn't make enough money to satisfy a young man's materialistic fantasies that were created by the commercial culture of the day.

Capitalism's chains reach beyond the personal desires for social advancement of the characters, however. Given the accusations against him, Clyde obviously needs legal representation. However, in the capitalist system, a quality legal defense does not come without payment, and in Clyde's case, that payment will need to be substantial, given the amount of evidence there is pointing to his guilt. He muses to himself while sitting in his cell "that nothing less than the Griffiths' millions, if so they chose to spend them, could save him from a fate which was no doubt due him" (614). Samuel Griffiths, before committing any resources to Clyde's defense, wants to determine whether or not he is guilty, because he refuses to support a defense if he is, in fact, guilty. At the same time, he is concerned about his public image: "The public was so prejudiced against wealth in such cases. Yet, some sort of a defense on the part of the Griffiths would certainly be expected by the public, whether subsequently the same necessity for such defense was criticized by them or not" (618). This is a situation in which there is no way for the Griffiths to emerge unscathed. If they finance Clyde's defense, they appear to be wealthy people trying to buy an acquittal for their nephew's murder of a working-class girl; if they refuse to support him, they are callous and uncaring, which are no doubt qualities bred by their money.

The trial itself is reminiscent of a commercial event that might have been staged by P. T. Barnum. Outside the courthouse where the trial is to take place, there are vendors selling food and keepsakes:

And with cries outside of: "Peanuts!" "Popcorn!" "Hot dogs!" "Get the story of Clyde Griffiths, with all the letters of Roberta Alden. Only twenty-five cents!" (This being a set of duplicate copies of Roberta's letters which had been stolen from Mason's office by an intimate of Burton Burleigh's and by him sold to a penny-dreadful publisher of Binghamton, who immediately issued them in

pamphlet form together with an outline of “the great plot” and Roberta’s and Clyde’s pictures (662).

There is a circus-like atmosphere around the trial, which points to yet another component of the commercial culture of the 1920s. No element of American life, it seems, is safe from the influence of capitalism and its commercial of acquisition. Here we have, on one hand, a man who is on trial for his life after killing a woman. On the other hand, we have a publisher seeking to profit from this story by selling the story to eager readers anxious to hear the sordid details.

There are multiple times throughout the trial that we as spectators are given examples of the panoptic power of capitalism. For example, there is a point in the prosecution’s cross-examination of Clyde that the district attorney asks him about various expenses he incurred during his trip with Roberta, suggesting that Clyde recalls the figures so well because he “didn’t have much money and it was important” (761). However, it is exactly that fact that catches him, because the prosecutor follows that up with a question in regard to the cost of the boat that he’d hired. When Clyde can’t recall the exact price, the prosecutor accuses him of not remembering because he had no intention of returning the boat, which would require him to pay: “You were in such a hurry to get out on the water and you did not expect to have to come back and pay for it anyway” (762). Clyde’s action was premeditated, according to the prosecutor, exactly *because* of his failure to inquire about the price. A young man like Clyde who was so thoroughly ensnared in the prison of capitalism would have been concerned about the cost of the boat in the same way that he was concerned about every other expense. Thus, his seeming insouciance in regard to the cost of the boat points to his guilt.

As the trial begins in New York, Clyde’s parents are in Denver. His mother is quick to defend her son to reporters seeking comment from her there, saying that if Clyde did in fact do what he was accused of doing, it was only because of the crowd with which he associated when

working at the hotel in Kansas City. And he only worked at that job, she says, because “neither Clyde nor any of the other children had ever enjoyed the opportunities that came to most” (657). Following his conviction, reporters mob the Griffith home in Colorado, eager for an interview with her. When asked why she didn’t attend the trial in person, she admits, “I had no money [...]. Not enough, anyhow” (783). The phalanx of reporters gives her the idea to inquire as to whether or not a newspaper would be willing to finance her travelling to New York to see her son, and a local managing editor agrees to pay for her trip. But this release from those chains was short-lived, as she learns from Clyde’s lawyer’s in New York that they will be unable to help him appeal his conviction without a significant sum of money: “And an appeal sure to cost not less than two thousand. And Mrs. Griffiths, after an hour in their presence, in which they made clear to her the basic cost of an appeal—covering briefs to be prepared, arguments, trips to be made—asserting repeatedly that she did not quite see how she was to do” (790).

She sets out on a lecture tour, talking about her son’s case, in the hopes of raising the necessary funds to finance an appeal. But capitalism’s rules follow her from Denver, and she quickly learns that, even if she were to sell many tickets to her lectures (which she’s isn’t able to do), there are numerous expenses that she’ll need to meet before there is any monetary surplus: “Nevertheless, as she soon discovered, there were other factors to be considered—carfare, her own personal expenses in Utica and elsewhere, to say nothing of certain very necessary sums to be sent to Denver to her husband, who had little or nothing to go on at present” (805). She is, in the end, unable to raise sufficient funds to mount an appeal for Clyde, and his execution is carried out. In essence, then, there is an argument to be made that Clyde’s fate mirrored that of his victim. Just as she was killed because her father wasn’t wealthy enough, Clyde’s inability to

appeal his death sentence because his own family couldn't afford the legal fees suggests that he, too, was killed because his father wasn't wealthy enough.

Before he dies, however, Clyde thinks about his situation while in his cell, asking, "Would no one ever understand—or give him credit for his human—if all too human and perhaps wrong hungers—yet from which so many others—along with himself suffered?" (846). Clyde's ponderings point to the fact that we are all subject to the same forces as those that led to his destruction. The desires to possess commodities and to improve one's socio-economic status are part of human nature. And given the commercial culture in which we live, that part of our nature is under constant assault by the discourse of advertising, tempting us and luring us. We are all subject to the same potential fate as Clyde Griffiths if we fail to moderate our desires.

Shelly Fisher Fishkin says of Theodore Dreiser, "Americans were blind, Dreiser felt, to important facts about themselves, their morality, their country, and their dreams. He wrote *An American Tragedy*, in large part, to help them take a fresh look at some of those facts" (117). Those facts, in the case of the novel, were of two different groups: facts pertaining to the Gillette murder case and facts pertaining to the American capitalist system. What readers discovered, however, was that "facts" were oftentimes open to interpretation.

Dreiser's own words about his work validate Fishkin's contentions and the oftentimes ambiguous nature of facts. The author himself said of writing *An American Tragedy*, "In my examination of such data as I could find in 1924 relating to the Chester Gillette—Billy Brown case, I had become convinced that there was an entire misunderstanding, or perhaps I had better say non-apprehension, of the conditions or circumstances surrounding the victims of that murder *before* the murder was committed" (Dreiser, *Uncollected Prose* 296). What these words say, especially in conjunction with those of Fishkin, is that the novel is as much about the American

lifestyle at the time – the commodity fetishization and accompanying worship of material wealth so apparent in a capitalist society – as it is about the murder itself. As a naturalist, Dreiser was keenly interested in the motivations behind actions, the unseen forces that compelled men to do the things they did. And in his writing of the novel, Dreiser wanted to bring to light those “conditions or circumstances surrounding the victim of that murder” prior to the actual act.

Bread Givers

American anti-Semitism was not a new phenomenon that suddenly appeared alongside the rise of Adolph Hitler in Germany. Rooted in racist beliefs that had been ingrained in the American psyche since the days of slavery, anti-Semitism in the United States tended to mirror immigration patterns beginning at the end of the nineteenth century. As more Jews immigrated, anti-Semitic feelings increased. As Stanley Feldstein suggests, “With a sharp rise in Jewish immigration, [...] Jews became a special target of American nativists’ hate campaign. [...] Anti-Semitism was more vicious than the usual anti-foreignism because it contained certain peculiar elements, rooted in the early Middle Ages, which followed Jews wherever they went” (233). Though that “racial” distinction was never made official, it is interesting to note that the 1910 census does ask for “language spoken,” and 41,723 respondents indicated that Yiddish was their language (Ruggles et al.).

Just as the Rudkus family’s collective naiveté in regard to the predatory loan that they take out in order to finance their “new” home, new Jewish families in the United States were often the target of unscrupulous capitalists who sought to imprison them in the Panopticon. In the case of Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers*, a classic work of Jewish immigration and assimilation to a new way of life in America, we see a clash between the traditional ways of the Old Country

and the new ways of the United States, with the latter winning out over the former. The result is that the family discovers how strong the chains of the capitalist Panopticon can be when they're imprisoning unwitting consumers in their clutches.

In 1925, Anzia Yezierska published *Bread Givers*, a semi-autobiographical novel about destitute Jewish immigrants living in Manhattan's Lower East Side. The story highlights the clash between the old and new cultures that so many immigrant families faced upon arriving in the United States. Most critics of the novel have focused on this element of the story, including historian Alice Kessler-Harris, who writes in her introduction to Yezierska's novel that the author "captured the tension between an America that longed to maintain the community of a traditional old world and yet sought the material goods and individual satisfactions of the new" (xi-xii). Norah Chase comes close to invoking the Panopticon of capitalism when she suggests that the title of the novel itself points to the need for sustenance, even the most basic of foods, in order to survive. She ties this need for food to what she calls Sara's "hunger for a meaningful life in the new world" (58). While not discounting the critique of the capitalist system that seems almost intent on preventing immigrants from improving their status, Christie Launius focuses more on what she calls the "romance plot" of the novel, describing it as an inescapable reality for Sara because her status as a Jewish immigrant female means that she is unable to rely on education or even her own efforts to advance in the capitalist system. Instead, her only true financial opportunity is to marry a man with an established income. While these critics have come close to distilling the authorial message down to the controlling mechanisms inherent in the capitalist system, they fail to fully explicate the idea that this prison is an all-seeing and all-controlling one, and it is one from which there is no escape.

The clash between the old ways and the new is manifested in the relationship between the ultra-orthodox and very traditional Reb Smolinsky and his daughters, Bessie, Mashah, Fania, and Sara. Whereas Reb is representative of the old world culture—he spends his days studying the Torah while his daughters work and hand over all of their earnings to their father—his daughters know that he is living in a past that no longer exists in the new world of the United States. The family is reliant for its survival on the meagre wages that the girls are able to bring in, and Reb will only allow them to marry if the marriage results in his being better off financially as a result. In short, throughout *Bread Givers*, we see the ways in which the capitalist Panopticon imprisons immigrants in search of a better life in America.

As the American-born children of the first wave of Jewish immigrants grew to maturity in the 1920s, a new voice arose in literature, specifically that of the second-generation Jewish Americans who had come of age immersed in the secular commercial culture of twentieth-century America. Many who wrote about their experiences within this demographic group had a unique perspective, as they had experienced life in both their non-American country of birth and life in their new American homeland, and much of their writing tended to lean towards “exploring the immigrant experience and that of their own generation” (Harap 45). It was between those two poles—that of the immigrants themselves on one end and that of their children on the other—that the previously-mentioned conflict flourished.

The conflicts that are presented in much of the body of American literature by and about the Jews of the early twentieth century go beyond just arguments about cultural differences between old and new. While those issues are certainly a major component, so, too, are issues related to anti-Semitism, politics, poverty, and the commercial culture that was fostered by the

controlling discourse of advertising, among others. Louis Harap writes of this group of authors and the themes on which they focused:

These writers were concerned with the desperate, sometimes unscrupulous, ascent of the second generation from poverty and slum living, the conflict between generations in the process, intermarriage, confrontation with anti-Semitism, and submission or resistance against the corrupting temptations offered by American political and business life, and, finally [...] confrontation with the problems of assimilation and Jewish identity (46).

Yezierska was among this group of second-generation Jewish authors. She immigrated to the United States at the age of sixteen, old enough to appreciate the opportunities a new life in America could offer her, despite the fact that her own father tried to keep her chained to the traditional orthodox Jewish lifestyle. The result is that we see in her writing what Louis Harap calls “a harsh, unyielding form of existence whose only saving grace was its opportunity for education and the acquisition of culture. Even this avenue of escape was closed to many who had no conception of a cultured life” (49). This “harsh, unyielding form of existence” is on full display in *Bread Givers*.

The novel opens with a scene of traditional gender roles that are the by-product of Reb’s orthodox outlook, as Sara, aged ten years, is standing in the kitchen peeling potatoes. She looks up as her sister Bessie walks in to the apartment, and Sara immediately “knew she had not yet found work” (1). We are told that this is an important fact in terms of the story, because “the whole family were hanging on Bessie’s neck for her wages. Unless she got work soon, we’d be thrown in the street to shame and to laughter for the whole world” (1). We are immediately introduced to a family that, in addition to being immersed in traditional gender roles, is also living in dire financial circumstances. The fact that the entire family is “hanging on Bessie’s Neck for her wages” points to the panoptic nature of the capitalist system. They have to get money in order to pay their rent, an example of the ever-present need for money in this system.

But with Bessie's inability to find work, acquiring the necessary financial resources is an impossible task. The family is ensnared by their own survival instincts; it is a struggle for survival at this point as opposed to struggling to keep up appearances or a false image.

We soon learn that the Smolinsky family is not the only family that is imprisoned within the Panopticon. Fania, another of the sisters who has been out searching for work, returns having had a similar experience to that of Bessie. She relates the story of standing outside a business that was advertising for workers, only to be caught in the middle of a mob fight between women trying to be the first in line for the application: "And in one place [...] there was such a crowd of us tearing the clothes from our bodies and scratching out each other's eyes in the mad pushing to get in first, that they had to call two fat policemen with thick clubs to make them stand still on a line for their turn" (2). It seems, then, that throughout New York City, there is a segment of the population that is desperate for work of any kind in order to make enough money to survive. One has to think that a scene such as the one that Fania describes here must be a strange sight for those immigrants who came to the United States in search of the "Land of Opportunity" that they'd heard so much about. It is, however, much the same situation as the members of the Rudkus family discovered in Sinclair's *The Jungle*.

This opening passage also points to is the fact that Reb, the girls' father, is not interested in going to work himself in order to support the family. Instead, as we find out, he is interested only in furthering his study of the traditional Jewish texts that he holds so sacred. He tells his family, "But my books, my holy books always were, and always will be, the light of the world. You'll see yet how all America will come to my feet to learn" (9). This is an example of Harap's idea of those who have no conception of a cultured life. Reb has no interest in assimilating to the American lifestyle, because his worldview is firmly planted in the past traditional ways. He

serves as a representation of the traditions which so many immigrants had to leave behind. However, he refuses to abandon those traditions, instead suggesting that he will impart those traditions to the Americans and thereby change the culture which he found upon arriving in the United States. James Giles writes of this active resistance on Reb's part, "The father's selfish and otherworldliness forces his wife and ultimately three of his daughters [...] to focus exclusively on their economic survival, destroying any possibility of their constructing a new, distinctly American identity" (128). His refusal to assimilate has effects beyond his own existence. The lives of his daughters are also affected by his attachment to the traditional lifestyle he left behind, and his influence on their lives will continue to infect them with a variety of unpleasant effects.

Masha is the sister who is most immersed within the consumer culture of the United States, an immersion that is the result of both first-hand experience and ideas she acquires second-hand from other sources. All of the ideas she has regarding the lifestyles of those wealthy people that lead lives of luxury are products of the discourse, though, as they serve as manifestations of what true success looks like in this culture. Sara tells us that Masha comes home and relates to them "stories that in rich people's homes they had silver knives and forks, separate, for each person. And new-ironed tablecloths and napkins every time they ate on them" (5). She also talks about marble bathtubs, hot and cold running water, and private bathrooms. "But these millionaire things were so far over our heads that they were like fairy tales" (5-6). These fantastical trappings of wealth do have the aura of make-believe stories, but only because they are so alien to the financially destitute Smolinsky family.

Even as fairy tales, these commodities do function as controlling discourse directing the actions of Mashah, who sees herself as worthy of those beautiful things. Sara explains that Mashah said that in regard to a particular American upper-class family "everybody in the family

had a toothbrush and a separate towel for himself, ‘not like us, where we use one torn piece of a shirt for the whole family’” (6). As a way of demonstrating to the reader the power inherent in the discourse of that “fairy tale,” Sara tells us that “Mashah quietly went to the Five- and Ten-Cent Store and bought, not only a toothbrush and a separate towel for herself, but even a separate piece of soap” (6). She is subscribing to societal expectations of what it means to be upper class, expectations that are created and perpetuated by the discourse of advertising.

This beauty-related discourse began to take hold many years before Yeziarska’s novel was published, as advertisers at the end of the nineteenth century began suggesting to middle- and working-class consumers that they should seek to emulate the sanitary habits of those of the upper classes, as this sort of emulation would make them appear of a higher class than they actually were. This exact subject is one that Juliann Sivulka touches on when she writes, “By urging ordinary American people to imitate the lifestyles of the elite by buying bathtubs and creating specialized places for bathing, sanitary fixture manufacturers further validated personal cleanliness for a broad range of people” (*Stronger Than Dirt* 69). And while this specific reference is to discourse surrounding bathtubs and bathrooms, the same principle applies to Mashah’s bathing accoutrements. She feels that she is deserving of treatment normally reserved for those of a higher class, and by acquiring the things that those of that social stratum use in order to keep clean, she believes that she will give off the appearance of membership in that group. And the power of that desire to emulate as an advertising strategy is one that was a favorite of 1920s-era advertisers, as it was a powerful factor in a consumer’s decision to purchase a commodity: “Whether people knew it or not, the powerful appeal to emulation, or the desire to be like others, especially those who occupy an envied position socially or financially, emerged as a powerful buying motive” (Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes* 154).

Regardless of how much she might wish to appear as a member of the upper class, Mashah and her family are firmly rooted on the lower rungs of the American social ladder. Shena, Reb's wife and the family matriarch, does what she can to keep the family fed with the meager financial means she has, but her husband's nonchalance in regard to the realities of life within the capitalist Panopticon weighs heavily on her mind. She says to him, "Does it ever enter your head that the rent was paid the second month? That to-day we're eating the last loaf of bread that the grocer trusted me? [...] You're so busy working for Heaven that I have to suffer here such bitter hell" (10). This is the reality of life in the economy of their new home, despite Reb's suggestion that "the real food is God's Holy Torah" (11). Whereas Shena is living in the present and understands all too well the fact that capitalism dictates that they must acquire money in order to survive, Reb is still existing in the traditional—some would say mythical—past, avowing to his family that he will "be happy and thankful to live in poverty, as long as I know that our reward will be complete in Heaven" (12).

The family's situation is not entirely uncommon in the Hasidic Jewish community of New York. Phyllis Franck writes of this population, "The educational system of the Hasidic Jews places the main emphasis on religious study. It does not prepare them to participate in the economic world outside of their community" (61). What's more, in the Hasidic mindset, women are considered to be a distraction to men, whose primary obligation is to study the Torah and pray. Reb, then is leading what is to many Hasidic minds a perfectly rational and acceptable life. He is doing what his religion requires of him by putting his Torah studies ahead of everything else, including work and generating an income to help support his family. The women in the family—those who aren't expected to study the Torah and, in rare instances, are even forbidden from studying the holy text—are expected to work and bring in the money required to help the

family survive. But their life experiences as Hasidic Jews, as Franck points out, have centered on their religion, not the acquisition of skills necessary for a job.

This lack of preparation is reflected in a comment made by Shena to Muhmenkeh, as she asks rhetorically, “Who would ever dream that in America, where everything is only business and business, in such a lost corner as Hester Street lives such a fine, such a pure, silken soul as Reb Smolinsky?” (16). This question is tempered, however, by her follow-up suggestion that she wishes he were more able to apply his energies to making money for the family: “If he was only so fit for this world, like he is fit for Heaven, then I wouldn’t have to dry out the marrow from my head worrying for rent” (16). While she can appreciate and admire his faith in life-after-death and the rewards he will find there, she also understands the concrete reality of survival that is manifested in the prison in which they live.

Sara, like her mother, is cognizant of the family’s financial straits, though she doesn’t share her mother’s periodic admiration for her father’s faith in the Torah. James Giles writes of Sara’s drive to succeed in America, “Sara refuses to accept the passive, survivalist role that her father has forced on the other women in his family” (129). She is at an age where she has not been fully immersed in the traditional culture that the family left behind when they immigrated to the United States, and as such she is able to look at this new culture in which they live with arguably the most pragmatic perspective of anyone in the family. Shena has moments when she is entranced by Reb’s faith, and Mashah is only interested in attempting to emulate those of higher classes. Sara, however, has a much more practical outlook, and understands that she must work in order to provide sustenance for herself and her family.

Sara formulates a plan to buy herring from Muhmenke; she insists on paying a penny apiece for the herring, despite Muhmenkeh’s offer to give them to her for free because, as Sara

tells her, “I want to go into business like a person. I must buy what I got to sell” (21). She takes the herring and begins to sell them on the street, like a true capitalist, at two cents apiece. And the force that drives her in this quest to sell the fish is the capitalist Panopticon in all its various guises: “Nothing was before me but the hunger in our house, and no bread for the next meal if I didn’t sell the herring. No longer like a fire engine, but like a houseful of hungry mouths my heart cried, ‘Herring—herring! Two cents apiece!’” (22). She is, as Giles suggests, refusing the role of passive victim and instead taking on the role of capitalist moneymaker, a position the new commercial culture in which the family now lives demands. And given her father’s refusal to assimilate to the culture, Sara feels that she is must do it herself.

For the Smolinsky family—and countless other immigrant families just like them—one of the greatest fears in their lives is the arrival of the landlord asking for the month’s rent. We are told, “Everybody was scared to death when the landlord came around” (26), and after Reb Smolinsky hits the woman who had recently come to collect their rent, the encounter is compared to the Biblical story of David and Goliath. Hannah Hayyeh, a neighbor, believes that Reb was justified in hitting her, saying to the assembled group, “Every month of your life, whether you’re working or not working, whether you’re sick or dying, you got to squeeze out so much blood to give the leech for black walls that walk away, alive with bedbugs and roaches and mice” (27). The capitalist Panopticon never releases its prisoners once they are born in to the system. In order to have a place to live—or food to eat or clothes to wear or any other personal necessity—one has to pay rent. And that rent is due regardless of personal circumstances or the uninhabitable nature of the room being rented. The Panopticon makes no differentiation between the rich and the poor in that regard; everyone must pay. But for those immigrants who are living

day-to-day and never knowing exactly where or how they will get their next meal, the Panopticon's chains feel tighter and less forgiving.

One of the unintended consequences of Reb's striking the rent collector is that the Smolinsky family attains a degree of local notoriety, so when they begin to rent rooms in order to make money to survive, their notoriety brings people to them very quickly. Reb's actions—despite being illegal—have the same effect as advertising. The news of his mini-rebellion spreads via word-of-mouth throughout the neighborhood, and imbues Reb with a quasi-celebrity status. He becomes something akin to a celebrity spokesperson endorsing a particular product, an advertising technique that has existed even before the first patent medicines put out by Lydia Pinkham in the mid-nineteenth century relied on the visage of the kindly old woman to sell the fake medical remedy. As a result of this unintentional advertising campaign, the Smolinskies are able to quickly fill their house with boarders, which enables them to pay their own rent and save an additional sum of money every month.

The result of this new financial windfall is that the family begins to suddenly climb the financial ladder. They acquire things like a new table and mirror, as well as towels, eating utensils, and a new soup pot. The result of all of these acquisitions is that, as Sara tells us, the family “could all sit down by the table at the same time and like people” (28-29). The suggestion, on one level, is that they hadn't to this point been living like human beings. In one sense, this was very much the view many Americans had of the Jewish (and other) immigrants at the time, and this may be read as the Smolinsky family taking their first step toward being assimilated Americans who are more worthy of being treated like the human beings that they are. The consumption of these commodities, on another level, introduces the family to another component of the capitalist Panopticon, namely that of desire. Soon after describing the family's

new acquisitions, Sara makes the statement, “But the more people get, the more they want” (29). This is the essence of the fuel that drives capitalism. We as consumers are never satisfied with what we have, no matter how sure we are that possessing a particular commodity will complete the picture of a perfect life we envision.

This statement by Sara recalls the words of cultural studies scholar Celia Lury, who writes that “the actual consumption or use of goods becomes a disillusioning experience. The actuality of consumption fails to live up to the dream or the fantasy. This persistent cycle of pleasurable expectation and disappointment explains the never-ending, insatiable character of modern consumption, why people continue to shop until they drop” (51). It is that constant cycle that keeps the engine of capitalism fueled and running, and which enchains consumers perpetually within the Panopticon. And it is a never-ending cycle, even for Sara and her family: “And more and more we wanted more things, and really needed more things the more we got them” (29). The family is unwittingly being drawn deeper and deeper into the capitalist prison that comprises the culture of the United States.

Despite their apparent financial success serving as an end to their immediate survival concerns, there is an early warning that things will not continue on this way for the Smolinsky family. Shena recalls the story of her own father, a wealthy merchant who had left his money and his wheat and wine business to Reb after his death. It was a successful business that Reb should have been able to run without much trouble and, in so doing, maintain a profitable income. However, Shena explains that Reb “wanted to sing first and then attend to business. He was a smart salesman, only to sell things for less than they cost” (34). By losing money on every sale he made, Reb soon ran through the family’s money, at which point, Shena says, the family’s “only hope was to come to America, where Father thought things cost nothing at all” (34).

Another sort of advertisement—equally controlling in the nature of its discourse as its more traditional counterparts—has drawn Reb to America, namely the rumors and stories he has heard about America as the “Land of Opportunity.” However, as he and his family have all discovered at this point in the novel, those rumors and stories are not based in truth, and they have to work in order to buy the things they need for their survival.

Reb tries to leverage the fact that everything has a price in a capitalist system by trying to sell off his oldest daughter Bessie as a wife to Berel Bernstein. It is an ironic twist on the traditional idea of a young woman’s dowry, the property that a bride brings to the marriage and which is subsequently given to her new husband. In this case, Reb argues that Berel should pay him for taking his daughter away: “The other children don’t earn much. And they need more than they earn. They’d spend every cent on themselves if I’d only let them. But Bessie spends nothing on herself. She gives me every cent she earns. And if you marry her, you’re as good as taking away from me my living—tearing the bread from my mouth” (46). Berel’s response is to tell Reb that he is willing to marry Bessie without a dowry, but that he should not be asked to pay her father money, too. Instead, he suggests that Reb should get a job: “In America they got no use for Torah learning. In America everybody got to earn his living first. You got two hands and two feet. Why don’t you go to work?” (48). He says much the same thing to Bessie the next evening, telling her, “This is America [...] where everybody got to look out for themselves” (49). In the end, Bessie refuses to leave her father without her income, and refuses to marry Berel.

Much the same fate befalls Mashah, who falls in love with Jacob Novak, the son of a wealthy department store owner. He is described as being self-confident in terms of his social position: “He did not wear a checked vest, nor on a red necktie a gold horseshoe pin. But it breathed from his quiet things, the solid richness from the rich who didn’t have to show it off any

more” (56). Jacob comes from a family whose wealth extends back multiple generations, putting him firmly in the old-money world of subdued elegance. He is a piano player—Reb’s only objection to him is that he plays the piano on the Sabbath—and he intends to marry Mashah. This would seem to be the answer to at least one of Reb’s prayers, as he complained that “Mashah always used out her wages on herself” and “said the sooner Mashah got married the better for us all” (56). She doesn’t provide him with an income in the same way that Bessie does, so she is of no practical use to Reb. His goal at this point is to get her out of his house, and that means marriage.

His father comes to meet the family, and his presence in the humble Smolinsky house is immediately felt by the whole family as that of unimaginable wealth: “The minute his father stepped in, we saw it was the richest man that had ever been in our house” (58). The corollary to this observation by Sara and her other family members is reflected in the reaction of Jacob’s father, who we are told had a “cash-register look in his eyes, that we and our whole house weren’t worth one of his cuff buttons” (58). He immediately asks his son to accompany him on a walk, and the pair never returns. Clearly Jacob’s father has forbidden his son to marry Mashah because of her family’s low status.

This prohibition against the marriage is an upper-class manifestation of Reb’s own philosophy, specifically that marriage should serve a purpose beyond love. In Reb’s case, he believes that he should benefit financially from his daughter’s marriage, and any man who does not make enough money to help support him, too, is not worthy of his daughter. In the case of Jacob’s father, however, he believes that marriage that should serve some sort of social purpose in the sense that those of similar classes should marry. In the case of Mashah, he views her desire to marry Jacob as her attempt to elevate herself out of poverty, and he will not allow his son to

be the one to enable her to climb the economic ladder. For both men, marriage is a financial transaction that, at its core, has little to do with romantic love. Marriage for these men is just another reminder of the economic prison that is created by the capitalist system.

This point is emphasized when Fania falls in love with Morris Lipkin, a poet and journalist. Upon learning of his profession, Reb warns Fania against marrying Morris: “A writer, a poet you want for a husband? Those who sell the papers at least earn something. But what earns a poet? Do you want starvation and beggary for the rest of your days? Who’ll pay your rent? Who’ll buy your bread? Who’ll put shoes on the feet of your children?” (68). The irony, of course, is that Reb is unable to see his own hypocrisy in his condemnation of Morris. Reb produces nothing and relies on the income provided by his daughters and the boarders his wife manages, while he himself studies all day. But his mind is not to be changed, as he tells her, “A poor man is a living dead one. Even dead you got to have money. The undertaker won’t bury you, unless you have the price of a grave” (69-70). This is yet another example of capitalism’s panoptic power: Even in death, one has to be able to pay in order to have what is considered a proper (or, alternatively, “socially acceptable”) burial.

Reb decides to intervene on behalf of his daughters and enlist the assistance of Zaretsky the matchmaker. Shena reminds him that this will require a dowry for his daughters, to which he replies that his genetics should qualify as dowry enough: “With me for their father they get their dowries in their brains and in their good looks,” to which Shena replies that it is she who should be credited for the girls’ looks. Unfortunately for Morris, at the same time that he comes to the house to argue his case for marrying Fania, Reb is just returning from his initial meeting with Zaretsky. He brings with him Moe Mirsky, who is described as “dazzling us with the glitter of

his shining wealth” (73). Reb acts as if Morris isn’t even in the room, and the latter leaves the room “like an unwanted ghost” (74).

Mirsky is a diamond dealer, a man that Reb describes as “a person of the world, and not a pale, half-starved poet” (75). His motivation for wanting him as a son-in-law soon emerges, when, after Mirsky has presented Mashah expensive diamond jewelry, “With this diamond-dealer in the family, all our troubles are over. You’ll see he’ll cover Mashah with diamonds. And through her riches, all of us will get rich quick. Think only of the future for the other girls with a sister in the diamond business” (77). Reb is again relying on his daughters—and, he hopes, at least one of their husbands—to support him so as to allow him to continue avoiding doing any physical work outside of studying. The two become engaged, and we are told that Mashah “didn’t care so much about Moe Mirisky or his diamonds. [...] But like all of us she was sick and tired from the house and crazy to get away” (77). Insofar as Reb cares about her marriage, however, whether or not she cares about him or not is of no concern. His sole focus is on ensuring his own future financial stability.

Buoyed by this success, Reb brings home another young man, Abe Schmukler, who buys cloaks and suits in New York to sell in Los Angeles. He begins to court Fania by bringing her gifts that serve to stoke envious feelings amongst her friends: “From the outside, she looked all excited with happiness, because every day Abe Schmukler brought her new things: dresses, cloaks, suits, candies, and flowers, till all the girls on the block were green with envy” (79). This bestowing of gifts upon Fania—which is intended, on some level, to elicit those feelings of envy from other girls—is reflective of Thorstein Veblen’s contention that tangible displays of success serve to induce in others a sense of envy and a desire to emulate that success (11-12). In the case of the gifts Fania is receiving from Abe, they serve a dual purpose: They simultaneously serve as

tangible reminders of Abe's business acumen and Fania's fortune in being courted by such a man. In both cases, the gifts are a demonstration of the "efficiency" that Veblen mentions, because in both cases those gifts are their own form of trophy.

Both women marry their respective suitors, and many in the neighborhood are overtly jealous of the family's good fortune. One neighbor suggests that for the Smolinsky family "America is a golden country," while another posits, "We must dry our heads worrying for bread, while they bathe themselves in milk and soak themselves in honey" (81). While Veblen and others might suggest that this is the inevitable envy that results from the sort of survival-of-the-fittest contest that goes on within a capitalist system, Sara feels a sense of depression resulting from the loss of friends that came about because of their family having what she calls "a little luck" (81). She likens the situation to "Dogs envying another dog a bone" (81). On another level, it may be read as those friends looking at Sara and her family as beginning the transformation into "real" Americans, a recurring theme throughout the novel. Andrew Heinze suggests of Jewish immigrants at this time, "The unique attitude of Jews toward America motivated them to view items of consumption as foundation stones of American identity" (197). Because consumable commodities were seen as distinctly American, the acquisition of those items was seen as fostering the process of full assimilation to American culture.

Her father, however, feels no such depression or guilt. Rather, he revels in the fact that his daughters are now that much better able to provide for his needs. One evening when there is no meat for dinner, Reb tells his wife, "With the hard brain work I do day and night, I can't live on the flavor of onions!" (81). He has not only continued with his study of the Torah, but has intensified his study, given that he feels even less financial pressure than he did before his daughters were married. He expresses that relief in response to his wife's telling him that the

price of meat increased by a nickel per pound: “With one son-in-law a diamond dealer and another a cloaks-and-suits manufacturer I ought to have at least one man’s meal a day” (82).

At that moment, Mashah enters and Reb tells her that it is her duty to provide him with meat, given that her husband is a diamond dealer. Mashah replies, “But he lied. He was only a salesman in a jewelry store. [...] He lost his job—lost it—because he let me wear the diamonds he was sent to sell” (83). Reb and the rest of the family had been taken in by Moe’s lies because they had been blinded by the appearance of his wealth. So deeply were they entrenched within the capitalist Panopticon that they couldn’t see that he was only dressing the part of a wealthy man. Mashah stays with the family while her husband looks for a new job, which he eventually finds working as a shoe clerk.

Reb’s dream of a wealthy son-in-law, at that point, falls squarely on the shoulders of Abe Schmukler alone. In what is termed “the first real letter” from Fania, she tells the family that Abe is a gambler (84). Although she has the trappings of wealth, she wants to give it up because of the fact that she is lonely and feels unloved by her husband: “So lonely did she get, that she wanted to leave all the riches of cloaks and suits, and the beautiful houses with fruits and flowers of that dream city” (85). By forcing his daughters to marry for money rather than love, Reb has learned that wealth isn’t always what it seems from the outside. While it can serve the function of making others envious because they see a rich man’s possessions and wish to have the same things, often wealth can serve as a veneer, underneath which that perfect image falls apart under closer inspection. Because of that truth, Sara vows that she’ll “never let no father marry me away to any old *yok*” (85, italics in original). She will marry the man with whom she is in love, regardless of his financial situation in life. She will be responsible for her own happiness and her own financial well-being, too. As James Giles writes, “Unlike her father, [Sara] will adapt her

Jewish heritage to the new reality of America and redefine it in the context of the American Dream” (129).

Despite his failures at matching his own daughters with wealthy men, Reb achieves again a sort of celebrity status—like he did when he punched the rent collector—this time as a matchmaker. He goes as far as to write an advertisement for his services, which appears in the *Ghetto News*. As is the case with many advertisements both then and now, Reb inflates his own merits and exaggerates his abilities. He claims to have “Girls and widows, with five hundred to five thousand dollars dowry” and “All kinds of men, doctors, lawyers, wealthy widowers” (91). His ad closes with the promise that he will “settle you with good luck for life” (91) if you only trust him in your matchmaking affairs. Of course, if he actually *did* have access to any of these men he infers that he represents—notice that he never claims to *actually* represent them, but rather just lists generic people—there is no doubt at all that he would have already matched (or attempted to match) the wealthiest with his own daughters.

In support of this point, when Zalmon the fish-peddler comes in to inquire about Reb’s services, Zalmon hints that, in addition to the money he makes from selling fish, his new bride would be able to “eat from the best—carp, flounders, pike—anything she could only wish herself to have” (93). This comment goes straight to what Reb desires in a son-in-law—specifically the ability to feed him—and he tells his wife later that night that “this would be a good chance to for us to get rid of our old maid” (94). By “our old maid,” he means Bessie, who is now well past the traditional age range for marriage. If he can marry Bessie to the fish-peddler, then he believes that he will have one less person in the house that requires feeding and access to all the fish he could ever want for his dinner. Additionally, he will get paid for his matchmaking services. When he decides to pursue making this match, Reb turns into the stereotypical salesman, telling

Zalmon, “I got a luck match for you, if you only want to pay the price” (96). The family’s “old maid” has suddenly, magically been transformed into “a luck match.” She is, Reb assures him, “A golden child with a diamond heart” (97). When Zalmon agrees to the match, Reb injects the idea that she won’t come for free: “See what I’m giving up for you! And all I ask from you is a little money to start myself a business, so as to let go her wages” (97). Because she has been the primary breadwinner in the family to this point, Bessie’s departure would leave Reb without a reliable source of income, so he needs to exchange her as a bride for the seed money he’ll need to start a business.

As a result of his agreeing to allow Bessie to marry Zalmon, Reb is paid five-hundred dollars, which he plans to use to “get into some quick money-making thing that will not take up too many hours a day, so I could get most of my time for learning” (111). When his wife suggests that he get a job as a Rabbi, he differentiates between himself and what he derogatorily terms “Americanized Jews” (111). He concludes that the best option for him to make his quick fortune is by purchasing a grocery store that he saw advertised in the classified section. The ad claims that the current owner is leaving for Europe on short notice and is willing to sell his store in New Jersey “worth four thousand, for four hundred dollars” (112). The only catch is that the sale must be in cash and it must be made immediately.

Reb is confident in his ability to earn a great deal of money quickly by purchasing the store, as he tells Shena, “In America, there is no need to be poor, if you only got the brains and money to begin something” (112). This comment serves to demonstrate the capitalist spirit that is somewhat latent in Reb, but which makes itself known periodically; it also serves to illustrate his naivete and greed. He knows that all he needs to do in order to break the cycle of poverty is to work. That is the capitalist mantra, though he has seemed unwilling to this point to subscribe to

it. But he doesn't want to just go to work as a member of the proletariat; he wants to be a bourgeoisie capitalist who has his own business. He doesn't want to work for the American Dream; he wants to buy it pre-packaged as if the Dream itself were a commodity one could purchase at a particular store. As we will see, his self-perceived business acumen abandons him when he needs it most, and he falls for a scam that entrenches him further within the dungeons of the capitalist Panopticon.

Reb travels to New Jersey to inquire about purchasing the grocery store, and he is amazed by the sheer volume of customers and commodities in the store. When Shena and Sara arrive to meet him, Shena is suspicious of why any store owner would want to give up what appears to be an incredibly lucrative operation for such a small sum of money, Reb assures her that all is well and that the owner simply "wants to go back to the old country, to see his relations and show off to the neighbors how much money he made in America" (114). Reb believes that the owner has achieved the Veblenian version of the American Dream, and he wants to display his trophies so as to evoke those feelings of desire and envy from his friends and neighbors. What Reb doesn't realize, though is that the whole display—from the endless stream of customers to the well-stocked shelves to the seventy-eight dollars and eighty-nine cents the owner claims he made that day—is all part of an elaborate sales pitch. It is, in essence, a living advertisement designed to lure in a naïve buyer like Reb. Even the other man who Reb claims wanted to buy the store ahead of him but was passed over for Reb because he was Italian whereas Reb is a Jew was all part of the scheme.

But the family is unaware of all of those unscrupulous machinations at first, as they are blinded by what they see as their unbelievable good fortune. Shena says joyfully, "The sun is begging to shine for us. After all our black years, we lived to see our own store bought in

America!” (116). She begins to plan out future purchases that she’ll make with their new-found wealth, starting with the ubiquitous symbol of the American Dream, a “bought house, with steam heat and hot running water and a white marble sink” (116). Reb, on the other hand, is more interested in ensuring that he remains faithful to his religious teachings by tithing the first hundred dollars they earn from the store to charity in order to show their collective thanks to God. To this, his wife asks a pointed question that highlights the inequalities inherent in the capitalist system: “How can you ever become a business man, in America, if the minute you get a few dollars in one hand, you want to give it away with the other to charity?” (117).

Shena has here unwittingly acknowledged her assimilation into the commercial culture of the United States. She has embraced one of the principal ideals of capitalism, specifically the idea that consumers have to look out for their own best interests first and foremost, and God has nothing to do with capitalist advancement.⁷ Giving charity or other financial assistance to those less fortunate is not a way to climb the capitalist socio-economic ladder. Those people in need of assistance are just other prisoners within the Panopticon, and giving them money won’t change their condition. Doing so will only strengthen the bonds holding the Smolinsky family. The conflict exhibited between the two different outlooks as to how best to spend their money—money they have yet to earn, ironically—highlights the division between the family members. Sara remarks to herself in regard to this division, “If only there were plenty of money between them, how happy they would be together, fighting in fun, instead of nagging and galling each other fighting over pennies” (117). While this may, on one level, be read as the musings of a

⁷ This is one point in which the capitalists and the socialists would seem to agree, as Karl Marx famously wrote, “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions” (qtd. in Raines 171, italics in original).

young girl who wishes her parents wouldn't fight, it also points to a much deeper issue, namely the power of money in American life, and it highlights the panoptic power of the economic system. What Sara can't possibly comprehend, however, is the fact that there is no escape from this prison, regardless of one's income level. As we have seen in past instances (and will see in future ones), a higher rank in society does not negate the effects of the prison-like atmosphere of capitalism. Rather, those bonds simply manifest in different ways.

But for the moment, the family is almost drunk on happiness of their prospects. They will have a steady income and plenty of food to eat; to their mind, it is only a matter of time before they will be members of the American upper class. Lost in her dreams of buying a piano and taking lessons, Sara inadvertently knocks over a stack of oatmeal boxes that had served as part of the store owner's fraudulent display. Her mother picks up a box and turns to Reb, saying, "Business man! What have you? You got air in your hand" (119). She has come to the sick realization that the boxes on display were empty, and it dawns on her that her husband has fallen victim to a scam. A closer examination of the store's contents reveals that she is correct in that assessment: "The shelves had goods only in the front row. The whole space behind was empty. Mother stabbed a knife into the tub of butter and hit into hard wood beneath the thin spread which had been plastered against the fake wooden bottom" (119).

The extent of the scam to which Reb fell prey comes to light as they look at the prices advertised on the store windows. It is Shena who explains the financial component of the scam, the piece that ensured a store full of customers eager to hand over their money: "No wonder the customers pushed on each other rushing to buy in this store [...]. What women would not kill each other crowding to a store where they could get ketchup for seven cents when it costs fifteen cents?" (120).

But it is only the next morning that the final piece of the advertising puzzle falls into place and the family truly understands how well the owner had orchestrated the sale of the store to Reb. When the Italian man who had expressed interest in buying the store but who had been passed over because of his nationality comes in to the store, Reb tells him that he has suddenly been called out to California to see his daughter. The suggestion is that he'd be willing to let the Italian man buy the store from him, to which the Italian man replies, "Me? [...] Me buy this store? What kind of sucker do you think I am?" (122). He goes on to explain, "The roll of one-dollar bills that I had yesterday with a fifty on the outside belonged to my late employer—the gentleman who sold you this store. I offered to buy it and displayed this roll six times yesterday, before you came. But you were the man we had been waiting for all day" (122). The scam here is simple; the owners had simply been waiting for a naïve buyer. One is reminded of the words spoken by Charles Austin Bates: "Advertisers should never forget that they are addressing stupid people. It is really astonishing how little a man may know, and yet keep out of the way of the trolley cars" (qtd. in Fox 37). Reb was blinded by the advertising display that was laid out before him and refused to see the reality behind the veneer.

In an attempt to defend himself, Reb invokes two names familiar to Americans at the time, Rockefeller and Morgan. He tells his wife, "They all began with empty hands. Their only capital was hope, courage to work out their ideas. I got a million burning ideas flying through my head. But I'm cursed with a wife who hangs like a stone on my neck—a nag, a *noodnik* that blocks out my sunshine" (133, italics in original). The irony in this statement stems from the fact that Reb is misrepresenting both J. P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller as entrepreneurs who made their fortunes from nothing but hard work. In the case of Morgan, he was born in a wealthy family in Hartford, Connecticut, and never worried about having enough money at any point in

his life. Rockefeller, by contrast, was the son of a con artist who made money by selling fake medicines to unsuspecting customers like Reb. While both men rose to be financial icons in American business, to suggest that both “began with empty hands” and that they had “courage to work out their ideas” ignores the truth about the upbringings of both men.

It is at this point that Sara decides to make her break from her father, setting out to find her own way in the world. It is her own declaration of independence, as she tells her father, “I’m going to live my own life. Nobody can stop me. I’m not from the old country. I’m American!” (138). It is at once a statement of defiance and a statement of ignorance, because she does not have the practical experience to understand the life she is about to begin or the difficulties associated with it.

But upon seeing her sister Bessie working with Zalmon selling fish—Sara watches them “as they fought for their life with the bargaining *yentehs*” (139, italics in original)—the truth becomes apparent. In the everyday transaction of buying and selling fish—a food source—we can see the manifestation of the capitalist Panopticon, as buyers seek to pay the lowest price in order to acquire the food they need to survive, while the sellers seek to sell for the highest price so they can make enough money to support themselves in the capitalist system. The scene encapsulates the struggle inherent in capitalism, with both sides offering compelling arguments. One buyer says to Zalmon, “My husband sweats blood for every penny. Why do you squeeze from me the last cent?” to which Zalmon replies, “You think I steal my goods? And I got to pay rent” (140). This exchange serves to illustrate one of the angles of the panoptic power of the economic system: the business owner has expenses and the customer has a limited amount of money to spend. As a result, both sides are trapped.

A similar scene plays out at Mashah's house, where Sara goes after being told to leave by Zalmon. When she comes to the house, Sara sees her sister engaged in an argument with a milkman, who tells Mashah, "You didn't pay last week's bill, and if you can't pay now, we'll have to stop the milk" (145). Mashah pleads with him, saying that the children need milk. The milkman tells her, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I got babies of my own. If I don't turn in this collection, I'll lose my job" (145). Again we see the interrelated nature of the capitalist system. Mashah can't afford to pay for the milk her children need, but the milkman has to collect the money or else he'll lose his job. Both sides of the equation make a compelling case for why they should get what they want; both sides are imprisoned by capitalism.

We find out, too, that Mashah's husband spends money freely without concern for household expenses. Mashah tells Sara, "Moe is working all right. But he bought himself a new suit last week and a new overcoat this week, so there wasn't anything left for the house" (146). She goes on to tell Sara, "With Moe for my bread giver I'm too dirt-poor to help you" (147). Her worries continue, as the meter shows that the gas is running low. But because she has no money with which to pay the gas company, Mashah has no idea of what she'll do. She asks rhetorically, "Can I never run away from this money—money—money!" The answer is no, she cannot. In a capitalist system, there is no escape from the need for money in order to acquire things, be they necessities like milk for children or luxuries like a new suit. Moe's answer to his wife's concerns about money is that she simply stop spending: "Who tells you to make bills? If you no money, then don't buy anything" (150). When Sara tries to defend her sister from this absurd argument, Moe threatens to break her neck if she doesn't leave, so she departs and begins to figure out a way to live on her own terms in this capitalist world.

Immediately after leaving Mashah's house, Sara recalls a story she had read in a newspaper, a story about a girl who was "slaving away in the shop. Her hair already turning gray, and nothing had ever happened to her. Then suddenly she began to study in the night school, then college. And worked and studied, on and on, till she became a teacher in the schools" (155). To Sara's mind, then, secular education—as opposed to the religious education her father so vehemently endorses—is the key to success in America. However, the road to getting that education will be far more difficult for Sara than the article suggests. In *Bread Givers*, as James Giles says, "education is again seen as the key to attainment of the dream, but the obstacles to that attainment are considerable" (127).

One of the obstacles Sara faces is finding a room where she can live by herself and study at night. She describes herself as being like "a drowning person clinging to a rope" when she finally finds a room that she can have to herself, but she is forced to pay the first month's rent in advance in order to secure possession of the room. As a result, she feels the pinch of the Panopticon tightening its grasp around her: "Only three dollars and sixty-five cents between me and hunger. A job. And I must get it at once" (160). Though she might have found a place to stay and paid for a month's rent, capitalism is like a hungry animal that must be fed constantly in order to keep it at bay. This reality is driven home to her when she writes out on a piece of paper her budget for the week. She has, by this point, secured work in a laundry, but after factoring in carfare, rent, and her other expenses, she learns that she'll have thirty-four cents a day for food. She asks, then answers, herself, "How could I have enough to eat from that? But that's all I can have now. Somehow it's got to do" (165). It is another example of the struggle between the human will to survive and the imprisoning power of capitalism.

This is the same sort of basic-level survival that we saw with the Rudkus family in *The Jungle*, a family of immigrants that, like Sara, was essentially a mishap or illness away from being homeless and starving. And just as the Rudkuses experienced unanticipated events that cost them money they hadn't budgeted, so, too, does Sara. In one instance, she burns a shirt that she is ironing at work, with the result that she is charged three dollars out of her paycheck for ruining the shirt. It is exactly the sort of cost that can destroy her, as she tells us, "Three dollars out from my wages, when every fraction of a penny was counted out where it had to go. Maybe for weeks I'd have to live on dry bread to make up the loss" (166).

Sara's sister Fania worries that Sara has focused herself too much on working and studying, and that she is neglecting her social life and, more specifically, her search for a husband who can take care of her financially. To that end, Fania takes it upon herself to arrange for her to meet Max Goldstein, a man who is going into a business partnership with Fania's husband. She soon learns that Max is obsessed with making money, as he tells her, "Money-making is the biggest game in America. At the lodge meetings I combine my business and my pleasure. It's meeting people. Matching wits. If my luck keeps up, I'll have enough in a few years to sit back and live on my income" (196). He goes on to tell her, "I can have college graduates working for me, for my agents, my bookkeepers, my lawyers. I can hire and fire them. And they, with all their education, are under my feet, just because I got the money" (199).

On one level, this sort of self-confidence and drive would portend an end to Sara's financial woes. However, his self-confidence soon turns into its own sort of self-promotion, as Max tells her, "I know I'm a good catch. No wonder all kinds of women are after me" (199). She realizes, however, that she will only be another accessory in his life, a trophy: "To him, a wife would only be another piece of property" (199). In the end, she acknowledges that if were to

allow herself to fall in love with him, she would eventually grow to hate him. Instead, she devotes herself even more fully to her studies in her quest to achieve her version of the American Dream.

At her first dance as a college student Sara learns that her sister Mashah, who as a young girl was so concerned with her clothes and appearance, understood the true nature of American youth. Sara discovers that “it wasn’t character or brains that counted. Only youth and beauty and clothes—things I never had and never could have” (220). The reason she can’t them is because they cost money she cannot afford to spend; the genetic gift of intelligence supposedly bestowed upon her by her father counts for nothing in this social world. She then asks herself a telling question that points to the inherent nature of capitalism: “Was there no escape? Will I never lift myself to be a person among people?” (220). The answer, in short, is that no, she will never be able to escape. Even when she graduates from college and goes on to teach, she will find out that the laws of capitalism do not discriminate against social classes. No amount of education can change that reality. Ironically, she gets so focused on trying to save money in order to buy clothes that she is unable to work as hard as she would like in her geometry class, which she ends up failing. As a result, she learns another hard lesson: education costs money, too, regardless of the grade one earns.

After graduating and returning to New York City, Sara is immediately thrust into the world of consumer culture that is far beyond what she might have experienced in school. Under the guise of looking for clothing for her new job as a teacher, she walks down Fifth Avenue, “devouring with my eyes the wonderful shop windows,” windows that serve to lure in customers just the same way that her father was lured into buying the grocery store in New Jersey. She muses to herself, “The dark night of poverty was over. I had fought my way up into the sunshine

of plenty” (238). However, as she will inevitably discover, that elevation comes with its own set of requirements she’ll have to maintain, maintenance that will cost money.

But before she can truly understand the nature of capitalism, Sara goes to see her parents on Hester Street, dressed in her new clothes. She learns that her mother is dying, though her father remains as devoted to his studies as ever. Her sisters are also gathered together in the room, and Sara remarks about the change in their appearances, change wrought by hard work and suffering under the yoke of capitalism: “How changed they were. Six years of poverty had pinched Mashah the beautiful into a ragged *yenteh*. And Bessie was grayer and drabber than ever before” (247, italics in original). Fania, however, is unimpressed by the new clothes Sara is wearing, as she remarks derogatorily, “Anyone can see a mile off Sara’s a school teacher” (247). Thus, while two of her sisters have spent the ensuing years since their departure in hard work with little to show for it, we can assume from her response to her sister’s appearance that Fania has continued to play the role of domestic trophy for her wealthy husband, allowing herself to be shown off to his friends as something to be coveted.

And while her mother is overly impressed with Sara’s educational accomplishments, her father is, predictably, put out by the fact that she is no longer giving him money on which to live. He says to his wife’s announcement that Sara is a teacher, “A lot I have from it. She’s only good to the world, not to her father. Will she hand me her wages from school as a dutiful daughter should?” (248). His hypocrisy is stunning, as this man has spent his life studying in order to bring the wisdom of his religion to the world through his presence, all without doing any sort of practical work that would bring in money for the family. However, now that his daughter has done much the same thing—with the added caveat that she will also be bringing in money as a result of her job—he criticizes her for not being any use to him because she is not giving him

money. He follows this up by suggesting that he, in fact, paid for Sara's education because he lost the wages she had been bringing prior to her departure: "It cost me enough, her education, all those years of wages that I lost" (249). His years of reliance on others providing him with the means to survive has blinded him to the realities of life under capitalism. He has been imprisoned for so long and in such tight straits that his absurd claims seem perfectly valid to him.

Sara, however, has learned, through both her experiences and her education, that to truly assimilate into American culture requires a capitulation to the forces of the capitalist prison. This understanding is on full display at her mother's funeral. Jewish custom calls for surviving family members to rend their clothing immediately prior to the deceased's body being lowered into the grave. Sara is the final member of her family to be confronted with rending her clothing, and she refuses, telling the undertaker, "I feel terrible enough without tearing my clothes" (255). When she is told that it has to be done—because it is Biblical law—she replies bluntly, "I don't believe this. It's my only suit, and I need it for work. Tearing it wouldn't bring Mother back to life again" (255). This is, to the minds of the orthodox Jews in attendance, outright blasphemy, and Sara says, "A hundred eyes burned on me their condemnation" (255). However, it is the verbal insult that is the most telling. She is called an "Americanerin" (255) by the assembled mourners, which translates literally to "a female American." However, the message is clear: Sara is no longer a part of her Jewish immigrant community, as she has abandoned those people. She is now a fully-assimilated American who understands that the cost associated with purchasing a new suit is higher than the cost of being viewed as having abandoned the traditions of her homeland.

Soon after his wife's death, Reb marries Mrs. Feinstein, the widow who lives in the apartment above the Smolinksies. Soon after their marriage, however, the new Mrs. Smolinsky

tells Sara, “There’s trouble enough [...]. Your father don’t earn a cent. He gives me nothing to live on. There’s not a penny in the house since yesterday. What will become of us? How is the old man going to get along if you children have deserted him?” (263). In a conflation of the various complaints lodged against Reb by his family, Mrs. Feinstein is playing both sides of the argument against Sara. On one hand, she is echoing the same words used by the other girls and their mother, namely that Reb doesn’t work and doesn’t do anything to support the family. At the same time, she is parroting Reb’s arguments against his own daughters, specifically that is their responsibility to see to it that he is taken care of.

She is a prisoner in the Panopticon, one who may be seen as both a prisoner of necessity and a prisoner of conspicuous consumption. When Sara inquires as to where all of her father’s lodge money has gone—the money he received as a result of his wife’s dying from various religious and social organizations of which Reb is a member—Mrs. Feinstein replies, “What about this furniture? I had to fix up a new house, and it all cost money” (263). She has spent the entirety of the lodge money on satiating her own consumptive desires, something that Sara cannot abide, especially when she notices what Reb’s new wife is wearing: “Pink ribbons peeped out from a new corset cover. Silk stockings, new shoes. All of Mother’s death money on her back. And she demanding more, like a leech” (263). Mrs. Feinstein has been imprisoned within the conspicuous consumption “tier” of the Panopticon, as she was disciplined by the discourse to buy those things deemed necessary for a “proper” home for a woman of her self-perceived socio-economic status. At the same time, and as a result of giving in to the discourse’s temptations, she now finds herself imprisoned in the survival “tier” of the prison, as she is now forced to plead for money in order to eat.

Mrs. Feinstein soon divulges the fact that she married Reb because he told her that his daughters would pool their resources in order to ensure his financial comfort going forward. In this way, she is a refrain of the gold digger archetype we saw in Edith Wharton's *Custom of the Country*. Marriage for her was simply a way to acquire the funds necessary to secure for her a particular level of luxury. As she tells Sara, "I married to better myself. I'm not his servant to wait on him for nothing" (264). She considers marriage a job, and she expects to be paid for it accordingly. She threatens to pursue legal action against Reb if he doesn't go to work, at which point Reb invokes an ironic twist of his thinking, namely that of relying on American secular law to defend his refusal to go to work: "I've just come from the lawyer. He told me no man over sixty can be arrested for not earning money for his wife. You're younger and healthier and they'll put you to work to support me. Thank God, some laws of America are yet made by men!" (265). He has narrowly averted imprisonment in a physical jail through the laws of man; but he is still imprisoned in the metaphorical one through the laws of capitalism.

By the end of the novel, Sara has realized that there is no way for her to escape the capitalist Panopticon. She tells us in a moment of reflection, "But in my rebellious youth, I thought I could escape by running away. And now I realized that the shadow of the burden was always following me, and here I stood face to face with it again" (295). She is, in this moment, contemplating having her ailing father move in with her so that she can take care of him at the end of his life. He is the burden that she must carry, financially, at this point in her life. She knows, however, that the burden will always be there, even if not in the form of her father. She acknowledges as much when she says, "It wasn't just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me" (297). She is referring to generations of Jewish scholars who preceded her father, men whose teachings would always inform her own existence.

But at the same time, we may read this as the fact that her burden—whether that burden be financial or moral—was there before she was born and will be there after she has died. In the years between those two polar points, she will remain trapped in the Panopticon of capitalism, just as those generations were before her and just as those generations after her will also be.

The overt conspicuous consumption manifested in Mrs. Feinstein's character and the anti-Semitism that was prevalent in *Bread Givers* are themes that reflect the cultural norms of the United States during the 1920s. Advertising was growing into a major communicative force that worked its sales magic on the docile body of Americans eager to join in the consumption movement. Manufacturers were quick to meet the needs—and to invent new needs—for consumers by producing vast numbers of different commodities, all promising consumers magical outcomes, a message reinforced by the advertising discourse. It was a time of fantastic economic growth, and Americans were enjoying the party, living like it would last forever. That belief is at the core of *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel of American excess.

The Great Gatsby

The sport of baseball has long been called America's national pastime, though its origins as an organized activity have multiple sources, including different games popular in eighteenth-century England. Despite the game's uncertain origins, it is unquestionably one of the most popular sports in the United States today, a popularity that was even stronger in the first half of the twentieth century. W. A. Phelon, a writer for *Baseball Magazine*, in an October 1910 article said that American baseball parks afforded spectators "the greatest display of pure democracy that can be found in any nation, any city, any gathering" (qtd. in Cottrell 6). The founding spirit of America was manifested on the baseball diamond. Adding to this, Phelon also said, "The ball

field is the real crucible, the melting-pot wherein the rival races are being mixed, combined and molded to the standard of real citizenship and the requirements of the true American” (qtd. in Cottrell 6). Baseball, then, is a mirror of American culture, and the changes to the sport have reflected changes in society.

That reflection hasn’t always been a positive one, however, as in the case of the 1919 World Series between the Chicago White Sox and the Cincinnati Reds, which ended with speculation of games being fixed by players to ensure a Cincinnati final victory in what came to be known colloquially as the “Black Sox Scandal.” Around the same time that Americans were questioning the purity of the institution of professional baseball, the United States Congress was passing legislation that outlawed the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcohol within the United States. The Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which ushered in the era of Prohibition in the United States, went into effect on January 17, 1920, and wasn’t repealed until 1933 when the Twenty-First Amendment was ratified on December 5 of that year, which repealed the Eighteenth Amendment. The Twenty-First Amendment has the distinction of being the only Constitutional amendment that repeals a previously-adopted amendment.

Ironically, with the outlawing of alcohol, Americans seemed to crave it all the more. As Edward Behr suggests, “There was an almost immediate, nationwide change in drinking habits. It became the time thing to do, among students, flappers, and respectable middle-class Americans all over the country, to defy the law—as much a manifestation of personal liberty as a thirst for alcohol” (89). Of course, all of those individuals who had “a thirst for alcohol” required someone to acquire the liquor in the first place, which led to bootlegging. Consumers were willing to pay a great deal of money in order to get liquor, so those who sold it were in the position to get very wealthy. Consider the fact that during Prohibition in New York City, a bottle

of Scotch whisky sold for upwards of twenty dollars and Champagne commanded prices in excess of thirty dollars per bottle; at the same time, the average apartment in the city rented for approximately fifteen dollars per month (Funderburg 10).

It was a case of extremes, with extreme lows in the supply and extreme highs in the demand. The result is that huge fortunes were amassed during the thirteen years that alcohol was illegal in the United States, a fact that casts yet another cloud over the democratic nature of the American capitalist system. Corruption had infiltrated the championship series of the American pastime, making a few gamblers a great deal of money as a result. At the same time, corruption helped to build massive family fortunes for those brave and wily enough to break the law by smuggling and selling alcohol during Prohibition. In both cases, we see the power capitalism holds over those living under its purview. People demonstrate a remarkable willingness to go to extreme lengths—including breaking the law—in order to amass more money, and that quest for more is a by-product of the commercial culture that led to the extreme overindulgence that characterized the mid-1920s. And that theme of overindulgence—and the corruption that went along with it during the period—are at the forefront of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, arguably the decade's most quintessential novel of excessive conspicuous consumption.

Written in 1925, *The Great Gatsby* tells the story of the eccentric Jay Gatsby as seen through the eyes of the somewhat naïve narrator Nick Carraway. One of the primary lessons we as readers can take from the novel is the message regarding the danger associated with the capitalist prison, especially when the commercial culture is as mature and fully-fledged as it is presented in the novel. When everything—and everyone—becomes a commodity within a society, then the power of the Panopticon is that much stronger. *The Great Gatsby* is the canonical tale of a man who appears to have no financial worries. Instead, his carnival-esque

parties—orgies of consumption—appear to be the embodiment of conspicuous consumption on nearly every conceivable level, an appearance that seems to contradict my argument that capitalism enslaves everyone who lives under its watchful eye. However, my contention is that even Gatsby himself is a slave to capitalist acquisition in a corrupt system that privileges those willing to violate laws in the interest of getting ahead.

There is a vast reservoir of scholarship focused on Fitzgerald's critique of capitalism, and to offer a comprehensive literature review within the confines of this work would be nearly impossible. To that end, I have made the choice to include here the scholarly works that are most closely related to my own argument. Regarding Fitzgerald's presentation of this corrupt American Eden, Lois Tyson argues that the pursuit of the American dream is at the core of Fitzgerald's criticism of capitalism. For Tyson, Gatsby's never-ending quest to "acquire" Daisy Buchanan represents the reality that capitalism enslaves everyone, regardless of status. Ross Posnock offers an argument that Fitzgerald's attacks on capitalism go beyond those of mere social critique and demonstrate the same sort of Marxist leanings one might expect to find in Upton Sinclair or other avowed socialist writers. Finally, Lauren Rule-Maxwell offers a micro-examination of sorts, by interpreting the scene in which Gatsby throws his shirts all over his bedroom for Daisy's benefit through the lens of John Keats' poetry. She concludes that the scene, like the rest of the novel, is a critique of American materialism at every level.

The novel is, when examined through a Foucauldian lens, more than merely a critique of the financial system or even a Marxist attack on the system. It is demonstrative of the limitless panoptic power wielded by the system, a power that entraps everyone. Fitzgerald illustrates how those who seem to have endless financial resources are as much imprisoned as those who seem to have barely enough to survive. There is no Marxist call-to-arms because the prison itself

cannot be overthrown. It is only through death that we are granted release, as Gatsby himself learns at the novel's end.

From our first introduction to Nick, we come to understand that he is financially well-off, as he tells us that his "family have been prominent, well-to-do people in this Middle Western city for three generations" (10). Nick is descended from "old money," which is why Gatsby, whose nouveau riche behavior comprises so much of the novel's plot, "represented everything for which [Nick has] an unaffected scorn" (10). Nick has come to the East in order to "learn the bond business" in New York City and rented a house on West Egg, which affords him access to both the social activities of that resort area while still being close enough to New York City to allow him to commute to his job there (11). It also places him in the position of being able to observe the goings on amongst those of the upper class so that he can comment on their activities and, when necessary, highlight the hypocrisy and unscrupulous nature of their actions.

Even though Nick's family wealth allows him to spend the summer on West Egg and that family wealth grants him a temporary respite from the capitalist prison, Nick is still beholden to the system as a whole. In addition to his business education, Nick is on a fact-finding mission; he has entered into the world so that he might observe society and report back to us, his readers, on what he has learned. But this education is all part of the panoptic schema, as Jeremy Tambling suggests: "In the Panopticon, the knowledge of a person is both coloured and colouring, and to acquire knowledge, by entering into the dominant discourse, is to learn the language of oppression" (186). By entering into the world of those unencumbered by the daily concern of finding enough money to survive on a day-to-day basis, Nick has become a member of Marx's bourgeoisie; he is essentially now one of the oppressors, albeit unintentionally so. This is, to my mind, Fitzgerald's way of suggesting that there is no way for one to be altruistic in a capitalist

society, because one is either of the oppressed class or the oppressing class. In capitalist terms, one is either part of the demand (oppressed) class or the supply (oppressing) class. To Fitzgerald's way of thinking, there is no middle class.

It is clear that, initially, Nick is impressed by the gaudy and overt displays of wealth he sees, especially those of Tom Buchanan, the husband of Nick's cousin Daisy: "His family were enormously wealthy—even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach—but now he'd left Chicago and come East in a fashion that rather took your breath away: for instance, he'd brought down string of polo ponies from Lake Forest. It was hard to imagine that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that" (14). Tom's overt displays of wealth are suggestive, to Nick's mind, of a freedom from concern in regard to money; Nick's naivete in the matter of finances are the reason for his way of thinking at the beginning of the novel. Nick will come to realize that Tom is as much imprisoned within the capitalist Panopticon as anyone else. In fact, he will come to learn that Tom is actually in a *tighter* grip of the imprisoning shackles than those without money strictly *because* he has so much money. In *The Great Gatsby*, we will see the truth inherent in Thorstein Veblen's comment, "All classes are in a measure engaged in the pecuniary struggle, and in all classes the possession of the pecuniary traits counts towards the success and survival of the individual" (180).

Tom Buchanan's material possessions are a primary indication of the commercial culture in which he is fully submerged, and his house is a showcase for those things. He tells Nick, in a seemingly nonchalant tone, "I've got a nice place here" (16) as a way of introducing Nick to the riches that surround him. The landscaping around the house includes an Italian-style garden and a rose garden that occupies a half-acre of land, indicating that Tom's property is massive. Of this type of conspicuous consumption—property ownership—Veblen writes, "Property is still of the

nature of trophy, but, with the cultural advance, it becomes more and more a trophy of successes scored in the game of ownership carried on between the members of the group under the quasi-peaceable methods of nomadic life” (21). Thus Tom’s home and the land upon which it sits both serve as emblems of his success as well as a vault in which to display the other trophies he has acquired as a result of his personal wealth. He is quick to tell Nick that the home “belonged to Demaine, the oil man” (16), a historical fact that suggests that the home, like Tom himself, has a wealthy lineage, and he tells this to Nick as a way of further highlighting the home’s power to instill in others a sense of envy.

Aside from the polo ponies that Tom keeps on his property, he also owns a motor boat and a few expensive automobiles. The interior of the home is decorated extravagantly yet tastefully, reflective of Tom’s status as a member of the old-money upper-class, including a wine-colored rug and what is described as “an enormous couch” (16). The Buchanans also employ servants, yet another symbol of their wealth and status.

Tom goes on to tell Nick about a book he is reading, *The Rise of the Colored Empires* by an author named Goddard, explaining that “if we don’t look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific stuff; it’s been proved” (21). Extrapolating from this philosophy the idea that there is a dominant race, it can be argued that discussion of *The Rise of Colored Empires* is a metaphor for Tom’s view of the nouveau riche who live across the bay in West Egg. This negative attitude towards that area is reflected in Jordan Baker’s own reaction to learning that Nick lives in what is described as “the less fashionable of the two” (13). Nick reports to us, “‘You live in West Egg,’ she remarked contemptuously” (20). Because of the reputation that West Egg has as being the home of the new-money members of the upper class—the “less fashionable” segment of the population for some arbitrary reason—the fact that Nick

lives there immediately makes him the object of contempt from those who are learning about his living situation for the first time.

Returning now to Tom's possessions, the one thing of which he is clearly most proud in terms of owning it is his wife, Daisy. The name is a perfect aptonym for Daisy's character. As her name suggests, Daisy is a flower that has been picked out of her natural habitat and put on display inside a home as a sort of decorative accessory. In an ironic twist of this aptonym, she refers to Nick as being like "an absolute rose" when he is sitting at the table with her, despite the fact that his own job as a bond trader is much more traditionally masculine, thus making him more of a trophy-seeker than a trophy (23). Her first words to Nick suggest as much, as she says upon seeing him, "I'm p-paralyzed with happiness" (17). She is paralyzed, both figuratively and literally. She cannot move from her position in the picture of a perfect life that Tom has worked so hard to create and maintain. She is a trophy in the Veblenian sense, indicative of Tom's success and prowess in all areas of life. This existence is her profession; it is what she does for a living and how she maintains herself. She is the wife of Tom Buchanan, a job that pays her enough to keep her happy on the exterior, despite the fact that her marriage seems to be a loveless one. Daisy is a commodity that is simultaneously owned by one man and coveted by another. As Judith Fetterley writes, "Daisy does not simply represent or incarnate that magical world Gatsby desires; she is herself the ultimate object in it. It is she for whom men compete, and possessing her is the clearest sign that one has made it into that magical world" (75).

The nature of their marriage as one of social convenience—Daisy provides Tom with her presence as a decorative accessory while he provides her with vast financial resources—is made clear to us when, during his initial visit, dinner is interrupted by a phone call for Tom. When Nick doesn't seem to understand the specific contents of this call, Jordan is surprised, saying that

she thought that everyone knew, adding that “Tom’s got some woman in New York” (24). Tom has a mistress to satisfy his sexual urges while he keeps his wife as the trophy that he considers her locked away in his house in East Egg. For her part, Daisy appears resigned to her lot in life, as she suggests that “that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool” (26). By playing that role, the girl in question can at least count on the fact that she’ll be taken care of financially in the world because of her beauty. Her status as fool will help her to adjust to the fact that her financial security is paid for with the sacrifice of a loving relationship with her spouse. This is, Nick tells us, an assertion by Daisy that declares “her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged” (26). That secret society is the upper-class, in which wives are trophies and mistresses are an accepted way of life. It is a society composed of what Tanfer Emin Tunc labels “the racism, sexism, and vice-laden violence of old wealth” (73). But those qualities don’t protect its members from the chains of the capitalist Panopticon, as Nick will highlight for us from his observation post outside of that society.

Between the village of West Egg and the metropolitan and financial center of New York City there is what is described as a “valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air” (30). This constantly-growing mass of ash is a depository for used coal ash from New York City, and lies on the highway between the nouveau riche resort and the city that represents the source of that resort’s residents made their money.

On the one end of this wasteland, we see those who have achieved some semblance of the American Dream: they own enormous houses in a lavish setting and have all the associated accoutrements and trophies that go with that lifestyle. On the other end is the city that made all

of that luxury possible for those people. They are divided by an ever-expanding swath of ash, a substance associated with death and decay. The fact that this ash farm is expanding suggests that the American Dream is being engulfed by the grey wasteland. This suggestion is supported by the industrial imagery associated with the ash; the ash is said to be in the shape of such things as houses (trophies awarded for hard work) and chimneys and rising smoke (industrial sites that are emblematic of the economic revolution). The suggestion here is that the inevitable result of material pursuit is exile to this desolate ash desert. It is the final prison in which those who seek those material ends are confined.⁸

Punctuating this argument of the inevitability of the fate for those capitalists is the billboard advertising the services of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, a Queens-based oculist. The billboard features a pair of eyes looking through glasses: “The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their irises are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose” (31). This billboard represents the commercial culture that is so deeply rooted in the core of New York City and the advertising that propels that commercial culture. The fact that it is for an eye doctor’s services lends an added degree of importance to its presence in this place because that particular service suggests that the collective American population who is so intent on achieving their materialist goals that they have become literally blind to the fact that the pursuit of those goals is leading them to a fate that is represented in the ash heap over which those eyes are keeping constant vigil.

⁸ This point is emphasized when Daisy tells Gatsby, “You resemble the advertisement of the man” (125). Though “the man” is never identified, it is a safe assumption that she is talking about Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, as his visage is the only one featured on an advertisement in the novel. If Gatsby does indeed remind her of that billboard, then his death at the end of the novel is a manifestation of the metaphorical death resulting from materialistic pursuit.

It is along this stretch, too, that Tom's mistress—Myrtle, a second flower-named woman within Tom Buchanan's harem—lives with her husband George, who owns a gas station on the side of the desolate highway. The station is itself also a beacon of commercial culture, featuring its own advertisement for the garage itself: "*REPAIRS. GEORGE B. WILSON. CARS BOUGHT AND SOLD.*" (32, emphasis in original). We are told, "Her face, above a spotted dress of dark blue crepe-de-chine, contained no facet or gleam of beauty, but there as an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering" (33). Note the language that Fitzgerald uses to describe Myrtle's vitality. She appears in such a way that one might be led to believe that her nerves are smoldering, a type of slow burning. That slow burning process will eventually lead to her becoming ashes, and thus joining herself with the ash heap that surrounds her. Given her link to burning and ashes, we can then say that a mistress like Myrtle—who is, like Daisy, a commodity, a decorative trophy that makes Tom feel somehow better about himself—is a component of the American Dream. Myrtle is impressed by Tom's money, and it is only because of his wealth that he is able to woo Myrtle the woman and subsequently control and own Myrtle the commodity. She, like all other commodities, will serve to further trap her possessor—in this case, Tom—deeper in the capitalist Panopticon as he is forced to spend increasing amounts of money on her in order to keep her satisfied and happy. His own financial position does not mean he is immune to the prison's power; even though he is not being forced to labor under duress to acquire money, he is still stuck in the cycle of constantly having to buy new things to satisfy Myrtle.

When Tom takes Myrtle and Nick to New York City, we see first-hand, through the eyes of Nick, tangible evidence of the panoptic power of materialist desires. At the apartment that Tom maintains for these liaisons, Myrtle changes her clothes from the brown muslin dress that

she wore on the train and puts on “an elaborate afternoon dress of cream-colored chiffon, which gave out a continual rustle as she swept about the room” (38). She has donned attire she deems more fitting of a woman whom others perceive to be of higher social standing. As Tanfir Emin Tunc explains, “Myrtle naively believes that dressing like a member of the old wealth elite will grant her instant admission into their exclusive world” (76). Although she is not—and never will be—Mrs. Tom Buchanan because of social taboos that dictate who Tom may and may not marry, she wants to dress as if she were. It is, to her mind, required of her; it is an indirect manifestation of the Panopticon exercising its power over her. And as a result of her wearing this new dress, we are told that “her personality had also undergone a change” (76). She becomes a larger presence in the small apartment: “Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment” (76). She is playing a part for her audience of admirers, a part that is associated with the socio-economic status she believes she is entitled to as a result of her relationship with Tom.

While narrating the story of the party at the New York apartment, Nick tells us that he “was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (43). As he observes the action unrolling like a tapestry before him, Nick provides us with an example of Tom’s violent tendencies in his description of Tom’s reaction to Myrtle when she displeases him. He relates that Tom and Myrtle begin having an argument about Myrtle’s use of Daisy’s name; Tom ends the argument by breaking Myrtle’s nose. This brings up the question as to why Myrtle chooses to stay with Tom, given his behavior. The answer is, quite simply, financial. Tom has money and prestige, qualities that Myrtle finds attractive. This superficial attraction is one that further augments Myrtle’s status as prisoner; she is willing to endure

physical abuse from Tom because of her need for money and status, things that she cannot otherwise acquire.

Tom is able to control Myrtle by wielding the power inherent in his wealth and social position, but he is also controlled by that wealth at the same time. Tunc writes of Tom's violent outbursts that he "is not afraid to lash out against women (especially his lower-class mistress whose materialism makes him feel powerful)" (Tunc 72). Myrtle's desires for material acquisition put her in the position of prisoner, and subjects her to Tom's wrath. However, Tom's wealth also fosters a sense of insecurity within him that forces him to constantly work to maintain the image attached to his socio-economic status. Thorstein Veblen writes of the spending habits of the upper class, "The motive is emulation—the stimulus of an invidious comparison which prompts us to outdo those with whom we are in the habit of classing ourselves" (78). This is the way in which Tom is chained within prison. He is constantly working to outdo those in his social group in terms of possessions, and the only reason he is doing so is because of his wealth; because he is wealthy, Tom has to spend increasing amounts of money in order to maintain his image in comparison to others. That process will continue without interruption until he dies.

The same process of repeatedly and endlessly spending money in order to maintain an image is one of the hallmarks of Nick Carraway's next door neighbor in West Egg, Jay Gatsby. One of Gatsby's defining indulgences on which he spends his money is his parties:

At least once a fortnight a corps of caterers came down with several hundred feet of canvas and enough colored lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby's enormous garden. On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors-d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold. In the main hall a bar with a real brass rail was set up, and stocked with gins and liquors and with cordials so long forgotten that most of his female guests were too young to know one from another (47).

The food and beverage offerings for these fêtes are both of the most luxurious and indulgent; in the case of the beverages, they're also illegal, as the novel is set in the midst of the Prohibition era.

Gatsby is spending vast sums of money in order to entertain his guests at each individual party, and given that he hosts these events “at least once a fortnight” suggests that he is an avid subscriber to the philosophy of conspicuous consumption. Tunc suggests that these parties are a metaphorical representation of the greed and overindulgence that characterized the era, characteristics that were themselves derivative of the omnipresent commercial culture that surrounded society at the time: “Fitzgerald uses Gatsby’s elaborately staged weekend parties as another metaphor for the greed, material excess, and unrestrained desire for pleasure that resulted in the corruption and disintegration of the American Dream” (74). Again we see the idea that the American Dream itself is built upon a hollow foundation—the amassing of material possessions—and as a result of that hollow foundation, it is collapsing under its own weight.

Initially, Nick is only a spectator of Gatsby’s parties, watching the proceedings unfold from his own house because he wasn’t invited to the parties, something that he assumed meant that he shouldn’t attend. He comes to find out, however, that many of Gatsby’s guests aren’t invited, but rather simply find their way to the house through word-of-mouth advertising about the parties. When Nick receives an official invitation—“a surprisingly formal note” hand-delivered by a “chauffer in a uniform of robin’s-egg blue” (48)—he remarks, “I believe that on the first night I went to Gatsby’s house I was one of the few guests who had actually been invited” (48).

At this first Gatsby party, Nick begins to hear the variety of rumors that circulate as to the mysterious host’s background. The rumors of the source of his wealth range from aristocratic

German relatives to bootlegging. Nick, however, refuses to believe any of the rumors, instead opting to rely on what he can verify for himself: “So my first impression, that he was a person of some undefined consequence, had gradually faded and he had become simply the proprietor of an elaborate road-house next door” (71). When Nick finally asks, Gatsby tells him flatly, “I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West—all dead now” (71). We will come to find out, however, that this is only the tip of the myth of Gatsby that the man himself works to perpetuate.

We learn, eventually, that Jay Gatsby was born James Gatz, the son of “shiftless and unsuccessful farm people” (104) from North Dakota. He worked at a succession of low-paying jobs—clam-digger, salmon-fisher, janitor—and met, by chance, a wealthy man by the name of Dan Cody, who is sitting on a yacht that the young Gatz sees as representing “all the beauty and glamour in the world” (106). Gatz’s envy of the lifestyle that Cody is living is emblematic of the theories espoused by Thorstein Veblen regarding emulation, which he sees as the primary source of the human desire to acquire material possessions. Cody is, to Gatz’s mind, the embodiment of the American Dream. He has achieved significant wealth and he is using that wealth as a means to conspicuous consumption that affords himself a luxurious lifestyle. Gatz internalizes the belief that the key to happiness—and the key to getting what or whom he wants—is the amassing of a fortune and subsequent conspicuous consumption of expensive material possessions.

As Jay Gatsby, he engages in all of his conspicuous consumption with a single goal in mind: the acquisition of the one commodity that has, to this point in his life, eluded his grasp. That commodity is Daisy Buchanan, the woman with whom then-Army lieutenant Jay Gatsby had fallen in love in 1917. However, her family had forbidden her from seeing him, instead steering her towards a more financially beneficial relationship with Tom. From that time

forward, Gatsby had set out to win Daisy by showing her that he, too, was able to provide for whatever material desires she might want. As James Nagel points out, “Jay Gatsby is most visibly engaged in the financial pursuit of the American Dream, but he does so to achieve the social and economic status Daisy requires of him. When he shows her his house, she is profoundly moved not by the depth of his devotion to her, but by the extent of his wealth” (122). He spends his adult life working to acquire the things that he thinks will win her heart, but she only sees him as just another man with a great deal of personal wealth. Nagel also points to the fact that the manifestation of Daisy’s imprisonment within the Panopticon extends to her “requirements” for a potential suitor. Specifically, any man who would win her heart must first attract her attention through his ability to provide for her financial comfort.

During that initial visit to his house, Gatsby at first demurs in terms of his own wealth by having her come to Nick’s cottage. However, Gatsby is sure to make the place look more appropriate to Daisy’s taste, as he has the lawn professionally mowed and flowers delivered. He wants to cater to the idea of himself as a self-confident man who does not feel compelled to display his wealth but, at the same time, will desiring to add a touch of luxury to the meeting. But his desire to display his financial success overpowers his humility, and he decides to take Daisy to his house. But first, he requires assurances from Nick that it “looks well,” and then tells Nick absent-mindedly, “It took me just three years to earn the money that bought it” (96). This is a potential disaster on Gatsby’s part, because Nick quickly reminds him that he’d said that he’d inherited all of his money. Here Gatsby is suggesting that he had to work in order to earn the money, something he explains away by telling Nick that he lost most of his inheritance “in the big panic—the panic of the war” (97). He follows that up by telling Nick that the business he is in is his own affair and not for Nick to know too much about. Gatsby is most likely involved in

some sort of unscrupulous money-making scheme that, like the Prohibition bootleggers or the gamblers who fixed the 1919 World Series, illustrates the darker side of capitalism.

While Gatsby is showing Daisy around his house, Nick is keenly observing him and commenting on his actions. We are told that Gatsby “revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes” (98). His possessions only have value in their ability to impress Daisy; the more they are able to accomplish that goal, the higher their value in Gatsby’s eyes. This goal puts Gatsby squarely in the realm of materialist, according to James Roberts: “The primary value of possessions, for diehard materialists, is their ability to confer status and project a desired self-image. Materialists view themselves and others as successful only to the extent that they possess products that project a desired image” (5). Gatsby is hoping to project a very specific image to Daisy, namely that he is worthy of her love, both because of his devotion to her and his financial success as manifested in his myriad personal possessions. However, Daisy does not succumb to Gatsby’s charms—materialist or otherwise—and returns home to Tom, leaving Gatsby to remain without her in his own home.

In addition to only seeing Gatsby as simply another wealthy man, she sees him, albeit perhaps subconsciously, as somebody whose wealth is newly-acquired, meaning that Gatsby will never be a part of the “old-money club” to which she belongs; he will never be accepted in to East Egg society. Richard Chase points out that Gatsby is an interloper in that world, and that he will never actually fit in because of his lack of personal training in how to behave: “[Gatsby] does not know how to conform to the class to which Daisy belongs and to this class he seems ridiculous” (166). Because he wasn’t born in to the world of old money, Gatsby has had to attempt to act as if he had been. However, he fails in this attempt, instead coming across as a

flashy, nouveau riche man desperate for attention, with the result being his failure to assimilate in Daisy's world.

One of the most telling moments of their time at the party is Tom's comment regarding the perceived source of wealth for so many of the nouveau riche attendees that he sees there. He tells Nick off-handedly, "A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know" (114). This comment is intended to convey disdain for the new-money crowd that Tom looks down upon. He, like Daisy, can't abide the overt displays of flashiness that characterize the behavior of those who have only recently joined the ranks of the upper class, and he feels the need to downplay their accomplishments by generalizing that the majority of them acquired their money through illegal means. On another level, though, he is suggesting that capitalism is itself a rigged game. There is, in Tom's mind, no way to achieve the materialist component of the American Dream through simple hard work and saving.

This clash of old and new money is the focus of Richard Chase's argument about the source of the novel's conflict. He writes, "The special charm of *Gatsby* rests in its odd combination of romance with a realistic picture of raw power—the raw power of the money that has made a plutocracy and the raw power the self-protective conventions of this plutocracy assume when they close in a united front against an intruder" (162). In the microcosmic sense, Gatsby is the intruder who is trying to work his way into Tom's world, both in terms of money and "possession" of Daisy. In a more macro sense, Gatsby is a synecdoche for the nouveau riche as a whole, as his lifestyle represents all the over-the-top indulgence of that class of consumers who are perceived as a threat to the traditions established by the old-money aristocracy. In the same sense, capitalism can be looked at in the same way as the 1919 World Series. The only way for gamblers to ensure that they would win their bets in the World Series was to fix the game to

conform to a predetermined outcome. The only way for them to get ahead was to cheat, just like Tom suggests the party-goers have done in order to acquire their wealth.

At the end of the evening after Tom and Daisy have left, Gatsby is left with Nick, and the two engage in a conversation about Daisy. Gatsby is morose, because he is afraid that Daisy did not enjoy herself and, by association, he feels that she didn't enjoy her time with him. When Nick tries to reassure him and suggest that he can't repeat the past, Gatsby replies, "Why of course you can" (117). It is then that we are privy to the true depths of Gatsby's fetishization of Daisy as a commodity. Nick tells us, "He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was" (117). Daisy is, to Gatsby's mind, frozen in time. She exists as a perfect image that he holds in his imagination, and he has juxtaposed that image with the reality that is Daisy, ignoring any evidence that might contradict his fantastical image.

In his quest to woo her, Gatsby has converted Daisy into a commodity in the same way that Tom has done, changing her from a human being into a decorative object that will, on some level, complete his life and make him truly happy. Echoing the words of Karl Marx, Kevin Hetherington explains commodity fetishism as "a theory of fetishism that positions subjects and objects (commodities) in a particular way, reading the commodity and commodified culture as an illusory representation of the world of production; something that seemingly involves consumers in the worship of the misleading figural or signifying qualities of material culture" (57). Gatsby has positioned Daisy in such a way that she represents the final piece to his American Dream.

She is a commodity that he has mythologized and bestowed with power that she can't possibly possess, qualities that he seems to think will make his own existence perfect.

Tom Buchanan, on the other hand, has reduced Daisy to the level of consumable possession. He treats her as a sort of *objet d'art* whose only purpose is to beautify the interior of his home and the exterior picture of his own life that he shows to the rest of the world. However, he has also unwittingly served to market his wife as a commodity, sending out an advertisement to a specific target audience about Daisy. That specific audience is Jay Gatsby, and the advertisement is manifested in the green light at the end of the Buchanan's dock. Nick first notices it—and its effect on Gatsby—after returning home from dinner at Daisy and Tom's house across the bay: “[Gatsby] stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock” (30).

The light represents, among other things, Daisy herself, the perfect flower that is just out of reach for Gatsby. It is also an advertisement for her, reminding Gatsby of everything that he wants, the commodity that he has fetishized to the point that it has become the focal point of all his personal desires. The light also represents the capitalist Panopticon. It is the unattainable thing that consumers seek which is the true foundational tenet of capitalism. If a consumer acquires *the* single thing that makes his life complete, he no longer has a need to acquire more commodities. But as long as there is the promise of something else available that is even better, consumers will continue to acquire commodities and keep the machine alive. In this way, we are all Jay Gatsby reaching out for the green light. Even those of the upper class like Tom Buchanan

or Jay Gatsby have a green light in their field of vision, the one thing they can never acquire despite their best efforts at capturing it.

The clash between Tom and Gatsby peaks during the gathering at the Plaza Hotel, one of New York City's monuments to old-money wealth and prestige. In addition to consuming bootlegged whiskey, Tom and Gatsby engage in an argument about Daisy's reasons for marrying Tom. Gatsby claims that the only reason she married Tom was because he wasn't as well-off financially as Tom, and that the only reason she did marry him was for his money. When Gatsby suggests that Daisy is leaving Tom for him, Tom's reply is a declaration of ownership: "She's not leaving me!" (139). His words are simultaneously a retort to Gatsby's suggestion and a command to Daisy. He is declaring his ownership of her as a commodity, just as Gatsby is attempting to acquire her. Both men have lowered her status to one of a material object that they both desire.

This argument culminates in Tom's revelation that he knows more about Gatsby's business dealings than he has, to this point, publicly acknowledged. He explains to the assembled group that Gatsby did, in fact, make his fortune—at least in part—through bootlegging; there is another project that he doesn't know anything about, but he assumes it's even more dangerous and illegal than bootlegging: "He and Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drug-stores and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That's one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him, and I wasn't far wrong" (140). Here we see a direct connection to Gatsby with the man who fixed the World Series, a connection that serves as demonstrable proof of his engagement in illegal activities. Gatsby acknowledges his involvement in bootlegging and goes so far as to implicate an acquaintance of Tom's in the business, too, which suggests that it's not just the new wealth that was augmented by bootlegging. Every sub-

caste within the upper class, it seems, is engaged in some variety of illegal activities, which may be interpreted as Fitzgerald issuing a blanket condemnation of the entire economic system as a whole.

The culmination of that condemnation is manifested in the inability of the power of love to conquer the love of money. In the case of Gatsby, he loves Daisy (or at least his image of Daisy) unconditionally and infinitely. Tom, alternatively, views her as an accessory to his life, but affords her the status and prestige that only his family's lineage can provide. As if to illustrate the power of the capitalist chains, Daisy chooses her desire for money and prestige with Tom over the potential for happiness and undying love with Gatsby.

Daisy leaves with Gatsby and they take his car which she drives back to East Egg, running over and killing Myrtle Wilson in the process. In killing Myrtle, Daisy is simultaneously eliminating her rival for Tom's attention and aligning herself with her husband. Despite the fact that she has killed Tom's mistress, she has also made herself his ally, because, like Tom and his old-money compatriots, she has killed the interloper who would seek to ascend to levels for which she is, in the minds of those of the upper class, not socially fit. She is a social climber with high aspirations, and she will never be accepted in that world because of her background. She is an intruder, to use the words of Richard Chase, and as such she has to be eliminated in order to maintain the established social order.

Before his murder at the hands of George Wilson, Gatsby has one final interaction with Nick Carraway. In what Nick calls the "only compliment I ever gave him," the narrator also manages to implicate himself in the worship of commodity culture, albeit unwittingly so (160). After Gatsby tells him goodbye, Nick turns to walk back to his house, then pauses. He turns and says to Gatsby, "They're a rotten crowd [...]. You're worth the whole damn bunch put together"

(160). On the surface, this statement is the compliment Nick thinks it is, suggesting that Gatsby is a better human being than the Buchanans and their ilk. However, notice that Fitzgerald has invoked mercantile diction in this passage: Gatsby is *worth* the others all put together; his *value* is equivalent to that amorphous amount. Nick has done to Gatsby what Gatsby did to Daisy. He has transformed him into a commodity and fetishized that commodity. Nick is the everyman figure in the novel, and we may see ourselves in him. Now that he has demonstrated his own tendency to commodify individuals and thereby expressed the fact that he, too, is imprisoned in the capitalist Panopticon, we are all suddenly conscious of the fact that we are in the same position.

Which brings us to what is arguably the most famous boat in American literature since the introduction of the *Pequod* by Herman Melville in 1851 or Huck's raft by Mark Twain in 1885. Just as the green light represented the impossible goal of the consumer seeking the perfect commodity in the commercial culture, the boats Nick Carraway describes in the novel's concluding passage represent all of us in our ceaseless quest to acquire that commodity, despite its nonexistent state. Nick's final words to the reader are, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (188). Just as Gatsby was in love with an imaginary vision of Daisy that he'd created and held on to from his youth, so, too, are American consumers convinced of the existence of perfection in the marketplace. We have been conditioned by the discourse of advertising that such an ideal is out there just waiting for us to find it, but we continually fail to find it. This is Fitzgerald's message to his reader. Those living in a capitalist society have been conditioned to strive for an ill-defined goal that is manifested in material acquisition, which requires those seeking it to amass a fortune. The means to acquiring that money is, more often than not, dependent on unscrupulous and oftentimes illegal activities, but

the quest goes on regardless. This is Nick's purpose in the novel. He serves as more than the narrator; he is the messenger for Fitzgerald, telling us what we as consumers need to know about the society in which we live. Nick highlights the transformations that are taking place within American society at the time, transformations that began long before *The Great Gatsby* was written and which continue on long after its publication. His message is that we are all boats beating against the current, boats that are never able to make any forward progress in the existing system. We as consumers need to reassess our priorities, or we will find ourselves forever entrapped within the capitalist Panopticon.

Daughter of Earth

On June 4, 1919, the United State Congress passed the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which was ratified on August 18, 1920, allowing women the right to vote. However, this watershed moment in American history did not alleviate all the societal oppression women were experiencing in the early twentieth century. As Rory Dicker explains, "Although women had gained the vote in 1920, they still experienced oppression in various ways, many of which stemmed from the fact that society thought of them primarily as wives and mothers, roles that had little status in mainstream society and less monetary remuneration" (57). Women were seen as homemakers—domestic workers—rather than professionals who were able to do work equivalent to that of their male counterparts. McLaughlin et al. explain this discrepancy: "Despite the increase in well-educated middle-class women in the labor force, women did not make much progress in entering professional fields. As late as 1930, 57 percent of employed women were black or foreign-born, and they worked primarily as domestics or operatives in the

apparel industry. Women were not allowed the roles of both employee and wife at the same time” (22).

There was a generalized feeling among many American women at the time that there had to be a better way for them to exist in the world, a way that would allow them to be partners and equals of men rather than subordinates and servants. In the somewhat rare instances when women were found working alongside men, typically their wages were significantly lower than those of their male counterparts. Christopher Lasch writes of this subject:

For women such as these, conscious of their intellectual but unable, it seemed, to make use of them within the sphere of women’s traditional duties, life, experience, “growth” were always *out there*, they belonged to the great world beyond the household and the family. But the sense of “alienage” was by no means confined to women. When one sees the feminist impulse as an aspect of a more general development—the revolt of intellectuals against the middle class—one begins to understand the feminists’ acute fear that life had passed them by. For this conviction that life lay always outside the narrow confines of one’s own experience was common to all those, of whatever sex, who felt themselves imprisoned in the stale room of a borrowed culture (*New Radicalism* 62, italics in original).

Women especially felt the power of their imprisonment by social forces that told them that they were not equal to men. This alienation by the male-dominated society that they sought to enter was made that much more apparent in the minds of women when they knew that not only were they capable of doing the same work as men, in many instances they were capable of doing superior work. But they were relegated to their domestic duties, jobs that had traditionally been determined to be “female work,” and there was no way for them to break out of that role.

This theme revolving around different manifestations of the fight for female equality is not a new one; we saw it at play already in this chapter in the examination of Cather’s *A Lost Lady*. However, we will see it on full display in *Daughter of Earth* by Agnes Smedley. In that novel, Smedley offers a fictionalized account of her own autobiography, and in so doing

illustrates for us a real-world context in which the capitalist Panopticon wields great power and inflicts great damage on those imprisoned within its confines. At the same time, the novel offers a gendered view of how the system treats individuals, specifically women. And the story that Smedley tells is one of utter despair and inevitable personal destruction for those women who seek to escape from the Panopticon as opposed to those who passively accept their traditionally feminine roles as homemakers and mothers.

Published in 1929 just before the stock market crash, *Daughter of Earth* is Agnes Smedley's fictionalized account of her own childhood and upbringing. Joan Jensen calls the novel "a personal and revealing book, made possible by the distance, physical and mental, she had traveled from the west" (125). Most scholarship that treats *Daughter of Earth* is linked to gender-themed critiques. That said, there are scholars who have discussed the economic dimensions of the novel. Both Temma Kaplan and Bina Freiwald examine the absence of a male parent (the traditional source of income in the family) as that absence is manifested and explored in Smedley's novel. In the case of Kaplan, she contends that *Daughter of Earth* may be read as connecting poverty with femininity, because the duty of making money falls to the woman, but she is unable to make enough to truly feel comfortable. So despite the fact that the father has left his family with only their mother as the primary bread winner, his departure, according to Kaplan, is without repercussion, because the focus is on the female's inability to elevate the family's status. Freiwald, echoing Kaplan, suggests that Agnes is placed in an impossible financial situation, because she wants to leave the family and make her own way in the world, but as a woman, she feels compelled to stay and help her mother. Both scholars locate their critical interpretations of the novel in the social expectations imposed upon Agnes.

As she did with her work on *Bread Givers*, Christie Launius contends that the novel highlights the fact that women are forced into the only way of making money in order to survive that is open to them, namely marriage. Regardless of her own personal desires to break away from the traditional gender role through education and employment, Agnes is, Launius argues, chained to the traditional way of life. My interpretation of the novel focuses less on feminist critiques and more on the imprisonment of the characters inside the capitalist prison. Just as the Panopticon does not discriminate on the basis of financial status, it also does not recognize differences in race, religion, or gender. Women are equally susceptible to the forces of capitalism as their male counterparts, and Smedley makes that point abundantly clear in *Daughter of Earth*.

The novel opens with the narrator, Marie Rogers, contemplating the story that she has already written, specifically the story that comprises the novel itself. She warns us that it is “not a work of beauty, created that someone may spend an hour pleasantly; not a symphony to lift up the spirit, or release it from the dreariness of reality. It is the story of a life, written in desperation, in unhappiness” (7). This preface points to the fact that this is a story about the harsh realities of life. In addition to being a story about domestic violence and oppression, it is also a story of those trapped under the yoke of an economic system that imprisons them for their entire lives. On top of that, Smedley introduces the issue of gender into the equation, a historical issue that presents us with an additional layer of the panoptic power of the system, because women are treated as somehow lesser than their male counterparts, and as Smedley illustrates, prevented from many of the same opportunities as men at the time. We will see throughout the novel the literary manifestation of the idea regarding life experiences being somewhere beyond the typical woman’s sphere of existence at the time as expressed by Christopher Lasch.

As a child, Marie is unaware of her own poverty. She simply knows that her father works very hard as a farmer: “We were very poor. But that I did not know. For all the world seemed to be just like our home—at least that world of ours that stretched for some two hundred miles across northern Missouri” (9). Smedley here offers the suggestion to her reader that class distinctions are learned qualities, things that children are not born knowing about. It is only through life experiences that they come to realize their own differences from those around them, differences that are manifested in possessions and appearances. In her lower-class world, the young Marie is untouched by the discourse of the commercial culture that surrounds her small, isolated world. As such, she does not realize that she is of a lower socio-economic status than anyone else in the world, simply because she has no experience with that world.

Her first understanding of the possibilities of life outside her small town comes from a young cousin who, Smedley tells us, left town in search of a new career, a departure that became a story of local interest to many residents: “That was when the whole countryside was aroused by a young cousin of mine who ran away. In three months he returned—an educated man. He had learned to be a barber...and he wore store clothes!” (10). There are three levels to this passage that warrant closer examination: First, professional advancement happens somewhere outside of the small town Smedley and her family live in and if one hopes to advance one’s own socio-economic standing, one has to leave the town. Two, acquiring the jobs that are the manifestation of those mythical opportunities requires education. And finally, the true measure of how far one has advanced as a result of seeking out those opportunities is the possessions that come with the new job; those possessions are the fruits of the labor that justify the original departure from the town and the subsequent effort in both learning and working.

In the case of Smedley's cousin, he left town—he “ran away,” more specifically—and acquired the requisite education in order to become a barber. Upon his return, it was his “store clothes” that were the visible marker that served as proof of his success; going to the city and pursuing the opportunities one could find there meant diving into and assimilating with the commercial culture that resides there. And the cousin, in this instance, serves as a sort of living advertisement for the life that one can achieve in the city. Everyone in the small town sees him and notices his new clothes, and his very presence in that town fulfills the function of advertising's controlling discourse by showing what possibilities exist for anyone who is willing to take the chance and leave the town.

The importance of possessions—even for a family as poor as the Rogers—is highlighted in the scene early in the novel when the family seeks shelter from an approaching tornado. Initially, it is only the children who are at home. Annie, the oldest sister, leads her siblings towards the storm shelter, but is interrupted by the arrival of the parents: “We looked: there, turning a distant curve and sweeping down the long white lane my father and mother came, riding the two snow-white horses of which my father was so proud” (13). The horses are emblematic of a level of financial success in the mind of her father John Rogers. He sees the horses as emblematic of a higher than the one he occupies, and they serve the same function as any other commodity in that respect. They are a façade, a veneer covering the true nature of his existence, specifically that of a lower-class farmer.

Marie's mother Elly is equally attached to possessions, as indicated by her prioritizing specific commodities to be taken into the shelter: “My mother was screaming to him to bring the new sewing machine and the clock—her two most valued possessions—and to bar the door of the house” (13). The importance that Elly attaches to both the sewing machine and the clock is

aligned more with a pragmatic outlook than it is with an attempt to create a particular image for others to see. However, the fact that she deems these two possessions as worthy of saving in the event that the house itself is destroyed points to the importance they have in her own life as valuable items. While they might not represent Veblenian conspicuous consumption, they are high-priced commodities that are further indication that the tentacles of the commercial culture that pervaded the United States at this time have not only reached into this rural town, but also to those individuals who don't seem to have an extensive surplus of money to spend on such things. This points to the fact that those who are poor are just as susceptible to the powers of the financial prison as those who are wealthy.

In her Aunt Helen, Marie finds a woman who understands that the laws of capitalism require her to do whatever is necessary in order to earn the money she needs to acquire the things she wants. This understanding leads Helen to seek work on other farms as a young girl. Smedley writes of this early fortune-seeking, "Helen wanted to leave home and work. She asked all the neighboring farmers if they didn't want a hired girl. She was going to earn a lot of money and buy clothes with it!" (21). Again we see the importance attached to clothing as an outward and visible manifestation of one's personal financial success. In Helen's mind, the end purpose of working is to acquire the money needed to buy fancier clothes.

In a bit of foreshadowing, however, Marie suggests that that job and those clothes were just the beginning, as Helen grew increasingly imprisoned within the Panopticon: "That was long ago. Since then I have seen her desire for the beautiful, her love of life, walk hand in hand with the unloveliness and all that negates life. Why, I ask, must the opposites walk hand in hand? Why should the things that gave distinction to Helen lead her to destruction?" (21). The answer to this question is that personal destruction is the inevitable result of the incessant quest for more

and better commodities. Without that perpetual supply of new commodities—and consumers buying those new commodities—the system can’t survive. Additionally, the commercial culture created by advertising that helps to fuel the human desire to improve one’s standing also helps to perpetuate the capitalist system by encouraging consumers to buy commodities. The result, as I have been illustrating, is that consumers are trapped within a financial prison because they are constantly chained to the idea of perpetual image enhancement-through-commodity acquisition.

Helen uses her new job—and the income it provides—to flaunt her successes to those in the town. The annual harvest dance and supper is a chance for everyone in the town to get together and socialize; it is also a chance for those who can afford to do so to show off their success as manifested in their possessions. To this festival Helen arrives to something of a celebrity welcome, as Smedley writes, “To be a hired girl drawing your own money gave you a position of authority and influence in the community. Everyone at the dance knew she earned three dollars a month; you could tell it by her proud bearing and her independent attitude toward her new beau. She commanded!” (28). The language Smedley employs here suggests that money is something to be admired and respected. Helen’s three dollars a month in the early twentieth century was worth close to \$100 in terms of twenty-first century buying power, and while we aren’t privy to the incomes of others in the town, their admiration of Helen’s financial worth suggests that her salary of three dollars a month is a significant amount of money in their eyes. It is, more importantly, enough money to generate envy in many of those who see her; specifically, it seems to breed a desire for a similar lifestyle in Marie’s father.

Immediately following the harvest festival, Marie tells us that her parents were having an argument about money. Her father, she says, “wanted to make money, he said—a *lot* of money—and he could make it now if he went away somewhere” (34, italics in original). In what has

become a common refrain, John Rogers is falling victim to the Siren song of the capitalist Panopticon. He believes that acquiring more money will bring him the happiness that seems to have eluded him to this point during his life on the farm. Marie tells us, “My mother was satisfied to work ceaselessly and to save a few pennies a year, but for my father such an existence was death, and he had stood it as long as he could” (34). The meagre savings the family has managed to accumulate—the result of working “ceaselessly”—is not enough for him, and he wants to follow Helen’s lead and leave town in search of better financial opportunities. John believes the discourse of capitalism that tells him money is the source of happiness, because with money he can buy those things that will generate in others the same envy he himself is feeling right now.

John refuses to give up on this dream of financial success and, eventually, wins out over his wife’s protests. The family picks up and moves in a covered wagon, like the pioneers who settled the American frontier. Marie tells us of this decision to leave that “from that moment our roots were torn from the soil and we began a life of wandering, searching for success and happiness and riches that always lay just beyond—where we were not. Only since then I have heard the old saying: ‘Where I am not, there is happiness’” (35). The family returns to their farm, but John leaves again soon after, presumably in search of work. John returns several months later in the company of a doctor that gave him a job: “Both he and my father were dressed in store clothes. My father’s broad-brimmed soft hat was pulled down over his left eye and he wore a black tie that flew in the wind. As he turned I saw the shining buckle of his many-colored belt” (39). His months of labor have provided him with enough money to purchase these things, symbols of the commercial culture that has permeated the city of St. Joseph where he was working. And, because a man’s wife, in the model explained by Thorstein Veblen, is a reflection

of his own successes, John bought Elly a bolt of black silk that she could use to make herself a dress. The gift is simultaneously a manifestation of John's financial success and also Elly's second-tier status as a woman and homemaker. She doesn't get the same store-bought clothes as her husband; instead, she has to make her own clothes, though out of store-bought (and presumably quite expensive) silk.

John again leaves the farm, and Marie and her family move into town, which she tells us "was something to boast of; everybody lived in towns" (42). Their new status as town residents living in Trinidad means, to their mother's mind, that they "ought not 'act like tramps'" (42), which means washing their feet and going to church on Sundays. Soon after their arrival in town, John Rogers returns, though he does so without the clothing and possessions that had marked his earlier arrival. Marie tells us, "Now he spoke no more of his dreams of becoming a doctor, of earning much money quickly, nor of dressing my mother in silk. Instead, he was shorn of all his glory. His fine clothes had been replaced by a soiled shirt and a pair of blue overalls. His white horses that traveled with such swiftness, were gone—where he would not say" (43).

John tells a story of having killed a man and needing to leave town alone, but Elly recognizes both the lie and the motivation that drives him to tell it: "'Y'ought to be ashamed of yerself, tellin' such things before th' children,' was all she said, and then with a flash of wrath: 'If you want to run away and leave us like you've already done, jist go; don't come tellin' me stories fer an excuse!'" (44). He soon admits to the lie, claiming that "he could make a lot of money in the West" (44). He leaves again, this time aboard a train, in his vain attempt to make enough money to make himself happy, a fool's errand within the Panopticon. There will always be something more—more money, more commodities, more status—that will cause him to see his own life as lacking at any given moment. The constant disillusionment with the present

condition keeps consumers trapped within the capitalist prison, only letting them go so far as the marketplace in order to spend more of their money to acquire more commodities in the never-ending process of acquisition.

While Marie and her family remain behind in Trinidad, Marie tells us, “There was but one thing on which I could depend—poverty and uncertainty” (46). Her focus on financial status is indicative of the fact that they are all imprisoned in the Panopticon; there is no escape from it because they need money in order to secure the basic necessities of life. To that end, she tells us that she and Beatrice, along with their brothers, “dragged gunny sacks along the [railroad] tracks and filled them with coal that had fallen from the passing engines” (46). The coal is used, in turn, to fuel fires for cooking and for warmth. Meanwhile, John Rogers is working along the banks of the Purgatory River for the comparatively huge salary of three dollars a day, which leads him to dream about his future as a wealthy man: “For he was really making tremendous money. He talked in much bigger terms than formerly...he was going to be real rich” (47). His wealth earns him the respect of those around him, including his wife, who is “humble and modest before [John] now” (47). That respect, however, is short-lived.

Another individual who earns the respect of those in the town is Helen, who comes to live with the Rogers family. She is drawn to the town because of letters written to her by her sister, and once she arrives, she thinks about what sort of work would be appropriate for her to do. She considers herself, we are told, to be in a position to be particular about which sort of work she’ll pursue, because “she knew her value” (48). She considers herself above those willing to do more menial and less lucrative work, an opinion that has formed itself as a result of her belief in her own sophistication arising from her time away working as a hired girl. She eventually takes a job working as a laundress, despite warnings from both John and Elly about

the dangers of working there in terms of her moral behavior. She gives the wages she earns to Elly to help pay the family's living expenses, and that money is put to good use in terms of supporting both the capitalist system and the Panopticon it produces: "Yet for years it was her money—earned in one way or another—that furnished us with most of the colorful and good clothing we had. When Helen began to draw weekly wages she took an equal place with my father in our home. She was as valuable and she was as respected as he" (49). The ability to provide the family with things like store-bought clothes simultaneously inserts the family into the panoptic oversight of capitalism, it also elevates Helen to the status of provider.

Despite Helen's financial contributions, however, Marie and her siblings are still well aware of the fact that they are not what others would consider wealthy. Their understanding of this financial reality manifests itself in their school experiences, including the fact that they believe that they will never be able to go to the town's high school: "The high school and riches seemed to go together. Anyway we, who lived beyond the tracks, knew that we could never dream of going to high school" (50). This idea of wealth being linked to a person's ability to go to school points to a glaring paradox in the capitalist system. One of the primary ways of climbing the ladder in American society is through education. However, as is the case with Marie and her siblings—and countless children like them—they have to go to work in order to support their own family when they are old enough, usually around the age that they'd normally be entering high school. As a result, the population most in need of the opportunities afforded by education are denied those opportunities because of the panoptic power of capitalism that forces them to go to work to provide the money necessary for survival.

Marie's experience at the local grade school also serves to reinforce in her own mind the family's stark poverty as compared to those better-off children with whom she attends school.

One of her earliest memories of school is of a teacher reading aloud to the students about proper manners. At one point, the teacher reads something about sleeplessness, and one of the suggestions that the book has for combatting insomnia is to change beds, because fresh sheets on a new bed help one get to sleep. This, however, is an entirely alien concept to Marie, who says, “I had never seen sheets on a bed; we used only blankets. And to what bed I should change was a puzzle! For we only had four beds for eight people. Of course, I reflected, rich people like the little white girl did that” (53). This is one of Marie’s first comparisons of her family’s financial situation to that of those around her, but it will not be the last.

She is invited to a birthday party for the aforementioned “little white girl.” She insists on taking a gift—she believes that bananas are the ultimate gift, based on her own experiences—but her mother initially refuses to buy them. Marie’s reaction echoes the theories of emulation put forth by Thorsten Veblen: “My mother objected to buying bananas as a present, but after I had cried and said everyone else was taking things, she grudgingly bought three” (54). In this scene, Marie is comparing herself to the other children that will be at the party, and she doesn’t want to seem somehow lesser than those children. This concern on her part suggests that emulation is something that begins far earlier than adulthood. Marie is, at her young age, already exhibiting signs of anxiety regarding her status as compared to her peer group. It is her first step towards willingly allowing herself to be imprisoned within the capitalist Panopticon.

Despite her best efforts at matching those peers, however, Marie finds herself falling far short in appearance: “Now here I was at a party where I wasn’t wanted. I had brought three bananas at a great sacrifice only to find that no other child would have dreamed of such a cheap present. My dress, that seemed so elegant when I left home, was shamefully shabby here” (55-56). These things that she is using as comparisons for her own situation—the other gifts brought

by the wealthier children and the more glamorous clothing they wore—are manifestations of the commercial culture of the United States. Their value as manifestations of higher social standing is created and perpetuated by the discourse that fuels that commercial culture. These children—and their parents, one may assume—have been told by the discourse that is found in advertising that these things are outward visible signs to others that the possessor (or, in the case of the gifts, the giver) of those commodities is of a wealthy status and, as such, deserves all the social rights and privileges associated with that distinction.

This section provides a perfect example of the binary nature of the capitalist Panopticon, and illustrates how those at either end of the socio-economic spectrum can be equally entrapped within that prison. On the one end, we have Marie. She is unable to imagine the life those of the upper class lead due to her stark poverty. But at the same time, she understands the fact that without money, she will starve. What's more, despite her financial situation, she still falls victim to the human need to fit in with one's peer group through emulation. Even though she can't afford to buy the same things as her wealthier acquaintances at school, she still feels compelled to spend the absolute limit that her family can afford so as to at least present what is to her mind a plausible attempt at fitting in with them. At the same time, those wealthy children are already showing signs of having been indoctrinated into the commercial culture that requires that they continually spend to buy newer and better commodities in order to keep pace with those around them.

After repeated instances of what Marie describes as “many attempts and many failures” of her parents to acquire something resembling financial security in the world, she describes her mother and father as “naïve folk who believed that a harvest followed hard labor; that those who work the hardest earn the most” (62). As is so often the case with Smedley's writing, the author's

diction here speaks volumes in regard to the overall message. The idea that hard work leads to reward is one of the foundational tenets of capitalism. Adam Smith wrote of this idea, “Labour was the first price, the original purchase money that was paid for all things. It was not by gold or by silver, but by labour, that all the wealth of the world was originally purchased” (50). Labor is the original form of currency in a capitalist economy, and it continues to be a form of currency.

Labor is a commodity, according to Marx, an idea that, initially seems to be in agreement with those of Adam Smith. However, in Marx’s explanation, we see an additional layer to the commodification of labor, specifically the idea that, like any other commodity, labor is subject to the forces of the free market system. As a result, some forms of labor are valued more highly than others because of the net result of the specific forms of labor. For instance, a defense attorney and an assembly-line worker may both work the same number of hours during a given week, but their pay will not be the same. This difference in pay is an example of the commodification of human labor, and it is the source of naivete for Marie’s parents.

John and Elly Rogers believe in the purity of the capitalist system as outlined by Adam Smith. They subscribe to the belief that if they work hard, they’ll be rewarded. Unfortunately, they are, to use Marie’s own description, naïve to the fact that, as Marx points out, different manifestations of human labor carry with them different use-values and, as a result, different reward structures. A tangible example of this theory comes in the form of John’s job carrying coal from a mine. When it comes time for him to get paid, John is dismayed at how little money he has earned despite his long hours of work. He tells the mine owner, “God, man, I’ve worked since May an’ I’ve had my own team an’ wagon an’ I’ve been up at daylight an’ come home at dark” (64). The owner directs John’s attention to the contract that he signed, and we are told that he “had seen many angry men and weeping women in his day...men and women who knew

nothing of legal phrases in the contracts they signed” (65). John’s response to this is one that is informed, albeit unknowingly on his part, by the work of Karl Marx: “So we’re to work to buy silk dresses fer yer wife an’ send yer kids to high school! [...] I trusted yer word...I come from a place where a man’s *word* is his honor an’ he don’t need no paper...I didn’t know you was a God damned thief stealin’ bread out of the mouths of women an’ children” (65, italics in original). John is coming to the realization that, as a member of the laboring class proletariat, his labor serves to enrich his employer more than it enriches himself. His Panopticon is one predicated on survival; he has to work in order to earn the money necessary for his and family’s survival. This fact is repeated in a church sermon when the minister quotes the Gospel of Mark, saying, “To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away” (73). Marie’s internalization of this verse is immediate: “What he was saying I already knew. We belonged to the class who have nothing and from whom everything is always taken away” (73).

Marie’s aunt Helen, like everyone else in the novel, is also caught in that same grip, though she has found a way to flourish within the prison, specifically by earning money as a prostitute. When John confronts her about the way in which she chooses to make money, she adamantly defends herself:

An’ if I *was* a whore, John Rogers, I want to know who made me one! *You*, John Rogers! You! Elly ain’t had enough money to buy grub and duds for herself and the kids. I’ve giver her my wages each pay-day. [...] How d’ye think she was to live? ... Washin’? ... damn you! You’re an ornery low-down dog! *You* to call me names! You! Where did you think I could get money for my duds ... I *won’t* go in rags. . . . I *won’t* get married and let some man boss me around whip me and let me starve! *I’ve* a right to things (82-83, italics in original).

Helen here exhibits characteristics of both extremes of the capitalist Panopticon, and explains that both of those extremes drove her to offer sexual favors in exchange for money. She has to make enough money to help her sister survive because John is unable or unwilling to do so. At

the same time, she admits to being enamored with the material culture that tempts her vanity with clothes and other accessories.

Helen's argument regarding personal and financial independence as reasons for becoming a prostitute echoes one of the themes we saw, albeit in a much more subtle fashion, in Wharton's *Custom of the Country*. In Smedley's novel we see a more overt example of Thaddeus Russell's contention that prostitutes were at the forefront of the American feminist movement (101). Helen is refusing to submit to the (patriarchal) societal expectation that she allow herself to be a kept woman, giving up any sense of personal independence in favor of marriage to a man who may or may not actually love or respect her. Instead, she establishes her own identity independent of marriage, and manages to make enough money to live comfortably. Of course, despite that comfort level, she is still trapped within the Panopticon of capitalism.

With this revelation concerning the source of her income, Helen is forced to leave the family home. Soon after describing Helen's departure, Marie tells us that women in the state of Missouri were granted the vote that year, and her mother found a new courage with which to stand up to John, who senses that he is losing control of his wife and leaves home as a result. This leaves Elly with no source of income whatsoever, and she is forced to go out and do other peoples' laundry in order to provide for her family. Marie who, with her sister Bessie, follows her mother's lead by taking in washing, tells us, "We never ceased dreaming of a washing machine to save her back from so much pain. But there were always shoes to buy, and there were school books. Unable to make any headway we decided that I must also get work and that [Beatrice] must wash alone" (88). The family's financial situation has grown so dire and the capitalist Panopticon so dominates them that they need the extra income that another full-time

job outside of the home can provide. And it becomes Marie's duty to find that job in order to keep the family alive.

One method that Marie employs for acquiring goods that doesn't require any monetary expenditure on her part is that of stealing, something she admits to doing from stores when out running errands for her mother. Marie says of her shopping trips, "The clerk would turn his back to fill the order, and I would, with a quick movement, take the things that we needed at home, and slip them into my pockets or under my coat" (91). She justifies her actions by pointing out that other children did the same thing, and offers the suggestion that it wasn't a major financial burden on the store owners because she tended to steal from "the big stores where rich people from the big houses where my mother washed clothes, bought things" (91). Wealthy people shop in stores that charge higher prices and therefore have a higher profit margin, thus offsetting her petty thievery. The flannel shirts she brings home for her siblings in the winter from the store where she works in exchange for "very low wages" despite working "like a slave" (92) are, the inference is, stolen from that store.

Marie's thievery indicates that she and her family have been completely consumed by the capitalist Panopticon. Given the work ethic she has displayed and her desire to help provide for her family, we have to believe that her less-than-noble actions are done out of necessity rather than some amoral streak that runs through her psyche. The system has driven her to steal, and that demonstrates the over-arching and all-powerful qualities of the financial prison into which she was born.

The following spring, the family moves to a mining camp where John has found work; Annie, the oldest sister, remains behind, however, because she is engaged, although she dies only two years after being married. As for Marie, it is determined that she and her siblings will be

taken out of school following the family's move so that they can work because, as she tells us, "we had starved long enough" (95). Once the family arrives in the camp, they discover that the company that owns the mines also owns everything else in the camp, including the housing and the store, as well as the railroad that services the camp; this multi-faceted ownership situation earns the company the nickname "Almighty Power" from Marie. This creates a situation where those living in the camp must buy their goods at an inflated price.

What is more, the workers aren't paid in cash, but rather in script that can be used at those company-owned store:

This Almighty Power issued its own money—script—and all miners and workers were paid with it instead of in American money; the banks in Trinidad cashed it at a 10% discount. A man was told he would be paid two dollars a day, but he was paid in script. When he objected to the high prices for food at the Company store, he was told it was necessary because he was paying in script, and script was discounted in the city (100-101).

The company doesn't pay its employees cash, but rather in company-issued script. That script is not given the full value of cash by the bank, which means that stores that accept it—stores owned by the company, remember—must charge more for goods because the script they issue is discounted at a lower rate than cash, which they don't pay their employees. The company is making money off the backs of its employees in multiple ways simultaneously. Historically, this was a relatively common practice at the time, especially in mining camps.

In addition to over-charging for items in the store, the company tries to cheat the miners out of money in other ways: "The miners knew, from years of experience, how much they had dug; but always they were credited with less than they dug. [...] The bills were always more than they earned, men charged bitterly—a blanket added here and there that they had not bought, all kind of things added that they had never seen" (101). When the miners protest these unscrupulous acts on the part of the company, they are told to "Pay or get out" (102). It's a

simple matter of the company being able to exploit their employees, the prisoners under their control. As Marie tells us, “To leave the town meant money. To go to another meant going to the same conditions [...]. In all directions lay the lands and the towns of the Company, and to the north lay other towns of other Companies with conditions just the same” (102). There is literally no escape for the miners, because even if they were to leave the camp they were currently working in, they would simply end up in another camp with identical working and living conditions. Marie discovers the truth of this inescapability first-hand when the family moves to Tercio, another mining town. Of this town she says, “Over Tercio brooded the same atmosphere as in Delagua,—smoldering discontent and hatred. Here were the same complaints about the weigh boss, the hours, wages, insufficient props and other precautions against falls, the high prices and dishonesty of the Company store, the payment of script instead of American money” (117).

This is the financial world that Marie knows. It is a perpetual struggle for existence, as laborers find themselves in a situation from which they cannot escape. But Marie also knows that there is something more to life than what she has experienced to this point. Echoing the words of Christopher Lasch, Marie knows there is something more *out there*. Somewhere out in the world beyond these mining towns is a better life, and she longs to find it. As she tells us,

Had it not been for the wanderlust in my blood—my father’s gift to me—and had I not inherited his refusal to accept my lot as ordained by a God, I might have remained in the mining towns all my life, married some working man, borne him a dozen children to wander the face of the earth, and died in my early thirties. Such was the fate of all women about me. But settled things were enemies to me and soon lost their newness and color. The unknown called (123).

Notice the cyclical nature of her statement. She sees a world in which she stays put and gets married, then has children. The fate of those children, we can surmise, would be identical to her own. They, too, would stay in that same town and, in turn, have children of their own. This

continual cycle of reproduction perpetuates the system, as children grow up to be commodified laborers who have only their ability to work to sell in order to survive.

Through what she describes as a meeting that occurred by “purest chance” (126), Marie meets a school teacher who encourages her to study and take the county teachers’ exam. She does well enough to get a job teaching in a town populated by “rough people” (127). This new job allows her to leave Tercio, but a family emergency brings her back: her mother is sick, and she must go see her. It turns out that she is suffering from malnutrition. Elly’s illness is yet another manifestation of capitalism’s power to imprison individuals. Not only is Elly forced to work for food, the only food she can acquire with her meager wages is of such little nutritional value that it can barely sustain life. And, in the end, that force of the economic system kills Elly, as she succumbs to the illness and dies.

Following Elly’s death, Marie eventually leaves behind the world of teaching and takes a job selling magazine subscriptions, an occupation that appeals to her desire to see more of the world. It also promises to be a much more lucrative career option. Several salesmen encourage her to join their ranks for those reasons: “It was foolish of me, they told me, to sit in an office for five dollars a week. Out on the road you not only made money, but you saw the fastest places going” (148). Spending time “on the road” as she calls it will offer Marie the opportunity to make more money, certainly, but it will also introduce her to the commercial culture that is the foundation of so many of those places that the salesmen describe as “the fastest places going.” Because her exposure to life has been limited to small mining towns for the most part, she has not truly experienced the full force of the American commercial culture that fostered the nation’s economic growth. Ironically, when she stops back to visit her old hometown of Trinidad, her first stop is a lodging house located on Commercial Street. She tells us, in contrast to this seemingly

cosmopolitan-named street, “Later I would go over beyond the tracks and let some of my old friends see what it meant to be a successful lady!” (152). She has returned as the conqueror who intends on showing off her Veblenian booty to those she now deems to be beneath her. She has crossed over into the other level of the capitalist Panopticon.

What she discovers, however, is that her father is living together with her two brothers in absolute poverty. Her reaction is to remain detached and only provide financial help to ease their stay in the prison: “I believed only in money, not in love or tenderness. Love and tenderness meant only pain and suffering and defeat. [...] I would speak only with money, hard money. Even now I had power—for I had over eighty dollars pinned inside my shirt” (155). Marie the conqueror has returned to her old hometown victorious financially, though she has apparently inured herself to any sort of emotional compassion for her siblings. She uses her money to buy new clothes for her brothers which, she admits, is an attempt to assuage her own guilt at having so much while they have so little: “Before the day was spent I had less than ten dollars in the envelope beneath my shirt...the rest I spent on warm clothing for my brothers. So it was that I tried to buy off my guilty conscience” (155). She isn’t concerned about the fact that she has spent so much of her money on them; Marie is confident that she can make more selling subscriptions. Her sales luck is not as good as it had been, however, and she makes her way to Carlsbad, New Mexico, and eventually on to Clifton, Arizona, where she meets up with Big Buck, a man who had worked with her father in the coal mines.

Big Buck offers to support Marie for six months, providing her temporary release from the confines of the capitalist prison. During this time, he hopes that she will be able to support herself without his assistance. She takes the opportunity to advance her education, what she sees as the key to finally emerging from poverty: “Light...ideas...thought. And still my own way was

obstructed. I returned to the school to stare steadily at that hemmed-in road of my life. I would break all obstacles...work, money, study!” (185). Remember that she had said during her childhood that education was only for those so wealthy that they didn’t have to work in order to survive; she is now, at least for six months, a member of that exclusive club thanks to Big Buck’s generosity.

During her time in Phoenix, she meets Karin and Knut Larsen, siblings that introduce Marie to socialism. After getting engaged to Knut, she agrees to move to San Francisco when Big Buck stops sending her money and she has to drop out of school. The city represents the next “out there” location where, she hopes, her dreams reside. Before she can leave for California, however, Marie gets a letter from her brother George informing her that he and her other brother Dan “had been turned over to a brutal farmer to do with as he wished” (191). The farmer works both boys “like animals,” and he beat Dan “until the skin had been broken on his body and blood had run down his back” (191). In this scene, the boys are portrayed as both literal and figurative prisoners. They are imprisoned by the farmer in a literal sense, and by the financial system that their labor is helping to support in a more figurative sense. The result for Marie is that their entrapment serves to entrap her, because, despite her earlier callousness towards their suffering, she can’t forgive herself for not helping them. She calls the letter “the indictment against me, I who was considering a better life in San Francisco!” (191). She decides, in the end, to send all of her money to George with the promise to herself that she would work to rescue her brothers from bondage: “Life is hard and life had taught me hard lessons. [...] I would study never-endingly until I could make enough money to bring my brothers to me and send them to school” (192). Again, we see her viewing education as the key to success and happiness in life.

Once in San Francisco, Marie takes a job as a stenographer while going to school part-time. She describes her work as “typing business letters for the land speculators who poured in from Los Angeles, fat, bloated vultures who bought up large tracts of land and held them until poor men who needed land mortgaged their lives to buy” (203). That is to say, she is assisting wealthy men in their quest to become increasingly wealthy by exploiting those who have nothing. This new job presents an interesting thematic juxtaposition for Marie. She is, on the one hand, trying to speak out against the capitalist system by decrying the evils it perpetuates on the members of the proletariat, like herself and her family. However, at the same time, she is acting as a cog in the giant machine that enables the system to perpetuate its exploitative powers. Ironically, in her quest to rise above the system and escape the capitalist prison through education—she had to study to become a stenographer in the first place—she ends up working to fuel the engine that empowers that prison.

Marie gets pregnant twice during her time in San Francisco, and twice elects to have an abortion. In both cases, we see yet another layer of the control that capitalism is capable of wielding in peoples’ lives. In the first case, she consults with a doctor who tells her that, while an abortion itself is technically illegal, she can go to a drug store “and get something” (205). From there, if something goes wrong with her pregnancy, she’ll be able to legally end the pregnancy. He informs her that he will do that procedure for “a special price for you of one hundred dollars” (205). As she contemplates this information, Marie has a realization about the human condition. In much the same way that capitalism requires a constant influx of both commodities for sale and consumers willing to purchase them in order to survive, the human race requires that people reproduce in order to perpetuate the species. Both conditions require money on the part of individuals. As Marie says of the hundred-dollar fee, “All the money I had saved! Still it would

be cheaper” (205). The unstated part of this thought is what, exactly, is more expensive than the abortion. The answer to that question is a child. Having a child is, at its most basic level, a process that tightens the prison’s shackles on a consumer. Thus, for Marie, having an abortion—despite the fact that it will consume her entire savings—is a more sensible option than having the child and paying to raise it. In the end, the doctor falsely diagnoses her as having tuberculosis and, as a result of the diagnosis, declares that childbirth would be hazardous and she must have an abortion.

The second time she gets pregnant, Marie again seeks out a doctor, and this time we see a manifestation of the lyrics to a popular Bing Crosby song from the 1920s: “The rich get richer and the poor get children.” As she sits in the waiting room of the doctor’s office, Marie comments on the other women sitting around her. They are described as “respectable women, young and middle-aged, wives and mothers” (217). The presumption is that they are all there for the same service as Marie, though she stands out as the only non-wealthy woman in the room. That fact is not lost on her, as she comments about her fellow patients, “Well-dressed women—only women with money could afford such an operation” (217). Just as education is presented as a luxury reserved for the rich—the population that, from a financial standpoint, needs to advance their status the least—so, too, are family-planning services. Those who can most easily afford to raise a child are also in the position to most easily afford to avail themselves of the opportunity to avoid paying to raise a child. Those who can least afford to raise a child—poor and working-class women like Marie—are the ones who can also not afford to have a safe and effective medical abortion. The cycle of imprisonment continues because of the financial catch-22 inherent in the capitalist system, and Marie’s disillusionment regarding the possibility of a better future for herself begins to grow.

Her disillusionment strengthens when she is kicked out of school because of the fact that “there were many things wrong” with her, according to the university (221). Among these was the fact that she identified as a socialist, that she associated with men, and that she allowed “other girls in the school to read books that were not proper—Ellen Key’s ‘Love and Marriage’ and such things” (221). Her response to this is by now a common refrain: “Perhaps somewhere else...just beyond...it would be better” (222). Her last vestige of hope for a better life has not been completely snuffed out by the power of capitalism, and she is holding on to the belief that there is still somewhere in the country where she can find the life of which she has dreamed for so long.

Her final stop is New York City, the epicenter of American commercial culture. Every stop in her journey to this point has been a step up the ladder of commercial culture. At each stop, she gave up another piece of her existence to that culture. Upon her arrival in New York, she realizes that the city is fully consuming her: “Always before I had felt like a person, an individual, hopeful that I could mold my life according to some desire of my own. But here in New York I was ignorant, insignificant, unimportant—one in millions whose destiny concerned no one” (234). Without realizing it, she has willingly entered into the bowels of the capitalist Panopticon. She has come to the absolute center of that unforgiving prison, and there will be no escape for her. Her work in New York reflects this personal defeat:

I went back to my room where dozens of stenographers did their work without question, without presuming to think that they knew what a magazine should contain. For a long time I sat at my desk, humiliated and resentful, hating my work, hating the necessity of spending my days taking down the thoughts of such a man when I wished to learn to have and express thoughts of my own (237).

The work is necessary not because she is producing some sort of journalism that will forever change the course of human history. Rather, it is necessary in and of itself for the salary it provides her—twenty or twenty-five dollars a week—so that she might be able to survive.

At the same time, she continues to attend socialist meetings and to learn more about the philosophy that informs the movement, but she grows ambivalent about the cause. Her mixed emotions erupt when she gets a letter from her brother George, who stole a horse and was put in jail. Marie tells us of her socialist friends, “They idealized the working class, and I feared they might not understand the things that grow in poverty and ignorance. They would say my brother would have been justified had he stolen bread, when hungry, but he should not have stolen a horse. Even I, who loved him so dearly, felt this” (242). She comes to realize, however, that her brother had little choice in the situation because “life out there was hard merciless,” and her brother “from the moment he could use his childish hands [...] had labored for his bread” (242). She now sees that the world is a ruthless place that doesn’t allow for people of the working class to take any sort of break from their toil. If they do, they starve. The human condition is locked in to the capitalist prison, with the former feeding the latter. No matter how hard we might want to make the world a better place, Smedley seems to be suggesting, the world will just respond with increased strength to keep us in our current state of miserable existence.

Marie writes him a letter in which she chastises George for doing what he did, but sends him the entirety of her money, along with as much as she was able to borrow from Karin. She learns a few weeks later that her brother was killed while working: “George had been killed while working as a day laborer digging a ditch [...]. The walls of the ditch had caved in and broken his neck. They dug him out and his mouth and eyes were filled with mud. They had buried him beside my mother and the Company he was working for had paid my father fifty

dollars for his life” (245). In a final insult to Marie’s humanity, the capitalist system has determined that her brother’s life was itself a commodity, a commodity with a price tag of fifty dollars attached to it.

Later Marie is raped (for which she is paid fifty dollars by her rapist, thus suggesting that sexual acts are also a commodity, even when obtained by force) and tries to asphyxiate herself, but she is saved by the fact that she left the window open in her apartment. As she is regaining consciousness in the hospital, Marie muses about the true nature of life under a capitalist system: “I hated her because I obeyed, and because the world into which I was being borne was so hard and brutal. I had been away at some place where existence was a rhythmical clicking, a waiting and waiting for something to happen. Now it had happened and I had been sent down here on this earth as experiment for someone” (299). Death is the only escape she sees from the brutality of this capitalist prison, but she is unable to physically repel the life-giving and life-saving oxygen that flows into her body at the hospital.

Smedley’s use of the homophonic word “borne” to describe Marie’s recovery points to the fact that we are brought into this world as prisoners without any consent on our part, and there is no escape outside of our own death. As Marie says at the end of the novel, “It will always be like this” (406). She has finally come to the end of her illusions about a better life somewhere over the horizon. She has finally come to the realization that the economic prison into which she was born is one from which she cannot escape in this lifetime. The only escape is death.

* * *

The metaphorical Gatsby-esque party that characterized the American economy through the 1920s came to an all-too-unmetaphorical ending in October of 1929. Due to a host of economic factors at play during the time—including massive speculation on the part of investors who were convinced that the stock market offered a guaranteed positive return on their investment—the Dow Jones Industrial Average (DJIA) climbed to heights never before seen. Americans believed that the good times wouldn't end, that the good times *couldn't* end. It was as if some sort of magical spell had been cast upon the financial markets of the country, and those fortunate enough to live in the United States were blessed with impossibly good financial luck, despite the current reality that not everyone in the country was wealthy. That inequality, however, would surely change, or so said the collective American belief system. As Phillip G. Payne writes, “Despite the uneven nature of the prosperity, Americans felt good about themselves as the decade came to a close. Surely the rising economic tide would eventually float those left behind” (46).

That naïve belief came crashing down—literally—on Tuesday, October 29. The Great Depression that began with that precipitous drop in the value of the stock market came to be the defining characteristic of the 1930s in the United States. Because of the interrelated nature of the capitalist American economy—paired with the fact that capitalism works as such a powerful force in the lives of everyone who lives under the system—there were almost no sectors of the economy that were not affected by the financial havoc. And the aftershocks of that financial havoc would continue to be felt throughout the American economy for the next decade. It would literally take a second world war—and an abandonment of the United States' isolationist policies at the time—to break the Great Depression's hold. But before that could happen, Americans first

had to survive the 1930s, a time when the panoptic power of capitalism was on full display, and American novelists were there to report it for readers.

Chapter Four
The Bubble Bursts: The 1930s

Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?: The Great Depression

There have been few—if any—financial events to rival the Great Depression in terms of cataclysmic economic results. No facet of American life was left untouched by the financial chaos wrought by the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing economic stagnation that followed. At the height of the Depression, as many as seventeen million people—more than one-quarter of the American workforce—was out of work and looking for a job (Howes 23).

From the perspective of the manufacturer-consumer relationship, what the Depression did for average American consumers was to force them to revert to a focus on basic needs and the utilitarian nature of the commodities that they were buying. Consumption during the thirties for so many Americans was not about conspicuous displays of wealth or emulation of celebrity icons; rather, it was about weighing the cost of a commodity with the benefit that it provided. This mindset can radically affect how manufacturers and retailers focus their efforts, as they must adjust their own practices to fit with market conditions. Kaj Ilmonen explains the fundamental theory informing a commodity's use value as it relates to consumer demand:

There can be no demand for commodities unless they are perceived by consumers as objects of their needs, as use values. The use value of a commodity, whether real or imaginary, can only be harnessed to the consumer's purposes after exchange has taken place. It follows that use value is not an economic category in the first place, but it attaches consumption to civil society – its everyday activities and varied social microspace. Consumption represents the point of intersection between the economy and everyday life (36).

The use value associated with a commodity became of paramount importance during the Great Depression, because of the simple fact that in order to purchase a particular commodity, the buyer had to part with a sum of money, and money was in short supply for many Americans.

Different segments of the American population were affected in different ways by the Great Depression, but there were characteristics in terms of buying habits amongst those different groups that were fairly uniform across different demographics. Specifically, a majority of American consumers at the time subscribed to the belief that any commodity that they purchased needed to fulfill a particular need first, with desire-fulfillment being a tangential concern. If a manufacturer wanted to survive the Great Depression, then they had to focus on a much more utilitarian appeal than they had during of the previous decades. There were two primary avenues that advertisers at the time pursued in order to sell their goods: cost-value and consumer fear. Julian Sivulka explains, “To connect with the Depression-wracked public, admakers found two appeals of immense value. One obvious tactic was the blatant emphasis on price. The other tapped into consumers’ insecurities” (*Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes* 169).

While the idea of advertising a product based on its value to the consumer from a financial perspective is self-explanatory, the concept of marketing to personal insecurities is a much more multi-faceted strategy. On one level, a prevalent fear at the time that permeated just about every member of the American workforce was the fear of losing one’s job. On an actual level, that fear of potential job loss was more often than not rooted in the fear of a company’s being forced to downsize its labor force rather than any single characteristic of a specific employee. However, Sivulka points out that advertisers managed to link the general anxiety surrounding the potential loss of a job with one’s personal actions: “Nonetheless, scare campaigns aimed at job insecurity surpassed even economy appeals in capitalizing on

Depression-era fears” (*Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes* 173). What these sorts of appeals tended to focus on were personal hygiene and efficiency, which were posited as potential reasons for losing one’s job. While bad breath or running late to work one day due to missing a train might not result in the loss of a job, plenty of mouthwash and automobile advertisements planted these suggestions in the minds of consumers as a way of playing on the general fear of unemployment.

In addition to insecurities about their jobs, many Americans at the time had physical and psychological insecurities, many of which were the direct result of living during a time of extreme financial uncertainty. Given that men were, historically, the gender on whom fell the task to support their family financially, the sudden precipitous drop in the nation’s economic well-being took its toll on the psyche of men throughout the United States. In short, many workers in the United States felt guilty at not being able to provide for their families. And just as advertisers sought to capitalize on consumers’ insecurities, so, too, did they try to leverage consumers’ collective feelings of guilt. Benjamin Singer highlights this strategy when he writes, “What these and many hundreds of other ads of the 1930s had in common was their playing upon peoples’ insecurities about their physical or psychological selves. The social context—a severe economic depression—served as backdrop for guilt and fear” (38). And while it highlighted these personal insecurities, the Great Depression also brought into stark relief a truth about capitalism: The panoptic nature of the economic system does not discriminate against any group. All Americans felt their imprisonment more intensely during this period, regardless of religion, race, economic status, or any other label.

As I Lay Dying

The human tendency to compare oneself to others is often used as a barometer of one's own status; if we can perceive ourselves as superior to those around us, at least in our own minds, then we believe that our social status is elevated. Much of this analysis of the literature of the first two decades of the twentieth century has examined how authors have manifested this very idea in their works, and what that manifestation means for our understanding of those works. The wealthy tend to look down at those less fortunate, regardless of what specific rung on the socio-economic ladder they might occupy; those at the highest levels look down on essentially everyone, while those in the middle look down on the lower levels. Even those of the lower class can often find someone less well-off financially than they are, which enables them to look down on yet another segment of the population.

With the onset of the Great Depression, however, the distance between the ladder rungs decreased significantly. Almost overnight, those who had been at the loftiest heights of society were brought down to levels they never thought possible. As a result, the previous financial distinctions between the rich and poor—specifically among the white population of the United States—became much harder to discern for an external observer, and led those of what was previously a much higher status to invoke a new descriptor for those who had always been members of the lower class. Members of that latter group were labeled “white trash.”

White trash was not a new term in the American lexicon. Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray point out that the term traces its origins to African-American slaves who used it as a derogatory descriptor for white servants on plantations (2). Going back even further in history, Duane Carr points out that jokes at the expense of those in lower economic classes is present in ancient Rome: “Making the poor the butt of jokes is not unique to the American South, of course.

Juvenal noted the trend in first-century Rome and castigated his fellow citizens for their thoughtless jibes at the unfortunate” (3).

The term was eventually appropriated by American whites seeking to supplement their own self-perceptions of elevated class status while, at the same time, subjugating other American whites in much the same way as racist ideology subjugates those of different races: “The term white trash helps solidify for the middle and upper classes a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority. But as [John] Waters points out, ‘white trash’ is not just a classist slur—it’s also a racial epithet that marks out certain whites as a breed apart, a dysgenic race unto themselves” (Newitz and Wray 1-2). This points to the idea that those of the upper- and middle-class might have fallen down closer to the level of the lower classes, but there was still an inherent difference between the collective groups, even if contemporary financial situations didn’t make that difference obvious. As Pierre Bourdieu writes of class distinctions, “A class is defined as much by its *being-perceived* as by its *being*, by its consumption—which need not be conspicuous in order to be symbolic—as much as by its position in the relations of production” (485, bold and italics in original). Thus, as long as pre-Depression class distinctions were *perceived* to still be in place, then those distinctions *actually* were still in place. And one way those distinctions were preserved was through the use of a derogatory term to describe those who were lower-class prior to the Depression.

Furthering this idea of cementing the social status of those of the higher classes, Julia Leyda suggests that the term white trash was used to differentiate those who were only temporarily in tighter financial straits from those who would remain poor even after the country’s economy recovered:

A historically informed, critical examination of how the term white trash functions in the 1930s demonstrates how middle-class whites constructed white

trash identity to explain the socio-economic immobility of other, less prosperous whites. The discourse of “trash” circulated in conjunction with claims about genetics and eugenics, adaptability to changing capitalist markets, and gender identity. The term signifies specific racialized class identities contingent on time and place, but always serving to distinguish the trash from upwardly mobile whites, who, no matter how poor, still have the potential for upward mobility that the trash lack (38).

Thus, those who are relegated to the status of white trash, in the minds of those doing the relegating, have no prospects of upward mobility.

The classification of these Americans as somehow lesser individuals is an example of what psychologists term dehumanization. According to Philip Zimbardo, “Dehumanization is the central construct of our understanding of ‘man’s inhumanity to man.’ Dehumanization occurs whenever some human beings consider other human beings to be excluded from the moral order of being a human person” (307). Dehumanization is also at the root of classifying a segment of the population as white trash. By applying a label of “white trash” to these individuals, those applying the label distinguish themselves from those that they perceive to be their inferiors by suggesting that the latter is non-human, thus justifying the former’s contempt of them.

In a strange twist of definitions and perspectives, the very notion of the egalitarian nature of American society is simultaneously destroyed and reinforced. A segment of the American population is, by being declared white trash, essentially shackled to a class from which they can never climb; in this regard, the concept laid out by James Truslow Adams in which everyone has the opportunity to ascend the ladder is laid to waste. However, at the same time, we must remember that this marginalized segment of the population is explicitly that. They exist in the margins, *outside* of the population that is otherwise deemed human. They are trash, and as such are not eligible to participate in the collective pursuit of the American Dream. But at the same time, all segments of American society—including those labeled “white trash”—are subject to

the same forces of capitalism and, as a result, all are equal under the eyes of that system. The Panopticon does not differentiate on the basis of social class.

In the annals of American fiction, there are few families more closely linked to the descriptor of white trash than the Bundrens of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. The novel, published in 1930, tells the story of a family's odyssey to bury the family matriarch in her own family burial plot in Jefferson, Mississippi. The subtext of that journey, however, is a message that subverts both the white trash label and the concept of the American Dream. As the Bundren family travels towards their destination, we learn increasingly more about each of the family members. We learn that they have hopes and dreams and desires, some of them pragmatic and some of them indulgent. But regardless of their nature, those desires all point to the family's essential humanity. One of Faulkner's hallmark characteristics as an author is his desire to elevate poor white trash in the eyes of Americans by celebrating their collective humanity, by showing that they are, beneath their poverty, human beings like everyone else. As J. Wayne Flynt posits, "No one is so famous for his portrayal of poor whites as William Faulkner. The Mississippi writer, more than any other novelist of the decade, depicted the poor white as something more than a primitive" (75). Despite their sometimes tragi-comic behaviors, the Bundrens, through Faulkner's writing, never let us forget their humanity.

There is an abundance of critical attention paid to narrative techniques as they are presented in *As I Lay Dying*. Deborah Chappell posits the idea that Anse Bundren is a human manifestation of the socialist ideal. She argues that by refusing to do work that makes him sweat, Anse is, through Faulkner, making a political statement about the bourgeoisie/proletariat relationship outlined by Marx in which it is from the sweat of the laborers that the bourgeoisie enrich themselves. Julia Leyda offers a discussion of the historical context of the term "white

trash” used to describe people like the Bundrens in the 1930s, and argues that in context, the term serves to create a marginalized other race. Susan Willis’s interpretation of the novel focuses on the transition from the agrarian to the urban in the narrative, which she argues mirrors the national tendency of migration to cities from farms. She suggests that, in the case of the Bundrens, this movement represents a shift away from the barter economy of the farm and towards the capitalist system of the more urban setting of the city. None of this analysis examines the Bundrens as victims of the system, imprisoned by the invisible bonds that are the capitalist tentacles.

The Bundrens are, in the eyes of those who serve as spectators along the route to Jefferson, white trash, a subhuman group that defies any sort of classification within the realms of humanity. Their appearances and actions often support this contention, and readers are, on one level, invited to join in with the fictional spectators and cast dispersions on the family. But despite their oddities, we are always cognizant of the fact that the Bundrens are human beings as deserving of happiness and success as anyone else. However, because of their status as white trash Americans, they are excluded from all that the American Dream promises, and the prospects for their upward mobility are as futile as their lateral mobility that is manifested in the trip to Jefferson.

Some of the traditional characteristics of the white trash stereotype are laziness and lack of intelligence. It is widely assumed that if individuals labeled as being white trash had any drive or intelligence to accomplish anything, they would be able to elevate themselves above that status. This is a stereotype that Faulkner incorporates into many of his works, as Duane Carr points out: “A standard stereotype of the disadvantaged white is that he is lazy, stupid, and behaves like an animal, and Faulkner often presents him as such” (90). Given both the stereotype

and Faulkner's penchant for incorporating it into his fiction, the generalization of the Bundren family as a collection of comically inept and lazy leeches is an easy one to make. Dewey Dell's own words about her father seem to suggest as much: "And pa thinks because neighbors will always treat one another that way because he has always been too busy letting neighbors do for him to find out" (26). Anse's continued refrain of wishing to be beholden to no man serves to ironically reinforce this habit. By in fact highlighting his status as a borrower, he is placing the onus on the giver to give without expectation of repayment. His repeated desire not to be in anyone's debt is reverse psychology that allows him to take without having to give back, and to do so free of guilt.

Despite that seeming laziness manifested in his refusal to do work himself, however, there is a quasi-explanation for Anse's refusal to work. The explanation itself requires a modicum of skepticism, given that it is a potentially apocryphal story related to us by Darl, who no doubt heard it from his father: "There is no sweat stain on his shirt. I have never seen a sweat stain on his shirt. He was sick once from working in the sun when he was twenty-two year old, and he tells people that if he ever sweats, he will die. I suppose he believes it" (17). Darl clearly has his doubts as to his father's mysterious allergy to work. Duane Carr argues that this justification is valid: "It is interesting, however, that in *As I Lay Dying*, only Anse is characterized as lazy and we are given a rationale for his laziness" (90). There is some support for Carr's interpretation, given that Anse is missing the toenails on his little toes, the result of "working so hard in the wet in homemade shoes when he was a boy" (Faulkner 11). Whether or not sweating as a result of hard work would kill him, Anse at least seems to have a history of having worked hard at some point in his life. But from what we see of their lives in the present,

there is little to suggest that Anse's hard work paid dividends manifested in any sort Veblenian trophies he can use to impress those around him.

However, despite their poverty, even those in the lower class like the Bundrens have the same human desires for things as those more financially well-off. In the end, resistance to the Panopticon is reduced to the level of futility, as represented by the fact that Darl—the only member of the Bundren family to question the idea of taking Addie's body to Jefferson as a pointless and dangerous effort—is committed to an insane asylum for his attempts at derailing the journey. Metaphorically, we may read this as what happens to those who dare to question the larger economic system and all that it represents.

Darl is the first character to whom we are introduced, as he is the first character (out of a total of fifteen) to narrate a chapter. In our entrée to the novel, we learn that the family lives in the country, presumably as tenant cotton farmers. Darl mentions both “green rows of laidby cotton” and “the cottonhouse in the center of the field” (3), suggesting an expectation of a crop that will provide the family with the requisite funds to ensure their own survival. A closer examination of the latter structure, however, suggests that the promise of new life inherent in the green fields will not come to fruition: “The cottonhouse is of rough logs, from between which the chinking has long fallen. Square, with a broken roof set at a single pitch, it leans in empty and shimmering dilapidation in the sunlight” (4). The Bundrens are poor white trash, a status that is reflected in their dilapidated cottonhouse and their seeming insouciance regarding the need to harvest and properly store the cotton crop.

However, given the state of the national economy at the time, it is entirely possible that even if the family members were to change their mindset and repair the cottonhouse, it stands to reason that their financial situation would not noticeably improve. Because of the inter-related

nature of the country's economy, when one group loses, so do others. In this case, the cotton that the Bundrens would provide through what is presumably a sharecropping arrangement is not required due to the lack of demand, a lack that is linked to the larger national economy. That inter-related quality of capitalism feeds into the panoptic power wielded by the system, because it means that everyone is connected to each other within the system, and when one component of that system breaks down, everyone suffers as a result.

This point is made stronger in the subsequent chapter, narrated by Cora Tull. Cora relates a story of baking cakes for a wealthy woman in town who is hosting a party. The chickens that the Tull family owns are themselves expensive, but Cora promises her husband that they will pay for themselves in the eggs that they lay: "So after they were going to cost so much more than Mr Tull thought, and after I promised that the difference in the number of eggs would make it up, I had to be more careful than ever because it was on my final say-so we took them" (6). The chickens are, then, an investment that Cora is expecting to pay dividends. Those dividends come close to becoming reality when Cora is asked to bake multiple cakes, which will result in her making enough money to buy even more chickens and build her flock: "So when Miss Lawington told me about the cakes I thought that I could bake them and earn enough at one time to increase the net value of the flock the equivalent of two head. And that by saving the eggs out one at a time, even the eggs wouldn't be costing anything" (7). On the surface, then, the chickens (and the eggs they lay) seem to be the perfect self-sustaining investment, as they provide enough dividends to pay for themselves.

However, this perfect investment proves to be less-than-perfect when it comes time for Cora to sell the cakes that she baked using the eggs those chickens had laid. After acquiring the ingredients (which requires a monetary expenditure, given the nature of the capitalist system)

and exerting the labor (which, as Marx points out, is its own form of commodity) to bake the cakes, her customer decides to cancel the party, which means that she will no longer need the cakes. She tells Cora that, because she won't be needing them, she won't be paying for the cakes. This prerogative of fickleness is one that is reserved for the wealthy, according to Kate Lawington: "But those rich town ladies can change their minds. Poor folks cant" (7). This exchange highlights both the interconnected nature of the economy and the perilous position in which the lower classes find themselves. A decision by someone of a higher class—a capitalist, in Marx's terminology—has much more far-reaching consequences on members of the lower-class proletariat than might initially be obvious. Poor folks, as Kate reminds us, can't afford to change their minds. They have to make a decision and live with it, regardless of the costs or the consequences.

Their incessant and seemingly inescapable poverty are by-products of the sharecropping system in which they exist. As laborers who work the land in order to make a profit for the landowner, they serve as the embodiment of Marx's proletariat. However, unlike Marx's vision of a future for that class of laborers, there does not appear to be any potential for the Bundrens—and, if we read them as representative of the population, then also for all sharecroppers like them—to improve their situation through violent revolution or any other means, for that matter. They are so imprisoned by the system that escape isn't a remote possibility. As Susan Willis argues of sharecroppers in general, "This is a population whose oppression was insured by debt peonage and inefficient farming techniques" (588). Because the Bundrens—whose patriarch repeatedly assures others that he will not be beholden to any man—are, in fact, so beholden to the landowner for whom they work, they have no hope of escaping their poverty.

Because the Bundrens are isolated in their rural setting—the antithesis of commercial progress—it stands to reason that they would not have been exposed to the commercialization of American cities at the time. However, bear in mind that mail-order businesses served to fill the gap between country-dwellers and commercial stores, meaning that a family like the Bundrens would have been exposed to advertising collateral for a variety of commodities. Case in point, the 1908 Sears, Roebuck catalog featured approximately three million words on nearly twelve hundred pages, the equivalent of thirty full-length books in today’s world (Leis et al. 62). The Sears catalog and publications like it were a vital connection between rural families and the far-off cities, and those catalogs served to bring the city’s array of commodities to the country.⁹

Furthermore, their odyssey to Jefferson represents, to the minds of some scholars, the transition occurring in the country at the time as the population was shifting from rural to urban settings. Susan Willis argues that the novel itself may be read as a metaphor for the nation’s history of migration to cities by the population, an interpretation that “allows us to see the plight of a single family as a figure for the migration this country’s agricultural workforce to the cities. The family’s migration is a geographic metaphor describing demographic change” (587). Part of the lure of that calling to more urban environments was, of course, the financial element. There were opportunities for work in the cities. But the true pull for those living in rural areas was that of the commercial culture discourse, and the Bundrens’ journey is representative of that. Commercial culture influences much of the family’s decision to take Addie to Jefferson to be buried, because Jefferson is a metropolitan area where the family members can acquire

⁹ The family members have exposure to the more metropolitan culture of the larger towns. For instance, Darl describes his brother Jewel as walking “with the rigid gravity of a cigar store Indian” (4), and Vardaman and Dewey Dell repeatedly discuss the train in the window of a store, with Vardaman remembering, “It goes round and round on the shining track” (216). Both of these displays are examples of in-store advertising designed to draw customers in to the store.

commodities that they have either heard about or seen advertised. Several members of the family demonstrate their own predilections to selfish indulgences: Cash wants a gramophone, Dewey Dell wants an abortion, Vardaman wants bananas, Anse wants false teeth. In each of these cases, the specific character is using the death of their mother and the ensuing journey to Jefferson as a way to get what they want, which may be read as a collection of overtly selfish acts. Whereas they should be focused on their mother's dying wishes and making the trip in order to honor those wishes, they are instead focused on satisfying their own desires.

But the satiation of those desires is more than mere selfishness; it is also the manifestation of the engine that drives capitalism. Bananas, false teeth, a gramophone, and an abortion are all selfish or self-gratifying indulgences that the individual family members seek to acquire while piggy-backing off their mother's death, but they are also the sorts of goods and services that propel the capitalist machinery and keep the system going. It is clear to see that the Bundrens, as prisoners who are buying things because they are trapped within the capitalist Panopticon, are, through their purchases, also helping to perpetuate the system that keeps them imprisoned. Like Cora's self-supporting chickens whose eggs are sold to pay for their upkeep, capitalism uses its own prisoners to perpetuate their imprisonment and keep the system alive.

Given the word-play that Faulkner incorporates with his characters' names throughout the novel, it seems relevant to discuss the specific names that help to inform this reading of the novel as critical of the capitalist system. Many of those character names point to particular components of the capitalist system, casting an ironic and critical light on the system as a whole. Consider first the fact that the family's name—Bundren—is an aptronymic near-homophone of the word “burden,” something that the family clearly is in terms of their relationship to the people and to the larger society around them. The Bundrens are not lazy, *per se*. Rather, they are

ignorant of their own helplessness because of their isolation from those of the upper class. They do not see any of the things they do as wrong in the moment—with the exception of Darl who is cognizant of the futility of the journey—and thus continue to do what they are doing. However, the result is that they require assistance from those around them—as Dewey Dell points out in regard to her father—which eventually causes them to be seen as a burden on people with whom they come in contact.

It is not just the family surname that points to a criticism of capitalism, as individual characters' first names are often clues to Faulkner's message in the novel, too. The patriarch of the Bundren family, for example, has a name that is a homophone for ants, insects that are known for industrious activity. As described by Bert Hölldobler and Edward O. Wilson, "Ants carry on in the midst of the shifting wreckage created by people, seeming not care whether humans are present or not, so long as a little piece of minimally disturbed environment is left for them to build a nest, to search for food, and thereby multiply their kind" (1). Ironically, ants are also known for being omnivorous insects that can be seen literally carrying the carcasses of dead insects and other animal matter. Hölldobler and Wilson call ants "the cemetery squads of creatures their own size" (2). In the case of Anse Bundren, of course, he is carrying the dead body of his deceased wife. This is an encapsulation of the man that is Anse Bundren. He is trying to survive by any means possible in a setting that qualifies as "minimally disturbed" in the midst of the wreckage of the Great Depression, itself wrought by mankind's greed. Despite this relatively generous description of ants by men who have made their life's work the study of the insects, most humans see ants as pests that need to be exterminated. Thus, the Bundren patriarch is associated with an insect that exists amid destruction and manages to survive through whatever

means necessary; upon being discovered by other humans, the insect is destroyed whenever possible.

Cash is the oldest of the Bundren children, and the source of much financial strain on Anse. The latter blames the road that was built near the family's home for Cash's desire to become a carpenter, training that required his going to school, which in turn required money. Anse says, "Making me pay for Cash having to get them carpenter notions when if it hadn't been no road come there, he wouldn't a got them" (36). Cash's name, then, may be read as a Faulknerian double-entendre. He is simultaneously a source of income for the family when he can find work as a carpenter, while also serving as a source of financial strain for the family because of the courses he had to pay to take in order to learn how to be a carpenter. His labor serves the function of commodity in the way that Marx suggests a laborer can sell his labor; but the skills required to perform that labor came at their own price.

Jewel is the third of the Bundren children, the product of an affair between Addie and Reverend Whitfield. Despite his status as bastard child within the family, Jewel's name suggests that he is the treasure that his mother longed for; he is, in the Veblenian sense, the tangible manifestation of her success. Because Addie spent the majority of her life shackled to Anse and his failed farming enterprise, she was never in a socio-economic position to be able to afford those things that might create envy and desire in the eyes of those with whom she came in contact. And as Veblen argues, that evocation of desire is at the root of material acquisition. Human beings want to be admired by others, and Addie Bundren is no different. This points to her inherent humanity, despite being categorized by outside observers as white trash. Jewel, as a product of the only "labor" Addie was able to do outside of her own home, represents Addie's attempt to elevate her own status in the eyes of others. Because she has had a child fathered by

someone as socially elevated as Reverend Whitfield, that child becomes a representation of the higher social status to which she aspires in vain.

The lone daughter in the Bundren family, Dewey Dell's name points to what others see as her purpose in life, specifically serving as a vehicle for reproduction. Her anatomy is reduced to geographical similes throughout the novel, specifically those parts of her body related to reproduction and child-rearing. She is like the land itself, which provides the Bundrens with their subsistence-level living as sharecroppers. For example, Darl describes her breasts as "mammalian ludicrosities which are the horizons and the valleys of the earth" (164). In much the same vein, her name is itself a reference to childbirth, specifically her vagina, the opening of the birth canal. All of the childbirth references in regard to her name and appearance reach an apex in the fact that she is pregnant with Lavee's child, and her personal motivation for going to Jefferson is to see about acquiring some sort of medicinal abortion that Lavee told her she could get there. Like Cash, she exists to serve a very specific purpose, that of producing children who will grow up to become laborers themselves, and her name reflects that purpose.

The youngest Bundren son is Vardaman, named for the populist Mississippi senator James K. Vardaman. Vardaman the senator ran on a platform of white supremacy, and relied heavily on poor Southerners—people just like Anse Bundren and his family—for political support. Thus, Vardaman's name is important in the novel, given his namesake's attachment to racial supremacy and appeal to poor, typically agrarian, voters. By choosing to name the youngest child in the family after a senator with James Vardaman's record and rhetoric, Faulkner made a very conscious decision to point to the (especially Southern) tendency on the part of so many people to resist change. James Vardaman famously said during the 1903 Mississippi Governor's race, "If it is necessary, every Negro in the state will be lynched. [...] The only effect

of Negro education is to spoil a good field hand and make an insolent cook” (qtd. in Wilkerson 39). By incorporating the source of this racist rhetoric as the source of the character’s name, Faulkner offers both the idea of social stagnation and an element of class-consciousness into the family’s own self-perception. By naming their child after James Vardaman, the Bundrens are endorsing the status quo that is manifested in his racist tirade, an endorsement that suggests that they believe it is futile to fight against the systems currently in place. Among those systems would be that of capitalism, which has imprisoned them all to an inescapable and permanent life of servitude. Vardaman’s name also suggests that the Bundrens are aware of their class difference, despite their attempts to ignore the derisive looks and comments they receive during their journey to Jefferson.

The only Bundren child yet to be examined in this study is Darl, who chronologically occupies the position of second-oldest child. His name does not offer any clue as to his purpose in the family structure. The name Darl does not imply a monetary transaction (Cash), nor does it imply a function (Dewey Dell). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “darl” is a shortened form of the word “darling” first recorded in 1930, which would seem to suggest that Darl holds a place of affection in his parents’ view, though not to the level of being something worth showing off to the neighbors (Jewel). However, Darl’s name has been shortened, which I would argue means that he is somehow not fully-formed. As such, Darl is an outcast from the family who doesn’t exactly fit into their collective lives. His failure to assimilate is manifested in his refusal to accept what he sees as an absurd and futile trip to Jefferson without protesting. Just as he is unable to assimilate into the family structure, Darl is also unable—or unwilling—to assimilate into the proscribed role of model prisoner within the capitalist panopticon. He refuses to accept his mother’s death as a reason to indulge in commercial consumption, and as a result he

is committed to an insane asylum. He is deemed unfit for life both in the family and in the larger society around him.

Returning to the idea that Vardaman's name evokes a sense of class-consciousness in the family members, it is clear that the Bundrens are ill-equipped to deal with the realities of the commercial culture that draws them to Jefferson in their individual quests to acquire commodities, a situation that augments the obvious class differences that they feel. For example, even before the family sets out on their journey, Dewey Dell says, "We are country people, not as good as town people" (60). Despite her youth, Dewey Dell is already conscious of the fact that she lives in the lesser of the two regions; she and her family can only aspire to live among those in the city. Regarding this sense of self-deprecation, Duane Carr praises Faulkner for his sympathetic presentation of the Southern poor: "Faulkner can, in fact, be given high marks for seeing some aspects of the effects of poverty quite clearly, namely low self-esteem and shame" (90).

The characteristics of low self-esteem and shame that are so overtly present in the Bundrens are made more overt by the fact that they are inherently linked with specific purposes through their names. They have been subverted to non-human status by those names, and their treatment at the hands of those around them serves to reinforce the idea that they are collectively sub-human. Julia Leyda suggests that this subjugation of the Bundrens is an intentional part of the strategy by others in the novel to soothe their anxieties regarding the idea of upward mobility that is at the core of American capitalism. Their classification of the Bundrens as less-than-human also serves to ease any guilt they may have in regard to their own socio-economic positions in light of the Bundrens' suffering:

Marking the Bundrens as trash obviates the need to explain their negative mobility in the "land of opportunity" the middle classes need to believe exists.

When country-dwellers travel to town, they face the prejudices of the townsfolk at every turn, particularly in their uneasy role as consumers with very little purchasing power. Simultaneously threatened and reassured by the presence of poor whites, the townspeople distance themselves from the trash by emphasizing their difference via their rural customs and by racializing the white trash as somehow biologically or genetically inferior to themselves (Leyda 41).

Despite the lack of experience they have as consumers in the city and the accompanying unease they experience in that role, the Bundrens do have individual desires for commodities. They, like other human beings, want things. So in that regard, they are as much human as anyone else, regardless of what their names might suggest to the contrary.

Their desires—so often relegated to the status of personal greed—are, then, emblematic of the Bundrens' humanity. Essentially, the argument posits that because they want, they therefore are. And in wanting things, they elevate their own status above that of the level of white trash to which so much of their society has relegated them. In wanting things, they are on an equal plane with anyone else in the world. This idea of equality recalls the words of William Leach, who wrote that this human trait of desire is an equal opportunity characteristic:

“American culture, therefore, became more democratic after 1880 in the sense that everybody – children as well as adults, men and women, black and white – would have the same right as individuals to desire, long for, and wish for whatever they pleased” (*Desire* 6). That desire, however, does more than make the Bundrens the equal of every other human in the sense that everyone has an equal opportunity to want things. It also puts them in another silo of capitalist equality, namely the silo of the Panopticon. In wanting things—and, perhaps more importantly, in the quest to acquire those things—the Bundrens discover that the financial system about which they know so little will treat them the same as it treats anyone else living under its purview. It will trap them within its confines forever.

The initial desire that drives the majority of the novel's plot is the collective desire on the part of the family members to honor Addie's wishes to be buried in her family's plot in Jefferson. While this is not a commodity acquisition in the traditional sense, it is a somewhat tangible goal for which the family is working and, due to the fact that it has a cost-benefit relationship associated with it, the journey itself is a commodity.

As a commodity in the traditional capitalist sense, the journey requires some sort of advertising discourse to cement its status as such. The trip to Jefferson has, in fact, two different layers of such discourse at play. The primary, surface-level discourse is Addie's declaration to the family that she wants to be buried in Jefferson, a quest that the family members feel they have a sacred duty to perform. Just as a salesman or some form of inanimate advertising collateral offer potential consumers the reasons that they should buy the particular commodity, Addie Bundren herself serves as the controlling discourse that compels the family to take her body to Jefferson. As Anse tells Tull about the vow he made to his wife in regard to getting her body to the family burial plot in Jefferson, "I give her my promised word in the presence of the Lord" (125). At the same time, the trip itself is tied to material acquisition, a point that adds a secondary layer to the Addie's primary discourse. Her death serves as both the original discourse (her dying wishes) and the gateway that allows the secondary discourse (the individual family members' desires for material possessions) to manifest itself in their minds.

During their journey, Anse begins to muse on his own life as a sharecropper—as a prisoner within the capitalist Panopticon from which he can't hope to escape—and soothes his own anxieties about life in the present with the belief that he will be rewarded in Heaven for all of his suffering on Earth. He remarks, "Nowhere in this sinful world can a honest, hardworking man profit. It takes them that runs the stores in the towns, doing no sweating, living off of them

that sweats” (110). This portion of his internal monologue could have very easily been lifted directly from the writings of Karl Marx.

But rather than call for a proletariat revolt that overthrows the capitalists as Marx hopes will happen, Anse Bundren falls back on yet another social discourse, specifically that of religion.¹⁰ His faith in the teachings of Christianity reassures him that his labors in this world, while not being rewarded in the commercial sense, will be rewarded in the spiritual sense: “Sometimes I wonder why we keep at it. It’s because there is a reward for us above, where they cant [sic.] take their autos and such. Every man will be equal there and it will be taken from them that have and give to them that have not by the Lord” (110). Anse Bundren’s God is a pure socialist, and Anse’s version of Heaven is a paradise that is a complete and eternal escape from the capitalist Panopticon. However, given that he first has to survive life on Earth until such time as he is destined to receive the reward his faith assures him he will receive, Anse does what he can to survive, including indulging in commodity acquisition in order to better his own life. He ends his musings about the trials of life on Earth by comforting himself with the knowledge that he will be able to get his false teeth once he gets to Jefferson: “But now I can get them teeth. That will be a comfort. It will” (111).

Due to the heavy rains that have washed out Tull’s Bridge, the Bundrens are forced to drive the team of mules across the swollen river. Predictably, however, the wagon gets caught in the river current and begins to list to the side. Cash stays on it in a vain attempt to stabilize the wagon, but it is knocked on its side and all the contents are thrown into the river. Jewel’s horse,

¹⁰ For Anse in this instance, religion is serving the function of Karl Marx’s oft-cited opium in that it is helping to pacify his mind and, thereby, essentially drug him into a more contented state of mind. Marx famously referred to religion as “*das Opium des Volkes*,” which translates to “the opium of the people” (*Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right”* 131).

which was also swept up by the river, manages to swim to shore, towing Cash behind him. However, the mules that had served as the source of locomotion for the family wagon are dead, and Cash's tools have fallen into the river. Two of the most important physical commodities that the family owns are now either gone or in jeopardy of being lost.

While Cash is lying on his back on the bank of the river recovering from the river-crossing debacle, the others search for his tools that fell in to the river. These tools, along with the now-dead mules, represent commodities that the family deems worth saving, because of the fact that they have an inherent use-value, as Marx describes it. They do not have the same manifestation of that use-value as human labor capital, but rather they serve as tools that provide a catalyst for that use-value. But Marx points out that the quality of a laborer's tools can have a dramatic effect on his labor efforts (*Capital* 460). The family seems to have some sense of understanding in this regard, because they are anxious to recover all of them, a process that involves at times life-risking behavior.

Of all the tools that they recover, it seems that the rule is the one most coveted. Darl tells us after its recovery by Vernon Tull, "He'll be glad of that [...]. It's right new. He bought it just last month out of the catalogue" (159). When Cash regains consciousness, he communicates to Jewel the fact that he also had a new set of saws that he "bought when he bought the rule" (163). Darl's inclusion of the fact that the ruler and the saws were purchased through a mail-order catalog suggests that the family is both aware of and affected by the commercial culture that is such a driving force in America at the time, despite the economic ravages of the Depression. In fact, it can be argued that because of that cataclysmic financial event the family is all the more aware of how valuable such a commodity is. There is an irony in the fact that Darl is the one telling us this information about the source of the ruler and saws, given that he will also be the

one who attempts to subvert the capitalist system by burning down Armstid's barn and, as a result, will end up being committed to an asylum.

The death of the mules in the river is another manifestation of the capitalist Panopticon, as they are laborers in their own right, pulling the family's wagon and serving as the only means of locomotion for that vehicle. Their use-value is manifested in the fact that they are the engine that is being used to transport the family to Jefferson, where they will participate as consumers in the capitalist marketplace. Without the mules, the wagon—together with the entire family—is completely immobile. To illustrate the fact that the mules serve as a manifestation of the family's imprisonment, consider the fact that Anse has to engage in bartering—a form of capitalist exchange—in order to acquire a new team of mules.

Anse initially tells Armstid that he had to exchange “a chattel mortgage on my cultivator and seeder” in exchange for a pair of mules (189). Armstid knows, however, that the value of those two items is not enough for a pair of mules, and he presses Anse, who admits that he “give other things” (190). As it turns out, Anse also used the money Cash was planning to use to buy “that talking machine from Suratt” (190) and Jewel's horse, which Jewel had paid for himself in yet another manifestation of capitalist exchange. Anse justifies his actions by suggesting that his family should suffer along with him:

For fifteen years I aint had a tooth in my head [...]. God knows it. He knows in fifteen years I aint et the victuals He aimed for man to eat to keep his strength up, and me saving a nickel here and a nickel there so my family wouldn't suffer it, to buy them teeth so I could eat God's appointed food. I give that money. I thought that if I could do without eating, my sons could do without riding” (191).

This provides an illustration of the nature of the shackles of capitalism's prison. There are things one must have in order to survive and to accomplish those things one has to do on a daily basis. Without those things—commodities that are imbued with Marxist use-values that allow humans

to go about their daily lives—an individual's mobility ceases until the requisite capital (in whatever form that may take) is amassed in order to re-acquire the necessary commodities.

Before continuing with the family's journey, Faulkner inserts Addie's chapter immediately following the disastrous river-crossing episode. In a rambling monologue that at times reads like a confession, she discusses the quasi-commodification of her own life. She had begun her adult life as a school teacher, despite her overt dislike of the children. Addie then relates Anse's fear of interacting with her family, who live in Jefferson. She recalls his saying, "Well, I got a little property. I'm forehanded; I got a good honest name. I know how town folks are, but maybe when they talk to me..." (171). While pointing to the fact that Anse enjoyed, at least at one time, something slightly above his current white trash status, his sales pitch also suggests that Addie is taking a significant step down in marrying Anse. Additionally, it suggests that both she and her new husband are aware of this class difference. As her children are born, she grows increasingly despondent, saying that she "gave Anse the children. I did not ask for them" (174). She admits to having an affair with Whitfield, the minister, a liaison that produced Jewel. She then says that "I gave Anse Dewey Dell to negative Jewel. Then I gave him Vardaman to replace the child I robbed him of. And now he has three children that are his and not mine. And then I could get ready to die" (176). Children are, for Addie, a form of payment. She feels that she owed Anse children in exchange for his having married her, despite the fact that she was descending in status by marrying him. This is yet another example of the commodification of marriage and of women as property that serve a use-value function in society, namely the bearing and raising of children to pay off some imagined debt associated with a man's choosing to marry a woman.

As their journey to Jefferson continues, the family stops in a small town along the way. It is the first center of commercial activity that they have encountered, and Dewey Dell avails herself of the opportunity to inquire as to the availability of a medically-induced abortion. She explains to a pharmacist, “He told me I could get something at the drug store. He said they might not want to sell it to me, but if I had ten dollars and told them I wouldn’t never tell nobody...” (202). It is the first time we have seen a Bundren participating as a consumer in the commercial realm, and it doesn’t end well for Dewey Dell, who is told that she cannot purchase any such drug from this particular pharmacy.

Meanwhile, Anse is inquiring in a hardware store as to the availability of cement. With the rotting corpse in the back of the wagon and the wagon itself looking like it is about to fall apart at any minute, the sight of the Bundrens is tragically comical. In fact, the scene the family creates is one that the town’s marshal is anxious to disassemble by having them move along immediately, to which Anse replies, “It’s a public street [...]. I reckon we can stop to buy something same as airy other man. We got the money to for hit, and hit aint airy law that says a man cant spend his money where he wants” (204). Anse is declaring his own equality as a consumer. He does not specify what it is that he is going to buy—which, in actuality, is only ten-cents worth of cement—but relies on the fact that he is a cash-carrying consumer who intends to spend his money, and for that reason alone he is the same as every other man. In a capitalist world, in other words, one’s willingness to participate in the market economy makes one the equal of anyone else, at least for that moment.

Anse intends to use the cement to create a cast around Cash’s broken leg, something that the marshal tells him will kill Cash: “You’ll cause him to lose his leg. You take him on to a doctor, and you get this thing buried soon as you can. Dont you know you’re liable to jail for

endangering the public health?” (204). The journey that is a metaphorical representation of the fact that the family is imprisoned within the capitalist Panopticon continues to cost them. In this case, the costs are double. On one hand, there is Cash’s broken leg, which requires medical attention that the family cannot afford to provide him. As a result, the family is metaphorically imprisoned as the result of life under capitalism. At the same time, Anse is threatened with physical imprisonment if he doesn’t tend to his wife’s burial immediately—or, alternatively, until he leaves the town and becomes someone else’s problem—because he is endangering the public welfare by potentially spreading disease. That, of course, requires yet another expenditure of money that the family cannot afford. The expressed motivation for going to Jefferson in the first place—honoring Addie’s wishes that she be buried there—is becoming itself a tool of the economic system’s control in that it is wielding the power to impinge on the family’s physical freedom.

After Anse does buy the cement and the wagon slowly lumbers out of the town, Cash begins to express doubts as to the wisdom of putting his leg in a cement cast. His doubts are, perhaps, related to the fact that the marshal said doing so would either kill him or result in his losing his leg, neither of which is an appealing option. His first protest comes when Anse says that they should set his leg while he still on the wagon, and Darl offers to help Cash off the wagon. Cash asks, “Wont we get to Jefferson tomorrow?” and then adds, “I can last it out” (207). He repeats the refrain that he could “last it out” several times, adding that doing this now will only delay the family’s progress. He goes so far as to tell them of his leg, “It dont bother to speak of” (207). He is clearly trying to find a way out of having his leg covered in cement that doesn’t involve his telling his father that it is a bad idea. Anse, however, is not to be put off the task, telling Cash, “We done bought the cement now” (207). Given that the money is spent and the

commodity has been acquired, Anse has full intentions of making sure that the money is put to good use. And that means making a cement cast around Cash's leg. While the cement is being poured, Cash is described as "watching us quietly with that profound questioning look" (209). He knows that this is a terrible idea that will result in more physical harm to him, but he also seems to understand the inevitable nature of the whole process. Like capitalism itself, there is a sense that once started with money being spent, the process of setting his leg in cement cannot stop. And it doesn't stop.

That night, the Bundrens set up camp at the Gillespie farm, sleeping outside of the barn, as Vardaman tells us: "We are not in the barn tonight but I can see the barn" (216). Vardaman also tells us that, when he went off in search of the place where the buzzards spend the night, he witnessed something happening that Dewey Dell advises him not to speak about: "*And I saw something Dewey Dell told me not to tell nobody. It is not about pa and it is not about Cash and it is not about Jewel and it is not about Dewey Dell and it is not about me*" (215, italics in original). The person whose name is conspicuously left off of the list of names that the incident does not regard is Darl, the family member whose name does not seem to connote anything. And that absence serves to support the argument regarding the panoptic power of capitalism, because the incident in question is the burning of the barn in an attempt to prematurely end the family's journey.

In the night, Anse, Jewel, Darl, Gillespie, and Mack, move Addie's coffin into the barn, presumably to keep it safe from any wildlife that might be attracted to the stench emanating from it. Darl, knowing this, sets fire to the barn in hopes of burning up both the coffin and Addie's body, so that the family can abort their mission to get to Jefferson. If there is no coffin to be buried, then there is no need to go to Jefferson to bury it. In a larger sense, Darl is attempting to

thwart the commercial desires of his father and several of his siblings. He views the fact that they are using the trip to Jefferson to fulfill their own desires—all of which center on material acquisition of one kind or another—as a moral outrage to the memory of his mother. By destroying the coffin, his hope is that the family will abandon the journey and will thus not serve as cogs in the capitalist machine by contributing to the system. Ironically, it is Jewel who saves Addie's coffin by risking his own life to run into the burning barn and carrying it out by himself. I say that this is ironic because Jewel is the one sibling with no ulterior motive in the Jefferson trip. In fact, he is the sibling who has been exploited for money, as Anse stole his horse and traded it for a new pair of mules. Jewel's motivation in making the trip, then, may be seen as purely altruistic. Remember, too, that he is only a half-sibling of the other Bundren children, and he is no physical relation to Anse, which puts him even further outside of the collective desires of the full-blooded Bundrens.

After they leave the Gillespie farm, the family next begins to encounter the visual manifestations of the capitalist discourse, specifically the businesses in the town of Jefferson. It is Darl, he who sought to subvert the capitalist system, that is the one who narrates the family's arrival in Jefferson, and the associated businesses that are a part of that community's commercial center: "We have been passing the signs for some time now: the drug stores, the clothing stores, the patent medicine and the garages and cafés, and the mile-boards diminishing, become more starkly recurrent: 3 mi. 2 mi" (226). Like an oasis in the desert, the mercantile center of Jefferson has suddenly appeared. Rather than serving as the place to bury their mother and wife, the town instead is presented as a place where material commodities and services can be acquired. However, as the Bundrens will soon learn, even a funeral is a commodity that requires an exchange of capital in order to acquire.

The family made no prior arrangements for the burial, and are thus forced to dig a grave themselves. That requires shovels, which they also failed to bring. Rather than spending the money to buy them, however, Anse manages to find someone willing to loan him the use of two shovels and they set out to perform the burial. As Doctor Peabody says while working on trying to correct the damage done to Cash's leg by the cement cast, "Of course he'd have to borrow a spade to bury his wife with. Unless he could borrow a hole in the ground. Too bad you all didn't put him in it too" (240). The whole scenario is evidence of the fact that the Bundrens are ignorant as to the ways of the city; they do not understand the realities of capitalism, which is the system's favorite sort of consumer. Those who don't understand it are unable to revolt against it. Instead they simply accept the situation as it is, accept their imprisonment as a part of life, and go on.

Dewey Dell's attempts to procure an abortion are yet another instance of the family's collective ignorance. She procures what an immoral pharmacy worker passes off as abortion medicine for ten dollars (this in addition to raping her). She comes to the realization soon after the purchase is made final that it isn't going to work as promised: "It aint going to work [...]. That son of a bitch" (251). Dewey Dell and the rest of her family are destined to remain trapped forever, and the fact that she will now be forced to carry her child to term suggests that the system will continue because there will always be babies born, future generations that can perpetuate the system that entraps them all. This generation of Bundrens, which has proven itself to be the burden that their name evokes. And given that they will become the role models upon which the next generation of Bundren offspring base their own lives, the family's legacy of being a burden to society will also continue.

The result of Darl's attempted arson of the Gillespie barn is that he is committed to an insane asylum to avoid the financial penalties the Bundrens would inherit as a result of being sued by Gillespie. Though we are not told the specifics of how he was apprehended by the authorities, we are told—by Darl himself, speaking in the third-person—of his imprisonment: “Darl is our brother, our brother Darl. Our brother Darl in a cage in Jackson where, his grimed hands lying light in the quiet interstices, looking out he foams” (254). There is an almost Orwellian quality to this undignified ending for Darl, as he is literally imprisoned because of his failure to assimilate to the all-controlling and all-powerful system of capitalism. His illegal actions, while justifying punishment, were in a larger sense an action aimed at rebelling against the capitalist machine. He refused to kowtow to the capitalist power, and as a result was confined to a cage. The capitalist Panopticon is entirely unforgiving towards those who would seek to circumvent its power, as Darl has now discovered. He has to be quarantined away from others so that his revolutionary ideas cannot infect the masses.

In the end, we see that the journey to Jefferson has been more than merely a family's quest to bury their matriarch. It has been a journey grounded in capitalist acquisition, as the driving motivations held in semi-secret by individual characters were desires for commodities. As Thorstein Veblen and others have argued, commodity acquisition is a primary force in elevating one's status and lifting one ever-closer to achieving the elusive American Dream. America is, after all, the land of opportunity, and the Bundrens are as entitled to their quest for acquisition as anyone else.

However, their collective efforts are stymied by a host of different economic forces that work to hinder their progress. Vardaman got his bananas and Anse got his false teeth, but the cost the family paid along the way was astronomical, including Darl's being committed and

Cash's leg requiring medical attention and lengthy rehabilitation. These pitfalls point to the fact that the Bundrens will never really climb above their current status as white trash. The journey itself may be read as a metaphor for an attempted ascension up the economic ladder, as the family members attempt to acquire those items of conspicuous consumption that will hopefully set them apart from others; those things will serve as the Veblenian booty used to instill envy in others. But the end result is that the family is a caricature of ridiculousness, and they end up where they began, as white trash. As Julia Leyda argues, "The meandering wagon trip and tragicomic attempts to fix Cash's broken leg suggest more than Anse's ineptitude, however. They also symbolize the dialectic of mobility and immobility that pervades the novel" (58). The family is stuck in their current position, and will be forever. As their journey to Jefferson suggested, they are immobile, both laterally and upwardly. They are destined to remain forever trapped within the capitalist Panopticon.

Their Eyes Were Watching God

In the landmark Supreme Court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, the court upheld the legality of racially-segregated public facilities. The plaintiff in the case, Homer Plessy, was an octoroon – a man who, biologically, was one-eighth black and seven-eighths white. His skin was light enough for him to pass as white in a social setting, and a group of citizens concerned about a Louisiana law enforcing racially segregated railroad cars wanted him to try to challenge the law. Plessy purchased a first-class train ticket in New Orleans and boarded the whites-only first-class car. The railroad company had been informed of his racial lineage, and arrested Plessy when he refused to move to the blacks-only car. Plessy sued on the grounds that his Fourteenth

Amendment rights had been violated, and his case eventually wound up in the hands of the United States Supreme Court Justices, who ruled against him.

The decision handed down by the Supreme Court seemed to defy the very words of the Constitution that the justices were sworn to uphold. Cheryl Harris, writing about the case, says: “[T]he Court's opinion amounted to a wholesale evasion of the argument that, as a matter of federal constitutional law, Plessy's assignment to a railway car for Blacks, in the absence of a clear standard defining who was white, was an arbitrary and unauthorized taking of the valuable asset of being regarded as white” (1749). Building on the arbitrary nature of racial classification itself, Harris here points out that the law itself was arbitrarily enforced. Because he was able to pass for white due to his lighter skin tone, Ferguson could not definitively be identified as black; it was only through previously-obtained information as to his racial make-up that the train conductor was able to identify him as non-white. Had there been no such information available beforehand, it is presumed that Plessey would have been allowed to ride in the whites-only car. In fact, part of the strategy employed by Plessy's legal team hinged on the arbitrary nature of racial distinctions. Lead attorney Albion Tourgée “was planning to question the very categories of race, to probe the social power of whiteness” (Elliott 270). Unfortunately, however, this strategy collapsed under the racial ideologies of the time.

In the case that came to define the civil rights movement, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954 effectively abolished segregation in public schools. James Olson explains, “In a unanimous decision, the court decided that separate but equal public accommodations and schools were inherently unequal” (39). Despite the ruling, however, it would be another two decades before the goal of full integration of public facilities across the

country was realized. It was into this world—a world in which separate-but-equal was an accepted fact of life—that African-American author Zora Neale Hurston was born.

Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston's semi-autobiographical novel published in 1937, offers readers a glimpse into the separate-but-equal construct as it was manifested at arguably its most profound level, specifically the city of Eatonville, Florida. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the town's population never swelled beyond 130 people, and the town only occupies approximately 1.1 square miles. Clearly Eatonville was never a major metropolitan area that would have warranted much attention except for one particular characteristic: Eatonville was populated entirely by black Americans. Robert Hemenway writes of the town's monochromatic population, "Eatonville, Florida, existed not as 'black backside' of a white city, but as a self-governing, all-black town, proud and independent, living refutation of white claims that black inability for self-government necessitated the racist institutions of a Jim Crow South" (11-12). The town's self-sufficiency notwithstanding, the fact of the matter was that Eatonville was a manifestation of separate-but-equal.

In 1889, a twenty-seven acre parcel of land in what was then known as Mosquito County, Florida, was donated by a white philanthropist named H. W. Lawrence in 1889 to "a group of Negroes for a townsite" (qtd. in McDonogh 145). Lawrence's only request was that the town be named after his friend J. C. Eaton, owner of a major citrus farming business in Florida. In describing the town where she was born, Zora Neale Hurston wrote of a specific location, "That corner has always been the main corner, because that is where Joe Clarke, the founder and first mayor of Eatonville, built his store when he started the town [...], so that people have gotten used to gather there and talking" (qtd. in McDonogh 148). The town would become the setting for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the novel features multiple scenes of townspeople

gathered in front of the general store, a mimetic representation of life in literature. This fact-based description and Hurston's fictionalized version of the same scene both point to the reality of the importance of commercial culture in the lives of human beings, regardless of race or religion or any other potentially dividing characteristic. Human beings desire material things, and it is a logical deduction that the place where people can buy those things in a small town naturally serves as a magnet for them.

The majority of scholarship on Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has focused on that novel's portrayal of working-class African-Americans. However, there is a sense of "timelessness" to the novel's setting; Sondra Guttman refers to Hurston's characters as "existing somehow outside of history" (92). She goes on to say, "No critic yet has discussed the degree to which Hurston's apparently 'timeless' or 'mythological' story of Southern black 'folk' is embedded in the cultural politics of the Depression" (92). And while she does situate the novel during the Great Depression, she fails to examine the nature of the economic system that created the conditions for that economic collapse and that also fostered the exploitative environment that essentially re-enslaved the black characters in the novel. Alternatively, Todd McGowan links Janie's three marriages to different forms of symbolic subjugation: her marriage to Logan represents her birth into a controlling, almost feudal economic system; when she marries Joe, she enters into what McGowan labels a relationship reflected in monopoly capitalism; her final marriage to Tea Cake qualifies as late capitalism. McGowan points to the fact that all three different marriages—and all three different forms of capitalist exploitation—involve Janie's being controlled by someone else, which itself points to the idea that those living under a capitalist system are themselves controlled by an outside force. However, he fails to link this

control to any sort of consumer behavior. Despite such focus on the exploitative nature of capitalism, none of that scholarship points to the panoptic nature of the system.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a manifestation of the separate-but-equal doctrine that had been validated by the *Plessy* decision. We are presented with a group of African-Americans who are seeking to establish themselves as a separate—but equal—entity by establishing their own city. This segregation is, we can surmise, one that comes about as a result of their being shunned by whites in other parts of the country. However, the fact remains that these men and women are doing what they can to achieve their own version of the American Dream. The message in the end is that the Dream itself does not discriminate, nor does the capitalist Panopticon. As we will see, separate-but-equal is more than a social doctrine that carried over from Jim Crow laws. It is a force that exists in the capitalist system, as well. While the men and women in Eatonville might have been separated from their white counterparts, they were equally desirous as whites of those material commodities that promised to make their lives better. This is the real-world manifestation of the racial component in William Leach's contention that desire for commodities was an equalizing force that cut across racial lines (*Desire* 6).

From the novel's opening lines, we are immediately grounded in the idea that some men achieve their dreams, while others are left wanting: "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men" (1). The immediate and overt reference to the novel's title through the mention of "the Watcher" suggests that there is a God-like quality associated with those dreams; if the eyes of the title belong to the Watchers who are watching for

their dreams to come in to shore, then God is manifested in those dreams. Capitalism, then, is a religion for these men, and money is the divine being they worship.

The novel's main plot begins with the return of Janie Starks to the town of Eatonville, from which she left with the trappings of a comparatively wealthy woman. The first women to notice her returning reference "all dat money her husband took and died and left her" (2). They immediately begin to speculate that her second husband absconded with all of her money, leaving her broke and alone. The last question we are presented with, however, is very telling about the attitude of these women towards Janie: "Why she don't stay in her class?" (2). This comment is presumably aimed at the way in which she is dressed—wearing overalls instead of the blue satin dress she was wearing when she left Eatonville the last time—and indicates an overt sense of class consciousness. The suggestion is that Janie has returned to Eatonville to reconnect with her less affluent roots, and there is a palpable sense of bitterness directed at that motivation for returning by these assembled women.

As Janie eventually begins to unpack her life story for us, we learn that she is the granddaughter of a former slave, with whom she lived and who served as Janie's only parental figure as she was growing up. Given the historical proximity to the emancipation, then, it is clear that both Janie and her grandmother are familiar with the Jim Crow laws that evolved out of Reconstruction. Like Hurston herself, Janie is well-versed in the socio-legal mandates of separate-but-equal.

Beyond the historical connection to the Jim Crow-era South, Janie's family lineage also serves as a tangible reminder of what is arguably the ultimate manifestation of the capitalist Panopticon, chattel slavery. Slaves were above all else property, and they were valuable property. A slave had to perform in order to demonstrate his value (a value manifested in the

price paid for him as property), or he would face the oftentimes violent consequences of his failure to do so. The all-seeing eyes of the capitalist system that simultaneously valued and imprisoned the African slave afforded no opportunities for leisure. The slave was treated as a machine, as something non-human, and worked as if he had no human feelings. By establishing a direct link to this practice that was rooted in the capitalist system that helped to build the American South, Hurston is again inviting us to examine her novel through a lens that is derivative of that financial system. Indeed, by invoking slavery as a marker for capitalism, she is also inviting us to consider the apparent contradiction contained within the fact that capitalism imprisons at the same time that it promises to afford upward mobility.

Janie's grandmother does, however, offer a glimpse into the mind of enslaved Africans, a glimpse that echoes William Leach. She tells Janie, "But nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will" (16). Even those who would seem to have the least hope maintain their ability to wish for things. Whether that wish is manifested in personal freedom, gender equality, or the possession of material commodities, the fact remains that at its core, the ability to wish for a better situation than the one currently present is a quality of humans that crosses racial and gender lines. And one of the earliest manifestations of that ability to wish for a better life in terms of Janie's own experience comes when her grandmother decides that she will marry Logan Killicks, a wealthy farmer who is much older than she is who Nanny believes can provide Janie with the necessary protection against the negative forces of capitalism: "'Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection. [...] Mah daily prayer now is tuh let dese golden moments rolls on a few days longer till Ah see you safe in life" (15).

The source of Logan's protective power lies in the fact that he owns a sixty acre farm. After she is married to him, Janie assumes that that protection will keep her happy; in short, she assumes that marriage will equate to her loving Logan. However, she learns that "marriage did not make love" (25). This lesson may be read as yet another manifestation of the capitalist Panopticon. Janie approaches her marriage as something akin to a financial transaction; in exchange for being Logan's wife, she will receive sufficient money to keep her happy and safe. She has a fantastical vision of how things will be once the transaction is complete, much like a consumer has in regard to acquiring a new commodity. Continuing with the idea that marriage is a financial transaction and her husband is a commodity, Janie is experiencing what Thorstein Veblen explains as a consumer's ever-present desire for a better standard of living:

But as fast as a person makes new acquisitions, and becomes accustomed to the resulting new standard of wealth, the new standard forthwith ceases to afford appreciably greater satisfaction than the earlier standard did. The tendency in any case is constantly to make the present pecuniary standard the point of departure for a fresh increase of wealth; and this in turn gives rise to a new standard of sufficiency and a new pecuniary classification of one's self as compared with one's neighbours (23-24).

Within months of getting married and seeing a change in her new husband's behavior towards her, Janie grows complacent—even resentful, at times—and begins to look, unconsciously at first, for the next human commodity that might promise to improve her life.

That next commodity appears in the form of Joe Starks, who is described as "a cityfied, a stylish dressed man with his hat set at an angle that didn't belong in these parts. His coat was over his arm, but he didn't need it to represent his clothes. The shirt with the silk sleeveholders was dazzling enough for the world" (27). The fact that Starks clearly "didn't belong in these parts"—an assumption based solely on his appearance—suggests that he is representative of the much more cosmopolitan setting of a commercialized city. Again returning to the words of

Thorstein Veblen, Starks' clothing and the money he has in his pocket are outward displays of his success and prowess: "The possession of wealth, which was at the outset valued simply as an evidence of efficiency, becomes, in popular apprehension, itself a meritorious act. Wealth is now itself intrinsically honourable and confers honour on its possessor: (Veblen 22). Joe Starks is the embodiment of the practice of using one's personal wealth to impress, attract, and even intimidate those with whom he comes in contact.

With his honorable nature established by his apparent wealth and corresponding conspicuous consumption, Starks becomes a fixture in Janie's imagination, as she thinks about her life with Logan. Ironically, when she mentions that she's been thinking about their relationship to him, Logan responds as one might expect Veblen's previously-described honorable man to answer. He tells her that she's been acting "powerful independent" recently (30), a suggestion that she is thinking for herself rather than only echoing her husband's demands. To this, he adds that he would expect her to be more penitent and appreciative towards him, given that she was "born in a carriage 'thout no top to it, and yo' mama and you bein' born and raised in de white folks back-yard" (30). Starks sees himself as powerful savior who rescued Janie from the clutches of poverty brought on by her being born into a lower-class existence. In turn, he expects Janie to appreciate him for that act of salvation.

Class differences, then, are a fluid concept that are relative distinctions. Whereas Joe is presumably wealthier than Logan, both are more financially well-off than Janie and her grandmother were, and thus are both in the Veblenian honorable position when compared to Janie. Money and the things it can buy equate to nobility, and that nobility demands respect. The fact that this distinction is such an important one in the minds of so many of the men in the novel—men who have historically been marginalized because of their race and have

subsequently self-segregated within their own town—is one that bears mention. One might assume that because of the fact that African-Americans had so long endured the pains of racialized class distinctions that the same population might look past them when given an opportunity to do so. In the case of the African-American characters we encounter, however, it is clear that class distinctions are still important. This supports the idea that classifying is inherent in human nature. It also supports the humanity of blacks at the time, furthering the idea that the act of desiring something is an equalizing force. If African-Americans have the same inherent drive to compare themselves to those within their own race, then they are like their white counterparts in that regard.

Janie refuses to accept her subservient role and leaves the “better” life that Logan’s land and work affords her. She leaves to meet up with Joe Starks so the two of them can elope, and as Janie is walking away from Logan’s, we are told, “The morning road air was like a new dress” (32). Janie here is making a comparison that is anchored to the commercial culture of the time. Notice that Hurston didn’t choose a generic adjective that implied a pleasant sensation. Rather, she specifically chose a simile in which she compares the feeling to that of wearing a new garment. Further, by choosing a garment, she is suggesting that Janie herself is entangled within the idea that one’s appearance as created by commodities is directly related to happiness. In this particular scene, her happiness can only be compared to the feeling she gets when she acquires and wears a new commodity. And given that she sees herself as breaking free from what she considers to be a servile relationship with Logan, we may assume that her happiness at that moment is fairly extreme, which indicates the depths of her attachment to the commercial culture and all that it represents in American society.

The day following their elopement, Joe buys his new bride “the best things the butcher had” (34), indicative of the link between commodities and happiness. However, when they arrive in the town of Eatonville, the couple discovers that it lacks anything resembling a commercial culture. It is so undeveloped, in fact, that Joe describes it as “nothing but a raw place in de woods” (34). He immediately asks to speak with the mayor of the town, and upon learning that there isn’t a mayor, he asks, “Ain’t got no Mayor! Well, who tells y’all what to do?” (35). His question, when taken literally, suggests that the residents of Eatonville *need* to be told what to do because they are clearly incapable of doing anything for themselves. This literal message is a metaphorical representation of the fact that their town lacks commercial culture and that culture’s accompanying discourse. Because these people have no visible commercial aspirations in their town, they have nobody to tell them—i.e. advertisers and their controlling discourse—what to do in terms of buying commodities.

The lack of any discernible commercial culture in Eatonville at this time may be read as a manifestation of the fact that African-Americans at the time were deemed subhuman. The fact that the town that is designated as a “black town” in that it is populated solely by African-Americans echoes the separation of the races fostered by the separate-but-equal laws established under the Jim Crow system. However, the noticeable lack of any commercial outlets in the town—paired with the lack of controlling discourse contained within the advertising system that supports those commercial outlets—highlights the fact that separate is inherently *not* equal, and can never be fully equal. Because things like desiring commodities and comparing oneself to others may be inherently human, the exclusion of avenues through which humans may exercise (or exorcise, as the case may be) their inherent drives means that humanity itself is relegated to a lower level than it is in those regions where commercial culture is present. Because they have no

sort of shopping district or other commercial venues, the residents of Eatonville are both separate and inherently unequal. With Joe Starks' entry into the town, however, that inequality will cease to be. He will bring with him the inherent drive to improve one's station in life through material acquisition that is such a hallmark of more socio-economically advanced societies. He will bring Eatonville into the present day, socio-economically speaking.

To that end, Joe announces his intentions to build the town's commercial infrastructure. He tells a few of the town's residents that he is "buyin' in here, and buyin' in big" (35). The diction that Hurston incorporates is important, because Joe is again implying a commercial element in regard to the town's advancement and development. By telling them that he plans to "buy in" to the town, he is contextualizing development in terms of a financial transaction; he will offer the money to promote the town's development in return, presumably, for a personal financial gain. Joe's initial plans are met with questions from the residents, because they tell him that the town itself consists of only fifty acres, and that Captain Eaton—the philanthropist who donated the land for the establishment of Eatonville in the first place—"ain't got no mo' land tu give away" (37). If Eatonville residents want to expand the town's geographic boundaries, they'll have to buy the land from Eaton.

This question of land ownership and acquisition is directly tied to the capitalist Panopticon, and is fueled by the underlying controlling discourse of American commercial culture. The town itself needs to grow bigger, in Joe's opinion, if it plans to move out of the backwards mindset in which he currently sees it as being trapped. That vision itself is informed by the commercial discourse that Joe has experienced in his travels, and which has so infiltrated his mindset that he has completely given himself over to it. He has become a disciple of the discourse, spreading its message to those with whom he comes in contact. The discourse is so

strong in his mind that he feels compelled to build out the town through the development of a commercial center, which requires a larger land area for the town. That larger area, in turn, requires capital. The residents of Eatonville had been, to this point, seemingly happy with the status quo in which they existed. But once the discourse entered that equation, the need for more and bigger and better became the new quest. By introducing the discourse to this virgin territory, Joe has also brought in the prison of capitalism.

Joe, however, remains undaunted and buys a 200-acre tract of land from Captain Eaton, for which he pays cash. The concept of such a transaction is almost too much for the other Eatonville residents to comprehend, but the focus of their attention is on Janie. They equate her being married to Joe with his ability to not only buy such a large parcel of land, but to do so with cash from his own pocket: “You oughta know you can’t take no ‘oman lak dat from no man lak him. A man dat ups and buys two hundred acres uh land at one whack and pays cash for it” (38). The fact that Joe is able to buy so much land with so little apparent effort causes one of the men present—Amos Hicks—to become envious of him, and it is this that Lee Coker claims is the source of their second-class status: “Us colored folks is too envious of one ‘nother. Dat’s how come us don’t git no further than us do. Us talks about de white man keepin’ us down! Shucks! He don’t have tuh. Us keeps our own selves down” (39). Coker here demonstrates his lack of understanding of how commercial culture operates in a society, as he doesn’t understand that it is envy that actually makes the capitalist system work.

At the same time, Coker’s comment suggests a level of naïveté on the part of the African-American residents of Eatonville, because they don’t realize that their inherent qualities—qualities like being envious of those around them—is part of their humanity. Ironically, in this particular setting, there is little commercial influence, so the natural assumption is that there is

little to evoke those envious reactions. However, Lee Coker's declaration seems to suggest that, despite the absence of an abundance of commodities, the residents still harbor those emotions. It is human nature to want things and to envy those who have what we don't but still want. It is a part of the human condition. In highlighting this quality in a completely isolated and segregated city, Hurston is highlighting for her white readers that non-whites—that population that has been subjugated through legal means by whites that deem themselves superior—have the same human emotions as their white counterparts. In essence, Hurston is doing for African-Americans what William Faulkner did for those lower-class lumped into the category of white trash in *As I Lay Dying*. She (like Faulkner) is elevating her characters to a level of humanity that places them on an equal plane as those whites who are of a higher class.

Another human trait that is fed by commercial culture and its controlling discourse is that of vanity. Vanity is one of the underlying factors in envy; when a person envies another because of his possessions, it is on one level a manifestation of personal vanity. The power of this human trait appears when Joe arranges to have the town's first street lamp installed. The lamp, we are told, comes via mail order from Sear, Roebuck, and Company (44), a fact that points to the encroachment of the outside forces of commercial culture into this previously untouched area. While many in the town are reluctant to have it—people complain that the lamp “was a useless notion” (44)—once it is installed, the collective opinion of the town changes: “But the whole town got vain over it after it came” (44). The lamp's installation becomes a staged show reminiscent of one of P. T. Barnum's campaigns a century earlier. The pairing of the marketing campaign orchestrated by Joe Starks and the ensuing pride the townspeople take in their new street lamp highlights again the power of the discourse of advertising to influence public opinion in regard to a particular commodity's value. It also highlights the reality of the theoretical

Panopticon in regard to capitalism. This initial volley of commercial culture's assault on the town of Eatonville and its residents will only serve to further their ambitions, which will lead them to acquiring more commodities, and the cycle will continue *ad infinitum*.

That cycle is apparent in Joe's own process of acquisition going forward, something that Janie soon learns evokes envy from the others in town. Arguably the most important personal purchase Joe makes is his house, which is so large that the other houses in town appear "like servants' quarters surrounding the 'big house'" (47). Joe goes on to purchase a desk that reminds the townspeople of desks owned by wealthy white men in Maitland. The description of his personal office highlights both the growth of the Eatonville commercial culture and the envy that Joe elicits in others: "What with him biting down on cigars and saving his breath on talk and swinging round in that chair, it weakened people. And then he spit in that gold-looking vase that anybody else would have been glad to put on their front-room table" (47). The sudden appearance of these commodities in the town causes residents to believe "that they had been taken advantage of. Like things had been kept from them. Maybe more things in the worlds besides spitting pots had been hid from them" (48). The discourse of the commercial culture is gradually taking control of the residents' thinking as they are exposed to an increasingly higher standard of living made possible through commodity acquisition.

At this point, the first inklings of Marxist thought begin to emerge in the minds of some Eatonville residents following the banishment of Henry Pitts for stealing some of Joe's ribbon cane. While residents like Sam Watson argue that Pitts should have to work for what he got just like everyone else, Sim Jones' argument echoes the thoughts of Karl Marx: "Joe Starks is too exact wid folks. All he got he done made it offa de rest of us. He didn't have all dat when he come here" (49). Jones is echoing Marx's argument by pointing out that Joe has made his money

off the backs of the residents; the former is the bourgeoisie capitalist, the latter the working-class proletariat. Regardless of their differing opinions, there is no Marxist revolutionary spirit amongst the townspeople because, in the end, the working class men and women know that their survival depends on the capitalist: “The town had a basketful of feelings good and bad about Joe’s positions and possessions, but none had the temerity to challenge him. They bowed down to him rather, because he was all of these things, and then again he was all of these things because the town bowed down” (50). Joe Starks has effectively achieved the status of capitalist with a host of dependents looking to him for their survival.

The scene with Matt Bonner’s mule serves as metaphorical example of what fate awaits those who continue to live under capitalism’s yoke. The mule is typically viewed as a beast of burden, an animal used for working and nothing more. Given its use as a natural sort of farming machine, when Matt’s mule turns up missing, he is understandably anxious to recover it. The mule appears in front of Joe’s general store, and a collection of residents engage in what is described as a “mule-baiting” in which they engage in torturing the mule for entertainment. Janie is disgusted by the display, saying, “They oughta be shamed uh theyselves! [...] Done been worked tuh death; done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatment, and now they got tuh finish devilin’ ‘im tuh death” (56). There are multiple ways to interpret this passage; one of those ways is as a comment on the treatment of working-class individuals by the wealthy capitalists who control their livelihoods.

Into this scene enters Joe Starks, who defies Marxist generalizations and stereotypes by offering to buy the mule from Matt. The latter has no need of the mule; he “bought dat varmint tuh let ‘im rest” (58). He has done an incredibly benevolent thing for a creature that serves him no purpose. It is a completely altruistic act. But it also speaks to the fact that only those in the

position of power such as that wielded by Joe can afford to be so altruistic. As Janie observes, “You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat make you lak uh king uh something” (58). The nobility associated with money by those who do not have as much once again makes its presence known in the story.¹¹

Returning to the discussion of the power of commercial discourse as manifested in advertising, consider the discussion surrounding the “great big ole scoundrel-beast up dere at Hall’s fillin’ station” (66). The beast in question is the logo of Sinclair high-compression gas, which was the first high-octane gasoline available to consumers. The gas was called H-C, which the manufacturer said stood for Houston Concentrate; it was advertisers who changed the meaning to high-compression (sinclairoil.com). Sinclair’s logo features a silhouette of a brontosaurus, a reference to the Jurassic origin of modern-day oil deposits, and it is this image that is referred to as the “great big ole scoundrel-beast” by Sam Watson. The power of the discourse is such that it has convinced Sam that the dinosaur in the image doesn’t destroy the gas station “cause dey got him tied up so he can’t. Dey got uh great big picture tellin’ how many gallons of dat Sinclair high-compression gas he drink at one time and how he’s more’n uh million years old” (66). Notice that Sam refers to it as “high-compression,” the name ascribed to the gasoline by advertisers, rather than the “Houston-concentrate” name originally given by the manufacturer. This suggests that he has been exposed to the advertising discourse despite the fact that he isn’t in the metropolitan cities and is instead living in segregation in Eatonville. The advertising campaign is so effective—and at least some of the residents of Eatonville are so

¹¹ Despite Joe’s benevolence, the mule dies and is eventually left for the buzzards to consume. There is an overt Marxist tone to the scene, in which the buzzards share equally in the feast once they have garnered permission to eat from their ruler.

naïve as to the nature of advertising—that it appears to be an actual living animal rather than simply an attention-grabbing logo aimed at selling gasoline.

As time goes by, Joe's benevolence dissipates. He becomes increasingly violent towards Janie. For instance, he slaps her "until she had a ringing sound in her ears" when dinner isn't cooked to his liking (72). After one such assault, Janie has a revelation about her husband, specifically that he isn't the man that she thought he was. In a detached monologue, we are told, "She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over" (72). Just like the dinosaur in the Sinclair Oil sign, the image of Joe that Janie had carried with her was nothing more than a logo, a piece of marketing collateral aimed at selling him to her. It is a piece of controlling discourse crafted to create an image that, she now realizes, can't possibly live up to her expectations or dreams. She has been victimized by the very same type of discourse as fuels the capitalist system that Joe himself represents. Her marriage has become a manifestation of the same prison that capitalism represents on a larger scale.

Despite this realization, however, Janie is unable to summon the strength required to leave Joe. However, we see in Janie's musings the beginnings of a search for the next new commodity that will improve her life: "Sometimes she stuck out into the future, imagining her life different from what it was. But mostly she lived between her hat and her heels, with her emotional disturbances like shade patterns in the woods—come and gone with the sun. She got nothing from Jody except what money could buy, and she was giving away what she didn't value" (76). Janie here expresses the idea that lasting happiness is not something that can

necessarily be obtained through material possessions. Joe's money can buy her things, but she longs for a more intimate, caring relationship, something that can only come from personal interaction, not material acquisition.

The ultimate meaninglessness of personal possessions comes to the forefront when Janie confronts Joe in front of a group of other men and intimates that his virility is diminished with his age. As a result of this direct insult to his manhood, Joe's own self-perception is challenged: "Then Joe Starks realized all the meanings and his vanity bled like a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. [...] When he paraded his possessions hereafter, they would not consider the two together. They'd look with envy at the things and pity the man that owned them" (79-80). The nobility that had previously been inscribed in his possessions is no longer attached to those things. The residents of Eatonville will envy only the things themselves, not the man who possesses them. And as Veblen argues, the end goal of conspicuous consumption is the evocation of envy from one's peers. Without that envy of the man, Joe Starks will lose his authority and power over those around him. Without that envy of the man, commercial culture will cease to exist.

Joe's death results in a funeral that "was the finest thing Orange County had ever seen with Negro eyes" (88). It is fitting that the original representation of American commercial culture in Eatonville is buried with the pomp and circumstance associated with that designation, a ceremony that includes a veritable parade of name-brands and lavish décor. His death also ushers in another parade, that of potential suitors seeking to marry Janie. They are all more interested in her inheritance from Joe than they are in her, however: "Janie found out very soon that her widowhood and property were a great challenge in South Florida. Before Jody had been dead a month, she noticed how often men who had never been intimates of Joe, drove

considerable distances to ask after her welfare and offer their services as advisor” (90). It isn’t until a man named after a humble Southern cookie takes an interest in her that Janie’s romantic interests are stirred. It takes a less cosmopolitan man in the form of Tea Cake to capture Janie’s romantic attention.

According to *Southern Living* writer Patricia Shannon, a Southern tea cake, by its very nature, lacks much flavor. She writes, “Don’t be surprised if you find these cookies to be a tad on the bland side. They’re not meant to be as flavorful as the decadent and highly-flavored cookies we’re accustomed to” (SouthernLiving.com). In choosing to name Janie’s successful suitor after what is described as a bland cookie, Hurston is indicating a drastic shift in Janie’s attention. She has moved beyond the search for the next shiny object that catches her attention by flashing money and material possessions, and is now instead looking for something (or someone) more basic and, she hopes, more caring and dependable. Nellie McKay says of Janie’s change in romantic pursuit, “She found those things: financial stability and social position, with Logan Killicks and Joe Starks, but they never satisfied her. Tea Cake showed her how to give herself love and to reach out to others in acceptance of their love” (61-62).

Tea Cake readily admits that he can’t shower Janie with riches, but he also claims that he is able to do what he wants, when he wants. Tea Cake doesn’t see a lack of money as an obstacle, but rather a mere matter of condition that has no real effect on his life. He tells Janie, “Ah don’t need no pocket-full uh money to ride de train lak uh woman. When Ah takes uh notion Ah rides anyhow—money or no money” (97). His genuine nature and lack of pretension attract Janie, but others in town are not so friendly. Hezekiah Potts, who himself has expressed a similar attitude towards commercial culture as Joe Starks,

tries to warn Janie against marrying Tea Cake specifically because of his lack of wealth. He tells her, “Dat long-legged Tea Cake ain’t got doodly squat. He ain’t got no business makin’ hisself familiar wid nobody lak you” (102-103). The suggestion is that personal wealth is viewed much like miscegenation, which at the time was illegal. Hezekiah’s argument suggests that only those of a certain standing should be able to court Janie, due to her own personal wealth. Because he lacks the requisite financial status, Tea Cake should automatically be excluded. It is much the same argument put forth by those who would suggest that only whites should be able to marry whites.

Tea Cake understands the social forces at work, so he leaves town in search of work so that he can demonstrate his ability to provide for Janie. While he himself doesn’t seem to be terribly concerned with money and conspicuous consumption, he understands the importance of personal image. He returns after two weeks, driving a car that he bought in order to allow Janie to go to bigger cities with major commercial centers so that she might buy whatever commodities she wants. If he can’t bring the commercial culture to Janie, he’ll make it so that Janie can take herself to the commercial culture. Either way, the dominant discourse exerts its control on Janie’s docile body. Even by associating with a man who is removed from the commercial culture that is the product of that discourse, Janie is still subject to its forces, so there is literally no way for her to escape its control.

Janie gives in to Tea Cake’s wishes and indulges herself in conspicuous consumption. The townspeople begin to gossip about her behavior, saying of Janie, “Done took to high heel slippers and a ten dollar hat! Looking like some young girl, always in blue because Tea Cake told her to wear it” (110). It seems that everyone in town has a negative opinion of why Janie is

spending her inheritance, and everyone's opinion in one way or another centers on the idea that Tea Cake wants her to spend all of her money. Refrains of his own poverty are repeated by various residents of Eatonville, but Janie tries to put the rumors and innuendos to rest, saying, "He ain't never ast de first penny from me yet, and if he love property he ain't no different from all de rest of us. All dese ole men dat's settin' 'round me is after de same thing. They's three mo' wider women in town, how come dey don't break dey neck after dem? 'Cause dey ain't got nothin', dat's why" (112). All the money she has spent to this point has been spent on herself, albeit perhaps at Tea Cake's encouragement. But the fact remains that he has not taken money from her. And as for the fact that he appreciates that she owns property, that simply makes him the same as any other man.

However, there does come a morning when Janie wakes up to find that Tea Cake is gone, along with two-hundred dollars she'd been keeping hidden as a precaution. Immediately, her worst fears are realized and it seems that those who warned her about Tea Cake may actually be right. She begins to think about Annie Tyler and Who Flung. The former was a fifty-two-year-old widow whose inheritance from her husband had left her financially comfortable. But, we are told, she spent her money on her appearance to attract young men and, once she'd accomplished that, on commodities to keep those young men interested in her: "Mrs. Tyler with her dyed hair, newly straightened and her uncomfortable new false teeth, her leathery skin, blotchy with powder and her giggle. Her love affairs, affairs with boys in their late teens or early twenties for all of whom she spent her money on suits of clothes, shoes, watches, and things like that and how they all left her as soon as their wants were satisfied" (118). The young men who ostensibly sought to court Annie were only interested in her for what she could buy them; once they had

acquired those things, they were gone. They were influenced by the dominant discourse that informs conspicuous consumption and nothing more.

Who Flung arrives, again under the guise of courting her, and he proceeds “to denounce his predecessor as a scoundrel and took up around the house himself” (118). The men who had come before him were only after her money because they were under the control of the discourse and trapped within the Panopticon. Who Flung, however, claims to be free from that control and instead proclaims his love for Annie. He convinces Annie to sell her house and move with the proceeds to Tampa with him, which she does. In the end, she returns with nothing, her hair its natural gray—though still showing remnants of the dye she’d used before—and all the fashionable accessories associated with her previous life gone. She recounts the story of what happened to the assembled Eatonville residents: “She was broken and her pride was gone [...]. Who Flung had taken her to a shabby room in a shabby house in a shabby street and promised to marry her next day. They stayed in the room two whole days then she woke up to find Who Flung and her money gone” (119). The scenario has very similar overtones to the one in which Janie currently finds herself.

As for Annie, her lack of any source of money did not release her from the Panopticon, for the prison operates on two levels: indulgence and subsistence. In Annie’s case, she is no longer able to participate in the indulgent level of the Panopticon, given that she has no way of buying those things that will evoke envy in those around her. Instead, she is focused on her daily survival needs, things like food that require some form of money in order to acquire. But because she has no money, she is forced to rely on the kindness of strangers who might take pity on a starving woman: “The next day hunger had driver her out to shift. She had stood on the streets and smiled and smiled, and then smiled and begged and then just begged” (119). Begging is the

only way she can find to survive, as death is the only true release from this prison. And Annie discovers that truth in the end: “She had waited all her life for something, and it had killed her when it found her” (120). The something she had been waiting for is the release from capitalism’s prison and all its associated components, including both the need to have money in order to eat and the need to have money in order to acquire things that will impress friends and strangers alike. She spent her life focused on those two goals, and it was only in death that she could find the true happiness that came with release from the prison.

Tea Cake returns, unlike Who Flung, but his account of what happened suggests that he might not be quite the modest man unaffected by the discourse that he initially appeared to be. Instead, we see a side of Tea Cake that suggests that he has a selfish component to his psyche that is motivated by commodity acquisition. He admits to Janie that he took her money, but only because “he was excited and felt like letting folks know who he was. [...] He never had had his hand on so much money before in his life, so he made up his mind to see how it felt to be a millionaire” (122). That meant hosting a dinner that was free for anyone who chose to attend, and then buying a guitar. From there, he came home because, “He had done found out how rich people feel and he had a fine guitar and twelve dollars left in his pocket” (124). At this point, it seems like Tea Cake has stolen her money and simply given in to what seemed to be previously latent conspicuous consumption-related desires, leaving her with only twelve of her original two-hundred dollars. However, he wins over three-hundred dollars in a dice game, which he uses to repay Janie her money. With that, it seems that he has purged his system of any desire to indulge in conspicuous consumption again, as he tells her, “Ah no need no assistance tuh help me feed mah woman. From now on, you gointuh eat whutever mah money can buy yuh and wear de same. When Ah ain’t got nothin’ you don’t git nothin’” (128). He is taking himself and Janie out

of the plane of conspicuous consumption and focusing solely on living in the realm of basic needs. However, they are still imprisoned regardless of whether or not they engage in indulgences, as the story of Annie Tyler will forever remind Janie.

Drawn by the promise of easy and plentiful work, Tea Cake takes Janie south to the Everglades, where he claims that people “don’t do nothin’ [...] but make money and fun and foolishness” (128). Once they arrive and get settled, it seems that Tea Cake’s beliefs are well-founded. He tells Janie, “All day Ah’m pickin’ beans. All night Ah’m pickin’ mah box and rollin’ dice. Between de beans and de dice Ah can’t lose” (129). It seems that Tea Cake’s earlier nonchalance in regard to money has been replaced with a desire to make as much as he can as quickly as he can. However, there is a sense—even an underlying knowledge—that the easy money won’t last, that it *can’t* last. The work is seasonal, after all, and the laws of capitalism dictate that when a laborer is no longer necessary, he no longer receives wages. So when the work runs out, so does Tea Cake’s money.

During the off-season when she and Tea Cake elect to remain in the Everglades, Janie befriends Mrs. Turner, a light-skinned African-American like Janie. Janie comes to learn that Mrs. Turner favors white people in most things, from which doctor she chooses to see to which stores she patronizes. Janie begins to see this devotion to white professionals as Mrs. Turner’s religion, and she delivers an extensive monologue in which she explains her understanding of this sort of worship:

Like the pecking-order in a chicken yard. Insensate cruelty to those you can whip, and groveling submission to those you can’t. Once having set up her idols and built altars to them it was inevitable that she would worship there. It was inevitable that she should accept any inconsistency and cruelty from her deity as all good worshippers do from theirs. All gods who receive homage are cruel. All gods dispense suffering without reason. Otherwise they would not be worshiped. Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear and fear is the most divine

emotion. It is the stones for altars and the beginning of wisdom. Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood (145).

Even though she is describing Mrs. Turner and her preference for white professionals over blacks, the language that Hurston employs here points to a religious devotion. For Mrs. Turner, white people and utilizing the goods and services that white-owned businesses provide is a form of religious devotion. Collectively, the act of availing herself of white-owned businesses is her God, the God that her eyes are watching.

To that end, recall that Hurston opens the novel with an invocation that seems to suggest that the unnamed watchers at the beginning of the story are watching for their chance to succeed financially. Capitalism is their deity, and it is capitalism that they are watching. Returning to Janie's description of Mrs. Turner's religious devotion to whites, the same monologue—word-for-word, in fact—could be substituted to describe capitalism. Those under the system's yoke lord over those less fortunate, and act subservient to those with more; they evoke envy in the former and express envy of the latter. The altar of commercial culture—the stores and mail-order catalogs that offer a seemingly endless array of commodities—is their place of worship. Given the ever-changing nature of fashion and the constantly-evolving marketplace, the god that is capitalism is clearly inconsistent and always requires new sacrifices in the form of consumers' hard-earned money. Mrs. Turner's worship at the altar of whiteness is directly related to this idea that capitalism is a god, as all of her white-worship is directed towards commercial enterprises. In the end, though, it is all the same because, as Janie tells us, real gods require blood. The way of life within the capitalist Panopticon is to bleed money, and the only way to escape is to bleed life through death.

The climax of their time in Florida comes with the hurricane that threatens to destroy everything in its path. The Native Americans living in the area begin to evacuate east, but Tea

Cake and the others ignore their warnings, believing that they are somehow protected from the weather because of capitalism's power: "Beans running fine and prices good, so the Indians could be, *must* be, wrong. You couldn't have a hurricane when you're making seven and eight dollars a day picking beans. Indians are dumb anyhow, always were" (155, italics in original). The bean-pickers are putting their faith in their own god, capitalism, to keep them safe. The irony here is that the Native Americans live a subsistence, cooperative lifestyle, with a financial system grounded in bartering. They, in turn, are the ones smart enough to know their own limitations against something as powerful as a hurricane, and they evacuate. Those living in a capitalist system, however, need the money and are so desperate to make it that they'll risk their own lives in its pursuit.

When the hurricane hits, Janie and Tea Cake seek refuge in a house along with Motor, and the three of them huddle together and stare at the door. They are described as "six eyes [that] were questioning *God*" (159, italics in original). They are not *watching* God, but rather *questioning* God. The hurricane is what is oftentimes described as "an act of God," but these collected people aren't watching God's power as it is manifested in the storm. Rather, they are questioning the god in which they put their faith, namely the god of capitalism. Nothing that they have been able to acquire through monetary means—not their house, not their furniture, not anything—can save them from the power of the storm. As it relates to the title of the novel, then, it seems that they were collectively watching the *wrong* God. They are forced to leave the house when the lake waters rise, and in the ensuing chaos, Tea Cake is bitten by a dog while helping to save Janie. They finally find shelter in another house, where they ride out the remainder of the hurricane.

When the storm finally passes, Tea Cake is forced to join a work detail helping to bury the dead left behind. Although he is working in grueling conditions and under the constant threat of being killed if he tries to escape, he is not paid for his labor. He is essentially a chattel slave. Tea Cake manages to escape the work detail and he flees with Janie, and the two leave the area. Four weeks later, Tea Cake begins to complain of headaches, the beginnings of rabies he acquired from the dog bite, and his condition finally worsens to the point that he needs a doctor. When the doctor tells Janie that Tea Cake is going to die, she pleads with him, “Us got plenty money in de bank in Orlandah, doctah. See can’t yuh do somethin’ special tuh save him. Anything it cost, doctah, Ah don’t keer, but please, doctah” (177). Tea Cake, who was seemingly immune to the effects of the commercial discourse when we first encountered him, has now sunk to the nethermost level of the capitalist Panopticon, the level that literally precedes personal freedom once and for all. He is now in a situation that, despite the fact that they have plenty of money, he cannot pay enough to fix. Tea Cake has finally learned that the only escape from the Panopticon is death. Janie hastens that end by shooting a now-deranged Tea Cake in self-defense, which presents us with one final example of the panoptic power of capitalism in the novel.

During her trial for murder, Janie longs to express what she sees as the truth of her situation, namely the fact that Tea Cake’s death was the only way to save him. Hurston tells us, “She tried to make them see how terrible it was that things were fixed so that Tea Cake couldn’t come back to himself until he had got rid of that mad dog that was in him and he couldn’t get rid of the dog and live. He had to die to get rid of the dog. But she hadn’t wanted to kill him. A man is up against a hard game when he must die to beat it” (187). The situation is akin to a rigged game in which Tea Cake stood no chance of ever winning. The Panopticon was going to wear

him down until his death, which is exactly what it did. I would argue that the “mad dog that was in him” was capitalism’s powers, and there was no way to beat other than to die. And, we may presume, Janie will inevitably trudge through her own life as a prisoner, too, until she is finally able to escape the shackles by dying herself. In affirming that reality for Janie’s future, Hurston has completed her elevation of Janie and other African-Americans to a status of full equality with their white counterparts. In the end, the Panopticon, like desire, does not discriminate, and everyone is equal in their imprisonment.

The Grapes of Wrath

During the 1930s, American farmers, heretofore fiercely independent and headstrong as they worked to grow the crops that kept Americans fed and clothed, gradually found themselves absorbed by the machinations of capitalism and the consolidation of land and cash. Historian James Gregory offers the statistics of the time: “Cash renters and share renters (who furnished their own implements and team and turned over one-quarter to one-third of their crop) in time became the majority of farmers in the region. By 1930, more than 60 percent of Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas farms and 35 percent of farms in Missouri were operated by tenants” (12).

As the Great Depression continued to wreak havoc on the American economy, farmers and landowners were also affected. The ripple effect that began on Wall Street eventually reached every cog in the capitalist machine, even the farmers who produced the food that people had to have in order to survive. As a result, the already thin profit margins available to farmers disappeared. As Gregory points out, “Required to reduce cotton acreage, landlords evicted many of their renters. Some also took the opportunity to consolidate their holdings and operate them themselves using tractors and hired labor, thereby displacing additional tenant families” (12-13).

As is frequently the case in this sort of situation, those who were least able to absorb the loss found themselves without any source of income.

Like sharecroppers, many land-owning farmers also faced financial hardships. It was often the case that farmers did not have the operating capital to help support their own agricultural operations, which meant borrowing money in order to buy seed and equipment. When that happened, the land-owning farmer was relegated to the status of share-cropper. In many cases, the only collateral the farmer had was the very land he was farming, and if that land didn't produce enough in a given season, the bank assumed ownership, thus running the farmer and his family off the land he had previously owned himself and injecting him into the seemingly constant stream of others who had suddenly found themselves without a living wage.

It was, to be certain, a decision that those who were forced to leave didn't make without a great deal of emotional struggle. As Wayne Flynt says, referencing James Agee and Walker Evans' examination of the population, "One need only read James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to understand how strongly the land bound the poor, how agonizing was their decision to leave it even for that illusive prosperity that so often was promised and so seldom realized" (Flynt 87). Their land was part of their family; the land was often the only legacy one generation had to pass down to the next, and ownership of that land was sacred. And with that ownership, farmers believed that they would be able to achieve the American Dream. However, because of the capitalist machine that consumed them, their dream was never realized. Instead, these so-called "famous men" set out on a search for work—any work—that would enable them to feed their families. And while Agee and Evans never received acclaim at the time for their account of the plight of tenant farmers, other American authors were more successful in their quest to tell the story of their suffering. One such author was John Steinbeck, whose novel *The*

Grapes of Wrath tells the story of the Joad family, displaced tenant farmers from Oklahoma who, branded as “Okies,” make their way west, drawn by the lure of plentiful work as promised in advertisements. The fictional Joads are representative of the hundreds of thousands of displaced farmers and others who went to California for work, the anonymous masses who never had their photographs or stories featured in a book. They were collectively famous men in search of that elusive praise.

Published in 1939, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* tells the story of the Joad family, Oklahoma sharecroppers who are forcibly evicted from their land when the company that owns the land decides that it is no longer a profitable arrangement. The Joads’ eviction is a manifestation of Marx’s own criticisms of capitalism, because it is the wealthiest entity in the system that is profiting from the poorest, and when the latter no longer serves the financial interests of the former, they are forced out without any sort of recourse or restitution. But their struggle only begins in Oklahoma with their eviction. Upon seeing the manifestation of society’s commercial culture in the form of handbills advertising for work in the west, they become nothing more than pawns in a game played by Adam Smith’s invisible hand. When they reach California, they find yet another manifestation of the laws of capitalism—that of supply and demand in the labor market—that blocks their attempts at survival. In short, the novel illustrates for readers what Steinbeck scholar Claudia Durst Johnson describes as “capitalism gone mad” (Johnson 9). In his discussion of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Morris Dickstein writes,

The plight and migration of the Joads, [...] the Dust Bowl, the loss of a family home, the trek in search of work, the awful conditions for migrant farm labor, the struggle to keep the family together, became a metaphor for the Depression as a whole. This portrayal aroused sympathy and indignation that transcended literature and became part of our social history, as if Steinbeck had been reporting on a real family, which in a sense he was (112).

Alternatively, Jonathan Dyer suggests that the lesson learned by the tenant farmers in the novel is that the financial system that is “gradually engulfing the entire nation” is the source of the economic problems the farmers are experiencing (2). As such, it is only through the destruction of that system that the farmers will be able to save themselves, but of course that task is an impossibility, given the system’s over-arching control of all who live under it. In contrast to these and other scholars, Rick Marshall argues that the highway represents a sort of industrial nirvana for Steinbeck, a metaphor for industrial cooperation between both the capitalists and the working class. This semiotic balance, Marshall argues, is what Steinbeck was truly longing for throughout his own life and the quest for that balance was his true message in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The novel’s attack of capitalism and overtly sympathetic socialist tendencies do not appear by chance. The author’s own view of capitalism was influenced by his father’s experiences. The author’s father—also named John—had been employed at a flour mill in Salinas, California, but lost his job when John was a teenager. His father would go on to open his own feed store that supplied local ranchers, but that business failed, and the future author experienced first-hand the realities of life under capitalism as he struggled with the knowledge that he and his family might not be able to afford food. Steinbeck’s own life experiences exposed him to the realities of the panoptic power of the system, an understanding that permeates *The Grapes of Wrath*, but one which critics to this point have failed to fully discuss.

As a student at Stanford University, Steinbeck worked with Mexican immigrants doing agricultural labor. That work gave him the chance to see first-hand how capitalism exploits member so the working-class, experiences that supplemented his own life story and cemented his beliefs in regard to what he saw as the evils of the capitalist system. He would go on to work

with that migrant laborer population collectively labeled “Okies,” and that experience would serve as the foundation for his attack of the financial system in *The Grapes of Wrath* and would also buttress his arguments against those who believed that the novel was nothing more than cheap propaganda. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Steinbeck said authoritatively, “I know what I was talking about. I lived, off and on, with those Okies for the last three years. Anyone who tries to refute me will just become ridiculous” (qtd. in Shillinglaw 177). We may read the novel’s main characters, then, as a synecdochic representation that serves to stand in for the vast number of displaced farmers who found themselves in similar circumstances. Those circumstances revolve around the panoptic nature of the capitalist system. Because of its importance to capitalism, advertising becomes a central focal point of Steinbeck’s critique of the economic system, as he narrates the story of a single family—a single family that represents an entire population—and the ways in which they are exploited and imprisoned by that system.

From the novel’s beginning, we are immediately immersed in a world of capitalism’s panoptic power. A driver inside a truck stop says of the wall-mounted slot machine that “they fix ‘em so you can’t win nothing” (7). While the line itself seems unimportant, it suggests that there is a controlling force at work in the world when it comes to the paying out of money. Capitalism is rigged in such a way so as to keep the working class from escaping from the prison-like system that forces them to work in order to survive. The trucker’s comment gains more significance in a later interchapter, when we observe a cook in a generic roadside truck stop making tick marks to keep track of how many times a particular machine has been played. He knows how many times each machine has to be played before it pays out, and when that time approaches, he plays the machine himself until he wins the jackpot, at which point he begins a new tally of marks (162). This pairing of scenes separated by both chronological time and

physical space in the novel is a microcosmic encapsulation of Marx's belief that the proletariat sacrifice for the enrichment of the capitalist. In this instance, those who come in to avail themselves of the truck stop's services—commodities they pay for—are used as tools to further the aims of the cook, who owns the truck stop. Those working-class diners naively play the slot machine, not knowing that they are being surveilled by the cook, who will ultimately win the final jackpot because of their "labor" of fruitless playing.

The truck driver who made the comment regarding the fixed nature of the slot machines leaves the diner, where he encounters Tom Joad, who has just been released from the state penitentiary. Tom has been released from a physical prison so that he can inhabit a world that is a metaphorical prison. He is the son of a "forty-acre cropper" who hasn't yet been forced out by either the economic conditions of the Great Depression or the environmental conditions wrought by the devastating effects of the Dust Bowl. The driver muses to Tom, "Croppers going fast now [...]. One cat' takes and shoves ten families out. Cat's all over hell now. Tear in and shove the croppers out" (8). Interestingly, even in the truck driver's description of things, it is not a person who is evicting the farmers, but rather a tractor, an inanimate machine. This detachment from responsibility is one that will play out again in later descriptions of evictions in-progress.

The driver later tells Tom that he is aiming to "get ahead" in life by improving his job prospects, a goal he plans to accomplish by taking correspondence classes by mail: "A guy got to get ahead. Why, I'm thinkin' of takin' one of them correspondence school courses. Mechanical engineering. It's easy. Just study a few lessons at home" (11). The comment regarding the course's ease and its only taking a few lessons sounds almost like it was taken directly from an advertisement, which suggests that the controlling discourse of advertising has infiltrated the driver's brain and is now directing his actions. This particular driver is someone who doesn't

want to be driving, but rather, as he says, being the person to “tell other guys to drive trucks” (11), and the advertisers who are selling this particular product know that about people like him. They are targeting those people who perceive themselves as better than what they currently are, but who need the added incentive of the promise of easy studying and just a few lessons in order to convince them to buy the product. The driver goes on to suggest that he “ought to take a course to be a fingerprint expert”, which is yet another correspondence course for which he has no doubt seen or heard advertisements (11).

As Tom nears the site of his family’s farm, he encounters Jim Casy, who Tom remembers as a preacher from his childhood but who now claims to have lost his faith in God and religion. He tells Tom, “The hell with it! There ain’t no sin and there ain’t no virtue. There’s just stuff people do. It’s all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain’t nice, but that’s as far as any many got a right to say” (23). This is a pointed reference to the Karl Marx, the spiritual father of socialism. Casy is here echoing Marx’s belief regarding religion, albeit in a slightly more roundabout way. Whereas Casy believes that humans act on their own nature and there is no way for man to fairly and honestly judge his fellow man, Marx simply called religion “*das Opium des Volkes*” (“the opium of the people”) (*Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right”* 131).

Casy asks Tom about his time in prison, and Tom tells him that there were benefits to being incarcerated, including regular meals and a bed. He relates the story of an inmate who was released early on parole, but returned a month later after intentionally and knowingly violating the terms of his release. When asked why he did it, the inmate replies, “They got no conveniences at my old man’s place. Got no ‘lectric lights, got no shower baths. There ain’t no books, an’ the food’s lousy” (26). In short, the parolee traded his incarceration in the

metaphorical capitalist Panopticon for incarceration in the literal McAlester penitentiary because in the latter, everything is provided for him. He is willing to sacrifice his physical freedom to be outside of the imprisonment that capitalism inflicts on those under its purview. It is telling of Steinbeck's view of the system that he writes about people who prefer life inside a physical prison to life outside in the one created by capitalism.

Before Tom and Casy arrive at the Joad farm—which has been abandoned by the time they reach it—Steinbeck gives us one of his sixteen intercalary chapters that punctuate the narrative of the Joad family members. In this particular one, we are told about the process by which many of the tenant farmers are removed from their land, sometimes by sympathetic landowners who “were kind because they hated what they had to do” and some who “were angry because they hated to be cruel,” while still others “were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold” (31). Despite their differing moods, however, there is one thing we are told that they all have in common: “All of them were caught in something larger than themselves” (31).

For Steinbeck, this is not a problem solely for the Joad family, but rather it is a problem for everyone everywhere. By saying that all of the landowners were “caught in something larger than themselves,” he is pointing to the fact that everyone living under capitalism's rules is affected by the same forces. When people can't afford to indulge in anything beyond subsistence-level necessities, their cost-cutting measures trickle down to the very land that grows food. It is no longer as profitable to the owner, so he evicts the tenants that had been farming it in favor of incorporating supposedly more efficient agricultural techniques. Because that tenant family can no longer count on an income, they are forced to make their own financial sacrifices, which in turn affect those merchants who relied on those farmers as customers. The snowball

grows as every new link in the chain is broken. Those who are living as prisoners within the capitalist system are imprisoned by their own personal relationships, in essence. Self-reliance is a myth in the system; everyone relies on others to do their part in order to sustain their own level of subsistence.

One strategy those in power in these instances deploy is that of simultaneously dehumanizing and anthropomorphizing the participants in the process. The defense is that it is not the landowner's desire to evict the tenants, but rather it is "the bank," an insatiable monster that must be obeyed: "The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it" (33). As a non-human "creature," the bank doesn't have human emotions, and so the eviction process means nothing to that entity. It is not the decision of the human actually carrying out the action; in fact, he is loath to carry out the wishes of the bank. However, because it is the monster that is the bank that is making the decisions, that individual is able to deflect the blame to the invisible yet ever-present power that is the bank and the capitalist system it represents.

This power overtakes even the hourly wage-earner who is driving the tractor sent to raze the buildings on the land. In this same intercalary chapter, the driver is described as one who "did not look like a man," wearing a dust mask and goggles, working as "a part of the monster, a robot in the seat" (35). He is only a pawn in this whole process. Steinbeck describes him as under the spell of the monster that is the bank: "But the driver's hands could not twitch because the monster that built the tractor, the monster that sent the tractor out, had somehow got into the driver's hands, into his brain and muscle" (35). He has ceded control of his own body to the desires of capitalism because he, too, is trapped in the prison and has to work in order to survive,

as he explains to the people who he is helping to evict: “Three dollars a day. I got damn sick of creeping for my dinner—and not getting it. I got a wife and kids. We got to eat. Three dollars a day, and it comes every day” (37). The monster takes from one side and provides to the other, but both sides are equally ensnared within the Panopticon of capitalism.

American commercial culture infiltrated deeply into society at this time, even to the most remote of rural areas. This understanding offers insight into the Joad family’s collective susceptibility to the controlling discourse of advertising, the commercial culture’s mouthpiece. According to advertising historian James Norris, in the first half of the twentieth century, “Mail order houses slanted the appeal of their ads to a rural consumer, and for many an isolated farm wife, the large, lavishly illustrated catalogue became an important cultural document” (15). Echoing this argument, Leis et al. suggest that it was through mail-order catalogs that those living in rural communities were able to participate more fully in the commercial culture of the urban centers, calling catalogs “an ingenious method” of opening up rural markets (56). The authors add that the day on which these rural residents received their Sears, Roebuck catalog in the mail “became a major social event” (Leis et al. 57).

In a generic sense, then, it is clear that even rural families were regularly exposed to the commercial culture that was permeating society. Steinbeck makes it a point to make the generic very specific by linking the Joads to that same experience of receiving the Sears catalog and ordering from it. In an early discussion about his father with Jim Casy, Tom Joad says, “Pa could write, but wouldn’t. It give him the shivers to write. He could work out a catalogue order as good as the nex’ fella, but he wouldn’t write no letter just for ducks” (Steinbeck 42). Tom’s father looks at writing as a means to an end, and that end is manifested in the acquisition of material goods from a catalog.

When Tom and Casy arrive at the remnants of the Joad family's now-abandoned home following what was their own personal version of the generic story told in the intercalary chapter, we as readers get a glimpse into how far the controlling discourse of advertising is able to reach. It is immediately apparent that the Joads have had extensive exposure to that discourse, as evidenced by the fact that there is an advertisement for Red Wing Shoes, founded by Charles Beckman in 1905, hanging in a deserted bedroom: On the wall a picture of an Indian girl in color, labeled Red Wing" (42). At the time, companies sought out new ways to engage their consumers, and one of their strategies for attracting and retaining new customers was by creating advertisements that were marketed as collectible artwork painted by well-known artists of the day. Julian Sivulka explains the thinking behind this sort of campaign: "Associating the brand name with fine art built an upscale image for an inexpensive product. Such ads created an instantaneous impression – 'picture magic.' [...] Among the early American artists were Frederick [sic.] Remington [...] and Jesse Wilcox Smith" (*Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes* 64-5). Through this technique, an advertisement's discourse could be further implanted into the minds of consumers who elected to decorate their homes with the message.

This advertisement for Red Wing also suggests that the family was aware of – and prone to – the lure of name brands in advertising. Norris says of brand names, "Brand names and qualities associated by consumers with brand names imparted a distinction, however artificial it may have been, among essentially identical items" (56). Steinbeck's peppering of his novel with references to brand-name products illustrates how every stratum of society is bombarded by advertising messages. Those messages, in turn, exploit consumers by convincing them to voluntarily pay more money for a brand name product. The nameless tractor driver who has been hired to knock down a barn in an intercalary chapter is said to be eating a sandwich made of

Spam, and Tom Joad at one point laments, “I wisht I had a sack of Durham [...]. I ain’t had a smoke in a hell of a time” (251).

The fact that the Joads are so deeply influenced by the discourse of advertising is made more overt to us through Steinbeck’s depiction of the handbills that circulate throughout the rural communities, advertisements that claim the need for workers in California. Claudia Durst Johnson points out that, despite denials from various groups about this sort of advertising, newspapers featured plenty of calls for workers: “Many farm families, like the Joads, claimed that they were drawn to the West because circulars and newspaper advertisements painted California as the land of milk and honey, where work was plentiful and farm ownership was a distinct possibility” (97).

In the case of the Joads and their migration westward, they were not lured by newspaper advertisements, but rather by handbills, one of the earliest advertising strategies ever developed.. Ma Joad tells Tom that his father “got a han’bill on yella paper, tellin’ how they need folks to work. They wouldn’ go to that trouble if they wasn’t plenty work. Costs ‘em good money to get them han’bills out. What’d they want ta lie for, an’ costin’ ‘em money to lie?” (92). Ma’s naivete in regard to the machinations of the capitalist system has led her to believe that there is a surplus of labor and a shortage of laborers. In an ideal capitalist system, that combination would equate to higher wages. But as I will shortly show, those who are convinced by these promises of plentiful work fall victim to their own human instincts aimed at improving their lives. They are seeking the American Dream that Adams wrote about, or at least some version of it. But what is perhaps more important to the conversation regarding advertising in this context is the specific type of advertisement and the audience’s reception of the discourse contained in those handbills.

The fact that the Joads and so many families like them are influenced so easily by handbills speaks volumes about their level of sophistication and experience with the commercial world. They are naively internalizing the controlling discourse put forth by the advertisements, and subsequently ignoring the underlying facts regarding the economic system that discourse is helping to support. Alternatively, those who sought to bring cheap labor from the American Midwest to California saw their audience as culturally stunted and, worse still, easily manipulated by the most basic of advertising ploys.

So desperate were the farmers for any sort of salvation that they were influenced by block letters on a piece of paper, an ad lacking any visual qualities that one would expect to accompany any advertisement of the 1930s. They are perceived by the advertisers as the human manifestation of the generic human beings Charles Austin Bates described when he said, “Advertisers should never forget that they are addressing stupid people. It is really astonishing how little a man may know, and yet keep out of the way of the trolley cars” (qtd. in Fox 37). They are the people who Steinbeck describes as “simple agrarian folk who had not changed with industry, who had not farmed with machines or known the power and danger of machines in private hands. They had not grown up in the paradoxes of industry. Their senses were still sharp to the ridiculousness of the industrial life” (282). The Joads are stuck in something of a time warp, relying on outdated farming techniques and lacking modern conveniences and technologies. As such, they are vulnerable to being exploited by even the most basic of advertising techniques.

Just as important as the handbills themselves is the audience’s reaction to the controlling discourse contained within those advertisements. As we have seen, the Joads are not immune to the power of advertising, and they are clearly driven by the discourse it contains. The important

fact to which they are completely ignorant, however, is that of the discourse's efforts to support the capitalist Panopticon. The handbills that the Joads and countless others like them read initially serve to offer hope. There must be, as Ma Joad reasons, plenty of work. Otherwise, there would be no need for those who are printing them to go to the trouble and expense of doing so.

What she and all those like her fail to account for, however, is the imprisoning nature of capitalism. Those in charge of hiring pickers know that the more desperate people are, the less they will have to pay. By incorporating a sort of shotgun strategy in which they cover as much of the potential target area for workers as possible, they know that they will have a higher likelihood of getting the message to those desperate enough to work for the lowest of wages. Herein lies the rigged nature of the economic system. By attracting a huge number of potential workers—a number far beyond what is needed to perform the job—employers have a sudden surplus of labor. They simply need to find those who are most desperate for work, the ones who are willing to work for the lowest possible wages.

Tom seems to be the only one prescient enough to understand the realities of the capitalist system, as he recounts to his mother a conversation he'd had recently with another man who was from California, "But he says they's too many folks lookin' for work right there now. An' he says the folks that pick the fruit live in dirty ol' camps an' don't hardly get enough to eat. He says wages is low an' hard to get any" (92). The law of supply-and-demand is inescapable in the capitalist system, and by the time the migrant workers discover this truth, it is too late for them to do anything about it. They are deceived by the discourse and trapped within the capitalist prison, willingly suspending any knowledge they might have of the laws that control the economic system in order to convince themselves that they have hope for their own future.

In order to go west, the Joads first must acquire a mode of transportation. That need, of course, requires money. This situation is indicative of the imprisoning nature of capitalism: The Joads have no option of staying where they are, but in order to move they have to spend what is for them an extraordinarily large sum of money. The most logical way for them to acquire that money is through farming the land, but they have been evicted from that land and are unable to farm it. It is yet another example of the catch-22 into which capitalism thrusts those living under the system. From the intercalary chapter about the car dealership, we see the way in which these unethical businessmen conduct themselves, leveraging their position within the capitalist hierarchy to exploit those who have so little but who need a car so desperately. Flags and shiny cars call out to potential buyers, buyers that the salesmen know are desperate for transportation. Like the handbills that are luring the migrants west, these subtle forms of discourse reel in the desperate buyers: “Flags, red and white, white and blue—all along the curb. Used Cars. Good Used Cars. Today’s bargain—up on the platform. Never sell it. Makes folks come in, though. If we sold that bargain at that price we’d hardly make a dime. Tell ‘em it’s jus’ sold” (62). These lures work in the way that the salesmen had hoped, as an endless stream of buyers come on to the lots in search of the vehicle that will take them away to the mythical, magical land of California and out of this quagmire of capitalist imprisonment.

The salesmen seem to embody everything bad about the traditional stereotype of a modern-day used car salesman. They are described as being “neat, deadly” with “small intent eyes watching for weakness” (61). They use every trick they can in order to entice buyers, from guilting them into buying to shoddy repair jobs to broken-down vehicles; they also charge exorbitant mark-ups on the prices compared to what they paid for the vehicles originally. The car lot manager muses that he wishes he could “get a hundred jalopies,” because that’s the market to

which he is catering. “We ain’t sellin’ cars—rolling junk,” he says of his inventory. His belief is that if he can’t get more than twice his own cost in a sale, he doesn’t want to consider carrying the vehicle: “Goddamn it, I got to get jalopies. I don’t want nothing for more’n twenty-five, thirty bucks. Sell ‘em for fifty, seventy-five. That’s a good profit” (62).

Of his customers, he is no more complimentary. “There’s a dumb-bunny lookin’ at that Chrysler,” he says of one potential buyer. Both the clientele and the inventory are reflections of the economic situation in which the Joad family finds themselves. As a result of the industrialization of farming techniques and the birth of large holding corporations that own factory-like farming operations, farmers have been reduced to the status of rusted and broken-down automobiles bought and sold by immoral businessmen. This scene provides a vivid example of Juliann Sivulka’s assertion that a consumer’s choice of commodities may be read as a reflection of the culture in which they live: “In any case, consumption choices simply cannot be understood without considering the cultural context. Culture is the lens through which people view the world of goods and which determines the overall priorities and meanings people attach to activities and products” (*Strong Than Dirt* 18). Consumption choices—in this case, the particular type of vehicle that the destitute migrants are trying to buy, what the manager describes as jalopies—are a product of one’s own culture. And in this case, that culture is composed of broken-down houses, barren fields, crippling debt, and destroyed dreams. The cars the families are buying in hopes of driving to California are tangible reflections of those stark realities.

Apparent in this section, too, is another reflection of Steinbeck’s critique of the use of brand-names to sell particular commodities. As the salesman himself says, they’re not selling cars, but rather “rolling junk.” But each one of those pieces of rolling junk has a specific brand

name attached to it, and it is that name recognition that makes the salesman's job easier. Because he can rely on the reputation of a particular brand – a reputation established through extensive advertising efforts – a potential buyer will already recognize the name and, if the advertising efforts have been successful, believe that the brand is reliable because of the name: "Yes, sir. '22 Dodge. Best goddamn car Dodge ever made. [...] Plymouths, Rocknes, Stars" (62). Later the manager boasts, "Got a Lincoln '24. There's a car. Run forever" (63). This exploitation of name-brand recognition extends to the advertising efforts, too: "Limp flags in the afternoon. Today's Bargain. '29 Ford pickup, runs good" (65).

However, Steinbeck adds an ironic twist to his examination of the faith that so many consumers had (and continue to have) in brand names. Al finally decides to buy a Hudson Super-Six for the family, but his rationale has nothing to do with the brand's reputation. He explains to the family, "Reason I says buy her is she was a pop'lar car. Wreckin' yards is full a Hudson Super-Sixes, and you can buy parts cheap" (101). Ironically, it is the fact that there are so many of the same model that are in junkyards that served as the selling point for Al. The brand name, in this case, has nothing to do with any sort of positive views regarding the quality or dependability of the car itself. Rather, the brand name serves the purpose of selling the car only because there are so many of them that have broken down to the point that they are no longer worth repairing, and now sit rusting in junkyards waiting for those seeking parts for their own cars. There is such a glut in the number of these cars that they are now effectively worthless, despite the brand name that is attached to them. This is an example of Steinbeck's attacks on the discourse of advertising, as he suggests here that, regardless of the name on a commodity or the amount of advertising used to sell it, in the end it all just ends up as so much junk on the side of the road, discarded and forgotten about.

The Joads' experience buying the beat-up car that they hope will carry them all the way to California is a reflection of the generic story told in the previous intercalary chapter, and is also itself indicative of their status as prisoners trapped within the Panopticon. They are forced to sell nearly everything of value that they own in order to get enough money to buy the car. Pa tells Tom that they "give seventy five for this here truck" and that he hopes the family will have "maybe a hundred an' fifty when we start" (83). He acknowledges that the tires on the truck "ain't gonna go far," and he had to buy "a couple of wore out spares" (83). This will not be the only expense that is associated with the journey, further enforcing the idea that capitalism is a prison. Not only did they have to buy the vehicle that they hope will be able to transport them to a place where they will be able to earn a living wage, that vehicle will end up costing them more along the way and requiring them to spend money that they can't afford to spend.

Their experience with selling their possessions is foreshadowed in the subsequent intercalary chapter, in which we read the story of a merchant trying to pay as little as possible in exchange for the possessions the farmers are desperate to sell. The unnamed farmers lament the fact that they are selling their possessions along with their own bitterness at the situation: "Fifty cents isn't enough to get for a good plow. That seeder cost thirty-eight dollars. Two dollars isn't enough. Can't haul it all back—Well, take it, and a bitterness with it" (86). The merchant buying the goods knows that he is in a position of power, as the migrants need the money and can't justify hauling their possessions home without selling them. So the farmers are stuck in a position of having to sell what they have for what the merchant is offering.

The exact scenario repeats itself in the subsequent chapter when the Joads go to sell whatever they can carry from John's farm: "They had got eighteen dollars for every movable thing from the farm [...]. They had assailed the buyer, argued; but they were routed when his

interest seemed to flag and he had told them he didn't want the stuff at any price. Then they were beaten, believed him, and took two dollars less than he had first offered" (97). When he hears the story of what happened, Pa recounts a story he heard from some other men: "Said the buyer fellas always done that. Scairt folks that way. We jus' don' know how to go about stuff like that" (97-98). It is true that people like that the Joads don't "know how to go about stuff like that," but it is also true that even if they did have that knowledge, they would still be stuck in their position. The practical reality is that they had no leverage, no bargaining power.

As the family drives west on Route 66, everything becomes a commodity with immense value. Food must be rationed, tires must be preserved, the car must keep going. As he drives, "Al was one with his engine" (123), suggesting the concern he has for the car's well-being, as any otherwise minor repair will be a major setback in this situation. What's more, the family discovers early on in their journey that in their haste to depart, they left behind their supply of water, which causes immediate discomfort: "Thirst set in instantly. Winfield moaned, 'I wanta drink. I wanta drink.' The men licked their lips, suddenly conscious of their thirst. And a little panic started" (125). Something as simple as water is a valuable commodity on this journey, and the family will soon discover that those seeking to capitalize on the migrants' misfortunes include those who would sell something as basic as water. When they stop at a service station and ask if they can get water, the attendant asks them if they plan to buy gas. Only after Al tells him that they are—and assures the attendant that they have money to pay for it—does the attendant allow them to use the water hose.

Despite what having might be deemed a greedy nature, the gas station owner discloses the fact that he, like the Joads, is doing what he has to do in order to survive. The owner is not necessarily seeking to profit off of others' misfortune; he himself is simply another prisoner

within the Panopticon, a member of the proletariat who is in the life-and-death struggle of capitalist competition. He remarks to Tom that there are a lot of cars on the highway, and adds, “Well, I don’ know what the country’s comin’ to. I jus’ don’ know. Here’s me tryin’ to get along, too. Think any them big new cars stops here? No, sir! They go on to them yella-painted company stations in town. They don’t stop no place like this. Most folks stops here ain’t got nothin’” (126). The discourse that serves as the catalyst driving the capitalist system is taking business away from this man because of his inability to market himself through advertising.

The new, modern stations—part of a national chain of gas stations, we may presume—have leveraged the power of the discourse inherent in their branding and advertising to pull potential customers away from this man’s station and countless others like it. This gas station attendant is to that industry what the Joads and other failing farmers were to agriculture. In both cases, the traditional model was consumed by the modern. In the case of the farmers, it was the mechanized techniques of the agribusiness model; for gas station owners it was the national chains and their immense capital reserves and marketing campaigns. For both, the end result was the same: their eventual financial destruction by the capitalist machine. As Tom tells the attendant before they resume their journey, “Pretty soon you’ll be on the road yourse’f. And it ain’t tractors’ll put you there. It’s them pretty yella stations in town” (128).

When the Joads arrive in Oklahoma City, their inexperience with the urban environment and its commercial culture becomes apparent. Ma wakes up from her nap in order to see the sights of the city as they pass through, and the rest of the family that is situated on top of the truck “stared about at the stores, at the big houses, at the office buildings” (132). The scene is one of urban development and advancement, and it is such a strange sight that the family members feel compelled to stare. Ruthie and Winifield, the youngest and therefore the most

naïve in regard to this sort of environment, “saw it all, and it embarrassed them with its bigness and its strangeness, and it frightened them with the fine-clothed people they saw” (132). The children don’t recognize Oklahoma City as a marvel of capitalist achievement that demands respect and admiration by those who encounter. Rather, they see it as something to be feared. The city, we are told, “was so big and so strange it frightened them” (132). They have no experience with anything like what they are seeing, but rather than amazement, they are terrified by it. It is as if they understand the capacity of the system to destroy, and they understand that the bright lights and fancy clothes are simply a means to that destruction.

In one of the continuing series of tragic events to befall the Joads on their journey to California, Grampa dies before they arrive, leaving the family to tend to his burial. The horrific irony of their situation is that they are faced with the question of whether or not to report his death. Doing so is required by law but, as Pa points out, “when you do that, they either take forty dollars for the undertaker or they take him for a pauper” (139). The burial cost would consume more than a quarter of the family’s total money, and that pecuniary loss would prevent them from getting to California. Again the capitalist machine continually places obstacles in front of those who seek to better their own situation. Because of the costs associated with a coroner and burial, even death becomes a tool of capitalism that allows others to enrich themselves financially off of the sadness and self-imposed obligations to the deceased felt by the survivors. In the end, the family decides on an alternative third option, to bury him themselves in defiance of the law. Whereas Uncle John says that it’s not the way Grampa would have done it because he would have “come out a-shootin’,” Pa replies, “We can’t do like Grampa done. We got to get to California ‘fore our money gives out” (140). Tom writes a note to be included with the body, in the event that Grampa’s corpse is ever unearthed and the authorities suspect foul play. In the note

he explains, “His fokes bured him becaws they got no money to pay for funerls” (142). This note, in its own simplistic way, points to one of the ultimate ironies of the capitalist Panopticon: The only way to escape the prison is through death, but even after that event the survivors are even more thoroughly imprisoned *because* of the deceased’s death.

The Joads befriend a couple heading west, the Wilsons, and Pa and Mr. Wilson begin to compare stories. They realize that they have both been affected by the identical discourse proclaimed in identical handbills that were distributed in their respective home regions. When Mr. Wilson questions whether or not it’s possible that the employers have already filled the positions they were seeking to fill, Pa replies that it’s only one small section of the state, and that he’s sure that there are plenty of other sites looking for laborers. His suspension of disbelief is essentially a survival instinct. If he allows himself to question the validity of the discourse, he will be faced with the reality that there is no escape from his current situation.

As if to reinforce his own belief and convince not only himself but also Wilson of the truth contained in the discourse, Pa says off-handedly, “Ma favors a white house with oranges growin’ around. They’s a big pitcher on a calendar she seen” (148). This comment illustrates the power of the discourse on multiple levels. In one sense, it serves to reaffirm Pa’s belief in the handbills he’s seen by allowing him to focus his thinking on the house he plans to buy once he’s made so much money by picking fruit as he was promised in the handbills. In another sense, the house itself is depicted on a calendar—a calendar that was most likely itself an advertisement for some other company or commodity—that has worked its own advertising magic on Ma’s thinking. She has conflated the sense of personal well-being and happiness with a particular house—a white one with orange trees growing outside—based on an image in a calendar. The image of the house on the calendar has cemented itself in Ma’s mind as the embodiment of her

version of the American Dream, and in so doing it has accomplished the same thing as an effective advertisement in controlling Ma's thinking

In the ensuing two intercalary chapters, we are offered two distinctly different viewpoints of the economic situation facing the migrants, one from a generic group of owners and the other from a truck driver at a café off the highway. The former, we are told, fears unionization by the workers, because, as Marx suggests, it is only through organization that the proletariat will ever be able to break free from their chains. Steinbeck tells us that the causes of this new-found sense of unity are "hunger in a stomach, multiplied a million times; a hunger in a single soul, hunger for joy and some security, multiplied a million times" (150). This is the base-level of the panoptic power of the system. The fact that human beings require nourishment in order to survive and acquiring that nourishment requires money means that, from birth, we are trapped in the system. Again, all humans living under capitalism's purview are always already in this prison from their first breath.

This point is brought down to a smaller scale in the next intercalary chapter, in which Steinbeck paints a verbal picture of small restaurants that line the highway: "Along 66 the hamburger stands—Al & Susy's Place—Carl's Lunch—Joe & Minnie—Will's Eats" (153). The painted signs that beckon to travelers are themselves discourse, relying on what is presumably the owner's name in order to convey a sense of familiarity and trust. It is as if the owners of these establishments are harkening back to the patent medicine days, when Lydia Pynkham's visage was one of the most trusted sources of medicinal remedies in the country based simply on the fact that she looked like a kind-hearted elderly woman who was there to take care of those in need. By presenting their restaurants as places where anyone could come in and, theoretically, know the owner by first name, these proprietors are capitalizing on the same sense of caring and

camaraderie. The discourse contained in their names suggests that they are all friends and that anyone who wants to eat with a friend should come in.

Once inside, diners are treated to several new layers of advertising discourse. One of these layers is the glass case of sundries and necessities: “At the end of the counter a covered case; candy cough drops, caffeine sulphate called Sleepless, No-Doze; candy, cigarettes, razor blades, aspirin, Bromo-Seltzer, Alka-Seltzer” (153). This is a rudimentary example of what William Leach talks about when describing the scene inside an early-twentieth century department store, where consumers were often “disoriented by the images and goods displayed behind the glass” (*Desire* 39). There is such a wide variety of items available for purchase in this particular setting that the sheer volume can frequently trigger desires for such things, as can the impulse-purchase factor whereby consumers buy things simply because the sight of them triggers a desire. Adding to all of these potential enticements are the advertisements for specific products—in this particular case, Coca-Cola—that adorn the walls inside. These specific corporate advertisements are supplemented by more generic enticements on signs throughout the interior. In short, the entire interior is essentially a temple to consumer culture, with enticements or calls-to-action in virtually every conceivable space.

Into this veritable shrine to a particular level of commercial culture comes a migrant family on their way to California. The children enter and go straight to the candy display, where they begin staring at the treasures behind the glass “not with craving or with hope or even with desire, but that with a kind of wonder that such things could be” (160). The children are enraptured by the sight of the display as intended, even if they have no hope of ever being able to acquire anything inside it.

Their father, meanwhile, is standing at the counter inquiring as to whether or not he can buy a loaf of bread. Mae, the waitress, at first tells him that she can't sell just the bread; she tries to up-sell him a sandwich instead, and the man replies, "We'd sure admire to do that, ma'am. But we can't. We got to make a dime do all of us" (159). At that point, the waitress tells him that they only have "fifteen-cent loafs" (159). After a few heated exchanges with Al, the cook, the waitress eventually agrees to give the man the whole loaf of bread for a dime. He knows he is taking what amounts to charity, and he expresses his gratitude. Following the bread sale, Mae herself finds a degree of sympathy for the family, as she sells the man candy at a price of two-for-a-penny, when the reality is that the candy was actually a nickel apiece. The act of kindness is one that, for the moment, means an immense amount to both the boys and their father, but the reality is that it is also indicative of how strong the chains that hold them are. The migrant family is so deeply entrenched within the Panopticon that a nickel's worth of bread is an act of charity and a gift that will postpone starvation for a period of time. But once that bread been consumed, they will be once again forced to rely on the kindness of strangers in order to just survive, and the further west the migrants travel, the more and more rare those acts of kindness become.

When we see the Joads again, they are continuing on their westward pilgrimage. At one point during the drive, Rose of Sharon tells her mother that she and Connie have decided that they don't want to live in the country anymore. They have decided to abandon their agricultural upbringing and instead move to a city, where Connie hopes to get a job. He serves as something of a form of commercial discourse himself, as we hear from Rose of Sharon when she recounts his list of future goals:

An' he's gonna study at home, maybe radio, so he can git to be a expert an' maybe later have his own store. An we'll go to pitchers whenever. An' Connie says I'm gonna have a *doctor* when the baby's born; an' he says we'll see how times is, an maybe I'll go to a hospiddle. An' we'll have a car, little car. An' after

he studies at night, why—it'll be nice an' he tore a page outa *Western Love Stories*, an' he's gonna send off for a course, 'cause it don't cost nothin' to send off. Says right on that clipping. I seen it. An', why—they even get you a job when you take that course—radios, it is,—nice clean work, and a future. An' we'll live in a town an' go to pitchers whenever, an'—well, I'm gonna have a 'lectric iron, an' the baby'll have all new stuff. Connie says all new stuff—white an'—Well, you seen in the catalogue all the stuff they got for a baby" (164-165, italics in original).

In her rapid-fire delivery of all the things she and Connie plan to acquire—including his plan to participate in correspondence classes that he got from an advertisement in a magazine—Rose of Sharon has woven a tapestry of dreams, all of them impossible for her to achieve, most likely. Ma knows this, on some level, as Steinbeck tells us that she “suddenly seemed to know it was all a dream” (165). However, her own self-preservation instinct fosters the same sort of suspension of disbelief as her husband's did in his own mind, and she refuses to acknowledge the fact that Rose of Sharon's list of dreams is just that and nothing more.

That suspension of disbelief loses strength, however, when the family stops for the night in a makeshift camp populated by migrants like themselves. As Pa tells the assembled travelers that “they's plenty of us to work, an' we're all good men. Get good wages out there an' we'll put 'em together. We'll make out” (188), his comments are met with something approaching derision from another man who tells him, “Me—I'm comin' back. I been there” (188). The assembled men immediately turn to face this man traveling the opposite direction, and he tells them, “I'm goin' back to starve. I ruther starve all over at oncet” (189). Pa, still clinging to his delusions about the prospects for work in California, assures the man, “I got a han'bill says they need men. Don't make no sense if they don't need men. Costs money for them bills. They wouldn't put 'em out if they didn't need men” (189). This is a refrain we have heard before. Why would an employer spend the money to print advertisements for workers he doesn't need? That naïve outlook is what fuels Pa's belief in the mythical prosperity of California.

After trying to avoid disappointing Pa with the truth of the matter, the man finally relents and unloads the specifics of capitalist laws:

It don't make no sense. This fella wants with hundred men. So he prints up five thousand of them things an' maybe twenty thousan' people sees 'em. An' maybe two-three thousan' folks gets movin' account a this here han'bill. Folks that's crazy with worry. [...] Maybe he needs two hunderd men, so talks to five hundred, an' they tell other folks, an' when you get to the place, they's a thsouan' men. This here fella says, 'I'm payin' twenty cents an hour.' An' maybe half a the men walk off. But they's still five hundred that so goddamn hungry they'll work for nothin' but biscuits. Well, this here fella's got a contract to pick them peaches or—chop that cotton. You see now? The more fellas he can get, an' the hungrier, less he's gonna pay (189-190).

Labor itself has become a commodity that is subject to the laws of supply and demand that control the capitalist marketplace. And when the human condition of hunger creeps in, it adds another dimension of price fluctuation, because those who are hungrier will be willing to work for even less, just so that they can feed themselves.

When the family crosses the border into California, they rest up for the trip across the desert to get to their final destination. While there, they encounter another migrant who is heading back home after spending time in California because, as he tells Pa and Tom, “At leas’ we can starve to death with folks we know. Won’t have a bunch a fellas that hates us to starve with” (205). It is the second person to attack Pa’s vision, and he questions the man about what it is that makes life in California so hard. And in response, yet another voice that is hesitant to destroy his dreams unpacks the realities of life for the migrants:

You ain’t gonna get no steady work. Gonna scrabble for your dinner ever’ day. An’ you gonna do her with people lookin’ mean at you. Pick cotton, an’ you gonna be sure the scales ain’t honest. Some of ‘em is, an’ some of ‘em ain’t. But you gonna think all the scales is crooked, an’ you don’ know which ones. [...] They’s a grove of yella oranges—an’ a guy with a gun that got the right to kill you if you touch one (206).

It is a prophetic description of how life will be for the Joads, but they have made it to California, and at this point there is no voice of reality that can send them back. They will just have to experience it for themselves, to realize that they are subject to the same imprisoning power as everyone else.

One of the first ways in which they are indoctrinated to this realization of their status as prisoners comes when a police officer confronts Ma and tells her that she and the family can't stay where they have set up their tarpaulin. When she protests about the treatment she receives, the officer tells her, "Well, you ain't in your country now. You're in California, an' we don't want you goddamn Okies settlin' down" (214). They are now members of a subhuman species. Despite the fact that they are white, native-born Americans, they are not afforded the same privileges otherwise reserved for that population.

More importantly, however, they have been dehumanized. Phillip Zimbardo explains of the dehumanization process, "It is easier to be callous or rude toward dehumanized 'objects,' to ignore their demands and pleas, to use them for your own purposes, even to destroy them if they are irritating" (307). By viewing the population as somehow deserving of inhuman treatment—or at least of not being worthy of humane treatment—then the abuser's conscience is soothed and the brutality can be carried out without concern on the part of the abuser. This helps to explain the words of a gas station attendant who says, "Them goddamn Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain't human. A human being wouldn't live like they do. A human being couldn't stand it to be so dirty and miserable. They ain't a hell of a lot better than gorillas" (221).

Steinbeck uses an intercalary chapter to explain one of the justifications for the dehumanization of the migrants by residents of California. In short, though there are multiple manifestations of the ways in which men foster hatred for the migrants, the core reason for that

hatred boils down to the laws of capitalism and the need for everyone to make money in order to survive within that system. Steinbeck writes,

And in the town, the storekeepers hated them because they had no money to spend. There is no shorter path to a storekeeper's contempt [...]. The town men, little bankers, hated Okies because there was nothing to gain from them. They had nothing. And the laboring people hated Okies because a hungry man must work, and if he must work, if he has to work, the wage payer automatically gives him less for his work; and then no one can get more (233).

Everyone finds that their tethers within the capitalist prison are tighter because of the migrants.

Compounding this tightening of the chains of the California residents is the fact that the migrants themselves are in competition with each other for work. This reality is made manifest for the Joads when they stop to camp in a Hooverville and one of the residents explains the brutal reality of looking for work in California to Tom:

S'pose you get a job for work, an' there's jus' one fella wants the job. You got to pay 'im what he asks. But s'pose they's a hunderd men. [...] S'pose them men got kids, an' them kids is hungry. S'pose a lousy dime'll buy a box a mush for them kids. S'pose a nickel'll buy at least somepin for them kids. An' you got a hunderd men. Jus' offer 'em a nickel—why, they'll kill each other fightin' for that nickel. [...] That's why them han'bills was out. You can print a hell of a lot of han'bills with what ya save payin' fifteen cents an hour for fiel' work (245).

Finally Tom is made to understand the answer to his queries regarding the vast supply of handbills and the economic rationale behind printing so many of them. It is a manifestation of capitalist competition. Competition between would-be laborers for a given job puts the capitalist in the position of being able to negotiate a lower wage. Beyond that, as Karl Marx points out, lower wages mean the laborer needs to work more in order to make enough to survive, so the capitalist gets more work for less money. This situation is a repetition of the earlier explanation given to the family when they first arrived in California, though it now seems to be becoming more clear in the minds of the Joads just how deeply they are entrenched within the system that will destroy them. Not only they are the targets of Californians who don't seem to want them in their

state, but they are also the enemies of other migrants, because everyone is in a fight to get work in order to survive.

We learn that the migrants are themselves a commodity beyond their capacity to work, too. They are valuable as prisoners, a fact that Tom learns when he inquires as to why a particular police officer seemed to be trying to goad him into a fight. Commenting about a situation in northern California, a man tells him, “Sheriff gets seventy-five cents a day for each prisoner, an’ he feeds ‘em for a quarter. If he ain’t got prisoners, he don’t make no profit. This fella says he didn’ pick up nobody for a week, an’ the sheriff tol’ ‘im he better bring in guys or give up his button” (271). In an ironic twist, physical prisoners are helping to foster the well-being of those trapped within the metaphorical prison, as the sheriff is making a profit by feeding those in his jail less than the state thinks they need.

The Joads find a temporary respite from the tribulations associated with life in the Panopticon by going to the quasi-socialist paradise within the government camp at Weedpatch. The camp serves as a self-governing and self-policing entity that is protected from the outside authorities. Contained within the gates of this enclosed world are flush toilets that are luxuries more closely aligned with capitalism. More specifically, they are luxuries more closely aligned with the middle- and upper-classes of capitalism. Despite their association with those people who are more well-off financially, even young Ruthie has some degree of familiarity with toilets because, as she tells Winfield, “Them’s the toilets. I seen ‘em in the catalogue” (299).

The camp also has running water, as well as baths and showers. When she hears this, Ma exclaims, “Praise God, we come home to our own people. I’m a-gonna have a bath” (307). She explains to the other women in the camp that she and her family “was farm people till the debt. And then—them people. They done somepin to us” (307). Ma here suggests that the process of

dehumanization that to which the Joads were subjected began when the family had to go into debt in order to survive. That loan marked the beginning of the end of the Joad family, but it is only now, in hindsight, that Ma is able to recognize that truth. But now she feels free again, free from debt and free from the dehumanizing label of Okie, because she is in the socialist sanctuary of the Weedpatch camp. As she says of the camp, “This here’s a nice place. We could be happy here awhile” (322). Her husband, however, punctuates that statement with a rejoinder of his own: “If we could get work” (322). Outside of the socialist paradise is the capitalist world where survival of the fittest is still the law of the land. The family is forced to move on from the camp. There is truly no escape from the Panopticon. Despite the fact, as Pa says, “Folks been so nice here—an’ the toilets an’ all. But we got to eat” (356). The realities of the human condition that keep people imprisoned dictate that the Joads must move on and leave behind the luxuries of the socialist camp in order to find work.

The Joads secure jobs picking peaches, though they inadvertently sign on as scab workers who are hired in order to break an ongoing workers’ strike. It is Jim Casy, who had arrived before the Joads, who tells Tom exactly what has happened:

We come to work there. They says it’s gonna be fi’ cents. They was a hell of a lot of us. We got there an’ they says they’re payin’ two an’ a half cents. A fella can’t even eat on that, an’ if he got kids— So we says we won’t take it. So the druve us off. An’ all the cops in the worl’ come down on us. Now they’re payin’ you five. When they bust this here strike—ya think they’ll pay five?” (382-383).

Soon after this conversation takes place, the wage does drop to the two-and-a-half cents that Casy warned Tom about, and the result is that the pickers who are willing to work now are “so goddamn hungry they’d pick for a loaf of bread. Go for a peach, an’ somebody’d get it first” (398).

Compounding the problems arising from the low wages is the fact that the company store marks their groceries up considerably in order to further fleece the workers, in much the same way as the company owners took advantage of the miners in Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth*. On Ma's first visit to the store, she remarks that the prices seem "awful high," to which the clerk replies, "Yes, it's high, an' same time it ain't high. Time you go on in town for a couple poun's of hamburg, it'll cos' you 'bout a gallon gas. So you see it ain't really high here, 'cause you got no gallon a gas" (374). As the store is owned by the same company that owns the farm on which the men are picking peaches, there is no recourse that is available to the workers.

The family finally moves on in search of better working conditions, and finally see a sign that is advertising for cotton pickers. They are directed to a line of empty boxcars that serve as sleeping quarters for the pickers, and the cars, "twelve of them, stood end to end on a little flat beside the stream. There was two rows of six each, the wheels removed" (409). The train cars are lined up like a pair of dice that end up as double-sixes—"boxcars" as the roll is called in craps parlance—which is a very difficult bet to win in a dice game.¹²

At the end of the novel, the Joads are forced out of the boxcar shelter by flooding rains, and they seek shelter in an abandoned barn. The barn itself may be read as a metaphor for the failure of individual farmers who tried to compete with the corporations that were the massive land holding companies. Its decrepit state reflects the Joads' own status, as the remaining family members cling to their last collective shred of hope that the future will hold something for them

¹² The odds of rolling a perfect double-six is one-in-thirty-six, the same as rolling any other exact combination of dice. However, in the case of boxcars, the casino payout is only 30:1, meaning the house only pays out \$30 for each \$1 that a gambler bets. The house edge, as a result, is 13.89%, which equates to a huge profit for the casino. Steinbeck is highlighting the fact that the Joads are betting with their lives, and the odds are stacked very steeply against them.

other than endless suffering. The scene recalls an earlier intercalary chapter, in which Steinbeck wrote, “There is a warmth of life in the barn, and the head and smell of life. But when the motor of a tractor stops, it is as dead as the ore it came from. The heat goes out of like the living heat that leaves a corpse” (115). This barn is like the abandoned barns the migrants left behind in Oklahoma. It is dead, outdated, no longer of any use to society. And those inside it are, it may be presumed, on the verge of a similar fate themselves.

Rosasharon, having given birth to a dead baby, uses her breast milk to feed a starving man on the brink of death that the family encounters inside the barn. Many critics have read the ending as a positive note in an otherwise nihilistic novel. Focusing on her “mysterious” smile that ends the book, these critics argue that her expression is a sign of hope for the future. However, all her feeding the man does is serve to keep him alive for a short period. While perhaps an act that demonstrates a sort of inherent kindness in human beings, the result is akin to Thomas Malthus’s contention that feeding a man who cannot support himself is nothing more than prolonging his misery and postponing his inevitable starvation.

The Joads have nothing at the end of the novel, and no prospect of anything resembling hope for a better future. The reason that she smiles “mysteriously” is because she is finally cognizant of the fact that she and her family have been fully absorbed into the culture that destroyed their lives in Oklahoma. She knows that there is no prospect for a positive future; hoping that a dying man will somehow recover sufficient strength to go back to a normal life by ingesting breast milk is absurd. Instead, her charitable action will only serve as a brief respite from death. Steinbeck’s word choice is explicit here; she is not smiling broadly or happily, or even simply smiling. She is smiling “mysteriously.” But to my mind, there is no mystery. She knows that the man is going to die, and she has made peace with that fact at that moment. What’s

more, she has made peace with the fact that there is no hope for her or her family, because they have been defeated by the capitalist machine, and resisting the machine's power is useless. It is only through assimilation and acceptance that we can find anything resembling inner peace and happiness. As Steinbeck writes, "We can't start again. The bitterness we sold to the junk man—he got it all right, but we have it still" (87). There is no reset button on life, and the Joads have no option but to go forward. And going forward means assimilating fully into the world that tried to kill them, and which may kill them all yet.

This reading of the ending recalls the words of Chinua Achebe cited at the beginning of this essay. If we read Steinbeck's work as condemning the American commercial culture fostered by advertising because of the manipulative and exploitative power contained within it, we can easily see ourselves in the same position as the Joads. We are, after all, constantly bombarded by advertisements from a variety of media and a variety of origins in a nearly incessant flood of promises and calls-to-action. We might take solace in the fact that, as we are more experienced with modern technologies and aware of advertisers' ploys, we're somewhat immune to the same forces that exploited the simple-minded Joad family. But as William Leach writes, we are all susceptible to capitalism's draw:

By the end of the [19th] century, however, commercial capitalism had latched on to the cult of the new, fully identified with it, and taken it over. [...] Market capitalism *was* hostile; no immigrant culture—and, to a considerable degree, no religious tradition—had the power to resist it, as non can in our own time. Any group that has come to this country had had to learn to accept and to adjust this elemental feature of American capitalist culture (*Desire* 5).

We are all the Joads. We might not be tenant farmers living in Oklahoma, and we might not be facing eviction from our homes and the prospect of driving a dilapidated vehicle cross-country only to face further exploitation, but we are just like them on another level. Like the Joads, we,

too, fall prey to advertisers' exploitation of our human desires. Like the Joads, we are all imprisoned by capitalism and its commercial culture.

The Day of the Locust

In 1923, as the American movie industry was growing rapidly, a new proposed subdivision was planned for Mount Lee, a peak in the Santa Monica Mountains overlooking Los Angeles, California. Because of its proximity to the newly-developed Hollywood region, the subdivision would be called Hollywoodland, and a sign that advertised the new residential area was constructed on the side of Mount Lee. It was a simple sign by most advertising standards, consisting of 45-foot-tall, all-white capital letters that spelled out the name of the subdivision. Over time, however, the letters began to deteriorate and the sign became more of an eyesore than an enticement. In 1943, the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce took over the upkeep of the sign, and that body received authorization to remove the last four letters. The result was the now-iconic Hollywood sign that serves as one of the most recognizable attractions in the world, an attraction that came into existence initially as an advertisement.

The history of the iconic sign and its link to commercial capitalism is a sort of synecdoche for the entirety of the area that the sign represents. By the 1920s in Hollywood, "the kind of moral control exerted by the old settlers over a comparatively small area was giving way to the big-town awareness of businessmen and bankers that the movies meant money" (Braudy 50). Punctuating this idea of the growing sense of Hollywood as a commercialized center of American capitalism, the larger city of Los Angeles began to market itself to the rest of the country as "the best advertised city in the world" (qtd. in Braudy 52). James Gregory writes of the city, "Los Angeles belonged to a different era, the age of automobiles, stucco, and film. The

prototype sunbelt city, it answered San Francisco's historicism with unreflective modernism. Sprawling, unconventional, it knew little of charm or tradition" (Gregory 36). Los Angeles wasn't worried about selling itself as a beacon of American history and culture; rather, it was more interested in promoting itself as the new land of opportunity. As Leo Braudy says of the 1920s in the area, "It was an era when advertising itself was being consolidated into an important American industry, and the merchandising skills developed during the early celebration of southern California and Los Angeles as the heartland of health and self-enhancement were a premium product" (52). People were being drawn to the area by more than just the glitter of show business. It was as if there were a California Dream within the American Dream. Los Angeles became a destination for those seeking to make their own selves and their own lives better. Los Angeles—especially Hollywood—became something of a commodity itself, a commodity that was advertised as being able to cure a variety of personal and professional ills. And as the population statistics testify, consumers of this discourse arrived in droves.

It is important to remember, however, that viewers only saw what the filmmakers wanted them to see. Roland Barthes touches on this ability of cameras to provide a specific, narrow, and oftentimes distorted view of reality. He writes in *Camera Lucida*,

The Photograph is an extended, loaded evidence—as if it caricatured not the figure of what it represents (quite the converse) but its very existence. [...] The Photograph then becomes a bizarre *medium*, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest *shared* hallucination (on the one hand "it is not there," on the other "but it has indeed been"): a mad image, chafed by reality (115, italics in original).

In describing a photographed image as something akin to a hallucination, Barthes suggests that we cannot necessarily trust what we see when an image is presented to us through the medium of a photographic lens such as the ones used in filmmaking. Because we are seeing a

perceived reality, that reality is always inherently a site of contested belief, and perhaps nowhere is that contested reality more overt than in what we see in films. The conflict between the real and the perceived as manifested in films is a perfect metaphor for Hollywood as a whole, as Hollywood is known for perpetuating a seemingly endless supply of binary dichotomies. Again turning to the writing of John Springer, we can see the types of conflicted realities that converge with one another in this land of dreams:

Hollywood has been a site, both real and symbolic, for the collision of contradictory energies and agendas: commerce and art, work and leisure, success and failure, sex and death. Hollywood has long possessed a Janus-faced identity as both the “promised land” and the “wasteland,” as an idyllic community of luxurious homes, swimming pools, and verdant lawns yet also the epicenter of cultural crisis and moral disintegration; as a town that kindles dreams of opportunity, wealth, and fame yet most often produces disappointment, disillusionment, and despair (3).

Hollywood has, from its earliest days as the nexus of motion picture fame, been the site of nearly impossible personal success through the creation of movie stars. However, that reputation has lured countless hopefuls to the area, men and women in search of that elusive fame. But, as Springer points out, the reality is that while Hollywood is a factory of dreams for the lucky few, it is a spirit-crushing wellspring of destroyed dreams.

Embedded within the culture of Hollywood was the conspicuous consumption that accompanied the success experienced by those who had realized their dreams. The area was surrounded by lavish luxury, the indicators of wealth and success that Thorstein Veblen cataloged. Those indicators are also regarded as manifestations of the American Dream, a link that American author Nathaniel West learned upon his arrival in Hollywood. According to Springer, “West [...] discovered in Hollywood a key to his ongoing interest in the mass dreams and collective fantasies of the American psyche” (157). It was such interest in the mass dreams and collective fantasies of the American psyche—fantasies that were rooted in so many

individuals' collective devotion to the American Dream and the quest for stardom and financial success—that became the center of West's critique in his novel about Hollywood excess, *The Day of the Locust*, published in 1939.

Scholar K. Edington argues that *The Day of the Locust* tells a story in which “the American dream has spun out of control, and images of apocalyptic vision suggest that the moral disarray of Hollywood anticipates the decline and fall of American society” (67). It is the American sentiment of attaching one's identity to one's career, Edington argues, that fosters this cultural destruction he sees in the novel. John Springer argues much the same thing, suggesting that Hollywood is representative of – both in terms of cultural history in the United States and in literary metaphor – the quest for an impossible reality. Diane Long Hoeveler argues that this quest for materialism is part of the mechanized system fostered by the capitalist system, but that the characters in West's novel strive to retain their humanist features, too. The result is that they are, she argues, schizophrenic, split between two different manifestations of their own existence (Hoeveler 412).

The novel's protagonist, Tod Hackett, has recently graduated from Yale with a degree in fine arts and he has come to Hollywood in search of inspiration for a specific painting that he wants to create, one that he has already titled “The Burning of Los Angeles.” The painting, as it is described in its embryonic idea form, “was going to show the city burning at high noon, so that the flames would have to compete with the desert sun and thereby appear less fearful, more like bright flags flying from roofs and windows than a terrible holocaust” (80). The complete destruction of Hollywood will be more of a carnivalesque celebration than an ultimate destruction in Tod's work.

From his perspective outside of the ring of those aspiring (and failing) actors and other Hollywood fame-seekers that populate the novel's cast, Tod is able to comment on the devotion to conspicuous consumption and projected images that are so inherently linked to the quest for material success. As John Springer writes of Nathaniel West's fiction, "His works persistently expose the tissue of lies and false expectations, fostered by mass culture, that infect his characters' lives. [...] It is the discrepancy between peoples' lives and their threadbare and fragmentary collective dreams that is the source of the bitterness and violence in all of West's novels" (158). West's characters, like every individual living in a capitalist system, are exposed to a barrage of discourse, so much of which is predicated on impossible promises. These promises, however, cultivate and nourish the dreams of those individuals who, despite their best efforts, are unable to achieve them. As a result, they are left disillusioned and bitter.

Concurrent with the rise of Hollywood's prestige and status as the place where dreams come true was the growth of the commercial culture that were the end-goal of so many of those dreams. Over the course of time, Hollywood became the epicenter of American fantasy, especially during the Great Depression. When so many Americans were living what amounted to subsistence-level life, they could still escape to those dreams of life that they saw portrayed in movies by successful stars who lived blissfully ignorant of the hardships wrought by the Depression. The classic "Hollywood ending"—the cinematic trope in which the end of the movie results in protagonists receiving their positive results and antagonists their negative results and everyone who deserves to do so lives happily ever after—was something that the vast majority of Americans could only hope for in their lives at the time. But the general perception of those Americans was that the American Dream was still a viable reality in Hollywood. And Nathaniel West sought to eradicate those beliefs in his fiction, as John Springer contends:

For West, Hollywood became the symbol of a mass culture that functioned both as a source of collective fantasy and an instrument of deception and control. All his works explored how human hopes and aspirations, the narrative and aesthetic formulas through which we impose a semblance of meaning on the contingencies of experience, were increasingly derived from a mass culture that offered mere escape and illusion—the false optimism of the *happy ending*” (158, italics in original).

Springer suggests that the collective belief in the potential for realizing some manifestation of the American Dream—and the collective refusal to give up on that dream—were the inevitable by-products of the commercial culture that was the engine that powered the Hollywood image. In that sense, Hollywood itself in *Day of the Locust* served as a manifestation of the controlling discourse that told Americans what they needed to do in order to be happy, and in so doing served as another metaphorical guard serving in the capitalist Panopticon.

But the participation of those who are trapped within the system is involuntary. They are born in to the system and, as a result of their own human nature, they have to cling to some sort of belief that there is a potential for that Hollywood ending. The reality of capitalism was manifested in their everyday surroundings. Greed and the capitalist quest for more had led the country into the Great Depression; the reality was anything but happy. In order to continue their daily lives, people had to believe in the promise of the future, even if they knew on some level that that promise was unattainable. James Light suggests much the same when he writes “The dominance of the dream is clear. In each of his novels West saw the need of man for a dream, but even more he saw the nightmare results of that need” (Light 210). People needed a dream to strive for, even if the inevitable result of that striving were something akin to a nightmare. In *The Day of the Locust*, West believed that the end result of striving for an impossible fantasy was frustration, which inevitably led to violence and ultimate destruction.

From the opening page of the novel, we are thrust into a world of fantasy mixed with disillusionment. Tod Hacket, who is working as a scene painter for a Hollywood studio, watching outside his office as “An army of cavalry and foot was passing. It moved like a mob; its lines broken, as though fleeing from some terrible defeat” (5). This opening passage is important on multiple levels. For one, what is described as a cavalry is actually a group of extras from a movie on the Battle of Waterloo, a point that is emphasized when a crew member interjects himself into the scene screaming that they are supposed to be at Stage Nine (6). This surrealist juxtaposition creates an immediate tension between the fantasy world of the movies and the reality of life in the present moment, suggesting that the fantasy cannot possibly stand up to the scrutiny of reality, because the reality exposes the fantasy as nothing more than an impossible dream.

The fact that the cavalry is described as “fleeing from some terrible defeat” points to the fact that these actors are trying to escape. Specifically, we can read this as the idea that those people working in the lowest rungs of the film industry in Hollywood have come there as a result of their running away from the Depression in hopes of finding fame. However, they have learned that even in Hollywood, reality has a way of creeping in and attaching itself to one’s existence, and they are attempting to flee that new-found reality, too. These extras represent a middle-ground between the success stories of Hollywood and the so-called “cheated” population that Tod encounters outside his office soon after seeing the cavalry pass by.

When he leaves his office, Tod is confronted by the fact that it seems that everyone in Hollywood is playing a part, dressing in costumes that are intended to present a particular image that has little or nothing to do with their actual reality. He details people outside on the street, many of whom

wore sports clothes that were not really sports clothes. Their sweaters, knickers, slacks, blue flannel jackets with brass buttons were fancy dress. The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneaks with a bandana around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court (7).

Just like the extras dressed up as cavalry soldiers, these everyday people on the streets of Hollywood are also playing a role, but theirs is a part within the larger fabricated social tapestry that is the manifestation of the American Dream. They are engaging in conspicuous consumption in order to portray a particular image; they have been indoctrinated by the discourse into believing that possessions—in this case, clothing—will imbue them with a particular mantle that suggests an elevated social status.

Juxtaposed with these well-dressed individuals are those who have not realized the dreams they sought in Hollywood. They have accepted the fact that life under capitalism is a never-ending futile quest for more possessions, and they look at those who appear to have somehow overcome the obstacles and succeeded in the system with disdain and contempt: “Their clothing was somber and badly cut, bought from mail-order houses. While the others moved rapidly, darting into stores and cocktail bars, they loitered on the corners or stood with their backs to the shop windows and stared at everyone who passed. When their stare was returned, their eyes fills with hatred” (7). James Light suggests that these observers represent more than just those disillusioned by the unrealized dreams of failed Hollywood actors. Rather, he suggests that they are representative of dreamers throughout America:

These are the cheated whose small dreams have betrayed them and who have come to Hollywood to die. They stare with hatred at the Hollywood scene. Like the cheated everywhere, they can never be emotionally satisfied, not by movies, radio, even violence. Always, however, they must search for an emotional life [...]. It is to entertain such as these that Hollywood purveys a world of exaggerated slapstick, lust, and violence. Hollywood does this not because it

wants to, but because it is what the cheated—the innumerable barbers in Peoria—want (Light 210).

Light here suggests that those in control of image-creation in Hollywood—those who create and disseminate the discourse—see it as a duty to the average American citizen to perpetuate the fantasy because those American citizens want (and perhaps even *need*) those fantasies in their lives. But the result on the streets of Hollywood is the creation of a population that resents the entire concept, because they believe that they have somehow been cheated out of their own successes.

Rita Barnard says of this group, “On the streets of Hollywood, wishes are conscious, concrete, and even profitable, but people are still passive, frustrated ‘starers,’ hating those who seem to live that “bona-fide life”” (331). In short, then, the two groups are the (perceived) haves and the (real) have-nots; the former is populated by poseurs playing a role, while the latter is populated by spectators who see the fantasy as a reality that others have and they do not. In regard to this idea, it is interesting to note that the original working title of the novel as ascribed to it by West was *The Cheated*, suggesting that the focus of the story was on those who had become disillusioned by their impossible quest to achieve the American Dream.

On his walk up the canyon to his home that evening, Tod notices the houses that dot the hillsides. They run the gamut in terms of geographic styles from Mexican to Samoan to Swiss, but they all have in common the fact that they are built from the same materials: “Steel, stone and brick curb a builder’s fancy a little, forcing him to distribute his stresses and weights and to keep his corners plumb, but plaster and paper know no law, not even that of gravity” (8). The reality of these garish homes that are so overtly out of place is that they aren’t built to last. Rather, they’re built to serve as temporary showpieces, symbols of the material excess that defines commercial capitalism. They are, like the set pieces on the movie sets, built to project an

image, a fantasy life that is itself a by-product of the desire to project a particular image to others as dictated by the commercial culture and its controlling discourse.

Tod muses while looking at a pair of other absurdly designed houses, “It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous” (8). There is a need for beauty and romance, but that need is grounded in the human instinct to flaunt possessions, to participate in the Veblenian display of conspicuous consumption. In this case, however, those possessions are as ephemeral and fake as the movie sets that create the fantastical cinematic worlds. The quest for the American Dream is, in this case, resulting in possessions that can’t last and only serve as a temporary realization of that dream. The American Dream is, then, built upon a hollow foundation. As Springer suggests, West’s vision of American commercial culture “implies an erosion, an undermining of the capacity to make any meaningful distinction between the real and the unreal—Hollywood as *simulacrum*” (160, italics in original). This simulacrum is the foundation for the Hollywood commercial culture and, as such, serves as a component of the controlling discourse within the novel. The simulacrum is a form of advertising that reflects that fact that one of Hollywood’s most ubiquitous symbols—the Hollywood sign—was itself a piece of advertising discourse in its original inception.

Jean Baudrillard posits that simulacrum is a form of “a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). In Baudrillard’s theory simulacra exist not as simulation, but rather as a sort of pseudo-simulation. In the case of the former, a simulation’s existence requires a model upon which it is based. Subsequently, that simulation becomes a new version of reality, a sort of simulated reality, which is a simulacrum. In the case of simulacra, however, Baudrillard argues that they come into existence without serving the role of simulation.

They exist as a parallel reality, but as a reality nevertheless. In Baudrillard's words, they compose a hyperreality. Baudrillard explains that a simulacrum "is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 2).

Baudrillard's ideas about the hyper-reality of a simulacrum may be seen in the cast of Hollywood characters that populate Tod's world. Like the town they inhabit, they themselves are individually a sort of simulation of reality that has itself become a new kind of reality. The first of these characters to whom we are introduced is Abe Kusich, a dwarf who makes his living as a gambler and low-level hustler. Abe compensates for his small stature with his oversized temper, which he quick to display at the first sign of anything resembling disrespect. And he does not allow his height to interfere with his embracing of commercial excess, as Tod points out to him during his first encounter with Abe. He tells us that Abe seems to be quite stylish, as he says, "That year Tyrolean hats were being worn a great deal along Hollywood Boulevard and the dwarf's was a fine specimen" (12).

Abe is also not shy about flaunting what he sees as his immense personal wealth, as he at one point "took out a thick billfold and shook it at Tod" (12). Abe commodifies everything—from the "four-bit broads" that he claims he shouldn't be "fooling with" to the fact that he can have an ex-lover injured "for twenty bucks" (12) and even to the forty-dollar abortion and ten-dollar gift he provides for a woman (14). All of this financial-related showmanship may be explained by the fact that he gambles and is therefore constantly thinking about money, but it also points to the fact that the commercial culture of capitalism does not discriminate based on social perceptions of individuals. Whereas Tod initially mistakes Abe for "a pile of soiled laundry lying in front of the door across the hall from his own" (10)—presumably because Abe

is so small and, the suggestion is, inconsequential—the fact is that Abe is as devoted to and imprisoned by the capitalist system as any full-sized American. His diminutive stature may banish him to the margins of society, but he is still welcome in the capitalist Panopticon.

The next character we meet is Claude Estee, a screenwriter who represents commercial success in Hollywood, whom we meet via a scene at his home where he is hosting a party to which Tod has been invited. Claude is like Abe in that he is focused on others' perception of him, and he wants to ensure that that perception is one of wealth and success. And like so many others in Hollywood, Claude is also a simulacrum, a representation of reality that has morphed into a new version of reality. In his everyday speech, he plays the role of Southern Plantation Owner: He is described as one who “teetered back and forth on his heels like a Civil War colonel” (17) and he says to a Chinese servant who works for him, “Here, you black rascal! A mint julep!” (18). The non-black Asian returns, we are told, with a Scotch and soda, suggesting that the drink order and the actual drink had nothing to do with one another; the Scotch and soda was prearranged, while the mint julep order was part of the act. This act extends to the home in which Estee lives, “a big house that was an exact reproduction of the old Dupuy mansion near Biloxi, Mississippi” (17).

Estee is trapped at the higher end of the socio-economic spectrum, but imprisoned nonetheless. He plays the part of one who was, at a certain point in history, deemed to be the master of all that he saw. A wealthy slave-owning Southerner was a man who typically held in his hands the fate of other men, men whom he owned as property. And that property was, like his lavish home, clothes, and other possessions, yet another outward display of his wealth and success. Claude Estee, however, is a simulacrum of that time, a sanitized and diluted version of the original who lives in a home that, we may presume, was built with the same materials as the

other out-of-place houses Tod cataloged for our benefit at the beginning of the novel. Estee—together with his various possessions—is a simulation of the original, and it costs him an immense amount of money to perpetuate that role.

One of those possessions that seems completely out of place in the glamorous world that Estee is trying to create is the rubber model of a dead horse that his wife has planted at the bottom of their pool: “The thing was a dead horse, or, rather, a life-size, realistic reproduction of one. Its legs stuck up stiff and straight and it had an enormous, distended belly. Its hammerhead lay twisted to one side and from its mouth, which was set in an agonized grin, hung a heavy, black tongue” (20). Even death is simulated in Hollywood, or so it seems, and a simulated corpse is something to be appreciated for its cost, as Joan Schwartzen explains: “It’s rubber, of course. It cost lots of money. [...] Think how happy the Estees must feel, showing it to people and listening to their merriment and their oh’s and ah’s of unconfined delight” (20). Regardless of how distasteful or grotesque the display, anything expensive is worthy of admiration by others in this world. The Estees—and, judging by her advocating for the entertainment value of the fake horse corpse, Joan—are so totally controlled by the commercial discourse that they will buy something so absurd and so macabre as a rubber replica of a dead horse to serve as a decorative accessory, and rely on the cost of that accessory to elicit appreciation from their guests. The message here is that the power of the discourse is such that it can convince people with enough money to buy essentially anything, so long as it serves a purpose of exhibiting a consumer’s ability to pay. Taste becomes a secondary (or even tertiary) consideration to price in this environment of extreme conspicuous consumption.

This scene with the rubber horse is an example of what Springer means when he writes that “West portrayed the tortured inner lives of characters dominated by mass culture, exploring

the collective dreams and fantasies of a society on the brink of collapse and exposing the monstrous contradictions and violent impulses at the core of American life” (158). The Estees and those like them in Hollywood are living a tortured existence, as they work tirelessly to impress each other by spending increasingly large sums of money and acquiring increasingly bizarre commodities and putting on increasingly grandiose displays of some sort of affected persona in order to convince each other that they are truly living the American Dream. The reality behind that façade is that none of them are happy and none of them are living up to the standards that are set by their peers, peers that they all believe are *actually* living out the fantasy those who see them want to live. In the case of Claude, his Southern Gentleman character isn’t spectacular enough to cover up Tod’s description for us of the real man, who is “a dried-up little man with the rubbed features and stooped shoulders of a postal clerk” (17-18). The role that Claude has chosen to play in order to serve as a camouflage against that reality is similar to the disguises worn by those around him. They are all playing roles in order to impress each other, all the while not realizing that none of them are living genuine lives. They are all simulacra living in the larger simulacrum of Hollywood, and their quest to perpetuate this false reality is the chain that keeps them trapped, as they are forced to continually spend increasing amounts of money in order to maintain the image that perpetuates the hyperreality of the simulacra.

Two of the most important characters in Tod’s life are his unrequited love interest Faye Greener and her father Harry Greener. The former, we are told early on, “refused his friendship, or, rather, insisted on keeping it impersonal. She had had told him why. He had nothing to offer her, neither money nor looks, and she could only love a handsome man and would only let a wealthy man love her” (16). Faye’s way of looking at an interpersonal relationship is much the same as that of Undine Spragg did in *The Custom of the Country*: Faye sees a relationship as a

way of enriching herself. Love in Hollywood, then, is a commodity just like anything else; love for Faye exists in the same realm as a rubber reproduction of a dead horse.

Harry is a periodic comedic actor who, despite his best efforts, is “a complete failure” (28). His one ascent to the lofty perch of fame came during a performance as a clown in a *comedia del’ arte* performance in Brooklyn as part of a traveling troupe, a performance that received critical praise from a local theater reviewer. Harry has in his possession, we are told, “more than a dozen copies of this article” (30), and he insists on showing it to Tod. He discovered upon his arrival in Hollywood that there was “little demand for his talents, however. As he himself put it, he ‘stank from hunger.’ To supplement his meager income from the studios, he peddled silver polish which he made in the bathroom of his apartment out of chalk, soap and yellow axle grease” (30). He markets this mixture as Miracle Solvent, peddling it door-to-door with a sales pitch that is reminiscent of salesmen hawking patent medicines: “‘Tis a box of Miracle Solvent, the modern polish par excellence, the polish without peer or parallel, used by all the movie stars. [...] The ordinary price, the retail price, is fifty cents, but you can have it for the extraordinary price of a quarter, the wholesale price, the price I pay at the factory” (45-46).

In this pair of descriptions, we see both the power of capitalism to trap and the power of discourse to influence thinking. In regard to capitalism’s power, we see the opposite end of the class spectrum that was present in the description of Claude Estee, as Harry is described as being on the brink of starvation because of his inability to find sufficiently lucrative work. Because he can’t get money through traditional channels, Harry is forced to sell his fraudulent “Miracle Solvent” that he makes in his bathroom, an example of John Springer’s contention that West “specialized in an ironic fiction constructed equally upon a cynical, black-comic vision of the world and a profoundly sympathetic understanding of the desperation and pain at the center of

modern existence” (158). Harry doesn’t seem to *want* to be forced to create and sell the silver polish equivalent of patent medicines, but his circumstances force him to do so. And because he has some experience as an actor, he is able to verbalize the advertising discourse to his potential customers, thereby working to influence their beliefs. His suggestion that there is a price he pays “at the factory” is ludicrous, given that he makes it himself in his own bathroom. But his dedication to delivering the sales pitch—the controlling discourse—is such that one is tempted to believe that he actually does go to a factory to purchase it prior to selling it door-to-door. Harry’s delivery works perfectly, and the customer ends up buying two cans of Harry’s Miracle Solvent. The whole scene points to the fact that consumerism and its accompanying discourse are present in every level of American society, from the most advanced to the most rudimentary. But regardless of social level, the power of the discourse to control consumer behavior and to keep consumers imprisoned within the capitalist Panopticon is omnipresent.

Harry’s seventeen-year-old daughter Faye has been raised from her infancy in the world of show business, and she leverages her youth and beauty to get what she wants. However, her youth and beauty are unable to offset her lack of actual acting talent, and as a result she never achieves the stardom that she so earnestly desires. In her failure to achieve stardom, Faye, according to John Springer, “comes to represent the empty promises and hollow fantasies of the mass culture offered by the movies” (163). Her professional aspirations, however, carry over to her own life, as she is constantly acting a role in this land of make-believe, just like the other characters who live in Tod’s world. In a passage that is ironic because of its lack of self-awareness on Faye’s part, she explains to Tod that she has “some swell ideas for pictures” and all Tod has to do “is write them up and then we’ll sell them to the studios” (64). The lack of self-awareness—the fact that she doesn’t seem to realize that she is proposing writing screenplays

that are themselves vapid and mass-produced—points to her inability to realize that the world she lives in and the way she navigates that world are equally shallow and fleeting. One day, her looks will fade and she will be forced to make her way through life without the benefit of being attractive to men. In the same way, her idea of selling movie scripts rests on a foundation of short attention spans and fantasy masquerading as reality.

Tod, for his part, realizes that this is all just an act, as we are told, “He realized as she went on that she was manufacturing another dream to add to her already very thick pack” (64). This level of awareness suggests that Tod is outside this group of Hollywood hopefuls, that he is able to comment on their behaviors as a neutral observer who is not himself enmeshed within their fantasy world. He understands that they have created for themselves a simulacrum of reality here in Hollywood, and that as long as they are all committed to playing the roles that they have assigned themselves within that simulacrum, the hyperreality that exists around them will continue. There is a tacit understanding among all of those involved in this artificial reality that there will be no breaking of the cinematic “fourth wall” separating the actors from the audience. As John Springer points out, “In Hollywood, the business of illusion-making is not confined by the factory walls of the studios; it spills out into ‘real’ life, where it is taken up as masquerade and façade” (160). For Faye, like so many others, that illusion-making is, on one level, also a voluntary acceptance of the chains that bind her in the capitalist prison, as she attempts to exchange her dreams for the money she needs in order to sustain life.

While Tod anxiously pursues a sexual relationship with Faye—a pursuit destined to end in futility—Homer Simpson, a mild-mannered accountant who has moved to California on advice from his doctor, serves as something of a foil to that sexual pursuit. Homer was working in a hotel in Waynesville, Iowa, where he had been employed for twenty years. One of his most

overtly apparent personality traits is the fact that he is trying to forget something, but “the thing he was trying so desperately to avoid kept crowding into his mind” (36). That “thing” is his own sexual impotence, a condition manifested in a failed sexual encounter with a resident of the hotel where he worked, a resident who was unable to pay her bill. When he was told to evict her, Homer engaged her in an awkward embrace as a sort of foreplay, but was apparently unable to engage in sexual intercourse with her. He left the room in a panic, and the woman paid her bill the following day and checked out, never to be seen again.

While critics have suggested that Homer is something of an anomaly in the novel because of his lack of participation within the simulacrum of Hollywood, to my mind, Homer serves as the embodiment of the typical American citizen of the day. He is a man that has worked at the same job for a long time, and he is in a position to live comfortably: “He could easily afford not to work for a while. His father had left him about six thousand dollars and during the twenty years he had kept books in the hotel, he had saved at least ten more” (40). On the one hand, he seems to be an example of the American success story, namely someone who saves money and avoids debt. Ironically, however, Homer is categorically lumped into the crowd of Hollywood transplants who have come to California to die. So while he is free from the immediate constraints of the capitalist Panopticon, the funds that enable that freedom are only used to facilitate his own death.

The final two characters of interest are Earle Shoop and Miguel, two minor characters who, despite their second-tier status, still serve to demonstrate the power of capitalism in maintaining the simulacrum of Hollywood. Earle Shoop works at a Western-themed store, where he dresses up and plays the role of an American cowboy. There is a meta-simulacrum at work here. Earle is playing a role within the simulacrum of Hollywood, and the role that he is

playing—that of the “typical” American cowboy—is itself based on nothing more than popular culture and mythology that traces its roots, in part, to the cowboy hero of Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902). Thus, the cowboy figure Earle plays is itself a simulacrum within the simulacrum of Hollywood.

Earle spends his days standing outside of a store that features a window display full of various elaborately-decorated saddles, spurs, horse bridles, and other Western accoutrements. We are told that “Earle always stood with his back to the window, his eyes fixed on a sign on the roof of a one-story building across the street that read: ‘Malted Milks Too Thick For A Straw’” (68). Earle is essentially a living advertisement, whether he is consciously aware of that fact or not. The fact that he spends his days looking at a billboard advertising a malt shop emphasizes the fact that he is just another billboard on the side of the building, spending its days looking at—and being looked at by—other billboards that are across the street from him. However, despite spending his life as an advertisement—and making money wherever and whenever he can—“Earle was always broke and whenever Tod went with them he was the one who paid” (69). He is simultaneously fueling the Panopticon and entrapped by it, and Earle is forced to rely on the benevolence of others to supplement his own income so that he can eat.

Earle’s partner in meta-simulacrum at the Western store is Miguel, a Mexican-American who dresses up as a Native American. The result is a comic triple-simulacrum: Miguel is playing the roles of both a Native American and a sidekick, a team that is an echo of the famed radio show “The Lone Ranger.” This program, first launched in 1933, told the story of a member of the famed Texas Rangers who was the sole survivor of a band of six Rangers who were involved in a shoot-out with a group of outlaws. The Ranger is found alive in the desert by a Native American named Tonto, who nurses the Ranger back to health, and the two become inseparable

partners fighting crime in the American West. These two simulacra—the Mexican-playing-Native-American and the idea of the cowboy and his sidekick—are embedded within the larger simulacra of Hollywood. It is as if the pair are working to reinforce a particular image that people want to see of Hollywood. Rita Barnard likens the Hollywood described by West as one that illustrates “the merging of the real with the image, the mock-up, and the seedy façade” (332). She goes on to point out that “it is at the moment when even dreams become a business that all the commonsense categories [...] are absorbed and erased in the totality of the spectacle: illusion as reality, reality as illusion” (Barnard 332). In the Hollywood simulacrum, then, peoples’ dreams and even their beliefs in fantasies like the American cowboy myth become commodities, and in that transformation the reality and the illusion become fused into a single entity.

The pair live in Homer Simpson’s garage together with Miguel’s fighting cocks, which Homer finds disgusting. However, he can’t bring himself to evict Earle and Miguel—or the fighting cocks, for that matter—because, as he tells Tod, “They’re broke and they have no place to go” (118). The pair of meta-simulacra are imprisoned to the point that they can’t even afford to pay for a place to live and must rely on a stranger in order to have a roof over their heads. For his part, Homer is working to circumvent the power of the Panopticon by giving away space in his own garage for the two to live, despite the fact that the associated activities—specifically cockfighting—disgust him.

Most of these characters are Hollywood outsiders who long to be on the inside in order to realize their dreams of fame and fortune. Their presence demonstrates that the capitalist Panopticon is present even in some modified version of a standard reality. The reality of the prison persists even in the simulacra manifested in phenomena like the culture of make-believe

that dominates Hollywood. John Springer suggests that West used these various characters to examine “the fate of those who, throughout the 1930s, were drawn by the golden promises of life on the ‘fortunate coast’ of southern California, and ended up in Hollywood hoping to find some meaning to life in the fleeting glimpse of a film star entering an elegant restaurant or the procession of celebrities at a movie premiere” (161). West wanted to illustrate the reality of the simulacrum that was—and, in many instances, continues to be—Hollywood, a simulacrum that supported the Panopticon of capitalism and the commercial culture that was manifested in the person of those celebrities who had achieved their fortunes and were using that money to consume as conspicuously as possible.

The explosion that Springer references materializes in the novel’s final pages with the riot that erupts while a crowd awaits the arrival of various movie stars outside Kahn’s Persian Palace Theatre. The ostensible purpose of the gathering is the premiere of a new movie, but it serves to illustrate the injection of reality into the simulacrum. A huge electric sign that is visible from a block away from the theater declares in all capital letters, “MR. KAHN A PLEASURE DOME DECREED” (154). The advertising sign, together with the prospect of proximity to celebrities, serves to draw an immense crowd of spectators to the area. The size of the crowd is potentially problematic, because of the mob mentality that could take over as those assembled try to get autographs or other remembrances of the event:

The police force would have to be doubled when the stars started to arrive. At the sight of their heroes and heroines, the crowd would turn demoniac. Some little gesture, either too pleasing or too offensive, would start it moving and then nothing but machine guns would stop it. Individually the purpose of its members might simply be to get a souvenir, but collectively it would grab and rend (155).

Tod enters into this simmering powder keg, and he immediately notices that the crowd of spectators is “made up of the lower middle classes” (156). In another sense, this is Marx’s

proletariat that has come to see and to get close to the bourgeoisie celebrities whose lifestyles they so desperately want to emulate. They will soon engage in a Marxist-inspired micro-revolution, but it will be snuffed out by the simulacrum of Hollywood.

Before the riot begins in earnest, however, Tod has a moment of clarity when he is able to see the assembled members of the proletariat for who they really are and how they got to California. West writes, “All their lives they had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor, behind desks and counters, in the fields and at tedious machines of all sorts, saving their pennies and dreaming of the leisure that would be theirs when they had enough. Finally that day came. [...] Where else should they go but California, the land of sunshine and oranges?” (157). The fantasy of California life is reminiscent of that myth perpetuated by the Joad family and others like them in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Ironically, however, in West’s version of that story, the migrants who arrive in California find the fantasy they were searching for, but eventually “get tired of oranges, even of avocado pears and passion fruit” (157). When these men and women who had labored their entire lives to reach the Promised Land of California, the reality could not match the fantasy that they had held for so long.

As a result of their disillusionment, the new arrivals in California come to question everything they’ve worked for all of their lives, and eventually they come to realize that they’ve been taken advantage of by the system: “Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they’ve been tricked and burn with resentment. [...] They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing” (157-158). This feeling of having “slaved and saved for nothing” is perhaps most evident at this moment in the novel in the person of Homer Simpson, whose passions burst over in a flood of violence directed at Adore Loomis. Adore throws a stone at Homer, hitting his face, and Homer chases after the child: “The boy turned to

flee, but tripped and fell. Before he could scramble away, Homer landed on his back with both feet, then jumped again” (161). Homer’s killing of Adore mirrors the violence of the mob around them, which Tod realizes is the painting he has been working out in his mind:

As he stood on his good leg, clinging desperately to the iron rail, he could see all the rough charcoal strokes with which he had blocked it out on the big canvas. Across the top, parallel with the frame, he had drawn the burning city, a great bonfire of architectural styles, ranging from Egyptian to Cape Cod colonial. Through the center, winding from left to right, was a long hill street and down it, spilling into the middle foreground, came the mob carrying the baseball bats and torches (165-166).

As the novel ends, a police officer offers to give Tod a ride home in order to let him safely escape the riot, and Tod gives the officer Claude Estee’s address. It is the ultimate surrender by Tod to capitalism’s power. Rather than go back to his own apartment, he chooses instead to go to the home of the one character who is most closely associated with material wealth and acquisition. The suggestion, to my mind, is that the riot will accomplish nothing. Marx’s proletarian revolt will not overthrow the system, and we are destined to return to capitalism’s prison in the end. The last image of Tod we have is of him in the back of a police car, imitating the sound of a siren, yelling as loudly as he can (167). He has completely surrendered at this point to the Panopticon’s power; there is nothing he can do save himself, so he gives himself over to its power. His scream—an imitation of the very sound that serves as the beacon of a vehicle that typically transports those who are physically imprisoned by handcuffs—suggests an assimilation to the power that surrounds him and an acceptance of that power’s control over his existence.

The title of the novel is a direct reference to the Biblical book of Exodus, in which God is said to have sent a vast swarm of locusts to destroy crops. The Egyptians enslaved the Israelites,

and the Egyptian Pharaoh refused to humble himself before God. God sent Moses to deliver a message to the Pharaoh:

How long wilt thou refuse to humble thyself before me? let my people go, that they may serve me.

Else, if thou refuse to let my people go, behold, tomorrow will I bring the locusts into thy coast:

And they shall cover the face of the earth, that one cannot be able to see the earth: and they shall eat the residue of that which is escaped, which remaineth unto you from the hail, and shall eat every tree which groweth for you out of the field:

And they shall fill thy houses, and the houses of all thy servants, and the houses of all the Egyptians; which neither thy fathers, nor thy fathers' fathers have seen, since the day that they were upon the earth unto this day (Exodus 10:3-6, KJV).

Our future under the capitalist system is, according to Nathaniel West, a bleak one that will mirror the fate suffered by the Egyptians when God sent the vast swarms of locusts to destroy their crops. However, as the riot in the novel suggests, that future is inescapable, in West's mind. We as a society are so deeply entrenched within the capitalist system that we cannot see our way out of it. The only way to escape the Panopticon is to create some sort of hyperreality in the form of a simulacrum, but even that is only a temporary escape. No matter how hard we try to maintain a sense of freedom, the reality of our condition will infiltrate the simulacrum and destroy the illusion, even in a simulacrum as fortified against such attacks as Hollywood appears to be.

Native Son

Despite its status as the world's foremost capitalist economy, the United States has seen more than one swell of support for communism since the turn of the twentieth century. In 1919, the year after the Armistice that ended World War I, four million American workers—22% of the workforce—went on strike to protest for higher wages (Russell 223). The strike was a national phenomenon, and virtually shut down rail service throughout the country, as well as

various industries and services. The prime suspects in terms of organizing this strike were American radicals who, it was believed, had been working with Bolsheviks, a belief that served as the foundation for what came to be called the Red Scare. The irony in this line of thinking was that it defied the actual laws of capitalism, the very system these attacks on Marxist ideology sought to protect. More specifically, as Thaddeus Russell points out, striking workers were actually seeking to drive the capitalist machine, not bring it to a halt: “In other words, the so-called Red strikes were more likely an effort by millions of ordinary people to improve their material lives—to make more money so they could spend more money, and to work less so they could enjoy, among other things, the new pleasures available with that money” (224).

This assignment of blame by capitalists is the idea of singling out a scapegoat, something that René Girard posits as a by-product of social upheaval. Girard believes that scapegoats emerge from what he describes as “the eclipse of culture,” which he defines as the result of culture becoming less differentiated. He writes, “Since cultural eclipse is above all a social crisis, there is a strong tendency to explain it by social and, especially, moral causes. [...] But rather than blame themselves, people inevitably blame either society as a whole, which costs them nothing, or other people who seem particularly harmful for easily identifiable reasons. The suspects are accused of a particular category of crimes” (*Scapegoat* 14). In the case of the 1919 strikes, the quest for better wages by the strikers pointed to a sort of cultural eclipse, as it was geared towards creating a more equitable distribution of wealth through higher wages for those of the working class. Any mention of the equitable distribution of wealth carries with it a tacit attachment to socialism, which led to the invocation of the Communist Party as the scapegoat in this instance.

Despite the labeling of the Communists as scapegoats—or worse—in American thought, the Communist Party secured a foothold in the United States, a foothold that was strengthened as a result of the stock market crash of 1929. Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes point to the fact that the crash served as proof of Communism's value (59). The onset of the Great Depression pointed to the fragility of the capitalist system, and suggested that the Communist prediction of capitalism's imminent demise was coming true.

Another popular scapegoat in American culture was the African-American. Barely a generation removed from slavery, black Americans occupied, for the most part, the lowest rungs of society. They were marked as lesser human beings, which led to justifications for exploitation by whites. That exploitation also fostered in many African-Americans an appreciation for the socialist mantras of equality and working-class empowerment. As Philip Foner points out, "Common sense demanded that the exploited Negro workers join with and vote for the Socialist party, since it was the only party of the exploited workingman. Only a party that recognized them as workers, treated them as equal to whites, and sought a solution to their problems was deserving of their support" (344). The Socialists were the only political party that black Americans could trust, because they represented the only chance blacks had at attaining anything resembling equality. The Communist ideal of social and economic equality was one that resonated with several canonical American authors, including African-American author Richard Wright. Wright's attack of American capitalism and embracing of communism highlights the panoptic power of the former and the theoretical solution to that situation as manifested in the latter.

Published in 1940, Richard Wright's *Native Son* was the author's first novel; it also served as a major force in helping to highlight the struggles that plagued African Americans

throughout the country, struggles that were more often than not the result of racist attitudes on the part of whites. Wright's own Communist leanings are on display throughout the novel, as Bigger Thomas learns that what much of what he has been led to believe about "the Reds" has been the by-product of fear-mongering and xenophobia. Wright's critique of capitalism in *Native Son* illustrates how the system's panoptic powers not only cut across racial lines, but also how the chains of that prison are strengthened when the prisoner in question is a part of a socially marginalized group, such as African Americans. Wright was a vocal critic of American capitalism, especially as that system functioned to perpetuate racial inequalities in what was purported to be the Land of Opportunity.

The novel's critical reception was mixed, despite the fact that it sold more than a quarter-million copies in its first month of sales. Many readers believed that Wright portrayed Bigger Thomas—the novel's protagonist—in such a way that he reaffirmed the worst fears of whites in regard to black male behavior. Others were concerned that Wright was celebrating crime and violence, as Bigger's only true manifestation of personal agency is his attempted extortion of money from the Daltons and his murder of Bessie. However, the novel does a superb job of showing the daily struggle of a man exploited by society who is trapped in an economic system that also exploits him. Wright's message to readers is, on one level, a reflection of his own Communist leanings. Much of the scholarly output regarding *Native Son* has focused on the multi-faceted issues of race, violence, and crime (all of which can be said to fall under the umbrella of capitalistic critique) that permeate the novel. Robert Bone calls the novel "a commentary on the more prosaic plane of daily living" (144). Echoing this theme, Vincent Pérez argues that Wright's novel was a criticism of the ways in which people allow themselves to be influenced by the mass media they encounter on a daily basis. Ross Pudaloff builds on this by

suggesting that Bigger Thomas essentially plays the role to which he is cast, a role that is created and developed by the mass media that infiltrates every level of his existence.

Despite the fact that the novel is explicitly concerned with the plight of blacks in American society, Wright's novel deals with much more than simply a black/white dichotomy in the world. The novel concerns itself throughout with the relationship between those with money (the Dalton family) and those without (the Thomas family, specifically Bigger). In addition to containing many visual manifestations of the American commercial culture, the novel also tells of the need for money as both a tool of survival and as a means of acquiring material things, a thread that runs throughout the entire story. Ross Pudaloff says of the novel's incorporation of this commercial culture element, "The implications of the power Wright grants to mass culture are extraordinarily significant in both psychological and esthetic terms" (98). The psychological element is particular serves as the catalyst for the novel's main story, the entrance of Bigger Thomas into the moneyed world of the Dalton family. The theme of class-consciousness and Bigger's reaction to his own status as exile in the land of the lower class is one of the engines that drives the novel's action. It is that theme that serves to highlight the panoptic nature of the economic system.

We are first introduced to this class consciousness from the novel's first page. The scene takes place in the interior of the Thomas's one-room apartment in Chicago's so-called "Black Belt," and we soon learn that there are four individuals living in this single-room dwelling. The tiny apartment affords no privacy for any of the occupants—Bigger's mother orders the boys to look the other direction so that she and her daughter can get dressed without being seen by the boys—and it is also infested by rats. The family's stark poverty is an immediate indication of the depths of their entrapment by capitalism. However, Bigger's mother doesn't see their situation as

the result of capitalist forces, but rather as the result of her son's laziness. She tells him, "We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you" (12). The suggestion is that were Bigger somehow more like a "real" man, he'd be able to support the family. She goes on to chide him, "Even when the relief offers you a job you won't take it till they threaten to cut off your food and starve you!" (12). Bigger and his family are subsisting on the welfare dole, and a prerequisite for that benefit is working when the opportunity arises. Bigger has been offered a job through a relief agency, but he has, to this point, declined to begin working; upon being told he'd lose his benefits if he didn't start working, however, he has apparently decided to begin.

Bigger, for his part, feels a sense of responsibility for the family's struggles, and it pains him that he is unable to help them. At different times, he uses hatred, anger, and violence in combination and individually as a form of self-defense against his feelings of helplessness throughout the novel. During an early interior monologue, he explains this emotional defense system to us:

He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. [...] He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else (13-14).

Bigger's powerlessness arises not from his inability to work, but rather from the fact that he can't beat the system. Capitalism is too powerful a force for him to escape, as his current living situation suggests. Even when he is able to temporarily escape that living environment, he remains imprisoned by the system, as do his mother and siblings. Bigger's helplessness arises from that reality, but he refuses to acknowledge it in his own mind. He knows, on some level, that it is true; but the moment that he acknowledges it and allows that reality to become true in

his own mind, the overwhelming nature of that imprisonment will destroy him both emotionally and physically. In fact, that exact scenario comes to pass. His murdering of Mary Dalton is the culmination of Bigger's realization that there is no escape from the capitalist Panopticon. And that understanding—the full and complete realization that he will always be imprisoned as long as he is alive—is what brings on Bigger's ultimate destruction.

But in order to understand Bigger Thomas the character and how he comes to that point, one has to begin with an understanding of his relationship to American culture of the late 1930s. Despite what Communist supporters might have wanted to believe or even told others was the truth, the American economy was gradually recovering from the effects of the Great Depression, dispelling the beliefs that capitalism's ultimate failure was imminent. The idea of the equal rights of all to desire things as espoused by William Leach was very much alive in the culture of late-1930s America. However, that idea didn't translate in exactly that way in practice, due to the fact that American cities were segregated. In the case of Bigger Thomas, he lived in that area of Chicago known as the Black Belt, an area in the South Side of the city that was set aside for black residents, many of whom had left Southern states because of the discrimination that they had experienced there.

Overcrowding and ramshackle living conditions were the rule in the Black Belt, where as many as 75% of the city's African American residents lived. For these men, women, and children, desiring was theoretically allowed, but it didn't do any good, as there was no real hope of realizing those dreams. In the case of Bigger Thomas, as Malcolm Crowley argues, he "had been trained from the beginning to be a bad citizen. He had been taught American ideals of life, in the schools, in the magazines, in the cheap movie houses, but had been denied any means of achieving them. Everything he wanted to have or do was reserved for the whites" (113). Bigger

was fully indoctrinated as to the specifics of the American Dream, which was predicated on the potential for social mobility, a point emphasized by Janny Scott and David Leonhardt. They posit the idea that, regardless of differences in status, “as long as there is something close to equality of opportunity, the differences between them do not add up to class barriers (3). Class barriers are fluid; however, as Bigger understands from his own first-hand experience, racial barriers are concrete and immobile. As a result of that immutable nature of the relationship between different races, class borders that are in place as a result of race are definite. Being black in 1930s America translated to being shackled to the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder, with no expectation or even hope of moving up.

Bigger has an opportunity to go to work for a wealthy white family, a job arranged for him through a relief agency, but his mother is afraid he’ll refuse it. She tells him, “You know, Bigger, [...] if you don’t take that job the relief’ll cut us off. We won’t have any food” (16). Bigger is carrying on his own shoulders the very survival of his entire family. Their humanity shackles them within the capitalist Panopticon, though it falls to Bigger to keep them alive within that prison. Thus, Bigger is doubly trapped. As he contemplates his situation, he expresses the futility of the choice as it is presented to him: “Yes, he could take the job at Dalton’s and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve” (16). Bigger is faced with being chained to a job that he resents or starving to death. It is the manifestation of the options afforded within the Panopticon: Either embrace life in prison and live or resist that life and die.

Before he reports to the Dalton home for his job interview, however, Bigger meets up with his friends at the poolroom. Outside, he sees an advertisement for a man named Buckley, a political candidate for State’s Attorney. The ad features a white face, with accompanying text: “IF YOU BREAK THE LAW, YOU CAN’T WIN!” (16). The problem with this statement—a

statement that is attempting to control the thinking of those who view it—is that people living under capitalism’s purview can’t win regardless. If they break the law, they will go to jail; if they don’t, they are still in jail, albeit a metaphorical one, with no way of improving their existence.

Bigger’s reaction to the image, however, suggests that the discourse’s message is lost on him: “I bet that sonofabitch rakes off a million bucks in graft a year. Boy, if I was in his shoes for just one day I’d *never* have to worry again” (16, italics in original). According to Bigger’s understanding, the white politician, who is represented in the visage of the controlling discourse that tells others that they can’t win if they break the law, is a member of the financial class to which Bigger aspires *because* he breaks the law. It is *because* of the illegal kick-backs and graft that this politician takes that he has been able to accumulate the wealth that he has accumulated to this point. The fact that Buckley is having to run for reelection, however, points to the fact that even someone with his income—through both legal and illegal means—is trapped within the capitalist Panopticon. He cannot afford to stop working, despite the multiple sources of money from which he draws his income, because the Panopticon will not allow him to stop. Ironically, he is availing himself of the discourse used in consumer culture in order to amass enough votes to ensure that he is able to secure another term in the political office that has enriched him to this point.

The poster declaring to viewers the futility of breaking the law as a way of getting ahead financially serves as a backdrop to Bigger’s thoughts regarding the crime he has planned with his friends from the pool hall. The group has tentatively planned to rob Blum’s Delicatessen, which is owned by a white man. Bigger muses to himself that successfully robbing the white-owned deli “would be a symbolic challenge of the white world’s rule over them; a challenge which they yearned to make, but were afraid to” (18). The rule of the white world is one that mirrors that of

the rule of capitalism. The whites keep their non-white counterparts marginalized and subjugated; capitalism keeps them imprisoned. By robbing Blum, Bigger and his friends seek to usurp both of those authoritative bodies in a single action; however, as Bigger says, they are afraid to carry through on their plan. The reality is that even if they possessed the inner fortitude to carry out such a robbery, their plan would be destined to failure because they cannot escape either their race or the capitalist prison that holds them.

This realization creeps into Bigger's unconscious thinking soon after meeting up with his friends at the pool hall. Initially, Wright describes for us a scene that is one of opposites, binaries that are punctuated by stark color contrasts: the boys are smoking, and their cigarettes are described as "slanting white across their black chins" (18); the clouds are big and white, contrasted with the "smooth black asphalt" (19); the landlords are old and white, as is the pilot flying the plane overhead that leaves a "streak of billowing white" behind them (19). For a moment, however, Bigger's worldview—a worldview that has, to this point, been defined by that black/white binary—"dissolved into blurred waves" (19). He momentarily loses himself in a dream of being able to fly like the pilot. When he tells Gus that he is sure that he could fly a plane were he given the chance, Gus brings Bigger back to the reality of his binary world: "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you *could* fly a plane" (20, italics in original). The conditions to which Bigger's race shackles him will prevent him from being able to pursue a wide variety of professions, including that of being a pilot. While he might have, in his dream world in which all the lines are blurred, the opportunity to wish for such a reality, in 1930s Chicago, those wishes are futile.

The message that the plane is writing in the sky soon becomes clear, and Bigger realizes that it is an advertisement for Speed Gasoline. The plane that Bigger so wishes he were flying at

that moment is disseminating discourse that will fuel the capitalist system. It is at this moment that the realities of the capitalist prison begin to crystalize in Bigger's own thinking: "There was in his eyes a pensive, brooding amusement, as of a man who had been long confronted and tantalized by a riddle whose answer he seemed always just on the verge of escaping him, but prodding him irresistibly to seek its solution" (20). In this moment, Bigger begins to see that he is subject to the imprisoning forces of capitalism and its controlling discourse. This understanding is the answer to the riddle that has eluded him to this point.

Rather than focusing on his thoughts of discourse and capitalism, however, Bigger suggests that he and his friends "play 'white,'" which is explained as "a game of play-acting in which he and his friends imitated the ways and manners of white folks" (21). On a small scale, this is an example of the boys fulfilling their role as black scapegoats for whites; in "playing white," they are mimicking the things they've seen in movies, despite not knowing exactly what the words mean. The boys are playing at being social equals with whites; they are at once assimilating themselves, to a degree, into a world they don't fully understand while, at the same time, undermining white authority by mocking it. This is a version of Girard's concept of an eclipse of culture, wherein well-defined social structures such as the black/white binary are upended. If the black boys can pretend to be white—even without knowing what they're saying actually means in reality—then they can pretend to be equal to whites.

But that illusion of even perceived, make-believe equality is shattered when Bigger goes on a rant about white ownership of the city's infrastructure: "We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail" (23). He believes that blacks are "the only things in this city that can't go where we want to go and do what we want to do" (24). Bigger's realization that his life is

equivalent of one lived in jail is telling. That he considers himself and others like him—specifically African Americans in the city—are the only ones who live in this condition, however, is telling of Bigger’s understanding of the larger system. While he sees himself in jail because of his race and the things that he is prevented from owning, the reality is that he is equal to whites in that sense, because they all those living under capitalism are in a single jail.

Capitalism is truly a great equalizer, because the reality is that *nobody* in the city of Chicago is free. While some (specifically white people) are free to go where they want when they want, that freedom is predicated on their having sufficient financial resources, which points back to the fact that even those at the highest levels of society are restricted by capitalism’s rules. So, again, while Bigger and other African Americans are doubly-imprisoned, whites in the city are imprisoned within the same financial Panopticon as blacks. Thus, Bigger’s suggestion that blacks are alone in their inability to do as they please is indicative of his failure, at this point in the novel, to truly grasp the nature of the financial system under which he lives. The full and complete answer to that riddle continues to elude his understanding. Ironically, Gus suggests that Bigger just needs to get drunk in order to forget his problems and, at least for the present moment, escape the realities of life in the Panopticon, a suggestion to which Bigger replies, “I can’t. I’m broke” (24). He doesn’t have the money needed for even that temporary respite; one needs money in order to escape the reality of needing money. It is yet another of capitalism’s catch-22s.

Prior to his interview at the Dalton home, Bigger and Jack decide to go to a movie. While Jack buys the tickets, Bigger stays outside and looks at the advertising posters for the movies currently showing; these are examples of the dominant discourse, and their messages are simultaneously both commercial and social: “Two features were advertised: one, *The Gay*

Woman, was pictured on the posters in images of white men and white women lolling on beaches, swimming, and dancing in night clubs; the other, *Trader Horn*, was shown on the posters in terms of black men and black women dancing against a wild background of barbaric jungle” (32). In advertising the movies and encouraging attendance by would-be viewers, the advertisers are also reinforcing the social discourse of the time, namely the barbarous nature of black “savages” contrasted with the genteel nature of their white “superiors.” These different depictions serve to reinforce Bigger’s own belief about whites’ power over him and other African-Americans.

The movies the boys watch serve to supplement the discourse and strengthen their already skewed beliefs by showing “typical” whites and blacks in “typical” race-specific behavior. In the case of *The Gay Lover*, the storyline features “scenes of cocktail drinking, dancing, golfing, swimming, and spinning roulette wheels” during which time “a rich young white woman kept clandestine appointments with her lover while her millionaire husband was busy in the offices of a vast paper mill” (33). White people, in this fictionalized version of reality that the boys accept as truth, are all wealthy and seemingly carefree. Even the cuckolded husband doesn’t notice that his wife is having an affair because, as Jack points out, “He’s so busy making money he don’t know what’s going on” (33). However, into this *sans souci* world there enters the Hollywood villain, “a sweating, wild-eyed young man” who “looks like a crazy man,” according to Jack (34). This crazy man produces a bomb from under his coat, which he proceeds to throw in to a crowded nightclub where the wealthy white woman and her lover are enjoying themselves.

It is soon revealed that the bomb-wielding maniac is yet another American scapegoat of the time, a Communist, and it is again made clear that the propaganda of the time infiltrated

nearly every level of culture, including (and perhaps especially) the movies. Because of anti-Communist sentiments that manifested as outright fear for many Americans, it was appropriate for a 1930s Hollywood villain to be a Communist. Jack and Bigger instinctively understand that a Communist is a generic villain to be hated, but they admit to one another that they're not entirely sure why that is the case. When Bigger asks Jack what a Communist actually is, the latter answers with another question: "A Communist is a red, ain't he?" (34). Bigger agrees that a Communist is a red, but he still can't confidently say what a red is, and Jack admits his own ignorance on the subject: "Damn if I know. It's a race of folks who live in Russia, ain't it?" (35). None of this helps clarify in the boys' minds why Communists are inherently villainous or evil, so Bigger is left to draw his own conclusion, one that is based on the message as presented in the movie he is watching: "They must be wild" (35).

Furthermore, based on what they see portrayed in the movie, Jack determines that Communists "must don't like rich folks," to which Bigger replies, "They sure must don't [...]. Every time you hear about one, he's trying to kill somebody or tear things up" (35). Again we see that the boys' view of Communists is based upon what they see in movies or hear in other forms of discourse. The discourse is all they know, and it is how they build their truths. Case in point, when Bigger asks Jack about the married couples' reconciliation to each other the end of the movie—a reconciliation complete with romantic kissing—whether or not "folks really act like that," Jack replies, "Sure, man. They rich" (35). In Jack's mind, there is no question that the presentation he sees in the movie is a representation of reality. This scene illustrates the power inherent in discourse, whether it be of a social, political, or economic nature.

So powerful is that discourse in Bigger's mind, in fact, that he finds himself not paying attention to the second movie—*Trader Horn*, which features the "typical" black savages dancing

naked in Africa—and instead thinking about wealthy white people. He tells himself of rich whites, “These were smart people; they knew how to get hold of money, millions of it. Maybe if he were working for them something would happen and he would get some of it. He would see just how they did it. Sure, it was all a game and white people knew how to play it” (36). This may be read as a tacit endorsement of Thorstein Veblen’s ideas about emulation of the wealthier classes by those who populate the lower classes. Bigger wants to emulate the lifestyle he perceives as being inherently linked to whiteness, a racial distinction that he in turn sees as inherently linked to wealth.

This belief that whiteness is wealth is one that has been formulated and nourished by the messages to which Bigger has been exposed. He assumes that there is some sort of secret that has been kept from him and other blacks to this point; those whites who aren’t wealthy, he concludes, are merely “stupid” (36). If they were smart, they’d be wealthy, too. But for blacks, it is not a case of intelligence, but rather simply a case of their not knowing how to play the game correctly in order to become wealthy. It is this belief that he must learn the rules of the game from white people that makes him decide not to rob Blum’s Delicatessen, though his pride forces him to blame his friends for their fear of carrying out the crime. He opts instead to pursue the opportunity presented to him by the relief agency, the chance to work for the Dalton family.

As he nears the Dalton home, he begins to notice his surroundings, and he begins to wonder whether or not the real-life Daltons will be like his imagined vision of them based on what he has been exposed to through various forms of media. The neighborhood is described as “a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded. [...] This was not his world; he had been foolish in thinking that he would have liked it” (45-46). Among those secrets, presumably, is the one that he most desperately seeks: the secret as to how to play the capitalist

game in such a way as to come out a winner, like the wealthy white people he has seen in movies. But upon entering the Dalton home, Bigger discovers that he has much more to learn about this world than simply how they made their money. For example, he doesn't understand the language that the Daltons use when speaking; their vocabulary is far advanced compared to Bigger's, and Wright tells us, "The long strange words they used made no sense to him; it was another language" (48).

Something that Bigger does instinctively seem to understand, however, is his place in the social hierarchy. Despite the fact that he cannot recall having been told by anyone how to act towards whites, he instinctively self-subjugates when he is around white people: "There was an organic conviction in him that this was the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence; none had ever told him that in so many words, but their manner had made him feel that they did" (50). It may be presumed that Bigger is intimidated by the fact that whites are, for the most part, better off financially than he and other black Americans at the time, a presumption that is supported by the fact that Bigger has heard rumors that Mr. Dalton is the owner of the real estate firm that owns the building in which Bigger and his family live. They pay, we learn, eight dollars a week for their single-room apartment, money that goes to help finance the Daltons' lavish lifestyle. He is surrounded at that very moment by luxury he cannot possibly imagine owning himself, and that understanding is juxtaposed with the fact that he and his family are helping, albeit to a miniscule degree, to pay for that luxury.

Upon being offered and subsequently accepting the job, Bigger is suddenly in a position to climb out of his family's financial hole. He will have his clothing provided, as well as his room and meals. In addition to this, his salary, he learns, will be twenty-five dollars a week, five dollars of which he is told is for him to spend as he pleases. The rest is for his family, to cover

their rent and to allow for his brother and sister to stay in school. After the particulars of his pay have been settled, he meets Mary, the only child in the Dalton family. She immediately asks Bigger if he belongs to a union, a question to which her father objects. This exchange reveals that Mary's sympathies lie with the laboring class, whereas her father is firmly planted in the capitalist camp. This suggestion is supported by the fact that Mary refers to her father as "Mr. Capitalist" soon after the discussion about unions. Bigger, however, has no understanding of any of this, as we are told, "He knew nothing about unions, except that they were considered bad. [...] He had heard about unions; in his mind unions and Communists were linked" (53-54). Again we see Bigger formulating opinions based on discourse; he has been told that unions are somehow bad, and despite not knowing anything else about them, the opinion expressed and sustained by the discourse has manifested itself as truth in his brain.

All Bigger seems to be truly cognizant of at this exact moment is that he is going to be making far more money than he ever thought possible, and driving an expensive car as the primary job that will make him that money. He is living, albeit vicariously in regard to the car, a conspicuous consumer's dream. In support of the fact that he sees his driving of the Daltons' car as his own form of conspicuous consumption, consider the fact that he "was a little disappointed that the car was not so expensive as he had hoped" (63). He sees the car as an extension of himself, which is indicative of conspicuous consumption.

From Peggy, the family's cook, that learns the true source of the Dalton fortune. She tells him that the majority of the family's money originated with Mrs. Dalton and her family. Mr. Dalton, then, may be linked to Undine Spragg and those like her who saw marriage as a money-making opportunity: "If it wasn't for her, he would not be doing what he does. She made him rich. She had millions when he married her. Of course, he made a lot of money himself

afterwards out of real estate. But most of the money's hers" (57). This insight may be read as the first lesson Bigger gets in how to amass great wealth, the idea that money begets money. For one to make money in a capitalist system, it seems, one has to have money already available, like was the case for Mr. Dalton. In Bigger's case, however, he cannot tap into a pre-existing source of financial support.

Momentarily, however, Bigger is blissfully unconcerned with monetary issues, as he reclines on the bed in his room in the Dalton house. While he is lying there reflecting on his good luck, he begins to think about the watch that he is wearing, which leads him to think of other things he will be able to acquire now that he will be able to afford them: "A dollar watch was not good enough for a job like this; he would buy a gold one. There were a lot of new things he could get. Oh, boy! This would be an easy life" (60). The watch is something he understands only as a symbol of one's status; it is not the utility of the watch that matters, but rather it is the appearance and the associations with that appearance that are important. The commodity itself is imbued with the power of discourse, as it sends a message to those who see it that the wearer is a person of some means. Bigger's desire for a gold watch that is more representative of what he sees as his professional status is indicative of the fact that he has been influenced by advertising discourse. He understands the importance of appearances, and he understands the power of expensive accessories like a gold watch.

Bigger never gets the chance to buy that watch, however, because his first night on the job proves to be his last. He is instructed to take Mary to the University in the car. While driving, he looks at her in the rearview mirror and notes, "She looked like a doll in a show window: black eyes, white face, red lips" (63). She is a commodity on display, and in that moment of commodifying her, Bigger has exerted, on one level, a sense of ownership of Mary. She is in

what he perceives as his car, and she is an object on display. She is a component of Bigger's conspicuous consumption fantasy, just like the car he is driving. He is unknowingly participating in a mimicry of the capitalist class, which again reflects Girard's themes of scapegoating. Bigger Thomas appears to be aspiring to a higher social status through his display of expensive commodities. As a black man at the time, it would have been nearly impossible for Bigger to acquire the car he is driving; as a black man at the time, it would have been equally impossible for him to be in anything other than an employee-employer relationship with a woman like Mary Dalton. In one sense, then, by acting as if he is the owner of this car and the "possessor" of this woman, Bigger is upending social norms, if only in his own mind. It is this exact sort of social eclipsing—this attempt at mimicking—that Girard claims leads to a particular group being cast in the role of scapegoat. And as we will soon see, Bigger finds himself in that exact position.

Interrupting Bigger's consumption fantasy is Mary's request that Bigger not take her to the University, but rather to pick up a friend of hers who, she tells Bigger, is also a friend of his. Bigger is unsure how to interpret that description, and immediately assumes that she is talking about picking up a Communist. We are told, "He didn't want to meet any Communists. They didn't have any money" (65). Bigger has, to this point, only been in the Daltons' employ for a few hours, but he has already assimilated his thinking to the idea that Communists are bad because they have no money. Whereas his thinking earlier—literally earlier in the same day—was that Communists were an unknown entity that "must don't like rich folks" (35), he has somehow learned at this point that Communists don't have any money. What's more, he is clearly now interested in using people with whom he comes in contact for financial gain. Both of these points suggest that Bigger is attempting to assimilate himself into the world of the Daltons that, up until recently, had been completely alien to him. He is, in that regard, inverting the social

hierarchy and establishing his position as a potential future scapegoat, a position he will occupy following Mary's death.

Despite his unconscious attempts to assimilate into the white world, Bigger is well aware of the stark differences between himself and Mary. He tells us as much when he drops Mary off to go and pick up Jan: "The guarded feeling of freedom he had while listening to her was tangled with the hard fact that she was white and rich, a part of the world of people who told him what he could and could not do" (66). She is white and wealthy; he is black and poor. The two are mandated to remain separate.

While Mary is away, Bigger begins to wonder about how people end up becoming Communists, and he recalls some of the discourse that he has seen in the past that influenced his understanding of who Communists are: "He remembered seeing many cartoons of Communists in newspapers and always they had flaming torches in their hands and wore beards and were trying to commit murder or set things on fire" (66). Bigger's reaction is a reflex response to the anti-Communist propaganda put out for Americans with irrational fears of members of that party. Someone entirely neutral on the subject whose only exposure to Communists was through the discourse in American (and therefore anti-Communist) newspapers and movies that tapped into Americans' collective fears of Communists, those neutral viewers would have their beliefs changed to anti-Communist, a change affected by nothing more than the images presented. Bigger Thomas is a perfect example of someone with no exposure to the party itself or its practitioners, but who still has a deep-seated and irrational fear of both the party and its followers based on nothing more than exposure to the biased discourse about them.

At Jan's request, Bigger takes Mary and Jan to a restaurant in the Black Belt, wherein again we see mimicry and an inversion of social norms, though not in the same way as Bigger's

pseudo-assimilation into the white world. In this instance, it is the white Communists who are attempting to assimilate into black culture. As Jan explains, “We want one of those places where colored people eat, not one of those show places” (69). He wants to go to a restaurant that offers a true representation of genuine black culture, not one that presents a sanitized version of life that would be deemed more palatable to whites. In his attempt to fully assimilate, Jan at one point says in reply to Mary’s complimenting the food, “You got something there [...]. Did I say that right, Bigger?” (73). Jan wants to appear as if he is just like Bigger, including in his speech, but is comically unsure of himself and the verbal expressions he is attempting to mimic.

During dinner, Jan attempts to engage Bigger in conversation, as he wants to find out more about Bigger, to get to know him as a person. One of the pointed questions Jan asks is about Bigger’s education; Bigger tells him that he dropped out of school after the eighth grade because, as he puts it, “No money” (74). The point here is that education is reserved for those people who can afford to send their children to school rather than to work in order to pay the family’s bills. Those who are most desperately in need of education—those at the lowest rungs of the ladder—are the least able to afford the education they need. In that regard, Bigger’s siblings are incredibly fortunate, though they don’t know it yet, because Bigger is going to be bringing enough money to cover the family’s expenses by himself, thus allowing his siblings to go to school. Unfortunately, that luck will be short-lived, as Bigger will soon lose his employment, as well as his freedom.

Bigger continues to drive Jan and Mary around Chicago for an extended period of time while they drink liquor in the backseat. By the time he drops Jan at his apartment and takes Mary home, she is extremely drunk. Bigger feels responsible for her, and is desperate to get her safely to her room. He is able to get her into her bedroom with a great deal of effort, but not before the

pair make enough noise to alert Mrs. Dalton to their presence. While he is still in the room, Mrs. Dalton comes in, though her blindness prevents her from seeing Bigger. He panics, because he fears being discovered in the room by Mrs. Dalton: “Mary’s body surged upward and he pushed downward upon the pillow with all of his weight, determined that she must not move or make any sound that would betray him” (84-85). The scene that follows never explicitly details Bigger’s motivation for keeping Mary quiet – is it fear of being caught in a white woman’s bedroom or fear of losing his job? – but his fear at being discovered leads him to unintentionally kill Mary, and his panic immediately intensifies: “The reality of the room fell from him; the vast city of white people that sprawled outside took its place. She was dead and he had killed her. He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman” (86).

Though Wright is intentionally ambiguous as to Bigger’s motivation for killing her, his frequent bouts of anger suggest that his temper could have been a factor, but the scene doesn’t rise to the level of rage necessary to kill another human. Alternatively, the primary motivating factor in this scene is his fear of losing his job. While the racial overtones are apparent, it is the economics of the situation that are more at the forefront of Bigger’s mind, a contention that is bolstered by his later actions when he demands and plans to recover the ransom as a result of Mary’s supposed kidnapping. He needs the job because of the income it provides; because he is imprisoned within the Panopticon of capitalism, he needs money to survive, and keeping the job is his main focus at that point in time.

Bigger’s immediate instinct is to blame someone else. He is the perfect scapegoat. The reports would no doubt detail the story of the black man who sought to overturn societal standards by making his way into a white woman’s bedroom, no doubt with the intention of raping her. He is guilty beyond any doubt, and must be punished. Unless, that is, someone else

was guilty. His mind stumbles upon the only other group as feared by whites, and that is the Communists: “Make them think that Jan did it. Reds’d do anything. Didn’t the papers say so?” (87). Mary’s Communist boyfriend—already under suspicion because of his political beliefs—becomes the new perfect scapegoat. Bigger settles on the story he will tell, then stuffs Mary’s body into the furnace. Having done all that he can to cover his tracks, he decides to flee the scene. He then notices that the car door is still open, and he sees Mary’s purse inside the car. He rifles through it, taking what is described as “a thick roll of bills; tens and twenties” (92). That money will serve to tide him over for the time being; it will help to keep Bigger alive as he formulates his escape from this situation.

Bigger begins to formulate a plan to cover up the murder, and he goes to his family’s apartment to retrieve some personal items on Sunday morning. While he is there, he wakes up his mother, who begins to inquire about his employment. When she finds out that he got the job—he doesn’t tell her anything about his situation with Mary’s death—she tells him, “You got a good job now [...]. You ought to work hard and keep it and try to make a man out of yourself. Some day you’ll want to get married and have a home of your own. You got your chance now. You always said you never had a chance. Now, you got one” (97). She is laying out for Bigger the reality of life in the Panopticon as an adult. He currently occupies a liminal space between childhood and adulthood, one in which he is expected to contribute to the family, but isn’t yet the head of his own family. As he grows into that latter role, his mother suggests, he will take on new duties that will further imprison him—things like a family to support, an apartment to pay for, bills associated with being the head of the household to pay. Ironically, the fact that he has gainful employment—a source of the funds needed to fuel the capitalist machine that will keep him imprisoned—sparks the mention of this future in the first place.

While eating breakfast with his family, Bigger begins to contemplate the magnitude of what has happened, and at that point he comes to believe that many people in the world are essentially blind to things that don't serve their own ends. He says of his mother, brother, and sister that "they wanted and yearned to see life in a certain way; they needed a certain picture of the world; there was one way of living they preferred above all others; and they were blind to what did not fit. They did not want to what others were doing if that doing did not feed their own desires" (102). He goes on to list others that he believes are blind, including Jan, Mary, Mr. Dalton, and Mrs. Dalton, of whom he says that she was "blind in more ways than one" (102). He finally concludes "that a lot of people were like Mrs. Dalton, blind" (102). He believes that people see in the world that which they want to see. They force the world around them to conform to their own sense of how it should be, and what can't be changed is ignored. One thing that people fail to see is their own imprisonment. They continue to behave as if they have free will in a capitalist society, all the while they perform daily actions that serve no other purpose other than fueling the capitalist system that is their prison.

The theme of blindness throughout the novel is one that bears a brief discussion here. There are different manifestations of this theme, both literal and figurative. Mrs. Dalton, for instance, is physically blind, and her blindness represents the idea that those with money – the bourgeoisie in Marxist parlance – are metaphorically blind in that they fail to see that their perceived benevolence (as in the case of Mr. Dalton's purchase of ping-pong tables for the Boys and Girls Club) are somehow helpful to the struggle faced by those of the proletariat. But Bigger points out that members of his own family and others, including Bessie, are also blind in their own way. This metaphorical blindness represents the idea that those who are imprisoned by capitalism cannot see their own reality because they have become so used to the condition. They

can't comprehend that there is a chance for a different type of financial existence simply because they can't understand anything different from what they have always known. Because people cannot fathom an existence outside of the capitalist system, the argument is then that the prison will exist forever, and those living under capitalism will forever remain in that prison, blind to any alternative.

The corollary to this blindness is that people do in fact see things the way that they expect things to be, and Bigger will soon find that he is seen through this exact lens. He hopes that people are unable to see what he did, and one memory that serves to buoy his spirits in this regard is the fact that Mrs. Dalton didn't catch him in the act. He tells himself that "Mrs. Dalton had not known that Mary was dead while she stood over the bed in that room last night. She had thought Mary was drunk, because she was used to Mary's coming home drunk" (102). Her physical blindness prevented her from seeing Bigger in the room, and her metaphorical blindness led her to "see" that Mary was drunk, because that was a frequent occurrence. However, what Bigger is failing to account for is that his blindness to the truth will work against him; his truth is that he did not intend to kill Mary. However, that is not the narrative that white Americans were used to and it is not the narrative they want to believe. They want to believe that a black man alone with a white woman in her bedroom was motivated by lust; they want to believe that Bigger's only reason for being in that room was to rape Mary and then murder her to cover up his crime. Bigger will be made into a scapegoat.

Bigger opts for acting as if he knows nothing about what happened and going about his daily life in a cloud of faux ignorance. News of Mary's absence begins to circulate throughout the house—the fact that she is dead, her body in the furnace at that very moment is still unknown to everyone except Bigger—but Bigger maintains his façade of ignorance. He offers a suggestion

that Jan was in Mary's bedroom with her the night before in a conversation with Mrs. Dalton, at which point she suggests that Bigger take the rest of the night off. He decides to go to see Bessie, and while riding on the street car his fingers wrap around the roll of bills he took from Mary's purse the night before. That action alone triggers in his mind a regret that he didn't get more money as a result of the murder: "But of the whole business there was one angle that bothered him; he should have gotten more money out of it; he should have *planned* it. He had acted too hastily and accidentally. Next time things would be much different; he would plan and arrange so that he would have money to keep him a long time" (123). The very act of murder has become, in Bigger's mind, a job; it is a way for him to make money. His resolution to things better "next time" suggests that he now sees murder as a viable way of making a living. Soon after he has this realization, he wants to announce what he has done to the assembled white faces, but remains silent: "He wanted the keen thrill of startling them, but felt that the cost was too great" (123). Wright's use of the financial-laden term "cost" in that sentence suggests that Bigger owns something that he would like to sell, metaphorically speaking. There is a price to pay for "selling" that information to the crowd, a tangible loss of the profit he stands to gain otherwise. In the Panopticon, murder and fear are both commodities with monetary values.

He goes to see Bessie to enlist her help in planning his escape, and she inadvertently gives him the idea of writing a ransom note to divert suspicion from him as the murderer. Bessie begins asking questions about where he is working, and when he wants to know why she is so interested, she explains that she "used to work over that section, not far from where the Loeb folks lived" (129). It is a reference to the Loeb—Leopold murders, which were committed in an attempt by the murderers to prove that they were literally too smart to be guilty of committing a

crime in the physical sense. They believed—and sought to prove—that their intelligence was of such a level that they were immune from guilt.

As Bessie explains to Bigger that Leopold and Loeb were “The ones who killed the boy and then tried to get money from the boy’s family...,” Bigger, is not actually listening to her at that point, as he is thinking ahead already to how that story ends: “...*by sending notes to them*” (129, italics in original). He begins to see in his own mind the way he can achieve his goal of making more money from the murder, of getting a bigger return on his investment that will enable him to live more comfortably, though still chained within the Panopticon. He asks himself rhetorically, “Why could he, why could he not, not send a letter to the Daltons, asking for money” (130). Again, the whole act of murdering Mary has become a commodity, a way for Bigger to make money. Ironically, he is mimicking the way white people committed the same crime, as he is taking his cue from the Leopold and Loeb case. His attempt to perform actions in the same way as whites points yet again to Bigger’s establishing himself as the perfect scapegoat for Mary’s murder.

Before he begins to lure Bessie into his plan to cover the murder, Bigger begins to contemplate the life that she leads. Her day-to-day life is a perfect encapsulation of the panoptic power of the capitalist system. Bigger’s internal monologue describes a life of hard work and hard living for Bessie: “He felt the narrow orbit of her life: from her room to the kitchen of the white folks was the farthest she ever moved. She worked long hours, hard and hot hours seven days a week, with only Sunday afternoons off; and when she did get off she wanted fun, hard and fast fun, something to make her feel that she was making up for the starved life she led” (132). Bessie’s life consists of constant work, even during those brief respites from labor that she gets on Sunday afternoons. When she is performing her job, she is literally working; when she is not

at her job, she is essentially working to forget about her life of constant labor. There is no relief for Bessie from the constant struggle of working to survive.

Bigger doesn't tell Bessie about the murder, instead opting to say that Mary eloped without telling anyone. He then suggests to Bessie that they could capitalize on her disappearance by pretending to have kidnapped her and extorting a ransom from the family. It is, to Bigger's mind, an opportunity to leverage his murderous act to enrich himself. He even goes as far as to suggest to Bessie that they should "cash in, 'cause nobody else is trying to" (136). When Bessie suggests that Mary might return before the ransom is paid, Bigger assures her that she won't, but refuses to say. At that point, Bessie knows that Bigger has done something to Mary, though she doesn't know exactly what. At that point, Bigger needs Bessie on his side, because she has suddenly become a liability to him; her suspicions, Bigger fears, could end his plans, his freedom, even his life.

Given Bessie's status as liability in Bigger's life now, he knows that he needs her loyalty, which he proposes to buy with the money he took from Mary. Wright says of Bigger's thoughts, "There was another way to bind her to him. He drew forth the roll of bills, peeled off one for himself, and held out the rest of the money toward her" (138). Money, the suggestion is, can buy anything; in this case, Bigger hopes it will buy loyalty from a co-conspirator. In a larger sense, Bigger's attempt to buy Bessie's loyalty indicates that money is simultaneously the fuel that keeps the capitalist machine going, as well as the fuel that keeps those living under capitalism in prison. In support of the idea that money fosters a sense of imprisonment within the capitalist system, consider the fact that Bessie, upon accepting the money from Bigger, is effectively under his control. She has to do what he tells her to do, because money is the almighty power that dictates actions in this world. Later in the novel, Bigger refuses to accept money from a reporter

who attempts to bribe him: “I want you to give me the dope,” he tells Bigger (187). The latter refuses, however, and returns the money. In that moment, Bigger is attempting to declare his own freedom from the Panopticon by not allowing himself to become beholden to capitalism’s fuel.

Once he has decided on how to approach the situation with the Daltons and the ransom, Bigger has a new feeling of personal agency. For a brief period of time, he believes that he is able to control his own destiny through his actions, and he convinces himself that as long as he is careful in his actions, he will never get caught and will make enough money to escape his situation. It is telling to read his thoughts at this moment: “For the first time in his life he moved consciously between two sharply defined poles: he was moving away from the threatening penalty of death, the death-like times that brought him that tightness and hotness in his chest; and he was moving toward that sense of fulness he had so often but inadequately felt in magazines and movies” (141). Bigger’s plan to force the Dalton family to pay a ransom despite the fact that their daughter is dead is one that was born out of a story he’d read about in the newspaper. As his lawyer says after Bigger is captured for the murder, “The boy got the idea from the newspapers. [...] He had heard men like you lie about the Communists so much that he believed them” (271). His end game in acquiring this ransom is to live a life he dreams about, a life he sees in magazines and movies. Bigger is attempting to live out the lives promised *by* the discourse through a plan he formulated *from* the discourse. He is a living manifestation of a man who cannot think for himself, but rather bases his actions and his dreams on things he reads and sees in the mass media. And when he internalizes the belief that he will succeed in this plan, “The feeling of being always enclosed in the stifling embrace of an invisible force had gone from him”

(142). Bigger believes that he has found the escape route from the Panopticon, as the “invisible force” that is the panoptic power of capitalism seems to have released its hold on him.

However, that hold renews its power over Bigger soon after, when he comes under suspicion in regard to Mary’s disappearance. He attempts to deflect that suspicion by implicating Jan, an implication he supports with a ransom note that included “one of those signs, like the ones he had seen on the Communist pamphlets” (167). In determining where to designate the ransom drop, reminders of the capitalist Panopticon continue to appear. In looking for an empty building from which to watch for the drop, he sees a sign indicating that a particular property is managed by the South Side Real Estate Company, the very same company owned by Mr. Dalton. Bigger’s reaction to seeing the sign is one that echoes Karl Marx’s description of the proletariat-capitalist relationship: “He paid eight dollars a week for one rat-infested room. [...] Mr. Dalton was somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god. [...] Even though Mr. Dalton gave millions of dollars for Negro education, he would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the city tumbling down from rot” (164). At that moment, Bigger definitively decides to send the note to the Daltons in order to “jar them out of their senses” (164). It is as if Bigger is trying to incite a micro-revolution, one that he plans to start by placing the responsibility for Mary’s disappearance with the Communists.

He delivers the note to the Dalton home, and the immediate effect is that the investigation turns again to Jan and his Communist associates. But upon discovery of a bone and one of Mary’s earrings in the furnace, it becomes immediately apparent that she is dead and that the kidnapping story is a hoax. At this point, Mary’s disappearance is no longer a commodity for Bigger, because he has no way of profiting from it. Information takes the place of the disappearance as the most valuable commodity in Bigger’s life, because it is information that

will aid him in his evasion. However, that information—typically in the form of newspaper reports—will cost him money and will also risk his being recognized.

Bigger feels he must confess to Bessie and rely on the fact that she is his co-conspirator, and will therefore not risk turning him in to the authorities. When she learns the truth, she fears that Bigger will be accused of having raped Mary, at which point he begins to think about life under capitalist rules as a form of rape. Bigger's likening that crime to his own life suggests a violent domination of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. He thinks to himself that "it was rape when he cried out in hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day" (214). He believes that he is constantly being raped by those in the upper class, the people who rule his life simply because they have the financial resources to do so, and he is raped by the system that keeps him imprisoned because of the violent control it wields over his existence.

This theme of rape carries over to Bigger's treatment of Bessie, as he clings to any sort of control over the elements of his own life that he can, regardless of the violence and pain exertion of that control might cause others. He takes her to an abandoned building, where he rapes her, despite her pleading that he stop: "Imperiously driven, he rode roughshod over her whimpering protests, feeling acutely sorry for her as he galloped a frenzied horse down a steep hill in the face of a resisting wind. *don't don't don't Bigger* [sic.]" (219, italics in original). Immediately after this sexual assault, he murders Bessie and throws her dead body down an airshaft. However, that action—one of self-preservation, to Bigger's mind—results in his losing the last of the money he had taken from Mary, as it was in Bessie's pocket when he threw her down the shaft: "Goddamn, yes, it was in her dress pocket! Now, he was in for it. He had thrown Bessie down the air-shaft and the money was in the pocket of her dress. [...] He had seven cents between him and starvation and the law and the long days ahead" (224). He has seven cents, and no way of

acquiring more money. The chains of the Panopticon will immediately begin to tighten around him as he is forced to survive in a world that requires money for survival while, at the same time, denies Bigger the opportunity to acquire that money.

The compressing of the space around him is made manifest in the novel by the newspapers' detailing of the search for Bigger, as those stories provide a visual map of the areas yet to be searched. Again, information is a commodity at this point, as it is the only thing that enables Bigger to elude capture. With his survival instinct ruling his every move, Bigger knows that he needs to acquire this commodity; in one instance, he pays for it with cash, while in another he steals a newspaper. Given his lack of money – and inability to acquire any more – he knows he has to save the limited financial resources he has. Even the decision to buy a loaf of bread is one that he weighs before purchasing it, especially given that bread in the Black Belt costs more than it does in white neighborhoods: “Bread sold here for five cents a loaf, but across the ‘line’ where white folks lived, it sold for four” (234). Marx posits the idea that capitalists thrive off their exploitation of the proletariat, and the fact that those who are least able to afford it are forced to pay more for bread is indicative of that idea. Capitalists use the system to their greatest advantage by exploiting its panoptic qualities through leveraging human survival needs in order to enrich themselves financially.

Bigger's eventual and inevitable capture are the culmination of his status as scapegoat. He goes from being just another African American face to being “That black sonofabitch” and a “black ape” (253). The newspaper stories that detail his capture and subsequent initial court appearance continue the racist doctrine of the discourse, describing Bigger as “reminding one of a jungle beast” and lacking “the charm of the average, harmless, genial, grinning southern darky so beloved by the American people” (260). He is cast in the role of a wild animal, a brute

deserving of his fate, which is his inevitable execution by the state. Bigger's status as prisoner now has taken on a new meaning, because he is in a physical prison as opposed to his previous metaphorical one; ironically, in this physical prison, the capitalist prison has no power, because the state has the obligation of housing and feeding the prisoner. Therefore, Bigger is released from one prison, but he finds himself in another one. But the priest that comes to visit him reminds him that life is, in its totality, essentially a struggle against misery: "Tha's whut life is, son. Sufferin'" (265). That suffering is manifested in things like the situation of Mrs. Thomas, who asks her son what she can do for him. Bigger knows there is nothing she or anyone else can do, but his mother's question is exceptionally poignant because of that fact that they are so poor. As the text tells us, "He knew that they had nothing; they were so poor that they were depending upon public charity to eat" (276).

Buckley's arrival outside Bigger's cell brings us back to a time before Bigger had ever encountered Mary Dalton or her family. The State's Attorney urges Bigger to confess, but he refuses. He tries to tell Bigger that he understands his situation: "I know how it feels to walk along the streets like other people, dressed like them, talking like them, and yet excluded for no reason except that you're black" (286). The source of Buckley's empathy is left unstated, which makes his entire soliloquy all the more absurd. Buckley concludes his interaction with Bigger by announcing to the other officers, "I'll be at my club. Let me know how the inquest goes" (288). After Buckley's departure, Bigger falls to the floor and weeps, "wondering what it was that had hold of him, why he was here" (288). He doesn't fully understand the machinations of capitalism, but he is all too familiar with the effects of those machinations on his body. When he was living as a free man, he was anything but free, because he was imprisoned by the system. Now that he is free from that system, he is imprisoned by the state.

During Bigger's trial, Mr. Dalton admits that there is a practice of charging a uniform rent across all similar apartments in the Black Belt. While this practice of price-fixing is an illegal practice in most instances—including one such as this one in which the agreement amongst competing interests to maintain a particular price level—Mr. Dalton testifies on the witness stand that, while he won't admit that there is a formal agreement between the different real estate management firms, he argues that to "charge them less rent would be unethical" because "there's a code of ethics in business" (304). The implication here is that Mr. Dalton is a carbon-copy of the prototypical capitalist outlined by Karl Marx, the capitalist who exploits his workers to the furthest extent possible in order to enrich himself. In Mr. Dalton's case, his "employees" are actually his tenants who are forced to live in a designated area and are, therefore, forced to pay whatever rent is deemed appropriate.

Later, in his cell, Bigger has a vision that sums up his own existence, as well as that of every other person living under the purview of capitalism. It comes too late for him to do anything to combat the situation, as he is locked in a jail cell, on the verge of being found guilty of murder and sentenced to death for that crime. However, in Richard Wright's description, we can take Bigger's vision as a picture of our own lives as consumers surrounded by the capitalist prison: "He saw a black sprawling prison full of tiny black cells in which people lived; each cell had its own stone jar of water and a crust of bread and no one could go from cell to cell and there were screams and curses and yells of suffering and nobody heard them, for the walls were thick and darkness was everywhere" (334-335). While not a perfect description of Bentham's original design for the ultimate prison, these words suffice to show that Bigger realizes that the world outside of the jail cell in which he is currently confined is simply another kind of jail with other

kinds of cells. It doesn't matter whether we are in a physical prison like Bigger is at that moment or not, as individuals living in a capitalist society we are always in prison.

So much of *Native Son* focuses on the overt racial segregation and subjugation in society, and as a result, much of the scholarly literature about the novel has tended to focus on that element. For example, Kenneth Kinnamon writes, "In a sense, the narrative action can be considered the externalization of Bigger's psychic instability, itself the result of his racial status" (60). Similarly, Aimé J. Ellis argues that the novel's presentation of Africa-Americans is "indicative of white America's racist and socially Darwinist disregard for black humanity" (183). It is important to remember, however, that so much of that racial division and exploitation in the United States finds its source in the practice of chattel slavery. In his closing argument at Bigger's trial, Boris Max argues just that point in attempting to explain what could have driven Bigger to murder Mary:

Our forefathers came to these shores and faced a harsh and wild country. They came here with a stifled dream in their hearts, from lands where their personalities had been denied [...]. They came from cities of the old world where the means to sustain life were hard to get or own. They were colonists and they were faced with a difficult choice: they had either to subdue this wild land or be subdued by it. We need but turn our eyes upon the imposing sweep of streets and factories and buildings to see how completely they have conquered. But in conquering they *used* others, used their lives (359).

The United States—the Land of the Free, the Land of Opportunity—was only a manifestation of freedom and opportunity for those in power. In order to realize the opportunities that were made available in this new land, those men in power had to enslave the non-powerful, to use those men as tools to build up the nation that would make them wealthy. Slavery, itself a tool of capitalism, is the most overt example of racial exploitation in American history. And that institution's aftershocks lived on long after its abolition, and continue to live on today.

Finally, one final passage from Max's closing argument explains the frustrations Bigger Thomas must have felt as a black man living in Chicago at the time. He tells the judge,

Your Honor, consider the mere physical aspect of our civilization. How alluring, how dazzling it is! How it excites the senses! How it seems to dangle within easy reach of everyone the fulfillment of happiness! How constantly and overwhelmingly the advertisements, radios, newspapers and movies play upon us! But in thinking of them remember that to many they are tokens of mockery. These bright colors may fill our hearts with elation, but to many they are daily taunts. Imagine a man walking amid such a scene, a part of it, and yet knowing that it is *not* for him! (363, italics in original).

The discourse that infuses nearly every element of American culture tells Bigger and those like him that they *should* want things, that they *should* desire to possess newer and better commodities in order to improve their lives. Capitalism creates an environment in which there is an equality of desire; we are all free to want whatever we might want. However, as Max's words argue, some of us are not allowed to carry through on those desires. Despite that reality, however, the Panopticon makes no distinctions. Because we are all equal in our desire, so, too, are we all equal in our status as prisoners.

Chapter Five

Always Forever?

On Sunday, December 7, 1941, the United States was drawn inextricably into war with the Empire of Japan following that nation's attack on the naval fleet at Pearl Harbor; four days later, on December 11, the US was officially at war with Germany, and the country was fully invested in World War II, fighting in two distinctly different theaters at the same time. The outbreak of war in Europe greatly accelerated the nation's recovery from the effects of the Great Depression. As John Morton Blum points out, "By the time of Pearl Harbor, military spending had already reached a monthly rate of \$2 billion. In the first six months of 1942, federal procurement officers placed orders for \$100 billion of equipment—more than the American economy had ever produced in a single year" (91).

There is evidence to suggest that while the United States was committed to neutrality in principle, there was an understanding among certain decision-makers that there could very well come a time when the country would have to enter the war. To that end, Roosevelt had arranged for Bernard Baruch to go to Europe in order to determine the scope of the Nazi threat to peace. He found that the German air force at that time consisted of 3,353 planes—compared to only 1,600 in the United States—and he "urged a rapid build-up of American military might as the best possible deterrent to attack" (Gerald Nash 101). His feelings were that if the United States

could create at least the appearance of a massive display of military might, it might discourage Hitler's advance.¹³

Average consumers in the United States were still feeling the aftershocks from the Great Depression, which meant that many families were not indulging in the sorts of luxurious lifestyles that had characterized the 1920s. With the massive uptick in industrial productivity due to the war effort, however, that situation changed. By the early 1940s, Americans were once again spending and living more comfortably; by 1943, total expenditures for goods and services in the United States was approximately ten-percent higher in the first quarter of the year compared to the same time period in 1940 (Witkowski 71). As the need for increased productivity grew along with American involvement in World War II, so, too, did the amount of income average Americans had at their disposal. Consumer spending increased and, as the laws of capitalism dictate, that increase in spending spurred an increase in production. As consumer demand grew alongside an increase in spending (which itself grew out of an increase in disposable income for many Americans), manufacturers expanded their operations in order to meet that growing demand for commodities. Gradually, the United States emerged from the decade-long Great Depression, thanks in large part to the outbreak of World War II and American involvement in that conflict. While the nobility surrounding the American entrance into the war can be debated, the economic ramifications are much less ambiguous. The industrial and economic build-up that accompanied the United States' entrance into the war served to end the effects of the Great Depression.

¹³ We can view this strategy as a form of advertising that is akin to a Potemkin village, which is built as a sort of theatrical set-piece that is nothing more than building facades designed to deceive others into believing that the village is a thriving center of life, when in reality it is both uninhabited and uninhabitable.

The post-war world was irrevocably changed in ways far beyond the recovery of the American economy, too. Allied troops in Europe found the remnants of the Nazis' so-called Final Solution in the form of a vast network of concentration camps, with horrors that defied description within them. In Japan, two nuclear bombs gave birth to the atomic age and the arms superpowers' arms race in a literal flash, a flash that instantaneously ended the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. In separate ways, both the concentration camps and the atomic bombs illustrated man's capacity for inhumanity. Whereas World War I had introduced the world to the horrors of trench warfare, that destruction of human life was limited to soldiers on a battlefield. One of the truths learned from World War II was that there was no longer necessarily a distinction between soldiers and civilians, there was only "us" and "them;" and the battlefield grew to encompass any area where "they" were.

American culture experienced other changes beyond the philosophical realm. The growth in industry resulting from the expansion of wartime production facilitated the urbanization of areas the country, a process that had already begun but which was accelerated during the war. That urbanization was fostered by the movement of individuals and families throughout the country, as people sought jobs; with so many men fighting overseas, many of those job seekers were women. One of the most iconic images arising out of World War II-era advertising was that of Rosie the Riveter, whose face, flexed arm, and encouraging "We Can Do It!" encouraged American women to join the workforce in support of the war effort. There were approximately 12 million women in the American workforce in 1941, a number that ballooned to approximately 16.5 million in 1945 (Nash 146). Minorities, too, benefitted from the production boom associated with World War II, as the percentage of African-American unskilled laborers in the workforce grew from three-percent in 1942 to eight-percent in 1945, while the number of skilled workers

increased two-fold (Nash 150). The growth in numbers for both women and racial minorities helped to sow the seeds for the Civil Rights Movement that would become a focal point of multiple political movements in the 1960s.

All of these changes in society wrought changes in authors' individual outlooks on the world, as they began to process the reality of the new world that emerged following the Allies' victory. There was, socio-politically, a palpable fear associated with the post-war decade, a fear of complete and utter destruction of the world as we knew it. The United States and the USSR, allies against a common foe during World War II, began to compete for world supremacy, the former serving as the champion of democracy and the latter as the champion of Communism. When the Soviets successfully tested their first atomic bomb in August of 1949, the test "would cast a pall over the entire upcoming decade. A fear of nuclear annihilation, an underlying anxiety that ran counter to the rampant consumerism that many equate with the time, became a part of the American scene" (Young and Young 12). This fear fostered the perpetuation of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union until at the very least the late 1980s.

Much of this fear of ultimate destruction manifested itself in the form of a child-adult binary in works by many canonical authors of the 1950s both in the United States and elsewhere. Two of the best-known examples are J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* (1954). Novels such as these suggest that the adult world is either one composed of hypocritical "phonies" (in the case of *Catcher in the Rye*) or one composed of those who solve disagreements by dividing into factions and destroying those in other factions (in the case of *Lord of the Flies*). There was a sentiment among many authors in the years following World War II that growing up was to be avoided if at all possible. It was only by remaining a child—at least metaphorically—that people could avoid the violence and

negativity associated with being an adult. It was adults, after all, who had been responsible for the atrocities of the Holocaust. It was adults who had created the ultimate weapon that could wipe out human lives in the cliched (although literal) blink of an eye. It was adults who were engaged in the Cold War. Peter Pan's refusal to grow up took on an entirely new significance in the post-war world.

Despite the multitude of changes American society witnessed following World War II, the capitalist society remained intact. In fact, following the wartime economic boom, the system seemed stronger than ever, and American prosperity and the country's standard of living have continued to grow to the present day. As the system has continued on, so, too, has its panoptic influence on society. Capitalism existed long before the twentieth century; for that matter, it existed long before the birth of the United States. And given the current conditions in our global society, it shows no signs of relinquishing its control. Consumers are as imprisoned today as ever, with advertisers capitalizing on new technologies to increase their reach and effectiveness. The condition of being always already entrapped has a long history and a seemingly endless future.

* * *

As I have argued throughout this work, those born into a capitalist system are born into a manifestation of the Panopticon. In this prison, there are no physical guards wielding clubs and gun, carrying rings of keys to use when locking our cells. Instead, we exist in a condition in which we perceive ourselves being watched. Our instinctual drives serve to discipline our

actions, and the controlling discourse of advertising builds on this discipline by telling us what to do. In the end, our only escape from this prison is death itself; there is no other alternative.

Those authors whose works make up the bulk of this work are not the only ones who may be read as pointing to this controlling nature of the economic system. In fact, the specific novels I selected aren't the only ones by those specific authors to interrogate capitalism in this way. I chose the specific authors and specific works I did based on my goal of providing a broad overview of American literature of the first forty years of the twentieth century. I chose the works I did in an effort to have representation from both typically canonical (a descriptor that itself is a loaded term) and non-canonical works by both men and women, white and non-white, Christian and non-Christian. In short, I sought to show America itself through my selection of novels, to offer a reading list that looked like all of America in order to show how my argument applies to all of America. There are, to be sure, other authors and other novels that would have served equally well as representative works in those chapters. Authors such as Jack London, Margaret Sanger, Jon Dos Passos, and Ernest Hemingway could all be said to have made similar observations in their works, as could countless other authors.

In his essay on consumer society, Jean Baudrillard recounts a fable that encapsulates the core reason for capitalism's longevity in the world: "There is a fable: 'There once was a man who lived in Scarcity. After many adventures and a long voyage in the Science of Economics, he encountered the Society of Affluence. They were married and had many needs'" ("Consumer Society" 38). Those of us living under the purview of a capitalist system are influenced by what we see. We see what others have and we want the same thing. We see things that we believe we need and want them. We see things that we never knew existed but now that we do know they

exist, we can't live without them. And, according to Baudrillard's fable, the more affluent the society, the stronger those desires on the part of consumers.

That desire is fueled by the controlling discourse of advertising, which oftentimes manifests in specific brands using advertising to differentiate themselves from competitors whose products are essentially identical to their own. Cigarettes are a prime example of this brand-name association. Lucky Strike introduced the tagline "It's toasted!" in 1917 to describe their tobacco, suggesting that their tobacco was toasted, which made it different—and inherently superior—to others; the problem with that line of reasoning is that *all* cigarette tobacco is toasted in order to facilitate the burning process. But as Thibodeau and Martin point out, that commonality didn't stop Lucky Strike from exploiting the public's ignorance in regard to the production of cigarette tobacco: "The slogan would prove immensely successful: even though all cigarettes are made with toasted, or cured, tobacco, consumers didn't know that, and they were attracted to the promise of mellow flavor" (16).

Lucky Strike rode the "It's toasted!" campaign to become the single best-selling cigarette brand of the 1930s (Brandt 75). It wasn't the only time that Lucky Strike would use manipulative advertising practices. A decade later, the brand—which originally came in green packaging—suddenly changed to an all-white package with a red bullseye. The ad campaign that launched this change told smokers that "Lucky Strike Green Has Gone to War!" The suggestion was that green dye was in such demand for the war effort during World War II that Lucky Strike had patriotically decided to forego its trademark green packaging to do their part for the troops. The reality was that research showed women were taking up the smoking habit in greater numbers in the 1940s, and women seemed to shy away from the green packaging. Lucky Strike went white to lure in more female smokers; the change had nothing to do with the war.

Brand-name packaging is simply that: packaging. There is little appreciable difference in many food (and similar) products that are marketed to consumers, but individuals are loyal to particular brands nevertheless. And it was this loyalty that those earliest marketers were seeking to leverage for their own gain, as Julian Sivulka points out:

All things being equal, brands from well-known companies proved more valuable than those from unknown companies, since people came to rely on these labels for assurance that the food they ate and the products they bought came from a reliable source. Moreover, manufacturers who advertised could bring customers to the point that they would ask stores for the product by name rather than accept a substitute (*Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes* 51).

Consumers could buy non-branded items of equal quality, items that would traditionally cost less than their brand-name counterparts. However, marketers chose—and continue to choose—to prey on consumer ignorance regarding everyday commodities like food that they need in order to survive as a way of keeping them imprisoned by the system. Advertisers have historically used the controlling power of discourse to manipulate our buying habits insofar as things we have to have in order to survive are concerned. That manipulation through the power of branding and advertising works to keep consumers imprisoned at the subsistence level, just as it does at the level of more luxurious indulgence. It worked at the end of the nineteenth century, and it works today. If anything, the power of the brand name has grown more powerful over the last century, a reality that suggests its power will continue to hold sway with consumers in the future.

This power is augmented by ever-improving technology. As cities have grown ever-larger and technological advances in society and business have moved us even further from any sort of self-sufficient lifestyle, the capitalist prison tightens its grip on us even more. Herbert Marcuse touches on this idea when he writes, “The most effective and enduring form of warfare against liberation is the implanting of material and intellectual needs that perpetuate obsolete forms of the struggle for existence” (4). As marketing professionals continue to create artificial

needs in the minds of consumers—paired with the very real needs that are inherent in the human condition—we as consumers will continue to be trapped by the system.

The image of capitalism as a prison-like structure runs counter to the very mores upon which the United States was founded. The monikers of “Land of the Free” and “Land of Opportunity” suggest that the country is the antithesis of one ruled by a system that serves as a financial Panopticon. If Americans truly are free and the United States truly is the land of opportunity, it stands to reason that all of us have at our disposal the means to climb the socio-economic ladder in order to improve our own station in life. However, as we have repeatedly seen in literary representations of American life during the first half of the twentieth century, the system is structured in such a way that these celebratory nicknames ascribed to the United States are themselves marketing tools, words that offer deceptive promises to would-be consumers of the American lifestyle. Under a capitalist system, freedom literally becomes, in an Orwellian twist of semantics, slavery. As Marcuse writes, “Under the rule of a repressive whole, liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination. The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but *what* can be chosen and *what is* chosen by the individual” (7, italics in original). The range of commodities available to consumers is itself a deception; we cannot declare ourselves a land of opportunity because of the variety of commodities available for purchase. The reality is that because of capitalism’s power to use our own human instincts against us, we are limited in our actual abilities to choose.

What, then, might freedom look like for Americans if they were somehow able to succeed in escaping the capitalist Panopticon? In Marcuse’s opinion, such an existence would mean “freedom *from* the economy—from being controlled by economic forces and relationships; freedom from the daily struggle for existence, from earning a living” (4, italics in original). To

my mind, this encapsulates the full range of freedoms that would be required in order for Americans to elude the grip of their prison. It would mean jettisoning personal concerns in regard to making comparisons with others; envy and covetousness would become unknown emotional states in this utopian world. It would also mean Americans' not having to work in order to feed themselves; their "daily struggle for existence," as Marcuse describes it, would also become an unknown way of life. This version of freedom looks very much like the mythical "socialist paradise" promised by various communist dictators throughout the world. This version of freedom, then, looks very un-American.

However, in terms of a theoretical framework for literary analysis, that reality points to the fact that American authors will inevitably continue to interrogate the capitalist system in terms of its panoptic power to exploit. If history is any guide—and recent works by authors such as Jay McInerney (*Bright Lights, Big City*), Cormac McCarthy (*No Country For Old Men*), Paul Beatty (*The Sellout*), Jeffrey Eugenides (*Middlesex*), and others seem to suggest that it is—we will find the panoptic power of capitalism as a thematic centerpiece of canonical novels in the future, as authors continue to examine our condition of being always already imprisoned.

WORKS CITED

WORKS CITED

- Aaron, Daniel. *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.
- Adams, James Truslow. *The Epic of America*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1931.
- Ammons, Elizabeth. "The Business of Marriage in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*." *Criticism*, vol. 16, no. 4, fall 1974, pp. 326-338.
- Applegate, Edd. *The Rise of Advertising in the United States: A History of Innovation to 1960*. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012.
- Ausperger, Michael. "Sinclair Lewis' Primers for the Professional Managerial Class: *Babbitt*, *Arrowsmith*, and *Dodsworth*." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 34, no. 2, spring 2001, pp. 73-97.
- Balter, Ariel. "What Does **** Want? Desire and Consumerism in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*." *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910*, vol. 27, no. 3, spring 1995, pp. 19-36.
- Barnard, Rita. "'When You Wish Upon a Star': Fantasy, Experience, and Mass Culture in Nathaniel West." *American Literature*, vol. 66, no. 2, June 1994, pp. 325-351.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.
- . "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives." *Image-Music-Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977, pp. 79-124.
- . "The Rhetoric of the Image." *Image-Music-Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977, pp. 32-51.
- Bash, James. R. "Willa Cather and the Anathema of Materialism." *Colby Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 3, September 1973, pp. 157-168.
- Baudrillard, Jean. "Consumer Society." *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence B. Glickman. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999, pp. 33-56.

- . *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Behr, Edward. *Prohibition: Thirteen Years That Changed America*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1996.
- Berger, Jonah. *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013.
- Bergquist, Gordon. "Biography of John Steinbeck." *Critical Insights: John Steinbeck*, ed. Don Noble. Pasadena, California: Salem Press, 2011, pp. 7-14.
- Blum, John Morton. *V Was For Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.
- Bone, Robert. *The Negro Novel in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958.
- Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Atheneum, 1980.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.
- Bowker, Geoffrey C. and Susan Leigh Star. *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999.
- Brandon, Craig. *Murder in the Adirondacks: An American Tragedy Revisited*. Utica: North Country Books, Inc., 2016.
- Brandt, Allan. *The Cigarette Century: The Rise, Fall, and Deadly Persistence of the Product That Defined America*. New York: Basic Books, 2009.
- Braudy, Leo. *The Hollywood Sign: Fantasy and Reality of an American Icon*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.
- Briggs, Vernon M., Jr. *Immigration and American Unionism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Calder, Lendol. *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Campbell, Colin. "Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming." *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence B. Glickman. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999, pp. 19-32.
- Campbell, Donna. "American Literary Naturalism: Critical Perspectives." *Literature Compass*, vol. 8, 2011, pp. 499-513.

- Carr, Duane. *A Question of Class: The Redneck Stereotype in Southern Fiction*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Through the Looking-Glass*. New York: Dover Publications, 1999.
- Cather, Willa. *A Lost Lady*. New York: Vintage Classics, 1990.
- Chan, Kara and Hong Cheng. "Materialism and Consumer Socialization: A Semiotic Analysis of Personal Loan Advertisements." *Communicative Business* no. 1, 2009, pp. 60-79.
- Chappell, Deborah K. "Pa Says: The Rhetoric of Faulkner's Anse Bundren." *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Culture*, vol. 44, no. 3, summer 1991, pp. 273-285.
- Chase, Norah. "An Immigrant Girl's Quest for the American Dream in Anzi Yeziarska's *The Bread Givers*." *Women in Literature: Reading Through The Lens of Gender*, eds. Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen Silber. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003, pp. 56-58.
- Chase, Richard. *The American Novel and its Tradition*. New York: Doubleday, 1957.
- Cottrell, Robert C. *Blackball, the Black Sox, and the Babe: Baseball's Critical 1920 Season*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002.
- Cowley, Malcolm. "Richard Wright: The Case of Bigger Thomas." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Native Son: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972, pp. 112-114.
- Danciu, Victor. "Manipulative Marketing: Persuasion and Manipulation of the Consumer Through Advertising." *Theoretical and Applied Economics*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2014, pp. 19-34.
- Danziger, Pamela N. *Why People Buy Things They Don't Need*. Ithaca, NY: Paramount Market Publishing, 2002.
- Dicker, Rory. *A History of U. S. Feminisms*. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2016.
- Dietrich, William S. *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun: The Political Roots of American Economic Decline*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.
- Donovan, Brian L. "Alimony Panic, Gold Diggers, and the Cultural Foundations of Early Twentieth-Century Marriage Reform in the United States." *Journal of Family History*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2017, pp. 111-127.
- Donovan, Nancy M. "Representing Grace Brown: The Working-Class Woman in 'American Tragedy' Murder Narratives." *Dreiser Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2, fall 2000, pp. 3-21.

- Dreiser, Theodore. *An American Tragedy*. New York: Signet Classics, 2010.
- . *Theodore Dreiser: A Selection of Uncollected Prose*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977.
- Dyen, Jonathan. "'I Never Saw Such People': Reading Steinbeck in the Great Recession." *English Text Construction*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1-21.
- Edington, K. "The Hollywood Novel: American Dream, Apocalyptic Vision." *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1995, pp. 63-67.
- Elby, Clare Virginia. "The Psychology of Desire: Veblen's 'Pecuniary Emulation' and 'Invidious Comparison' in *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*." *Studies in American Fiction*, 21.2 (Autumn 1993): pp. 192-208.
- Elliott, Mark. *Color-Blind Justice: Albion Tourg  e and the Quest for Racial Equality From the Civil War to Plessy v. Ferguson*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2006.
- Ellis, Aim   J. "'Boys in the Hood' Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*." *Callaloo*, 29.1 (Winter 2006): pp. 182-201.
- Ewen, Stuart. *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.
- . *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.
- Fabre, Michel. *The World of Richard Wright*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985.
- Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- Feldstein, Stanley, ed. *The Poisoned Tongue: A Documentary History of American Racism and Prejudice*. New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1971.
- Fennis, Bob M. and Wolfgang Stroebe. *The Psychology of Advertising*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Fetterley, Judith. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009.
- Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- Fiske, John and John Hartley. *Reading Television*. New York: Routledge Press, 1978.

- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2004.
- Flynt, J. Wayne. *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979.
- Foner, Eric. *A Short History of Reconstruction 1863-1877*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2014.
- Foner, Philip S. *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- . *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.
- Fox, Stephen. *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and its Creators*. New York: Vintage Books, 1984.
- Franck, Phyllis. "The Hasidic Poor in New York City." *Poor Jews: An American Awakening*, ed. Naomi Levine and Martin Hochbaum. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1974, pp. 59-69.
- Freiwald, Bina T. "Class, Subjectivity, Desire: Two Autobiographies." *Resources for Feminist Research*, vol. 25, no. 3/4, Winter 1997, pp. 26-33.
- Fuchs, Christian. "Surveillance and Critical Theory." *Media and Communication*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 6-9.
- Giles, James R. "Survival and Transcendence: The Jewish American Immigrant and the American Dream." *Critical Insights: The American Dream*, ed. Keith Newlin. Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2013, pp. 125-145.
- Ginsburg, Daniel E. *The Fix is In: A History of Baseball Gambling and Game Fixing Scandals*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1995.
- Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- . *The Scapegoat*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Glickman, Lawrence B. "Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History." *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence B. Glickman. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 1-14.

- Gregory, James N. *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Guttman, Sondra. “‘No Tomorrow in the Man’: Uncovering the Great Depression in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, vol. 63, no. 3, Autumn 2007, pp. 91-117.
- Hall, Stuart. “The West and the Rest.” *Formations of Modernity: Understanding Modern Societies, an Introduction*, ed. Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993.
- . “The Work of Representation.” *Representation*, ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, Sean Nixon. London: Sage, 2013, pp. 1-47.
- Harap, Louis. *Creative Awakening: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-Century American Literature, 1900-1940s*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.
- Harris, Cheryl I. “Whiteness as Property.” *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (June 1993): 1707-1791.
- Heale, Michael. *The United States in the Long Twentieth Century: Politics and Society Since 1900*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004.
- Heinze, Andrew. “From Scarcity to Abundance: The Immigrant as Consumer.” *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence B. Glickman. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999, pp. 190-206.
- Hemenway, Robert E. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980.
- Hetherington, Kevin. *Capitalism’s Eye: Cultural Spaces of the Commodity*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Higgs, Robert. *The Transformation of the American Economy, 1865-1914: An Essay in Interpretation*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1971.
- “History—Sinclair Oil.” www.sinclairoil.com/history/1920.html. Accessed 10 September, 2018.
- Hoeveler, Diane Long. “This Cosmic Pawnshop We Call Life: Nathanael West, Bergson, Capitalism and Schizophrenia.” *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 33, no. 3, Summer 1996, pp. 411-422.
- Hofstadter, Richard. *Social Darwinism in American Thought*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Hölldobler, Bert and Edward O. Wilson. *Journey to the Ants: A Story of Scientific Exploration*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994.

- Horowitz, Daniel. *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- Howes, Kelly King. "The Great Depression: An Overview." *Perspectives on Modern World History: The Great Depression*, ed. David Haugen, Susan Musser, and Vickey Kalambakal. Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2010.
- Hunt, Alan. "Getting Marx and Foucault Into Bed Together!" *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 31, no. 4, December 2004, pp. 592-609.
- Hyman, Louis. *Borrow: The American Way of Debt*. New York: Vintage Books, 2012.
- Ilmonen, Kaj. *A Social and Economic Theory of Consumption*, trans. David Kivinen. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Jensen, Joan M. *One Foot on the Rockies: Women and Creativity in the Modern American West*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995.
- Jhally, Sut. "Advertising as Religion: The Dialectic of Technology and Magic." *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*, eds. Lan Angus and Sut Jhally. New York: Routledge, 1989, pp. 217-229.
- Johnson, Claudia Durst. *Understanding The Grapes of Wrath: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Kallen, Horace M. *The Decline and Rise of the Consumer: A Philosophy of Consumer Coöperation*. New York: D. Appleton-Century, Co., 1936.
- Kaplan, Temma. "The Disappearing Fathers Under Global Capitalism." *Radical History Review*, vol. 1998, no. 71, 1998, pp. 84-90.
- Khan, Yasmin Sabina. *Enlightening the World: The Creation of the Statue of Liberty*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010.
- Kinnamon, Kenneth. "Native Son." *Major Literary Characters: Bigger Thomas*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990, pp. 60-72.
- Klehr, Harvey and John Earl Haynes. *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992.
- Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978.
- . *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type*. New York: Knopf, 1965.

- Launius, Christie. "The Three Rs: Reading, (W)riting, and Romance in Class Mobility Narratives by Yeziarska, Smedley, and Saxton." *College Literature*, vol. 34, no. 4, fall 2007, pp. 125-147.
- Leach, William R. *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*. New York: Vintage Publishing, 1994.
- . "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925." *The Journal of American History*, vol. 17, no. 2, September 1984, pp. 319-342.
- Lears, T. J. Jackson. "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930." *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880-1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983, pp. 1-38.
- Leiss, William, Stephen Kline, Sut Jhally, and Jacqueline Botterill. *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products, & Images of Well-Being*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. New York: Dover Publications, 2003.
- Leyda, Julia. "Reading White Trash: Class, Race, and Mobility in Faulkner and Le Sueur." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, vol. 56, no. 2, summer 2000, pp. 37-64.
- Light, James F. "Violence, Dreams, and Dostoevsky: The Art of Nathaniel West." *College English*, vol. 19, no. 5, February 1958, pp. 208-213.
- Lind, Michael. *Land of Promise: An Economic History of the United States*. New York: Harper Collins, 2012.
- Link, William A. and Arthur S. Link. *American Epoch: A History of the United States Since 1900 Volume I: War, Reform, and Society 1900-1945*. New York: Knopf, 1974.
- Lury, Celia. *Consumer Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.
- Marquis, Alice G. *Hopes and Ashes: The Birth of Modern Times, 1929-1939*. New York: The Free Press, 1986.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. I. New York: Penguin Classics, 1990.
- . *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto and Other Writings*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005.
- May, Henry F. *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917*. Chicago: Quadrangle, 1964.
- McDonogh, Gary W, ed. *The Florida Negro: A Federal Writers' Project Legacy*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1993.
- McGowan Todd. "Liberation and Domination: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Evolution of Capitalism." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, vol. 24, no. 1, Spring 1999, pp. 109-128.
- McKay, Nellie. "'Crayon Enlargements of Life': Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Autobiography." *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. Michael Awkward. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 51-70.
- McLaughlin, Steven D., Barbara D. Melber, John O. G. Billy, Denise M. Zimmerle, Linda D. Winges, and Terry R. Johnson. *The Changing Lives of American Women*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. "An American Tragedy, or the Promise of an American Life." *Representations*, no. 25, winter 1989, pp. 71-98.
- Mrozowski, Daniel. "How to Kill a Corporation: Frank Norris's *The Octopus* and the Embodiment of American Business." *Studies in American Naturalism*, vol. 6, no. 2, winter 2011, pp. 161-184.
- Mulligan, Roark. "Dreiser and the Dream." *Critical Insights: The American Dream*, ed. Keith Newlin. Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2013, pp. 92-112.
- Nagel, James. "*The Great Gatsby* and the American Dream." *Critical Insights: The American Dream*, ed. Keith Newlin. Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2013, pp. 113-124.
- Nash, Gerald D. *The Great Depression and World War II: Organizing America, 1933-1945*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979.
- Nash, Roderick. *The Nervous Generation: American Thought, 1917-1930*. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1970.
- Newell, Jay, Charles T. Salmon, and Susan Chang. "The Hidden History of Product Placement." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 50, no. 4, December 2006, pp. 575-594.
- Newitz, Annalee and Matt Wray. "Introduction." *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, ed. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz. New York: Routledge, pp. 1-14.

- Norris, Frank. *The Octopus: A Story of California*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1994.
- Norris, James D. *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865-1920*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990.
- Ocepek, Melissa G., George Royer, and William Aspray. "Food Fights for Freedom: A Critical Reading of Food Advertisements from *Ladies' Home Journal* During the Second World War." *Advertising and Society Review*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2015, np.
- Ohler, Paul. "Forms of Ambivalence to 'Tabloid Culture' in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*." *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 36, no. 2, June/September 2010, pp. 33-62.
- Olenyuk, Olena. "How Advertising Shapes Our Minds: A Pragmatic and Cognitive Perspective." *Journal of Languages for Specific Purposes*, vol. 3, no. 1, March 2016, pp. 41-50.
- Olson, James Stuart. *Historical Dictionary of the 1950s*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Palen, John J. *The Suburbs*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1995.
- Payne, Phillip G. *Crash!: How the Economic Boom and Bust of the 1920s Worked*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.
- Pizer, Donald. "Evolution and American Fiction: Three Paradigmatic Novels." *American Literary Realism*, vol. 43, no. 3, spring 2011, pp. 204-222.
- Posnock, Ross. "'A New World, Material Without Being Real': Fitzgerald's Critique of Capitalism in *The Great Gatsby*." *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, ed. Scott Donaldson. Boston: G. K. Hill, 1984, pp. 201-213.
- Powers, Penny. "Rawlinson's Three Axes of Structural Analysis: A Useful Framework for Foucauldian Discourse Analysis." *Aporia*, vol. 5, no. 1, January 2013, pp. 6-12.
- Pudaloff, Ross. "Native Son and Mass Culture." *Major Literary Characters: Bigger Thomas*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990, pp. 90-102.
- Raines, John, ed. *Marx on Religion*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002.
- Roberts, James A. *Shiny Objects: Why We Spend Money We Don't Have in Search of Happiness We Can't Buy*. New York: Harper Collins, 2011.
- Roberts, Mathew. "Bonfire of the Avant-Garde: Culture, Rage, and Readerly Complicity in *The Day of the Locust*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, spring 1996, pp. 61-84.

- Ross, Michael L. *Designing Fictions: Literature Confronts Advertising*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015.
- Ruggles, Steven, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, and Matthew Sobek. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 7.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V7.0>.
- Rule-Maxwell, Lauren. "The New Emperor's Clothes: Keatsian Echoes and American Materialism in *The Great Gatsby*." *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, vol. 8, 2010, pp. 57-78.
- Russell, Thaddeus. *A Renegade History of the United States*. New York: Free Press, 2010.
- Sassoubre, Ticien Marie. "Property and Identity in *The Custom of the Country*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 49, no. 4, winter 2003, pp. 6870-713.
- Scott, Janny and David Leonhardt. "Shadowy Lines That Still Divide." *Class Matters*, ed. Bill Keller. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005.
- Seavoy, Ronald E. *An Economic History of the United States From 1607 to the Present*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Shannon, Patricia. "What is a Southern Tea Cake Anyway?" www.southernliving.com/desserts/cookies/southern-tea-cakes. Accessed 10 September, 2018.
- Shillinglaw, Susan. "California Answers *The Grapes of Wrath*." *Critical Insights: John Steinbeck*, ed. Don Noble. Pasadena, California: Salem Press, 2011, pp. 177-196.
- Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle*. New York: Dover Publications, 2001.
- Singer, Benjamin D. *Advertising and Society*. New York: Addison-Wesley, 1987.
- Sivulka, Juliann. *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1998.
- . *Stronger Than Dirt: A Cultural History of Advertising Personal Hygiene in America, 1875-1940*. Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2001.
- Smedley, Agnes. *Daughter of Earth*. New York: The Feminist Press of the City University of New York, 1987.
- Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776.

- Springer, John. *Hollywood Fictions: The Dream Factory in American Popular Literature*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000.
- Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2006.
- Stone, Richard D. *The Interstate Commerce Commission and the Railroad Industry: A History of Regulatory Policy*. New York: Praeger, 1991.
- Tambling, Jeremy. "Prison-Bound: Dickens and Foucault." *Critical Essays on Charles Dickens's Great Expectations*, ed. Michael Cotsell. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co, 1990, pp. 182-198.
- Thibodeau, Michael and Jana Martin. *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes: Branding and Design in Cigarette Packaging*. New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2000.
- Tunc, Tanfer Emin. "The Great Gatsby: The Tragedy of the American Dream on Long Island's Gold Coast." *Bloom's Literary Themes: The American Dream*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009, pp. 67-80.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Frontier in American History*. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2009.
- Tyson, Lois. *Psychological Politics of the American Dream: The Commodification of Subjectivity in Twentieth-Century American Literature*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994.
- Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Versieren, Jelle. "The Moral Foundations of Adam Smith's Transitional Society: Reappraising Foucault's Representations of Wealth and Marx's Reconstruction of Value Theory." *Capital and Class*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2016, pp. 447-468.
- Voigt, David Q. *America Through Baseball*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976.
- von Cannon, Jordan L. "Prostitution, Primitivism, Performativity." *Studies in American Naturalism*, vol. 10, no. 1, summer 2015, pp. 41-59.
- von Schritltz, Karl. "Foucault on the Prison: Torturing History to Punish Capitalism." *Critical Review*, vol. 13, no. 3/4, summer 1999, pp. 391-411.
- Wallace, Honor McKittrick. "'An Orgy of Acquisition': The Female Consumer, Infidelity, and Commodity Culture in *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House*." *Real-World Writing, Writing the Real World*, ed. Janis P. Stout. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2005, pp. 144-155.
- Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.

- West, Nathaniel. *The Day of the Locust*. Glendale, CA: Bibliotech Press, 2016.
- Wharton, Edith. *The Custom of the Country*. New York: Vintage Classics, 2012.
- Wicke, Jennifer A. *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House, 2010.
- Williams, Raymond. "Advertising: The Magic System." *Raymond Williams on Culture & Society*, ed. Jim McGuigan. London: Sage Publications, 2014, pp. 57-84.
- Williamson, Judith. "Meaning and Ideology." D. McQuail (Ed.), *McQuail's Reader in Mass Communication Theory*, ed. Dennis McQuail. London: Sage Publications, 2002, pp. 298-301.
- Willis, Susan. "Learning From the Banana." *American Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 4, winter 1987, pp. 586-600.
- Wilson, Christopher P. "Sinclair Lewis and the Passing of Capitalism." *American Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, fall 1983, pp. 95-108.
- Witkowski, Terrence H. "World War II Poster Campaigns: Preaching Frugality to American Consumers." *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 32, no. 1, spring 2003, pp. 69-82.
- Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. New York: Perennial Classics, 1998.
- Yeziarska, Anzi. *Bread Givers*. New York: Persea Books, 2003.
- Yoder, Jon A. *Upton Sinclair*. New York: Ungar, 1975.
- Young, William H. and Nancy K. Young. *The 1950s*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004.
- Zimbardo, Philip. *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. New York: Random House, 2007.

Vita

Andrew Blair Spencer was born November 21, 1971, in Dallas, Texas, and is an American citizen. He earned a high school diploma from Woodberry Forest School in Woodberry Forest, Virginia, in 1991; a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Texas in Austin, Texas, in 1996; and a Master of Arts from Baylor University in Waco, Texas, in 2000. His personal website may be viewed at www.andrewbspencer.com and his ORCID identification is <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2890-3485>.

EDUCATION

Virginia Commonwealth University

Doctor of Philosophy, Media, Art, and Text

Dissertation: *Always Already Imprisoned: The Panoptic Power of Capitalism in American Literature, 1900-1940* (Dr. Richard Fine, Director)

Degree Expected 2019

Baylor University

Master of Arts, English

Thesis: *A Cowboy Looks at Reality: The Destruction of the Cowboy Myth in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy* (Dr. Ronald Thomas, Director)

Degree Awarded May 2000

The University of Texas

Bachelor of Arts, English

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Theatre Studies

Texas State Teaching Certificate, Grades 6 – 12 (General Education, English, Theatre)

Degrees Awarded May 1996

FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

American Culture Association

Michael Schoenecke Travel Grant, 2018

Virginia Commonwealth University

Graduate Teaching Assistantship, 2015 – 2019

Nominated for a Presidential Award for Community Multicultural Enrichment, 2019

J. E. Whitesell Award for Best Graduate Critical Essay, 2018

Texas Christian University

Nominated for the Wassenich Award for Mentoring, 2001

Baylor University
Graduate Fellowship, 1997 – 2000
Graduate Research Assistantship, 1997 – 1998
Graduate Teaching Assistantship, 1998 – 2000

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Virginia Commonwealth University
Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of English 2015 – Present

- Upper-division advanced writing

Texas Christian University
Adjunct Instructor, Department of Rhetoric and Composition 2000 – 20002

- Multiple sections of freshman and sophomore rhetoric and composition

Baylor University
Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of English 1998 – 2000

- Freshman composition

REFEREED JOURNAL ARTICLES

“‘Immortal Children of Undying Fame’: Oscar Wilde’s Quest for Immortality in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*” *English Studies*, vol. 99, no. 8, pp. 878-889.

“Beyond a Reasonable Doubt: Mathematical Proof of the Unequivocal Guilt of Margot Macomber in Ernest Hemingway’s ‘The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.’” *The Explicator*, vol. 76, no. 4, pp. 179-182.

“Voluntary Exploitation and Forced Assimilation: John Steinbeck’s Critique of American Advertising in *The Grapes of Wrath*.” *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 40, no. 14, December 2017, pp. 313-324.

“‘A Fiction of Law and Custom’: Mark Twain’s Interrogation of White Privilege in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.” *Mark Twain Annual*, vol. 15, 2017, pp. 126-144.

BOOK CHAPTERS

“A Cowboy Looks at Reality: The Death of the American Frontier and the Illumination of the Cowboy Myth in Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*.” *Western Futures: Perspectives on the Humanities at the Millennium*. Ed. Stephen Tchudi, et al. U of Nevada P, 2000, pp. 143-157.

REFEREED WEB-BASED PUBLICATIONS

“Re-Thinking Postcolonialism: Capitalism as an Imperial Force in Twentieth-Century American Literature, 1900-1940.” *The Apollonian: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, March-June 2016, pp. 31-42.

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Beyond the Frontier: Exploring the Indian Country*, by Stan Hoig. *Southwestern American Literature*

vol. 26, no. 1, Fall 2000, pp. 91-92.

BOOKS

Twenty-Six Miles. New York: iBooks Press, 2013. (fiction)

Tower of Thieves: Inside AIG's Corporate Culture of Greed. New York: Brick Tower Press, 2010. (non-fiction)

Bear Trap: The Fall of Bear Stearns and the Panic of 2008. New York: Brick Tower Press, 2008. (co-author with Bill Bamber, non-fiction)

Veneer. Baltimore: America Star Books, 2005. (fiction)

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

"Outside Looking In: Pip as Flâneur and the Panoptic Power of Capitalism in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*," South Atlantic Modern Language Association, Birmingham, Alabama, 2018.

"Everything that Rises Must Converge: Phallic Symbols as Hindrance to Personal Growth in *The Sun Also Rises*." XVIII International Hemingway Society Conference, The American University of Paris, Paris, France, 2018.

"A 'Thousan' Men Waitin': Panoptic Advertising Metrics in *The Grapes of Wrath*." 2018 Popular Culture/American Culture Association National Conference, Indianapolis, IN, 2018.

"The Importance of Being Remembered: Oscar Wilde's Quest for Immortality in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*" Southern Humanities Council Conference, Savannah, Georgia, 2018.

"The King and the Duke as Twain's Messengers in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*." Northeast Modern Language Society Conference, Baltimore, Maryland, 2017.

"Learning to Love What We Think We Hate: An Intertextual Analysis of *The Taming of the Shrew* and *10 Things I Hate About You*." Shakespeare in Modern Popular Culture International Symposium, Université d'Artois, Arras, France, 2016.

"Making a Murderer: Gender-Bending as Motive for Murder in 'The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber.'" XVII International Hemingway Society Conference, Dominican University, Chicago, Illinois, 2016.

"A Ful Fressh and Newe Reading of Chaucer's Guildsmen." The International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, 2001.

"Oh, Tell Us in Plain Words: The Oral Tradition in Episode I of *Ulysses*." 2001: A Joyce Odyssey, The University of Miami, Miami, Florida, 2001.

"It's Too Late, Old Sport: Why Gatsby Had to Die." The F. Scott Fitzgerald Society International Conference, Nice, France, 2000.

“Of Their Mutual Hideousness They Died: God’s Purging in Byron’s ‘Darkness.’” British Association for Romantic Studies Conference, The University of Lancaster, UK, 1999.

"Not Quite, Not White: The Okies as a Third Race in *The Grapes of Wrath*." Western Literature Association Conference, Sacramento, California, 1999.

“A Cowboy Looks at Reality: The Death of the American Frontier and the Illumination of the Cowboy Myth in Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*.” South Central Modern Language Association Conference, San Antonio, Texas, 1998.

“Golding in Jerusalem: The Banality of Evil in Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*.” Crossing Boundaries International Conference, University of Sheffield, UK, 1998.

OTHER PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Virtual Intern, United States Department of State, Office of Public Diplomacy, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2018 – Present.

English Department Faculty Meeting Graduate Student Representative, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018 – Present.

Co-founder and President, Media, Art, & Text Graduate Student Organization, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018 – Present.

Invited Panelist, “Academics and GTA Responsibilities: Surviving/Flourishing as a Graduate Assistant,” Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018.

Fulbright Scholarship Review Panel, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017 – 2018.

Critical Language Scholarship Review Panel, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017 – 2018.

Tenure and Promotion Review Committee, Department of English, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017.

Technology Committee, Department of English, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016 – 2018.

Co-Organizer, Art and Soul: A Conference on Religion and Literature, Baylor University, 2000.

Panel Organizer, “A Cub Reporter’s Catechism: Ernest Hemingway and Religion,” Art and Soul: A Conference on Religion and Literature, Baylor University, 2000.

Editorial Assistant, *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, 1998 – 2000.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

The Modern Language Association

The American Culture Association

The American Studies Association