The Ethics of American Realism: 1860-1910

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Ethics of American Realism: 1860-1910

by

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For over a century—since its appearance on the American literary scene—realism
has presented challenges to those who have attempted to define it as a genre. From realist
writers themselves (Howells, James, Norris) to prominent contemporary scholars
(Kaplan, Bell, Sundquist), many have debated the boundaries, characteristics, and
coherence of American realism. The most crucial questions concerning genre, those of
how texts within the genre are both unified and divided, have yet to be resolved. So, for
example, no adequate account has been given for how Henry James’s delicate eloquence
and Upton Sinclair’s heavy sermonizing belong to the same genre of fiction.
Furthermore, no satisfactory explanation as to the obvious differences between two such
texts has been offered. This project, The Ethics of American Realism: 1860-1910, adds to
conversations about American realism by working through these particular issues.
Specifically, it examines how realist texts are rhetorically deployed in order to explain
both the coherence of the genre and its inconsistencies. Chapters of this dissertation include discussions concerning the writings of William Dean Howells, Rebecca Harding Davis, Henry James, Émile Zola, and Frank Norris. Throughout, it argues that the uses to which realist texts are put and the ethics that drive these uses provide a framework through which scholars of American literature can define the genre. Theoretically speaking, *The Ethics of American Realism: 1860-1910* situates itself as a bridge between literary critical approaches to realism and rhetorical approaches to literature, re-casting American realist novels as rhetorical acts that have been designed to work in the “real” world and rightly positioning ethics at the center of the realist project. Keywords: realism, naturalism, genre, rhetoric, ethics.
# Table of Contents

Introduction .......................................................... 1

Chapter 1 .................................................................... 20

Deformed Bodies and Texts: Reading the Realism of Rebecca Harding Davis

Chapter 2 .................................................................... 64

Deformed Bodies and Texts: Reading the Realism of Rebecca Harding Davis
Part II: *Margret Howth*

Chapter 3 .................................................................... 114

*The Tragic Muse* and Henry James’s Ethics of Realism

Chapter 4 .................................................................... 165

Naturalism and the Ethics of Authorship: The Problem of Presley in *The Octopus*

Works Cited ............................................................... 230
Introduction

The goal of *The Ethics of American Realism: 1860-1910* is to theorize American literary realism, a genre that has frustrated scholars with its apparent lack of coherence and absence of defining characteristics. (After all, what is a genre if not a grouping of texts that all have something in common?) In this dissertation, I propose that American realism can be defined by a conviction that underlies nearly all of its fiction: that mimetic, fictional texts can do work in the real world. In other words, the genre is unified by its rhetorical nature. One only has to look as far as realism’s historical context to begin to see the validity of this claim: During the nineteenth century in the United States, the project of democracy had given rise to a culture that was characterized by the widespread use of deliberative rhetoric. Not since early in the common era did public discourse have such an influence over the material, social, and political lives of an entire nation. Along with increases in literacy and a growing print culture, the dependence of civic life on persuasive speech fostered a society characterized by public debates, lecture circuits, and magazine editorials. It was into this rhetorical culture that realists deployed their fiction, and upon closer examination, it is clear that realist writers were keenly aware of their participation in the American web of rhetoric.

The Logic of American Realism

Since realism’s appearance on the American literary scene (around 1860), literary theorists have debated the genre’s status *qua* genre. It is not difficult to see why. Realist literature encompasses a stunning spectrum of nineteenth-century texts. These are often further divided into sub-genres, some of which overlap each other: the social realists
(Howells, Sinclair, and Davis), the psychological realists (James and Wharton), the regionalists (Twain, Chopin, and Jewett), the naturalists (Crane, Dreiser, and Norris), the high realists (James and Howells), and so on. Some scholars argue to exclude certain writers from the realist pantheon, depending on these scholars’ definitions of the genre: for example, Twain, for the elements of fantasy and irony that seem to undermine the realism of his work, or Wharton, for her seeming inability to portray common, working-class characters. Some scholars propose that particular texts belong more appropriately to a different genre of literature, usually romanticism or sentimentalism. One thing is clear: the term realism does not represent a stable grouping of texts.

These debates about realism’s legitimacy as a genre began when the label was first applied to American literature (it was widely used in Europe for at least two decades previously). William Dean Howells, nineteenth-century novelist and editor of the Atlantic Monthly, championed realism as a genre, calling it “democracy in literature” (Criticism and Fiction 187) and praising it for “paint[ing] life as it is” (The Rise of Silas Lapham 178). Henry James seemed to recommend the same approach in “The Art of Fiction,” where he wrote that the “air of reality” and the “illusion of life” are the “supreme virtue[s] of a novel” (53). But it is clear that the two theorists are not arguing for the same version of realism; in fact, the feature of realism that Howells insists on, the moral function of the novel, is the feature that James most despises. Frank Norris out-and-out rejected the application of the label realism to his fiction, arguing that his literary form,

1 See pages 70-84 of Michael Davitt Bell’s The Problem of American Realism for a thoughtful, persuasive argument concerning the essential differences between these two writers on the topic of realism.
naturalism, was essentially different than realism and that it was in fact derived from romantic fiction (“Zola as a Romantic Writer”). However, most of Norris’s work bears a great deal of resemblance to work traditionally categorized as realist; many scholars identify naturalism as a sub-genre of realism. In other words, if Norris’s fiction is not realist, then it is difficult to say what fiction is realist. This dilemma typifies the problems with defining American realism; each individual text has characteristics in common with other realist texts, but no defining characteristic occurs in every instance of realism.

Because of this, contemporary scholars have struggled to stake out realism’s boundaries. The genre’s concern with materiality and labor, its investment in detail, and its staunch refusal of romantic conventions have all been proposed as the genre’s unifying feature. However, valid arguments have been made against each proposal. As a result, more sophisticated theories have been proffered. In Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910, Nancy Glazener writes, “[My] title insists that realism is something that has to be read for, not something that inheres in how a text is written or where it is published” (3). Eric Sundquist, in “The Country of the Blue,” argues that realism’s most prominent characteristic is its continual “veer[ing] toward romance” (20). Amy Kaplan, in The Social Construction of American Realism, writes, “This realism that develops in American fiction in the 1880s and 1890s is . . . an anxious and contradictory mode which both articulates and combats the growing sense of unreality at the heart of middle-class life” (9). Many of these theories are too specific to adequately explain the many permutations of realism, so some scholars now completely
bracket conversations about the genre as genre and focus instead on individual writers and texts. Michael Davitt Bell summarizes the situation:

It is hard to see Howells, Twain, and James—not to mention such successors as Sarah Orne Jewett, Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser—as constituting any single literary tradition or “school” of literature; the differences among their characteristic modes are far more striking than the similarities. It is also virtually impossible to extract from their novels and manifestoes any consistent definition of “realism” (or of “naturalism”) as a specific kind of literary representation. Only James, among the whole group, approached such definition with genuine rigor, and he was for this reason often at odds with, for instance, his friend Howells, the supposed leader of the war for realism. (1-2)

In the end, Bell declares the uselessness of such endeavors, saying that he does not “propose to comb the novels of our so-called ‘realists’ and ‘naturalists’ in order to extract from them, one more time, some implicit common aesthetic which we can then, in tautological triumph, call ‘realism’ or ‘naturalism’” (5). Instead, he turns to an examination of how the labels realism and naturalism were used to validate the efforts of particular writers.

Despite Bell’s emphatic disavowal of efforts to discover a “common aesthetic” underlying the realist project, I think that it is worthwhile to look for the historical logic that dictated American literature’s turn toward realism. In other words, in the mid-nineteenth century, something pressured the trajectory of American literature away from
romanticism and toward realism. Here, perhaps, we can find the coherence of the genre, not in a common form, but in a common purpose. I do not propose to “comb the novels” of the realists and naturalists for their formal consistencies, but I do plan to examine them for an underlying *raison d’être*, suggesting that what initiated the realist project and what kept it in progress until at least 1910 was not form, but function.

**Letting the Novels Speak**

One does not have to read far into American realist literature to realize that the novels themselves are not silent on this subject, that is, on the subject of their own existence. On the contrary, realist novels are replete with tales of artistic production, which are populated by artist- and writer-characters. And, in fact, these stories most often do not concern the formal characteristics of these artists’ work but the reasons, motives, and ideals for which they work. As Amy Kaplan has written, “[By] writing so often about writers, realists explore both the social construction of their own roles and their implication in constructing the reality their novels represent” (14). Kaplan argues that, in their novels, realists explore their own social positions, specifically in their roles as writers. In these metanarratives, which appear in the novels of almost every prominent realist writer, realists contemplate the social function of writing, and it is for this reason that these metanarratives are useful to literary scholars looking for the logic behind the realist project.

In this way, American literary realism bears a marked resemblance to French and American realist painting. In *Courbet’s Realism* and *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane*, art historian Michael Fried makes the persuasive
argument that realist painters Gustave Courbet and Thomas Eakins incorporate images of their own artistic activities into their paintings in order to work through the problematic nature of their work as artists. Fried claims that the existence of a spectator posed serious problems for European painters beginning in the seventeenth century; the unavoidable fact of a spectator made paintings not representations of reality, but staged and theatrical performances for what Fried calls beholders. In response to this problematic, painters developed strategies to negate the presence of the spectator. In the case of Courbet and Eakins, the painters attempt to bodily transport themselves into their paintings. As the painting’s primary (and original) beholder, the painter resists the staged nature of the painting and instead becomes part of the painting itself, thereby refusing the act of beholding. To simplify a very complex argument, in an attempt to deal with the ontological reality of the spectator, these realist painters represent the act of painting within the paintings themselves.

In several of its most important points, Fried’s argument suggests that metanarrative is a natural by-product of realism. For one, the argument turns upon the notion that the realist is part of the reality he or she represents. For Fried, the painter ontologically exists as the painting’s primary beholder; this reality cannot be escaped. As realists, therefore, Courbet and Eakins practice incorporation instead of denial. In other words, instead of reasserting their objectivity and denying their own presence in the painting mise en scène, Courbet and Eakins represent themselves as inside the painting. In comparing Courbet’s artistic practices to photography, Fried addresses “the contrast between the camera’s position outside the world it reproduces [as a machine/automaton]
and the painter-beholder’s position *inside* the world he represents” (*Courbet’s Realism* 281; original emphasis):

Think of the seated painter-beholder in the *Painter’s Studio* depicting his own immersion with the central group, or, again, of the figure of the hunter-painter in the *Quarry* who seems physically to be sinking into the pictorial field. Similarly, the fact that at any moment what the (still or motion picture) camera photographs is taken from a particular angle of viewing . . . is fundamentally opposed to the positional dynamics of Courbet’s project, which in its pursuit of merger would undo the separation between beholder and beheld that is the precondition for there being points of view at all. (281)

Fried argues that the realist is always already part of the subject being painted. In many ways, nothing is more natural than the attempt to merge the realist’s body with the painting’s *motif*. Furthermore, it seems that the realist’s task of representing life as it actually occurs in fact necessitates the portrayal of the artist at work.

Fried’s analysis also implies that metanarrative is a strategic response to the problematic existence of an audience. In his earlier writing on painting and the problem of the spectator, Fried develops the argument that, for centuries, painters used the strategy of *absorption* to deal with the existence of the audience. Painters portrayed subjects that were so absorbed in their fictional world that they denied the existence of the spectator. However, in *Courbet’s Realism*, Fried writes that “by the 1840s and 1850s the issue of theatricality [issues involving the existence of the spectator] had come to loom between
the painter-beholder and his canvas, with the result that it now had to be resolved in and through the act of painting rather than strictly as a problem of representation” (278).

Here, Fried implies that a crisis had come in terms of what realistic painting could deny; no longer could the subject of the painting simply ignore the spectator. Just as the realist could not deny his or her own existence as part of the painting, he or she could no longer deny the existence of the audience for whom the painting had been created. As in realist painting, in realist literature, the presence of metanarratives suggests that a crisis had come for American fiction as far as what it could deny about its own existence. The explicit turn toward realism had made it necessary for American writers to work through their relationships to their audiences.

**Ethical Considerations**

Courbet’s incorporation of himself into his paintings leads to what Fried calls the “positional dynamics of Courbet’s project” (281). As a realist, Courbet is compelled to map out the relationship between himself (the painter), his text (the painting), and his audience (the spectator). He eliminates the audience as a factor by merging its role with that of the painter, resulting in a hybrid role Fried calls the painter-beholder. Then, Courbet incorporates the painter-beholder into the painting, attempting to corporeally merge the painter and painting. In the case of Courbet, the three elements, painter, painting, and spectator, become identical. Other realists likewise struggle to understand their relationships with their audiences, sometimes with different results than Courbet. In *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration*, Fried demonstrates that Thomas Eakins similarly figures his own artistic activities in his paintings but stakes out a different painter-spectator
relationship than Courbet. In both cases, the realist painter works through the “positional
dynamics” of his art using metanarrative.

The metanarratives realist writers embed in their fiction serve a similar purpose,
to position the writer, text, and audience in relation to each other. To put it differently,
they diagram the social relationships between the three elements. As Kaplan has said, in
their fiction, realist writers “explore . . . the social construction of their own roles” (14).
This statement implies that the writer’s role is in fact a social one, that the text, without
which, after all, one is not a writer, puts the writer into a social relationship with an
audience. What writers explore in these metanarratives, then, is not just the act of writing
or the moment of artistic production, but a rhetorical situation.

This claim is validated by the numerous metanarratives in American realism that
deal with not only writing but also reading. Many realist novels explore the acts of both
artistic production and reception in an attempt to map out the most ethical relationship
between the two. This is, for example, clearly the point of one scene in William Dean
Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. In the scene, a high-society family is hosting a
dinner party; in attendance are several young people and a minister named Mr. Sewell
(notice the similarity to Howells’s own name). At the party, a young Miss Kingsbury
begins to describe the latest fashion in literature, epitomized by a novel entitled *Tears,
Idle Tears*. She declares, “It’s perfectly heart-breaking, as you’ll imagine from the name;
but there’s such a dear old-fashioned hero and heroine in it, who keep dying for each
other all the way through, and making the most wildly satisfactory and unnecessary
sacrifices for each other. You feel as if you’d done them yourself” (177). Mr. Sewell, who like Howells tends toward preaching, responds in turn (with a few interruptions):

I don’t think there was ever a time when [novels] formed the whole intellectual experience of more people. They do greater mischief than ever. . . . I should be glad of their help. But these novels with old-fashioned heroes and heroines in them—excuse me, Miss Kingsbury—are ruinous! . . . These novelists could be the greatest possible help to us [ministers] if they painted life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation, but for the most part they have been and are altogether noxious. . . . And the self-sacrifice painted in most novels like this . . . is nothing but psychical suicide, and is as wholly immoral as the spectacle of a man falling upon his sword. . . . The whole business of love and love-making and marrying, is painted by the novelists in a monstrous disproportion to the other relations of life. (178)

This scene is a commentary on the detrimental relationship the writer has formed with his or her readers. Not only does the author of *Tears, Idle Tears* position himself or herself in close sympathy with the reader (so that the reader feels the agony of the characters), but also abuses this closeness by conveying false ideals to the reader.

What Howells clearly believes, and I will argue the same of other American realists, is that the writer exercises influence over the reader, that fiction implicitly positions, educates, and coaches the reader. As Walter Ong writes in his essay “The Writer’s Audience Is Always a Fiction,”
What do we mean by saying the audience is a fiction? Two things at least. First, that the writer must construct in his imagination, clearly or vaguely, an audience cast in some sort of role—entertainment seekers, reflective sharers of experience (as those who listen to Conrad’s Marlow), inhabitants of a lost and remembered world of prepubertal latency (readers of Tolkien’s hobbit stories), and so on. Second, we mean that the audience must correspondingly fictionalize itself. A reader has to play the role in which the author has cast him, which seldom coincides with his role in the rest of the world. . . . Readers over the ages have had to learn this game of literacy, how to conform themselves to the projections of the writers they read, or at least how to operate in terms of these projections. (12)

Ong argues that the reader is a creation of the writer. So does Wayne Booth, who writes, “[The] implied author is someone with whose beliefs I must largely agree if I am to enjoy his work. . . . It is only as I read that I become the self whose beliefs must coincide with the author’s. Regardless of my real beliefs and practices, I must subordinate my mind and heart to the book if I am to enjoy it to the full” (137-8). Both critics acknowledge that the reader is, in many ways, at the mercy of the writer, that in the act of writing, the writer is not merely thinking aloud, so to speak, but is acting upon actual (often unwitting) readers.

Of course, Ong and Booth do not limit their observations to realists alone, but speak to all fiction writers. However, and Howells serves as an example of this, realists seem to be particularly concerned about the relationship formed between the writer, the
text, and the reader. As Jennifer Doyle has argued, nineteenth-century fiction in particular nurtures “fantasies of connection between the book, the writer, and the reader” (Untitled). Especially in its emphasis on intensely embodied characters and the material aspects of writing, realism “reminds us of the text’s opacity (we can finger the page but not the subject)” but also reminds us “of the text’s proximity to us (we do hold these pages in our hands)” (Doyle, “A New Race” 24). For realists, the relationships between the writer, the text, and the reader are not simply abstract notions. Often, they are figured as being physical and material (Doyle points to the materiality of bars, windows, and walls standing between the narrator and various characters in Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills”), as if the act of writing is tantamount to one body physically impacting another.

Here, we begin to see why ethics are an important consideration in a realist paradigm of writing. If ethics govern how bodies interact with one another, and writing is tantamount to the interaction between bodies, ethics should govern the act of writing. To put it simply, realists are concerned about how fiction might be used rightly, for the good of society. For example, Émile Zola addresses the relationship between fiction and ethics in his treatise The Experimental Novel, and although Zola was specifically theorizing the ethics of naturalism in his essay, it speaks to what was occurring at the time in American realism. Zola begins his essay by characterizing experimental medicine, looking forward to the day when “the doctor will be the master of maladies” and “will cure without fail” (25). As the essay progresses, Zola compares the work of the experimental doctor with
that of the novelist, showing that the work of the novelist will also bring about “the greatest possible amount of justice and freedom” (25). He writes,

This, then, is the end, this is the purpose in physiology and in experimental medicine: to make one’s self master of life in order to be able to direct it. . . . Well, this dream of the physiologist and the experimental doctor is also that of the novelist. . . . Their object is ours: we also desire to master certain phenomena of an intellectual and personal order, to be able to direct them. We are, in a word, experimental moralists, showing by experiment in what way a passion acts in a certain social condition. The day in which we gain control of the mechanism of this passion we can treat it and reduce it, or at least make it as inoffensive as possible. And in this consists the practical utility and high morality of our naturalistic works . . . (25-6)

Although here Zola makes no mention of the relationship between the writer and the audience, he does emphasize the moral thrust of naturalist (or realist) fiction. Like Howells and so many others, Zola was conscious of, even preoccupied by, the good or harm that his fiction could do. In fact, in The Experimental Novel he makes social improvement his main reason for writing in the first place.

What makes Zola’s unusual characterization of the experimental novel so important for our discussion here is his almost presumptuous premise that the best writing is not thought but action. Again and again, he calls experimental novelists “workers” and novels their “work,” casting novel-writing in the terms of scientific
experiment, suggesting that novelists work on social conditions in the way that a chemist manipulates chemicals (38). *The Experimental Novel* indicates that, in the late nineteenth century, fiction was being reconceptualized. No longer limited to fantasy or mimesis, fiction was action. And, it had the potential to be activism.

**Fiction at Work in the World**

Nineteenth-century realists conceptualized writing as action and texts as doing work in the real world. They deliberated about the most ethical way to conduct themselves as artists. In order to fully understand realism as a genre, we as scholars must take into account these ideas as a crucial part of the genre’s historical context. However, as Francis-Noël Thomas argues in the preface to *The Writer Writing: Philosphic Acts in Literature*, the only way to take seriously such ideas is to legitimate “the writer’s conceptions of what a text might be and how it might be used to address an issue, answer a question, solve a problem—in short, how it might *do* something” (xviii; original emphasis). Of course, as critics, here we have transgressed the border between literary and rhetorical studies. Technically speaking, language at work in the world is the province of rhetoric. However, as Thomas points out, it is only by acknowledging texts as the acts of writers that a critic gives “full scope to the original ideas of great writers” (xviii). Especially in the case of realism, which I argue is particularly rhetorical in nature, fully comprehending the text (and the genre) means considering it in its rhetorical dimensions.

Such is the course charted out for *The Ethics of American Realism: 1860-1910*, to map how particular realist texts were rhetorically conceptualized and the ethical concerns
that motivated them. To this end, the first two chapters of this dissertation analyze the fiction of Rebecca Harding Davis, arguably the first realist writer in the United States. Davis’s pioneering role in American realism positions her writing as a prototype of realist fiction to follow, and it is important to understand how she envisioned her writing as working in the world. Fortunately, like many other realists, Davis embeds a metanarrative into her first story, “Life in the Iron Mills,” that educates her readers on how to approach this new form of fiction and outlines her beliefs concerning art’s ability to work lasting change in society. Applying the ideas of the metanarrative to “Life in the Iron Mills” as a whole demonstrates that Davis strove to craft fiction that would change undesirable aspects of social and material reality. In her stories, she dwells on materiality (bodies, waste, walls) in order to indicate immaterial truth (suffering, need, privilege), hoping that through these relays, the audience will be persuaded to change in lasting ways. To summarize, chapter one argues that “Life in the Iron Mills” portrays realism as a means to improve deplorable social and material conditions.

This paradigm of realism—that fiction should be used to persuade audiences into changing for the overall good of society—became standard, and many realists, including William Dean Howells, espoused some version of it. Davis herself adhered to this standard despite opposition from the literary establishment to her second realist work, Margret Howth, the subject of this dissertation’s second chapter. The analysis in this chapter focuses on how Davis maintained her commitment to realism as activism, even as her publisher demanded that she change the formal characteristics of her fiction. To briefly explain, the editor of the Atlantic Monthly objected to the gloomy tone of Davis’s
original story and asked her to significantly revise it. The result is a second version of *Margret Howth*, the only version extant today, which is a confused mixture of realism and sentimentalism and activism and acceptance. However, in my interpretation of the novel, I argue that Davis purposefully disfigures *Margret Howth* in order to indicate the story’s original rhetorical intentions. In other words, the sentimental distortions of an otherwise realist novel are persuasive strategies used by Davis to direct readers to social action. Therefore, despite the aesthetic differences between “Life in the Iron Mills” and *Margret Howth*, the two texts are designed to accomplish similar goals.

In chapter three, I consider an ethics of realism that differs profoundly from Davis’s, that of Henry James. In my analysis, I argue that, for James, realism is most ethical when it aims, not toward immediate social and political goals, but toward mimetic excellence. James’s novel *The Tragic Muse* self-consciously repudiates realism that is politically oriented and instead advocates for fiction that represents reality for no immediate purpose. The novel’s narrative follows the main character as he attempts to choose between a career as a politician and a career as a painter. In what I see as a commentary on his own practice as an artist, James sets up political action and seemingly function-less artistic activities as direct opposites; then he portrays art as the more ethical undertaking. When viewed as a rhetorical act, *The Tragic Muse* argues that politically disinterested art actually works for the betterment of society. When this metanarrative is considered in light of James’s craft, it shows that James favors a practice of realism that focuses on accurately representing life as it is experienced and that he rejects the idea that his writing needed some sort of political or social justification. This reading of James’s
novel explains many of the formal differences between James’s fiction and that of other realists like Howells or Davis.

Chapter four extends the work of mapping the ethics of American realism by considering the rhetorical dimensions of American literary naturalism, which is widely regarded as a sub-genre of realism. Naturalism is distinctly deterministic, viewing the motion of the universe as largely unalterable; however, the novels themselves are rife with social and political outrage, which feels to readers as though they are being called to action. My analysis attempts to work through the seeming contradiction between a form that presents social and political action as futile and a novel that seems to plead for activism, in this case, Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*. Through interpreting the metanarrative in this novel, I arrive at the conclusion that Norris reconciles the contradictions of naturalism by appealing to the supernatural. Specifically, the failures of the character Presley, a poet, are a stark contrast to the successes of the character Vanamee, a mystic, demonstrating that art’s inability to change social and material reality can only be remedied by supernatural means. In the end, Norris’s reconciliation of naturalism’s contradictions is at best tentative.

As a whole, *The Ethics of American Realism: 1860-1910* suggests that the logic of American literary realism—as a genre—can be found in an authorial/textual awareness of fiction’s ability, through mimesis, to act as an agent in social and material reality. In other words, the notion of a text representing the world and at work in the world is the defining characteristic of American realism. My readings of the novels of Davis, James, and Norris, taken together, argue that realist texts have in common the underlying conviction.
that fictional representations of reality are in fact rhetorical acts. This argument is distinct from those which, like Bell notes, “comb the novels of our so-called ‘realists’ and ‘naturalists’” to find some “implicit common aesthetic” (5), not only because of its focus on function rather than form but also because of its capability to accommodate and explain realism’s heterogeneity. Instead of trying to squeeze all realist fiction into a common mold, my theory of realism expands to incorporate realist fiction as it manifests itself in unexpected or unorthodox ways. Specifically, according to this conceptualization of realism, the obvious differences between realist texts can be accounted for by considering the variety of rhetorical purposes for which realists have written. Realist texts vary according to the uses that their authors envision for them; while an overall awareness of fictional texts as rhetorical acts permeates the genre, these self-conscious rhetorical acts are deployed for different political reasons and along different ethical lines. In other words, as a form, realism embraces a variety of values, intentions, and ethics; as Leo Bersani writes, the realist novel “welcomes the disparate, it generously gives space to a great variety of experience” (61). It therefore follows that any theory attempting to define realism must as well give space to the adaptability of the genre.

Overall, my research shows that an account of realism’s rhetorical dimensions and of the ways that realist authors understood their novels as rhetorical acts is crucial to understanding the genre as a genre. A preoccupation with the ethics of mimesis defines realism as a genre, and differences in ethics and values explain the spectrum of texts labeled as realist: from Mark Twain to Upton Sinclair, from Sarah Orne Jewett to Henry James. In positioning the genre at the intersection of rhetoric and literature, this
dissertation sheds new light on the logic of American realism. By situating itself as a bridge between literary critical approaches to realism and rhetorical approaches to literature, *The Ethics of American Realism: 1860-1910* re-casts American realist novels as rhetorical acts that have been designed to work in the real world and in the end discovers ethics to be at the core of the realist project.
Deformed Bodies and Texts: Reading the Realism of Rebecca Harding Davis


Realism in the United States arguably began with Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills or The Korl Woman.” Most scholars of American realism agree that Davis’s early fiction was the first appearance of realism on the American literary scene. As Lisa Long has pointed out, literary history traditionally positions Davis’s fiction as a bridge between the romanticism and sentimentalism of antebellum fiction and the high realism of William Dean Howells and Henry James (267). Others have gone further to show the pioneering role that the realism of Rebecca Harding Davis played and the influence that her fiction held over the postbellum realists. Many scholars identify her as an early realist, and Jane Atteridge Rose calls her fiction “avant-garde realism” (11).

Sharon Harris points out that Davis’s work directly influenced the literary theories of William Dean Howells, realism’s most outspoken advocate in the late nineteenth century. She writes, “Certainly Howells, as much as any other American realist, was influenced by Davis. He was assistant editor of the Atlantic Monthly in the late 1860s when Davis gained national recognition for her innovative fiction and was publishing in that journal some of her finest realistic studies, which detailed her theory of the commonplace . . . which is at the core of all facets of literary realism” (10). If it is true that Howells was directly influenced by Davis’s realism, considering his forceful promotion of realism, then it is not exaggeration to say that Davis changed the course of American literature.²

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² Both Nancy Glazener and Michael Davitt Bell make the argument that William Dean Howells was the driving force behind the popularization of realism in the United States.
However, I consider Sharon Harris’s characterization of Davis as a “metarealist” to be the most apropos description (19). Harris elaborates on this label by saying that such writers “typically synthesize several modes . . . but realism remains their most explicit focus, and the incorporation of realism into their writings is a conscious effort to transform literature from the mystical or other-worldly realm of romanticism into an art form that represents quotidian experience” (19). In other words, Harris notes that early realists attempt to theorize their formal practices as they execute them. These early realist texts therefore contain a narrative and a metanarrative, the story and instructions that tell us how to read and understand the story. Composition scholars Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein refer to this practice as “metacommentary,” in which the writer fuses two kinds of texts in order to facilitate the reader’s understanding (123). In the case of Davis’s “Life in the Iron Mills or The Korl Woman,” the author blends the story of the mills with the metanarrative of the korl woman in order to theorize realism as she produces it. The result is a powerful piece of rhetoric with layered persuasive attempts: the attempt to persuade readers to enact social change and the attempt to persuade readers to read “Life in the Iron Mills” correctly.

The necessity of this layered approach is apparent when one considers the difficulty of the first objective, which is to persuade readers to enact social change. Of course, Rebecca Harding Davis was not the first writer to attempt to inspire social change through writing fiction. For decades, sentimental novelists had written fiction with the hopes of inspiring reform, the most notable example being Harriet Beecher Stowe and her
novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). And, while in hindsight we can say that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was successful in helping to bring about the abolition of slavery, in 1861, when Davis began writing fiction, the potential of sentimental fiction had yet to be fulfilled. It was against the background of sentimental fiction’s seeming inability to bring about social change that Davis developed and championed her “theory of the commonplace” (Harris 10). In turning to a new form of fiction, Davis had to teach her readers how to understand and read it. If her audience did not understand realist strategies, then it would be impossible for Davis to use realism to bring about social change. Together, these two trajectories—toward social change and a new form of fiction—in “Life in the Iron Mills” make it a quintessential realist text and an apt subject for the study of realist ethics.

In this chapter, I will explain how Davis uses realism to push her readers toward social action. Interpreting her own metanarrative about how realism works, I will argue that Davis envisions realism as functioning in a very particular way. More specifically, in “Life in the Iron Mills,” Davis depicts realism as a form of fiction that focuses on material reality, or what Davis calls the commonplace, in order to elucidate immaterial truths. These truths include the imperative of social action. In this story, realism is a series of relays connecting material reality, immaterial truth, and social action. Realism is portrayed as working in this way: The writer is responsible for faithfully representing material reality, and the reader is required to examine the material reality for immaterial truth. Ideally (although I will show that Davis calls this into question), social action follows naturally from the discovery of truth. The term *realism* then seems particularly

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3 To read further on the rhetorical goals of sentimental fiction, see Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs*. 
appropriate when applied to Davis because of her starting point, material reality. Yes, Davis’s ultimate goal is the same as that of the sentimental novelists, but her notions of how literature should accomplish this goal are fundamentally different.

Let us, then, begin with this goal: social change. It is by no means a foregone conclusion that Davis wrote “Life in the Iron Mills” with the intention of promoting action on the part of the readers. However, this issue has been the subject of much scholarly work, to which I will now appeal. Davis scholars generally agree that Davis wrote “Life in the Iron Mills” to advocate for some kind of social reform. These scholars vary in the type of reform they see Davis as advocating, and some arguments are more compelling than others. Jean Pfaelzer writes that Davis takes “the emotive route to reform,” proposing that “Davis appeals to feelings as well as to details from ‘life in the commonplace’ to criticize systems” that sanction oppression (2). Whitney Womack and Sharon Harris extend this description by identifying the kind of reform that Davis advocates through her fiction. Womack writes that Davis opposed collective reform movements and instead contended that “reform efforts are personal, immediate, hands-on, and spiritual” (119). Harris writes similarly that “Davis insisted upon . . . personal activism” and “repudiates any theory allowing for passivity and transcendence” (54, 49).

Other writers specifically deal with the Christian element in Davis’s prescription for reform. Some suggest that Davis was secretly sympathetic to liberationist theology or liberal Christian utopianism (Shurr, Hughes). However, Janice Lasseter convincingly argues that Davis advocates for reform within the Evangelical Protestant church. By
carefully examining the original manuscript of “Life in the Iron Mills,” Lasseter arrives at the following conclusion:

The holograph version and, less effectively, the 1865 text target the Evangelical Protestant church as the primary social institution which had failed at what [Davis] believed was its most elemental task—to allow “brotherly love” to inhere in the church and then suffuse American culture, thereby eliminating poverty. Were that vision to be realized, the Evangelical Protestant Church [sic] would become the instrument of humanitarian reform needed to moderate an industrial, capitalist economy that was running amuck. (175-6)

Lasseter’s argument thus identifies both the problem and solution as existing within organized Christianity. While these characterizations of Davis’s visions of reform vary slightly in emphasis, they all argue for and support the notion that Davis’s fiction was written with the goal of social change—in one form or another—in mind.4

That Rebecca Harding Davis wrote the story with the intention of promoting social action is evident from her portrayals of the Quaker woman at the end of “Life in the Iron Mills.” To summarize, Davis presents the activities of the Quaker woman as a tenuous solution to the problematic developed through the bulk of the story. It is the personal, practical activism of the Quaker woman that removes both Hugh and Deb from the filth of the city and places Deb in a place of spiritual rejuvenation. Davis sets up the

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4 In addition to the works mentioned in this paragraph, for further reading on Davis’s reformist intentions, see Sara Britton Goodling’s “The Silent Partnership” and Lisa A. Long’s “The Postbellum Reform Writings of Rebecca Harding Davis and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.”
Quaker woman’s intervention into the lives of Hugh and especially Deb as a prototype of reform for her readers. This fact has been widely recognized by Davis scholars. Harris writes, “Though Davis does not idealize the Quakers, they most often represent her alternative spiritual perspective. . . . Rejecting the platitudes of so-called Christian reformers, she presents the Friends as those who know right from wrong and who actively pursue the rights of others in that context. . . . Exemplifying Davis’s desired activism, the Quaker woman quietly tends to Deborah’s needs . . .” (53-4). According to Harris, then, the “activism” encouraged by Davis is the quiet care-taking of the Quakers. Similarly, Janice Lasseter argues, “Since Davis so frequently defends her realism on the grounds that her characters are ‘from life,’ it is quite possible that a personal knowledge of the Society of Friends renders the Quaker aspects of the story entirely realistic. Quakers are the sole practitioners of the kind of social activism Davis believed Evangelical Protestants had blatantly ignored” (181). Lasseter echoes Harris in her opinion that the Quakers exhibited a kind of activism that Davis could propose as a solution to the conditions of the laboring classes.

In addition to the Quaker woman’s role in the plot, the descriptions in “Life in the Iron Mills” suggest that there exists a desirable alternative to life in the iron mills. From the beginning of the narrative, Davis uses images of nature to throw into relief the industrial pollution of city life. This nature-city opposition proposes the natural environment as a positive alternative to the city, which is portrayed as hell itself. The narrator tells us that the town is covered in thick smoke that “rolls sullenly in slow folds from the great chimneys of the iron-founderies, and settles down in the black, slimy pools
on the muddy streets,” and continues, “Smoke on the wharves, smoke on the dingy boats, on the yellow river,—cling in a coating of greasy soot to the house-front, the two faded poplars, the faces of the passers-by” (11). The narrator expands on this description until offering the following musing about the river: “What if it be stagnant and slimy here? It knows that beyond there waits for it odorous sunlight,—quaint old gardens, dusky with soft, green foliage of apple-trees, and flushing crimson with roses,—air, and fields, and mountains” (13). Davis places these two settings in direct opposition in order to show readers the desirability of the latter in the face of the misery of industrial life. In fact, when Hugh envisions a solution to his life of hard labor, he dreams of escape “out of the wet, the pain, the ashes, somewhere, anywhere,—only for one moment of free air on a hill-side, to lie down and let his sick soul throb itself out in the sunshine” (41). Here the natural environment is portrayed as salvation for Hugh, and although it is denied him, it is offered to Deb. The depiction of a natural environment as an alternative to the pollution of city life recurs in Davis’s work, and in “Life in the Iron Mills,” it is used to recommend the activist agenda of the Quaker woman.

We can identify the Quaker woman’s activities as those that are recommended by Davis because she crowns them with the same imagery. The narrator tells us that the woman “in the same, still, gentle way, brought a vase of wood-leaves and berries, and placed it by the pallet, then opened the narrow window. The fresh air blew in, and swept the woody fragrance over [Hugh’s] dead face” (61-2). The woman brings with her the restoration that Hugh and Deb require, and then she takes them both back to the hills: “Thee sees the hills, friend, over the river? Thee sees how the light lies warm there, and
the winds of God blow all the day? I live there,—where the blue smoke is, by the trees” (62). The Quaker woman then is associated with the natural environment that Davis proposes as an alternative to the smoke and filth of the city. Just as the natural environment brings healing to the river at the beginning of the story and to Deb at the end, the Quaker woman’s activism brings healing to those that she encounters. In the end, the Quaker woman’s activism is proposed by Davis as a response to the depressing conditions of the working class.

While the example of the Quaker woman does demonstrate that Davis envisioned some sort of reform as a solution to the problems of the working class, the tenuousness of Davis’s proposal of this solution must be noted. Critics have commented on the unsatisfactory nature of this solution, in general accusing Davis of recommending religion as a panacea for the material problems of class and labor. However, I want to suggest that the more pressing problem lies with Davis’s portrayal of this solution, not the solution itself. The Quaker woman’s appearance on the scene of “Life in the Iron Mills” feels forced and seems like an appendix, not the story’s organic end. In other words, the weakness of the Quaker woman solution is one of form, not necessarily content. In her essay, “‘A New Race of Hottentots, Perhaps?’: Aesthetics and Politics in ‘Life in the Iron Mills or, The Korl Woman,’” Jennifer Doyle encapsulates the issues that surround the story’s end. She writes, “The narrator half-heartedly recounts Deborah’s release from prison and her redemption under the guidance of the Quakers who take her in. . . . The moral offered by her rescue (perhaps an argument for the redemptive power of faith) is feeble when compared with the maudlin scenes that precede Deborah’s
redemption. The affective end, the emotional crisis, of the story is the scene of Hugh’s death” (4; original emphasis). Doyle goes on to demonstrate that the story’s recuperative ending is eclipsed by a larger doubt about the efficacy of the work of art (Davis’s own chosen form of activism) in bringing about this ending. To put it differently, the formal problems of the story’s end—of the solution proposed—is reflective of the story’s larger ambivalence about whether art can offer any solutions to material problems. In this way, the story’s conclusion returns us to its most pervasive and persisting problematic: how art, in this case fiction, can bring about lasting social change. As I formerly suggested, “Life in the Iron Mills” has two purposes embedded in its narrative: first, to bring about social change, and second, to help readers understand the first purpose, which is to bring about social change.

This problematic is by no means exclusive to Davis’s work. As I have already indicated, sentimental novelists grappled with it before Davis began writing, and political fiction became a staple of American literature in the years following the publication of “Life in the Iron Mills.” The question of how art can bring about lasting social change has been approached in many different ways by literary theorists and is especially prominent in discourse influenced by Marxist literary theory. But, it is important to recognize that this problematic first and foremost belongs to the field of rhetoric; it is a matter of persuasion. The earliest writings of Greek rhetoricians address how one can use discourse to move others to a desired end, and the political uses of rhetoric were widely recognized in the works of Gorgias, Plato, and Aristotle. By the time of the Roman Empire, rhetoric was almost exclusively used for political and pragmatic purposes.
Therefore, Davis’s question of how art, specifically realism, can bring about social change is primarily a rhetorical one and can be usefully addressed through rhetorical theory. Allow me then to recast her question in rhetorical terms: How can realism be used to move an audience to act upon undesirable social conditions?

Davis’s rhetorical movements, I believe, can most effectively be analyzed through the rhetorical theory of Augustine. There are many reasons for this, some of which will become clear later in this chapter, but I will elaborate on a few here. First, Augustine’s writing on rhetoric is in many ways a synthesis of all the rhetorical theory before him. His writing was the last to engage classical rhetoric until the Renaissance, and it is the culmination of hundreds of years of rhetorical theory. Substantial innovations in rhetorical theory would not occur again until the twentieth century. Secondly, Augustine’s work speaks specifically to Davis’s particular brand of persuasion. Most of the classical rhetoricians were concerned with persuasion toward policy; Gorgias, Aristotle, Cicero, and others were primarily interested in rhetoric that produced a one-time decision. In other words, this rhetorical theory was developed in order to ensure a desirable decision, vote, or verdict. However, this isn’t really what Davis sees as her end goal. As I have already discussed, Davis advocates for repeated acts of personal activism; she seems to call for a lifestyle change in her audience. Plato indirectly addresses this issue, but it is Augustine who most fully engages the topic of persuasion that is intended to produce permanent changes of behavior in an audience.

In his treatise *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine addresses two questions. The primary question is, “How does a speaker get an audience to act in accordance with the
truth?" The secondary question asks, “How does a speaker communicate to the audience what the truth is?” And though, of course, Augustine is writing within the context of Christian preaching, the parallels to realism as a persuasive strategy are striking. In its earliest instances and throughout its domination of the American literary scene, realism was engaged in answering these two questions. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine gives us a picture of the rhetorical scenario that Davis faces in “Life in the Iron Mills.” In order for a speaker to convince an audience to change his or her behavior toward a particular moral or ethical dictate (“the good toward which our persuasion aims” [Augustine 481]), he or she must engage in an intricate rhetorical process. Augustine writes,

> For if the matters taught are such that knowledge of and belief in them are sufficient, agreement with them is nothing more than confessing their truth. But when a line of action is the matter of instruction, and that this be followed is the reason for the instruction, in vain is conviction that the words are true, in vain is the style of the speech pleasing, if action does not follow upon understanding. It is necessary therefore, that the sacred orator, when urging that something be done, should not only teach in order to instruct, and please in order to hold, but also move in order to win. For indeed, it is only by the heights of eloquence that man is to be moved to agreement who has not been brought to it by truth, though demonstrated to his own acknowledgment . . . (467)
The process, then, to persuade an audience to act (also described by Augustine as “to move” or “to win” [467]) begins with instruction (also described by Augustine as to make “what was obscure . . . clear” [465]). Along the way, the speaker must also please the audience in order to maintain its attention. Finally, only after these two goals have been reached, persuasion, defined by Augustine as movement or action, can (but not necessarily will) take place (Augustine 466).  

5 The difficulties inherent in instruction alone are formidable. In speaking of instruction, Augustine writes,

And [intelligibility] indeed must be insisted upon, that we may be understood, not only in conversations with one person or with several, but also much more when a sermon is being delivered before assemblies. For in conversations, each one has the opportunity of questioning; but when all are quiet, that one may be heard, and all are turned toward him with fixed attention, then it is neither customary nor proper for any one to ask about what he has not understood, and for this reason it should be the special concern of the speaker to assist the silent listener. (465)

The process of instruction then, or of communicating truth, Augustine’s secondary concern, is in itself a difficult task. At one point, Augustine writes that part of instructional speech is for the “matter” to be “fixed deep in the heart” (465). The demands on the speaker, then, just to instruct and clarify seem extensive. However, part

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5 Here, Augustine’s aims of discourse correspond to Cicero’s “offices” of rhetoric, to inform, to please, and to persuade, and to Cicero’s three styles, the plain, the middle, and the vigorous. See Cicero’s De Oratore and Orator.
of the process is also to keep the audience’s attention by pleasing them, which also presents a set of demands to the speaker. Still speaking of instruction, Augustine warns the speaker that pleasing the audience should not be overlooked. He writes that speech presented in “an unpleasing manner” appeals to only the most “zealous persons” (465). Augustine writes, “[Because] of the natural fastidiousness of most people, even the very food which is necessary for life’s sustenance must have seasoning” (466). To put it less figuratively, Augustine is saying that even basic truths must be presented pleasingly, or the audience will not receive them. Thus, Augustine presents us with a rhetorical scenario in which even the secondary task is complicated.

However, bridging the gap between communicating the truth and persuading the audience to act upon it presents even more problems to the speaker. In fact, Augustine gives recommendations to the speaker for bridging this gap, but in the end, he suggests that this task is better left to God (468). Augustine hints at the difficulties of moving from instruction to persuasion in the long passage quoted above. To paraphrase, he says that if a person is not brought to action by a presentation of the truth, which has been “demonstrated to his own acknowledgement,” then it will require the “heights of eloquence” to do so (467). Elsewhere, Augustine writes, “But if the audience needs to be aroused rather than to be informed, in order that they may not be slow in living up to what they already know, and that they may give their assent to what they are convinced is true, greater powers of oratory are required” (458). In order to move an audience from acknowledgement to action is a task that demands extraordinary persuasive efforts. Augustine also seems concerned about the genuineness and permanence of the persuasion
that takes place during a speech. As I mentioned above, for speakers who desire to bring about permanent lifestyle changes in an audience, the temporary nature of the rhetorical moment is of real concern. Although a speaker can judge the effects of his or her speech through the “tears” and “groans” of the audience, Augustine recognizes that his success as a speaker can only be ultimately proven by “the actual fact” of a “change of life” (480). Obviously, the difficulties that plague speech intended to move an audience to action are numerous and significant.

As a result, Augustine’s recommendations for the speaker are to try as many strategies as might work. He addresses the case of those who need to be “aroused rather than informed” by saying, “In such a case, entreaties and reproaches, exhortations and compulsion, and every other means conducive to stirring the heart are necessary” (458). This is an important passage because it indicates that, according to Augustine, the means of moving an audience from acknowledging the truth to action is by “stirring the heart.” It seems that persuading an audience to act involves some kind of spiritual or emotional change that is difficult for a speaker to produce. Elsewhere, Augustine speaks of the “heart” making “so important and so serious a decision,” a result of being “set on fire by the grand style of oratory” (477). It is then a spiritual or emotional change that Augustine seeks when trying to bridge the gap between communicating the truth and convincing an audience to act upon it.

The problem, really, in moving a listener from acknowledgement to action is one of spiritual or emotional identification. Augustine indirectly demonstrates this in passages to which I have already alluded. Consider these excerpts once more:
It is necessary, therefore, that the sacred orator, when urging that something be done, should not only teach in order to instruct, and please in order to hold, but also move in order to win. For indeed, it is only by the heights of eloquence that a man is to be moved to agreement who has not been brought to it by truth, though demonstrated to his own acknowledgement . . . (467; emphasis added)

But if the audience needs to be aroused rather than to be informed, in order that they may not be slow in living up to what they already know, and that they may give their assent to what they are convinced is true, greater powers of oratory are required. (458; emphasis added)

In the first excerpt, the word “agreement” is used to indicate the desired result of “urging that something be done.” In short, “agreement” is tantamount to action. In the second excerpt, the word “assent” is used to refer to “living up to what they already know.”

Again, “assent” is tantamount to action. It seems, then, that agreement and assent are the precursors to action. Not to be confused with being convinced that something is true, assent and agreement seem to take place within an audience when they have so fully identified with the speaker that they will take the action that the speaker is advocating. In other words, there is an agreement or assent that takes place after the listener’s mind has been convinced but before the listener has taken action. The only logical thing for the listener to agree with or assent to (as truth has already been communicated and acknowledged) is the will of the speaker. According to Augustine, then, in order to move
an audience to act, the speaker must convince the audience to identify with him or her spiritually and emotionally.

Obviously, this spiritual and emotional identification is difficult for a speaker to produce. I suspect that it is for this reason that Augustine writes that a speaker should “strive . . . as far as possible . . . to make his words understood, enjoyed, and persuasive” (468). However, Augustine adds this encouragement: “He can do [this] if it is possible, and in so far as it is possible more through the piety of his prayers than through his orator’s skill” (468). After all, “[Who] knows either what is best for us on a special occasion to say, or what is best that others should hear from us, if it be not He who sees the hearts of all?” (468). The difficult nature of persuasion in the end brings Augustine to place its outcome finally in the hands of an all-seeing God who can meet spiritual and emotional needs more effectively than a preacher.

This rhetorical situation that Augustine presents is the same that Davis faces. She must figure out how to communicate the truth to her audience and how to move them to act. To summarize, according to Augustine, she must inform them of the truth so that they acknowledge it; she must please them in order to maintain their attention; she must convince them to identify with her spiritually and emotionally; all in order to move her audience to action. Davis’s realism is a response to these rhetorical demands. The metanarratives in “Life in the Iron Mills” tell us not only how to read this new genre but also the purposes for which it was invented. Specifically, the portrayals of reading in the story demonstrate the workings of realism on an audience. Davis shows that, if realism works as a rhetorical strategy, it will move its audience from material reality to
immaterial truth and then on to social activism, in a pattern that closely parallels Augustine’s rhetorical process for moving an audience to action.

Augustine points out that, before one can persuade an audience to action, he or she must inform that audience of the truth. Davis resolves to educate her audience on the truth by beginning with representations of material reality. However, in “Life in the Iron Mills,” material reality is always put to the service of elucidating some larger, more immaterial truth. Davis makes this clear by persistently figuring bodies as hermeneutic objects. These bodies are presented by Davis as disclosing the souls that they also mask. Scholars have noted this tendency in “Life in the Iron Mills” with interest. In “Class, Gender, and a History of Metonymy,” Wai Chee Dimock discusses the extent to which this metonymic “reading” of the material body for some immaterial human existence was a characteristic of nineteenth-century epistemology and literature. In fact, Dimock specifically refers to Davis, noting “Davis’s obsessive interest in the generalizability from material conditions to material bodies, and from material bodies to immaterial persons” (94). And, in *Bodies and Machines*, Mark Seltzer constructs a reading of “Life in the Iron Mills” by focusing on Davis’s “taking up the problem of the body and its representations in its most basic terms—in terms of the fundamental relation between the hand and the head” (130). Seltzer ultimately concludes, “The reduction or irreduction of identity to material and the material body is tested through a chain of analogies, linking or interrupting the links between material conditions, bodies, and souls” (133). As Seltzer points out, the body in “Life in the Iron Mills” is not only a façade for the soul; it also

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6 Dimock, in fact, goes on to discuss Deb’s opacity in this regard, positing Davis’s resistance to an easy generalization from material to immaterial.
conveys truths about material conditions. In this story, then, material reality is not simply material; rather, it both masks and discloses more immaterial truths.

One example will serve to highlight the readerly relationship between the body and the soul in “Life in the Iron Mills” since many examples will be given later in order to discuss the exact nature of that relationship. In this particular passage, Davis makes clear that one can discern Hugh Wolfe’s soul by reading his body. In the following excerpt, Deb visits Hugh’s jail cell as, unbeknownst to her, he is preparing to commit suicide:

She peered closely into his face. Something she saw there made her draw suddenly back,—something which Haley had not seen, that lay beneath the pinched, vacant look it had caught since the trial, or the curious gray shadow that rested on it. That gray shadow,—yes, she knew what that meant. She had often seen it creeping over women’s faces for months, who died at last of slow hunger or consumption. That meant death, distant, lingering: but this—What ever it was the woman saw, or thought she saw, used as she was to crime and misery, seemed to make her sick with a new horror. (53)

On more than one occasion in this scene, Deborah is portrayed as scrutinizing Hugh’s face, and the result of her scrutiny makes her beg him, “Hugh, boy, not THAT!” (57). By reading Hugh’s face, Deb is able to discern the condition of his soul, a condition that Davis goes to great pains to relate. In this case, upon close examination, material reality opens up onto a more existential truth. First, the shadow on Hugh’s face “meant” an
approaching death. But also, she sees a desperation that is soon to become suicide. This example demonstrates that Hugh’s physical features actually carry a larger significance by also bearing out the condition of his soul.

In “Life in the Iron Mills,” the relationship between body and soul in the story is not dichotomous; instead, it can be imagined as dialectical, or as a series of relays. The body gives readability to the soul but also masks it. In addition, abuse to the body can alter the soul while sickening of the soul can weaken the body. Consider the way this configuration is portrayed in this extraordinary passage:

Miserable enough [Deborah] looked, lying there on the ashes like a limp, dirty rag,—yet not an unfitting figure to crown the scene of hopeless discomfort and veiled crime: more fitting, if one looked deeper into the heart of things,—at her thwarted woman’s form, her colorless life, her waking stupor that smothered pain and hunger,—even more fit to be a type of her class. Deeper yet if one could look; was there nothing worth reading in this wet, faded thing, half covered with ashes? no story of a soul filled with groping, passionate love, heroic unselfishness, fierce jealousy? of years of weary trying to please the one human being whom she loved, to gain one look of real heart-kindness from him? If anything like this were hidden beneath the pale, bleared eyes, and dull, washed-out-looking face, no one had ever taken the trouble to read its faint signs: not the half-clothed furnace-tender, Wolfe, certainly. Yet he was kind to her: it was his nature to be kind, even to the very rats that swarmed in the cellar: kind to
her in just the same way. She knew that. And it might be that very knowledge had given to her face its apathy and vacancy more than her low, torpid life. One sees that dead, vacant look steal sometimes over the rarest, finest of women’s faces,—in the very midst, it may be, of their warmest summer’s day; and then one can guess at the secret of intolerable solitude that lies hid beneath the delicate laces and brilliant smile. There was no warmth, no brilliancy, no summer for this woman; so the stupor and vacancy had time to gnaw into her face perpetually. She was young, too, though no one guessed it; so the gnawing was the fiercer. (21-2; emphasis added)

Davis here portrays the complex relationship between body and soul. Without a doubt, Deb’s body has been destroyed by years of hard labor. She is characterized by “her thwarted woman’s form” with “pale, bleared eyes” and a “dull washed-out-looking face.” She is compared to a “limp, dirty rag” and described as a “wet, faded thing.” These descriptions emphasize Deb’s analogy to a piece of cloth that has been used repeatedly; she is washed out, limp, dirty, and faded. This language implies that Deb’s material body (note the synonymous nature of “cloth” and “material”) has been altered by overuse. Furthermore, we learn that her face is etched with “stupor,” “vacancy,” and “apathy.” But Davis tells us at the beginning of the passage that we must look “deeper into the heart of things” in order to find the cause of this material change. One must read this “wet, faded thing” in order to find “the story of the soul” beneath. We are told that “it might be that very knowledge,” that Hugh did not love her any more than the rats in the basement,
which “had given to her face its apathy and vacancy more than her low, torpid life” (emphasis added). Actually, Davis tells us that the “stupor and vacancy” fiercely “gnaw” themselves into her face. We know, then, that Deb’s body represents, bears out, both her material conditions and the state of her soul.

In turn, the soul can be affected by the abuse of the body. The body not only reflects the soul, but also alters it. That which makes Deborah’s soul grieve, that Hugh does not love her, is a direct result of her physical deformity, which was caused by her material conditions. Davis writes, “She knew, in spite of all her kindness, that there was that in her face and form which made him loathe the sight of her . . . his soul sickened with disgust at her deformity, even when his words were kindest” (22). Deb’s starving soul is the effect of physical abuse. Deborah is physically deformed by her years of poverty and hard labor. Hugh does not love her because of these physical deformities. This misery etches itself onto her body, which further deforms her face with “stupor,” “vacancy,” and “apathy.” Because of the body and soul’s dialectical relationship, Deb’s soul is impacted by material conditions.

Similarly, Davis portrays how material conditions impact the souls of the working class in general. She depicts their material conditions as burrowing through their bodies into their souls, much like Deborah’s misery gnaws into her face. Davis writes of Hugh,

The slow tides of pain he had borne gathered themselves up and surged against his soul. His squalid daily life, the brutal coarseness eating into his brain, as the ashes into his skin: before, these things had been a dull aching into his consciousness; to-night, they were reality. He gripped the filthy
red shirt that clung, stiff with soot, about him, and tore it savagely from his arm. The flesh beneath was muddy with grease and ashes,—and the heart beneath that! And the soul? God knows. (40)

The picture developed here is one of assaults against the body that are repeated so often that they penetrate the body and affect layers deeper below. We see that the “slow tides of pain” gathered themselves in order to lay siege against his soul; the day-to-day miseries of impoverished living have “eat[en] into his brain”; and, the heart has become “muddy with grease and ashes” because of the state of the flesh. All three metaphors involve the actions of penetration and infiltration, suggesting that the body is a kind of permeable barrier between material conditions and the soul.

In Davis’s paradigm, material conditions pressure the body/soul dyad. In response to material conditions, either the body or soul is transformed and pressuring the other entity to respond. For example, because Hugh Wolfe’s body is classed, his soul is as well. Davis describes Hugh’s face as bearing “its heavy weight of brain, its weak, uncertain mouth, its desperate eyes, out of which looked the soul of his class” (35). Hugh’s working-class soul is visible through corresponding, even matching, physical traits. Similarly, material conditions impact Deborah’s attitude and correspondingly, her physical attributes. Davis tells us that after Deb takes ownership of Kirby’s money, she temporarily loses her physical class-markers. In contrast to her previous description as old and haggard, Davis describes her thus: “She was young, in deadly earnest; her faded eyes, and wet, ragged figure caught from their frantic eagerness a power akin to beauty” (43). With her miserable material conditions temporarily alleviated, Deborah’s soul
changes from being sick and starved to “earnest,” “eager,” and “power[ful].” And, correspondingly, her physical appearance transforms from being old, “faded,” and “ragged” to being “young” and “beaut[iful].”

This correspondence among material conditions, body, and soul is also exemplified in the character Mitchell, who is part of the middle-class company that visits the iron mill in the middle of the night. From the first, Davis’s descriptions of Mitchell speak of embodiment. We are first told that Mitchell critically surveys the bodies of the laborers. Then, Davis writes, “He was an amateur gymnast,—hence his anatomical eye; a patron, in a blasé way, of the prize-ring . . .” (29). Then, from Hugh’s perspective, “Then flashed before his vivid poetic sense the man [Mitchell] who had left him,—the pure face, the delicate, sinewy limbs, in harmony with all he knew of beauty or truth” (40). The issue of embodiment is important with Mitchell because he so distinctly contrasts with Hugh. Where Hugh’s body and soul must react to the pressures of miserable material conditions, Mitchell’s body and soul almost glow with refinement. Hugh sees himself as a distorted version of Mitchell, “marking acutely every smallest sign of refinement, then back to himself, seeing as in a mirror his filthy body, his more stained soul” (30). In contrast to Hugh’s deformed body and sickened soul, Mitchell has a “clear, magnetic face” and a soul that is “[bright] and deep and cold as Arctic air” (36). Just as Hugh’s body and soul are marked by poverty and hard labor, Mitchell’s are marked by the clarity, refinement, and the indifference of his class. Thus, by reading the body, one can understand the soul and can trace the impact of material conditions.
From Davis’s portrayals of the relationship between body and soul, we can extrapolate that material reality is not simply material; rather, it both masks and discloses immaterial truths, both spiritual and ethical. In other words, the body/soul dialectic in “Life in the Iron Mills” signifies the relationship that truth has with material reality.

Again, we shift from the story’s content to its form. In the narrative of “Life in the Iron Mills,” the body gives readability to the soul. In the metanarrative, representations of material reality screen immaterial truths. In other words, by portraying material reality in her story, Davis is able to elucidate truth and complete part of Augustine’s rhetorical process for moving audiences to act.

Davis encourages this leap from content to form by making it herself. Through the metanarrative of the korl woman statue, Davis takes her body/soul dialectic, which up to this point has been applied only to characters, and transfers it onto a work of art. Like the bodies of Deborah and Hugh, the korl woman’s body is distinctly marked. It is described as “the white figure of a woman . . . a woman, white, of giant proportions, crouching on the ground, her arms flung out in some wild gesture of warning” (31). However, every description of the korl woman gives Davis’s readers not only the textures of her body, but also the immaterial meaning that is contained within and communicated by it. Consider the following passages:

There was not one line of beauty or grace in it: a nude woman’s form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some one poignant longing. One idea: there it was in the tense, rigid
muscles, the clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf’s. (32)

Where did the fellow learn the sweep of the muscles in the arm and hand? Look at them! They are groping, do you see?—clutching: the peculiar action of a man dying of thirst. (32)

Sometimes,—to-night, for instance,—the curtain is accidentally drawn back, and I see a bare arm stretched out imploringly in the darkness and an eager, wolfish face watching mine: a wan, woful face, through which the spirit of the dead korl-cutter looks out, with its thwarted life, its mighty hunger, its unfinished work. Its pale, vague lips seem to tremble with a terrible question. “Is this the End?—they say,—“nothing beyond?—no more?” Why, you tell me you have seen that look in the eyes of dumb brutes, horses dying under the lash, I know. (64)

Each of these excerpts pairs a description of the korl woman’s body with a reference to the soul. In each, Davis tells us how the body appears and then what these appearances mean. In each, she tells us how the korl woman should be read; she tells us to interpret the woman’s body to find the woman’s soul. And, in case there is any confusion, Davis corrects Doctor May’s reading of the statue, implicitly correcting any would-be readers. The following dialogue tells us that the korl woman’s significance is in her immaterial, rather than bodily, hunger. May asks Mitchell,

“What does the fellow intend by the figure? I cannot catch the meaning.”
“Ask him,” said the other, dryly. “There he stands,”—pointing to Wolfe, who stood with a group of mean, leaning on his ash-rake.

The Doctor beckoned him with the affable smile which kind-hearted men put on, when talking to these people.

“Mr. Mitchell has picked you out as the man who did this,—I’m sure I don’t know why. But what did you mean by it?”

“She be hungry.”

Wolfe’s eyes answered Mitchell, not the Doctor.

“Oh-h! But what a mistake you have made, my fine fellow! You have given no sign of starvation to the body. It is strong,—terribly strong. It has the mad, half-despairing gesture of drowning.”

Wolfe, stammered, glanced appealingly at Mitchell, who saw the soul of the thing, he knew. But the cool, probing eyes were turned on himself now,—mocking, cruel, relentless.

“Not hungry for meat,” the furnace-tender said at last.

“What then? Whiskey?” jeered Kirby, with a coarse laugh.

Wolfe was silent a moment, thinking.

“I dunno,” he said, with a bewildered look. “It mebbe. Summat to make her live, I think,—like you. Whiskey ull do it, in a way.”

The young man laughed again. Mitchell flashed a look of disgust somewhere,—not at Wolfe.
“May,” he broke out impatiently, “are you blind? Look at that woman’s face! It asks questions of God, and says, ‘I have a right to know.’ Good God, how hungry it is!” (32-4).

In this conversation, Doctor May wrongly reads the statue as representing physical hunger. Wolfe, the artist, in an interpretation of his own work, corrects him. Then, Mitchell, “who saw the soul of the thing,” articulates Wolfe’s stammering analysis. The woman’s face and body communicate spiritual, or at least immaterial, hunger, something “to make her live” or something that satisfies her “right to know.” The significance, then, of the korl woman is the meaning that she conveys—the soul that is communicated through her body and the material conditions that pressure both.

The body of the korl woman, like that of Hugh, Deb, and Mitchell, also represents the material conditions of the laboring class. Doctor May recognizes this clearly enough. He exclaims, “Look . . . at this bony wrist, and the strained sinews of the instep! A working-woman,—the very type of her class” (32). The narrator also tells us at the end of the story that the korl woman’s look represents the abuse of labor: “Why, you tell me you have seen that look in the eyes of dumb brutes, horses dying under the lash” (64). Along with these explicit reference to labor and the korl woman’s body, Davis also provides us with descriptions of the korl woman that precisely correspond to those of the laborers in the story. The korl woman is a representation of both Deb and Hugh himself. She is a working woman, like Deb, with a hunger for something to make her live, to redeem her “thwarted life.” In several places, Davis describes Hugh in terms that are used to describe the korl woman. He is “mad with hunger; stretching out his hands to the world . . .” (45).
In this way, the korl woman not only represents a spiritual reality, but she also represents the state of her class. In either case, the reader must look through or past the body for truth.

In the story, the korl woman stands in for “Life in the Iron Mills” itself, reflecting back on the strategies Davis uses to persuade her readers. Davis, by transferring her paradigm of reading bodies for souls to reading representations of material reality for truth, encourages us to read her story in the same way. That the korl woman represents art, indeed “Life” itself, functioning as a metanarrative, is clear. Specifically, corollaries can be drawn between the narrator’s story and Hugh’s statue. The narrator’s goal is to pass onto his or her readers the story she has read in the lives of the workers that pass by the window. Hugh as well tries to capture the essence of the laborer’s life. The language used to describe both artistic endeavors is almost identical in places. The narrator tells us that he or she presents “only the outline of a dull life” (13):

If you could go into this mill where Deborah lay, and drag out from the hearts of these men the terrible tragedy of their lives, taking it as a symptom of the disease of their class, no ghost Horror would terrify you more. A reality of soul-starvation, of living death, that meets you every day under the besotted faces on the street—I can paint nothing of this, only give you the outside outlines of a night, a crisis in the life of one

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7 Many writers, including Kirk Curnutt, Ruth Stoner, Richard A. Hood, and William H. Shurr, have debated the identity and gender of the narrator. As this discussion does not serve my project in this chapter, I will bracket this conversation and use the feminine pronoun to indentify the narrator.
man: whatever muddy depth of soul-history lies beneath you can read according to the eyes God has given you. (23)

We see here that the narrator describes Hugh’s tale as the “outline” of a life that is soul-starved. The narrator also seems to imply that the barest faithful representation of the laboring class should be enough to communicate its “soul-starvation.” The story’s narrator says that she is trying to make a “dumb” secret “a real thing” to the readers (13-4). However, the narrator goes on to say that she “dare not put this secret into words” (14). How then does the narrator think the secret will be made real to the readers if not through words? The answer is as curious as the question: “These men, going by with drunken faces, and brains full of unawakened power, do not ask it of Society or of God. Their lives ask it; their deaths ask it” (14). This response suggests that the subjects of the story are not constituted by words but are real things. Not as representations, but as the real, the subjects make their dumb appeal. Here Davis seems to try to collapse the difference—as she sees it—between material reality and the ethical/spiritual truth she wants to convey.

The korl woman statue is described in almost identical language. I have here reproduced a quotation from the conclusion of “Life in the Iron Mills”:

Nothing remains to tell that the poor Welsh puddler once lived, but this figure of the mill-woman cut in korl. I have it here in a corner of my library. I keep it hid behind a curtain,—it is such a rough, ungainly thing. Yet there are about it touches, grand sweeps of outline, that show a master’s hand. Sometimes,—to-night, for instance,—the curtain is
accidentally drawn back, and I see a bare arm stretched out imploringly in
the darkness, and an eager, wolfish face watching mine: a wan, woful face,
through which the spirit of the dead korl-cutter looks out, with its thwarted
life, its mighty hunger, its unfinished work. Its pale, vague lips seem to
tremble with a terrible question. ‘Is this the End?’—they say,—‘nothing
beyond?—no more?’ Why, you tell me you have seen that look in the eyes
of dumb brutes,—horses dying under the lash. I know. (64)

In this short passage, we see that the korl statue directly corresponds to the narrator’s own
tale. Just like the narrator’s tale the korl woman “remains to tell that the poor Welsh
puddler once lived.” Just like “Life in the Iron Mills,” the korl statue is kept in a corner of
a library. Even down to the characterization of the art-text as an “outline,” the
descriptions of the two pieces match. Both texts are constructed in order to represent
subjects who are (paradoxically) “dumb” and who ask desperate question of the audience.
The narrator tells us that the statue confronts the men visiting the factory: “Only the
dumb face of the rough image looking into their faces with the awful question, ‘What
shall we do to be saved?’” (35). The first conclusion that can be drawn from these
similarities between “Life in the Iron Mills” and the korl statue is that the body/soul
relationship that we see in the story has a larger formal significance. The way that Davis
presents the body as a hermeneutic object, which one reads for a more universal meaning,
can be taken as Davis’s recommended method for reading the presentations of material
reality in her fiction.
The second conclusion concerns the functioning of realism as a rhetorical strategy. The foregoing analysis suggests that, in the realist endeavor, the realist writer’s role is to present reality in all its opacity. In other words, the ideal realism for Davis would be the complete collapse of the real and the representation. On multiple occasions, Davis describes the work of art as projecting a “dumb” question. In fact, she implies that the narrator is silent and that the subjects themselves ask the question through their lives and deaths. If this is the case, then it is left to readers of realism to execute the method of reading that Davis recommends if they want to derive meaning from the text. It is the role of the readers to move between the material reality that Davis wants to channel, more than represent, and the truth that she must convey in order to move her readers to action. In this way, we can see that, as realism proposes a solution to the rhetorical problematic set out by Augustine, the (ideal) realist strategy seems to lay a great deal at the feet of the readers. The burden that Augustine places on the speaker to communicate the truth to the audience Davis seems to, at least theoretically, displace onto the audience itself.

Of course, Augustine’s rhetorical process for moving an audience to action does not end with the communication of truth. As the opening sections of this chapter make clear, there is a wide chasm between convincing the audience of the truth and moving them to make permanent lifestyle changes. Augustine suggests that the bridge between these two achievements is that of generating an identification, or sympathy, between the speaker and his or her audience. Again, the difficulties of this process are considerable. Augustine suggests the full gamut of rhetorical remedies: “entreaties and reproaches, exhortations and compulsion, and every other means conducive to stirring the heart”
(458). Eventually, though, he tells speakers that they should probably pray for God’s help to generate sympathy with their audiences. “Life in the Iron Mills” shows us that Davis also recognized that these problems were inherent to her rhetorical situation. In attempting to solve them, though, it seems that again she finds that remaining faithful to realism leaves much responsibility to her readers.

The difficulties of inciting sympathy in readers are depicted through two key moments in “Life in the Iron Mills,” in which Davis portrays characters who are looking out of an upper-story window onto active streets below. At the beginning of the novel, she presents us with the narrator, whose story drifts “up before” her (13), as though it rises from the tableau of the street below:

Something of the same idle notion comes to me to-day, when from the street-window I look on the slow stream of human life creeping past, night and morning, to the great mills. Masses of men, with dull, besotted faces bent to the ground, sharpened here and there by pain or cunning; skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes; stooping all night over boiling caldrons of metal, laired by day in dens of drunkenness and infamy; breathing from infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness of soul and body. (12)

In this passage, the narrator is both invested in and distanced from the men that she witnesses. As Doyle has noted, the narrator shares a larger space with these men, but she is “idly tapping the window-pane,” effectively barred from entering in their procession (Doyle 24; “Life” 13). A similar scene occurs later in the novel, where Hugh Wolfe looks
out of his jail cell onto the street below. He, like the narrator, resists the window’s presence, “scratching the iron bars of the window with a piece of tin which he had picked up” (52). Davis gives us his thoughts as he watches the street below:

It was market-day. The narrow window of the jail looked down directly on the carts and wagons drawn up in a long line, where they had unloaded. He could see, too, and hear distinctly the clink of money as it changed hands, the busy crowd of whites and blacks shoving, pushing one another, and the chaffering and swearing at the stalls. Somehow the sound, more than anything else had done, wakened him up,—made the whole real to him. He was done with the world and the business of it. He let the tin fall, and looked out, pressing his face close to the rusty bars. How they crowded and pushed! And he,—he should never walk that pavement again! (54)

This scene is almost a replica of the one in which the narrator looks out the window. Again, we have a character looking out of a window, at once experiencing the busy scene below but also barred from participation.  

These two moments represent, even allegorize, the act of reading and, further, the difficulties inherent in the act of reading. To demonstrate that these two scenes allegorize the reception of a work of art is easily done with reference to a few textual examples. First, the narrator experiences the “old story”—Hugh’s story—as “float[ing] up before”

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8 Doyle has noted the similarities between these stories and uses them to discuss the ambivalence that Davis has toward her own artistic endeavors. My reading of the two scenes that follows, while focusing on the rhetorical problem of sympathy, owes much to her analysis.
her (13). This story rises from the streets with which the narrator is meditatively engaged. Also, this story is explicitly described as representing the “masses of men” that form the procession down below. The narrator speaks of the “tiresome” story as “only the outline of a dull life, that long since, with thousands of dull lives like its own, was vainly lived and lost: thousands of them,—massed, vile, slimy lives . . .” (13). Hugh’s story is simply one of the many that can be read in the street procession. In short, the narrator sees Hugh’s story as representative of those that she has read in the streets below. Thus, the narrator is reading Hugh’s story as she looks out the window onto the crowd of workers. The narrator recounts for us—the readers—what she herself has already read.

Hugh’s experience at his jail-cell window is quite similar. The scene below is described through Hugh’s “artist’s” perspective: “How clear the light fell on that stall in front of the market! And how like a picture it was, the dark-green heaps of corn, and the crimson beets, and golden melons! There was another with game: how the light flickered on that pheasant’s breast, with the purplish blood dripping over the brown feathers! He could see the red shining of the drops, it was so near” (55). Hugh looks at the street scene as one who gazes upon a beautiful painting; he is depicted as the audience of a work of art. In this moment, Davis uses Hugh to allegorize her own reader. This interpretation is corroborated by Hugh’s fascination with the “tall mulatto girl” in the market (57). He is again preoccupied with her as though with a work of art: “A free, firm step, a clear-cut olive face, with a scarlet turban tied on one side, dark, shining eyes, and on the head the basket poised, filled with fruit and flowers, under which the scarlet turban and bright eyes looked out half-shadowed. The picture caught his eye. It was good to see a face like that.
He would try tomorrow, and cut one like it [in korl]” (57-8). The language Davis uses here, “poised,” “half-shadowed,” and “picture,” along with Hugh’s own desire to represent the scene, suggest that we are meant to see the life on the street as a tableau, a piece of art staged for consumption, or reading. This interpretation has already been postulated, although for a different overall purpose, by Mark Seltzer, when he writes in *Bodies and Machines*, that “[the] representation of the market in the genre of the still life, or better, the representation of the still life of the market itself, could not be more clearly marked” (138). For Seltzer, the scene on the street is tantamount to a still-life painting.

However, Davis clearly depicts the problems with these acts of reading. As Doyle has observed, both scenes of reception are complicated by the *a priori* and material existence of the window. The windows force a wedge between each character and the scene on the street. The narrator idly taps on the window pane, able only to discern “fragments of an old story” (13). She is left with only the capability to “look deeper” (14), and although he or she asks that fellow readers join and “come right down” with him or her “into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia” (13), at the end of the tale, the narrator has remained in the library, looking out of the window (64). She has been prevented from entering the scene that she witnessed by the confining physical impediment of the home. Similarly, Hugh must confront the material limitations to his ability to join the scene on the streets; he is confined to his jail cell. Each description of the street ends in a description of Hugh’s despair at his exclusion from the activity:

He wondered if Neff remembered he was there,—if any of the boys thought of him up there, and thought that he never was to go down
that old cinder-road again. Never again! He had not quite understood it before; but now he did. Not for days or years, but never!—that was it. (54)

In one minute he could be down there. It was just a step. So easy, as it seemed, so natural to go! Yet it could never be—not in all the thousands of years to come—that he should put his foot on that street again! He thought of himself with a sorrowful pity, as of some one else. (55)

The picture caught his eye. It was good to see a face like that. He would try tomorrow, and cut one like it. To-morrow! He threw down the tin, trembling, and covered his face with his hands. (58)

As for the narrator of “Life in the Iron Mills,” for Hugh, entering into the scene on the street is fraught with difficulties, if not impossibilities. In each case, the character must necessarily remain distanced from the scene he or she is trying to engage.

These two moments in “Life in the Iron Mills” illustrate the rhetorical gap between understanding and action, a gap that seemingly can only be bridged through the illusive quality of sympathy. Both the narrator and Hugh can discern what is occurring on the street, and they can identify its significance. Furthermore, both the narrator and Hugh desire to enter into the activity on the street. It is the narrator’s expressed intention to enter into “the fog and mud and foul effluvia” (13), and Hugh longs to be part of market-day again. However, even as these two characters are only able to see the streets because of the existence of the windows, they are also prevented by the windows from fully experiencing these same scenes. The experiences of the narrator and Hugh parallel that of
the reader of “Life in the Iron Mills.” Through the story, this reader may be able to observe material reality and to understand its significance. However, sympathetic identification is difficult—if not impossible—because of material impediments. The reader cannot fully sympathize with Davis’s story because of the existence of his or her individual body, even as the reading act is facilitated by the material reality of the text.

Doyle articulates the importance of this observation:

> Touch [an allegory for the text’s material life in our hands], of all the senses, reminds us of the text’s opacity (we finger the page but not its subject), but it is also a reminder of the text’s proximity to us (we do hold those pages in our hands). It brings us into contact with that tiny but incomprehensible distance between the work of art and the world it represents—not through an ecstatic collapse of the reader’s body into the text, but through a constant reminder of the uselessness of trying to break through the material barrier that separates the reader from the subject of representation. (25)

These scenes demonstrate how aware Davis was of the difficulties accompanying her rhetorical situation. Of course, one of these difficulties is that of class: others have competently made the argument that Davis was unable to bring her middle-class readers

9 This argument is also convincingly made by Doyle, pp. 24-26.

10 In no way do I wish to convey that sympathy is completely desirable and unproblematic. Many scholars have discussed the oppressive tendencies that plague sympathetic identification (see Saidiya Hartmann’s *Scenes of Subjection* and, concerning Davis’s writing specifically, Rosemarie Thomson’s “Benevolent Maternalism and Physically Disabled Figures”). However, my emphasis in this chapter is on the difficulties of creating sympathy, not the problems that accompany it.
into a complete understanding of the reality of working-class conditions. But again, class differences are part of the material conditions that prevent one person from acting on the behalf of another.

Nowhere are the problems of generating sympathy more explicitly discussed in “Life in the Iron Mills” than in the conversation among Hugh, Doctor May, Mitchell, and Kirby, which concerns the korl woman statue. In this crucial scene, Davis shows us her skepticism about art’s ability to effect social and material change. Through this audience’s reception of the korl sculpture, we are presented with the problems that haunt the reception of a rhetorical text. First, of course, the text must be correctly interpreted. We have already seen how Doctor May is puzzled by the korl woman and is unable to “catch the meaning” (32). Then, once Mitchell, “who saw the soul of the thing” (33), clarifies the meaning of the sculpture, the audience is unable to form the appropriate response. Kirby, the mill-owner’s son responds with, “Ce n’est pas mon affaire” (34). He further explains that he prefers not to think about the material or spiritual conditions of his employees. Doctor May is slightly more invested, encouraging Hugh to make something of himself, but declining to support Hugh financially, saying, “I have not the money, boy” (37). And, perhaps the most poignant response comes from Mitchell, the cool art critic, who sees the meaning of the sculpture but theorizes his way out of helping Hugh. Davis tells us that “[Mitchell] looked at the furnace-tender as he had looked at a rare mosaic in the morning; only the man was the more amusing study of the two” (36). Mitchell, who had “the air of an amused spectator at a play” (36), excuses himself by

11 See Amy Lang’s “Class and the Strategies of Sympathy.”
saying that his help would “be of no use” because he is not one of the workers (38). He eloquently defends his position:

Reform is born of need, not pity. No vital movement of the people’s has worked down, for good or evil; fermented, instead, carried up the heaving, cloggy mass. Think back through history, and you will know it. What will this lowest deep—thieves, Magdalens, negroes—do with the light filtered through ponderous Church creeds, Baconian theories, Goethe schemes? Some day, out of their bitter need will be thrown up their own light-bringer,—their Jean Paul, their Cromwell, their Messiah. (39)

Mitchell excuses his own detached response to the korl woman’s hunger by saying that reform must come from within the laboring classes. In this scene, Davis demonstrates the improbability of a work of art spurring on actual change in the world. And, even more distressing is the fact that those who understand the text’s meaning are able to evade “personal responsibility” (Doyle 17). In fact, Mitchell justifies his callousness to Hugh’s situation through—surprisingly—his inability to fully sympathize with Hugh (“I am not one of them” [38]). In a vicious tautology, Mitchell suggests that because he cannot sympathize, he cannot sympathize enough to help.

Davis’s use of realism as a rhetorical strategy presents problems when it comes to sympathy. She seems to hope that by simply presenting the unembellished reality, readers will be moved to action. Consider again the question posed in the previous paragraph: “Has the power of its desperate need commanded the darkness away?” Davis is not speaking of the sculpture itself in this question. The “desperate need” she emphasizes is
not that of the sculpture *qua* sculpture but that of the subject, the laboring woman. It appears that Davis conflates realism and reality; here, the artistic form is a transparent medium through which reality is conducted to the reader. A similar passage in the opening paragraphs of the story confirms this conclusion. The narrator is describing the dumb question asked by the lives and deaths of the worker. This description is followed by a few strange sentences: “I will tell you plainly that I have a great hope; and I bring it to you to be tested. It is this: that this terrible dumb question is its own reply; that it is not the sentence of death we think it, but, from the very extremity of its darkness, the most solemn prophecy which the world has known of the Hope to come” (14). The hope of the narrator is that the question is its own hopeful reply. Of course, though, this question is unspoken; it is projected through the lives and deaths of the workers. How can a question that is silent be its own reply? Davis suggests that the answer is in asking the question. In other words, the lives of the workers, when they are exposed, will be powerful enough to change material conditions. Davis’s “great hope” is that “Life in the Iron Mills” can bring about social change.

This hope requires a great deal of the reader; it demands that the reader be open to sympathy—to the point where no entreaties or rhetorical strategies are necessary, the reality being enough to persuade. Davis seems uncertain as to whether she has such a reader, and, in the end, does not merely tell her story but adds, as Augustine recommends, “entreaties and reproaches, exhortations and compulsion” (458). The most obvious of these strategies are her narrator’s direct addresses to the reader, which construct an
interestingly antagonistic relationship between the narrator and the reader. Consider the following moments of apostrophe occurring in Davis’s story:

What do you make of a case like that, amateur psychologist? You call it an altogether serious thing to be alive: to these men it is a drunken jest, a joke,—horrible to angels perhaps, to them commonplace enough. (12)

There is a curious point for you to settle, my friend, who study psychology in a lazy, dilettante way. Stop a moment. I am going to be honest. This is what I want you to do. I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me,—here, into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia. . . . I want to make it a real thing to you. You, Egoist, or Pantheist, or Arminian, busy in making straight paths for your feet on the hills, do not see it clearly . . . (13-4)

You laugh at it? Are pain and jealousy less savage realities down here in this place I am taking you to than in your own house or your own heart,—your heart, which they clutch at sometimes? The note is the same, I fancy, be the octave high or low. (23)

You laugh at the shallow temptation? You see the error underlying its argument so clearly,—that to him a true life was one of full development rather than self-restraint? that he was deaf to the higher tone in a cry of voluntary suffering for truth’s sake than in the fullest flow of

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12 See Richard A. Hood’s “Framing a ‘Life in the Iron Mills.’”
spontaneous harmony? I do not plead his cause. I only want to show you
the mote in my brother’s eye: then you can see clearly to take it out. (46)

In each of these interjections, the narrator seems to assault the reader on behalf of the
characters in the story. These direct addresses express Davis’s doubt that she has a
sympathetic reader. Therefore, while she hopes that the reality alone will persuade her
readers to action, Davis also belies this optimism through her fictional construction of the
reader. At least in these moments, Davis envisions and projects a reader that is not
receptive to her agenda.

In addition to these expressions of doubt, Davis periodically requests that the
reader see or look at her subject. In these places, it seems that the narrator tries to force
the reader to sympathize with the characters. We are encouraged to look at “the man’s
soul, as God and the angels looked down on it” (42). One of the most moving of these
passages instructs the reader in the following way:

I want you to come down and look at this Wolfe, standing there among the
lowest of his kind, and see him just as he is, that you may judge him justly
when you hear the story of this night. I want you to look back, as he does
every day, at his birth in vice, his starved infancy; to remember the heavy
years he has groped through as boy and man,—the slow, heavy years of
constant, hot work. . . . Be just: when I tell you about this night, see him as
he is. Be just,—not like man’s law, which Seizes on one isolated fact, but
like God’s judging angel, whose clear, sad eye saw all the countless

13 For more on the fictional construction of the reader, see Walter S. Ong’s essay, “The
Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction.”
cankering days of this man’s life, all the countless nights, when, sick with
starving, his soul fainted in him, before it judged him for this night, the
saddest of all. (25)

In these passages, the narrator begs the reader to consider Hugh’s circumstances before judging him. But, the narrator is asking for more than consideration. She is instead asking for sympathy—for the reader to emotionally and spiritually identify with Hugh. In these moments, in which Davis offers explicit instructions on how to read the story, her suspicions that she does not have a sympathetic reader surface.

While these rhetorical strategies speak to Davis’s doubt about the possibility of persuading an audience to change, they also prove that she thought the attempt worthwhile. In fact, the existence of “Life in the Iron Mills” itself testifies to Davis’s belief that humans can be persuaded to change.14 And, the story ends hopefully enough with this meditation on the korl sculpture, which now sits in the narrator’s library:

Only this dumb, woful face seems to belong to and end with the night. I turn to look at it. Has the power of its desperate need commanded the darkness away? While the room is yet steeped in heavy shadow, a cool, gray light suddenly touches its head like a blessing hand, and its groping arm points through the broken cloud to the far East, where, in the flickering, nebulous crimson, God has set the promise of the Dawn. (65)

The narrator summarizes the job of the korl figure: to communicate through the body a spiritual state that should move the audience to action. However, the narrator also

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14 Doyle makes a similar argument, p.2.
recognizes that the sculpture has not “commanded the darkness away,” since “the room is
yet steeped in heavy shadow” (65). Still, the narrator perceives the sun rising, and the
hope that accompanies the korl woman sculpture explains the existence of “Life in the
Iron Mills.” The question that the narrator poses in the last sentence applies equally to
both texts: “Has the power of its desperate need commanded the darkness away?” (65).
Davis’s willingness to write the story, despite her misgivings about its efficacy, points to
an optimism, not only about the possibility of reform but also about the possibility of
persuasion.
Deformed Bodies and Texts: Reading the Realism of Rebecca Harding Davis

Part II: Margret Howth

In 1860, Rebecca Blaine Harding (Davis) submitted “Life in the Iron Mills” for publication in the prestigious literary periodical, the *Atlantic Monthly*. In January 1861, she received a response, which she was afraid to open “being so sure it would be a refusal” (Davis qtd. in Olsen 86). What she found in the letter, however, was the story’s enthusiastic acceptance, written by the *Atlantic*’s editor, James T. Fields. The story was accepted without reservation although Fields questioned Davis’s choice of title and she deferred to his judgment (Harris 57). In the end, however, “Life in the Iron Mills” was published almost exactly as it had been submitted by Davis.¹⁵

Before “Life in the Iron Mills” even appeared in print, in March 1861, Fields wrote to Davis, asking her for another story. He offered her a one-hundred dollar advance for her next story and asked for the exclusive rights to everything that she wrote (Olsen 87). Her response was characteristically modest. She wrote that she had nothing written at the time, also saying, “Your kindness touches me more because it is so unexpected. I see that the novelty of the scene of the story [“Life in the Iron Mills”] has made you overestimate it—another, most probably, would disappoint you. However, I will try” (Davis qtd. in Harris 57). She also declined the advance. In less than a month, however, she again wrote to Fields telling him, “I have begun another story entitled ‘The Deaf and the Dumb.’ If it pleases you, and you accept it, would you wish to insert it in the June issue?

¹⁵ There were some minor changes made Davis’s original story. See Janice Lasseter’s “The Censored and Uncensored Literary Lives of Life in the Iron-Mills.” The manuscript itself is housed at the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA.
If so I will finish it at once . . .” (Davis qtd. in Yellin 287). Although Fields’s responses to Davis have been lost, we know that Davis did finish and submit her short story, “The Deaf and the Dumb,” to the Atlantic Monthly.

Inexplicably, the editor who had appreciated the literary achievements of “Life in the Iron Mills” was not as pleased with “The Deaf and the Dumb.” Even more remarkably, it seems that he objected to the very quality in this new story that had made “Life in the Iron Mills” a success. Although James Fields’s rejection letter is no longer extant, we have Davis’s May 1861 response to him, which I have decided to reproduce in full:

I am sorry. I thank you for the kindness with which you veil the disappointment. Whatever holier meaning life or music has for me, has reached me through the “pathetic minor”—I fear that I only have power to echo the pathos without the meaning. When I began the story, I meant to make it end in full sunshine—to show how even ‘Lois’ was not dumb, how even the meanest things in life were “voices in the world, and none off them without its signification.” Her life and death were to be the only dark thread. But ‘Stephen Holmes’ was drawn from life and in my eagerness to show the effects of a creed like his, I “assembled the gloom” you complain of. I tell you this in order to ask you if you think I could alter the story so as to make it acceptable by returning to my original idea. Let [Lois’s] character and death (I cannot give up all, you see) remain, and the rest of the picture be steeped in warm healthy light. A perfect day in
June! Will you tell me if that is your only objection—the one you assign? Would the character of Holmes be distasteful to your readers? I mean—the development in common vulgar life of the Fichtian philosophy and its effect upon a self made man, as I view it? Let me thank you again for your candor and kindness. Will you return the story directed to the address below? If you do not think I could alter the story, shall I try again, or do you care to have me as a contributor? I assume, you perceive that you agree with Carlyle that “sincerity is the chief merit of a book”—publisher and hope that you will always be sincere with me. If I write for you again, would it be any difference if the story was longer than the last? I felt cramped, and we of the West like room you know— (Letter to James Fields)

From the quoted portions in Davis’s letter, it appears that Fields found the “gloom” and its “pathetic minor” of the story unacceptable. However, he did respond positively to her proposed revisions, and in a letter to Fields’s wife, with whom Davis had struck up a friendship, Davis wrote, “I will try and meet his wishes by being more cheerful” (qtd. in Yellin 288). A month later, in May 1861, Davis wrote again to Annie Fields, saying that she had “sketched a story, which (as Mr. Fields is indifferent as to length) will extend through three no’s” (qtd. in Yellin 289). In July, Fields received the rewritten, longer version of “The Deaf and the Dumb.” He accepted it immediately.

The subsequent letters written by Davis to Fields chronicle her dissatisfaction with the new story, which Fields had re-titled Margret Howth. On July 30, 1861, Davis
wrote to Fields, “If I could have dared write a true history of today! But even in its purest phases I was afraid to touch forbidden subjects so only the husk of the thing was left, of course” (qtd. in Yellin 289). A little over a week later, she asked Fields if she could have time to further revise the story, saying, “The story disappointed me, and I was afraid you would not like it. It was so much like giving people broken bits of apple-rind to chew” (qtd. in Yellin 289). And another week later, she objected to the novel’s new title: “I don’t like ‘Margret Howth’ at all, because she is the completest failure in the story, besides not being the nucleus of it” (qtd. in Yellin 290). And, in September, Davis expressed her concerns that the serialization of the novel in the Atlantic Monthly would be “so tedious, every body will be tired” (qtd. in Yellin 290). Nevertheless, Margret Howth was serialized in the Atlantic Monthly between October 1861 and March 1862. Davis still remained hopeful that Fields would let her revise the novel; when he was considering publishing the story in book form, she composed the following request: “If the Story of To-Day were in book form it ought to have a more complete ending, don’t you think? If you do think so, please send me the last four or five pages, and I will alter them now” (qtd. in Yellin 290; original emphasis). Fields refused, and the book publication of Margret Howth issued in February 1863, selling 2000 copies in three printings (Yellin 290).

The revised plot of Margret Howth is fairly convoluted and difficult to follow. The story opens with a portrayal of young Margret Howth working her first day as a bookkeeper at a factory. We discover that her father has gone blind, and in order to provide for the now impoverished family, Margret must go to work. The owner of the
mill, Dr. Knowles, is planning to sell the factory to his partner, who in turn will give it to his daughter’s fiancé, a man named Stephen Holmes. Dr. Knowles plans to take his proceeds from the sale and establish a commune that will house and rehabilitate the indigent; he is specifically interested in Margret because he thinks that she has the makings of a reformer as well. However, when he proposes this to Margret, we discover that she is torn—her true allegiance is to Stephen Holmes, her former lover, who rejected her in order to make his fortune and develop his Self’s full potential. As all the characters in the story await Holmes’s marriage that will make the sale of the factory (and the fates of all the other characters) final, the crisis in the story comes. Stephen refuses to give mercy to a criminal, who in turn burns the factory to the ground. Holmes nearly dies in the fire, and while recuperating, realizes that he truly loves Margret. The two are reunited, and oil is discovered on the Howth’s property. The novel ends on this happy note.

When summarized in this way, the novel’s plot appears to follow the patterns of a sentimental novel. In fact, many scholars have categorized the novel as belonging to the sentimental genre. Jeffrey Miller argues that *Margret Howth* perpetuates the “domestic ideology” that buttressed many nineteenth-century sentimental novels (269). Jean Yellin critiques the novel’s “happy ending” (291). And, Sharon Harris and Sara Goodling compare the sentimentalism of *Margret Howth* to American literary naturalism, a more dramatic version of realism that would become popular in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Finally, Jean Yellin indicts what she calls the “feminization” of *Margret Howth* by James Fields (271). Each of these writers acknowledges that, on some
level, *Margret Howth* is a sentimental novel that perpetuates conservative notions about women and labor. Nevertheless, it is my contention that *Margret Howth* deploys a rhetoric of realism, one which is perhaps more faithful to reality than even that of “Life in the Iron Mills.” I will also argue that, in reading *Margret Howth*, one can trace the same reformist ethics that motivates the realism of “Life in the Iron Mills.”

On the surface, *Margret Howth* significantly differs from “Life in the Iron Mills.” First, “Life in the Iron Mills” is characterized by its narrative coherence and richness. Although Davis addresses complicated themes such as the efficacy of art, the machine-like existence of the working class, and the injustice of the justice system, she never loses control of the narrative, instead creating a multi-layered and multi-voiced text that manages all of its complications. The same cannot be said for *Margret Howth*. Half-formed ideas seem to make their appearance in the story only to be contradicted in later chapters. Narrative trajectories are left unfinished, and overall the novel comes off as incoherent.

The two texts also seem to achieve widely differing levels of rhetorical effectiveness. “Life in the Iron Mills” not only explicitly articulates the effects it intends to produce on the audience, it also displays a single-mindedness of purpose in the story’s construction. While the narrative is complex, rarely is the audience confused about how to feel about a character or event in the story. Davis carefully maps her intentions onto

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16 Most of these writers use their argument about the sentimentality of *Margret Howth* to preface a more complex argument about the novel.

17 For a fuller explanation of these characteristics of “Life in the Iron Mills,” see the previous chapter of this dissertation.
the text, as Jean Pfaelzer writes, establishing a “sympathetic actual reader” (30). On the other hand, *Margret Howth* is constituted by mixed messages about both the characters and their actions. Characters with which readers are clearly meant to identify are later disowned, and actions that are early in the novel portrayed as moral and positive are eventually proved to be detrimental and useless by a carefully constructed counterargument. To summarize, “Life in the Iron Mills” is an engaging and aesthetically pleasing read, despite its depressing content, while *Margret Howth* grinds against the artistic sensibilities of even the most casual reader.

However, it is reasonable to assume that the original version of *Margret Howth*, “The Deaf and the Dumb,” which is no longer extant, was more similar to “Life in the Iron Mills” than *Margret Howth* is. Many reasons support this assumption. First, “The Deaf and the Dumb” was begun no more than a year after “Life in the Iron Mills,” and perhaps more significantly, “The Deaf and the Dumb” was written *in response to* the success of “Life in the Iron Mills.” These facts together suggest that “The Deaf and the Dumb” continued with “the novelty of the scene of the story” found in “Life” (Davis qtd. in Harris 57). Secondly, Davis’s letters show that the two stories originally shared a *milieu*. James Fields’s comments on “The Deaf and the Dumb,” which were preserved through Davis’s response to him, speak to this similarity. Apparently, Fields complained about the “pathetic minor” of the story, objecting to how she “assembled the gloom” of the story (Davis, Letter to James Fields). Davis’s own characterizations of “The Deaf and the Dumb” also suggest the similarity of subject matter. Her goal was “to show how even ‘Lois’ was not dumb, how even the meanest things in life were ‘voices in the world, and
none off them without its signification’” (Davis, Letter to James Fields). Furthermore, she writes that she intended “to show the effects of a creed like [Stephen Holmes’s]” and to detail “the development in common vulgar life of the Fichtian philosophy and its effect upon a self made man” (Davis, Letter to James Fields). Davis attributes the “gloom” of the original story to the development of this “effect.” To put it briefly, in portraying the life of a self-made man (Holmes), Davis constructed a story characterized by sadness. One can only imagine, then, that the original version of the story detailed the ways that Stephen Holmes’s self-absorption led to the misery of other characters. Considered together, these reasons suggest that “Life in the Iron Mills” and “The Deaf and the Dumb” shared a single vision on Davis’s part. The differences between the two stories then seem to have arisen later—after James Fields’s interference and “The Deaf and the Dumb” had become Margret Howth. In short, the changes in Davis’s fiction between “Life in the Iron Mills” and Margret Howth can be traced to James Fields’s opposition to Davis’s realistic form.\(^{18}\)

However, the revisions to Margret Howth do strengthen its ties to “Life in the Iron Mills” in an important way. In both texts, reading is conceptualized as work. In fact, a parallel is drawn between reading Margret Howth and reading in “Life in the Iron Mills.” In “Life,” reading is portrayed as a process of seeing through, of working through representations to a meaningful reality. This reading takes place first on the level of bodies and souls and then on the level of art and meaning. Both reading tasks lead the reader finally to an understanding of material conditions and, hopefully, their own ethical

\(^{18}\) Jean Yellin comes to the same conclusion in her afterword to Margret Howth (296).
obligations.\textsuperscript{19} In \textit{Margret Howth}, Davis extends her drama of reading; the paradigm of reading established in “Life” must be applied to \textit{Margret Howth} itself. The reader must use the deformities of \textit{Margret Howth} to find the novel’s meaning and relevance. Like the bodies in “Life in the Iron Mills,” \textit{Margret Howth} is a deformed instance of material reality that must be read carefully for meaning.

Let me propose, as others have done, that Davis did not fully revise “The Deaf and the Dumb” and in fact never intended to fully revise it. Instead, she carefully obscured her meaning and thereby subverted the attempts of James Fields to alter the story. Whitney Womack affirms this proposition when, in her essay “Reforming Women’s Reform Literature,” she writes of the narrator’s intrusions into the narrative of \textit{Margret Howth}: “Davis intentionally allows her seams and gaps to show, as the confrontational narrator comments repeatedly on the difficulty—and perhaps the futility—of combining these two story lines” (123). And, Sharon Harris thinks similarly, saying that “[what] we have in \textit{Howth}, then is not the story Davis originally wrote, but the one to which she acceded but subverted. . . . Revisions after Fields’s initial rejection may be assumed in several instances by the bitterness with which ‘full sunshine’ is incongruously inserted into the story” (64). Like these scholars, I want to suggest that Davis purposefully makes visible the violence enacted on her text in order to continue her work with realism. The traces, cancellations, and contradictions woven into the novel serve to point the reader to the violence of revision (and therefore the altered form of the novel) and to the meaning beyond and behind the text. This method of subversion and

\textsuperscript{19} See the previous chapter of this dissertation for a more detailed explanation of this thematic in “Life in the Iron Mills.”
obscurity allow her to at least gesture toward the realism of “Life in the Iron Mills.” This follows the pattern established in “Life,” in which the deformities of the body are always indicators of something more—religious truths, material conditions, or ethical dictates.

Despite the revisions made to Margret Howth, careful readers can trace in it the realist rhetoric of “Life in the Iron Mills.” That Davis still believed in the efficacy of realism in Margret Howth—that she did not change her fundamental approach to literature—is clear from many of the novel’s elements. Specifically, the subject matter, metacommentary, and symbolism in Margret Howth speak to the realism we see in “Life in the Iron Mills.” First, as in “Life,” Davis claims that the subject of Margret Howth is the daily lives of the working class, and this subject is portrayed similarly in the two stories. Second, the novel’s metacommentary, which is found mainly in what Womack called the narrator’s “intrusions” (122), affirms realism in opposition to romanticism. Lastly, the symbolic gestures that Davis makes toward realism show that her formal concerns in Margret Howth are almost identical to those in “Life in the Iron Mills.”

Davis declares the subject of her novel in its opening chapter. She writes that she is concerned with “simple, humble things,” “common things,” “and “homelier, subtler lights” (4-5). She tells us that she is going to provide a “rough sketch of one or two of those people whom you see every day, and call ‘dregs’” (6). In other words, from the beginning of the novel, Davis asserts that her subject matter will be the same as that of “Life in the Iron Mills”: the quotidian lives of the working class. In fact, she identifies Margret Howth’s content with that of “Life” by using the same language to describe both. In Margret Howth, Davis says that she will present “very common lives . . . such as
are swarming in yonder market-place” (7). This description is reminiscent of the masses of men who drudge through the marketplace in “Life in the Iron Mills.” Note also the similarity between the following two passages, which describe the workers in “Life in the Iron Mills” and in *Margret Howth*:

I look on the slow stream of human life creeping past, night and morning, to the great mills. Masses of men, with dull, besotted faces bent to the ground, sharpened here and there by pain or cunning; skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes; stooping all night over boiling caldrons of metal, laired by day in dens of drunkenness and infamy; breathing from infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness for soul and body. (Davis, “Life” 12)

[A] train of cars rushed into the hall to be loaded, and men swarmed out of every corner,—red-faced and pale, whiskey-bloated and heavy-brained, Irish, Dutch, black, with souls half asleep somewhere, and the destiny of a nation in their grasp,—hands, like herself [Margret], going through the slow, heavy work . . . (Margret Howth 16)

These two descriptions show that the populations in the stories are very similar. Pictured in the context of their work, crowds of men are characterized by their stupid faces and their dark souls. Both passages emphasize the men’s bodies. Both reference the influence of alcohol. The similarities between the two stories’ milieus extend even further. The prominent portrayals of industry in the two texts are comparable. Images of hell pepper the texts’ descriptions of, on one hand, the streets and the iron mill in “Life” and, on the
other, the streets and the factory in *Margret Howth*. “Life in the Iron Mills” describes its setting as “a city of fires,” “a street in Hell,” and “t’ Devil’s place” (20). And, the men who visit the iron mill suggest that it compares to Dante’s inferno (27). Similarly, *Margret Howth* describes the city streets as “th’ openin’s to hell,” “Gehenna,” and “a hungry devil” (70). When the factory goes up in flames, “[it] was a live monster now,—in one swift instant, alive with fire,—quick, greedy fire, leaping like serpents’ tongues out of its hundred jaws, hungry sheets of flame maddening and writhing toward [Lois]” (171). In both sets of descriptions, the setting is described in terms of fire, hell, and by extension, suffering. Both stories ostensibly deal with the miserable conditions of the working class.

Davis also directly comments on her chosen novelistic form, realism, defending its value as a genre. In addition to repeating a trope from “Life in the Iron Mills” by asking the reader to “go down into” the common things of life (*Margret Howth* 6), Davis also develops an explicit comparison between realism and romanticism throughout the novel, extolling the virtues of realism and characterizing romanticism as obsolete and out-of-date. The first of a series of passages on the differences between Davis’s writing and the fantasies of romanticism comes only a few pages into the novel:

My story is very crude and homely. . . . I expect you to call it stale and plebeian, for I know the glimpses of life it pleases you best to find; idyls [sic] delicately tinted; passion-veined hearts, cut bare for curious eyes; prophetic utterances, concrete and clear; or some word of pathos or fun from the old friends who have endenized themselves in everybody’s
home. You want something, in fact, to lift you out of this crowded, tobacco-stained commonplace, to kindle and chafe and glow in you. I want you to dig into this commonplace, this vulgar American life, and see what is in it. (6)

Another opens the novel’s fifth chapter: “Now that I have come to the love part of my story, I am suddenly conscious of the dingy common colors on the palette with which I have been painting. I wish I had some brilliant dyes. I wish, with all my heart, I could take you back to that ‘Once upon a time’ in which the souls of our grandmothers delighted . . .” (101). This passage continues by comparing the heroes and heroines of *Margret Howth* to those of the romances that the audience is used to reading. The passage concludes with the poignant question, “Now, being prepared for disappointment, will you see my hero?” (105). Davis implies that the realism of *Margret Howth* is the opposite of what will bring the readers pleasure. Why then does she strain to bring a real-life picture to the readers, if she “wishes with all her heart” that she could do the opposite? The first passage concludes with the statement that “I think [vulgar American life] has a new and awful significance that we do not see” (6). So, again, we return to the notion, present in “Life in the Iron Mills,” that Davis sees realism as offering the reader a significance that is usually unseen and that is not accessible through the genre of romanticism.

Davis also compares realism and romanticism through the interactions between Margret Howth’s father and his friend, Dr. Knowles. Davis gives us a dialogue on politics that takes place between Mr. Howth and Dr. Knowles. The two men argue over the value of democracy; while Dr. Knowles, a reformer who plans to establish a
commune that will shelter the disadvantaged, remains quiet, Mr. Howth calls the
Republic “a sham” that is founded on the “slimes of yesterday” (24-5). Howth’s final
word on America is, “Look at her, in the warm vigour of her youth, most vigorous in
decay! Look at the germs and dregs of nations, creeds, religions, fermenting together! As
far as the theory of self-government, it will muddle down here . . . into a puling,
miserable failure!” (26). Davis sets up Knowles as the advocate of the “common” people,
while she shows that Howth sees them as the nation’s downfall. Then, Davis moves from
reproducing the dialogue to commenting on it. She connects Mr. Howth with a grand, but
obsolete past. She describes him as “clinging, loyal and brave to the quaint, delicate
fancies of his youth, that were dust and ashes to other men” (32). Eventually, Davis
moves the commentary into the realm of literature, in which Mr. Howth represents an
old, outmoded, gallant form of literature:

The Doctor had not spoken for a moment. It might be that he was careless
of the poetic lights with which Mr. Howth tenderly decorated his old faith,
or it might be, that even he, with the terrible intentness of a real-life
purpose in his brain, was touched by the picture of the far old chivalry,
dead long ago. The master’s voice grew low and lingering now. It was a
labor of love, this. Oh, it is so easy to back out of the broil of dust and
meanness and barter into the clear shadow of that old life where love and
bravery stand eternal verities,—never to be bought and sold in that dusty
town yonder! To go back? To dream back, rather. To drag out of our own
hearts, as the hungry old master did, whatever is truest and highest there,
and clothe it with name and deed in the dim days of chivalry. Make a poem of it,—so much easier than to make a life! (32-3)

In her commentary on the dialogue, Davis represents the romantic past as lost and obsolete. It is “quaint,” “old,” and “far.” Though Davis does not question the value of these sentiments, she represents them as misplaced in the industrial nineteenth century. And, when she extends this representation to the literature of the past (note the language: “poetic lights,” “picture,” “dream back,” and “make a poem”), she critiques it as no longer relevant. Later in the conversation, Dr. Knowles explicitly connects these “dreams” to the tales of Arthur, Galahad, and Guinevere. By following the logic of this dialogue, we can see the Davis connects romanticism with old-world nostalgia, fantasy, chivalry, and most importantly, irrelevance. On the other hand, realism, her chosen form, stands for romanticism’s relevant opposite; it is modern (note the subtitle, “The Story of To-Day”), real, and significant.

Finally, in addition to the subject matter and the metacommentary in Margret Howth, the symbolism of writing itself reflects Davis’s core principles of realism. Margret Howth’s story arises out of the narrator’s contemplation of a ledger, a trope that also is used in “Life in the Iron Mills,” where the narrator remembers a story while gazing at the korl woman statue (“Life” 64-5). Like the korl sculpture, the ledger is depicted as a mode of representation, and I will argue that the ledger is portrayed
specifically as a *realist* work of art.\(^{20}\) Furthermore, I believe that it is a representation of Davis’s own artistic practice. Davis describes the ledger and its writer to us:

It was a ledger, iron-bound, with the name of the firm on the outside,—Knowles & Co. . . . This ledger, you see by the writing, has been kept by a woman. . . . The writing here is curious: concise, square, not flowing,—very legible, however, exactly suited to its purpose. People who profess to read character in chirography would decipher but little from these cramped, quiet lines. Only this, probably: that the woman, whoever she was, had not the usual fancy of her sex for dramatizing her soul in her writing, her dress, her face,—kept it locked up instead, intact; that her words and looks, like her writing, were most likely simple, mere absorbents by which she drew what she needed of the outer world to her, not flaunting helps to fling herself, or the tragedy or comedy that lay within, before careless passers-by. The first page has the date, in red letters, *October 2, 1860*, largely and clearly written. I am sure the woman’s hand trembled a little when she took up the pen; but there is no sign of it here; for it was a new, desperate adventure to her, and she was young, with no faith in herself. (8-9)

\(^{20}\) While the extended analysis offered here is my own, the credit for the idea of the ledger as realist representation belongs to Jennifer Doyle, who mentioned it during a class discussion.
From this passage, we can draw three escalating conclusions: first, that this scene represents literary authorship; second, that it represents realism; and third, that it represents Davis’s own realist authorship.

That this scene can be read as a representation of literary authorship is fairly obvious. Davis even goes so far to use the symbol of writing in a book in order to draw out the analogy (in comparison to “Life in the Iron Mills,” in which artistic production is portrayed through sculpture). Also, that the book bears the name of a company shows that the text is a professional, public one. Because of this, it can be concluded that the ledger represents not only a literary text, but also a published literary text. It is also clear that in representing a work of literature, the ledger is specifically a work of realism. We are told that the writing does not “dramatize” the writer’s inner life but instead “absorbs” the outer world. Later on, Davis represents the bookkeeper’s action as “copying from one [book] to the other as steadily, monotonously, as if she had been used to it all her life” (9). The mimetic, continuous action of the writer in fact represents Davis’s idea of realist authorship: the purposeful copying of reality. The narrator notes that the writing in the ledger is “not flowing” but “very legible . . . exactly suited to its purpose.” A few paragraphs later, the writing is described again: “[See] how sharp the angles are of the blue and black lines, how even the long columns” (9-10). The writing in the ledger then, like the realism that Davis advocates at the beginning of the novel, is not pleasant and “flowing,” but “sharp,” designed for a particular purpose.

This self-reflexive moment in the text represents Davis’s own artistic production. Davis writes, “Here are the first pages: see how sharp the angles are of the blue and black
lines, how even the long columns: one would not think, that, as the steel pen traced them out, it seemed to be lining out her life, narrow and black” (9-10). The writer-character is Margret herself, and she is writing her life story in the ledger. Since Margret Howth’s life story is *Margret Howth* the novel, the ledger can be said to symbolize *Margret Howth* the novel. Because Davis is the author of *Margret Howth* the novel, the writer of the ledger here specifically represents Davis herself. Other textual evidence confirms this series of connections. We are told that the woman is new to such professional labor. We know that *Margret Howth* was only Davis’s second published work and, through her correspondence with James Fields, that she was nervous about its publication. And, interestingly enough, Davis talks about the state of the writer’s mind with confidence, but also as though she is letting the reader of the ledger in on a secret: “I am sure the woman’s hand trembled a little when took up the pen; but there is no sign of it here” (9). This comment seems to indicate a special, inner knowledge about the character’s experience. In addition, Davis’s letters tell us that she specifically asked James Fields to indicate the date of the ledger, October 2, 1860, approximately the same date that Davis began writing “Life in the Iron Mills” (Yellin 302).

Let me for a moment discuss the importance of the ledger’s symbolism. If, as I have proposed, Davis herself is figured in Margret, and if the ledger is symbolic of Davis’s work, then the work of writing in the ledger is tantamount to the work of producing realist fiction. Davis then portrays herself as a professional, resignedly copying life into her novels. What this demonstrates is that at this time in her career, Davis considered herself to be a realist. The singular importance of this fact will become
apparent as we delve further into *Margret Howth*. But for now, it is sufficient to say that this evidence satisfactorily demonstrates that in *Margret Howth*, Davis did not have any intention of changing her realist approach to literature.

Just as Davis did not intend to deviate from her realist approach to her fiction, there is evidence that she had no intention of changing its fundamental message. Her goal continued to be inspiring her readers toward reform. In other words, she wanted *Margret Howth* to put forward the same message as “Life in the Iron Mills.” In “Life in the Iron Mills,” the narrator begs the following on Hugh’s behalf: “Be just,—not like man’s law, which seizes on one isolated fact, but like God’s judging angel, whose clear, sad eye saw all the countless cankering days of this man’s life, all the countless nights, when, sick with starving, his soul fainted in him, before it judged him for this night, the saddest of all” (10-1). The same request is at the core of *Margret Howth*. The whole plot turns on Stephen Holmes’s treatment of Joe Yare, Lois’s criminal father. On the night before the factory is turned over to Holmes, he is visited by a friend who asks him to be merciful to Joe Yare, who has apparently committed a crime that only Holmes knows about. It seems that Joe committed this crime before he had been imprisoned and that he has recently been released from custody. Holmes’s friend asks him not to turn in Joe to the authorities and in essence send him back to prison, and a conversation about justice follows:

“He’s tryin’ to do right, Yare is.”

The old man went on, trying not to be eager, and watching Holmes’s face.
“He’s tryin’. Sendin’ him back—yoh know how that’ll end. Seems like as we’d his soul in our hands. S’pose—what d’yoh think, if we give him a chance? It’s yoh he fears. I see him a-watchin’ yoh; what d’yoh think, if we give him a chance?” catching Holmes’s sleeve. “He’s old, an’ he’s tryin’. Heh?”

Holmes smiled.

“We didn’t make the law he broke. Justice before mercy . . .”

(132).

Stephen gives a similar response when Yare himself asks for mercy. Joe Yare tells Holmes that he’s trying “to be a different man” (165). Holmes ignores him, not even looking in his direction, and then finally responds, “Whoever breaks law abides by it. It is no affair of mine” (165). Yare offers a plea that sounds similar to the one Davis makes on behalf of Hugh in “Life in the Iron Mills”:

“It’s not just,” [Yare] said, savagely. “What good’ll it do me to go back ther’? I was goin’ down, down, an’ bringin’ th’ others with me. What good’ll it do you or the rest to hev me ther’? To make me afraid? It’s poor learnin’ frum fear. Who taught me what was right? Who cared? No man cared fur my soul, till I thieved ‘n’ robbed; ‘n’ then judge ‘n’ jury ‘n’ jailers was glad to pounce on me. Will yoh gev me a chance? will yoh?”

(166)

When Holmes refuses, Joe Yare burns down the factory, destroying the future that Holmes had so carefully planned. The narrator’s request in “Life in the Iron Mills” could
have easily been written in reference to Stephen Holmes and his decision concerning Joe Yare. Because Stephen ignored the difficult circumstances in the lives of the underclass and meted out judgment without understanding or sympathy, many of the characters in *Margret Howth* suffer.\(^{21}\) To sum up, Davis’s message to her readers about sympathy and action is borne out through both “Life in the Iron Mills” and *Margret Howth*. Davis’s ideals, the meaning behind her stories, are consistent in the two texts.

In addition to having a similar form and meaning as “Life in the Iron Mills,” *Margret Howth* perpetuates the paradigm of reading that is established in “Life.” In both texts, reading the body enlightens an audience about the soul housed inside. The body both conceals and reveals the soul. As in “Life in the Iron Mills,” in *Margret Howth* the narrator describes most characters by reading their bodies. The contours, marks, and distinctions in the characters’ bodies reflect the nature of their souls. Dr. Knowles’s face is described as “dominant, restless, flushing into red gusts of passion, a small, intolerant eye, half hidden in folds of yellow fat,—the eyes of a man who would give to his master (whether God or Satan) the last drop of his own blood, and exact the same of other men” (13). It is in the deformities of the man’s face, which “repelled most men,” that Davis finds his character (13). Other characters are described similarly. Stephen Holmes, Davis’s example of a self-proclaimed self-existent man, is also analyzed through his bodily features. Davis tells us that he has an “iron face,” and that “[men] with pale faces and heavy jaws like his do not carry their religion on their tongue’s end; their creeds

\(^{21}\) Yellin contends that in the original version of *Margret Howth*, Stephen Holmes was killed in the fire that was set by Joe Yare (295). In this case, the effects of Stephen’s notions about justice would be even more pronounced than in the version we have today.
leave them only in the slow oozing life-blood, false as the creeds may be” (112). Again, Holmes’s nature is borne out through his physical features.

In fact, it seems that, in Margret Howth, Davis prescribes this method of reading (through the material to the immaterial) as the best way to interpret reality. Two passages support this notion. The first is given after Margret’s second day working at the factory. Davis writes:

So the day wore on in the town and country; the old sun glaring down like some fierce old judge, intolerant of weakness or shams. . . . He looked down in that city as in every American town, as in these where you and I live, on the same countless maze of human faces going day by day through the same monotonous routine. Knowles, passing through the restless crowds, read with keen eyes among them strange meanings by this common light of the sun,—meanings such as you and I might read, if our eyes were clear as his,—or morbid, it may be, you think? (89)

In this excerpt we see that the sun looks down on the people of the town, judging them coldly. It seems that the sun symbolizes an objective truth—unmoved by pity or mercy. It is in this light that Knowles reads “strange meaning” in the crowds. We are told though that in Knowles this light produces the merciful impulses that it itself lacks. As he looks at the people, Davis tells us that “the uncouth old man, sick in soul from some pain that I dare not tell you of, in his own life, looked into the depths of human loss with a mad

22 In “Class, Gender, and a History of Metonymy,” Wai Chee Dimock uses the terms “material” and “immaterial” to generalize from terms like “body” and “person.”
desire to set it right” (90). So that, when Knowles reads the souls of others in the light of objectivity, he is moved to action.

The second passage that presents this same notion immediately follows the one above. It contrasts the sun’s light with another light “by which the world was seen that day, rarer than sunshine, and purer” (91). We are told that “[there] were places where [the sun] did not shine; down in the fetid cellars, in the slimy cells of the prison” (90).

However, the “rarer” light is stronger:

It fell on the dense crowds,—upon the just and the unjust. It went into the fogs of the fetid dens from which the coarser light was barred, into the deepest mires of body where a soul could wallow, and made them clear. It lighted the depths of the hearts whose outer pain and passion men were keen to read in the unpitying sunshine, and bared in those depths the feeble gropings for the right, the loving hope, the unuttered prayer. (91)

This light, which Davis eventually identifies as God’s light, is characterized as, not judging or “unpitying,” but merciful and loving. Where this light reads, it brings clarity. But we are further told that “[not] many eyes were clear to sees its shining that day” (91).

Nevertheless, Davis tells us that the character Lois Yare “caught faint glimpses” of it (91).

These passages are important because they present a paradigm for viewing the world. Both excerpts demonstrate how this process of reading brings to light the suffering of others, and both excerpts show that reading for the souls of others brings about amelioration of their suffering. In “Life in the Iron Mills,” Davis tells us that the
churchgoers would have helped Hugh if they had known what was going on in his soul (45), and Davis shows that this action of reading others is crucial for bringing about change. Davis explicitly demonstrates that those who bring about changes in the lives of others are those who, like Knowles, “read with keen eyes” or, like Lois, “caught faint glimpses . . . of its heavenly clearness” (92). Knowles attempts to pass this vision on to Margret, and Davis attempts to pass it on to us. At one point in the novel, Knowles takes Margret to a “fetid den,” a shelter that houses the homeless “tramps,” escaped slaves, and drunken men. He decides it will help her forget her own troubles to see the desperation of others. Davis tells us, “He dragged her closer to the women, through the darkness and foul smell. ‘Look in their faces,’ he whispered” (151). Then again he says, “[You] sit by the road-side, with help in your hands, and Christ in your heart, and call your life lost, quarrel with your God, because that mass of selfishness has left you,—because you are balked in your puny hope! Look at these women. What is their loss, do you think?” (152).

And, finally, he takes her to the body of a woman who drank herself to death because her lover died in an industrial accident. He says, “She’s dead now, here. She drank herself to death,—a most unpicturesque suicide. I want you to look at her” (153). Three times Knowles asks Margret to look at the suffering people; we find out later that he is trying to convince her to join him in his reform work. These examples demonstrate that the method of reading that Davis uses to present her characters extends to how the characters read each other and the world around them.

Finally, Davis also attempts to persuade us, her readers, to view the world in a similar way. The paradigm of reading that she herself uses in presenting her characters is
extended to how the characters interpret each other, and this is extended to the relationship between the readers and the text. As readers, we are encouraged to see the meaning that lurks behind or haunts the text. The narrator repeatedly instructs the reader to “look” or “see clearly.” The novel begins by telling the reader, “Neither I nor you have the prophet’s vision to see the age as its meaning stands written before God. . . . It is not clear to us. . . . Yet the To-Morrow is there; if God lives, it is there. The voice of the meek Nazarene, which we have deafened down as ill-timed, unfit to teach the watchword of the hour, renews the quiet promise of its coming in simple, humble things. Let us go down and look for it” (4). Here, Davis invites her readers to join her in a search for meaning; this search is executed in the form of a story: the readers must use the story to look for meaning. The novel’s opening paragraphs instruct us to “search in common things for auguries of the hopeful, helpful calm to come” (5), “to dig into this commonplace, this vulgar American life, and see what is in it” (6), and “to go down into this common, every-day drudgery, and consider if there might not be in it also a great warfare” (6). Davis’s explicit message to the reader here is to work to find meaning in the novel’s realism, repeating “Life in the Iron Mills” in its message to read material reality for the signs of immaterial meaning. To put it differently, we must turn Davis’s paradigm of reading in “Life in the Iron Mills” onto the text of Margret Howth.

In fact, Margret Howth provides us with a guide to reading the novel in the character of Lois Yare. Lois’s physical deformities are an analog to the deformities of Margret Howth itself. Just as Lois has been irrevocably marked by the textile industry, Margret Howth has been scarred and distorted by the publishing industry. However, Lois
also carries great meaning for those who know her despite her bodily defects, and as we have seen, *Margret Howth*, despite the distorting revisions, retains its fundamental form and content. More importantly, though, *because of* her deformities, Lois signifies the reality of material conditions. And, similarly, *Margret Howth*, because of its incoherence and narrative deformities, signifies the reality that James Fields tried so hard to suppress.

Lois is a trenchant example of embodiedness in nineteenth-century American fiction. In fact, she is the most heavily embodied character in Davis’s early fiction. Lois’s body is her defining characteristic; it dominates the way other characters and we as readers perceive her. Descriptions of her fixate on her physical markers. She is described as “helplessly crippled” (54), “old and stunted” (55), “marred” (66), “a poor vile thing” (93), and “deformed” (258). Again and again, Davis refers to Lois’s “distorted little body” (67), “broad, misshapen forehead” (68), “scarred face” (69), “coarse, distorted body” (148), “misshapen body” (92), “pock-marked face” (110), and “sunken face” (209). In fact, at several points in the novel, Lois is referred to simply as the “body” (57, 201).

We are told that Lois’s physical deformities and mental disabilities are the result of some accident at the textile factory where she worked as a child. Lois describes her own history at the mill:

I kind o’ grew into that place in them years: seemed to me like as I was part o’ th’ engines, somehow. Th’ air used to be thick in my mouth, black wi’ smoke ‘n’ wool ‘n’ smells. In them years I got dazed in my head, I think. ‘T was th’ air ‘n’ the’ work. I was weak allus. ‘T got so that th’
noise o’ th’ looms went on in my head night ‘n’ day,—allus thud, thud.

‘N’ hot days, when th’ hands was chaffin’ ‘n’ singin’, th’ black wheels ‘n’ rollers was alive, starin’ down at me, ‘n’ the’ shadders o’ th’ looms was like snakes creepin’,—creepin’ anear all the’ time . . . (69)

Lois pictures her disabilities as occurring because of a poisonous environment. In fact, the factory conditions seem to slowly penetrate her body and debilitate her. Davis explicitly connects Lois’s over-embodied state to the material conditions in which she lived as a child.

In *Margret Howth*, it is clear that Lois’s physical condition has caused her to possess a special soul. Davis explains that, Lois acquires a specific kind of knowledge because of her deformities. In fact, Lois is depicted as having the unique capacity to see what others cannot. Lois catches “faint glimpses” of “heavenly clearness” and “know[s] the message in the depths of colour in the evening sky” (91-2). Somehow Lois instinctively understands beauty. Davis speculates,

Was it the disease of her injured brain that made all things alive to her,—that made her watch, in her ignorant way, the grave hills, the flashing, victorious rivers, look pitifully into the face of some starved hound, or dingy mushroom trodden in the mud before it scarce had lived, just as we should look into human faces to know what they would say to us? Was it weakness and ignorance that made everything she saw or touched nearer, more human to her than to you or me? She never got used to living as
other people do; these sights and sounds did not come to her common, hackneyed. (93)

It is both in spite of and because of her physical injuries that Lois is a special person, or soul. Davis tells us that “the weak soul of the girl staggered from its dungeon, and groped through these heavy-browed hills, these colour-dreams, through the faces of dog or man upon the street, to find the God that lay behind” (94). It is because of her bodily “dungeon” that Lois has a “weak soul.” But, it is because of her “weak soul” that Lois has the ability to see beauty in all circumstances. The sight that Davis hopes to foster in her readers is already found, fully developed, in the physically marred Lois.

Lois’s existence has a positive effect on those who know her. As the previous paragraph shows, Lois is able to see God in “dog or man” (94). Her treatment of others produces similar behaviors in others. According to Davis, Lois brings out the best in others:

Some subtile power lay in the coarse, distorted body, in the pleading child’s face, to rouse, wherever they went, the same curious, kindly smile.

Not, I think, that dumb, pathetic eye, common to deformity, that cries, “Have mercy upon me, O my friend, for the hand of God hath touched me!”—a deeper, mightier charm, rather: a trust down in the fouled fragments of her brain, even in the bitterest hour of her bare life,—a faith, faith in God, faith in her fellow-man, faith in herself. No human soul refused to answer the summons. Down in the dark alleys . . . there was an undefined sense of pride in protecting this wretch whose portion of life
was more meager and low than theirs. Something in them struggled up to meet the trust in the pitiful eyes,—something which scorned to betray the trust,—some Christ-like power in their souls, smothered, dying, under the filth of their life and the terror of hell. (77)

Those who encounter Lois are moved by her. She has a healing effect on others. Following the line of causation, because of Lois’s material conditions, she is bodily deformed; because of her bodily deformities, she has a unique gift of sight; because of this gift of sight, Lois is able to affect others positively and persuasively. Those around her seem to automatically sympathize with her situation.

Lois’s ability to bring out the best in others is precisely what Davis desires to accomplish through her writing. The sympathy that Lois creates in her “audience” is exactly what Davis struggles to create with her readers. In this way, Lois functions as an analog to the text *Margret Howth*; those around her parallel our role as readers. In order for Lois’s neighbors to experience the benefits of her person, they must first read and acknowledge the violence done to her body. Similarly, when we read *Margret Howth*, we must acknowledge the industrial violence done to it in order to fully appreciate its meaning. Just as Lois has acquired special knowledge from her bodily suffering, so the deformed text has a significance to convey to those who are willing to read through the deformities. For both Lois and *Margret Howth*, their greatest persuasive powers lie in their deformities.

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23 See previous chapter for a discussion about how Davis attempts to foster sympathy for the working class through her fiction.
As I noted in the previous chapter, Augustine, as a rhetorical theorist, speaks to Davis’s particular situation. In discussing the best way to persuade audiences to change their behaviors, he addresses the problems and potential unique to the opaque, but meaningful text. Specifically, he writes about how truth can be “obscured” in language. While Augustine urges his students to speak with clarity, he also writes that obscurity has its place in rhetorical situations. He writes that “useful and helpful” obscurity functions in a particular way: “either to exercise and, as it were, to refine the minds of their readers, or to break down the prejudices and to whet the zeal of those who are willing to learn, or, too, to keep in the dark the minds of the wicked, either that they may be converted to a good life, or be excluded from the mysteries” (464). Augustine suggests that the opaque text has a dual rhetorical purpose. First, it wields a sort of super-persuasive, super-rhetorical power. Those who are willing to “exercise” or work through the text reap the benefits of a fuller knowledge of the truth. Secondly, however, it serves to exclude those who are unwilling to work through the text’s opacity. Augustine sees obscurity as encouraging a particular kind of reader, the one who has a desire to know and is “willing to learn.” For Augustine, then, the opacity of language can often yield a more engaged audience.

Augustine’s ideas on this subject closely parallel those of Rebecca Harding Davis. In her fiction, Davis consistently portrays the world or reality as a hermeneutic object that must be carefully read for greater meaning. She also demonstrates that texts work the same way. They reveal their meaning only through the reading-work of the audience. For Davis, like for Augustine, the more opaque the object, the more valuable the meaning.
Therefore, the kind of reader that is being sought out and encouraged is a reader who brings to the text a desire to know and a willingness to work. In this rhetorical paradigm, reading is work that precedes a reward of understanding.

Davis requires us to be this kind of reader when we read Margret Howth, working through its opacities in order to fully understand its message. Processing the text’s “deformities” can tell us how to understand it. By noting the often-confusing cancellations and contradictions in the novel, we can begin to see its meaning. We know the reason for the novel’s inconsistencies; we know that Davis was asked to revise the novel by her publishers, and that she did so. We know that she changed the “gloom” to “full sunshine” and that she was unhappy with the final product. The final product, the Margret Howth that we have today, is a piecemeal text, composed of original writing from “The Deaf and the Dumb” and the new material added to please James Fields. What is produced is a text that resists itself, and I would like to suggest that Davis—consciously or not—retained her original purpose by obviously subverting the continuity of the novel. In other words, by tracing the tensions within the novel, we can better understand the rhetoric of Margret Howth.

Oddly enough, this strategy to preserve her text’s persuasive purpose is first noticeable in Davis’s letter to Fields, assuring him that she would be willing to revise her story. Before she had even begun revisions, she was ambivalent about doing so and intent on retaining the novel’s original meaning. In the letter, Davis tells Fields that she had originally intended the story to end happily, but that the story ran away with her, so to speak. Then, she writes the following sentence: “I tell you this in order to ask you if you
think I could alter the story so as to make it acceptable by returning to my original idea.”
The sentence seems to suggest that Davis herself is proposing revisions. However, her reluctance to do so is evident in the original, handwritten letter. In the original, the word “story” is written over a visible erasure, and barely apparent behind this word is the faint outline of the word “meaning” (Davis, Letter to James Fields). Read literally, the letter indicates that Davis proposed to change the novel’s meaning and then thought better of it, proposing instead simply to change the plot. However, I’d like to extend this reading to a slightly metaphorical level. In my opinion, this letter represents *Margret Howth* itself. Davis left on the novel evidence of erasure, behind which we can still discern the novel’s meaning, which has remained visible because of the violence done to the text. While the “story” of *Margret Howth* has been permanently changed, the meaning—through erasure—is preserved. In both readings, the story’s original rhetorical purpose, through Davis’s design or as a natural result of revision, remains visible in the story’s obvious discontinuity.

Overall, the novel resists itself in its attempts to cancel out the realism of the story by layering a romantic plot over it. The novel almost painfully and regretfully ends the story with Margret and Stephen’s marriage and Margret’s complete absorption in the domestic space. In the end, Margret, who Davis herself called “the completest failure” in the novel, has no interest in the struggles of others in the realm that Davis calls “To-Day” (qtd. in Yellin 290). In the last paragraphs of the novel, Davis writes, “What is this To-Day to Margret? She has no prophetic insight, cares for none, I am afraid: the common

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24 This has been documented and explained by Jean Yellin, who argues that James Fields attempted to “feminize” Davis’s text (271).
things of every-day wear their old faces to her, dear and real. Her haste is too eager to allay the pain about her, her husband’s touch too strong and tender . . . for her to waste her life in visions” (266). The woman who Knowles envisioned as an activist ends the novel as a romantic heroine. Indeed, the romantic or sentimental moments of the novel increase as the story builds, and Davis includes the following warning before they overwhelm the novel: “Now that I have come to the love part of my story, I am suddenly conscious of dingy common colors on the palette with which I have been painting” (101). The novel vacillates between the praise of realism and comments like this: “Of course, if I could, I would have blotted out every meanness before I showed it to you . . .” (104). Although Davis does not blot out “every meanness” of the story, she does undercut and rewrite it, using familiar tropes of the sentimental novel. Stephen Holmes is initially portrayed as the calculating, self-involved philosopher; he ends the novel speaking the words of a romantic hero (236). The novel begins by declaring its subject as the lives of the impoverished and desolate; it ends with Howths’ discovery of oil on their property and rescue from poverty. And, Lois’s love initially is depicted as the highest a human can attain; at the end of the novel, she regrets not being able to form romantic attachments: it was “[a] different love from any she had known; better, she thought. It could not be helped; but it was better” (258). Overall, the effect is jarring. Leaving the realist parts of the novel to exist side-by-side with the traditional tropes of a sentimental ending produces a tension that the reader must grapple with in order to comprehend *Margret Howth*. 
The wrenching of this realist novel into a happy ending distorts many of the character portrayals. One of the most noticeable tensions in the novel is found in its portrayal of Dr. Knowles. The treatment of Knowles is far from consistent, and one scarcely knows how to feel about his character. At the beginning of the novel, Davis writes from his perspective, and we instantly sympathize with his ideas and aims. However, by the end of the novel, he is a bitter man with no role in the novel’s conclusion. It appears that Davis’s attempts to sentimentalize the novel required Knowles to be completely neutralized, and so he—and the ideas of reform that he represents—is canceled out by a very literal defamation of character. At the beginning of the novel, Dr. Knowles is portrayed sympathetically. We know that he treasures and values Margret, seeing something in her very special. He wants her to work with him in his efforts to help the indigent, thinking of her that “this woman had been planned and kept by God for higher uses than daughter or wife or mother” (20). He obviously sees in Margret what Davis wants us to see; he is in effect Davis’s surrogate in these moments. Furthermore, Davis portrays Knowles’s reform work with the same impassioned language that she used to plead on Hugh’s behalf in “Life in the Iron Mills”:

People called this old Knowles an infidel, said his brain was as unnatural and distorted as his body. God, looking down into his heart that night, saw the savage wrestling there, and judged him with other eyes than theirs. The story [of Jesus as a Reformer] stood alive in his throbbing brain, demanding hearing. All things were real to this man, this uncouth mass of flesh that his companions sneered at; most real of all, the unhelped pain of
Life, the great seething mire of dumb wretchedness in streets and alleys, the cry for aid from the starved souls of the world. You and I have other work to do than to listen,—pleasanter. But he, coming out of the mire, his veins thick with the blood of a despised race, had carried up their pain and hunger with him: it was the most real thing on earth to him,—more real than his own share in the unseen heaven or hell. By the reality, the peril of the worlds instant need, he tried the offered help from Calvary. It was the work of years, not of this night. Perhaps, if they who preach Christ crucified had doubted him as this man did, their work in the coming heaven might be higher,—and ours, who hear them. (50)

In this passage, we can see how Davis’s sympathies lie with Knowles. She tries to give her readers the picture of Knowles that God had “looking down into his heart that night.” In other words, she is trying to show how he is misunderstood. The fact that she connects Knowles with the “real” also connects the reader to him—as the reader has known from the beginning of the novel that he or she is embarking on a quest for the commonplace and the real. And, we see the building passionate description of the people Knowles has undertaken to help: “the unhelped pain . . . the great seething mire of dumb wretchedness . . . the cry for aid.” Davis uses the reader’s sympathy for those who are “unhelped” and “dumb” to connect the reader to Knowles. As readers, we can only conclude that Davis wants us to identify with Knowles and his actions on behalf of the poor.

However, shortly after this passage, Davis begins the work of erasing the reader’s identification and sympathy with Knowles. His character undergoes a strange assault by
the novel; he is portrayed as cruel, angry, and foolish. First, with a “covert sneer” and a “surly nod,” Knowles cruelly mentions Stephen Holmes’s engagement in front of Margret (78). Then, three characters who are discussing Knowles’s commune call it a “castle in the air” (83). Eventually, Davis, referring to Knowles, writes, “Philanthropists, for some curious reason, are not the most amiable members of small families” (114). The novel criticizes not only Knowles’s character, but also his efforts on behalf of the poor. However, the real assault on his character occurs in the second half of the novel, as Davis develops the romance between Margret and Stephen. Knowles is visiting Stephen Holmes in the hospital, and Davis writes,

> The truth is, Knowles was thoroughly out of place in these little mending-shops called sick-chambers, where bodies are taken to pieces, and souls set right. He had no faith in your slow, impalpable cures: all reforms were to be accomplished by a wrench, from the abolition of slavery to the pulling of a tooth. . . . [It] made him out of temper to meet the sisters. . . . So the homely live charity of these women, their work, which no other hands were ready to take, jarred against his abstract theory and irritated him, as an obstinate fact always does into the hand of a man who is determined to clutch the very heart of a matter. . . . Don’t sneer at Knowles. Your own clear, tolerant brain, that reflects all men and creeds alike, like colourless water, drawing the truth from all, is very different, doubtless, from this narrow, solitary soul, who thought the world waited for him to fight down his one evil before it went on its slow way. An
intolerant fanatic, of course. But the truth he did know was so terribly real to him, there was such sick, throbbing pity in his heart for men who suffered as he had done. And then, fanatics must make history for conservative men to learn from, I suppose. (178-80)

In this passage, Davis cleverly maligns Knowles’s character, and with it, his sympathy with suffering people. She holds the nuns at the hospital up as examples of Christian charity and labels Knowles as a fanatic, a reformer who wants too much too fast. She displaces Knowles’s radicalism as the impetus of change in the novel with a more moderate version of reform. Interestingly, this happens again later in the novel. Davis introduces a new character, a minister named Van Dyke, who is portrayed as a practical man, and who, of course, takes it upon himself to critique Knowles and his ideas. On both occasions, Knowles, as a symbol of a solution for social wrongs, is defamed and displaced by more moderate characters with whom readers can more easily sympathize. By applying the term “fanatic” to Knowles, Davis attempts to erode the reader’s allegiance to him. By the end of the novel, the reader realizes that Knowles has served no purpose whatsoever in the plot, unless it is to be completely discredited.

The portrayal of Stephen Holmes also changes drastically in the course of the novel. In “The Deaf and the Dumb” Davis had originally portrayed Stephen’s philosophy of life as one that ends in misery. In her letter to Fields, she says that the gloom in the original story was a result of developing Stephen’s story, the story about Fichtian philosophy and the self-made man. This original purpose is evident throughout the first half of the novel. In fact, the opening pages of the novel read, “Your enemy, Self, goes
with you from the cradle to the coffin; it is a hand-to-hand struggle all the sad, slow way, fought in solitude” (7). Before Chapter VIII, the direction of the plot in regard to Stephen is decisive. He has forsaken Margret in order to pursue self-development, and in doing so, has decided to marry Miss Herne in order to gain the fortune he needs to continue achieving his personal potential. Though he misses Margret, he tells himself that there is no such thing as love in real life (143). He signs the deed to the factory, thereby also sealing his marriage to Miss Herne, and Davis tells us “swept his soul clean of doubt and indecision” (160). That night Joe Yare burns down the factory. Everyone suffers from Stephen’s pursuit of his own potential. Margret’s domestic happiness is destroyed; the Howths are impoverished; and, for a while, it seems that Stephen himself will die in the fire as a result of his judgment of Joe Yare. Had the novel ended at this point, its moral would have been clear: the pursuit of Self leads to self-destruction and the destruction of others. Critics propose that Davis ended the original version of “The Deaf and the Dumb” with Stephen’s death in the fire (Yellin 295). However, in her attempt to end the story more happily, she needed to resurrect Stephen, so to speak.

The erasure of Stephen’s character is different but no less complete than that of Knowles. Davis accomplishes Stephen’s transition from a self-deceived villain to a sentimental hero by resurrecting him. After the fire, literally speaking, Stephen goes into a state of semi-consciousness that lasts for several months. Figuratively speaking, however, Davis kills Stephen Holmes and brings him back to life. The references to Stephen’s coma as death are frequent. One passage describing the coma contains at three references to his death, which are italicized below:
It might be years, it might be ages. Even in after-life, looking back, he
never broke that time into weeks or days . . . he had drifted out of coarse,
measured life into some out-coast of eternity, and slept in its calm. When,
by long degrees, the shock of outer life jarred and woke him, it was feebly
done: he came back reluctant, weak: the quiet clinging to him, as if he had
been drowned in Lethe, and had brought its calming mist with him out of
the shades. (173; emphasis added)

These references continue through the next few pages. We are told that he “drifted . . .
into a sleep like death” and eventually became “conscious . . . of his old life over the
gulf” (175, 177). Davis even says the talk of his visitors “jarred him as strangely as if one
had begun on politics and price-currents to the silent souls in Hades” (176). In addition to
these direct comparisons between Stephen’s coma and death, Davis gives us descriptions
that evoke death and the after-life. She writes,

They were very long, pleasant days in early December. The sunshine was
pale, but it suited his hurt eyes better: it crept slowly in the mornings over
the snuff-coloured carpet on the floor, up the brown foot-board of the bed,
and, when the wind shook the window-curtains, made little crimson pools
of mottled light over the ceiling,—curdling pools, that he liked to watch:
going off, from the clean gray walls, and rustling curtain, and transparent
crimson, into sleeps that last all day. (174)

In these descriptions, Davis evokes death with the “crimson . . . curdling pools,” which
call to mind pools of blood, and with the brown carpet and foot-board, which suggest that
Stephen is laying in a coffin. Davis also implies the after-life in this passage, where the pale light effuses “very long, pleasant days.”

These portrayals of Stephen’s death and rebirth continue through the rest of the novel, where they are explicitly connected to his change of heart. In his coma, he is aware that Margret has visited him, and Davis tells us that he knew she was there—“he would have known it, if he had been dead, lying there.” And then, he thinks “of what might have been” (194). Davis follows this with an assault on the reader: “Do you wonder at the remorse of this man? Wait, then, until you lie alone, as he had done, through days as slow, revealing as ages, face to face with God and death. Wait until you go down so close to eternity that the life you have lived stands out before you in the dreadful bareness in which God sees it . . .” (194). Stephen’s change of heart occurs out of an encounter with death, and his alteration is pronounced. He gives up his “Fichtian philosophy” on life and pursues a marriage to Margret (Davis, Letter to James Fields). However, the question about the reader’s wonder at Stephen’s remorse implies Davis’s awareness that her readers may find Stephen’s metamorphosis unbelievable.

The changes to Knowles and Holmes are made necessary by Davis’s wish to bring the “love part of [the] story” to an acceptable conclusion (101). Throughout the novel, the question of Margret’s destiny seems to be answered in two competing ways. At the beginning of the story, it is clear that Margret has embarked on a new life of work in order to prevent the starvation of her family. But, it also seems that her future is still undetermined. On one hand, we know that Knowles has plans for Margret, that he believes that she “has work to do” (14). We know too that Davis suggests that there is a
unique relationship between the two, “a repellant resemblance which made them like close relations” (19). There are also suggestions that Margret should confront reality and embrace the possibilities of work before her. Davis writes, “Other women whom God has loved enough to probe to the depths of their nature have done the same,—saw themselves drying up within them, jeered at, utterly alone. It is a trial we laugh at. . . . They come out of the trial as out of martyrdom, according to their faith: You see its marks sometimes in a frivolous old age going down with tawdry hopes and starved eyes to the grave; you see its victory in the freshest, fullest lives in the earth” (60). This passage, which is discussing Margret’s abandonment by Stephen, implies that those who “accepted her trial” had the victory while those who cling to lost possibilities are characterized as “frivolous.” Here, Davis mocks women who live for unrequited love. She further criticizes Margret’s self-pity:

Margret did not speak; let the poor girl [Lois] sob herself into quiet. What had she to do with this gulf of pain and wrong? Her own higher life was starved, thwarted. Could it be that the blood of these her brothers called against her from the ground? . . . [Was] she to blame? Her Virginian blood was cool, high-bred; she had learned conservatism in her cradle. Her life in the West had not yet quickened her pulse. So she put aside whatever social mystery or wrong faced her in this girl, just as you or I would have done. She had her own pain to bear. Was she her brother’s keeper? It was true, there was wrong; this woman’s soul lay shattered by it; it was the
fault of her blood, of her birth, and Society had finished the work. Where was the help? (72)

After her conversation with Lois had concluded though, Margret has changed for the better. Davis tells us that “the morbid fancies were gone” (78). And, Margret thinks, “How actual it was to-day,—hearty, vigorous, alive with honest work and tears and pleasure! A broad, good world to live and work in, to suffer or die, if God so willed it,—God, the good!” (78). The acceptance that Davis portrayed previously as necessary has come, and it seems that Margret is will accept her work with Dr. Knowles.

However, like the stories of Knowles and Holmes, Margret’s story takes a completely different direction in the later chapters of the novel. Actually, this direction is foreshadowed by early references to Margret’s “true life” or her “true self,” which has been “thwarted” by her abandonment by Stephen. Davis juxtaposes this true life with Margret’s current life of “shallow duty and shallow reward” (44, 59). Often side-by-side with the valorization of acceptance and work, these comments erode not only the audience’s ideas about Margret’s future but also the audience’s ideas about her character. The struggle between the two sets of values continues as Margret faces both a tête-à-tête with Stephen and a visit to the slums with Dr. Knowles. But, as the novel progresses, and as Knowles is discredited and Stephen redeemed, Margret’s cheerful work in helping Dr. Knowles is forgotten, and the story forges full-speed-ahead toward her reconciliation with Stephen and her fulfillment in domestic occupation. Margret begins reform work because she needs money, and Davis portrays her as miserable and unfulfilled. Then, Van Dyke, Davis’s newest voice of authority, confronts Knowles about Margret’s destiny. He
asks, “How do you know [God] gave this Margret Howth the spirit and understanding of a reformer? There may be higher work for her to do” (217). And indeed, Margret is portrayed as lifeless and an “automaton” in her newest endeavors (225). Stephen confronts her about her new occupation, saying, “When you loved me long ago, selfish, erring as I was, you fulfilled the law of your nature; when you put that love out of your heart, you make your duty a tawdry shame, and your life a lie. . . . You have deceived yourself . . . when you try to fill your heart with this work, you serve neither your God nor your fellow-man” (232-3). However, once Margret consents to be Stephen’s wife, she has a “dewy, healthy hand,” “flashing” eyes,” and hair “like a mist of tawny gold” (241-2). According to the novel, Margret had been given “her true work” in her marriage to Stephen (243). Somehow, Margret’s true life, true self, and true work are fulfilled in Stephen Holmes.

The most tragic erasure in the story, however, is Davis’s final undermining of her own finished novel. She begins the novel’s closing paragraphs with a description of “the yet living men and women of whom I have told you” (264). Her commentary on the story is far from confident. She calls it “vague and incomplete, like unguessed riddles” that she has “no right to solve” (264). She mourns Margret’s incompleteness, saying, “She has no prophetic insight, cares for none, I am afraid” (265). And, she characterizes Margret as excessively invested in her domestic concerns; she is “too eager” to comfort her husband, and her husband’s touch is “too strong and tender” (265). She leaves her discussion of Margret by hoping for something better: “What is To-Morrow until it comes? . . . [The]
Helper yet waits near her. Here is work, life: the Old Year you despise holds beauty, pain, content yet unmastered; let us leave Margret to master them” (266). Davis’s unwillingness to sanction the story as complete is echoed in the questions with which she confronts the reader:

My story is but a mere groping hint? It lacks determined truth, a certain yea and nay? It has no conduit of God’s justice running through it, awarding apparent good and ill? I know: it is a story of To-Day. The Old Year is on us yet. (265)

It does not satisfy you? Child-souls, you tell me, like that of Lois, may find it enough to hold no past and no future, to accept the work of each moment, and think it no wrong to drink every drop of its beauty and joy: we, who are wiser, laugh at them. It may be: yet I say unto you, their angels only do always behold the face of our Father in the New Year. (266)

These questions betray Davis’s insecurities about the novel and, in doing so, acknowledge its flaws. For all intents and purposes, Davis labels her novel as unsatisfactory and “groping,” lacking in purpose. And in each set of questions, Davis attempts to answer with a reference to the inadequacy but reality of “To-Day,” but these answers only seem to reinforce the power of the questions. In the end, Davis effectively cancels out the whole story, overriding it through questions about its integrity.

These contradictions, cancellations, and tensions are deformities that, once noted, can be read for meaning. Davis’s modus operandi of asking her audience to look through
appearances to an immaterial truth here is extended to the form of her literature. In other words, as in “Life in the Iron Mills” and as in the example of Lois Yare from *Margret Howth*, bodily or textual deformities are flags that not only signal a deeper, more spiritual reality but also point to material conditions. For Davis, the body or the text is a site that bears both the individual soul and the material world. In the case of *Margret Howth*, the text has obvious and puzzling deformities that signal a masked meaning and also expose material conditions.

These contradictions, cancellations, and tensions indicate a meaning that parallels that of “Life in the Iron Mills,” instead of, as it appears, contradicting the earlier text. By closely examining the text’s deformities, we can begin to see traces of rhetorical goals and intentions that parallel those of “Life in the Iron Mills.” As I suggest above, the tension in the novel seems to be between a story of struggle and sacrifice and one of happiness and contentedness; in the end, Davis attempts to undo the struggle and sacrifice by imposing happiness and contentedness. If we cursorily read the novel, instead of carefully noting the tensions in the text, it seems that Davis opposes the activism of Dr. Knowles since she ends the novel by destroying his project and discrediting him as a fanatic who has mistakenly misinterpreted Margret’s calling in life. This seems to run counter to the impulses of “Life in the Iron Mills,” which openly calls for action on the behalf of the dispossessed. If we only take into account the discrediting of Dr. Knowles, we must ask how the author changed her opinions so drastically in such a short time. However, by tracing the contours of the novel’s deformities, by reading the text’s body, so to speak, we see that the novel contains elements that parallel “Life in the Iron Mills,”
but that these elements have been aggressively suppressed and resisted. To sum up, the novel’s meaning survives in subversion. Rebecca Harding Davis could have rewritten the story, but instead she chose to simply revise it, and these revisions show up as textual deformities that preserve the message of “The Deaf and the Dumb.”

However, the novel seems to indicate—through an analogy between Lois and the novel—that Davis wishes for the story’s meaning to be released from its disfigured text. At least, this is her ideal. This message is conveyed through a comparison between the now-deceased Lois and Davis’s still continuing story. Davis writes, “I strive to grope, with dull, earthy sense, at [Lois’s] freed life in that earnest land where souls forget to hunger or to hope, and learn to be. And so thinking, the certainty of her aim and work and love yonder comes with a new, vital reality, beside which the story of the yet living men and women of whom I have told you grows vague and incomplete, like unguessed riddles” (263-4). She imagines Lois’s work as vital and certain in comparison to her own story that grows vague and incomplete. Interestingly though, Lois’s freedom is specifically described as disembodied. Davis writes in the same section that “Lois, free, loving, and beloved, trembled from her prison to her Master’s side in the To-Morrow” (262). And, in this strange passage, the author glories in Lois’s disembodied state:

I like to think of her poor body lying there: I like to believe that the great mother was glad to receive the form that want and crime of men had thwarted,—took her uncouth child home again, that had been so cruelly wronged,—folded it in her warm bosom with tender, palpitating love. It pleased me in the winter months to think that the worn-out limbs, the old
scarred face of Lois rested, slept: crumbled into fresh atoms, woke at last with a strange sentience, and, when God smiled permission through the summer sun, flashed forth in a wild ecstasy of the true beauty that she loved so well. (263)

The advantage that Lois has over the “vague and incomplete” story of the “yet living men and women” is that she has a life freed from bodily restrictions. The freedom of Lois’s work is that it is not hampered by a body, which Davis presents as imposing hunger, hope, uncertainty, and incompleteness. In contrast, the disembodied state is vital, certain, and permanent (souls “learn to be”). This passage establishes the limitations of Margret Howth by presenting the story as embodied. On the other hand, Davis envisions a truth, or meaning, freed from these limitations.

Besides pointing to the story’s meaning, the novel’s contradictions, cancellations, and tensions also direct us to its material conditions, just like the bodily deformities of Davis’s characters. In “Life in the Iron Mills,” Deborah has a hunchback because of the years of difficult labor; Hugh is enervated by his work in the mill; and, the korl woman’s body indicates her class in its strange proportions. In Margret Howth, Lois has been destroyed in body and mind by her childhood in the factory. The violence of industrial labor is permanently marked on the bodies of these characters. Similarly, the deformities of Margret Howth, the novel, direct us to the industrial violence enacted upon it. In other words, the novel’s defects point us to the publishing industry’s power to maim and destroy. In revising her novel, Davis not only preserves her original story’s meaning but also exposes and indicts James Fields and the Atlantic Monthly for its abuses of power.
Just as “Life in the Iron Mills” presents heavily embodied characters in order to expose the conditions of the laboring classes, Rebecca Harding Davis gives her readers a heavily embodied text in order to expose the conditions of the publishing industry.²⁶

In fact, Davis goes so far as to embed this narrative in the novel itself. Immediately after she characterizes Dr. Knowles as a fanatic, she reflects upon his activism, and some interesting parallels between her own life and that of Knowles emerge. Davis tells us that, after his dreams have been destroyed by the fire in the factory, Knowles goes to the site “where his Communist buildings were to have stood” (180). Knowles visits the site “as one might go alone to bury his dead out of his sight . . . looking first at the smoking mass of hot bricks and charred shingles, so as clearly to understand how utterly dead his life-long scheme was” (180). Then, Davis broadens the commentary on Knowles to include herself and her audience: “It was all over now. All the afternoon . . . he sat there looking at the dingy gloom: just as you and I have done, perhaps, some time, thwarted in some true hope,—sore and bitter against God, because He did not see how much His universe needed our pet reform” (181). This passage comes close to describing Davis’s reaction to James Fields’s rejection of her story, and the fact that she includes herself in this description only affirms the analogy between Knowles’s and Davis’s disappointment about their “pet reform.” The analogy continues as Davis comments on Knowles’s activities after his hopes of activism have been destroyed. She writes,

²⁶ Davis is not the only realist to critique the practices of the publishing industry through a novel’s metanarrative. Other realists who have written similar critiques include Honoré Balzac (Lost Illusions), George Gissing (New Grub Street), and William Dean Howells (A Hazard of New Fortunes).
He went to work now in earnest: he had to work for his bread-and-butter, you understand? Restless, impatient at first; but we will forgive him that: you yourself were not altogether submissive, perhaps, when the slow-built expectation of life was destroyed by some chance, as you called it, no more controllable than this paltry burning of a mill. Yet, now that the great hope was gone on which his brain had worked with rigid, fierce intentness, now that his hands were powerless to redeem a perishing class, he had time to fall into careless, kindly habit: he thought it wasted time, remorsefully, of course. He was seized with a curiosity to know what plan in living these people had who crossed his way on the streets; if they were disappointed, like him. Humbled, he hardly knew why: vague, uncertain in action. (182)

This description of Knowles closely follows Davis’s own activities after “The Deaf and the Dumb” had been rejected by James Fields, as they are portrayed in her letters. She “had to work for [her] bread-and-butter,” so she accepted, albeit not submissively, the uncontrollable “chance.” However, without the impetus of activism “to redeem a perishing class,” which had been ruled out by Fields’s requirements, Davis “fell in careless, kindly habit” of simply noting the commonplace (rather than calling her readers to action). Finally, the result, the final version of *Margret Howth*, could most certainly be described as “vague” and “uncertain in action.” Clearly, the story of *Margret Howth* is about more than Margret Howth herself. From beginning to end, the novel’s unanswered questions about reform and activism speak to its own belabored history.
It is common for scholars to define realism by virtue of its portrayals of industrial violence. But in the end, *Margret Howth* directs us to—not the industrial violence enacted upon its characters—but the industrial violence enacted upon itself. *Margret Howth* is not only an example of realism, but it is realism itself. It returns us to the material conditions of its own production. *Margret Howth* directs us to, as Fredric Jameson calls it, its own “inner form” (*Marxism and Form* 409). As readers, by going through a process of noting and interpreting deformities, we are returned to the real.
The Tragic Muse and Henry James’s Ethics of Realism

Between 1867 and 1868, Henry James reviewed two novels by Rebecca Harding Davis, *Waiting for the Verdict* and *Dallas Galbraith*; his opinions of her fiction are not flattering. While James praises the storylines of Davis’s novels (he calls *Dallas Galbraith* “almost interesting”), he criticizes the execution of these ideas (228; original emphasis). He acknowledges that both novels, *Waiting for the Verdict* and *Dallas Galbraith*, are well-conceived and even notes that the “leading idea” of *Waiting for the Verdict* “strikes us as a very good one” (220). Furthermore, James writes that “in the conception and arrangement of her story,” Davis “displays no inconsiderable energy and skill” (Rev. of *Dallas Galbraith* 223). Still, both reviews end with the rueful conclusion that despite their best efforts, the two novels fail to be good literature. James writes, “When the best thing that can be said of a novel is that it is brave or noble or honest or earnest, you may be sure that although it may be . . . a very good deed, it is a very bad book” (Rev. of *Dallas Galbraith* 224). This is the crux of James’s complaints about Davis’s writing: while her novels may be considered acts of goodness, they are not instances of great art.

Although James criticizes Davis’s portrayals of the “weak and wronged among God’s creatures” (Rev. of *Waiting* 218), he does not find fault with Davis’s choice of genre. In fact, his criticism is based on the quality of her supposedly realistic representations. He writes, “The author has made herself the poet of poor people—laborers, farmers, mechanics, and factory hands. She has attempted to reproduce in dramatic form their manners and habits and woes and wants. The intention has always been good, but the execution has, to our mind, always been monstrous” (Rev. of *Waiting*
221). For James, the realism of the novels is poorly done. He summarizes the body of her work as “disfigured by an injudicious straining after realist effects which leave nature and reality at an infinite distance behind . . .” (Rev. of Waiting 221). According to James, Davis works so hard to produce a response in her audience, which he calls “realist effects,” that she actually increases the differences between her fiction and “nature and reality,” in other words, life as it is experienced by her readers. In this statement, James separates realism into two different varieties: that which strives after “realist effects” and that which attempts to reproduce “nature and reality” as closely as possible. It is perhaps fair, then, to say that James has a different vision of realism than Davis and that his dismissal of her novels is possibly a result of this difference. In other words, what James interprets in Davis’s work as a problem in execution could actually be attributed to her altogether different artistic standards and goals, a rhetoric of realism that James equates with a lack of skill.

In his reviews, James has two allegations against Davis’s realism. First, he argues that the pathos of her writing mars its realism. He writes that Davis’s “manner” is characterized by “lachrymose sentimentalism,” and James cannot “conceive of a method of looking at people and things less calculated to elicit the truth” (Rev. of Waiting 221). In other words, the sentimentality of the novels works against their realism. James is passionate in his condemnation of this tendency in Davis’s fiction:

[Davis] is oppressed with the conviction that there exists in the various departments of human life some logical correlate to that luxurious need for tears and sighs and sad-colored imagery of all kinds. . . . Nothing is more
respectable on the part of a writer—a novelist—than the intelligent sadness which forces itself upon him on the completion of a dramatic scheme which is in strict accordance with human life and its manifold miseries. But nothing is more trivial than that intellectual temper which, for ever dissolved in that melting mood, goes dripping and trickling over the face of humanity, and washing its honest lineaments out of all recognition. It is enough to make one forswear for ever all decent reflection and honest compassion, and take refuge in cynical jollity and elegant pococurantism. (Rev. of Waiting 221-2)

James juxtaposes his version of realism, which is characterized as “respectable,” “intelligent,” “decent,” and “honest,” with Davis’s version, which he castigates as “luxurious,” “sad-colored,” “dripping,” and “trivial.” His portrayal of Davis’s fiction is one of emotional indulgence that is far from “nature and reality” (Rev. of Waiting 221).

James’s second allegation against Davis’s realist fiction is that it is too moralistic and didactic. He claims that Davis’s efforts to make writing literature into “a very good deed” are “pretensions” that are “very different from those of the simple novel of entertainment, of character, and of incident,” a kind of novel that James obviously finds superior to Davis’s (Rev. of Dallas Galbraith 224-5). James contrasts Davis’s novels with “the objective novel,” which “appeals to the reader’s sense of beauty, his idea of form and proportion, his humanity, in the broadest sense” (Rev. of Dallas Galbraith 225). The problem with Davis’s fiction is that it tries to appeal “to the conscience, to the sense of right and wrong, to the instincts of charity and patronage” (Rev. of Dallas
Again, James does not waste the opportunity to decry this persuasive strategy:

There have been no great didactic novelists. Richardson . . . is valued as the great inventor and supreme master of “realism,” but his moralism hangs about him as a dead weight. The same may be said . . . of Thackeray’s trivial and shallow system of sermonizing. As a story-teller he is well-nigh everything—as a preacher and teacher he is nothing. On the other hand, the great “objective” novelists, from Scott to Trollope, are almost innumerable. It is our impression that Mrs. Davis might, by taking herself in hand, make a very much better figure in this company than she has heretofore done in the other. (Rev. of Dallas Galbraith 225)

When James sets up the comparison between the didactic novel and “objective” novel, he is actually distinguishing between two versions of realism, the latter his own and the former Davis’s. James objects to realist literature that, like Davis’s, attempts to act upon social and material reality; in his view, this activism limits the novel’s objectivity and its ability to “elicit the truth” (Rev. of Waiting 221).

James’s two complaints about Davis’s realism—its sentimentality and moralism—can be reduced to the same factor, her overt attempts at persuasion. James quarrels with Davis’s efforts to produce particular effects on her audience. About Waiting for the Verdict, he writes, “In her desire to impart such reality to her characters as shall make them appeal successfully to our feelings, she emphasizes their movements and gestures to that degree that all vocal sounds, all human accents, are lost to the ear, and
nothing is left but a crowd of ghastly, frowning, grinning automatons” (222). He argues that her efforts to produce pity in her audience lead to “pernicious effects” in her style (Rev. of Waiting 222). In other words, something artistic is lost in the obvious efforts to move the audience toward a particular response, in this case, pity. James writes similarly of Dallas Galbraith, saying that “[Davis] aims at instructing us, purifying us, stirring our pity,” but James points out that “the novelist who pretends to edify and instruct must be gifted with extraordinary powers, and that to carry out his character successfully he must have a stronger head than the world has yet seen exercised in this department of literature” (225). In both cases, James takes issue with Davis’s rhetorical goals: to produce effects on her audience and to persuade them to make particular changes in their worldviews and behaviors.27 His argument is that such a rhetorical and functional focus damages the artistry of the novel.28

On this point, James’s argument is not merely with Rebecca Harding Davis, but with the literary establishment of the late nineteenth century. Personified in the figure of William Dean Howells, the editor of the Atlantic Monthly, the opinion of literary critics at

27 For a more extended discussion of Davis’s realist rhetoric, see chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation. These chapters argue that Davis’s attempt to produce pity in her audience is the defining characteristic of her realism. In other words, she aims for her fiction, as James has noted, to be a “very good deed” (Rev. of Dallas Galbraith 224).

28 In The Rhetoric of Fiction, Wayne C. Booth analyzes the development of this principle in Western literature, even using Henry James as a primary example, and argues that eliminating rhetoric from fiction is actually impossible. He writes, “Since Flaubert, many authors and critics have been convinced that ‘objective’ or ‘impersonal’ or ‘dramatic’ modes of narration are naturally superior to any mode that allows for direct appearance by the author or his reliable spokesman. Sometimes . . . the complex issues involved in this shift have been reduced to a convenient distinction between ‘showing,’ which is artistic, and ‘telling,’ which is inartistic” (8).
such institutions was that realism had a positive moral influence on its readers. Howells, realism’s most outspoken and powerful advocate, saw the realist novel as taking on the “office of teacher” and serving a moral function in society (“Criticism and Fiction” 187). As Nancy Glazener has shown in *Reading for Realism*, Howells specifically promoted realism as “healthy” for American readers. Glazener makes the observation that Howells analogizes the reading of sentimental novels and alcohol consumption, two behaviors that are, according to him, addictive and dangerous. Realism, on the other hand, with its stark, wholesome approach to representation is medicinal for its readers (Glazener 95).  

Howellsian realism was heavily engaged with morality and social improvement. It was realism with a mission: as Richard Brodhead names it, “to upgrade collective mental life” (110). Michael Davitt Bell writes that Howells had an “idea of the realist as socially responsible moral instructor” (71). It is this particular brand of realism—and Howells’s influence made this brand more prominent than any other—that James critiques in his reviews of Rebecca Harding Davis’s fiction.  

James argues that realism should not concern itself with promoting morals or calling its readers to action. What then does he advocate for? If realism is not an

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29 Analogizing alcohol consumption and alcoholism with undesirable behaviors was not an uncommon trope in nineteenth-century American culture. Acknowledging the persuasiveness and traction of this particular analogy is important in understanding the popularity of Howellsian realism. According to John C. Briggs, even Abraham Lincoln used this analogy in order to promote self-government and the abolition of slavery. See chapter 3 of Briggs’s *Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered*.

30 I feel justified in grouping Howells and Davis together in their approach to realism even though Davis’s fiction precedes Howells’s by at least a decade. Scholars have noted Davis’s influence on Howells (see Harris, p. 10). In critiquing Davis, James comments on the literature that she helped to establish.
intervention into social, political, or material reality, then what is it? James moves toward answering these questions in his 1884 essay, “The Art of Fiction.” In this essay, he broaches the topic of the “conscious moral purpose of the novel,” but his argument is that representations cannot be moral or immoral (62). He suggests that mimesis is morally neutral—that it indifferently reproduces life as it is experienced. James proposes a different purpose for the novel, one that has nothing to do with social engagement, morality, or politics:

I may therefore venture to say that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel—the merit on which all its other merits (including that conscious moral purpose of which Mr. Besant speaks) helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life. The cultivation of this success, the study of this exquisite process, form, to my taste, the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist. They are his inspiration, his despair, his reward, his torment, his delight. It is here in very truth that he competes with life . . . (“The Art of Fiction” 53)

Here James suggests that the reproduction of life as it is experienced by the novelist is sufficient purpose for the novel. In other words, he proposes mimesis for its own sake. At the beginning of the essay, he says as much: “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life” (46). For James, the novel finds its rationale in mimesis itself. He argues that the novelist is occupied in the same task as the historian,
insisting that “as the picture is reality, so the novel is history” (46). Those who disagree imply “that the novelist is less occupied in looking for the truth . . . than the historian, and in doing so it deprives him at a stroke of all his standing-room. To represent and illustrate the past, the actions of men, is the task of either writer . . . (46-7). Like the historian, the novelist’s work consists only of representing life as it has occurred. For James, a moral purpose, an object of persuasion, is unnecessary. The ideal novel is not political; it is only aesthetic.

James’s position on the realist novel is based on an ethical system that privileges truth over activism. For him, “the supreme virtue of a novel” is its “air of reality” (“The Art of Fiction” 53). “The Art of Fiction” repeats this principle over and over again. He writes, “It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality” (52). And, writing of the novelist, “It is here, in very truth, that he competes with life; it here that he competes with his brother the painter in his attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle. . . . All life solicits him, and to ‘render’ the simplest surface, to produce the most momentary illusion, is a very complicated business” (53). He concludes that the novel “must stand or fall, according as it seems to possess truth or to lack it” (61). For James, then, the novelist’s aim should be to convince the reader of the truth of the novel, and in this, he or she must “reproduce life” (49).

As a result, the “good novel” is not the one that persuades its readers to change, but the one that truthfully represents life. In this way, the measure of a good novel is in its
execution, not its effects. James differentiates these two in his review of *Dallas Galbraith*, writing, “Quite as much as [Davis], we believe that life is a very serious business. But it is because it is essentially and inalienably serious that we believe it can afford not to be tricked out in the fantastic trappings of a spurious and repulsive solemnity. Art, too, is a very serious business” (228). James’s ethical system is based on artistic virtuosity. For James, the good novel, as he writes in the same essay, “appeals to the reader’s sense of beauty, his idea of form and proportion, his humanity” (225). Good literature reaches for artistic perfection. The final paragraph of “The Art of Fiction” offers this advice to would-be writers: “Remember that your first duty is to be as complete as possible—to make as perfect a work” (65). James even distinguishes between a good novel and bad one on these grounds: “[There] is as much difference as there ever was between a good novel and a bad one: the bad is swept, with all the daubed canvases and spoiled marble, into some unvisited limbo or infinite rubbish-yard, beneath the back-windows of the world, and the good subsists and emits its light and stimulates our desire for perfection” (“The Art of Fiction” 49).

James’s prioritizing of language that corresponds to life—language that approximates truth—finds its precedent in Platonic discourse. James follows Plato in his preference for truth over persuasion. In Plato’s narrative, the “Phaedrus,” he argues that language whose goal is to uplift an audience through bringing them closer to the truth is ethically superior to language whose goal is simply to persuade the audience to act or believe a certain way. The central question of the “Phaedrus,” which is discussed between the characters Socrates and Phaedrus, is how language can be used ethically.
Plato addresses this question by characterizing the noble rhetorician (versus the evil rhetorician) using his well-known fable of the charioteer. In the fable, Plato claims that all souls are constantly in motion and that the natural and right direction for the soul is upward, toward the gods and toward truth. However, the soul is made up of three parts. Plato writes, “We will liken the soul to the composite nature of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. Now the horses and charioteers of the gods are all good and of good descent, but those of other races are mixed; and first the charioteer of the human soul drives a pair, and secondly one of the horses is noble and of noble breed, but the other quite the opposite in breed and character. Therefore in our case the driving is necessarily difficult and troublesome” (149). The struggle of the soul is to govern the unruly horse and to reach the divine realm. It is a struggle toward perfection. This parable metaphorizes the act of persuasion. The noble rhetorician will appeal to the “noble horse” and move the soul closer to truth; the evil rhetorician will use persuasion to nurture the “unruly” horse, which epitomizes desire. Above all, the noble rhetorician values “reality,” “truth,” and “knowledge” (150).

For Plato, perfection through approaching truth is the noble rhetorician’s goal for his audience. Through the noble rhetorician’s influence, the audience is elevated and enlightened. As Richard Weaver writes in “The Phaedrus and the Nature of Rhetoric,” “[Rhetoric] at its truest seeks to perfect men by showing them better versions of themselves. . . . Rhetoric appears, finally, as a means by which the impulse of the soul to be ever moving is redeemed” (1371). Ethically speaking, then, language is put to its highest good when it draws its audience near to the truth. It is for this reason that Henry
James places such a premium on true-to-life-ness and believability: life, when represented well, elevates its audience beyond what could be accomplished by persuasive strategies. As James points out, the “objective novel” naturally elicits “the emotion of sympathy” while the sentimental conjures “the feeling of pity.” James ironically comments, “We do not propose to enquire which is the higher school of the two” (Rev. of *Dallas Galbraith* 225). In addition, he writes, “Nothing is more respectable on the part of a writer—a novelist—than the intelligent sadness which forces itself upon him on the completion of a dramatic scheme which is in strict accordance with human life and its manifold miseries” (Rev. of *Waiting* 221-2). In this case, a respectable, intelligent sadness naturally accompanies fiction that is faithful to reality. However, James continues, “But nothing is more trivial than that intellectual temper which, for ever dissolved in that melting mood, goes dripping and trickling over the face of humanity, and washing its honest lineaments out of all recognition” (Rev. of *Waiting* 221-2). The simple presentation of truth produces more improvement in audiences than conscious attempts to change them.

James’s opposition to a socially oriented, overtly persuasive rhetoric of realism is not limited to his theoretical and critical writing; it also appears in his fiction. In composing his novels, James struggled to find a mode of realism that would satisfy the literary establishment and his own principles. In Richard Brodhead’s *The School of Hawthorne*, he argues that James sought to become a serious and recognized writer, and in order to do so, he needed to be identified with the most prominent form of fiction in America: realism. Brodhead writes, “Realism carries the weight for James in the early
1880s of the master’s work, the literary expression of fully developed power. Faced with the need to undertake a form of work that he can think of as great, James turns to realism as the available form of greatness: as the style equipped, through its literary descent, to signify major work; and so to establish, when he shall have mastered it, that he is now major himself” (145). James recognized that realism—especially Howells’s conception of realism—was his avenue to preeminence, and so he attempted to work within the boundaries of this genre. As Michael Davitt Bell notes, “The middle 1880s were . . . the years in which James’s friend, William Dean Howells, was beginning to call publicly for realism in fiction, and it is generally agreed that what James was trying out at this time was, precisely, realism. . . . There can be no doubt that during the middle 1880s, as during no other period of his long and protean career, Henry James was setting out to transform himself into a realist” (71). Critics generally agree that James’s The Bostonians and Princess Casamassima make up James’s “realist phase,” the period in which he attempted to meet the demands of the literary establishment through writing realist novels that were socially and politically engaged. As Bell writes, for James, “conventional realist thinking proved harder to escape than the apparently easy bravado of James’s critical essays might suggest” (84).

Unfortunately, James’s realist experiment was not a huge success; he struggled to merge the rhetoric of Howellsian realism with his own. As a result, The Bostonians and The Princess Casamassima have been characterized as artistic failures. Leon Edel, the well-known biographer of Henry James, wrote that The Bostonians failed to show
James’s “mastery over his materials” (324). Bell writes that the novel is “simply too disjointed and inconsistent to articulate any coherent position,” ultimately concluding,

There are plenty of plausible explanations to account for the ultimate incoherence of *The Bostonians* . . . and all of these factors were no doubt significant. It is nevertheless also important to remember that *The Bostonians* was the initial product of James’s decision to make himself over into a realist. This first fruit of his realist experiment is surely a better book than James’s American contemporaries thought it; like *A Connecticut Yankee*, again, it is at the very least a fascinating mess. As a token of what being a realist was likely to mean, however, the book’s instability and incoherence can hardly have been heartening to its author. Still, James was not deterred; he only waded in farther, farther into the amalgam of realism and politics, farther away from his own experience—wading in ultimately, some would say, over his head. (91-2)

As Bell observes, James’s efforts to push past his own experience “into the amalgam of realism and politics” resulted in a “mess” of a novel. However, after the failure of *The Bostonians*, James “only waded in farther” and wrote *The Princess Casamassima*, which Bell characterizes as “every bit as confused as *The Bostonians*” (97).

Critics attribute the incoherence of these novels to James’s inability to combine the social and political elements of Howellsian realism with the objectivity of his own. For example, Brodhead writes, “[What] James discovers, in the writing of these novels, is that he cannot practice this sort of work on its terms, and that it will not work on his”
These critics argue that, in *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*, James addresses social and political issues only cursorily, engaging them only enough to give the novels a recognizably political story line. In other words, James engaged social and political topics only enough to legitimate his experiments with realist *style*. The result is a conflicted novel, a novel with competing purposes. This, Bell notes, is a self-destructing realism, which leads to an incoherent and unstable novel (101). Richard Brodhead writes, “But by engaging this style in its literary aspects—in separation from the social cares and commitments that usually attend it—James averts one set of problems only to raise another. For if realism is first and last a form of literary representation, it is the nature of this representation to express certain social understandings” (164). Brodhead suggests, with Howells and other realists, that there exists “some necessary relationship with being ‘realistic’ and being ‘political’” (Bell 83). Such critics imply that if realism is not socially and politically engaged, its style will be meaningless and incoherent, unmoored from its proper foundation.

James responds to the notion that realism must be politically or socially oriented in *The Tragic Muse*, the novel that follows *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*. Probably written out of his experiences with the “realist experiment,” *The Tragic Muse* reflects on art’s relationship with the political and social realms. More specifically, it defends James’s apolitical approach to realism. Through the dilemmas faced by the characters in *The Tragic Muse*, James develops a detailed ethics of realism that differs profoundly from that of Howells, Davis, and other American realists. In this novel, whose main characters are artists (a novelist, a painter, and an actress), James
argues that realism without a “conscious moral purpose” can be more than simply an incoherent literary style, as Brodhead suggests. The novel’s complicated metanarrative contends that imitation for its own sake is worth undertaking and that writing in order to represent truth is ethically superior to writing in order to perform a political or social function.

_The Tragic Muse_ ran in the _Atlantic Monthly_ from January 1889 to May 1890 in seventeen installments (Edel 351). It tells the story of a young British man, Nick Dormer, whose prominent but poor family wishes him to take his late father’s position as a representative in the House of Commons. They have extensive plans for Nick, who, although he wants to please his family, would like instead to become a portrait painter. On the advice of his friend Gabriel Nash, an aesthete/novelist, Nick gives up his political seat, and also his politically-minded fiancée and the goodwill of his family, and becomes a portraitist. The novel’s subplot involves Nick’s cousin Peter, who as a theater critic, falls in love with a blossoming actress named Miriam Rooth. Peter, professionally a diplomat, feels he cannot respectably marry an actress, but when asked, he refuses to give up his career to marry Miriam. Despite the novel’s many conflicts, it ends happily enough with Nick reconciled to his family and Peter married to Nick’s youngest sister. By forcing Nick and Peter to choose between politics and art, the plot of this novel pits these two realms against each other; both men must choose between the mutually exclusive options. In setting politics and art as opposites in _The Tragic Muse_, James addresses his personal dilemma concerning realism—his seemingly forced choice between writing for a political purpose and writing for mimesis.
In the end, *The Tragic Muse* works out a Jamesian rhetoric of realism, a rhetoric of realism that eschews the didactic and political in favor of the mimetic and aesthetic. The conclusion of the novel finds its artist-characters reconciled to and embracing an aesthetic life despite this life’s apparent lack of purpose. The aesthetic life is portrayed as what James calls in the preface to *The Tragic Muse* a “repudiation of the great obvious, great moral or functional or useful character” (1106). In *The Tragic Muse*, the aesthetic life, which symbolizes the act of representation for no immediate political or social purpose, is finally portrayed as superior to a life of function, purpose, and direct influence on the daily lives of people. In regards to James’s own artistic practices, mimesis is shown to require no justification on the basis of function. *The Tragic Muse* correlates the aesthetic life with mimetic representation in order to construct a rationale for James’s realism.

In *The Tragic Muse*, the aesthetic life is embodied in the character of Gabriel Nash. Nash is, as John Landau has pointed out, a classic Jamesian aesthete (39), and Powers calls him “a sort of angelic messenger of the god of art” (346). Gabriel Nash spends his time in *The Tragic Muse* conversing with other characters, encouraging the artists in the novel to continue their work. He has no discernible occupation and evidently wanders the globe in search of beauty. His character can be best elucidated through the following conversation with Nick Dormer:

“And what *is* your business?”

“The spectacle of the world.”

Nick laughed out. “And what do you do with that?”
“What does any one do with a spectacle? I look at it.”

“You are full of contradictions and inconsistencies. You described yourself to me an hour ago as an apostle of beauty.”

“Where is the inconsistency? I do it in the broad light of day, whatever I do: that’s virtually what I meant. If I look at the spectacle of the world I look in preference for what is charming in it. Sometimes I have to go far to find it—very likely; but that’s just what I do. I go far—as far as my means permit me. Last year I heard of such a delightful little spot: a place where a wild fig-tree grows in the south wall, the outer side, of an old Spanish city. I was told it was a deliciously brown corner, with the sun making it warm in winter! As soon as I could I went there.”

“And what did you do?”

“I lay on the first green grass—I liked it.”

“If that sort of thing is all you accomplish you are not encouraging.”

“I accomplish my happiness—it seems to me that’s something. I have feelings, I have sensations: let me tell you that’s not so common. It’s rare to have them; and if you chance to have them it’s rare not to be ashamed of them. I go after them—when I judge they won’t hurt any one.”

(123-4)

This conversation establishes not only how Gabriel Nash sees himself but also how others see him. Nick interprets Nash’s existence as one that accomplishes very little.
In general, literary critics share Nick’s doubts about Nash’s accomplishments. They frequently note the vagueness of Nash’s function in *The Tragic Muse* and have not hesitated to call into question his purpose in the narrative. He is often taken to be a background character, one who matters relatively little when it comes to the main storylines of the novel. He is typically interpreted as a superfluous detail in a long, amorphous novel. From early in the novel’s history, readers have called Nash “nonfunctional” (Cargill 177). For instance, Adam Sonstegard suggests that “Gabriel only seems to exist in the narrative in order to be coyly mysterious and to try to rearrange the other characters’ aspirations” (29). Other critics have suggested that Nash serves only a symbolic function in the novel. Some readers of the novel suggest that Nash represents a particular message, such as “that what one does—even, for instance, in art—matters little in comparison with what one is—say, an artist” (Powers 345). Others read Nash as representing one side of a struggle in which the best answer is balance. Landau writes, “The figure of Gabriel Nash and the contrast to him that is provided by Nick Dormer are used to suggest the appeal and the dangers of overaesthetization” (35). And, “[In] the context of *The Tragic Muse* the figure of Gabriel Nash is used, negatively as it were, to suggest the cogency of maintaining the boundary separating art from life” (Landau 39). Landau identifies Nash as James’s most complete portrayal of the aesthete, a figure that is woefully one-sided, “only concerned with his own specific, and generally self-interested, conception of the beautiful” (28). Many of these descriptions admirably describe Nash’s job as a single character, as though he were performing a monologue, but
they do not fully address his role in the plot of the novel. Nash, in all of his seeming uselessness, is the most crucial character in *The Tragic Muse*, and his place in the novel signals an important message to readers—that the irrational and non-essential are also the necessary and valuable.

It is not wise to underestimate Gabriel Nash’s importance to the plot of *The Tragic Muse*; Nash is the author of *The Tragic Muse*. In fact, he is the only artist-character in the novel who is actually a writer. Nick gives the most essential details about Nash to his sister Biddy, emphasizing his work as a novelist:

“The man’s a fellow I knew very well at Oxford. He was thought immense fun there. We have diverged, as he says, and I had almost lost sight of him, but not so much as he thinks, because I’ve read him, and read him with interest. He has written a very clever book.”

“What kind of a book?”

“A sort of novel.”

“What sort of novel?”

“Well, I don’t know—with a lot of good writing . . .” (21)

Despite his apparent lack of an occupation, Nash’s identity is connected to his being a writer. James stresses the ease with which Nash uses language. Early in the novel Biddy Dormer notes that Nash’s English “had . . . a conspicuous and aggressive perfection. . . .

31 Much analysis of Nash focuses on Nash’s sexuality or the real-life person who was James’s model for the character. (See, for example, the dialogue between Oscar Cargill [“Mr. James’s Aesthetic Mr. Nas”] and Lyall Powers [“Mr. James’s Aesthetic Mr. Nash—Again”].) However, I am more concerned in this chapter with Nash’s role in the novel’s main conflict between mimesis and function.
He seemed to draw rich effects and wandering airs from it—to modulate and manipulate it as he would have done a musical instrument” (17). And later, when Nash draws an analogy between musical instruments and artistic talents, Nick asks him what his instrument is. Nash replies, “To speak to people just as I am speaking to you. . . . I talk— I talk; I say the things that other people don’t, that they can’t, that they won’t” (277). Again and again, James emphasizes Nash’s almost preternatural relationship to language. Ultimately, Nash’s job in the novel is to be the novelist, which suggests the self-reflexive nature of his role in the novel. One can almost imagine James smirking as Nick tells Nash that he “talks like an American novel” (380).

In *The Tragic Muse*, Gabriel Nash certainly acts out the role of the novelist, orchestrating the novel’s plot and dictating the direction of all the major characters. His interventions into the narrative move the plot forward; he always appears when he is needed in order to drive the plot in an unexpected direction or when the characters need a push in the right direction. Nash himself says that “I drift—I float . . . my feelings direct me—if such a life as mine could be said to have a direction. Where there’s anything to feel I try to be there” (20). Nick recognizes that he needs Nash to steer him. James tells us,

In London, after the episode at Harsh, Gabriel had not reappeared: he had redeemed none of the pledges given the night they walked together to Notre Dame and conversed on important matters. He was to have interposed in Nick’s destiny, but he had not interposed; he was to have dragged him in the opposite sense from Mrs Dallow, but there had been no
dragging; he was to have saved him, as he called it, and yet Nick was lost. (272)

Miraculously—as though out of the clear blue sky—Gabriel appears as Nick is painting during a two-week hiatus from political life. Gabriel, using his “mystical influence” (508), convinces Nick to pursue painting instead of politics, and “as affairs took their course, it marked really . . . a turn of the tide in Nick Dormer’s personal situation” (274). We are told that Nick “felt a good deal, before, as if he were in Nash’s hands” (378) and that Nash decides to make Nick his “business” for a while (277). At the novel’s conclusion, Nick says that Gabriel “has seen [him] through” (504) and that he “rescued” him and “converted” him (510). All of these instances combine to demonstrate that Nash has guided Nick Dormer, who is the novel’s main character, to a particular end. And, Nash also directs the lives of other characters in the novel, especially Miriam Rooth, the young actress. He arranges for her to meet Madame Carré, a retired actress, and Peter Sherringham, a young critic, who take it upon themselves to lead Miriam to success. When Nash calls Miriam and Nick “my children,” he is speaking literally; it is as though he himself has created and molded them (287).

As the novel’s novelist, Gabriel is able to accurately predict how the story will unfold. He serves an oracle-like purpose in the novel; what he predicts comes to pass. Nash tells Peter Sherringham that Miriam Rooth, who begins the novel as a terrible actress, will become great and that Peter will take her on “for life” (108). Nash predicts the directions of Miriam’s and Nick’s careers. He foretells the end of the story, saying that Julia will reconnect to Nick by asking him to paint her (511). Nash’s uncanny ability
to predict the events of the novel suggests that he has some part in bringing them about. Nick rightly observes that “this contemplative genius seemed to take the words out of his mouth, to utter for him, better and more completely, the very things he was on the point of saying. Nash’s saying them at such moments appeared to make them true, to set them up in the world” (295). Nash is a creator; when he speaks, what he says becomes real. This ability exactly corresponds to the work of a novelist: the novelist writes and, in doing so, brings characters and events into existence.

Nash’s exit from the events of The Tragic Muse works well with our interpretation of him as the novel’s novelist. In short, Nick undertakes to paint a portrait of Nash, “as a kind of feather from the angel’s wing, or a photograph of the ghost” (512). As Nick paints Nash, it is clear that Nash is uncomfortable sitting for a portrait, and eventually Nash stops coming to sit. He disappears from the novel, and his portrait begins to fade. James adds this concluding thought: “Of course the moral of the Hawthorne tale would be that this personage would come back on the day when the last adumbration should have vanished [from the portrait]” (514). Critics generally agree that Nash, for a variety of reasons, resists representation. However, the most coherent explanation of this “resistance” is given by Nick Dormer in his observation of Nash’s discomfort during his sitting:

Nick felt, accordingly, as if he had laid a trap for [Nash]: he asked himself if it were really fair. At the same time there was something fascinating in the oddity of such a relation between the subject and the artist, and Nick was disposed to go on until he should have to stop for very pity. He caught
eventually a glimmer of the truth that lay at the bottom of this anomaly; guessed that what made his friend uncomfortable was simply the reversal, in such a combination, of his usual terms of intercourse. (513)

What Nick realizes, and what we learn, is that throughout the course of the novel Nash has been the artist, not the object of representation. Nash is used to “living upon irony and the interpretation of things,” to “being outside of the universe,” and to being “a free commentator and critic, a sort of amateurish editor of the whole affair.” In having his portrait painted, he ends up being “brought into” the “universe,” “interpreted ironically,” and “reduced to . . . humble ingredient and contributor” (513-4). Nash’s disappearance from the novel indicates that his primary role is that of the artist; he is unable to fulfill the role of a character, the object of representation.

A final sign that confirms Nash’s role as author in The Tragic Muse is his philosophy concerning art. Essentially, Nash’s idea is that he works in life; he sees his artistic activities as arranging effects in real life. When Julia Dallow asks Nash if he is an artist, he replies, “I try to be . . . but I work in such a difficult material. . . . I work in life!” (107). He often describes life should be arranged—as though it were a novel. At one point he complains, “Ah, repetition—recurrence: we haven’t yet, in the study of how to live, abolished that clumsiness, have we? . . . It’s a poverty in the supernumeraries that we don’t pass once for all, but come round and cross again, like a procession at the theatre. It’s a shabby economy that ought to have been managed better. The right thing would be just one appearance, and the procession, regardless of expense, forever and forever different” (38; original emphasis). Two things are immediately obvious about this
quote. First, Nash identifies life as a work of art—here, a play. Secondly, he suggests that life can and should be altered, “managed better,” like a play by its director. Nash repeats these two basic principles throughout The Tragic Muse: his business is the “spectacle” or “comedy” of this world (123, 279). By the end of the novel, other characters are talking about how life would be most beautifully arranged and judging the actions of others by Nash’s standard. In short, Nash wants to become “a perceptible force for good” and to be a “success” in “living” (121, 273). Nick calls Nash’s “little system” the “aesthetic life” (125). Nash explicitly equates this “working” in life with writing a text, implying that authorship is at work in his “experiments” with the other characters (121):

Life consists of the personal experiments of each of us, and the point of an experiment is that it shall succeed. What we contribute is our treatment of the material, our rendering of the text, our style. A sense of the qualities of a style is so rare that many persons should doubtless be forgiven for not being able to read, or at all events to enjoy us: but is that a reason for giving it up—for not being, in this other sphere, if one possibly can, a Macaulay, a Ruskin, a Renan? Ah, we must write our best: it’s the great thing we can do in the world, on the right side. One has one’s form, *que diable*, and a mighty good thing one has. I’m not afraid of putting all life into mine . . . (121)

Nash completely conflates artistic representation and acting in the real world. However, since his “real world” is actually fictional (he is a character in a novel), for him artistic representation and acting in the real world are literally the same thing. As he acts in the
lives of the other characters in the novel, he is in effect changing their representations in the context of the novel itself. To sum up, his real-world act is the authoring of *The Tragic Muse*.

To bring together this analysis of Gabriel Nash, I offer this conclusion: in *The Tragic Muse* the most excessive and seemingly needless character is of prime importance. Both Nash’s persona as an aesthete and his apparently superfluous role in the novel lead readers of *The Tragic Muse* to believe that he is merely residue in the story, an extraneous detail. However, upon closer examination, we see that Nash occupies the most important role in a novel, that of the novelist. James elevates a character who does nothing to the level of creator. With Nash, the ephemeral is also the eternal. On one hand, he is barely real; Nick notes, “[No] recollection of him, no evocation of him in absence could do him justice. You couldn’t recall him without seeming to exaggerate him, and then recognized when you saw him that your exaggeration had fallen short. He emerged out of vagueness . . . and would evidently be reabsorbed in it . . .” (273). In being associated with the ephemeral, however, Nash is also connected to the “eternal,” permanent, and essential (514). Nick tells Miriam, “The only thing [Nash] really takes seriously is to speculate and understand, to talk about the reasons and the essence of things: the people who do that are the highest” (504). In his portrayals of Nash, James characterizes the fleeting and temporary as serious, eternal, and significant. Nash’s role in the novel points to James’s ideas concerning literature—that what seems non-essential, luxurious, or excessive is in fact important and even necessary.
In *The Tragic Muse*, James prioritizes seemingly purposeless artistic activities over actions that find justification in function. Nowhere is this clearer than in the story of Nick Dormer. In the plot events that concern Nick, James sets up politics and aesthetics as direct opposites and then argues that a serious commitment to artistic pursuits is ethically superior to a serious commitment to politics. At the level of metanarrative, James uses Nick’s situation to comment on his own artistic practices, suggesting that mimesis for its own sake—gratuitious representation—is a better pursuit than representation that is socially and politically engaged. In the end, James uses Nick Dormer to refute Howells’ s prescription for purposeful, socially engaged realist novels.

The plot events involving Nick Dormer literally contrast the worlds of politics and aesthetics. Nick is asked to choose between the two mutually exclusive fields. At the opening of *The Tragic Muse*, Sir Nicholas Dormer, a famous politician, has died, and his impoverished family wants Nick to follow his father’s lead by becoming a representative in the House of Commons. His wealthy cousin, Julia Dallow, has implied that she will marry him if he is elected. While Nick is clearly a gifted speaker and is well loved by his constituents, he is tempted to give up a career in politics to pursue his little-known talent in painting portraits. With the encouragement and influence of Gabriel Nash, Nick resigns from his political position, losing the good graces of his family and fiancée, and becomes a portraitist. The novel concludes Nick Dormer’s story by narrating the beginning of his journey as an artist. Nick’s choice to sacrifice everything else in his life and to become a painter offers James the opportunity to weigh the two pursuits and
advocate for the value of the aesthetic life, which, as I will argue, indicates James’s preference for his particular brand of realism.32

In *The Tragic Muse* Nick’s dilemma centers on which form of representation—political or artistic—he should take up as an occupation. Of course, this choice forces Nick to consider the value and ethics of each pursuit. The novel arranges all of Nick’s friends and family on one side or the other. Most of the Dormer family, including Julia Dallow, pressures Nick to become a politician and offers many arguments that emphasize the benefits of becoming a politician and the disadvantages of becoming an artist. On the other hand, many of Nick’s friends, most significantly Gabriel Nash, encourage him to pursue his talents as a painter, decrying politics and praising aesthetics. The two sides openly clash throughout the novel, both marshalling their most persuasive arguments. The following conversation between Lady Agnes, Nick’s mother, and Gabriel Nash epitomizes these interactions:

“We know what Mr Nash thinks of politics; he told us just now he thinks they are dreadful.”

“No, not dreadful – only inferior,” the personage impugned protested. “Everything is relative.”

“Inferior to what?” Lady Agnes demanded.

Mr Nash appeared to consider a moment. “To anything else that may be in question.”

32 For more discussion on the importance of choices and moral dilemmas in James’s novels, see Peter Brooks’s *The Melodramatic Imagination*. 
“Nothing else *is* in question!” said her ladyship, in a tone that would have been triumphant if it had not been dry.

“Ah, then!” And her neighbour shook his head sadly.” (42; original emphasis)

For each side, there is no middle ground. Nash calls politics “inferior . . . to anything else that may be in question.” For her part, Nick’s mother asserts that “nothing else *is* in question.” James could not have more directly opposed politics and art as occupations.

From the beginning of the novel, Nick’s family (much like William Dean Howells in his position on realism) promotes political representation as being morally superior to purely artistic representation. In the novel’s first several scenes the Dormer family is visiting the annual Salon exhibition in Paris. Lady Agnes complains about the outing, calling the artwork “horrors,” saying that Nick has forced them to see “murders,” “tortures,” and “all kinds of disease and indecency” (7-9). She objects to the supposedly immoral content of the pieces. She also objects to Nick’s interest in art on the grounds that in abandoning politics, he is committing a crime against his family. She begs Nick not to “commit the crime” of failing to marry Julia because by marrying her, he could “have it all” (167-8). Her explanation follows: “Together there is nothing you couldn’t do. You can have the first house in England—yes, the first! What freedom *is* there in being poor? How can you do anything without money, and what money can you make for yourself—what money will ever come to you? That’s the crime—to throw away such an instrument of power, such a blessed instrument of good” (168-9). For the Dormer family, Nick’s work in politics is an act of goodness, and his interest in art is immoral by default.
His turn to art is characterized by his family as “apostasy” and “wickedness” in contrast to “the grander, nobler aspirations” connected to the political realm.

The Dormers emphasize Nick’s entry into politics as a responsibility, which suggests that this particular occupation has relevance in the real world; in other words, it serves a purpose. Lady Agnes pressures Nick to run for office specifically because it is his responsibility to his family and to his father’s memory. She leaves his decision to his “sense of responsibility,” which she fears is “all gone” (12). She envisions Nick’s life as fulfilling all of the needs of the family: “She made the vision shine before him now, somehow, as she stood there like a poor woman crying for a kindness. What was filial in him, all the piety that he owed, especially to the revered spirit of his father . . . was capable from one moment to the other of trembling into sympathetic response” (171). For Nick’s family, his responsibility and duty (both ideas connected with work) is to hold political office, which James portrays as serving a socially recognized function. Nick’s benefactor, a retired politician and close friend of his father, is depicted as function embodied:

It was as if experience, though coming to him in abundance, had dealt with him with such clean hands as to leave no stain and had never provoked him to any general reflection. He had never proceeded in any ironic way from the particular to the general; certainly he had never made a reflection upon anything so unparliamentary as Life. He would have questioned the taste of such an excrescence, and if he had encountered it on the part of another would have regarded it as a kind of French toy, with
the uses of which he was unacquainted. Life, for him, was a purely practical function, not a question of phrasing. (202)

If he acquiesces, Nick is faced with such a life, where “general reflection” is a questionable indulgence, but where he would know his function. For his family, this is clearly the ethical choice, that which produces the clearest benefits.

However, *The Tragic Muse* also offers a moral and ethical argument for Nick’s pursuit of aesthetics. James posits “imagination,” “generosity,” “the finest perceptions,” and “the highest courage,” all qualities associated with the artist, as values (64). And, when Nick asks Nash to define what he calls “right,” Nash proposes a definition that privileges the artist, not the politician: “The conscience that’s in us—that charming, conversible, infinite thing, the intensest thing we know” (276). He elaborates:

> The brute, the ass, neither feels, nor understands, nor accepts, nor adopts. Those fine processes in themselves classify us. They educate, they exalt, they preserve; so that, to profit by them, we must be as perceptive as we can. We must recognize our particular form, the instrument that each of us—each of us who carries anything—carries in his being. Mastering the instrument, learning to play it in perfection—that’s what I call duty, what I call conduct, what I call success. (276)

Nash defines ethical behaviors as those which execute “the fine processes,” of which only humans are capable. Because Nick has taken up politics as a career, Nash accuses Nick of “grossness of immorality” (275). He tells Nick, “One must do one’s best to find out the right, and your criminality appears to be that you have not taken the common trouble. . . .
to be what one may be, really and efficaciously . . . to feel it and understand it, to accept it, adopt it, embrace it—that’s conduct, that’s life” (276). Nash defines ethics as fulfilling one’s potential as a human, and on these grounds, he accuses Nick of doing a “great wrong . . . to the human race” (277).

Because we have already noted that James aligns himself with Nash, both of them being authors of *The Tragic Muse*, we can assume that James sides with Nash in this debate. However, for the sake of argument, let us analyze how James demonstrates the immorality of politics. He shows that entering politics leads Nick into unethical and immoral behavior: Nick’s primary political activity is speech making, and he is known for his clever speeches both as a candidate speaking to voters and as a representative speaking on behalf of his constituency. In other words, James emphasizes the representational aspect of Nick’s political career. However, unlike Nick’s painting, where James highlights the collapse between truth and representation, in Nick’s political career, James points to the disjunction between truth and representation. First, we learn that Nick does not accurately represent himself in his speeches. He himself identifies his speeches as hypocrisy. For example, when his benefactor, Mr. Carteret broaches the subject of Nick’s political speeches, “Nick was on the point of declaring again that he was a humbug, so vivid was his inner sense of what he thought of his factitious public utterances, which had the cursed property of creating dreadful responsibilities and importunate credulities for him” (213; original emphasis). James summarizes Nick’s situation in the following way:
He had a talent for appearance, and that was the fatal thing; he had a
damnable suppleness and a gift of immediate response, a readiness to
oblige, that made him seem to take up causes which he really left lying,
enabled him to learn enough about them in an hour to have all the air of
having made them his own. Many people call them their own who had
taken them in much less. . . . He had assumed a virtue and enjoyed
assuming it, and the assumption had cheated his father and his mother and
his affianced wife and his rich benefactor and the candid burgesses of
Harsh and the cynical reporters of the newspapers. His enthusiasm had
been but young curiosity, his speeches had been young agility, his
professions and adhesions had been like postage-stamps without glue: the
head was all right, but they wouldn’t stick. (489-90)

Nick’s speeches are misrepresentations of himself and his intentions. They are, as Plato
pointed out, persuasive strategies that do not draw an audience closer to the truth; they
are bad rhetoric.

Furthermore, James extends his critique by showing that political speeches are
inherently incapable of capturing the truth. The emptiness of Nick’s political speech
making is repeatedly noted in the novel. James characterizes Nick’s political
campaigning in this way: “[All] his life became an overflow of verbiage. Thought
retreated before increase of sound, which had to be pleasant and eloquent, and even
superficially coherent, without its aid” (178). Nick himself tells Julia, “[My political
speech] has nothing to do with the truth or the search for it; nothing to do with
intelligence, or candour, or honour. It’s an appeal to everything that for one’s self one despises . . . to stupidity, to ignorance, to density, to the love of names and phrases, the love of hollow, idiotic words, of shutting the eyes tight and making a noise” (74). The emptiness of political speech is again emphasized later in Nick’s conversation with Julia. Nick begins by saying,

“My mother’s even more political than you.”

“I dare say she is, and quite right!” said Mrs Dallow.

“And she can’t tell me a bit more than you can what she thinks, what she believes, what she desires.”

“Excuse me, I can tell you perfectly. There’s one thing I always desire—to keep out a Tory.”

“I see; that’s a great philosophy.”

“It will do very well. And I desire the good of the country. I’m not ashamed of that.”

“And can you give me an idea of what it is—the good of the country?

“I know perfectly what it isn’t. It isn’t what the Tories want to do.”

“What do they want to do?”

“Oh, it would take me long to tell you. All sorts of trash.” (76) James portrays a political world where political representation is at best empty and at worst outright hypocrisy. Most importantly, political speech is disconnected from truth. It becomes obvious that this is not the most desirable place for Nick. Gabriel Nash says that
he has a “terror” of seeing Nick as a “great statesman.” He calls Nick’s political speeches “like listening to a nightingale in a brass band” (27).

Nick Dormer’s turn to portrait painting is portrayed in The Tragic Muse as an ethical triumph. While the world of politics has “nothing to do with the truth or the search for it” (74), Nick’s efforts as a portraitist are intent upon finding truth. We see this in his multiple attempts to paint a portrait of the protean Miriam Rooth. When Nick sees Miriam, “[She] became a magnificent result, drawing a hundred formative instincts out of their troubled sleep. . . . He had the good fortune to see her, as a subject, without striking matches, in a vivid light, and his quick attempt was as exciting as a sudden gallop—it was almost the sense of riding a runaway horse” (287). In painting a portrait of Miriam, Nick embarks on the adventure of trying to nail down her essential self. What he comes to realize is that in order to capture the truth of Miriam’s person, he must paint her more than one time. The first portrait depicts her as the Tragic Muse. James tells us that “[her] beautiful head was bent a little, broodingly, and her splendid face seemed to look down at life” (335). The portrait is a success: “Unfinished, simplified, and in some portions merely suggested, it was strong, brilliant and vivid and had already the look of life and the air of an original thing” (334). Then, while Nick is still in the midst of painting Miriam’s first portrait, he realizes that she has transformed into a completely different person. He tells her, “I should like to do you as you are at present. You’re totally different from the woman I painted—you’re wonderful” (394). The second portrait is not the muse, but “the charming woman, the person one knows” (429). Finally, midway through the second portrait, he considers trying for “a third masterpiece” (450). Through Nick’s
painting of Miriam’s portraits, James emphasizes the concern that the portraitist has for capturing the truth—even when it is most elusive. He attributes the following speech about portraiture to Gabriel Nash, but it seems too passionate to not contain James’s own beliefs on the subject:

Nick shared his box at the theatre with Gabriel Nash, who talked . . . about the possible greatness of the art of the portraitist—its reach, its range, its fascination, the magnificent examples it had left us in the past: windows open into history, into psychology, things that were among the most precious possessions of the human race. He insisted, above all, on the interest, the richness arising from this great peculiarity of it: that, unlike most other forms, it was a revelation of two realities, the man whom it was the artist’s conscious effort to reveal and the man (the interpreter) expressed in the very quality and temper of that effort. It offered a double vision, the strongest dose of life that art could give, the strongest dose of art that life could give. (294)

According to James, portraiture, of all the arts, has the greatest capability of rendering truth, and, as it has been noted, truth is the area where political action fails. Whereas, for James, political speech is inherently untrue, portraiture is inherently true. In its very form, it has an intimate relationship with the truth.  

Nick Dormer’s story in The Tragic Muse metaphorizes Henry James’s own struggle with the demand that he turn away from artistic activities that seemed to lack

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33 For further reading on how James conceptualizes the relationship between truth and the visual arts, see chapter 4 of James Kirschke’s Henry James and Impressionism.
purpose and toward more politically oriented fiction. Just as Nick is pressured by his family and friends to run for office and to become a politician, James was pressured to compose fiction that was politically or morally motivated. The Dormers tell Nick that “the aesthetic life” is tantamount to “his becoming a nobody” (374). They are confused as to how he could give up a life of service and function (not to mention wealth) to “spend his years copying the more or less vacuous countenances of [his] fellow-mortals” (278). Similarly, as Brodhead has noted, James believed that the only path to greatness was to capitulate to the demands of the literary establishment (145). However, both men turn from their unhappy endeavors in politics to “find peace and pleasure and wisdom and worth” in such a non-essential realm as mimetic representation (278).

The most pressing question confronted by the novel is whether artistic pursuits—on their own merit, without moral justification—deserve one’s serious attention and commitment. For Lady Agnes and Julia Dallow, Nick’s “being serious” is equated with entering politics as a profession (31). The place for art is in “trifling” or “pottering” (328, 271). Interestingly, Julia Dallow has no problems with Nick taking his vacations to paint, nor does Lady Agnes quarrel with Biddy Dormer’s penchant for sculpting. (As a woman, Biddy’s occupation will always be perceived as a hobby rather than a profession). Aesthetic pursuits are fine when they are kept in their place. According to his family, Nick’s real offense is in making a pastime or “dabbling” into a “serious” occupation. When Nick considers giving up his career, he inverts the terms of the equation, pairing art with the label “serious” and effectively placing politics as the unessential element. Nick’s moral dilemma is that he cannot decide whether or not to make his artistic pursuits
serious and to center his activities on his portrait painting. For a time, Nick tries to make painting his hobby while still pursuing his political career. However, James tells us, “It was frivolity and folly, it was puerility to spend valuable hours pottering over the vain implements of an art he had relinquished; and a certain shame . . . arose from the sense not of what he clung to, but of what he had given up. He had turned his back upon serious work, so that pottering was now all he could aspire to” (271). Nick eventually turns back to art as “serious work” and devotes himself to painting. We learn that Nick exchanges “one responsibility for another sort” (422). It is this exchange that throws Nick’s family into turmoil. What we see transpiring is that Nick’s choice is not merely one profession over another; instead his decision to become a painter reconfigures the way that the other characters must define the concepts of function and excess. For these characters seriousness is associated with function, which is in turn associated with politics, while “dabbling” is associated with excess, which is in turn associated with art. Nick privileges excess by dubbing art as “serious”; this is the scandal of Nick’s choice.

As I have above suggested, the struggle between political and artistic representation in The Tragic Muse enacts a central conflict in the genre of realism. Howells’s urgent need to recuperate fiction for a larger social and moral purpose was a conviction that James could not manufacture. Instead, James turned to a kind of realism that found representing truth to be a sufficient rationale. When one reads James into Nick Dormer’s situation, it becomes clear that James’s practice of realism was every bit as scandalous to the established American literary institution of realism as Nick’s practice of portraiture is to his family and constituents. By focusing his version of realism on
mimetic rather than didactic principles, James made his literary practice seem gratuitous. In other words, just like Nick’s career in art, James’s fiction can be read as meaningless, a string of details that serves no larger social or moral purpose. The scandal of Nick’s resignation is the scandal of James’s realism, a genre that privileges unjustified mimesis.

The kind of realism with which James aligns himself has long been identified with a “scandalous” promotion of meaningless details over purposeful narratives. Roland Barthes addresses this tendency when he writes of the “reality effect”:

> What the irreducible residues of functional analysis have in common is that they denote what is commonly called ‘concrete reality’ (casual movements, transitory attitudes, insignificant objects, redundant words). . . . What does it matter that a detail has no function in the account as long as it denotes ‘what took place’? ‘Concrete reality’ becomes a sufficient justification for what is said. . . . All this demonstrates that the ‘real’ is assumed not to need any independent justification, that it is powerful enough to negate any notion of ‘function,’ that it can be expressed without there being any need for it to be integrated into a structure, and that the having-been-there of things is a sufficient reason for speaking of them.

(233)

Barthes’s analysis of the detail speaks to James’s entire practice of realism. His realist rhetoric is engrossed in the “having-been-there,” and *The Tragic Muse* is his argument that the real “is powerful enough to negate any notion of ‘function.’”
However, in terms of narrative fiction, the meaningless detail is problematic. In her genealogy of the detail, Naomi Schor writes that Barthes’s “‘useless,’ totally parasitical details” have long been critically condemned as “symptomatic of decadence” (100). She asks, “What then is a Barthesian detail . . . ? It is marked . . . by its participation in an economy of excess. It always enjoys the status of supplement, a luxurious extra. . . . The Barthesian detail is always supplementary, marginal, decentered . . .” (109). The excessive nature of the realist detail is where its importance lies. Schor writes that “it follows [from Barthes’s argument] that the more a detail is proof against meaning, the more it resists attempts at semantic-structural recuperation, the better it is able to lend the referential text the full weight of reality” (102). In other words, as the detail resists meaning, it becomes more and more a signifier of the real itself. As it becomes more unnecessary, it becomes more indispensable. The realist detail is always gratuitous and yet always essential to the mimetic project. Schor suggests that, as a result, realists often practiced “anxious detailism,” which is “preoccupied with ensuring its own legitimation” (165). Because of this anxiety, writers attempted to make details mean, a practice Schor calls “a sacralization of the detail” (182). What emerges is a defense of the gratuitous and the excessive, in the form of novels like James’s *The Tragic Muse*.

James goes to great lengths to defend fiction that valorizes the realist detail. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Peter Sherringham’s refusal to marry Miriam Rooth. Peter is perhaps the most tragic figure in *The Tragic Muse* simply because he cannot bring himself to give up his important life as a diplomat to be the husband of an artist. Peter’s situation closely parallels Nick Dormer’s, except that Nick chooses what
James portrays to be the better path. Reproach follows Peter Sherringham through the novel. It is important, though, to note the terms of Peter’s refusal. He tells Miriam, “Don’t you see that it’s only if it were a question of my going on the stage myself that there would be a certain fitness in your contrasting me invidiously with Nick Dormer and in my giving up one career for another? But simply to stand in the wing and hold your shawl and smelling-bottle!” (480). Miriam responds very appropriately by telling Peter that holding her shawl and smelling-bottle is “a mere detail” that represents the “precious services” a man like Peter might render to the woman he loves (480). However, it is his position as a detail that repulses Peter and causes him to return to public affairs. The objection that Peter has against a future with Miriam is very similar to one that naturalist author Frank Norris launches against realists in his essay “A Plea for Romantic Fiction.” There, he rails against writers who obsess over “the drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner” (76). Peter’s description of the shawl and smelling-bottle also sounds hauntingly similar to Barthes’s emphasis on “Flaubert’s barometer” and “Michelet’s little door” (230). These details, for Barthes, say “we are the real,” but serve no purpose in view of the plot (234). In contrasting Peter’s sad rejection of such details with Nick Dormer’s triumphant embrace of them, James emphasizes the value of such “meaningless” activities.34

34 Many critics, Schor included, have suggested that a connection exists between the detail and a threat to masculinity. Here Peter’s refusal to become Miriam’s accessory is weighted with his dread of playing a feminine or non-essential role in their marriage. See Schor’s Breaking the Chain and Reading in Detail and Bell’s The Problem of American Realism.
The threat, danger, and scandal of mimesis exist only if it is not recuperated for some larger moral purpose. In *The Tragic Muse*, James defies and simultaneously threatens the nineteenth-century American literary establishment by stubbornly clinging to his unjustified mimetic practices. The novel declares that traditional notions of morality are irrelevant to real artistic pursuits. What finally emerges is that James’s set of ethics about art has nothing to do with traditional morality, and it is through the character of Miriam Rooth that James most fully develops his ideas concerning the ethics of realism. Using Miriam, James constructs his theory that morality (or the “right”) in art is found only in its execution, not in its subject matter (as Howells argues).

Miriam is first introduced in *The Tragic Muse* as Gabriel Nash escorts her and her mother through the Paris Salon exhibition. We learn that Nash has arranged for Miriam, an unpracticed, frightened amateur, to read for Madame Carré, a retired but accomplished actress. At the recitation, Miriam is awkward and, according to Nash, “magnificently stupid” (45). However, through her own perseverance and Peter Sherringham’s guidance, Miriam blossoms into a talented actress. James concludes her story at the end of the novel by stating that it is difficult for him “to do much more than allude to the general impression that her remarkable career is even yet only in its early prime” (533).

Miriam Rooth is portrayed as pure actress; James indicates that her essential being is just as much a construction as the characters that she portrays. At the novel’s opening, she is introduced as being without origin; she has several stage names; and, we are told that Biddy Dormer thinks that Miriam and her mother “were people whom in any country . . . one would immediately have taken for natives” (17). Miriam’s character is distinctly
devoid of any stable identity. In addition, her leading characteristic is her mutability. James writes, “It came over [Peter] suddenly that so far from there being any question of her having the histrionic nature, she simply had it in such perfection that she was always acting; that her existence was a series of parts assumed for the moment, changed for the next” (132). Peter Sherringham, the character with whom Miriam is most intimate, tells Miriam that she is “an embroidery without a [moral] canvas” and a “creature who is all an artist” (146-7; original emphasis). And, Gabriel Nash says to her, “You have stopped acting, you have reduced it to the least that will do, you simply are . . .” (296; original emphasis). Nick reflects that Miriam “had more moods than he had tints on his palette” (502). There is no character in The Tragic Muse who is not struck with Miriam’s essential changeability.

James also invites us and the other characters in the novel to read Miriam as not only changing, but also as a façade or as empty. In the novel’s preface, James writes that Miriam is only described from the points of view of other characters, not from within her own consciousness (1113). This choice on his part suggests to readers that Miriam has no point of view; she functions in the novel only as a façade. The verbs “appeared” and “seemed” are continuously used in The Tragic Muse to describe Miriam. Furthermore, at the beginning of The Tragic Muse, when Miriam reads for an audience for the first time, the other characters quickly reduce her to her beautiful appearance. James tells us that “the best part of the business was to look” (91). Nick says that Miriam is “made for” sitting for portraits, suggesting that she was designed from the very first to exist solely in her appearance (85).
Miriam’s sitting for Nick also reinforces the notion that Miriam is more real in her appearance than in her being. With her, “the representation was the deep substance” (337). Her portraits “seemed to fill the place” and “unfinished . . . had already the look of life and the air of an original thing” (436, 334). The paintings of her actually take on the being of the “original,” Miriam herself. Miriam exists most potently in the realm of representation rather than embodiedness. In a comparison with Julia Dallow, Miriam’s person or being is described as not being fixed to her physical presence:

[Julia’s] charm operated apparently in a very direct, primitive way: her presence diffused it and fully established it, but her absence left comparatively little of it behind. It dwelt in the very facts of her person—it was something that she happened physically to be; yet . . . its envelope of associations, of memories and recurrences, had no great density. She packed it up and took it away with her, as if she had been a woman who had come to sell a set of laces. The laces were as wonderful as ever when they were taken out of the box, but to get another look at them you had to send for the woman. What was above all remarkable was that Miriam Rooth was much less irresistible to our young man than Mrs Dallow could be when Mrs Dallow was on the spot. He could paint Miriam, day after day, without any agitating blur of vision; in fact the more he saw of her the clearer grew the atmosphere through which she blazed, the more her richness became one with that of the flowering picture. (494)
In this passage, Miriam and Julia’s identities are compared in terms of presence and absence. The point of this description is to illuminate Julia’s personality; however, we learn something important about Miriam in the comparison. Julia is portrayed as being physically embodied; her identity is not separate from her physical presence. Miriam is suggested to be the opposite. Her being is completely present in the representations of her. In other words, the substance of her person is fully located in images of her.

However, this implies that Miriam has no depth. Peter Sherringham repeatedly returns to Miriam’s seeming emptiness, saying, “I don’t know what’s in her . . . nothing, it would seem, from her persistent vacancy” (89; emphasis added). He concludes, “The girl’s very face made it vivid to him now—the discovery that she positively had no countenance of her own, but only the countenance of the occasion, a sequence, a variety (capable possibly of becoming immense), of representative movements. . . . The expression that came nearest to belonging to her, as it were, was the one that came nearest to being a blank” (132-3). Miriam’s essence is lack, a vacancy; the fullness of her being is found in her performances, whether they are on stage or canvas.

The discourse on morality that surrounds Miriam is tied to this characterization. Other characters frequently express concerns that because she lacks substance, she is also amoral. The suggestion seems to be that she is without a soul (414). Peter Sherringham suggests that any of her virtues and vices are really just appearances of them: “Her character was simply to hold you by the particular spell; any other—the good-nature of home, the relation to her mother, her friends, her lovers, her debts, the practice of virtues or industries or vices—was not worth speaking of. These things were the fictions and
shadows; the representation was the deep substance” (337). In other words, Miriam’s morality can only be a fiction, just like everything else about her. Miriam embodies representation itself. Not only is she most present in performance, but James makes it clear that an actress, more than any other artist, must erase the self in order to represent faithfully. A conversation between Miriam and Peter illustrates this. Peter says,

“... A creature who is all an artist – I am curious to see that.”

“Surely it has been seen, in lots of painters, lots of musicians.”

“Yes, but those arts are not personal, like yours. I mean not so much so. There’s something left for—what shall I call it?—for character.”

Miriam stared again, with her tragic light. “And do you think I’ve got no character?” As he hesitated she pushed back her chair, rising rapidly.

He looked up at her an instant—she seemed so ‘plastic’; and then, rising too, he answered: “Delightful being, you’ve got a hundred!” (147-8)

For James, an actress—who is herself a work of art—must become a blank canvas, so to speak; she must become morally neutral; morality cannot originate in imitation. The anxiety, therefore, about the morality of a work of art’s subject is legitimate. If the morality of a piece of art is not found in its subject matter, it does not exist at all.

Mrs. Rooth, Miriam’s mother, symbolizes the Howellsian concern about morality. Her anxiety is that Miriam will be immoral if she takes on roles that are not respectable. She wants Miriam to perform in an environment of the “purest tone” and the “highest standards” (86). She “shouldn’t like to see [Miriam] represent a very bad woman—
really bad one” (87; original emphasis). Miriam summarizes her mother’s views about her in this way:

She wants me to be a tremendous sort of creature—all her ideas are reducible to that. What makes the muddle is that she isn’t clear about the kind of creature she wants most. A great actress or a great lady—sometimes she inclines for one and sometimes the other, but on the whole she persuades herself that a great actress, if she’ll cultivate the right people, may be a great lady. When I tell that won’t do and that a great actress can never be anything but a great vagabond, then the dear old thing has tantrums . . . (417; original emphasis)

Peter Sherringham also expresses his reservations about Miriam’s character: “It struck him abruptly that a woman whose only being was to ‘make believe,’ to make believe that she had any and every being you liked, that would serve a purpose, produce a certain effect, and whose identity resided in the continuity of her personations, so that she had no moral privacy . . . but lived in a high wind of exhibition, of figuration—such a woman was a kind of monster . . .” (132). The concern with Miriam’s moral state can be read as a concern about the morality of mimesis itself. Because imitation is inherently amoral or morally neutral, the reality it reflects must be respectable for representation to be respectable. Of course, this principle only holds if morality is defined traditionally—as socially approved behavior.

James renders irrelevant the morality of the subject matter by redefining morality when it occurs within the context of art. He basically locates the morality or “rightness”
in the performance itself instead of the artist or the subject matter. Through Miriam, James presents a resolution to the Howellsian concerns about mimesis and morality. This resolution is foreshadowed when, in the first scene of the novel, Biddy Dormer confronts her mother’s fear that the art they are viewing may be morally objectionable by saying, “The subject doesn’t matter; it’s the treatment, the treatment!” (10). But James’s resolution takes its fullest form in a conversation about Mrs. Rooth’s concerns about Miriam’s moral state. Madame Carré, Miriam’s mentor, and Gabriel Nash attempt to correctly define morality for Mrs. Rooth:

You mix things up, chère madame, and I have it on my heart to tell you so. I believe it’s rather the case with you other English, and I have never been able to learn that either your morality or your talent is the gainer by it. To be too respectable to go where things are done best, is, in my opinion, to be very vicious indeed; and to do them badly in order to preserve your virtue is to fall into a grossness more shocking than any other. To do them well is virtue enough, and not to make a mess of it the only respectability. That’s hard enough to merit Paradise. Everything else is base humbug!

Voila, chère madame, the answer I have for your scruples. (88)

Madame Carré speaking to Mrs. Rooth might as well have been James correcting Howells. Madame Carré explicitly tells Mrs. Rooth that she is confused about the true definitions of morality, respectability, and virtue. Here, Madame Carré redefines virtue as virtuosity, much as James does in “The Art of Fiction,” when he warns his readers not to confuse questions of art with questions of morality (62-3). The idea here is that those who
are looking for morality—or, in the widest sense, good—in a work of art look in the wrong place when they search for it in the subject matter.

In Miriam’s case and in “The Art of Fiction,” we learn not only that the morality of a work of art is found in its quality, but also that quality is defined by a work of art’s true-to-life-ness. When Madame Carré confronts Mrs. Rooth, Carré indignantly defends her theory of morality-as-execution by referencing her performance’s mimetic attributes. She cries, “Bad women? Je n’ai joué que ça, madame. ‘Really’ bad? I tried to make them real!” (87). Miriam’s own response to her mother’s concerns is, “I represent, but I represent truly” (459). Miriam obviously takes the Madame Carré’s lessons to heart; throughout the novel, her goal is to reenact the life that she sees around her. She points out people in life that she would like “to do” on stage (139). She declares, “One must see everything, to be able to do everything” (258). James tells us that

Miriam was delighted to find that seeing more of the world suggested things to her; they came straight from the fact, from nature, if you could call it nature: so that she was convinced more than ever that the artist ought to live, to get on with his business, gather ideas, lights from experience—ought to welcome any experience that would give him lights. But work, of course, was experience, and everything in one’s life that was good was work. . . . [If ] you only kept your eyes open nothing could happen to you that wouldn’t be food for observation and grist to your mill, showing you how people looked and moved and spoke—cried and grimaced, or writhed and dissimulated, in given situations. She saw all
round her things she wanted to ‘do’—London was full of them, if you had eyes to see. (345; original emphasis)

Miriam’s success comes from her investment in accurately representing reality. Through Miriam, James advocates for an ethics of art that finds its highest good in faithful imitation, not in the respectability of the subject matter that is imitated.

Miriam’s adherence to this alternative ethical system does yield the highest good for her audiences. Gabriel Nash knows how valuable Miriam is to humanity and explains to Peter,

She will have brightened up the world for a great many people; she will have brought the ideal nearer to them, held it fast for an hour, with its feet on earth and its great wings trembling. That’s always something, for blessed is he who has dropped even the smallest coin into the little iron box that contains the precious savings of mankind. Miriam will doubtless have dropped a big gold piece. It will be found, in the general scramble, on the day the race goes bankrupt. (383)

Nash prophesies that Miriam will add to the “savings” of mankind. He speaks of artistic endeavors as the gems that will outlast humanity itself and that will preserve it through the “huge and ornamentally vulgar” modernity (382). James validates Nash’s ideas about Miriam when he describes Miriam’s performance as Shakespeare’s Juliet, the role itself alluding to the continuation of a tradition of artistic production. James depicts the audience’s response to Miriam’s performance and suggests that she has given them
something incalculably valuable. He describes the audience as “throbbing,” “responsive,” and “stretching out wide arms to the future” (461). James writes,

Nick had often heard more applause but he had never heard more attention; for they were all charmed and hushed together and success seemed to be sitting down with them. . . . People snatched their eyes from the stage for an instant to look at each other, and a sense of intelligence deepened and spread. It was a part of the impression that the actress was only now really showing, for this time she had verse to deal with and she made it unexpectedly exquisite. She was beauty, she was music, she was truth; she was passion and persuasion and tenderness. She caught up the obstreperous play in soothing, entwining arms and carried it into the high places of poetry, of style. And she had such tones of nature, such concealments of art, such effusions of life, that the whole scene glowed with the colour she communicated, and the house, as if pervaded with rosy fire, glowed back at the scene. Nick looked round in the intervals; he felt excited and flushed—the night had turned into a feast of fraternity and he expected to see people embrace each other. (461-2)

Miriam’s triumph and Nash’s prophecies about her tell us that the concerns about Miriam’s morality are irrelevant. Her ability to bring beauty and “intelligence” to an audience edifies the audience on a plane far above that of preaching a message of good behavior and self-improvement.
Henry James’s rationale for his form of realism is the driving force in *The Tragic Muse*. In setting up various oppositions between the pragmatic, political world and the world of aesthetics and artistic representation, James defends his own practice of realism, which is founded on the principle that mimesis—without any other justification—is both ethical and essential. By identifying himself with characters such as Gabriel Nash, Nick Dormer, and Miriam Rooth, James pushes forward the idea that realism does not need to be recuperated for a larger social or moral cause. And, his opposition to characters like Julia Dallow and Lady Agnes Dormer suggests his fundamental split with the Howellsian realism that dominated the American literary scene during James’s career.
Naturalism and the Ethics of Authorship: The Problem of Presley in *The Octopus*

Mark Seltzer has called the naturalist novel a “melodrama of uncertain agency” (18). Certainly, the novels of the American naturalists stage a conflict between two competing ideologies, what Torsten Pettersson calls “scientific determinism” and “moral outrage” (78). On one hand, on the affective level, naturalism is a genre driven by moral indignation and a desire for reform, much like its progenitor, literary realism. In appealing to the moral outrage of the readers, these novelists seem to subscribe to the belief that their readers have the agency to alter the deplorable material conditions presented in the novels. On the other hand, however, one of the most common characteristics of American naturalism is the genre’s commitment to a deterministic worldview. By continually subjecting their characters to determining forces outside of these characters’ control, naturalist novelists suggest that humans, their readers included, have no agency to bring about reform. As Robert E. Morseberger has noted, these novels “simultaneously seem to call for reform and deny the possibility of reform” (105). In this way, the naturalist novel pleads for that which it swears is impossible.

No American naturalist novel dramatizes this conflict as fully as Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*. Norris’s novel is a fictional re-telling of an 1880 incident at Mussel Slough in California. In both the historical occurrence and Norris’s version, ranchers rent land owned by the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad with assurances that the railroad will sell the land cheaply to them in the future; when the railroad inflates the prices and attempts to evict the resident farmers, a bloody conflict ensues (Starr viii-ix). In *The Octopus*, Norris dramatizes the ranchers’ desperate attempt, using both legal and illegal
means, to defeat the railroad. He goes to great lengths to create sympathy on the part of the readers for the ranchers’ predicament, and it is with frustration that the readers come to realize that the ranchers have no chance of success. While the novel is replete with “morally charged rhetoric,” it finally refuses any positive outcomes of such rhetoric (Petterson 80).

In *The Octopus*, Norris depicts a universe governed by laws that humans are powerless to change. More specifically, Norris shows human beings who are at the mercy of the inevitable forward progress of history, which Norris describes as “a vast trend toward appointed goals” (*The Octopus* 577). And despite the novel’s talk of abstract “Forces” that dictate the lives of humans, the historical progress that Norris depicts is actually material and economic. More specifically, *The Octopus* locates Force in material reality—in the natural, the physical, and the economic. In one of the novel’s most famous lines, Norris writes that “the Wheat” itself is the Force that pushes history forward: “As if human agency could affect this colossal power! What were these heated, tiny squabbles, this feverish, small bustle of mankind, this minute swarming of the human insect, to the great, majestic, silent ocean of the Wheat itself!” (448). For Norris, an abstract, “colossal power” is embodied in tangible, concrete reality, and ideas manifest in matter. As Malcolm Cowley has noted, “There [is] a tendency in almost all naturalistic writers to identify social laws with biological or physical laws” (64). And, Mark Seltzer demonstrates that the naturalists’ “discourse of force” is nothing more than the “discourse

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35 Leigh Ann Litwiller Berte suggests that the following fall under the umbrella-term of “Force” by Norris: “evolution, mechanization, instinct/primitivism, biology, nature, vitality, economics, politics, and spirituality” (204).
of thermodynamics” (29), a natural law that specifically theorizes the existence of matter. In essence, in *The Octopus*, “material considerations” are “the central influence on the characters” (Wood 107). Norris depicts a dynamic, material system that progresses regardless of the characters’ attempts to secure agency and that, in the end, undermines the reformist rhetoric of the novel.

More significant than the problems that the conflict between determinism and moral outrage presents to the coherence of the novel are the problems that it poses to the novel’s own *raison d’être*. In other words, naturalism’s dilemma of agency and moral action extends to the act of writing the naturalist novel. The naturalist novel’s “melodrama of uncertain agency” questions the novel’s own existence. In his critical essay, “The Responsibilities of the Novelist,” Norris specifically characterizes the novel as a moral force in society. However, if, as *The Octopus* suggests, moral action is in the end meaningless and ineffective, then there is no reason to write. In Norris’s novel, the insignificant effort of the individual is completely eclipsed by the monumental natural energies that oppose it. Logically speaking then, the naturalist writer, aware of the uselessness of writing, should not exist. To sum up, the very existence of the naturalist novel is *both* an argument for the agency of the individual and an argument against it. In

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36 Much of Norris’s critical writing, including “The Responsibilities of the Novelist,” was composed contemporaneously with *The Octopus*. We can assume, then, that the opinions he voices in these texts are the same as those he held during his work on *The Octopus*. See H. Willard Reninger’s “Norris Explains the Octopus” and Donald Pizer’s introduction to *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*. 
the end, the naturalist novel is always haunted by the question, why write? What does one accomplish by writing the naturalist novel?\textsuperscript{37}

In *The Octopus*, Norris attempts to work through this sticky issue. The epic battle in the novel between the railroad and the ranchers is given to readers primarily through the perspective of the poet Presley, who Norris also uses to examine the efficacy of art in a material-centered deterministic system. On witnessing the injustices done to the ranchers, Presley is moved to write on their behalf. He writes a poem called “The Toilers,” which advocates for their cause, and with this poem, Presley achieves widespread popularity. His success, however, is short-lived. True to the worldview presented in *The Octopus*, following the publication of “The Toilers,” every endeavor Presley makes to alter the ranchers’ situation ends in failure. Despite Presley’s enthusiastic efforts, the novel ends with the massacre of the ranchers, the triumph of the railroad, and Presley’s flight to a more peaceful setting. In short, Presley’s acts of resistance, which consist largely of writing and speech, make no impact on the unfolding of events in the novel. Presley’s experiences in *The Octopus* seem to suggest that the deployment of language for moral purposes is futile. Nevertheless, the novel itself and its moral “tenor” argue to the contrary (Pettersson 77). As Morseberger points out, “At the end, Norris dismisses the entire human tragedy as unimportant, though if it were indeed

\textsuperscript{37} Émile Zola, in “The Experimental Novel,” attempts to address this very question. In his explanation, he suggests that the naturalist—through writing novels—experiments with social conditions in order gain mastery over them. His implication is that if the novelist can discover the determining factors in a deterministic system, he or she will be able to effect change. According to Zola, the naturalist wants to understand the “way a passion acts in a certain social condition” in order to “treat it and reduce it, or at least make it as inoffensive as possible” (25). Zola concludes triumphantly, “[I]n this consists the practical utility and high morality of our naturalistic works” (25).
so, there would be no reason for his novel and no sense of outrage as the author chronicles man’s inhumanity to man” (111).

For the moment, let us assume that *The Octopus* does—by its very existence—remain open to the possibility that language can influence material reality. The question plaguing the novel then becomes not “why write?” but “how does one write successfully against such odds?” In this case, it becomes crucial to understand the conditions that precipitate Presley’s failures, in other words, taking Presley as a negative example. By piecing together exactly how Presley manages to fail, readers can begin to approach Norris’s understanding of how an artist can produce texts that work in the real world. In the end, what is required is a rhetorical analysis that examines Norris’s portrayals of both successful and unsuccessful attempts at persuasion. Because the subject of texts at work in the world is the focus of rhetorical studies, a rhetorical perspective can usefully be brought to bear on the task of diagnosing Presley’s inadequacies and understanding how Norris justifies his own artistic activities.

*The Octopus* makes clear that Presley has a problem; his failures are well marked. At the novel’s opening, Norris explains that Presley has come to California with the intention of writing an epic poem that portrays the romance of the American West, “the Song of the West” (10). However, immediately we are told of the difficulties that he faces. Norris writes, “He had set himself the task of giving true, absolutely true, poetical expression to the life of the ranch, and yet, again and again, he [was] brought up against the railroad, that stubborn iron barrier against which his romance shattered itself to froth and disintegrated, flying spume” (12-3). Presley is frustrated by the “realism, grim,
unlovely, unyielding” (12). Eventually, he gives up his dream of writing the “great, vague epic poem of the West” (395). Next, Presley decides to write on behalf of the ranchers and to become the struggle’s poet (395). However, that attempt, the product of which is Presley’s poem “The Toilers,” proves fruitless as well. While it stirs up discussion for a time, by the end of the novel, members of the upper class who have directly benefited from the ranchers’ defeat are praising the poem. At a dinner held at the home of a railroad executive, one woman tells Presley, “I have read your poem, of course, Mr. Presley. . . . What a sermon you read us, you dreadful young man” (605). The playfulness of this conversation marks the failure of the poem to provoke serious interest and cause real reform. In addition, Presley’s other failures in the novel complement those of his artistic endeavors: He fails to kill S. Behrman; he fails to exonerate Magnus Derrick; and, he fails to find the Hooven women in San Francisco before they starve to death. When all of Presley’s misadventures are taken together, it is clear that Norris has emphasized—even over-determined—Presley’s failures.

However, not immediately discernible are the reasons for Presley’s failures. Norris portrays Presley as well intentioned and enthusiastic, and as readers we feel that he should eventually succeed in making some impact on the situation, but he never does. What exactly has Presley done wrong? True to form, *The Octopus* wavers between attributing Presley’s failures to fate and attributing them to his own personal shortcomings. Although Presley is perhaps, as he thinks, “foredoomed to fail,” he also appears to hold himself responsible for at least some of his mistakes (589, 565). We are concerned here with the failures that Presley can prevent. To determine a naturalist ethics
of authorship, we must deal with what an artist can and must do in order to alter a
determined system of progress that is largely impervious to change.

To help us pinpoint the reasons for Presley’s failures, we can in fact turn to Émile
Zola’s novel Germinal. Fortunately, Germinal directly explains what The Octopus leaves
open to conjecture. By reading The Octopus in light of Germinal, we can understand
more fully what Norris is attempting to accomplish in his novel. Because Germinal and
The Octopus are, as I will argue, intentionally similar, we can link interpretations of the
two novels, using each to complement the other.

Without question Norris was heavily influenced by Zola. In fact, as a young man,
Norris called himself “The Boy Zola” (Starr xviii). In his series of critical essays, Norris
both advocates for naturalism and sets up Zola as naturalism’s premier writer and a role
model for up-and-coming naturalists. Norris praises the literature of Zola, saying that his
is “a world of big things,” and extolling the genre of naturalism as “unique, somber,
powerful beyond words” (“Zola as a Romantic Writer” 72). He sees in Zola’s naturalism,
which Norris also describes as a type of “romantic fiction,” something that other writers
should model. He calls this literature, of which Zola is “the very head,” “an instrument,
keen, finely tempered, flawless—an instrument with which we may go straight through
the clothes and tissues and wrappings of flesh down deep into the red, living heart of
things” (“A Plea for Romantic Fiction” 75-8). To be sure, as a writer, Norris saw himself
as following Zola’s lead.

Furthermore, many writers on literary naturalism have noted the specific
similarities between Germinal and The Octopus and have suggested that Norris used
Zola’s novel as the inspiration for his own. Ronald E. Martin writes, “From Zola [Norris] seems to have gotten his whole approach to fiction: his sense of subject, scope, structure, and even (to some extent) of theme and tone are directly relatable to the novels of Zola we know he read” (151). Martin further explains that Norris’s planned trilogy, which would begin with *The Octopus*, “was to a surprising extent what Zola had done in novels like *La Terre*, *Germinal*, and *La Bête Humaine*” and that “in launching into his new Idea, Norris was returning to the original source of his inspiration as a novelist” (162). Donald Pizer goes even further to suggest that Norris uses specific elements of *Germinal* in the composition of *The Octopus*, specifically “the technique of introducing an outsider into an economic struggle and of using his innocence as a means both for exposition and for the gradual crystallization of an attitude toward the dispute” (*The Novels of Frank Norris* 126). Finally, Lars Ahnebrink, in his groundbreaking and comprehensive study of naturalism as a genre, *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction*, devotes a large portion of a chapter to enumerating the similarities between *Germinal* and *The Octopus*. In his analysis, Ahnebrink points out how the two novels share plotlines, characters, setting, language, and even specific scenes (294-8). Indeed, *Germinal* and *The Octopus* are too similar in too many aspects for Norris—who was intimately familiar with Zola’s work—not to have used the earlier novel as a source of (to put it generously) inspiration.

Especially in the areas of *The Octopus* that are the concern of this chapter, Norris seems to have correlated his novel with Zola’s. Firstly, the plot, as it involves Presley, is almost identical to the plot of *Germinal*. *Germinal*’s plot centers on the character of Étienne Lantier, who despite his superior education and experience as a skilled laborer,
becomes a coal miner at a mine called Le Voreux. Like Presley in *The Octopus*, originally an outsider, Étienne soon becomes embroiled in local economic disputes. Specifically, Étienne aligns himself with the disgruntled coal miners, who barely earn enough to feed themselves but who are subject to a new pay cut, the result of the mine ownership’s recent losses. The novel, like *The Octopus*, pits labor against capital, and Étienne’s role as a representative for the workers in that struggle parallels that of Presley in the later novel. Étienne’s superior education makes him the logical choice for the leader of the worker’s rebellion, and he uses his reading on social theory to incite the miners to action and to organize a strike. However, he soon finds that he is unable to productively marshal the exploited workers’ rage, and the strike becomes a violent riot, in which many of the workers are killed. At the conclusion of *Germinal*, starving and mourning their dead comrades, the miners return to the mine, forced to accept the lower wages that the mine’s ownership, which Zola aptly names “the Company,” had initially proposed. Like Presley, Étienne fails in using his education to serve the workers’ cause, and both novels end in the workers’ defeat. At the end of *Germinal*, Étienne leaves Le Voreux to work for the Workers’ International, an escape that is the precedent of that of Presley at the end of *The Octopus*. Like Norris’s novel, *Germinal* ends with the triumph of capital and the flight of the central character, who is one of the few survivors of a violent massacre.

Characters in *Germinal* also find their counterparts in *The Octopus*. Most importantly for this study, especially similar are the central characters in the two novels, Étienne Lantier in *Germinal* and Presley in *The Octopus*. First, Étienne and Presley serve
to initiate the action in both novels. *Germinal* and *The Octopus* both begin with these two characters’ entrance into an already-brewing economic conflict.\(^{38}\) The arrival of these two outsiders incites and focuses the resentment of the other characters in the novel. Both Étienne and Presley are characterized as having a superior education to the other characters in the novel, and they use their intellect and learning to catalyze the workers’ rebellion. Secondly, as Pizer has noted, the two men are outsiders to the conflict that is taking place (*The Novels of Frank Norris* 126). Specifically, they have no local ties to the struggle, and they are free to quit it at any time with no consequences. Also, they are not economically involved in the struggle. Neither man relies on the success of the workers’ struggle in order to survive. In other words, unlike the workers they represent, they choose to involve themselves in the fight against capital. At any point, both Étienne and Presley can walk away from the conflict and find economic success elsewhere, and in fact, both do so at the novels’ ends. Lastly, both characters ultimately fail in their efforts to represent the workers; neither is successful in changing material conditions.

Because the way that Norris portrays and uses Presley in *The Octopus* is patterned after the way that Zola portrays and uses Étienne in *Germinal*, we can interrogate *Germinal* to see if it can shed any light on Presley’s failed rhetorical attempts in *The Octopus*. In other words, the causes of Étienne’s failures, which are more fully explained, can perhaps help us to understand the causes of Presley’s failures.

Étienne’s failures take the form of the disastrous outcomes of the miners’ strike, which he spearheaded. Because of Étienne’s inability to guide the miners, the strike

\(^{38}\) The two economic conflicts occur in the industries of mining and farming, and Mark Seltzer has noted the correlation of mining and farming in naturalist fiction (34).
becomes a violent riot that results in the deaths of many miners and the unsuccessful end of the strike. The violence begins when Étienne speaks to the gathered miners during a rally. He is carried away by his own rhetoric, and, according to Zola, “Reason tottered before this mental effort and left only the obsession of the fanatic. Gone were the scruples of his human feeling and common sense, and nothing seemed simpler than the realization of this brave new world” (275). The crowd takes its cue from Étienne, and the people, “light-headed with hunger, saw red, had visions of fire and blood in a glorious apotheosis out of which universal happiness was rising before their eyes” (281). The scene ends as Étienne’s audience marches toward a neighboring mine shouting, “Death to the traitors!” (282). When Étienne sees the physical violence of the strike-turned-riot, he protests and attempts to persuade the miners to act rationally. But, “They had all long since given up obeying Étienne. Despite his order, stones went on flying, and he was dismayed at the sight of these brutes whom he had unleashed. . . . All the old Flemish blood was there, thick and placid, taking months to warm up, but then working itself up to unspeakable cruelties and refusing to listen to any arguments until the beast in them was sated with atrocities” (341). In the end, the miners (perhaps rightly) blame Étienne for the violence returned upon them by the French army, and a group attempts to stone him to death (422-3).

Obviously, the riot and its tragic effects for the miners resulted from Étienne’s abortive attempts to use language to impact material conditions. Zola identifies the problem as Étienne’s speech at the rally, which incites the violent riot. Étienne begins the speech by outlining the reasons and goals for the strike; “he had adopted the frigid tones
of a simple representative of the people making his report” (272). His intention seems to be to direct the miners to reaching their collective goals. However, soon he begins speaking “in a different voice,” “no longer the secretary of an Association, but a leader, an apostle bringing the gospel of truth” (273). His speech, which concerned abolishing the wage system and achieving social justice in the face of unjust material conditions, crescendos, and its impact on the audience of three thousand starved and desperate miners is profound. Zola writes that “they were uplifted in a religious ecstasy” and “hysterical” (276). He tells us, “This was power that [Étienne] was holding in his hands, materialized in the three thousand breasts whose hearts were beating at his bidding” (277). So, on one level, the speech was a success; it had persuaded the audience to act.

However, Zola makes obvious that Étienne’s oration is problematic. Not only does Zola point to the rally as the cause of the violent riot, but he also lampoons Étienne’s performance. Zola mocks Étienne’s mastery of the theoretical material in his speech and seems to laugh at Étienne when he “trotted out his favorite subject,” pointing out that Étienne spoke in phrases “the pedantic jargon of which pleased [Étienne] mightily” (275). Zola also notes that Étienne loses his bearings and “his human feeling and common sense” (275). Zola comments skeptically, “[Étienne] had foreseen everything and he referred to it as though it were a machine he could fix up in a couple of hours, and neither fire nor blood counted” (275-6). The biggest problem with Étienne’s speech, however, is that, although he succeeds in persuading the audience to act, he is not able to educate them on the reasons for and goals of their action. Zola makes the following comments as he narrates the climax of Étienne’s speech:
Here, in the icy winter night, was a whole people in a white heat of passion, with shining eyes and parted lips, famished men, women, and children let loose to pillage the wealth of ages, the wealth of which they had been dispossessed. . . . They were uplifted in a religious ecstasy, like the feverish hope of the early Christians expecting the coming reign of justice. Many obscure phrases had baffled them, they were far from understanding these technical and abstract arguments, but their very obscurity and abstract nature broadened still further the field of promises and carried them away into hallucinations. What a wonderful dream! To be the masters and suffer no more! To enjoy life at last! (276)

After this moment in the speech, the audience is no longer under Étienne’s control; they are swept away by the pathos of his speech and unaffected by its logic. By the end of the rally, Étienne is “at the end of his tether, hoarse with trying to get a moment’s silence in order to come to some definite decision” (282). When he tries to bring the audience back to the business of carrying out the strike, he is unsuccessful. His persuasive attempt fails to accomplish his goal, which is to make the audience conscious of the role they must play in order to make the strike successful.

Étienne’s role in the workers’ rebellion is to provide intellectual leadership, and his failure to persuade the miners toward productive action is his failure to represent them as their leader. From his first days in the mine, Étienne tries to influence the other miners to interpret their struggle in light of Marxist political theory (143-4). Over his first few months at Le Voreux, Étienne succeeds in moving the workers to collectivize and create
a provident fund, which would support the community in the case of a strike. Zola writes, “Étienne’s influence spread far and wide and gradually he was revolutionizing the village. His unobtrusive propaganda was made all the more telling by his increasing popularity” (171). Because he is able to theorize about the miners’ position and formulate a plan for their relief, he becomes their leader. Zola explicitly connects Étienne’s knowledge about social theory to his role as leader of the rebellion:

From now on Étienne was the undisputed leader. As study sharpened his intellect and enabled him to speak on all subjects with authority, the evening conversations became oracles which he delivered. He spent nights reading and received more and more letters; he had even begun subscribing to _Le Vengeur_, a Belgian socialist paper, and this, the first paper of its kind to be seen in the village, had earned him a position of extraordinary prestige among his mates. (221)

Étienne’s responsibility in the miners’ rebellion is to give it form. He takes it upon himself to take the workers’ revolutionary energy and channel it in a productive and progressive direction. However, in his obligation to bring theory to their action and to guide the audience to what Marxist theory calls class consciousness, he ultimately fails.

Étienne is unsuccessful in making his ideas relevant to the miners, and Zola explicitly attributes this lack of success to Étienne’s inflated opinions of himself. In Étienne’s speech at the rally, he is carried away by his influence over the miners and ends up forgetting the purposes for which he has spoken in the first place. As a result, he stirs up the crowd without giving them necessary instruction. Zola describes the scene: “The
clamour rose again. Étienne was tasting the heady wine of popularity. This was power that he was holding in his hands, materialized in the three thousand breasts whose hearts were beating as his bidding” (276-7). Drunk with his own power, Étienne foolishly leads the workers into utopian dreams. The destructive and unproductive riot proves that such rhetoric, presented without an emphasis on theoretical knowledge, is counterproductive and even dangerous.

Étienne’s foolish speech is caused by his pride at being a political leader, a feeling that has been germinating in Étienne for months. As Étienne grows more influential among the miners, he becomes more egotistic and ambitious for further success. He is “carried aloft by the joy of leadership” in which “gusts of pride wafted him higher and higher” (229). Zola writes early in the novel that Étienne “tasted the joys of satisfied vanity and drank the heady wine of growing popularity,” which encourages “still more his dreams of the coming revolution in which he was destined to play a part (171-2). As the strike, which now serves both Étienne’s personal goals and the goals of the miners, continues, Zola describes how Étienne’s vanity and ambition increase:

Every day his popularity grew, and every day he felt more elated. To be carrying on an extensive correspondence, discussing the fate of workers in the four corners of the province, giving consultations to the miners of Le Voreux, above all to be a centre and feel the world pivoting on oneself, a mere ex-mechanic and collier with black greasy hands, all this naturally flattered his vanity. . . . [He] found renewed delight in his dream of becoming a popular leader: Montsou at his feet, Paris in the mists of the
future, who could tell? member of parliament some day, the dais of some
great hall where he visualized himself castigating the bourgeois in the first
speech made in parliament by a working man. (221-2)

Eventually, Étienne’s “real ambition” becomes “to be like a Pluchart [a political leader
who works for the Workers’ International] and give up manual labor in order to work full
time in politics” (360). Étienne’s pride and ambition separate him from the miners and, in
the end, cause him to look out for his own interests rather than theirs. For Étienne, the
strike becomes as much about his own achievements as the miners’ welfare.

Zola’s indictment of Étienne’s ambition becomes more prominent when we
examine his portrayal of Pluchart, which is less than flattering. From the first, the interest
of Pluchart (and the Workers’ International) in the miner’s struggle has been more
political than sympathetic. Zola tells us that “[Pluchart’s] underlying idea was to exploit
the strike and win the men over to the International, towards which so far they had shown
themselves very lukewarm” (222). And, as Germinal proceeds, the critique of Pluchart
grows more virulent. Zola describes his arrival at a meeting of the miners:

He arrived in a carriage drawn by a broken-winded old hack. He leaped
down, slim and dandified, with a square head too big for his body, and in
his black frock coat he looked like a well-to-do artisan in his Sunday best.
For five years now he had never so much as used a file, and he dolled
himself up, taking particular care of his hair, very proud of his success as
an orator. . . . He served his own ambition very actively, constantly
running round the province and airing his views. (238)
Eventually, the International convinces the miners to join the collective by promising them aid during the strike, but “four thousand francs, sent from London by the International, had scarcely provided bread for three days. Since then, nothing” (245). Zola emphasizes the effects of this disappointment on the miners: “The death of this great hope broke down everybody’s courage. . . . They felt lost in the cruel winter, cut off from the world” (245). To sum up, Pluchart and the International are portrayed as (at best) irrelevant and (at worst) frauds. Because of this, Étienne’s ambition of working for the International and his eventual fulfillment of that ambition indicates a fall rather than an ascent.

Étienne’s pride and ambition can be traced back to perceptible class differences between himself and the miners. Étienne begins *Germinal* as an acknowledged superior to the miners (139). Unlike them, he chooses to work and struggle at Le Voreux. Instead of resuming “his hungry tramp on the road,” he decides to “go down to the mine again to suffer and to fight,” not because he must, but because he is intrigued by the “wind of revolt blowing from Le Voreux” (71, 80). As the novel continues, Étienne finds himself more and more disgusted by the miners’ way of life. Zola writes, “Gradually, as [Étienne’s] own tastes had become more refined and all his instincts had been slowly raising him towards a higher social class, these people had nauseated him more and more” (425). Furthermore, his lack of familial ties to the community makes him more financially secure than the miners. Étienne becomes “almost wealthy” because “a married collier may not be able to make both ends meet, but a steady, single man without
dependants can even save” (171). As the novel progresses, the differences between Étienne and the miners become more pronounced.

In fact, with his increase in wealth, Zola begins to identify Étienne as a member of the bourgeoisie. He writes that “a slow transformation began to come over Étienne” and that “a certain instinctive care for his appearance and for the refinements of life, which had been overlaid by poverty, now came to the surface” (171). This passage suggests that Étienne possesses an inherent proclivity for the refinements of a bourgeois lifestyle, which a short period of poverty has stifled but not eradicated. And, while the events of the novel suggest that Étienne’s rise to leadership will benefit the miners, Zola undermines these implications by commenting, “In reality he was climbing a rung of the social ladder into the ranks of the detested bourgeoisie, with an intellectual satisfaction and feeling of well-being which he dared not admit to himself” (222). Here, Zola seems to imply that the intellectual leadership that Étienne has assumed is actually creating the class differences between him and the miners. This is affirmed later in the novel when Étienne is forced to go into hiding, and he reflects on the events that have unfolded:

Now he spent hours lying on the hay turning over vague ideas which he did not recognize as his own, a sensation, for instance, of superiority which set him apart from his mates, as though his intellectual progress had raised his whole being to great spiritual heights. He had never reflected so deeply, and he wondered why he had felt such disgust after the mad rush through the pits; but he dared not answer his own question, for he was revolted by memories of mean covetousness, coarse instincts and the
stench of all this poverty which was in the very air you breathed. . . . How sickening! to think of these poor wretches all living in a heap and washing together in the same tub! There was not one of them with whom you could talk politics seriously, it was a bestial existence in that everlasting choking stink of onions! . . . Gradually his vanity at being their leader and the constant necessity of doing their thinking for them was setting him apart and creating within him the soul of one of the bourgeois he hated so much.

(358-9)

In providing intellectual leadership to the miners, Étienne’s bourgeois tendencies become more pronounced, and he clearly does not belong to the same class as the miners.

The class differences between Étienne and the miners can in the end be attributed to Étienne’s education. Readers of Zola’s Rougon-Macquart novels are already aware of Étienne’s history and the fact that he received a primary education in the novel *L’Assommoir* (108). He arrives at Le Voreux with an education, which has been supplemented by his friendship with the socialist Pluchart, and a background of skilled labor. After his first day of work at the mine, Étienne decides to leave Le Voreux and find work elsewhere, thinking, “it was wiser to clear out . . . for with his better education he could not share the herd-like resignation of these people, and knew he would end up by throttling one of the chiefs” (71). It is this education that propels Étienne into the role of intellectual leader, and it is also this education that allows him to earn more money than the other miners (171). In the end, Étienne’s education is the fundamental cause of
his failures. The riot stems from Étienne’s inability to educate the miners, which is in turn caused by his ambition and the class differences between him and the miners.

In following this chain of causation, the reader may be surprised to realize that that which makes Étienne qualified to lead and represent the miners, his education, also makes him unqualified to do so. Although the miners need an educated man like Étienne to lead them (this is evidenced by the fact that before he arrives, their longstanding resentment has not lead to action), his education is the fatal flaw in their rebellion. It promotes in Étienne a tendency toward ethical breaches that result in the miners’ defeat. In fact, through his portrayal of Étienne Lantier, Zola calls into question the idea of intellectual leadership. Furthermore, *Germinal* opens up a conversation about the socialist leader and ultimately about the activist tendencies of naturalist fiction.

Theories about the conflict between labor and capital rely heavily on the vexed notion of intellectual leadership. On one hand, intellectual leadership is absolutely necessary for the rise of the proletariat. It is through their intellectual leaders that the proletarians understand their role in history, achieve class consciousness, and organize their revolution. In other words, intellectual leaders are responsible for bringing theory to the proletariat’s action, a process that is necessary for the success of the revolution. Marx and Engels describe these leaders as “the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others” and those who “have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletariat movement” (“The Manifesto of the Communist Party” 485). Georg Lukács’s
description in *History and Class Consciousness* elaborates on that of Marx: “[To] comprehend [the ultimate goal] is to recognize the direction taken (unconsciously) by events and tendencies towards the totality. It is to know the direction that determines concretely the correct course of action at any given moment—terms of the interest of the total process, viz. the emancipation of the proletariat” (23). The theoretical component of the workers’ resistance is essential for its success, and theory must be brought to the masses by those who understand it.

Of course, the notion of a thinker bringing theory to the masses is also problematic. As Gilles Deleuze says in “Intellectuals and Power,” “No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall” (Foucault para. 2). Ideas cannot translate themselves into actions. It is in this area that Marxism meets rhetorical studies. The relationship between the intellectual leaders and the workers is a rhetorical one; language must bridge the gap between theory and practice. Ultimately, it is through the deployment of language that activists can impact material conditions. As Marx writes in his “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right,*” “Material force can only be overthrown by material force; but theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses” (60). This means, then, that the outcome of the conflict between labor and capital rests on the success or failure of the intellectual leader’s use of rhetoric. This is precisely the scenario that Zola depicts in *Germinal.*

Problems typical to what rhetoricians call “the rhetorical situation” plague the intellectual leader’s attempt to bring theory to bear on practice. The difficulty of the
The rhetorical situation is that the audience is always a variable. The speaker is confronted with the fact that no amount of discourse can physically alter material reality. While it can certainly be demonstrated that—as Althusser has famously noted—“ideology has a material existence” (165), language can only affect material conditions through the bodies of the audience; the rhetorical situation requires that the audience understand and act upon the ideas of the speaker. To clarify, language can only persuade people, not matter. The audience, of whom each individual must be persuaded, is necessary for a speaker or writer to achieve material change. This scenario is fraught with difficulties. In the case of the thinker bringing theory to the masses, Lukács warns against a particular misstep, one that Étienne makes in his speech to the miners:

Even more to the point is the need to discover those features and definitions both of the theory and the ways of gripping the masses which convert the theory, the dialectical method, into a vehicle of revolution. . . . If this is not done that “gripping the masses” could well turn out to be a will o’ the wisp. It might turn out that the masses were in the grip of quite different forces, that they were in pursuit of quite different ends. In that event, there would be no necessary connection between the theory and their activity, it would be a form that enables the masses to become conscious of their socially necessary and fortuitous actions, without

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39 This is why classical rhetoricians like Aristotle, for example, attempted to reduce the unpredictability of the rhetorical situation by analyzing and classifying audiences. See Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. 
ensuring a genuine and necessary bond between consciousness and action.

(2)

Lukács’s point is that a faulty rhetorical method could fail to accomplish the speaker’s goals, which would, in the end, spell failure for the workers’ movement.

Furthermore, as Étienne discovers in Germinal, this particular rhetorical situation is prone to failure because it ventures into ethical gray areas. Particularly, intellectual leaders face the ethical problems surrounding representation. As Marx and Engels point out in “The Communist Manifesto,” intellectual leaders typically arise from within the ranks of the bourgeoisie and then join the proletarian movement (483-4).40 This scenario requires that a person of privilege speak on behalf of those who are oppressed. The ethical issues that accompany this situation are, perhaps, obvious. First, because the intellectual leader cannot fully identify with his or her working-class followers, there is a good chance of mis-representation. In speaking for and speaking to workers, the intellectual leader may not fully understand the workers’ particular situation. And this leads to another, more serious concern. As Zola has shown, the intellectual leader may mistake his or her own interests as the interests of those being represented. As Gayatri Spivak has said in her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” “Representing [the subaltern], the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent” (275). If the intellectual leader is not careful in this rhetorical situation, he or she is liable to represent his or her

40 Marx explains further in “The German Ideology.” Intellectual labor and the privilege of education usually fall to those in the bourgeoisie; therefore, it is rare to see an intellectual leader who comes from the working class (159).
own interests as the interests of the workers. As the previous paragraphs have argued, this is the ethical mistake made by Étienne, which leads to the failure of the miners’ rebellion.

In portraying this rhetorical situation in *Germinal*, Zola joins other realist and naturalist writers who incorporate a socialist leader/intellectual in a novel.\textsuperscript{41} These characters reflect the difficulties of activism, as they attempt to use language to influence material reality. Many of them, like Étienne, become entangled in issues of ethics or in problems related to efficacy. Because of this, these characters can be seen as self-reflective elements in realist and naturalist novels. They embody the moral outrage of these novels, and in the case of the naturalists, face the almost insurmountable obstacles preventing them from changing material reality. In many ways, the socialist leader/intellectual is the naturalist’s avatar, who struggles to understand and fulfill his or her role in changing material conditions and who wrestles with whether this change is even possible.

Étienne’s unconscious struggle to transcend his class position and join the miners in their efforts to resist their exploitation is a microcosm of the give-and-take between determinism and activism in naturalist fiction. Zola shows that in many ways Étienne’s situation is determined by social and economic factors. He cannot erase his education, and therefore his privilege, nor can he change his position in a classed system. However, Zola also demonstrates that Étienne fails to act ethically in circumstances where he might have some agency. Zola shows us that, despite the odds for failure, there is room for

\textsuperscript{41} These other authors include but are not limited to Jack London (in *Martin Eden*), Elizabeth Gaskell (in *North and South*), Upton Sinclair (in *The Jungle*), and Edith Wharton (in *The Fruit of the Tree*).
success in the miners’ resistance. In portraying the relationship between the determined materialist system and human agency and activism, *Germinal* suggests that ethics play an important role in widening the space for human agency. Zola intimates that Étienne might have been successful if he had more conscientiously approached his role in the miners’ struggle, which was imposed upon him by his class position. However, he takes upon himself the responsibility of representing the miners without acknowledging the ethical obligations placed upon him. To put it in Marxist terms, he attempts to bring the miners to class consciousness without achieving class consciousness himself.

To move forward, then, let us take *Germinal* as the prototype for Norris’s *The Octopus* and Étienne as the predecessor of Presley. It is immediately clear that a similar situation to that of Étienne is taking place for Presley. Like Étienne, Presley uses his better education to speak for and to speak to the worker, and like Étienne, Presley fails in his attempts. In the end, Presley’s failures can be traced back to a combination of the problems posed by intellectual leadership and his own ethical failures. In other words, when we look for the same problems in Presley that we observed in Étienne, we find the same scenario unfolding.

The opening of Norris’s novel foregrounds Presley’s class position. *The Octopus* begins by describing a bicycle excursion that Presley is taking around the San Joaquin Valley. He “had looked forward to spending nearly the whole day . . . reading, idling, smoking his pipe” (15). We are told that he is on a holiday that he hopes will restore his health after being “threatened with consumption” a year or so before the events in the novel (9). As Norris narrates Presley’s tour of the area, though, we become aware of the
fact that, in the background of Presley’s excursion, everyone else in the valley is working. To guarantee that Presley’s class position is noted by his readers, Norris explains that “[Presley’s] eyes were a dark brown, and his forehead was the forehead of the intellectual, wide and high, with a certain unmistakable lift about it that argued education, not only of himself, but of his people before him” (8). And, then, Norris confirms this impression: “He was thirty years old, and had graduated and post-graduated with high honours from an Eastern college, where he had devoted himself to a passionate study of literature, and more especially, of poetry” (9). To sum up, then, Norris makes obvious that Presley comes from a family of intellectuals, and his résumé indicates that he has had a life of privilege.

Norris goes further, however, and suggests that Presley possesses weaknesses of character that are related to his class. Norris writes that Presley’s mouth and chin convey the “impression” of “a delicate and highly sensitive nature” (8). Furthermore, from his appearance, “one expected to find him nervous, introspective” and “morbidly sensitive to changes in his physical surroundings” (8). This list of characteristics leads to the following projection about his moral strength: “he would be slow to act upon such sensations, would not prove impulsive, but because he was merely irresolute” (8-9).

Norris traces these weaknesses back to an imaginary exchange, writing that these characteristics spoke of a “refinement,” which “had been gained only by a certain loss of

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42 In his article, “‘A Little Turn Through the Country’: Presley’s Bicycle Ride in Frank Norris’s The Octopus,” Reuben J. Ellis argues that “the bicycle is a sign of the smart, perhaps somewhat decadent, privileged life that Presley may have lived as a young college man” (21).
strength” (8). Thus, it is because of his family’s privilege that Presley lacks both physical and moral strength.

From Norris’s perspective, this is probably the worst critique that could be leveled against an artist. According to Pizer, Norris was “caught up” in a “conflict between a decadent aestheticism and an emerging school of manliness, adventure, and the outdoors” (Introduction 20). For Norris, literature and aestheticism are associated with effeminacy and dilettantism. He embraces as his ideal literature that, according to him, emerges organically from life and experience. In his essay, “Why Women Should Write the Best Novels: And Why They Don’t,” Norris writes, “[A]ll the temperament, all the sensitiveness to impressions, all the education in the world will not help one little, little bit in the writing of the novel if life itself, the crude, the raw, the vulgar, if you will, is not studied” (35). Norris rejects what he believed to be the formal literary establishment and passionately advocates for his ideal. Of course, as Pizer notes, “it was personally important for Norris to assert the masculinity of true art” (Introduction 23). Norris himself was well-educated and pampered; Kenneth Lynn even goes so far as to call him a “mama’s boy” (158). Norris viewed his upper-class upbringing as a handicap. Larzer Ziff writes, “Norris was trying to break through from his inherited position of comfort and genteel taste, which, he felt, offered him only a substitute for life” (253). In this way, from the opening of his novel, Norris sets up Presley as a negative example, whose bourgeois proclivities do not lead him to produce “a literature of ‘life’” (Pizer Introduction 24).
Pizer writes that Norris’s criticism associates “masculinity [with] moral force, effeminacy [with] moral indecision or weakness” (Introduction 24). The same is true about his presentation of Presley in *The Octopus*. In describing Presley’s “loss of strength” due to his “refinement,” Norris goes on to write the following about the young artist: “It could be foreseen that morally he was of that sort who avoid evil through good taste, lack of decision, and want of opportunity” (9). This sentence confirms two interpretations of Norris’s description of Presley. First, it tells us that Presley, like his counterpart Étienne, possesses moral and ethical weaknesses that are caused by his class position. According to this sentence, Presley does not actually possess a principled set of ethics and could easily act immorally if he was given the opportunity. Secondly, this sentence confirms that Presley enters the story with his fate already determined by his class privilege. Norris’s description of Presley focuses on how Presley “would” act (8). Here, the word “foreseen” emphasizes that Presley’s behavior can be predicted on the basis of his class. Therefore, from the novel’s first pages, Norris suggests that Presley is characterized and limited by his class position. Don Graham agrees, writing that “Presley

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43 My reading of *The Octopus* intersects with Norris’s notions of gender in important ways. During the nineteenth century in the United States, women emphasized their superior sense of morality in order to gain a hearing for their political ideas. The work of the naturalists, especially their overt attempts to connect moral strength with masculinity, indicates an effort by male writers to reclaim moral superiority. This emphasis on morality is pervasive in these male writers’ ideas about their own artistic practices. In *The Octopus*, Norris glorifies art that “does work” and devalues art that serves only aesthetic or ornamental purposes. At many point in the novel, such art is associated with female (or feminine) characters who are depicted as silly and lacking fortitude. In contrast, ideal versions of art are connected to characters whose masculinity and morality both are firmly established. Presley’s vacillation between these two poles—femininity and masculinity—is an indictment against him and his artistic practices. For further reading on how Norris casts his ideas about art in terms of gender, see Donald Pizer’s chapter introductions in *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*. 
is never capable of achieving the status of the natural artist, because Norris limits his capacities from the start” (99).

As Graham suggests, Presley’s artistic endeavors reflect, not Norris’s ideal, but the opposite—Presley’s own bourgeois origins. Presley’s ambition is to write an epic poem about the American West. Presley’s writerly preference for epic and romance speak to his bourgeois tastes and tendencies. When he travels to California, he is looking for “some vast, tremendous theme, heroic, terrible, to be unrolled in all the thundering progression of hexameters” (9). Presley tells his friend Vanamee, “It is the epic I’m searching for. . . . It always eludes me. I was born too late. Ah, to get back to that first clear-eyed view of things, to see as Homer saw, as Beowulf saw, as the Nibelungen poets saw. The life is here, the same as then; the Poem is here; my West is here; the primeval, epic life is here . . .” (41). Presley is looking to write “the True Romance” (13). His desire to write an epic poem that portrays the grandeur of life in the West is consonant with upper-class aesthetics. In Mimesis, Erich Auerbach carefully maps the slow progression of Western literature as it moved from its origins in epic to its conclusion (in Auerbach’s lifetime) in modernism. Auerbach’s thesis is that literature progressed from glamorizing the lives of the powerful and wealthy to documenting the conditions of the ordinary man. In other words, over time Western literature transformed from epic poetry into realist fiction, and its perspective became less elitist and more egalitarian. Presley’s vision of the Song of the West, then, is related by its very genre to the ruling classes, and as Presley himself notes, the time is “too late” for such literature.

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44 Graham’s argues that Norris purposely limits Presley by making him a poet instead of a novelist (99-101).
Presley’s distastes are as telling as his preferences. He is disgusted by the commonplace, the material, and the workaday. As one would expect, he is naturally repulsed by what he names as “realism.” The political struggle between the ranchers and the railroads, “these eternal fierce bickerings,” “irritated him and wearied him” (12). Norris writes, “In the picture of that huge romantic West that he saw in his imagination, these dissensions made the one note of harsh colour that refused to enter into the great scheme of harmony. It was material, sordid, deadly commonplace” (12). The material conditions in the San Joaquin valley disrupt Presley’s romantic vision. Norris tells us that he wants to ignore these aspects of life in the valley, but that he cannot. Because of this, his romance “broke” and “failed” (12). Norris writes, “[There] it became realism, grim, unlovely, unflinching. . . . All the noble poetry of the ranch—the valley—seemed in his mind to be marred and disfigured by the presence of certain immovable facts” (12). For Presley, then, realism is nothing but the disfigurement of the romantic.

Like Auerbach, Norris correlates Presley’s distaste for realism with disgust with working people and their lives. As Norris continues his description of Presley’s frustration with “immovable facts,” he transposes that frustration onto the people who comprise the “material” and the “commonplace” (12). The passage continues,

[Presley] told himself that, as a part of the people, he loved the people and sympathised with their hopes and fears, and joys and griefs; and yet Hooven, grimy and perspiring, with his perpetual grievance and his contracted horizon, only revolted him. . . . His heart went out to the
people, and his groping hand met that of a slovenly little Dutchman, whom it was impossible to consider seriously. (12-3)

Even earlier in the novel, Norris characterizes Presley similarly, saying, “These uncouth brutes of farmhands and petty ranchers, grimed with the soil they worked upon, were odious to him beyond words. Never could he feel in sympathy with them, nor their lives, their ways, their marriages, deaths, bickerings, and all the monotonous round of their sordid existence” (5). Presley is specifically repulsed by the dirt and grime of the ranchers; it is literally the materiality of their lives that he cannot countenance. His class position locates him firmly in the realm of aesthetics, ideas, and leisure; he is separated from work, soil, and material reality. Therefore, when Presley decides to speak to and speak for the workers, he must figure out how to use the language of ideas to do work in the material world, a task for which he is ill prepared.

Norris’s preference for “masculine” art is related to his advocacy for “the novel with a purpose” (“The Novel With a ‘Purpose’” 90). According to Norris, the novel has a moral purpose, which the novelist is obligated to fulfill (“The Need of a Literary Conscience”). The masculine novel and the novel with a moral purpose are connected by a common concern with work and action. As Donald Pizer writes, “[Norris’s] emphasis on the masculinity of a literature of ‘life’ allied that literature with the honorific masculinity of the world of affairs, where men ‘got things done’ and aided the world’s work” (Introduction 24). Norris viewed the novel as an agent that had the potential to work in the material world. In other words, he saw that the novel had the potential to be rhetorically effective. However, he also believed that only a particular kind of literature,
which followed a particular set of ethics, would be able to achieve such effects. Through Presley, Norris shows how a writer fails to achieve these results; in *The Octopus* Norris carefully outlines the kind of literature that he believes cannot do work in the material world. By discussing the literature that will not achieve effects in a largely determined material system, Norris gestures toward an ideal literature that can work within that system to achieve change. In effect, he makes recommendations for the problematic socialist figure who frequently appears in realist and naturalist novels.

As a result, Norris is particularly critical of art that has no moral purpose, art to which he portrays Presley as coming dangerously near. In a scene that takes place in a San Francisco gentlemen’s club, where Presley and the Derrick men await the ruling on their civil suit against the railroad, Norris takes the opportunity to condemn art whose purpose is to please its audience, and in doing so, to perpetuate existing material conditions. Norris portrays this kind of art as not only elitist but also indifferent to the material world.

This scene in *The Octopus* begins when Presley, Magnus Derrick, and Derrick’s two sons are joined by a local painter named Hartrath and a capitalist named Mr. Cedarquist. The conversation quickly turns to art and the “Million-Dollar Fair and Festival,” an event being organized by Hartrath and Mrs. Cedarquist. The fair is promoted by its organizers as “a Realisation of the Beautiful” and a symbol of “Art,”

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45 Interestingly, Mr. Cedarquist is also related to Presley, his wife being identified as Presley’s aunt (312). This further demonstrates Presley’s elite class position and his inherent connection to capital, not labor.
“Literature,” “Culture and Refinement” (315). However, Norris takes great pains to expose the fair as fraudulent and complicit with the oppression of working people.

First, Norris takes several pages to comment on the fraudulent nature of the Fair, which promotes novelties as legitimate art. His critique is worth reproducing:

Mrs. Cedarquist was a fashionable woman, the president or chairman of a score of clubs. She was forever running after fads, appearing continually in the society wherein she moved with new and astounding protégés—fakirs whom she unearthed no one knew where, discovering them long in advance of her companions. Now it was a Russian Countess, with dirty finger nails, who travelled throughout America and borrowed money; now an Æsthete who possessed a wonderful collection of topaz gems, who submitted decorative schemes for the interior arrangement of houses and who “received” in Mrs. Cedarquist’s drawing-rooms dressed in a white velvet cassock . . . (312)

The passage continues to list at least twenty more such “protégés” before continuing, “And all these people had a veritable mania for declamation and fancy dress. The Countess gave talks on the prisons of Siberia, wearing the headdress and pinchbeck ornaments of a Slave bride; the Æsthete, in his white cassock, gave readings on obscure questions on art and ethics” (313). This passage goes on to describe the ways in which “these people” fooled the public with such obvious chicanery. At last, Norris announces, “It was the Fake, the eternal, irrepressible Sham; glib, nimble, ubiquitous, tricked out in all the paraphernalia of imposture, an endless defile of charlatans that passed
interminably before the gaze of the city, marshaled by ‘lady presidents,’ exploited by clubs of women, by literary societies, reading circles, and culture organisations” (314). Norris concludes by condemning the Fair as a “gala for the entire Fake” (314). Norris makes it obvious that he views the art and culture promoted by the Fair as morally deficient. First of all, this art is gendered as feminine, and it is “marshalled by ‘lady presidents’” and “exploited by clubs of women” (314). As Pizer has pointed out, for Norris, femininity and effeminacy are associated with “moral indecision or weakness” (24). In addition, he demonstrates that these artists or “apostles of culture” are nothing more than swindlers. He writes, “The fakirs worked the community as shell-game tricksters work a county fair, departing with bursting pocket-books . . .” (314). For Norris, the artists who gathered at the Fair are frauds.

This is also made clear through the figure of Hartrath the artist. At the club, Hartrath’s painting, “A Study of the Contra Costa Foothills,” is being raffled to benefit the Million-Dollar Fair. Norris describes it thus: “In the foreground, and to the left, under the shade of a live-oak, stood a couple of reddish cows, knee-deep in a patch of yellow poppies, while in the right-hand corner, to balance the composition, was placed a girl in a pink dress and white sunbonnet, in which the shadows were indicates by broad dashes of pale blue paint” (310-1). The painting is described as benign, and significantly, the conversation about it among the ladies present is portrayed as inane and uselessly theoretical:

46 Here, Norris correlates femininity with ornamentation and a false morality. For a sustained argument on this tendency in realist literature, see Naomi Schor’s Reading in Detail and Breaking the Chain.
The ladies and young girls examined the production with little murmurs of admiration, hazarding remembered phrases, searching for the exact balance between generous praise and critical discrimination, expressing their opinions in the mild technicalities of the Art Books and painting classes. They spoke of atmospheric effects, of middle distance, of “chiaroscuro,” of fore-shortening, of the decomposition of light, of the subordination of individuality to fidelity of interpretation. (311)

The importance of this moment is that—like the novelties at the Million-Dollar Fair—“A Study of the Contra Costa Foothills” offers nothing real. In fact, Hartrath is criticized by Mr. Cedarquist for his art’s lack of relevance to the real world. Cedarquist, who Donald Graham says represents Norris’s own position on art (90), argues that art like Hartrath’s only removes people from material reality when it should be engaging them with it. Cedarquist tells Hartrath,

It is just such men as you, Mr. Hartrath, that are the ruin of us. You organise a sham of tinsel and pasteboard, put on fool’s cap and bells, beat a gong at a street corner, and the crowd cheers you and drops nickels into your hat. Your gingerbread fête; yes, I saw it in full blast the other night on the grounds of one of your women’s places on Sutter Street. I was on my way home from the last board meeting of the Atlas Company. A gingerbread fête, my God! and the Atlas plant shutting down for want of financial backing. A million dollars spent to attract the Eastern investor, in
order to show him an abandoned rolling mill, wherein the only activity is
the sale of remnant material and scrap steel. (303)

Cedarquist’s point is that the artistic performances of the Million-Dollar Fair actually
distract people from oppressive material conditions. He accuses Hartrath of making
people “indifferent to public affairs” (303).

According to Cedarquist, the problem with such art is that it leads to oppression
and tyranny. He theorizes that “the indifference of the People is the opportunity of the
despot” (304). He continues, “The People have but to say ‘No,’ and not the strongest
 tyranny, political, religious, or financial, that was ever organised, could survive one
week” (304). In the end, he attributes the People’s oppression to their own lack of
resistance, saying, “If it is not a railroad trust, it is a sugar trust, or an oil trust, or an
industrial trust, that exploits the People, because the People allow it” (304; original
emphasis). However, Cedarquist puts upon artists like Hartrath the burden of promoting
public indifference. He points out that Shelgrim, the president of the Pacific and
Southwest Railroad, donated five thousand dollars to the Million-Dollar Fair because it
serves his company’s interests. He tells Hartrath, “Our dear Shelgrim promotes your
fairs, not only as Pres says, because it is money in his pocket, but because it amuses the
people, distracts their attention from the doings of the railroad. When Beatrice was a baby
and had little colics, I used to jingle my keys in front of her nose, and it took her attention
from the pain in her tummy; so Shelgrim” (317). The art of the Million-Dollar Fair
distracts its audience from its own exploitation. According to Cedarquist and probably
Norris himself, art that is not engaged with resisting material conditions actually robs its audience of agency.

Cedarquist’s theories on art are echoed by Herbert Marcuse, a Marxist theorist who writes about the relationship between art and material reality. In his essay “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” Marcuse outlines the dangers of art, suggesting that art’s seeming transcendence of material reality can lull audiences into passive acceptance of oppressive material conditions. According to Marcuse, the capitalist state allows art to exist because it serves to create the illusion of individual freedom. In other words, the artwork’s beauty gives the viewer a sense of freedom and removes him or her from reality. The ideal of equality and freedom is relegated to the work of art, and the state can continue to “postpone gratification” (100). To put it differently, the pleasure brought about by art can work to support oppressive material conditions. According to Marcuse, art must remain grounded in material conditions in order for it to alter material reality.

Art has the potential to inspire its audience to imagine an existence superior to that experienced in reality. However, this inspiration can only occur if the work of art references both the material reality and the possibility of a better experience. This tension is necessary for art to do work in the material world. Therefore, if the novelist/activist is to achieve rhetorical effectiveness and therefore agency, he or she must ground his or her art in material reality.

In The Octopus, at the end of the scene in the gentlemen’s club, Presley finds himself compared to Hartrath and his writing to Hartrath’s painting. Mrs. Cedarquist tells Presley, “You have so much in common. . . . I can see so much that is alike in your
modes of interpreting nature. In Mr. Presley’s sonnet, ‘The Better Part,’ there is the same note as in your picture, the same sincerity of tone, the same subtlety of touch, the same nuances,—ah” (315-6). Here, the wealthy and ridiculous organizer of the Million Dollar Fair is not only comparing Presley to Hartrath but also praising Presley’s poetry. In this way, Norris insinuates that the writing done by Presley in the early parts of The Octopus is as ineffective as the painting of Hartrath and possibly as fraudulent as the art displayed at the Fair. Again, Presley’s art serves as a negative example of art that “gets things done” and “aids in the world’s work” (Pizer, Introduction 24).

After the day at the gentlemen’s club, a day which sees the defeat of the ranchers in court, Presley completely gives up his Song of the West and decides to write on the ranchers’ behalf. He attempts to inform the public of the injustice being perpetrated by the railroad and to persuade his audience to, as Cedarquist advocated, say “no” to tyranny. However, like his predecessor Étienne, Presley succumbs to the ethical weaknesses that are associated with his class privilege. In the end, his endeavors to change material conditions through his writing fail, and Norris points to a reason why, in many realist and naturalist novels, a determined material system dominates the efforts of the socialist figure.

It seems at first that Presley’s poem “The Toilers” conforms to Norris’s artistic ideals and therefore will succeed in changing material conditions in the San Joaquin Valley. Presley composes “The Toilers” with the best intentions. He moves away from highbrow literature, putting aside “Milton, Tennyson, Browning, even Homer” (307). Norris tells us that Presley “addressed himself to Mill, Malthus, Young, Poushkin, Henry
George, Schopenhauer. He attacked the subject of Social Inequality with unbounded enthusiasm” (307). The product of Presley’s new intellectual project is his “Socialistic poem,” “The Toilers” (307). At first, “The Toilers” is only a “half-finished poem” that “was a comment upon the social fabric, and had been inspired by the sight of a painting he had seen in Cedarquist’s art gallery” (371). But, after witnessing even further exploitation of the ranchers and farmers in the valley, Presley is seized “with a mighty spirit of revolt” (371). Presley finishes the poem in a fit of outrage:

For a time, his pen seemed to travel of itself; words came to him without searching, shaping themselves into phrases,—the phrases building themselves up to great, forcible sentences, full of eloquence, of fire, of passion. As his prose grew more exalted, it passed easily into the domain of poetry. . . . He picked up his incomplete poem of “The Toilers,” read it hastily a couple of times to catch its swing, then the Idea of the last verse—the Idea for which he so long had sought in vain—abruptly springing to his brain, wrote it off without so much as replenishing his pen with ink. He added still another verse, bringing the poem to a definite close, resuming its entire conception, and ending with a single majestic thought, simple, noble, dignified, absolutely convincing. (371-2)

The triumph of this moment is conveyed in the last phrase of this passage; the poem is “absolutely convincing.” Norris here implies that Presley has written a poem that will reach its audience. Presley’s friend Vanamee observes the poem’s effectiveness as a piece of rhetoric. He tells Presley, “In this poem of yours, you have not been trying to
make a sounding piece of literature. You wrote it under tremendous stress. Its very
imperfections show that. It is better than a mere rhyme. It is an Utterance—a Message. It
is Truth. You have come back to the primal heart of things, and you have seen clearly.
Yes, it is a great poem” (376). As the names “Utterance” and “Message,” the poem’s
success is in its ability to communicate its ideas. In writing the poem, Presley’s focus is
not on aesthetic perfection but on effectiveness, and it appears that the poem has the
“counteraesthetic appeal” that The Octopus and Norris’s critical writing seem to
prescribe.

In addition, “The Toilers” engages with material reality on many levels, unlike the
art at the Million-Dollar Fair, whose purpose is to distract its audience from material
reality. First of all, the poem was written in response to a particular historical moment
and particular material conditions. It takes as its subject matter the ranchers’ struggle
against the capital and power of the railroad. Secondly, the poem’s form seems to grow
almost organically out of the struggle. Norris tells us that Presley’s pen “travels of itself”
and that the prose “passed easily into the domain of poetry” (371-2). As Vanamee notes,
the poem’s imperfections speak to the trauma of the moment. Lastly, the poem shows a
change in Presley’s feelings toward the People.47 When the poem is completed, Norris
writes, “Now he was of the People; he had been stirred to his lowest depths” (372). And,
Presley publishes his poem in the daily press, choosing the People to be his primary
audience. Again, it seems that Presley is living up to Norris’s artistic ideals. In “Novelists
of the Future,” Norris writes,

47 Norris usually uses the term “People” (capitalized) to refer to working men and
women. See his critical essay, “Novelists of the Future: The Training They Need.”
She is a Child of the People, this muse of our fiction of the future. . . . Believe me, she will lead you far from the studios and the aesthetes, the velvet jackets and the uncut hair, far from the sexless creatures who cultivate their little art of writing as the fancier cultivates his orchid. . . . [She] will lead you—if you are humble with her and honest with her—straight into a World of Working Men, crude of speech, swift of action, strong of passion, straight to the heart of a new life, on the borders of a new time . . . (13-4)

It seems that “The Toilers” moves Presley from serving as a negative example to embodying Norris’s ideals.

Presley’s failures with “The Toilers” are not to found in the poem’s composition but in its delivery. In an important conversation between Presley and Vanamee, Norris communicates his ethical standards on this subject: In order for the poem to have an impact on material reality, it must reach the audience who is being called upon to take action. Vanamee tells Presley that he must publish the poem in the daily paper rather than literary magazines. Vanamee insists, “‘The Toilers’ must be read by the Toilers. It must be common; it must be vulgarized. You must not stand upon your dignity with the People if you are to reach them” (377; original emphasis). Vanamee’s advice makes sense if Presley’s goal is to reach an audience, persuade them to act, and alter the material system in which they exist. However, at this suggestion, Presley hesitates and protests that

In rhetorical studies, the term “delivery” denotes one of five aspects of rhetoric. “Delivery” refers specifically to the way a speech is brought to an audience (instead of how it is prepared).
publishing the poem in a literary magazine would give him such “a background” and “weight” (377). Now, Presley’s upper-class flaws begin to expose themselves, and this moment suggests that Presley’s failures will be caused, like those of Étienne, by vanity and ambition. However, for the moment, Vanamee defeats these impulses of Presley. He cries,

Gives you such weight, gives you such background. It is yourself you think of? You helper of the helpless. Is that your sincerity? You must sink yourself; must forget yourself and your own desire of fame, of admitted success. It is your poem, your message, that must prevail,—not you, who wrote it. You preach a doctrine of abnegation, of self-obliteration, and you sign your name to your words as high on the tablets as you can reach, so that all the world may see, not the poem, but the poet. Presley, there are many like you. The social reformer writes a book on the iniquity of the possession of land, and out of the proceeds, buys a corner lot. The economist who laments the hardships of the poor, allows himself to grow rich upon the sale of his book. (377; original emphasis)

Vanamee emphasizes the efficacy of Presley’s poem and censures his desire for fame and personal success. In fact, he implies that the success of the poem depends on the ethics of the poet. In response to Vanamee’s criticism, Presley declares, “I know I am sincere, and to prove it to you, I will publish my poem, as you say, in the daily press, and I will accept no money for it” (377). Presley’s decision not to accept payment for his poem and to publish it in a public forum is followed by public recognition of “The Toilers” (394). It
seems as though “The Toilers” will succeed in impacting the ranchers’ situation because of the attention drawn to it, and Norris confidently writes that “the struggle had found its poet” (395).

However, again Presley’s inherent weaknesses of class assert themselves. First, his lack of resolve diminishes the effects of the poem. Presley realizes that he might extend the influence of “The Toilers” by speaking to audiences about his cause. He dreams of what he might accomplish:

To range the entire nation, telling all his countrymen of the drama that was working itself out on this fringe of the continent, this ignored and Pacific Coast, rousing their interest and stirring them up to action—appealed to him. It might do great good. To devote himself to “the Cause,” accepting no penny of remuneration; to give his life to loosing the grip of the iron-hearted monster of steel and steam would be beyond question heroic. . . . He would declare himself the champion of the People in their opposition to the Trust. He would be an apostle, a prophet, a martyr of Freedom.

(395)

Here again, Norris opens up a space for agency, suggesting that Presley can change the outcome of events in the novel. However, Presley wastes his chance. Norris writes, “But Presley was essentially a dreamer, not a man of affairs. He hesitated to act at this precise psychological moment, striking while the iron was yet hot, and while he hesitated, other affairs near at hand began to absorb his attention” (395). Norris tells us that Presley is essentially a dreamer; in other words, his personality is set in a particular direction. This
suggests that Presley’s actions are in part already determined. Furthermore, they are
determined in a way that does not line up with Norris’s ideals. Presley is not a “man of
affairs,” not a man who works in the world.\textsuperscript{49} Norris comes close to saying that Presley is
especially incapable of impacting material reality.

Presley also gives in to his impulses and uses “The Toilers” to promote his own
career, and in the end, this also leads to his failures. Although the ranchers’ situation is
growing direr, “[Presley] had been at work on a collection of some of his verses, gathered
from the magazines in which they had first appeared. Presley had received a liberal offer
for the publication of these verses in book form. ‘The Toilers’ was to be included in this
book, and, indeed, was to give it its name” (461). To put it plainly, Presley profits from
the ranchers’ suffering; the ranchers’ loss is his gain. Presley becomes everything that
Vanamee denounced when he warned Presley, “You preach a doctrine of abnegation, of
self-obliteration, and you sign your name to your words as high on the tablets as you can
reach, so that all the world may see, not the poem, but the poet. . . . The social reformer
writes a book on the iniquity of the possession of land, and out of the proceeds, buys a
corner lot. The economist who laments the hardships of the poor, allows himself to grow
rich upon the sale of his book” (377). Presley’s ethics and his desire for change give way
under the weight of his own pride and ambition.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{49} Here again, Norris seems to cast doubt on Presley’s masculinity—and therefore his
art—by saying that he is not a “man of affairs” (395).

\textsuperscript{50} Norris suggests that this ethical breach is as serious as that of Magnus Derrick, who
bribes a newspaper editor and government officials. Presley mails his book manuscript at
the same time that he delivers Magnus’s bribe to the newspaper editor (462-3).
Norris suggests that part of the problem with Presley’s book publication of “The Toilers” is that the poem is not being put to its true work. This poem, unlike Presley’s other poetry and unlike the art that is featured at the Million-Dollar Fair, is part of material reality. It was born out of outrage, and its form shows the trauma of its composition. As Vanamee points out, its “Truth” is in its “imperfections,” which show that Presley wrote it “under tremendous stress” (376). The poem is born out of material conditions and has been intended to work upon material conditions—as a “Message” and an “Utterance” (377). By putting “The Toilers” into a book, Presley takes it out of its rhetorical situation. In addition, in order to publish “The Toilers” in book form, Presley must erase the poem’s imperfections. Norris writes that “[Presley] had been preparing the collection for publication, revising, annotating, arranging” (461). The problem with this, as Vanamee has correctly seen, is that such revision erases the traces of the poem’s materiality. It makes invisible the historical moment out of which the poem was written, and it erases the “tremendous stress” and labor of the poet himself. In fact, Norris connects Presley’s impulse to revise with a detachment from the material conditions that produced “The Toilers.” Immediately after the poem is composed, Presley is seized with the desire to revise it, a mistake that he narrowly avoids. Norris writes the following about Presley’s impulse to revise “The Toilers”: “Then the artist in him reasserted itself. He became more interested in his poem, as such, than in the cause that had inspired it. He went over it again, retouching it carefully, changing a word here and there, and improving its rhythm. For the moment, he forgot the People, forgot his rage, his agitation of the previous hour, he remembered only that he had written a great poem” (372-3).
Presley’s desire to erase the poem’s imperfections is an attempt to remove it from its material conditions.

When Presley revises “The Toilers” and accepts money for its publication, he puts the poem to work for the capitalist system; he makes the poem a commodity. As Fredric Jameson points out, the commodity’s message is that “pleasure already exists and is available for consumption” (Late Marxism 147). When the work of art becomes a commodity, it becomes, like Hartrath’s painting, pleasurable only and not resistant. It represses the reality of material conditions by saying that pleasure has already arrived. This is why Norris emphasizes Presley’s revisions of the poem. A politically effective work of art, instead of repressing material conditions, must bear the traces of labor on it, which will result in demystification for the audience. Instead, when Presley revises the poem, he is attempting to remove its revolutionary potential, the traces of his own labor and the material conditions that inspired the poem. In this way, Presley makes his poem ineffective. The work of art must result in class consciousness for the audience; it must inspire awakening, not satisfaction.

It is therefore not surprising that the story of “The Toilers” ends with a poignant comparison to Hartrath’s painting, a reference that assures readers of Presley’s failure. After the ranchers have been bankrupted, discredited, and massacred, Presley flees to San Francisco to get “away from Bonneville and the sight of the ruin there” (563). While there, he attends a dinner at the home of a railroad executive. At this meal, Presley finds his poetry, like the painting of Hartrath, the conversation piece among society women, who refer to Presley as “our new poet of whom we are all so proud” (592). Presley
becomes the women’s “protégé of the hour,” like the “imposters” who are featured at the Million-Dollar Fairs (314). His work has become the art that “amuses the people” and “distracts their attention from the doings of [Shelgrim’s] railroad” (317). At the dinner, Presley must face the rhetorical failure of his poem, its failure to accomplish its intended work. The railroad executive’s wife, Mrs. Gerard, tells him, “I have read your poem, of course, Mr. Presley. . . . ‘The Toilers,’ I mean. What a sermon you read us, you dreadful young man” (605). And, while her flippant attitude is enough to assure Presley that she does not appreciate the poem’s intended effect, her misinterpretation of it leaves no doubt. She continues, “I felt that I ought at once to ‘sell all that I have and give to the poor.’ Positively, it did stir me up. You may congratulate yourself upon making at least one convert. Just because of that poem Mrs. Cedarquist and I have started a movement to send a whole shipload of wheat to the starving people in India. Now, you horrid réactionnaire, are you satisfied?” (605). This moment in the novel is perplexing because it seems that the poem has done some work after all, and yet the reader feels frustrated because nothing has changed for the ranchers with whom their sympathy lies. The truth is that, as Presley recognizes, no changes in consciousness have taken place.

Presley’s failures to reach his audience result from ethical lapses, which are in turn caused by his class position. Norris makes this fact painfully obvious in a scene, which, as in Germinal, features the novel’s central character delivering a speech to an audience. Like Étienne, Presley addresses the workers, attempting to rally them and guide them toward success. However, he is not able to transcend his class position, and despite his efforts, he leaves the audience impassioned but uninformed. Not understanding his
words, they end up dissolving the League, the ranchers’ collective, and losing their property to the railroad.

Presley’s speech is the speech of an aesthete. His language is elegant and stylistic; his historical examples include references to ancient Egyptian dynasties and the fall of French monarchies; he throws in a French phrase or two. Biblical allusions pepper his speech, and he weaves an extended metaphor in which the ranchers are represented by Samson, who will one day “reach . . . out his arms for the pillars of [the] temples” (550). The speech ends with vague references to classical mythology and socialist theory. He cries, “Freedom is not given free to any who ask; Liberty is not born of the gods. She is a child of the People, born in the very height and heat of battle, born from death, stained with blood, grimed with powder. And she grows to be not a goddess, but a Fury, a fearful figure, slaying friend and foe alike, raging, insatiable, merciless, the Red Terror” (552; original emphasis). Such elevated speech fails to produce understanding in the audience, and Norris describes the scene as Presley finally takes his seat:

A prolonged explosion of applause followed, the Opera House roaring to the roof, men cheering, stamping, waving their hats. But it was not intelligent applause. Instinctively as he made his way out, Presley knew that, after all, he had not once held the hearts of his audience. He had talked as he would have written; for all his scorn of literature, he had been literary. The men who listened to him, ranchers, country people, storekeepers, attentive though they were, were not once sympathetic. Vaguely they had felt that here was something which other men—more educated—
would possibly consider eloquent. They applauded vociferously but perfunctorily, in order to appear to understand. (552)

Presley’s education has done nothing but alienate the people he seeks to convince. His status as an intellectual prevents him from rhetorical success. As Pizer has written, “Both Presley’s early and later failures stem from the same cause—his intellectuality. His temperament has been overrefined by his years of study, and he is either too withdrawn or too sensitive to participate successfully in the concrete actualities of life which are the artist’s true matrix” (The Novels of Frank Norris 135). The scene of Presley’s speech concludes with his reflections on it. Norris tells us that he “saw clearly for one moment that he was an outsider to their minds” (552). “Disappointed, bewildered, ashamed,” Presley realizes that “he had not helped them not their cause in the least” (552). Twice, Norris repeats the phrase, “he had failed” (553).

In this way, Presley’s failure to connect with his audience correlates with that of Étienne. To be sure, Presley is more educated than Étienne; his audience is not as impoverished as that of Étienne; and, Presley’s efforts are more aesthetically centered than Étienne’s. However, structurally they both serve the same purpose in their respective novels. Like Étienne in Germinal, Presley’s role in the attempt to change material conditions is to use language to impact action. The problem with Presley, though, like that with Étienne, is that he does not adequately deal with his own class privilege, the class privilege that enables him to speak to and speak for the workers. In other words, Presley does not himself achieve class consciousness, and this prevents him from ethically representing the workers. Theodor Adorno writes of the guilt of class privilege
in what Jameson calls “The Parable of the Oarsmen.” In this parable, Adorno compares the artist to Odysseus and the workers to the oarsmen on Odysseus’s boat. When Odysseus encounters the Sirens, he plugs the ears of his oarsmen; their job is simply to row, and they must not hear the Sirens’ song to do so. Odysseus, on the other hand, allows himself to enjoy the beauty of the music in order to guide the workers safely. This is a system that privileges Odysseus, the artist, and oppresses the oarsmen, the workers. Although necessary, it is a situation that brings guilt to the artist (Late Marxism 129-30). Presley never acknowledges this guilt or makes the slightest attempt to transcend his class position, and his failures are simply the result of his lack of class consciousness. He never reaches an “awareness of the thinker’s position in society and in history itself, and of the limits imposed on this awareness by his class position” (Marxism and Form 340). Because Presley does not recognize the difficulties inherent in his rhetorical situation, he fails to alter material reality.

Through Presley, Norris is able to confront his own misgivings about his artistic practices. Norris gives form to his concerns about his own ability to influence a material reality that he sees as largely determined. In “Presley’s Pretense: Irony and Epic Convention in Frank Norris’ The Octopus,” Steven Frye writes, “In some sense, Presley must remain distinguished from Norris, in his general passivity, his naïve pretense to literary immortality, his physical weakness, and, as Norris presents it, his overemphasis on intellectual pursuits. However, in another sense we cannot ignore the similarities. Through Presley, Norris explores a matter quite personal: the tense and vexing role of the aesthete in the modern world” (214). Norris uses Presley to map the precarious position
of the artist in a determined social system; Presley serves as the “negative” form of Norris’s anti-intellectualism, posing problems rather than solutions (Pizer, *The Novels of Frank Norris* 135). Presley articulates the problem pressuring the naturalist novel: Those who are educated enough to use language to impact material reality do not possess the ethical fortitude necessary to do so. Through the mechanisms of class, the natural, material system of progress limits the agency of intellectuals.

However, Norris postulates an answer to this problem through another figure in *The Octopus*, the character Vanamee. Vanamee obviously functions as a foil to Presley, and it is in his practices and achievements that we can discern Norris’s solution to the problem he presents through Presley. In fact, Pizer proposes that Vanamee is the “positive” form of Norris’s anti-intellectualism (*The Novels of Frank Norris* 135). Where Presley’s leading characteristic is his inability to make ethical decisions and to use art to impact material reality, Vanamee is noteworthy in *The Octopus* specifically for his uncanny ability to change that which appears to be unchangeable. Norris positions Vanamee as the direct opposite of Presley: Vanamee is the successful artist. Where Norris uses Presley to expose a problem, he uses Vanamee to propose a solution. For Norris, Vanamee is an artist who is able to alter what has been acknowledged to be unalterable.

Vanamee’s story forms a relatively small part of Norris’s six-hundred-plus page novel. Still, in many ways, it is the most crucial part of the novel. As Charles Crow notes, “The shepherd Vanamee and the subplot in which he appears have always been the most puzzling aspects of Frank Norris’ *The Octopus*” (131). However, I will argue that the
Vanamee subplot was absolutely necessary for Norris because it offers the only solution to the problems that Presley presents for the novel and the naturalist genre. Norris introduces Vanamee as an old friend of Presley, “a college graduate and a man of wide reading and great intelligence, but he had chosen to lead his own life, which was that of a recluse” (35). Vanamee’s history in the San Joaquin Valley begins eighteen years before the events in the novel. Like Presley, Vanamee spent one of his college vacations at the Los Muertos ranch, and it was there that at the age of nineteen, he met a young girl named Angéle. The two fell in love, which was described by Norris as “one of those legendary passions that sometimes occur, idyllic, untouched by civilisation, spontaneous as the growth of trees, natural as dew-fall, strong as the firm-seated mountains” (36).

Vanamee and Angéle met nightly in the Mission garden, but one night, another man arrived before Vanamee and raped Angéle. The rapist, known only as “the Other,” was never found, and Angéle died giving birth to his child. Vanamee disappeared, and “for two years no syllable was heard from him” (39). From that point on, Vanamee lived the life of a shepherd-nomad, “in the desert, in the mountains, throughout all the vast and vague Southwest, solitary, strange” (34). Norris writes, “Three, four, five years passed. The shepherd would be almost forgotten. . . . Then, without warning, he would reappear, coming in from the wilderness, emerging from the unknown” (34). When the events of *The Octopus* begin, Presley encounters Vanamee as he is watching over a herd of sheep in the hills of the San Joaquin Valley.

Although Vanamee never actually produces a work of art and in fact rejects traditional notions of representation, Norris explicitly identifies Vanamee as a “poet.”
From the first pages of *The Octopus*, Norris establishes Vanamee’s artistic practices as an alternative to those of Presley. In introducing Vanamee, Norris writes, “Of a temperament similar in many ways to Presley’s, there were capabilities in Vanamee that were not ordinarily to be found in the rank and file of men. Living close to nature, a poet by instinct, where Presley was but a poet by training, there developed in him a great sensitiveness to beauty and an almost abnormal capacity for great happiness and great sorrow; he felt things intensely, deeply” (36). This description is repeated later in the novel when Norris writes of “these two strange men, the one a poet by nature, the other by training, both out of tune with their world, dreamers, introspective, morbid, lost and unfamiliar at that end-of-the-century time” (217). In comparing the two poets, Norris portrays Presley’s art as a product of the literary establishment, contrived and unnatural. In contrast, Vanamee’s art is an outgrowth of his communion with nature. It is obvious that Vanamee is *The Octopus*’s true poet; only a poet who lives “close to nature” will fit in a novel that privileges the beauty and force of nature. And, certainly, Vanamee understands the interrelationship of art, material reality (or nature), and ethics better than Presley, as it was Vanamee who encourages Presley to publish “The Toilers” in the daily press and to seek the poem’s “Message” and “Utterance” rather than his own prestige (377). Throughout the novel, Norris marks Vanamee as a poet who is more attuned than Presley to art’s purpose and the responsibilities of an artist.

Because of Vanamee’s intimate relationship to nature, he does not experience Presley’s difficulties with class consciousness. He seems to connect with the workers on an elemental level, almost as though they are united by the very grime and soil that
Presley finds so repulsive. In describing Vanamee’s first visit to the San Joaquin valley, Norris writes,

At the time of his meeting with Angéle, Vanamee was living on the Los Muertos ranch. It was there he had chosen to spend one of his college vacations. But he preferred to pass it in out-of-door work, sometimes herding cattle, sometimes pitching hay, sometimes working with pick and dynamite-stick on the ditches in the fourth division of the ranch, riding the range, mending breaks in the wire fences, making himself generally useful. College bred though he was, the life pleased him. He was, as he desired, close to nature, living the full measure of life, a worker among workers, taking enjoyment in simple pleasures, healthy in mind and body.

(37)

While Vanamee has the same background as Presley, he relates to material reality not through cognition like Presley but through labor. Vanamee seems to understand that in order to experience the beauties of the land, he must work the land, not simply observe it. Presley assumes that his education and his talent empower him to represent the West and those that live in it. Vanamee instead lives the existence that Presley merely wants to represent. In comparing Presley to Vanamee, Norris points out that Presley lacks essential knowledge about the laborers he seeks to represent and the material reality he looks to change. Norris directly compares the two artists in relationship to their subject, the laborer. In the following scene, the day laborers are eating dinner following a hard day’s work:
For upwards of an hour the gang ate. It was no longer a supper. It was a veritable barbecue, a crude and primitive feasting, barbaric, homeric. But in all this scene Vanamee saw nothing repulsive. Presley would have abhorred it—this feeding of the People, this gorging of the human animal, eager for its meat. Vanamee, simple, uncomplicated, living so close to nature and the rudimentary life, understood its significance. He knew very well that within a short half-hour after this meal the men would throw themselves down in their bunks to sleep without moving, inert and stupefied with fatigue, till the morning. Work, food, and sleep, all life reduced to its bare essentials, uncomplex, honest, healthy. They were strong, these men, with the strength of the soil they worked, in touch with the essential things, back again to the starting point of civilisation, coarse, vital, real, and sane. (132-3)

In this excerpt, Norris suggests that Presley wishes to write on behalf of men that he knows nothing about. Vanamee, because he lives “so close” to these workers, “understands,” “knows,” and is “in touch with the essential things.”

Furthermore, Norris offers Vanamee’s successes as proof of his superiority as an artist. His ability to use language to alter material reality starkly contrasts with Presley’s dismal failures. Like Presley, Vanamee wants to change material reality, an act that—if we follow the logic of Presley’s story—is impossible. In fact, Vanamee wishes to accomplish the ultimate alteration of material reality; he wants to bring his dead lover Angéle back to life. Norris is careful to emphasize that Vanamee does not merely want to
commune with Angéle’s spirit; he wants to physically resurrect her. Vanamee declares to Father Sarria that Angéle “comes to his imagination only as what she was, material, earthly” and that he doesn’t want her “spiritualised, exalted, glorified, celestial” (143). Vanamee cries, “I would rather be unhappy in the memory of what she actually was, than be happy in the realization of her transformed, changed, made celestial. . . . Her soul! That was beautiful, no doubt. But, again, it was something very vague, intangible, hardly more than a phrase. But the touch of her hand was real, the sound of her voice was real, the clasp of her arms about my neck was real. Oh . . . give those back to me” (143). Like Presley’s desire to change the course of events concerning the struggle between the ranchers and the Railroad, Vanamee wants to alter history by returning Angéle to her material existence.

Vanamee believes that he can resurrect Angéle because—and this is the strangest part of Norris’s novel—he possesses a sixth sense that gives him supernatural abilities. Specifically, Vanamee has the power to communicate telepathically with living things and to persuade them to do as he commands. At the beginning of the novel, while he is tending sheep, Vanamee telepathically summons Presley. Presley comes to him—without knowing who has called him—“wondering all the time that he should answer the call with so little question, so little hesitation” (32). As they greet each other, Norris presents us with this dialogue:

The shepherd smiled and came forward, holding out his hands, saying, “I thought it was you. When I saw you come over the hill, I called you.”

“But not with your voice,” returned Presley. “I knew that some one wanted me. I felt it. I should have remembered that you could do that kind of thing.”

“I have never known it to fail. It helps with the sheep.”

“With the sheep?”

“In a way. I can’t tell exactly how. We don’t understand these things yet. There are times when, if I close my eyes and dig my fists into my temples, I can hold the entire herd for perhaps a minute.” (33)

Norris makes clear that not only can Vanamee telepathically communicate to people, but also that he has the ability to influence and even control them. When he summons the priest Father Sarria, Sarria tells him, “I am not sure that it is right to do this thing, Vanamee. I—I had to come . . . It troubles me . . . to think that my own will can count for so little. Just now I could not resist” (139; original emphasis). Somehow, Vanamee can bypass the will of whomever he summons, and Norris attributes this power to Vanamee’s relationship to nature. Vanamee himself tells Presley, “I believe . . . in a sixth sense, or, rather, a whole system of other unnamed senses beyond the reach of our understanding. People who live much alone and close to nature experience the sensation of it. Perhaps it is something fundamental that we share with plants and animals” (216-7). And, when Vanamee is talking to Father Sarria, Norris writes of Vanamee’s face, “It was the face of
the inspired shepherds of the Hebraic legends, living close to nature, the younger prophets of Israel, dwellers in the wilderness, solitary, imaginative, believing in the Vision, having strange delusions, gifted with strange powers” (146). What Norris seems to be implying is that because Vanamee is so closely aligned with nature, he is given nature’s power.

Vanamee attempts to use this power to bring Angéle back to life. He lies on her grave, and “his recollection of his strange compelling power . . . recurred to him. Concentrating his mind upon the one object with which it had so long been filled, Vanamee, his eyes closed, his faced buried in his arms, exclaimed: ‘Come to me— Angéle—don’t you hear? Come to me’” (153). After trying again and again, “beyond the reach of the vision, unlocalised, strange, a ripple had formed on the still black pool of the night,” and Vanamee was sure “there had been Something” (158). For months this continues, and “he had seemed to feel her approach, seemed to feel her drawing nearer and nearer to their rendezvous” (384). Then, one night, “she stood before him, a Vision realised” (391). We learn that the figure that Vanamee had called to himself was Angéle’s daughter, also named Angéle. But for Vanamee, and for Norris, this is success. For Vanamee, “Angéle or Angéle’s daughter, it was all one with him. It was She” (392). Norris affirms that Vanamee has achieved what he set out to do, alter material reality. He writes, “It was no longer a figment of his imagination, a creature of dreams that advanced to meet Vanamee. It was Reality—it was Angéle in the flesh, vital, sane, material, who at last issued forth from the entrance of the little valley. . . . Not a manifestation, not a dream, but her very self” (638). Somehow, Vanamee is able to do what Presley could not.
The Octopus suggests that Angéle’s resurrection is, for Vanamee, an artistic success. In the novel, although Vanamee is specifically called a “poet,” there is no record of his ever producing a work of art because he believes that art is not expression but action. In discussing Presley’s Song of the West, the two men have the following discussion:

“Well, yes, it is there—your epic,” observed Vanamee, as they went along. “But why write? Why not live in it? Steep oneself in the heat of the desert, the glory of the sunset, the blue haze of the mesa and the cañon.”

“As you have done, for instance?”

Vanamee nodded.

“No, I could not do that,” declared Presley; “I want to go back but not so far as you. I feel that I must compromise. I must find expression. I could not lose myself like that in your desert. When its vastness overwhelmed me, or its beauty dazzled me, or its loneliness weighed down upon me, I should have to record my impressions. Otherwise, I should suffocate.”

“Each to his own life,” observed Vanamee. (41-2; original emphasis)

Vanamee takes a wider view of art; he sees his life as his artistic project. For him, expression is an inferior form of art. The better thing is to “go back . . . so far” to a pre-representation moment, when “expression” has not yet occurred, to grasp truth itself
rather than a representation of truth. Vanamee skips representation, but Norris does not deny him the title of “poet.” Vanamee’s masterpieces are his actions and his experience of life, and in this way, the resurrection of Angéle is poetic success.

Vanamee is not merely the only successful artist in *The Octopus*; he is the only possible formulation of a successful artist in a novel like *The Octopus*. In Presley, Norris presents a seemingly unsolvable problem: The artist must have a moral purpose, but he also cannot be effective in acting upon his moral purpose because his class position, which is imposed by nature, separates him from his intended audience. What is required by the novel’s problematic—in order to justify the novel’s existence—is an artist who can manipulate nature, who can transcend his class position, and who can therefore achieve effects in material reality. What the novel requires, then, is a God-artist, who can operate outside the limits of the naturalist system. Thus, the strange and supernatural Vanamee subplot.

Vanamee’s mystical powers are necessary. Norris has demonstrated that Presley’s good intentions are simply not strong enough; despite his best efforts, he cannot escape his class position in order connect to his audience. In contrast, Vanamee is able to make his audience conform to his will; in this scenario, the audience has no agency, and they are easily persuadable. In other words, the audience is no longer a variable. Norris’s vision of magic as a kind of super-rhetoric is not an innovation. In one of the earliest known documents concerning rhetoric, Gorgias’s notorious “Encomium of Helen,” Gorgias argues that Helen of Troy should be exonerated from the accusation of immorality because she was entranced by Paris’s persuasive power. He writes of oratory,
“Speech is a powerful lord, which by means of the finest and most invisible body effects the divinest work” (45). Gorgias identifies persuasive speech as a kind of magic when he writes, “Sacred incantations sung with words are bearers of pleasure and banishers of pain, for, merging with opinion in the soul, the power of the incantation is wont to beguile it and persuade it and alter it by witchcraft” (45). Here, Gorgias suggests that spoken words possess magical potential and are tantamount to witchcraft. This sentiment is echoed in Longinus’s famous treatise “On the Sublime,” where he writes that sublimity in speech “exert[s] invincible power and force and get[s] the better of every hearer” and “produced at the right moment, tears everything up like a whirlwind” (347). Furthermore, Longinus writes that rhetorical visualization, a technique he advocates for the production of sublime effects, “enslaves the hearer as well as persuading him” (357). By trivializing the agency of the audience, these rhetoricians write as though orators can approach acting directly on nature, matter, or society.

And, it was during the Renaissance in England that rhetoric was most closely identified with magic and, eventually, science, another art that works upon the material world. According to the tradition of thought that John C. Briggs calls “Timaeic,” both are branches of an art that endeavors to persuade or move things or people (x). We can characterize the Timaeic notion of rhetoric as closely connected to natural philosophy. The tie between the two is the importance of understanding nature, including human nature, in order to move or persuade it. Briggs describes this understanding, which is completely foreign to modern readers, as “the old notion that man’s understanding and influencing nature have a bearing upon his understanding and persuasion of human
beings” and as “the idea that the natural world harbors immaterial bodies of spirits capable of some form of perception” (x). As Briggs suggests, the relationship between magic and rhetoric is preserved in the relationship between science and magic. He writes that “the new sciences . . . promise to move or persuade ‘all things’—rocks as well as beasts and human beings” (1). In analogizing magic or science with rhetoric, Renaissance thinkers imply that the two realms of study rely on the same process. Both are used to make potentialities into material reality. In this way, rhetoricians found in the concept of magic a way to conceptualize their endeavors to set language to work in the world. Norris appeals to magic in a similar way; he extends the natural, the rhetorical, and the scientific to include the supernatural, or as Pizer puts it, “reshapes the supernatural into the natural” (131).

Vanamee can be successful as a poet because he does not work against nature—as Presley seems to do—instead, he works with it. Vanamee’s attempts to return Angéle to life are part of nature’s cycle of recreation. Over and over again, Angéle is compared to the wheat, which dies every season, is buried, and springs back to life. On the night that Angéle returns to Vanamee, the wheat emerges from the soil. Norris writes, “The Wheat! The Wheat! In the night it had come up. It was there, everywhere, from margin to margin of the horizon. The earth, long empty, teemed with great life. Once more the pendulum of the seasons swung in its mighty arc, from death back to life. Life out of death, eternity rising from out dissolution [sic]. There was the lesson. Angéle was not the symbol, but the proof of immortality” (392-3; original emphasis). Vanamee’s last conversation with Presley affirms this belief: “Life never departs. Life simply is. For certain seasons, it is
hidden in the dark, but is that death, extinction, annihilation. I take it, thank God, that it is not. Does the grain of wheat, hidden for certain seasons in the dark, die? The grain we think is dead *resumes again* . . .” (635; original emphasis). By identifying Angèle with the wheat, Norris is able to explain Vanamee’s success in resurrecting her. Vanamee has understood and cooperated with the forward motion of nature. And, by positioning Vanamee as the successful, ideal artist, Norris is able to carve out a space for art in a naturalist system.

Of course, this type of relationship between the artist and the natural, material world supposes that the universe operates according to some kind of morality and that the agency of the artist is located in his choice to work alongside nature instead of against it. This is an interpretation of Norris’s novel that has often been offered by literary scholars. Although not always directly addressing the problem of art and efficacy, scholars have proposed that Norris’s deterministic system is, in the end, a moral and ethical one. Donald Pizer writes that in Norris’s work “all human action is both devoid of free will and inherently good” (*The Novels of Frank Norris* 142). Thomas Austenfeld suggests that Norris’s portrayal of determinism in *The Octopus* shows a “large-scale approach to ethical reasoning where the greatest good is done for the greatest amount of people” (35). And, perhaps the best comment on *The Octopus*’s moral system is given by Norris himself in an interview about the railroad trust, in which he says, “I believe that the trust will survive if it is a good thing for the country” (Nader 81). Because Norris portrays the determined, material system in *The Octopus* as one that eventually does right, he can
offer Vanamee as a poet who satisfies both the moral impulses and the strict deterministic drive of the novel.

However, by offering Vanamee as a solution to the naturalist dilemma, Norris actually admits the dilemma’s insolubility. In other words, he takes a real problem and proposes an imaginary solution. Norris appeals to magic to resolve naturalism’s rhetorical issues, to wit, the genre’s guiding principle that language is unable to change material conditions. This move, however, is an admission of defeat; Norris has failed to find a real solution to a real problem and has instead proposed a solution that fits theoretically but does not work in reality. Vanamee is a fix, but he is an impossible fix. Similarly, Vanamee’s version of art—living as art—does away with representation altogether. In the end, the ideal art is the end of art. In both cases, Norris’s ideals lead back to his questions.

To put it differently, Norris’s naturalism cannot stay within its boundaries; he pushes the genre’s premise to excess. That is the difference between *Germinal* and *The Octopus*; Zola dwells only on social problems and offers no solution. Norris takes Zola’s propositions to their logical conclusion. If the natural and material world leaves no room for agency, then humans are left to appeal to the supernatural. However, as readers of *The Octopus* have recognized, the supernatural seems out-of-place in the naturalist novel. The Vanamee subplot is the implosion of the naturalist novel, in which the novel, from within, self-destructs. Norris finds no solution to the tension between moral outrage and determinism in the real world, and so he turns to a solution that is, in the end, untenable. Such is, as Zena Meadowsong writes, the formal drama of the naturalist novel (12). Meadowsong argues that naturalism is “self-rupturing” in that “realism falters before the
horror of the reality described” (5, 8). In other words, the reality that Norris promises to faithfully reproduce exceeds his ability to render it in language. As a result, Norris transposes the narrative to a mythic register, making what Meadowsong calls “the mythic move” and naturalism’s move to the “irrational and supernatural” (8). This drama is enacted at the novel’s formal level. To acknowledge the artist’s lack of efficacy in a deterministic system is tantamount to Norris’s own extinction, so he preserves himself at the cost of faithfulness to his genre. As Meadowsong writes, “Realism gives way to myth in the representation of a monstrous and overwhelming reality” (13). However, in this case, the monstrous reality Norris faces is his own erasure.

So, Norris creates an ideal author who is the God of his own universe. Vanamee is not bound by nature’s limitations. Vanamee tells Father Sarria that it seems that he is “stronger than death” and that “if [he] only knew how to use the strength of [his] will, concentrate [his] power of thought—volition,” he could bring Angéle back (148). Norris comments on this desire, writing that Vanamee’s “vast egotism” causes him to “forget God” (153). Norris further explains, “[Vanamee] arrogated [God’s] power to himself—struggled to be, of his own unaided might, stronger than death, more powerful than the grave” (153). And, by the end of the novel, Norris’s prototypical artist has attained this power. In other words, Norris creates a world that responds to Vanamee’s summons. By doing so, Norris claims for himself such power. This act establishes the author—who in reality is given only Presley’s abilities—as omnipotent and gives Norris a renewed motivation to write the purposeful novel.51

51 I owe the phrasing of this final sentence to my colleague Elizabeth Spies.
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