

64

MODERN
AMERICAN
LITERATURE

Desire and Disillusionment

A Guide to American Fiction Since 1890



Lawrence E. Hussman

Desire and Disillusionment: A Guide to American Fiction Since 1890 departs from the typical academic study in that it appeals to the general reading public, undergraduate and graduate students, and literary scholars. The book's focus on a highly relatable subject, longing and loss, its running plot summaries, and lucid presentation account for this broad appeal. Lawrence E. Hussman examines selected novels and short stories of fifty major American fiction writers from Stephen Crane to Junot Diaz. The reader will also find references to American politics, history, and popular culture in the book. Additionally, the author's decidedly original, provocative critical approach delivers new insights that will reshape thinking about American literature as a reflection of the nation's way of life. Literary critics will find the discussion of naturalism as a bridge to modernism and postmodernism especially enlightening. Furthermore, the book includes a summary of ideas about desire from the ancient philosophers to today's scientists who study the brain. *Desire and Disillusionment* can serve as a stimulating textbook in American literature, history, or philosophy classes.

Lawrence E. Hussman is Professor Emeritus of English at Wright State University. He is the author of numerous scholarly essays and influential, highly acclaimed books focusing on the fiction of Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris. Moreover, he has written two works of popular nonfiction, *Counterterrorist* and *Danger's Disciple*. He holds a doctorate in English from the University of Michigan and, in addition to his academic career in the United States, he has taught American literature in Europe as a Fulbright scholar and as a visiting professor.

Desire and Disillusionment



Yoshinobu Hakutani
General Editor

Vol. 64



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

Lawrence E. Hussman

Desire and Disillusionment

A Guide to American Fiction Since 1890



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hussman, Lawrence E.

Desire and disillusionment: a guide to American fiction
since 1890 / Lawrence E. Hussman.

pages cm. — (Modern American Literature: New Approaches; Vol. 64)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. American fiction—20th century—History and criticism.
2. American fiction—19th century—History and criticism. I. Title.

PS379.H85 813'.509—dc23 2013011873

ISBN 978-1-4331-2291-0 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-4539-1143-3 (e-book)

ISSN 1078-0521

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the “Deutsche Nationalbibliografie”; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de/>.

Cover image: *Longing on the Edge* © Jerzy Durczak

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability
of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity
of the Council of Library Resources.



© 2013 Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York
29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006
www.peterlang.com

All rights reserved.

Reprint or reproduction, even partially, in all forms such as microfilm,
xerography, microfiche, microcard, and offset strictly prohibited.

Printed in Germany

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Foreword</i>	1
<i>The Provenance of Longing</i>	3
<i>Preamble: American Desire and Literary Naturalism</i>	11
<i>Writers</i>	15
Stephen Crane (1871–1900)	15
Frank Norris (1870–1902)	21
Kate Chopin (1851–1904)	27
Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945)	34
Jack London (1876–1916)	45
Edith Wharton (1862–1937)	54
Willa Cather (1873–1947)	60
Sherwood Anderson (1876–1941)	68
Sinclair Lewis (1885–1951)	76
Carson McCullers (1917–1967)	81
Katherine Anne Porter (1890–1980)	88
F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940)	92
William Faulkner (1897–1962)	103
Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961)	110
John Steinbeck (1902–1968)	119
John Dos Passos (1896–1970)	123
Nathanael West (1903–1940)	131
James T. Farrell (1904–1979)	138
Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960)	145
Richard Wright (1908–1960)	149
Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964)	153
E. B. White (1899–1985)	155
Walker Percy (1916–1990)	159
Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977)	165
J.D. Salinger (1919–2010)	172
Truman Capote (1924–1984)	180

Saul Bellow (1915–2005)	184
Evan S. Connell (1924–2013)	187
James Baldwin (1924–1987)	193
Richard Yates (1926–1992)	199
John Updike (1932–2009)	210
Norman Mailer (1923–2007)	216
Philip Roth (1933–)	222
John Cheever (1912–1982)	230
Wallace Stegner (1909–1993)	237
William Styron (1925–2006)	241
Toni Morrison (1931–)	249
Cormac McCarthy (1933–)	256
N. Scott Momaday (1934–)	262
Annie Proulx (1935–)	267
Don DeLillo (1936–)	272
Raymond Carver (1938–1988)	279
Joyce Carol Oates (1938–)	286
Bharati Mukherjee (1940–)	295
John Irving (1942–)	300
Lee Smith (1944–)	307
Jane Smiley (1949–)	312
Jay McInerney (1955–)	316
Elizabeth Strout (1956–)	321
Junot Díaz (1968–)	325
<i>Conclusion: Past as Future</i>	331
<i>Afterword: A Call to Contentment</i>	335
<i>Notes</i>	343
<i>Bibliography</i>	349
<i>Index</i>	363

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the following persons who have been of invaluable help to me in conceptualizing and completing this book: Leonard Cassuto of Fordham University; William Irvine of Wright State University; David A. Horowitz of Portland State University; Clare Eby of the University of Connecticut; Jurek and Joanna Durczak of the Maria Curie Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland; the late Nancy Burke of the University of Warsaw; Mary Clifford; and especially Luz Rezende for her vital encouragement and help. I want to thank as well Ohio's taxpayers without whose support this book would not have been written, but certainly not the politicians who railed and voted against taxes. Grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Fulbright Commission were also helpful to my project.

Random House kindly granted permission to include "Sunday Morning" from THE COLLECTED POEMS OF WALLACE STEVENS by Wallace Stevens, copyright 1954 by Wallace Stevens and renewed 1982 by Holly Stevens. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited. Interested parties must apply directly to Random House, Inc. for permission.

I am grateful to Faber and Faber for permission to reproduce without alteration or omission "Sunday Morning" from *Collected Poems* by Wallace Stevens.

Foreword

American “literary naturalism” had its heyday during the 1890s and the following decade. Since then, its early adherents’ fixation on expansive desire and its frequent consequence, disillusionment associated with religious and spiritual doubt and denial, has been front and center in our most significant novels and short stories. Critics often note these themes in given works, but there has been no sustained look at them from a broad cultural perspective, a deficit this book addresses.

Nearly everyone has experienced longing and loss, so I aim to engage a wide audience. My interest in spreading the rewards of reading beyond the literature classroom dates back many years. When I chaired the English Department at Wright State University in the 1980s, for example, several colleagues and I prepared an extensive, free-of-charge “Fiction Reading List for the General Public” that we distributed to a national audience.

Stanford University historian David Kennedy has expressed regret that contemporary scholarship in his field seldom appeals beyond academe.¹ Literary studies have become even more professionally targeted, typically choked with convoluted prose and terminology that particularly discourages.² With some of *Desire and Disillusionment*’s intended readers in mind, I steer clear of unneeded critical jargon. To make my book more user friendly, running plot summaries have been included to guide readers unfamiliar with referenced works; characters have been allowed to speak for themselves and their creators through liberal use of quotations; and the number of writers addressed has been limited to a representative group of fifty. I offer interpretations but do not mean them to enslave.

I begin with a selective survey of thought about desire from ancient philosophy to contemporary psychology and brain science. I then identify a special linkage to desire in the founding and development of American civilization, argue that extravagant expectation partly defines our national character, and discuss naturalism and its legacy. Next come entries on specific writers in approximate chronological order. Owing to obvious space restrictions, I often select a single novel and/or short story for attention, though the same preoccupation with desire and disillusionment can be found in other works by the same authors. Moreover, a like emphasis on these themes can be located among nearly all of the nation’s important fiction writers not treated here, as well as in most of our significant drama and poetry.³ The book ends with speculation concerning the future of American

fiction and an interpretation of an inspiring American poem to leave the reader with an uplift.

Dealing with the grim take on existence that pervades most substantial American novels and stories produced since 1890 can be a cheerless experience. When I taught classes covering these works over several decades in the United States and Europe, I usually appended the phone number of the local suicide prevention hotline to the class syllabus. Just in case. Discovering fictional worlds in which deflected desire plays a crucial role can nevertheless enlighten and encourage as well. Fictional characters rehearse the very wants and needs that roil readers' own lives. Their dreams and struggles underscore our human commonality. Mark Lilla, Columbia University professor of political philosophy and religion, contends that "What Americans yearn for in literature is self-recognition." (qtd. in Donadio 3)⁴ Essayist Joseph Epstein once identified the way that first-rate fiction can meet this need. Surveying all of the books he had thus far read, including history, philosophy, social science, and other categories, he concluded that novels had most clearly affected his makeup: "They have been decisive in giving me a method or style of thinking, a general point of view, and a goodly portion of such understanding as I may have of the world." Again, he remarks: "I read these writers partly because much of my education has been through fiction, partly because I still love the novel and short story above all other literary forms, and partly because I hope they will tell me things I do not know about the way we live now" ("Educated" 33; "Will You" 222). The fiction addressed on the following pages possesses that power to advance readers' understanding of the world and themselves and to help them appreciate how others have lived and are living.

The Provenance of Longing

“All human activity is prompted by desire.”

—Bertrand Russell

The distinguished critic Harold Bloom points out that “Wisdom literature teaches us to accept natural limits” (4). By our lights today, that literature has to be seen as, therefore, always in a tension with our psychological makeup. After all, desire, according to contemporary science, in part defines us as human. We now know, or think we know, that our “hard wiring” includes yearning, and that “selfish genes” as well as various elements of neurochemistry guide us. But the collision between human longing and limitations, implicit in the central idea that Bloom identifies in wisdom literature, has been subjected to scrutiny since ancient times.

The Hindu hymns that make up *Rig-Veda* (1700–1100 BCE), the oldest religious text that boasts unbroken commitment, holds that life began not with the dawning of the first light as the Hebrew Bible would have it, but with the first desire. The earliest Asian philosophers recognized the need to address humanity’s insatiable longing. Siddhartha Gautama (566–486 BCE) founded Buddhist belief on the escape, through an eight-fold process, from human suffering caused by the misplaced craving for transient things. This indicates extensive discontent in the ancient world, though psychological unrest surely dates from the first glimmerings of human cognition. The Chinese thinker Chuang Chow (370–285 BCE) advised searching for satisfaction in nature and freeing oneself from seeking as a path to fulfillment, while accepting events as they happen. His countryman Han Feizi (280–233 BCE) thought that parents raised children not out of love but in anticipation of future security and that the true nature of humanity centers on profit and selfishness.

Plato (428–348 BCE) began the western discussion of desire and disillusionment in earnest. His *Crito* defines happiness as not simply living but, rather, living well. Humans desire, according to the argument in *Crito*, to possess the good, defined as happiness. Plato’s *Philebus* has Socrates asserting that pleasure derives from expectation or a hope of future satisfaction. In *Republic*, however, Socrates laments people’s propensity to enlarge their expectations, often leading to conflict with others. In *Symposium*, he holds that “anything which desires something desires what it does not have, and it only desires when it lacks something” (200). Desire can be erotic,

oriented toward friendship, in search of intellectual companionship, or focused on the world of ideas. Again, Socrates warns in Plato's *Gorgias* against the intemperate and insatiable pursuit of an impossible, selfish satisfaction while adopting Euripides' comparison of the human soul, which he identifies as the seat of desire, to a perforated vessel into which one pours water (longing) to no effect.

Aristotle (384–322 BCE), anticipating modern thought in his *Physics*, believed that desire defines humanity. For him, the infinite remains always potential, representing a pervasive process of coming into being, never realized in the here and now. In his *Ethics*, Aristotle cautions that to attain a noble nature, a person has to be taught and then has to practice the control of desires to strike a balance between craving too much and too little. He viewed the moral virtues as desire-regulating character traits. And he believed that indulging the passions without the tempering of intellect constitutes a dangerous moral weakness. Happiness, he thought, amounts to the fruition in pleasure of all our activities.

Epicurus (342–270 BCE), while focusing on pleasure as the ultimate good, separated human desires into categories he called illusory and natural. The illusory kinds derive from artificially cultivated tastes. Illusory desires are the most dangerous because they are insatiable. The natural desires signify far more. Not all of these are to be satisfied, though. We need to concentrate on the necessary ones. Humanity has three kinds of needs that will not be denied: equanimity or peace of mind; bodily health and comfort; and the requirements for life itself. A pleasant life calls for exercising the virtues prudently, knowing the worth of various satisfactions and, on the other hand, their costs. Learning to be satisfied with the necessities of life and not becoming the victim of misdirected desire will garner happiness.

Epicurus' successor, Epictetus (55–135 CE), who left no writings, lectured on the good life which, in his view, consisted in mastering desires, performing duties, and thinking correctly. All of life's agitations, according to Epictetus, flow out of the disproportion between our wills and the external world. The natural man assumes happiness to be possible when the external world comes up to his expectations. Building too much hope dooms us to endless sorrow, envy, and strife. We have to bring our desires into balance with actuality.

The Greek philosophers shared an ethical standard called *eudaemonia*, roughly defined as contentment achieved through a virtuous life. Religious *eudaemonia* called for directing actions toward the highest good, namely God, though some, the Stoics for example, believed God unnecessary for contentment.

Among the Roman philosophers, Cicero (106–43 BCE) believed that the desire for praise motivated humanity. Lucretius (95–55 BCE) held in his

poem *De Rerum Natura* that love equals madness and suggested opening the mind to the blemishes your lover displays, a bit of counseling that several American writers under the spell of the “impossible he/she” would have profited from heeding. Lucretius also observed that “so long as we have not what we crave, it seems to surpass all else; afterward, when that is ours, we crave something else, and the same thirst for life besets us as ever, open-mouthed” (3.1082–85). Seneca (c. 3 BCE–65 CE) warned again and again about the perils of desire. The person consumed by longing for future-based fulfillment must suffer ennui and a mind that can find no rest. If you curb your wants and occupy yourself with practical matters, Seneca advised, you will lack nothing.

In his *Enneads*, Plotinus (204–270 CE) pointed out that when physical matter absorbs attention, the soul becomes plagued with sensual desires. Turning away from matter and evil allows the soul to regain integrity. Yet Plotinus sent something of a mixed message, for he did regard the world as the fullest expression of the beauty “above.” This beauty can be enjoyed, not shunned, once a person has discovered the basics of existence and achieved inner-constraint. For a Plotinian, the apprehension of beauty stirs the soul. It offers a taste of the realm beyond being.

The early Church fathers weighed in with wisdom of their own on the subject of desire. In his *Confessions*, Augustine (354–430) identified desire, along with joy, fear, and sorrow, as the four agitations of the mind. Humans get tempted to seek knowledge through the senses while loving God provides the real answer. In his *City of God*, Augustine identified sex as a good which becomes an evil when claimed as the center of life, the proper center being movement toward consummation in eternity. In heaven, according to Augustine, there will be no more of the surging restlessness of this life. All will be content there, though some will have more than others.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), also saw in God the satisfaction of every human desire, available once a person has lived for the sake of that goal. No created good can be man’s last end. Every man desires perfect happiness. Original sin equates to the desire to be like God. Aquinas believed that the non-static Christian Heaven promised not only eternity but also fulfillment and joy. His contemporary, Bonaventure (1221–74) implicitly indicted material desires by designating sense perception as the lowest form of knowledge. This world, according to Bonaventure, resembles a Jacob’s ladder ascending to God from the material. Another important medieval philosopher, Duns Scotus (1265–1308), described the human will as always restless, always seeking something greater than any finite end. If all possible conditions existed simultaneously, he believed, the world would be absolutely unlimited and totally fulfilling.

The French humanist François Rabelais (1494–1553) noted that the strongest desires urge toward “things forbidden,” for whatever is “denied us” (101). René Descartes (1596–1650) believed that since humans have been implanted with the idea of perfection, God must have implanted it. In his *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) held that desire adds up to love, a motion toward an object called good. Aversion or hate forms its opposite. Since humans exhibit self-interest and endless desires, happiness cannot be a static condition but rather a process of satisfying wants. Power, according to Hobbes, represents man’s basic desire, and it ends only in death. Without government, people, creatures of desire, would be at each other’s throats. The basis for a civil society, therefore, comes down to individuals’ desire for a long and pleasant life.

The multi-talented English intellectual Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682) held that souls “desire to be truly each other,” but this being impossible, they must get on with their lives “without a possibility of satisfaction” (*Religio* 143). The English theologian and philosopher Joseph Butler (1692–1752) challenged Hobbes’s belief in overriding self-interest. Butler thought that the passions and desires could be controlled through rationality, leading to personal and societal happiness. In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) sanctified freedom, the lack of which made morality impossible. “Happiness” merely supplies the generic name for desire’s satisfaction. When reason controls the will and recognizes duty, desires can be lifted to a higher status.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) strongly influenced Theodore Dreiser, and by indirection, many of the American writers who followed him. Schopenhauer subjected desire to intense scrutiny. He believed that even the human throat, teeth, and bowels represented objectified hunger. He defined the will as desire itself, wanting and striving without apparent rationality. But he thought sex to be the hidden motivation behind all this grasping. Salvation lay in knowledge, which quiets the will. Our desires can never be satisfied, but we can find inner peace by recognizing the way the world and the mind work.

Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) believed that nothing great in the world had ever been accomplished without passionate desire, the engine of the historical process. The World Spirit attains its final self-consciousness through human passion. Heroes, agents of the World Spirit, make the most remarkable of humans. But their lives lack satisfaction. When they obtain the object of their desires, they lose their stature. Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) in his *Either/Or* explored the hedonistic mode of living, using Don Juan, the seducer who cannot commit, as illustration. Every woman for Don Juan represents femaleness in general. He lives only in the erotic present. But

the moment soon passes and a new desire emerges, condemning him to a series of immediacies that must eventually lead to emptiness. American fiction has supplied many such melancholy Don Juans.

German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann (1843–1906) made the case that civilization comes down to a compendium of illusions. Spanish theorist George Santayana (1863–1952) emphasized the conflict between the ideal and the real and held that happiness depends on admitting limitations. The Christian message took hold because disillusionment with the real forced the imagination to seek solace in an idealized afterlife. Living with such hopes traps one in a world of dreams. French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) believed that the world could best be understood, through intuition, as centering on “longing after the restlessness of life” (55–56). English realist Samuel Alexander (1859–1938) thought that religious emotion represented a singular yearning for the entirety of existence.

American thinker John Dewey (1859–1952) believed that desire drives the human forward. But the particular objects of desire never perfectly match the desire itself, no matter how close they come to doing so, because, sadly, “Every important satisfaction of an old want creates a new one...” (285). Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) believed that a loving God entices human desire, drawing us toward final fulfillment. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) thought that death looming ahead of all humans invested their choices with urgency, since every choice cuts off significant alternatives.

Moritz Schlick (1882–1936), the German originator of logical positivism, believed life’s locus should be love, which yields the highest possible happiness, and which when sought directly often proves elusive. The greatest happiness comes through altruism, which emerges in maturity. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), philosopher and one time president of India, considered religion to be like an emotion, seeking the transcendent out of frustration with the flawed finite. The German psychiatrist-philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) juxtaposed this world to transcendence, which he called “the Encompassing.” Existence ties to matter, which has a horizon beyond which hides the unknowable and indefinable.

The existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) judged life to be an impossible pursuit toward a reunion of being and nothingness, resulting in alienation and unhappiness. The human misfortune, time bondage, he thought, brings on an alienated, unhappy consciousness. The Zen Buddhist Daisetz Suzuki (1870–1966) preached that escape from life’s suffering required overcoming desire, especially sensual desire.

Russian-American novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand (1905–1982) held that fulfillment should be pursued through strict self-interest, abetted by laissez faire capitalism. American theorist Susan Sontag (1933–2004), fascinated by individuals’ relation to the visual, wrote often about desire. For

Sontag, the camera functioned as a projection of the cameraperson's (often sexual) longing. American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1947–), a booster of Hellenistic ethics, advises discarding “the zeal for absolute perfection as inappropriate to the life of a finite being” (510).

Contemporary neuroscientists and psychologists have explored new frontiers of brain function that relate to desire, among the most challenging the Portuguese Antonio Damasio (1944–). In his 1994 book *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, Damasio concludes from his work with brain-damaged patients that neural circuits and biochemical activity drive us to “behaviors that we may or may not be unable to suppress by strong resolution” (121). He observes that because of the way the brain functions, we never experience a “present.” We are caught between the past and the future, always “hopelessly late for consciousness” (240). As a result, Damasio believes, “the inchoate cry” for “a never-achieved sense of inner balance and happiness to which most humans aspire are (sic) not likely to diminish soon” (257–58).

The same year that Damasio's *Descartes' Error* appeared, evolutionary psychologist David Buss (1953–) published *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*. Buss's book examines in depth the biology of love and lust. Along the way, he demolishes the romantic view of love and recommends squaring idealistic dreams with reality. Coupling by the young orients toward reproductive benefits. Like other mammals, humans normally do not bond with a single person over a lifetime, moral prescriptions notwithstanding. Evolutionary logic leads men to seek women who approximate a certain standard of physical beauty that bespeaks procreative possibility. Women rarely consider a man's physical characteristics as necessary for sexual interest. Men tend toward sexual varietism, depending on stage in life, women rarely. Men's fantasies usually involve multiple partners, women's a single lover. Given these zones of conflicting interests, Buss ends by reminding his readers that “we have always depended on each other for the fulfillment of our desires” and recommending realistic expectations (222).

Andrew Newberg (1966–), a physician, professor, and researcher working on the connection between the brain and spiritual experiences, and Mark Robert Waldman, identify social consensus as one source of influence that conditions our beliefs and desires, the others being our own perceptions, cognitions, and emotions. We tend to believe what we learn from others if it suits our purpose, beginning in childhood. Newberg and Waldman point to a number of related states that need further neurological study, including love and disappointment; passion and despair; longing and hopelessness; attraction and displeasure; desire and misery; and hope and dread. Faith will always be with us because it functions as a survival mechanism, imparting a sense of meaning to life with its plaguing uncertainty. The idea of God,

Newberg asserts, begins in the frontal lobes of the human brain and it can answer hopes for happiness. Science does not negate the possibility of a spiritual realm coexistent with the material one, but caution should be exercised since people fall victim to self-deception and the brain biases us toward a spiritually optimistic outlook. In any event, we cannot be certain about the nature of reality. Some people programmatically believe, thanks to their neurological makeup and emotional range. Newberg and Waldman's study of Buddhist believers, Catholic nuns, and speakers in tongues shows that experiences of transcendence alter the neurology of the brain. Happiness, however, does not depend on beliefs, but on positive social relationships. Optimistic beliefs can heal, but unrealistic expectations can cause stress.

Psychiatry Professor Daniel Siegel (1957–) recommends mental development and personal transformation through awareness about how the mind itself functions, awareness of awareness. He posits from neuroscience and his professional case histories that the brain never stops growing (neuroplasticity) and can actually be altered with practice. By thinking about thinking, humans can begin to see themselves with openness and objectivity, and eventually others as well. This can lead to a “we” as opposed to an “I” perspective, enhancing existence. All of Siegel's patients, he contends, could be diagnosed as suffering from disillusionment, the longing for something they cannot find. Most significantly, they long for a sense of human interconnection that gives life a sense of meaning. Knowing that brain complexity allows infinite choices can lead to the creation of an integrated life narrative based on self-acceptance, acceptance of others, and attention to deep longings present since childhood. Such a narrative can provide continuity and fulfillment in the face of life's transience and uncertainty.

Psychologists Daniel Gilbert (1957–) and Timothy Wilson (1951–) write of people's propensity to “miswant.” Were we made differently, they argue, we could pursue our wants, attain them, and be satisfied with them. But as things stand, we tend to long for things that, once attained, do not make for happiness. The problem lies in our confusion about what we really want.

Lastly, psychologist Jonathan Haidt (1964–), a leader in the emergent field of Happiness Studies, argues that people need love, work, and linkage to a larger idea for fulfillment. This requires training disorderly brain functions, though genes largely determine success at doing so. Haidt believes in the worth of striving for some things and that the effort can contribute to happiness. He quotes with approval fellow psychologist Richard Davidson's formulation of “pre-goal attainment positive affect” and “post-goal attainment positive affect” (33, 83–84). But the latter most often dissipates because we quickly adapt to accomplishment. It follows, then, that fulfillment must come from the pursuit of the goal, not from the goal itself, except

for those modest ends that Haidt recommends, like leisure time and acts of kindness that paradoxically fulfill the bestower.

Over the centuries, deep thinkers have approached desire and disillusionment in these and related ways. Since 1890, American fiction writers have taken their own turn at explaining how longing and letdown operate, and how the process has informed the national psyche.

Preamble: American Desire and Literary Naturalism

"The nearest dream recedes unrealized..."

—Emily Dickinson

"And where is what I started for so long ago? / And why is it as yet unfound?"

—Walt Whitman

"It was the distance / Was savory."

—Emily Dickinson

An urgent yearning for some vague, unquantifiable fulfillment often vexes people. The Spanish have a name for this formless, soulful longing. They call it *anhelo*. The Portuguese label it *saudade*. The Poles suffer *tesknota*. Arabs speak of *hanin*, Koreans, *keurium*, Armenians, *karot*, Finns, *kaiho*, and Japanese, *setsubou*. The German Romantic figure Jean Paul coined the term *weltschmerz* to describe life's ongoing disappointment (132). Writers and artists have drawn on unfulfilled desire as subject matter innumerable times. The French writer Andre Maurois has asserted that "Lost Illusions is the undisclosed title of every novel..." (27). If desire and disillusionment weigh heavily on most lives and world literature has taken notice, can America be said to be unique or even unusual in its relationship to these experiences, and its writers distinctive in describing them? I think so.

From its very first sighting by the European explorers, the American continent itself has been appended with myth concerning its greater potential than elsewhere for meeting even the most extravagant of earthly expectations. A measure of the early merger in the mind between America's beckoning shores and extraordinary anticipation can be taken by noting a few ecstatic lines from "To the Virginian Voyage," written in 1606 by English poet Michael Drayton (1563–1631): "Virginia, / Earth's only paradise. / Where nature hath in store / Fowl, venison, and fish. / And the fruitfull'st soil, / Without your toil, / Three harvests more, / All greater than you wish" (83, lines 23–30).

Drayton's vision of the land across the Atlantic as a venue of virtually certain surfeit guaranteed by material plenty ran counter to the wisdom of thinkers from ancient times to his own. Just half a century earlier, for example, the French-Swiss Protestant theologian John Calvin had drawn

attention anew to the limits of earthly contentment: “God would have to create new worlds, if He wished to satisfy us” (qtd. in Bloom, *Wisdom*, 18; ch. 1). Yet the very designation of the American continent as “The New World” seemed to invite speculation that God had done just that.

Much of the literature produced by our earliest writers gave expression to the longing for a realization of the highest human hopes in traditional religious terms. The New England seventeenth-century Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet, for one example, often offered loaded comparisons between flesh and spirit, pointing her readers away from their daily lives and in the direction of the “Celestial City” situated in an afterlife of perpetual bliss. John Winthrop, the man who would become governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, however, trained the colonists’ minds on their intermediate destination. His Puritan sermon “A Modell of Christian Charity,” perhaps composed and delivered on the very voyage that brought Bradstreet to America, called the nascent settlement a “city upon a hill” and the “place we desire” and ended by connecting faith, Christian kinship and generosity to material prosperity. (41–43). Winthrop’s sense that the New World would set a shining economic as well as spiritual example for the Old World anticipated the addition in the next century of an American mission, dictated by the country’s propitious positioning, to showcase not only its religious heritage and democratic institutions, but also its material might. By the nineteenth century, this mission had morphed into the idea of Manifest Destiny, the belief that the United States had as its providential purpose the spreading of capitalist democracy across the whole American continent.

With a seemingly inexhaustible supply of natural resources and fertile soil to exploit, as well as an empowering individual enterprise and a middle-class creed established early on, America had been favored by fate and impelled by initiative. Walt Whitman’s mid-nineteenth-century poetry captured the country’s undeterred faith in the potential of the “nearer beyond,” of the continent itself to inspire progress toward ultimate temporal achievement and fulfillment for individuals. Whitman’s generation of Americans in fact attained unprecedented levels of economic prosperity. The poet’s enthusiasm meshed with the evolving notion of American exclusivity, the belief that the country had flourished and would flourish in the future because of its singular situation. Insulated by two oceans from the wars and tribalism of Europe and Asia, America would continue to create the moral, political, economic, and social conditions that freed it from the handcuffs of history.⁵

Despite all of these enduring notions of national preeminence and the real material well-being that the country made available to many, however, personal fulfillment seemed in short supply. As early as 1835 the French visitor and commentator Alexis de Tocqueville noted a remarkable gap

between Americans' situation and their satisfaction with it. Despite being "placed in the happiest condition that exist[ed] in the world," Americans seemed to the Frenchman sufferers from an unanticipated "agitation...in the midst of their abundance," settling in one place only to soon depart, driven by their "changing desires," their brows ubiquitously furrowed. Many individuals in democratic societies behaved thusly, de Tocqueville judged, but never had "a whole people" shown such variable, unanswered longings (511–12).

By the third quarter of the century, upheaval in the sciences and philosophy had begun to rock religion's foundations, undermining its role as fulfiller of last resort. Late in *Leaves of Grass*, the nominally Quaker Whitman rues both his worldly and spiritual disillusionment, as the epigraph quoted above attests, and those simple lines could serve as a summation of much of the American literature written since (95). The concentration on longing and discontent among our later writers links to the darkening of the American literary landscape between 1890 and 1900. During that decade, the naturalistic ideas clustering around Darwin's theory of evolution, reinforced by the philosophy of Herbert Spencer and others, then filtered through novelists abroad including Emile Zola and Thomas Hardy, made their way into the fiction of influential American advocates like Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Kate Chopin, and Theodore Dreiser. Each made a personal selection from the received list of naturalistic beliefs and denials—that religion, a distracting daydream, has no reality behind it; that heredity and environment shape humanity; that only the strongest survive and even they but temporarily; that people possess neither souls nor significance; that change and chance, not a benevolent Deity, control individual destinies; that reality should be seen as a closed, cause and effect system grounded in the natural world.⁶ The American literary naturalists believed these ideas to be both freeing and severely damaging to the individual's hopes for ultimate self-realization.

Gertrude Stein would later calculate the profit and loss from the key naturalistic revelation and liken it to the discovery of America: "Evolution...opened up a new world and at the same time closed the circle, there was no longer any beyond" (61). Naturalism's good news did not hit American writers as hard as its bad news because the latter called into question many of the nation's most basic beliefs about personal prospects. Though, according to Nietzsche's famous declaration, God had died, setting humanity free to explore a life on earth without arbitrary restrictions and to make choices existentially, longing now logically stopped at earth's end. Earthly commodities, however, even love and sex, could never deliver the denouement promised by the clergy. Any hope of a definitive fulfillment in this world would prove vain, notwithstanding the proffer of a presumably reachable "happiness" in the Declaration of Independence.

By World War I, literary naturalism's artistic ideals, including its strict objectivity, its precise observation stripped of sentiment and moral judgment, its equating of humans and animals, and its emphasis on the squalid and violent became less fashionable and began to give way to the modernism already flourishing abroad. The modernist aesthetic stressed symbolism, myth, memory, subjective perception, the imagination, and a quest for beauty. Nevertheless, the naturalists' core set of ideas questioning the ultimate purpose of existence earned acceptance from most modernists and has since displayed impressive staying power. The majority of naturalism's American successors have also judged its confining legacy a prescription for discontent. In stressing desire and disillusionment, these writers have employed and continue to employ their own experience to portray fictional characters whose longings lead to dead ends.

Since naturalism, our fiction writers have most often created characters fixated on tightly targeted desires for material goods, wealth, fame, social position, and sex, as well as those for more nebulous things such as love, peace, and beauty. They have been fascinated by the very act of hankering, especially the unfocussed or inexact kind, the desire for something unmatched in this world, highlighting it again and again. They have employed a variety of symbols that signal these yearnings, including light (as opposed to the dark of disillusionment), glitter, brightness, the sea, the horizon, space, the sky, distant mountains, distant countries, distance itself, roads, the American West, California, Hollywood, imagined worlds, Ferris wheels, escalators, trains, planes, birds, magnets, doors, windows, movie screens, advertising signs, white clothing, an idealized past, and a beckoning future, among others.

On the pages that follow, I consider a number of writers who have deliberated post-Darwinian discontent in some of the finest novels and short stories America has produced.

Writers

Stephen Crane (1871–1900)

The extremely fertile wife of a New Jersey Methodist minister gave birth to Stephen Crane. One of fourteen siblings, Crane began writing as a teenager. His first solid short stories were published in 1892, after he had ended his lackluster, never-to-be-completed college career. He privately published his “risqué” first novel, *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* the following year. His war novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) won him lasting international admiration. Several of his stories dating from 1897 rank as American classics. His early death from tuberculosis deprived American literature of possible future works of genius, but gained him status as a tragically romantic literary figure akin to the English poet Thomas Chatterton, who died at seventeen. Most of Crane’s fiction expands on a chilling exchange that forms one of his abrupt poems. In it a man addresses the universe and asserts his existence, only to be answered, in effect, so what?

Crane amplified some of the implications of that unsettling response in *Maggie*, often identified as the first naturalistic novel (or more precisely, novella) by an American because of its emphasis on environment as destiny determiner. It appeared pseudonymously in 1893 after Crane had received a number of rejections from timid or unimpressed publishers and it did not reach a wide public for a number of years. Set in New York’s squalid Bowery district, it focuses on Jimmie Johnson and his sister, Maggie. In fact, Crane divides attention almost equally between the two, so that the novella might as reasonably have been called *Jimmie, a Boy of the Streets*. Trapped in a tangle of ferocious family fights as children, the two siblings develop differently.

Jimmie grows from street-brawling urchin to sneering youth who lacks “respect for the world, because he had begun with no idols that it had smashed” (46). He spends his adolescent days on the streets “dreaming blood-red dreams at the passing of pretty women” (47). Eventually he gets a job driving a horse-drawn truck and while discharging his duties, starts displaying an incongruent sensitivity and a generic, amorphous longing. As he begins each work assignment he falls into a “trance of observation” and untargted feeling, setting his sight on “a high and distant object” (48). During his rounds he gazes at fire engines which he loves “with a dog-like devotion,” and especially the magnificent horses that draw them, creatures he admires “ineffably.” Only some jarring bit of traffic proves capable of

breaking Jimmie's reverie. And though he spends his days seducing and more than once impregnating women and joining bar fights, the moon on one "star-lit evening" moves him to wonder and reverence (49). After his persistently drunken father's death, Jimmie assumes the headship of the family and behaves much like him.

Meanwhile, Maggie, the always-begrimed child, has developed into an eye-catching young woman of emergent sensibility. She finds her first job in a collar and cuff factory employing a number of female workers who display "yellow discontent" (50). Soon, however, an acquaintance of Jimmie's, a crude, pugnacious, flashy bartender named Pete bedazzles her, his relative wealth of experience evidence of his social preeminence. In fact, Crane employs Pete as an exemplar of the "impossible he/she" phenomenon, the supposed personification of perfection in a would-be lover, a concept that will turn up again and again as I discuss subsequent novels and stories. The more inclusive designation I'm using here traces to a seventeenth-century poem by the Englishman Richard Crashaw, which speaks of its narrator's longing for "That not impossible she."⁷

Maggie's quasi-religious linkage of Pete with a romantic ideal anticipates scores of similarly directed rhapsodic flights in later American fiction: "Her dim thoughts were often searching for faraway lands where, as God says, the little hills sing together in the morning. Under the trees of her dream-gardens there had always walked a lover" (52). She credits Pete with "greatness" and tries to "calculate the altitude of the pinnacle from which he must have looked down upon her." While she slaves away at her job, she imagines that this "knight" of a bartender lives in "a blare of pleasure" and has his pick of women so that she can have no chance with him. To her surprise, however, he reveals his attraction to her. Their relationship begins when he invites her to a sleazy entertainment at a seedy Bowery theater that Maggie thinks radiates a "golden glitter" (53-54). The experience sets her to longing for the advantages of the wider world: "She craved those adornments of person which she saw every day on the street, conceiving them to be allies of vast importance to women" (59). The stage heroines that appear in the melodramas she attends with Pete lead her to wonder if she could ever acquire their "culture and refinement" (62).

Maggie leaves home to be with Pete and her hopes heighten: "She imagined a future, rose-tinted, because of its distance from all that she had experienced" (74). But her chances of escaping her constricted world slowly fade as circumstances conspire. One of Pete's former flames reappears and wins him away. Maggie returns to her home but her boozing mother, given her daughter's loss of respectability, rejects Jimmie's suggestion that she be allowed to stay. Maggie appeals to Pete for protection but he rebuffs her.

Some indefinite time later, the homeless Maggie has become a street walker. Inexplicably unable to attract any but the most repulsive of customers despite her physical charms, she heads at last for the black waters of the river. Crane measures the expanse between Maggie's earlier dreams and her dismal destiny, played out in the gathering darkness: "Afar off the lights of the avenues glittered as if from an impossible distance." The final sentence of this, her final scene, evokes the faint, "varied sounds of life, made joyous by distance and seeming unapproachableness" as the waters close over her (89). The references to distance in these last two quotes, a paragraph apart in the text, accentuate the gulf between Maggie's prior longings and their objects. But they also point up the incapacity of those objects to ultimately fulfill in any case, since the "joy" they proffer recedes with proximity, Pete having been one such "object." The novella's penultimate chapter describes the worthless Pete entertaining a gaggle of women and drinking himself unconscious. While he sprawls on the bar floor, the girlfriend for whom he had dumped Maggie steals his money. In the last chapter, Jimmie, his mother, and mourners from their tenement gather. One of the women cajoles and convinces Maggie's mother to forgive her sinful daughter.

Crane's emphasis on Maggie's doomed desires prefigures the obsession with disillusionment displayed by his naturalist contemporaries, but her suicide owes as much to vestiges of Victorianism in Crane as to any commitment to naturalism's prized objectivity. After all, when he sends her seeking oblivion in the river's depths, he simply replaces the conventional moral dictate "death before dishonor" with "death immediately after dishonor." In fact, Crane does not restrict his old-fashioned moralizing in *Maggie* to this instance. He barely mutes his disapproval of Pete and Maggie's heartless, alcoholic mother, not to mention some of Jimmie's treatment of his sister. At times his censure becomes all but overt, as in the case of the "stout gentleman" approached for help by Maggie as she walks the streets. The man lurches away rather than risk his reputation to "save a soul" (87). These instances of less than naturalistic rigor should remind readers that Crane's minister-father wrote temperance tracts, that his mother actively involved herself with the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and that a crusading moral reformer by the oxymoronic name of B. O. Flower accepted and privately published *Maggie*.

Crane unevenly applied *Maggie's* realistic veneer and scuffed it as well with details, both omitted and provided. For instance, Crane skips over the sweat shop conditions of the collar and cuff factory in half a paragraph, thus missing an opportunity to further document slum conditions and provide a reason for Maggie to long for release and to choose prostitution over a return to her former work. And the reader can be forgiven for wondering, as well, how long the line of delivery wagons outside the Johnsons' quarters must be,

waiting to replace all the furniture the family keeps reducing to splinters during their frequent family fights. There is, moreover, no particular reason for Crane to make Maggie physically attractive. Had she been plain rather than pretty her tragedy would have been no less poignant and the story more credible. Cosmetics may be cheaper than furniture, but they would have been a luxury beyond Maggie's means. Crane researched the brothel business in Syracuse for the novella, so it should not have taken more than one visit to a red light district to persuade him that women could function successfully there without physical attractiveness. He does not identify the source of Maggie's fine feeling either. Given her conspicuous lack of positive role models, her characterization seems unconvincingly anomalous. Nor does Jimmie's one outburst of upbeat passion, so unlike all the other slum dwellers' emotions in the story, get explained. Maggie's looks and sensitivity and Jimmie's delight at the sight of the moon owe more to an unruly romantic streak in Crane than to artistic necessity or verisimilitude. But, of course, that same warmth of feeling impelled him to implant within these characters not only reasonable, unfulfilled desires but also the species of undifferentiated, unrealizable longing generated by his philosophy. Though underdeveloped, *Maggie* sets the agenda for his fellow naturalists.

Among Crane's many short stories, an early one called "An Experiment in Misery" (1894) follows a poor young man wandering city streets depressed and hungry. His desires having been long since depleted, he looks for a fellow outcast with whom to share his plight. He trudges through an upscale neighborhood to "his own country," a downtrodden district where he pools pennies with another, older street person and the two find cots for the night in a flophouse of "unspeakable odors" and "intense gloom" (139, 142). The vagrants share a meager breakfast the next day and the food stirs memories of better times in the older man, who had once lived "high" as a common laborer. Now, shelter at night and a morning morsel shared with a fellow sufferer translates into "'livin' like kings'" (146). As the two sit in a city park watching the employed parade past, the young man rues their illustration of "his infinite distance from all that he valued." Other people's privileges underscore the unattainability of his hopes: "Social position, comfort, the pleasures of living were unconquerable kingdoms. He felt a sudden awe."

Before concluding the story, Crane uses the young man's plight to critique America's economic order, which promises possibility to some while denying others' desires, "forcing its regal head into the clouds, throwing no downward glances" (147). Beaten down by the system, the young man accepts defeat.

A week after the publication of "An Experiment in Misery" Crane's companion story called "An Experiment in Luxury" appeared. This time, a

young man's friend talks him into testing the proposition, pushed by clergymen, that millionaires are actually unhappy and that, like everyone else, they must suffer some "private tragedy which makes [them] yearn for other existences." The test involves observing the rich family of one of the young man's college classmates, named Jack, during a visit to his house. The tasteless exterior of the place itself strongly suggests the vanity of human wishes, "asserting its quality as a fine thing when in reality the beholder usually wondered why so much money had been spent to obtain a complete negation" (148).

Once admitted by the officious footman, the young man begins his experiment. The home's splendid interior awes him. The sound of chattering women from somewhere out of sight suggests carefree activity. When Jack ushers him into his "amazingly comfortable room," its "beautiful disorder" implies an owner who "did supremely as he chose" (149). Jack's carelessly scattered possessions appear "to have been flung by an artist." His friend, impressed by the "vast wonder" of luxuriously lounging in the room while others were "blackened and mashed in the churning life of the lower places," feels the first flush of envy. He has to admit to a troubling ambivalence in his response to opulence: "There was one side of him that said there were finer things in life, but the other side did homage." He begins to feel a sense of his own entitlement and a reanimation of dormant desires: "There had been times in his life when little voices called to him continually from the darkness; he heard them now as an idle, half-smothered babble on the horizon edge" (150). On the one hand, he recognizes the folly of seeking fulfillment through power, but on the other the unquestionable allure of that dominance: "It was delicious to feel so high and mighty, to feel that the unattainable could be purchased like a penny bun. For a time, at any rate, there was no impossible. He indulged in monarchical reflections" (151).

The young man begins his journey back to earth when his friend introduces him to his family. Jack proceeds to conduct one of his regular rows with a sister, while she and the other two sisters argue among themselves, striving mostly to be beautiful, like potted plants. The young man realizes, though, that the sisters will retain their looks longer than women who toil. As for the father, he spends the time on his hands playing with a kitten. Jack's mother, in the midst of "rampant irritation" over her husband's distracted disregard of some domestic trivia, appears less than contented. The young man's observations of her address the question posed by the experiment. Her eyes reflect "a life of terrible burden" and they seemingly scan a sphere "lined with tangled difficulties." Her face shows "no sign that life was sometimes a joy" (152). The young man attributes her seeming unhappiness to her social climbing. He judges her to be like other women of her kind, "ignorant of that which they worshipped," a social ascendancy they mistak-

only believe “could set the sky ablaze” (153). But at dinner, the family’s lighthearted chatter causes the young man to adjust his sights again. He concludes that the negative view of wealth preached from the pulpit overstates the misery of millionaires, though contentment eludes all.

Crane’s stories and novels often highlight the way perspective shapes personal realities. His characters make judgments and change opinions based on the flow of their experiences. One of the unmistakable visits to this theme informs his much admired story “The Open Boat.” Four men, cast adrift after a shipwreck, try desperately to maneuver their overmatched lifeboat ashore. Onlookers using the beach assume that the men in the dinghy are enjoying a day of fishing. The man in the boat whose thoughts match Crane’s reflects on a poem he had heard again and again as a child about a soldier killed in battle. The soldier’s death had never meant more to him than “the breaking of a pencil’s point,” but he sees it differently now that he faces his own end in the sea (353). A little later in the struggle to reach the shore, he has an epiphany when an unreachable, “tall wind-tower” ashore comes into view. He sees in the tower an emblem of the indifference of nature, rendering him and the other men in the boat as unimportant in the cosmic scheme as “ants” (355). When three of the four finally reach shore alive after being tossed from the dinghy by a huge wave and carried by the surf, they believe, thanks to their lessons learned and their perspectives altered, that they can now be “interpreters” (359).

In the distilled dialectics of his short verses, Crane forges a link between the often flawed perspective of individuals, meaninglessness, and unfulfilled desire, managing to represent what we might term “naturalist angst” in the starkest terms. One such poem has its first-person narrator attempting to reason with a man “pursuing the horizon” which always eludes his grasp. “You can never—,” the narrator cautions. But the man cries “You lie” and runs on (26). The first-person narrator of another poem arduously climbs a “mighty hill” expecting to be rewarded with fulfillment for his efforts, only to see from the summit “gardens lying at impossible distances” (28). Again, a man observes what he takes to be a ball of gold in the sky, actually ascending and attaining it only to discover its clay substance. When he returns to earth and looks skyward a second time, the object above appears once more to be a ball of gold. Another of Crane’s poetic protagonists, this one more perceptive than the rest, ultimately finds it impossible to credit the existence of a sufficient object for the world’s “torrent of desire” (52–53). A number of his other poems feature men futilely searching for an absent God.

We will never know because of his tragic, early death whether Crane would have developed into a master naturalist matching Dreiser in stature. The positive evidence includes several excellent short stories, most notably “The Open Boat,” “The Blue Hotel,” and “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky”

(the latter de-romanticizes the American West). Besides being ripping good stories, they boast remarkably crisp expositions of naturalism's theoretical underpinnings. On the other hand, most of his posthumously published work pales by comparison. He will certainly be remembered longest for *The Red Badge of Courage*, which gets tagged as an impressionistic rather than a naturalistic novel. But to the extent that his other works presented desire and disillusionment in naturalistic context, they pointed to one of the principle preoccupations of the American literature to come.

Frank Norris (1870–1902)

The noted critic Alfred Kazin separates naturalist novelists into two types. Those in the first group draw their mostly downbeat subject matter from “personal experience,” a fact that makes much of their work “a form of autobiographical discourse.” Dreiser, who grew up in grinding poverty, certainly qualifies. And to a lesser extent so does Crane, given his upbringing amidst respectable deprivation as the son of an undistinguished minister. Kazin's second type takes in those whose personal history reflects relative privilege. They come to their practice “as a literary idea,” in search of an artistic model rather than to demonstrate a personally held deterministic view of life (87–88). Here, Frank Norris fits the bill, although the evidence suggests that after adopting naturalism as a method he came to consider its matter compelling as well. Norris's affluent San Francisco parents, a prominent jeweler and an actress, could well afford to send Frank off to the University of California in 1890. There he discovered Zola's novels and supposedly never again appeared on campus without a copy of one of them under his arm. Four years later, without a degree, he enrolled in a creative writing class at Harvard and began two novels, one of which reached the public in 1899 and the other, posthumously, in 1914. Critics rightfully regard the first, *McTeague*, as one of the finest examples of the naturalist genre by an American.

God has been naturalistically banished from *McTeague*, a melodramatic tale of lust, greed, and violence, by turns grim and comical. Desire dominates the narrative with gold its central symbol. We meet the title character, a burly, unlicensed dentist with a one-watt wit, in his San Francisco “professional” parlors. There, in the city of the Golden Gate, he dreams of installing, outside a corner window, a grand advertisement for his practice, “a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive.” Norris further establishes *McTeague*'s tawdry taste with an inventory of the parlor's art objects, consisting of a stone pug dog (the equivalent of today's plastic flamingo, concrete goose, or wooden garden gnome) and a drolly described steel engraving of Lorenzo de' Medici's court, which he had bought because “there were a great many figures in it for

the money" (265). Apparently he would have regarded *The Thinker* and the *Mona Lisa* bad investments.

McTeague's desire takes a much different direction when his only close friend, Marcus Schouler, brings his attractive cousin-girlfriend, Trina Sieppe, to him for extensive dental work. As the weeks of treatment progress, Mac grows more and more attracted to Trina. In the process, his previously dormant sexuality begins to stir and he soon comes to view the very idea of womanhood as "dazzling, delicious, charming beyond all words" (281). Not surprising, then, that one day when he has Trina anesthetized, he surrenders to "the foul stream of hereditary evil" passed to him from his father, and in a move that could pass for near pornography in the 1890s, kisses her "grossly, full on the mouth." This scene became the most often noted of any Norris ever crafted, but critics have seldom paid attention to an uncharacteristic bit of insight that the novelist attributes to Mac just before he performs his "dirty" deed. As he considers the pros and cons of his intention, he realizes "dimly" that if he goes through with it, Trina will "never be the same to him, never so radiant, so sweet, so adorable: her charm for him would vanish in an instant" (284–85). Actually Trina's charms will evaporate for Mac only a couple of hundred pages later, but his vague feeling of impending disappointment prefigures the novel's central idea.

The same theme also animates two prominent subplots concerning neighbors in McTeague's apartment building. The first involves a mentally unbalanced cleaning woman who continually mesmerizes an avaricious old Jew named Zerkow (not Norris's only crude stereotype) with an invented tale. The woman, Maria Macapa, regularly alludes to a gold dinner service that, in her fevered brain, she believes her Central American family once owned. Zerkow's greed for gold, described as "his dream, his consuming desire," eventually unhinges him too, and he kills Maria but soon winds up dead himself, floating in San Francisco bay, still clutching a sack full of tin plates and pots and knives and forks (294).

The second subplot concerns two seniors, Old Grannis and Miss Baker, who live in adjoining apartments and long for an intimacy prevented by shared shyness. The one somewhat hopeful note in the novel's otherwise consistent cynicism sounds when the two eventually get together "in a little Elysium of their own creating," though Norris refrains from positing any glorious "ever after" for the two, leaving them to pursue "the long retarded romance of their commonplace and uneventful lives." And Norris signals possible trouble ahead for a man of Grannis's romantic dreams. It should be noted that the old man overcomes his diffidence and addresses Miss Baker for the first time during the raucous, animalistic gorging at the McTeagues' wedding dinner. This venue mocks Grannis's dream of atmosphere for his first encounter with his impossible she, "evening somewhere, withdrawn

from the world, very quiet, very calm and peaceful" (384). As McTeague and Trina's stories play out, Grannis and Miss Baker fade from the narrative, denying the reader a gauge of their destiny together.

Meanwhile, the main plot thickens. Despite his intuition warning of disappointment to come, weeks after his stolen kiss Mac remains enchanted by Trina. In fact, he tosses and turns each night "thinking of her, wondering about her, racked with infinite desire of her." He spends his days dreaming about carrying her off "to some vague country, some undiscovered place where every day was Sunday" (291). For her part, Trina longs to be "away, and away, and away, anywhere" (313). The "infinite" nature of these amorphous desires, beyond the capacity of any earthly being or place to satisfy them, spells impending trouble for Mac and Trina. Mac banishes any doubt he might have about Trina, however, when Marcus unaccountably volunteers to step aside and allow the dentist to replace him as her suitor. One of Mac's early dates with his love interest brings him a sharper sense of disappointment in her than the earlier stolen kiss. Making his initial sexual move on a fully conscious Trina, Mac crushes her to him until she responds passionately. At this point Norris grants Mac a succession of inklings that something has been forfeited, that an object desired must lose much of its power if possessed. The moment Trina gives herself to him he thinks less of her, prompting Norris to generalize: "With each concession gained the man's desire cools; with every surrender made the woman's adoration increases" (322).

The theory of sexual cross-purposes broached by Norris through McTeague in this passage not only extends the novel's account of male psychology but also introduces a reading of female desire that will be developed through Trina's characterization. Or to put Norris's insight in the words spoken by a male character in a much later novel: "I think men talk to women so they can sleep with them and women sleep with men so they can talk to them" (*Brightness*, 90). Just how Norris came to his mature understanding of sexual politics at such an early age remains unclear. Whether through reading Zola or the sex manuals of the day or through his own early experience, he accurately gauged the typical male's tendency to possess, question, regret, and move on and the female's to submit in hopes of an evasive closeness and commitment. In any case, Norris will show in *McTeague* how the collision of divergent male and female sexual desires threatens to beget mutual disillusionment. Indeed, once he introduces Mac and Trina's thirst for each other, he tells the reader that the couple's "undoing had already begun" (326).

Of course, McTeague's single-digit IQ impedes the lesson. Immediately after his murky recognition of loss through acquisition, he experiences a "great joy" at having won Trina and they become engaged. (323). When she

wins five-thousand dollars in a lottery, various developments lead to the couple's tragic fates. Despite Mac's wish to spend the money, Trina invests it for the interest. Marcus plots revenge against Mac for "stealing" Trina. Mac and Trina eventually marry. Mac's passion for Trina inexorably wanes and he begins neglecting her. Despite her disgust at Mac's slovenliness, Trina's love for him grows for a while in keeping with her expenditure of self in the relationship. Marcus informs the authorities about the illegal dental practice, ending Mac's illicit career and reducing his earning power. Trina's frugality warps into an illness until she becomes a miser to rival George Eliot's Silas Marner. At the same time, her pleasure in physical surrender twists into a masochistic craving for Mac's growing abuse. When Mac finally deserts her, she finds work as a scrub woman and withdraws her lottery winnings.

Once she has the five-thousand in gold coins, Trina substitutes a new, more satisfying relationship for the old, inadequate one with Mac. She spends all of her spare time admiring her treasure. She even takes it to bed with her, at one point achieving a writhing orgasm in response to the metallic feel of the coins over the length of her bare body. (She keeps the coins in a chamois bag with the characteristics of a scrotum). Thus, she seems to have finally found the answer to her longing for relationship and loyalty. The coins, so erotically pleasurable to the touch, will, she thinks, always be there for her. But her satisfaction turns out to be short-lived. Mac, destitute and desperate by this time, murders her and steals the money, though the thought of hurting her during his early infatuation had caused him "positive anguish" (283).

Now a fugitive, Mac heads for the mountains and takes a job at the gold mine where he had worked before becoming a sham dentist, but his sixth sense warns him to move on. Next, he partners briefly with a prospector looking to make a strike, which they in fact do. But again Mac's intuition forces him to flee, leaving a potential fortune behind. He heads across the alkali wastes of Death Valley in hopes of reaching the symbolically named Gold Mountain and then Mexico. Marcus, joining a posse in pursuit, forges on alone when the sheriff decides his men and their horses can't follow the dangerous course the heedless McTeague has set. When Marcus finally catches up in the middle of the desert, the two grapple, and Mac kills Marcus. In his last throes, however, Marcus manages to shackle himself to McTeague. Norris leaves his protagonist to die manacled to his pursuer.

In order to advance his naturalistic agenda, Norris uses the environment in the novel's late scenes to link his earlier treatment of heredity as destiny to a contention that persons are, in the big picture, inconsequential and helpless: "The great mountains of Placer county had been merely indifferent to man; but this awful sink of alkali was openly and unreservedly iniquitous and

malignant" (560). In "The Open Boat," which appeared the year before *McTeague*, Crane used a nearly identical reading of setting and situation to make his own naturalistic case, though in reverse order. As the men in the lifeboat struggle to reach dry land, they first think of the waves that threaten to swamp them as "wrongfully and barbarously abrupt," but finally understand nature to be "flatly indifferent" to humanity's struggles (340, 355).

Norris also deals late in *McTeague* with longing for the unattainable. As he brings the novel to its conclusion, he clearly feels compelled to shed what light he can on this all-embracing hunger. After all, none of the specific objects (including Trina) that *McTeague* has claimed to crave can come close to accounting for the intensity of his longing for them. The same holds for the things that all of the other players in the novel have gone after. Norris assumes responsibility for explaining what his intellectually limited characters cannot, and Mac's flight through Death Valley gives him the opportunity. As the fugitive Mac makes his way through the mountains and across the desert toward some destination he really cannot define, he repeatedly makes "a vague, nearly automatic gesture." He reaches one hand again and again toward the ever-beckoning vista before him "as if he would clutch it and draw it nearer" (554). At the same time, the "radiance" and "barrenness" of the landscape depicted suggest the pull and the push back of desire and despair until the scene reaches its defining moment with *McTeague* chasing "the receding horizon...that always fled before him" (562). In these passages that link measureless space with persistent, abstract desire, Norris unknowingly rehearsed in the new God-deprived, naturalistic context what became one of the most striking associations in much subsequent American fiction. Writers from Dreiser to Don DeLillo have since used retreating horizons as a way of signaling the longing for some post-Darwinian illimitable. *McTeague* focuses on unquenchable longing as the most fascinating and troubling attribute that seemingly separates humans from the animals that naturalists so often liken to them as part of their reductive agenda. The novel makes a powerful statement about desire in the context of modern materialism.

While researching a new novel after he completed *McTeague*, Norris published a disenchantment story in the *San Francisco Examiner*. "As Long as Ye Both Shall Live" had been unknown to scholars until recovered in the 1980s.⁸ The tale, Norris's best in the shorter form, opens with Austin Drone, a young man about town, spotting a beautiful woman at a gathering. He tells a third party of his attraction and the compliment eventually reaches the woman, Miss Havens, who expresses interest. When they meet a week later at a dinner party, Drone writes a flirtatious note on her palm and instructs her to keep it gloved until she gets home. Norris then springs a surprise on the reader expecting the usual romantic tale. Suppressing his fantasies of Miss Havens, Drone heads for his fiancée's house. His year-long engagement to

Laurie Champlin has left him more than a bit bored by her: "He would kiss Laurie when she should come in—of course—and no doubt she would kiss him, but he knew that there was no great sweetness in it for him, as once there had been." He tries to squelch his misgivings since an engagement represents a difficult to "draw back," gentlemanly commitment. And he braces himself for another conversation consisting of the "same old worn-out pleasantries that they still pretended to laugh at; the same exchange of opinions and the same topics that they long ago knew by heart" in addition to "the same mutual declarations that they pretended to believe, and with which they tried to deceive themselves as well as each other," an apt description of relationship reduced to, as today's phrase would have it, "phoning it in" (4).

As Drone mulls the disheartening deterioration of his link with Laurie, he picks up a photograph she had recently taken of a young man named Kneeland. Drone had long since prevailed in his rivalry with Kneeland for Laurie's affections, or so Drone had assumed. In the photo, however, Kneeland wears the fraternity pin that Drone had given Laurie. A "sudden flame of anger and a quick twist of jealousy" banishes Drone's apathy (5). Still, when Laurie finally appears, his indifference resurfaces and a pro forma dialogue with her follows. At this point, the story shifts focus to Laurie, who had spent the afternoon with Kneeland. The two had bumped into each other at a library where Laurie had withdrawn, significantly, a romantic novel about undying love and happy marriage. She and Kneeland had spent a charming time talking on a tea-house balcony overlooking San Francisco and the bay, an experience "long to be remembered."

Now, moments before she joins Drone in the drawing room, Laurie examines two sides of herself, one pledged to her fiancée and another romantically unfulfilled. Although she has been looking forward to this evening with Drone, the afternoon had reminded her that her appreciation of him had "worn itself out." She tries to convince herself otherwise, sure that "all engaged people had these little crises of uncertainty." When she joins Drone in the drawing room and he shows insufficient interest, though, she searches for "some way to rouse his flagging affection" (6–7). His false protestations of passion for her set off a "wrangle" from which they emerge pledged to each other, yet unconvinced of their love and "voluntarily blind to their mutual hypocrisy" (8). Laurie returns to her room and the romantic novel which, we learn, she and Kneeland have notated and initialed.

When Drone leaves the Champlin home that evening, he happens on Miss Havens, who reveals that she has kept her gloves on all evening from fear of erasing his presumably amorous message. Meanwhile, Kneeland in his apartment muses over his love of Laurie and his intention to have her. Miss Havens, back in her own home at last, ungloves her hand, smiles sweetly, and kisses the inscribed palm. Then Norris, thrusting a knife into the

conventional reader of his day, relegates romance to the rubbish heap with the story's last line: "Drone and Laurie Champlin were married two months later" (10). Though Norris, like Dreiser, did not excel at the short-story form, "As Long as Ye Both Shall Live," which slaps at the consecration of flagging desire, proves an exception.

Shortly after the publication of *McTeague* in 1899, Norris conceived and began planning an epic trilogy to be constructed around the cultivation of, speculation in, and distribution of wheat. A credible case could be mounted for the first volume, *The Octopus* (1901), as the most underrated American novel. Its relative neglect by critics and historians today disserves readers. It has a grand cinematic sweep, a strong narrative with appealing subplots, a large cast of colorful characters, marvelous crowd scenes, vivid descriptions of nature, and an intriguing blend of romantic and naturalistic elements. Its ultimate message, though, like that of *McTeague*, holds that human desire comes to nothing, that men and women in the cosmic scheme equate in significance to gnats.

The second volume of the projected trilogy, *The Pit*, published posthumously in 1903, falls short of *The Octopus* artistically and the third volume never materialized. The posthumously published novel, *Vandover and the Brute*, suffers from an overdose of the melodrama that sometimes tripped up Norris. But when he died of peritonitis the age of thirty-two, America lost one of its most promising novelists. Norris had the bad luck to live a little longer than Crane, thus forfeiting much of his rightful romantic aura. Arguing that one or the other might have developed into the more important writer would be a little like squabbling over whether Mickey Mantle, had he not been injured so often, would have hit more home runs than Hank Aaron. Both quarrels come down to pure conjecture. Suffice it to say that Norris showed at least as many signs as Crane of future greatness.

Kate Chopin (1851–1904)

Though Kate Chopin's birth preceded Crane's, Norris's, and Dreiser's by two decades, her many short stories and two novels appeared during the 1890s when the three men were beginning their own careers. Chopin has not always been recognized as a naturalist, but she read with assent some of the same thinkers who influenced Dreiser, namely Schopenhauer, Darwin, T. H. Huxley, and Herbert Spencer. She also read a great deal of French fiction, including Zola's. Familiarity with these figures contributed to her disregard of her inherited Irish-American Catholicism, though she remained a believer in a spiritual realm. She seems to have taken most seriously from her reading of the naturalists, especially from Darwin and Huxley, the relativity of morals based on Nature's unconcern.

Those who knew Chopin described her as a vibrant personality, but she suffered several devastating early-life losses that certainly left emotional scars. Her father was killed and her half brother died by the time she reached twelve. She married into a Louisiana Creole family at twenty, bore six children, became a widow at thirty and on the death of her mother four years later, found herself completely bereft of adult family members. At this point she returned to her native St. Louis and began to take up writing seriously with a view to publication. Women's frustrated search for satisfaction provides much of the subject matter for her fiction. Her first novel, *At Fault* (1890), explored the then touchy subject of divorce, and its consequences.

Chopin's sensitivity to deflected desire can be found in the commonplace book and diary she kept between the ages of sixteen and twenty. One entry records her worry that her longing to see Germany might turn out to be the "baseless fabric of a vision" (37). When she attended a particularly appealing classical concert in St. Louis, she confided in the journal that she had been transported by the music to the point where she "longed to be blind, that [she] might drink it all in undisturbed and undistracted by surrounding objects" (63–64). On her honeymoon trip to Europe with Oscar Chopin, she fell in love with Heidelberg and wrote in her diary, tellingly, that "for once in [her] life" she had not been let down by the "real versus the ideal" (109). These personal musings point up a nature prone to brood over the limitations of life in general and help explain the absorption with the specific societal checks on women's self-realization that features in her fiction.⁹

By all accounts Chopin loved her husband very much and her marriage seems to have been as happy as the institution allows. Yet those who knew her observed periods of sadness even before Oscar Chopin's death. Her fiction often focuses on the thrill of young love and courtship followed by marriage that bores and enchains with children. Whether she chafed at her marital situation before her widowhood can't be known. But either by observing the situation of married others or by reflecting on her own union in retrospect, she often attacked the societal constraints placed on women through the lens of marriage. Since she had to thread a needle between the prejudices and prudery of critics and reviewers during the repressed decade in which she wrote, her stories do not always reveal the depth of her wish to protest women's situations. But several portray female characters in the grip of insistent, thwarted desire. One such, the 1894 tale "The Story of an Hour," definitely does. And it makes its point by pitting one woman's sudden yearning for a shapeless freedom against the bonds of matrimony.

Less than three pages long, "The Story of an Hour" concerns a young woman with "heart trouble," Louise Mallard, whose husband has apparently just been killed in a train wreck. Her sister and a friend of her presumably "late" husband try to console her. After an immediate "storm of grief,"

Louise retires to her upstairs room to be alone. There she takes the story in a surprising direction. As she sits by her window occasionally sobbing, the sounds of life on this pleasant spring day—a peddler calling to prospective buyers, a “distant song” sung by an unseen someone, birds dialoguing in the trees—combine to stir her repressed desire (198). She trains her gaze on the “away off yonder” of blue sky and begins to feel a “thing that was approaching to possess her.” Try as she might to stifle this insistent sensation, she begins to whisper to herself “‘free, free, free!’” A surge of “monstrous joy” suddenly seizes her as she realizes that there will be “a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely.” Though she had loved her husband “sometimes,” she now realizes that “self-assertion” had always been her suppressed desire and the “strongest impulse of her being” (199). Gathering her composure and responding to her sister’s worried appeals, she descends the stairs “like a goddess of Victory.” But the front door suddenly opens and her husband, who had been far from the scene of the railroad accident and even unaware of it, walks in. Louise collapses and dies “of heart disease—of joy that kills” (200). Little wonder that Chopin encountered resistance to publishing this story.

Since the feminist movement “The Story of an Hour” has usually been interpreted as a brief for women’s liberation, and it certainly can be read as such. Its relationship to the desire and disillusionment theme beginning to grip the imagination of turn-of-the-century American writers who had discovered the naturalist philosophers and scientists, however, has been less noted since the tale appeared. There can be little doubt that reading the naturalist thinkers intensified Chopin’s questioning of the existing social order of things, including marriage. If the developing thought of the time correctly construed the material makeup of all reality and the absence of a supernatural way out, then all bets were off. Chopin evidently saw the situation in such terms at this point in her career. A vast uncharted moral landscape was coming into view for the initiate, a terrain that might accommodate a woman’s freedom to pursue her deepest desires unencumbered by marital or other obligations. But Chopin was acutely aware of the unlikelihood of this tantalizing if somewhat frightening freedom being bestowed by the patriarchy, at least in the near term. And so, momentary “joy” kills off Louise Mallard before the poor woman can test the viability of her dreams. But when in her few minutes of assumed widowhood she scans the “way off yonder” for signs of contentment to come, Louise displays her emotional kinship with an ever-lengthening procession of unfulfilled seekers in twentieth and twenty-first-century American fiction.

Another early, brief story that measures the distance between the limitations placed on women by convention and their ungovernable wishes, “The Kiss,” first reached print in 1895. A young woman named Nathalie sits