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Jeffrey A. Brune

Industrializing American Culture: Heartland Radicals, Midwestern Migration, and the
Chicago Renaissance

Jeffrey A. Brune

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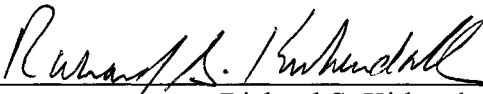
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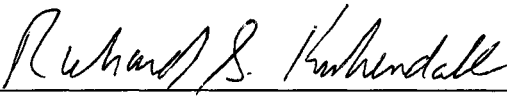
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Chair of the Supervisory Committee:


Richard S. Kirkendall

Reading Committee:


Richard S. Kirkendall


James N. Gregory


William J. Rorabaugh

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Abstract

Industrializing American Culture: Heartland Radicals, Midwestern Migration, and the Chicago Renaissance

Jeffrey A. Brune

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Professor Emeritus Richard S. Kirkendall
Department of History

“Industrializing American Culture” uses the Chicago Renaissance, a literary movement whose importance is rarely appreciated today, to show industrialization’s powerful influence on the development of twentieth-century American culture. During a brief period in the 1910s, the leaders of the movement, including Floyd Dell, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, and Edgar Lee Masters, popularized a set of themes and a style that ended the nineteenth-century American romantic tradition and helped set a new direction for the nation’s literature. They introduced to American writing a frank examination of sexuality. They focused on the grit of the industrial metropolis and the mundane life of Midwestern towns. They wrote about ordinary characters and, for the first time, introduced America’s urban vernacular to fiction and poetry. They also brought to American novels a less celebratory, more nuanced view of American migration and helped bring a style of realism to the fore of American writing.

Why they made these particular stylistic and thematic choices had much to do with their experiences growing up in the industrializing Midwest. All of these authors were from the regional hinterlands where the wrenching social, economic, and political changes of industrialization shaped their childhood and youth in the late nineteenth

century. As their families experienced downward mobility, these authors developed a Midwestern radical outlook pieced together from the many political movements that swept through the region. At the same time, however, their families clung to middle-class identities and the future authors developed a strong success ethos. They joined the ranks of ambitious Midwesterners who migrated to Chicago and, over the long term, succeeded in building professional careers. The changes they brought to American literature reflected many of their influences growing up in the industrializing Midwest. As they led American writing in new directions, they helped industrialize American culture.

This deeply contextualized study offers a new understanding of the relationship between cultural and social history in the twentieth century. It also reevaluates the impact of American radicalism by focusing on its cultural legacy. In addition, it is one of the few studies of America's internal cityward migration during the industrial era.

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DEDICATION

To Dick Kirkendall.

Introduction

In 1917 and again in 1920, H. L. Mencken proclaimed Chicago “the literary capital of the world.” His articles gushed with praise for the Chicago Renaissance, a literary movement in the early twentieth century whose styles and themes helped set a new direction for American literature. “Find me a writer who is indubitably American and who has something new and interesting to say, . . . and nine times out of ten . . . he has some sort of connection with the abattoir by the lake.” Known for his hyperbole, Mencken declared, “With two exceptions, there is not a single American novelist, a novelist deserving a civilized reader’s notice—who has not sprung from the Middle Empire that has Chicago for its capital . . . It has drawn [writers] in from their remote wheat-towns and far-flung railway junctions, and it has given them an impulse that New York simply cannot match.”¹

The writers of the Chicago Renaissance built their reputations by innovating with styles and themes as they helped set a new direction for American literature. Yet, despite their accomplishments, their prestige declined soon after the movement ended because their transitional works, by the measures of most critics, paled in comparison to the great novels of the 1920s. Even Mencken later changed his mind about Chicago literature and tried to disavow his earlier praise.² Innovation, it seems, gave the movement a short-lived fame. However, if we want to understand the early development of modern

¹ H.L. Mencken, *London Nation*, 17 April 1920; *Chicago Tribune*, 28 October 1917.

² Samuel Putnam, *Paris Was Our Mistress: Memoirs of a Lost and Found Generation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1947, 1970), 46.

American culture, we need to pull the Chicago Renaissance back from the margins and revisit its giddy moment in the early twentieth century.

The Chicago Renaissance was a broad movement in the arts and letters, and included everything from typographic design to architecture, but its most powerful impact on American culture came from its writing. Some scholars date the Chicago Renaissance as early as the 1880s and separate the movement into two generations, yet the one that had the greatest impact on American literature began in the 1900s and peaked in the second decade of the century. This dissertation emphasizes that later generation of writers and focuses on the authors and critics who played the most significant roles: Floyd Dell, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, and Edgar Lee Masters.

The Chicago Renaissance popularized a set of themes and a style that ended the nineteenth-century American romantic tradition and helped set the direction for the nation's modern literature. It introduced to American writing a frank examination of sexuality that challenged the Victorian grip on mainstream literature. It focused on the grit of the industrial metropolis and the mundane life of Midwestern towns, departing from the pristine settings of romantic novels and poems. It featured ordinary characters from humble backgrounds and, for the first time, introduced America's urban vernacular to fiction. It also brought to American novels a less celebratory, more nuanced, and more troubling view of American migration, and helped bring the style of realism to the fore of modern American writing. To be sure, other writers in different parts of the country pushed the same agenda, but it seems unlikely that this change would have taken place at

this time without the literary movement. This dissertation looks at the impact and especially the origins of the movement. It is a deeply contextualized study that places the Chicago Renaissance in its proper social history context.

Most people have never heard of the Chicago Renaissance, so a broad description is warranted here. The term “Chicago Renaissance” is itself a misnomer. Chicago was a new city and did not have any notable cultural movement in its past to be reborn. Furthermore, the writers of the movement were mostly interested in innovation and saw themselves as breaking traditions rather than resurrecting them. It was Mencken, the Baltimore critic, who invented the name, and he did so only as the movement was waning. He coined the term in the same articles in which he proclaimed Chicago “the literary capital of the world.” Nonetheless, the name has stuck and, despite its problems, accurately evokes the city’s creative, artistic environment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Since its inception, “Chicago Renaissance” has referred to the city’s literary movement. The majority of this dissertation focuses on a one specific group of writers associated with that term, but in chapter one I argue that the definition of the Chicago Renaissance needs to include a wider array of the city’s artistic activity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As others have noted, there were two generations of writers during this period, but many of the same forces that helped them succeed also produced work in other artistic fields ranging from architecture to typographic design to sculpture. Efforts at cultural uplift in Chicago began with the rebuilding of the city after the Great Fire of 1871 and gained momentum in the late 1880s

and early 1890s as the city prepared to show itself to the world with its 1893 Columbian Exposition. This period of literary and artistic activity continued through the 1910s.

Literature and art were able to flourish in Chicago because of a regional system born out of the Midwest's economic and social development. The system developed talent in the hinterlands which it drew to Chicago as part of an intraregional migration of ambitious individuals who would succeed in the city. The city's burgeoning printing industry, as well as the rise of local cultural philanthropy, made Chicago particularly appealing to migrants who wanted to pursue their interest in writing and the arts. Cultural philanthropy was a form of civic boosterism during a period when notions of "highbrow" culture took shape among the elite throughout the North.

As cultural philanthropists built an infrastructure that made Chicago a center for art education and art patronage, the city's burgeoning publishing industry offered career opportunities to writers and commercial artists. Chicago, with its lack of cultural traditions, was particularly open to innovation and its booming industries, especially publishing, offered opportunities to writers as well as commercial artists like typographic designers. The same system that drew writers also brought in artists such as Lorado Taft, who became a famous sculptor and painter, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, cartoonist John McCutcheon, and Oz Cooper and R. Hunter Middleton, two commercial artists who took advantage of the rise of advertising and publishing and revolutionized the field of typographic design.

More widely recognized than the artists, the literary writers of the Chicago Renaissance came in two generations. The first started in the 1870s, but thrived especially in the 1890s and early 1900s. The most prominent among them were Hamlin

Garland, Robert Herrick, Henry Blake Fuller, Harriet Monroe, Edith Wyatt, Hobart Chatfield-Taylor, William Morton Payne, and Joseph Kirkland. This group preferred to associate with the more genteel elements of local society, and although they experimented with realism, their work was not as bold as their successors' and their national impact was limited. Chicago remained only an outpost in the national literary scene.

The second generation of writers, who dominated Chicago between the mid 1900s and the late 1910s, has been the subject of most studies of the movement including this one. For the sake of simplicity, after the first chapter this dissertation refers to them when using the term Chicago Renaissance. This group included Theodore Dreiser, Floyd Dell, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, and Carl Sandburg, as well as others such as Vachel Lindsay, Margaret Anderson, and lesser known authors. All of the main figures came from industrializing small cities and towns in the Midwestern hinterlands and only Masters came from a family that did not suffer during the era's economic turbulence. Dreiser came from Terre Haute and his family moved from town to town in Indiana; Sherwood Anderson grew up in Clyde, Ohio; Masters grew up in the Springfield region of central Illinois; Sandburg was from Galesburg, Illinois; and Dell grew up in two industrial towns along the Mississippi River: Quincy, Illinois, and Davenport, Iowa.

Coming from such cities and from families without much money gave this group a much different set of experiences than most of the genteel writers who dominated American literature in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, these writers were heavily influenced by the leftist political movements that spread through the region, which gave them a critical perspective of industrial capitalism. Many also found that their

downwardly mobile families were not able to live up to middle-class standards, which often resulted in social ostracism. This led many of them to question the moral codes and other dominant social standards.

Although their families were not well-to-do, the writers of this group were ambitious individuals who migrated to Chicago to further their professional careers. Dreiser, Sandburg, and Dell were journalists; Masters was a lawyer, and Anderson was an advertising writer. The first to arrive in the city was Dreiser, initially in 1887, which did not go well, and then again in 1892. Although he arrived during the period when the first generation of Chicago Renaissance writers was at its peak, he did not have much contact with them. After spending a few years building his career in Chicago and developing skills as a writer, he became an itinerant journalist for a number of years and eventually settled in New York. However, when he wrote his first novel there, in 1899, it was mainly about Chicago and showed the region's and the city's influence on him.

First published in 1900, *Sister Carrie* would not become important until a decade later, only after the second generation of the Chicago Renaissance began to form. The individual most responsible for bringing the movement to its peak was Floyd Dell. He arrived in the city in 1908 and quickly gained the attention of editors at the *Evening Post*. Seven months after he arrived, the newspaper launched its *Friday Literary Review*, Chicago's first newspaper literary supplement. After the twenty-two-year-old was named assistant editor, he quickly made a name for himself with his insightful literary criticism which helped the *Friday Literary Review* gain national attention and set the direction for the local literary movement. In less than two years, he became chief editor of the publication.

Dell's most important contribution to the Chicago Renaissance came from his literary criticism in which he called for an end to the romantic tradition of American literature. He wanted writers to experiment with realism and use it to focus on descriptions of gritty cities, plain towns, ordinary characters, vernacular language, and sexuality. He wanted writing to reflect more accurately the conditions of industrial America. When he read *Sister Carrie*, he found an example of the realism he envisioned and held it up as a model for others to follow. The novel's initial publication had been suppressed due to its publisher's moral qualms. Dreiser managed to get the book republished in 1908, and it became an important novel after Dell discovered and promoted it. With Dell using his criticism to lead the way and *Sister Carrie* providing an example of what a new American realism could be, the movement took its shape.

In addition to his important literary criticism, Dell also organized a literary salon. He started building the social scene shortly after he moved to the city, and it reached its peak in 1912 and 1913 when he and his wife, Margery Currey, lived in the South Side's Jackson Park. There they hosted parties where writers read their work, offered feedback, and discussed topics ranging from political radicalism to Freud. The salon became a tool for developing a common direction for their literary movement. The more powerful members, such as Dell and Dreiser, also used their national influence to promote other writers in the group.

The Chicago salon was one of the early American bohemia and those who joined tried to live by alternative ideas about love, sex, and gender. In an effort to challenge what they viewed as an repressive Victorian morality, they practiced free love and open relationships, even though they tried to maintain their marriages. Their main challenge to

Victorianism came in their writing, in which they addressed the topic of sexuality in a frank, nonjudgmental manner. They also tried to set up an environment that allowed women to be equal, and individuals such as Margaret Anderson, Margery Currey, and Susan Glaspell gained opportunities and status usually denied to women. However, their experiments in free love and gender equity never worked as well in practice as in theory. Attractive women such as the sculptor Tennessee Mitchell became objects of lust and competition, which undermined their ideas about gender equity, and jealousy and resentment eventually destroyed many of the relationships of the bohemians.

Nonetheless, the salon helped bring writers together to improve their writing and set an agenda for the Chicago Renaissance. This social scene brought Sherwood Anderson into the movement when he migrated to Chicago in 1912. Shortly after arriving, he was told to send his first manuscript to Margery Currey, who read it and recommended it to her husband, who also saw promise in the work. Anderson was shy about joining the Jackson Park scene, but one night happened to meet Currey while walking in the area. After discussing the manuscript, she won his trust and convinced him to come to a party at her studio that night. There Anderson met Dell and the two instantly struck up a fruitful relationship. Dell appreciated Anderson's early efforts with realism and gave him feedback for improving his writing. Anderson found Dell's assistance so valuable that at one time he referred to the critic as "my literary father." Dell used his columns to help launch the new author's career, referring to Anderson as the city's "great unpublished author" and as an "unrecognized genius." He also arranged for Anderson to present part of his *Windy McPherson's Son* manuscript to an influential group of publishers and critics.

The Dell/Currey salon also helped bring Dreiser and other visitors into the fold. Dreiser had long since moved to New York, but Dell, after promoting *Sister Carrie*, reached out to the author and encouraged him to join the parties. Dreiser made frequent trips to the city and, as the salon reached its peak, made extended visits in order to do research at the Newberry library for an upcoming book. Although he could be socially awkward, Dell was able to pull him into the salon where Dreiser quickly became the next revered figure and was feted each time he returned to the city. Dell, Masters, and Anderson in particular looked up to Dreiser and solicited his advice. He also became an important East Coast connection for the Chicago Renaissance authors, most of whom sought him out when visiting New York and relied on him for introductions to the local literati and publishing houses.

Other people who did not live in Chicago also joined the movement, but unlike Dreiser most of them were still living in the Midwestern hinterlands. Vachel Lindsay, the poet from Springfield, Illinois, was the most accomplished author who did not migrate to the metropolis. He became a regular at the Dell/Currey parties and would visit Chicago just for the events. Other important visitors from the hinterlands were George Cram Cook, Dell's best friend from Davenport, and Susan Glaspell, another Davenport radical who would become an important cultural figure herself. After becoming involved in the movement through their connection with Dell and their frequent visits to Chicago, they moved to the city where Cook became Dell's assistant editor at the *Friday Literary Review*. Another person from Davenport, poet Arthur Davison Ficke, also became part of the salon, even though he had had no previous connections with Dell.

Edgar Lee Masters was never willing to join the Dell/Currey social scene, but the local literary network was still able to pull him in. He moved to Chicago in 1892 as a lawyer and tried to plan his career so that he could live comfortably and spend as much time writing as possible. Despite his absence from social events, he established important relationships with Sandburg and Dreiser that helped him grow as a writer and won him two important advocates. His first connection was with Carl Sandburg, whom he met in 1914. Sandburg, who two years earlier had settled in Chicago, was working for a tabloid with labor sympathies and requested an interview with Masters, who was the attorney for a waitresses' union fighting a court injunction against picketing. Masters knew that Sandburg was a poet and was sympathetic to labor, so he gladly accepted the request. Conversations about poetry, politics, and their similar experiences with populism in 1896 quickly cemented their relationship. Masters soon began joining Sandburg in restaurants and saloons that leftist writers and artists frequented.

From his position on the periphery of Chicago's literary scene, Masters also started a relationship with Dreiser by writing the author in New York to solicit his literary advice. Soon the two met when Dreiser visited Chicago, and from that point forward they always made a point of spending time together whenever they were in the same city. Masters even took Dreiser on a trip to his native region of central Illinois, which Dreiser found fascinating. When Masters wrote *A Spoon River Anthology*, which was set in that area, he credited Dreiser as one of his main literary influences.

Periodicals were also important to the success of the movement, and two more were established during the peak of the literary social scene. At one of the Dell/Currey parties, Margaret Anderson, a regular guest, announced the start of her new publication,

the *Little Review*. Founded in 1914, Anderson wanted it to stand for absolute freedom of expression and innovation, which represented the experimentalism and radicalism of the movement. At times its openness led to uneven quality in the publication, but also allowed for some pathbreaking work from Chicago and elsewhere. In one of its daring moves, it published James Joyce's *Ulysses* in serial form. Like the *Friday Literary Review*, it quickly gained national attention.

Poetry magazine, begun in 1912, was the third major periodical of the Chicago Renaissance. Its founder, Harriet Monroe, was an unlikely contributor to this phase of the Chicago Renaissance because she had been part of the more conservative, genteel literary scene in the late nineteenth century, and her verse was more traditional and romantic. However, even though her poetry did not fit well with the second generation of Chicago Renaissance authors, she was determined that *Poetry* would represent all the major trends in the field at a time when poets were deeply divided and moving in very different directions. Despite the bitter divisions, she succeeded at bringing them together under one publication. She published new Chicago Renaissance poets who experimented with realism, and at the same time received submissions from Ezra Pound and other Imagists who were at odds with the likes of Sandburg and Masters. It quickly became the most important English poetry magazine in the world and thrust Chicago poetry onto the international stage, where it received praise from people like William Butler Yeats and criticism from Pound and others. The wide range of poets it published included Sandburg, Yeats, Pound, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and Robert Frost.

With Dell's literary criticism setting the direction for the movement, *Sister Carrie*'s example of a new realist writing, a literary salon, and three influential literary

periodicals, the most popular and influential works of the movement made it into print between 1914 and 1918. That year, Masters began publishing a series of poems that received an unusual amount of attention. Dreiser loved the verses and did all he could to promote his friend, which included hosting a grand reception in New York to introduce the poet to Eastern publishers and critics. In less than a year MacMillan published the poems as a book called *Spoon River Anthology*. In anticipation of the publication, the *New York Times* conducted an interview with Masters, which it had never done for a first-time author, and ran the story in its magazine section instead of its book review. In addition to these exceptional honors, the *Times* also called him one of the three major American poets. When the book finally was released, it went through ten printings in its first eight months and became one of the most popular volume of poetry ever written in the United States.³

Carl Sandburg started publishing his most important verses at the same time as Masters. Like his fellow poet, he also published his work in serial form, in Monroe's *Poetry* magazine. When they were printed, they received mixed reviews and did not garner the same kind of attention as Masters's poems. Some even questioned whether his unconventional verse fit the definition of poetry, while others hailed him for creating a new kind of uniquely American verse. After the uneven reception, no major publisher sought him out, but the network of the Chicago Renaissance came to his aid. Masters, who was basking in the success of *Spoon River Anthology*, became Sandburg's primary advocate and enlisted his close friend Dreiser, who then sought help from the Baltimore critic H. L. Mencken. Monroe also played an important role and saw to it that Sandburg

receive the 1914 *Poetry* prize. With this support, *Chicago Poems* was published in 1916 with a foreword written by Masters. The book sold fairly well for poetry, even though it did not cause the sensation that *Spoon River Anthology* had, and received favorable critical attention. Its title poem, which described Chicago as the “hog butcher to the world,” became widely known and helped define the identity of the new, industrial city.

Sherwood Anderson also rose to the forefront of American letters in this same period. In 1916, the same year as *Chicago Poems*, he published his first novel, *Windy McPherson's Son*. Although its sales were not good, it earned him recognition and praise in the literary world. After his initial success, Anderson went through a brief slump before making his breakthrough. The reviews of *Windy* helped him get another novel accepted for publication the next year, but this book, *Marching Men*, was not as well received. With this failure, he could not find a publisher for either of his next two novels. However, in 1916 he began writing a set of stories set in an Ohio town and published them in magazines. The idea stemmed in part from reading Masters's poetry, and, because they won him positive attention, he turned his attention back to these in 1918. The result was the 1919 book, *Winesburg, Ohio*. Of all the novels that came out of the Chicago Renaissance, this one had the most immediate popular and critical success.

Despite the accomplishments of the movement in the 1910, the Chicago Renaissance ended quickly by the end of the decade. Dell, who had been a vital force in the movement, left Chicago in late 1913 and many of the important personal relationships that had helped build the movement broke down. World War I also took a toll on the

³ Many have claimed that this was the best-selling volume of poetry ever in the U.S., but because accurate

movement, as it dampened idealism, strengthened morality censors, and put bohemian radicals on the defensive. Dell's *Moon-Calf*, published in 1920, is probably the last work that can rightly be associated with the Chicago Renaissance. Except for Dreiser, none of the authors would have major literary achievements after the end of the movement, partly due to the fact that much of their material had come from autobiography. The Chicago Renaissance helped change the direction of American literature, but the city's moment in the spotlight was short-lived.

As a historian, my interest lies more in explaining the origins and of the Chicago Renaissance than in presenting an analysis of its texts. I call this study "Industrializing American Culture" because the Midwest's economic, social, and political changes of the late nineteenth century allowed this movement to happen and influenced its character. Industrialization was the most powerful force of this era, but I do not mean to imply that industrial capitalism was hegemonic. In politics, society, and culture, the industrialization of the Midwest was a dialectical process that developed from many oppositional forces of the era, including the rise of corporations, radical and reformist politics, the changing character and migration patterns of the middle class, downward mobility, the rise of Chicago's innovative newspaper industry, and urbanization. The writers who flourished in Chicago, unlike many of the more genteel Eastern authors who preceded them, experienced first-hand the powerful forces of industrialization. They brought to American writing a new set of experiences, loyalties, agendas, and innovations. Their connection with these industrial forces also explains why their themes

and styles could resonate in modern America and help set a new direction for the nation's literature.

For the Chicago Renaissance, industrialization is a more useful concept than the modern(ism) paradigm that historians have used in their studies of other American intellectuals in this period. In many ways, Chicago writers fit the model of American moderns, especially in their personal behavior; they embraced sexual freedom, freedom of speech, gender equality (at least in theory), and political radicalism. Many of those who participated in the Chicago Renaissance also went on to become leading bohemians in Greenwich Village. However, of their major works there was only one, *Winesburg, Ohio*, that can rightfully be called a work of modernism. The rest were realistic. Furthermore, these writers embodied many of the trends of the middle class and of their region that do not fall under the definition that historians have created for modernism.⁴

By emphasizing the close relationship between industrialization and the Chicago Renaissance, this dissertation builds upon Raymond Williams's theory of cultural formation. Social location, Williams argues, is key to understanding the formation of artistic movements. The Chicago Renaissance cannot be separated from local and regional social developments. It reflected many of the political and social developments

⁴ When discussing the modern(ism) paradigm, I refer especially to Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000) and Robert M. Crunden, *American Salons: Encounters with European Modernism, 1885-1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), as well as Malcolm Bradbury, "The Nonhomemade World: European and American Modernism," *American Quarterly* 39 (Spring 1987): 27-36; Daniel Joseph Singal, "Towards a Definition of American Modernism," *American Quarterly* 39 (Spring 1987): 7-26; and Dorothy Ross, "A Sampler of Modernisms," *Reviews in American History* 21 (1993): 121-125.

in the industrializing Midwest that shaped the experiences of these authors and others in the region.⁵

This dissertation also looks at culture as a site of political contest. Building on Antonio Gramsci, John Bodnar sees political relations “determined less by an older form of left/right politics or a struggle between social groups and more by a contest over signification and narrative construction.” Dell and others often made that same argument, and were well aware of the political dimensions of their literary battles. They were fighting to bring what they saw as the realities of industrialization into the American narrative. They wanted to represent the gritty industrial city, the small industrial towns, the urban vernacular, the ordinary individuals affected by economic change, and the uncelebrated rural-to-urban migrations of industrialization. They also wanted to challenge the hegemonic Victorian morality that they experienced as an oppressive force. Dell and others believed that realistic literature would help people become more aware of the effects of industrialization, which could lead to political revolution.⁶

However, success in the field of culture did not translate into political revolution. While they brought a critical, often radical perspective to their writing, they also represented (even if unintentionally) some of the more conservative, bourgeois elements of the era. The Chicago Renaissance also shows how audience reception can mitigate the politics of a cultural movement. Transforming the themes of national narratives is important in and of itself, but Gramsci and the radical participants in the Chicago

⁵ Raymond Williams, “The Future of Cultural Studies” and “The Uses of Cultural Theory,” both in *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso: 1996). Two historians have brought Williams’s ideas into studies of the U.S. and brought his ideas to my attention: Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: the Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996); Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999).

Renaissance wanted cultural change to lead to political revolution. General readers, critics, and other writers interpreted the movement's works in ways that would have disappointed those with a leftist agenda.

The first two chapters of the dissertation explain how the political, social, and economic history of the industrial era shaped the Chicago Renaissance and the lives of its leaders. Chapter one focuses on the regional system that allowed a national cultural movement to develop in Chicago. The most important parts of this system were the rise of the city's publishing industry—especially journalism—and the “upward movement” of the city's boosters who were struggling to gain highbrow cultural legitimacy for their crass industrial city. The Midwest's system of cultural production also included the regional hinterlands, which, with their educational reforms of the late nineteenth century, nurtured the talent that would enable a cultural movement to succeed in the metropolis. Chapter two looks at the leftist politics of the industrial Midwest that affected the leaders of the movement and their writing, as well as the middle-class values, ambitions, and migration patterns that also influenced the authors.

The last two chapters examine the products, the reception, and the impact of the Chicago Renaissance. Chapter three is mainly about the issue of sexuality, which was part of the writers' effort to undermine the moral hegemony of the middle class. Early in their lives, the writers of the Chicago Renaissance rebelled against middle-class, Victorian values, which led them to create a free-love bohemia in Chicago. They then used their writing to deliver their challenge to sexual norms, bringing a frank, nonjudgmental treatment of sexuality into their literature. Their treatment of sexuality

⁶ John Bodnar, *Blue-Collar Hollywood: Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film*

was their most original achievement and left their most obvious imprint on modern American writing. Chapter four examines the other changes that they helped bring to modern American literature, as they devoted attention to the grit of the city, the mundane life of small towns, the modern urban vernacular, ordinary characters, and the style of realism. It also looks at the results of their efforts to effect political change through the medium of literature.

Despite being such an important cultural movement, the Chicago Renaissance does not receive the attention that it deserves. The blame for this begins with literary critics, who became enamored with the great writers of the 1920s and quickly forgot about the Chicago authors who helped change the direction of American literature. Scholars occasionally have paid attention to the Chicago Renaissance, but their studies have shortcomings as well. Until recently, most of them have focused on description and on the local and regional context, rather than the movement's national significance. Nonetheless, I owe them some debts. Bernard Duffey's *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters* (1954) provides a complete overview of the literary Chicago Renaissance, including the earlier, more "genteel" generation. He places the movement within the context of American literature, coming at the end of the romantic period, but does not go far in his arguments about the movement's national impact. Dale Kramer's *Chicago Renaissance* (1966) focuses on the second generation of writers, or what he refers to as the "liberation movement," and goes into great detail about the events of the movement, the social scene, and the lives of the authors. Both books provide excellent descriptions of the movement and its social scene, and I have drawn heavily from them.

Two other helpful books, Hugh Dalziel Duncan's sociological *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center* (1964) and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's *Culture and the City* (1976), explain the local efforts that went into making Chicago a viable center of American culture. Both Duncan and Horowitz make strong arguments about the process of creating literary centers, focusing on the roles of corporations and philanthropic institutions. I also have borrowed heavily from biographies of the movement's leaders, the best of which are Douglas Clayton's *Floyd Dell: The Life and Times of an American Rebel* (1994), Kim Townsend's *Sherwood Anderson* (1987), and Richard Lingeman's *Theodore Dreiser: At the Gates of the City, 1871-1907* (1986). In addition to these studies of the movement, there is also Lisa Woolley's *American Voices of the Chicago Renaissance* (2000), which analyzes linguistic representations of women, African Americans, immigrants, and the working classes in the writing that came out of Chicago.

There are also more general studies of the literature of the region and the city that do not concentrate narrowly on the Chicago Renaissance. Coming mostly from the field of cultural studies, they emphasize original analysis of text and attempt to situate their subjects within the larger trends of American literature. The most useful of these studies are Ronald Weber's *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing* (1992), which outlines the period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when writers from across the region gained recognition for the first time; Carl Smith's *Chicago and the American Literary Imagination* (1984), which looks at how writers responded to and represented the new metropolis; and Timothy Spears's *Chicago Dreaming* (2005), which focuses on how migrants from the hinterlands viewed the city, and how the regional perspective of Chicago shaped its identity and institutions.

The study nearest to my own is Robert Crunden's *American Salons: Encounters with European Modernism, 1885-1917* (1993). Crunden's book looks at the literary salons that developed in six American cities. He argues that these salons, which nurtured new and creative thought, were the key to the development of modernism in America, though he does not see the Chicago authors as modernist writers. Unlike some of the scholars of the movement who fail to examine its national impact, he makes a strong case for the Chicago Renaissance as a key chapter in the development of American literature and culture, which gave me confidence in my own project. I am grateful for that.

This dissertation, like the work of Crunden, argues that the Chicago Renaissance was a key event in the development of twentieth-century American culture. However, it goes further than Crunden and other scholars in drawing connections between this literary history and the political and social history of America's industrialization. Without being deterministic, and without discounting influences from Europe and elsewhere, I am seeking to show the connections between America's industrialization and the development of American culture. To focus only on the urban intellectuals in the U.S. and Europe misses some of the crucial influences on modern American culture.

Of course, Chicago was not an island and this group had important interactions with writers and critics on the East Coast as well as those across the Atlantic. The members of the movement spent a good deal of time in New York, and their careers depended on the major book publishers, almost all of whom were in New York by that time. In the realm of criticism and the major publications of the movement, people living outside the city were especially important. *Poetry* and the *Little Review* relied heavily on

outside advisors and contributors. H. L. Mencken, the Baltimore critic, was a key promoter of the movement. These authors were also well read, and Zola and others Europeans writers influenced them in important ways and gave them styles they could model and modify.

In examining a cultural shift, this dissertation also addresses some important topics in political and social history. Foremost among them is the history of American socialism. A half century or more ago and even more recently, historians and sociologists paid a great deal of attention to socialism. They have focused especially the question as to why it failed in the United States.⁷ Comparing the American experience with the European one, they were often profoundly disappointed. Their central theme of defeat has also appeared in the work of labor historians who have focused on the left's noble efforts and modest victories.⁸ Scholars who try to celebrate the victories of socialism without acknowledging this theme of defeat do so at their own peril.

By focusing on culture instead of formal politics, my study is one of a growing number that offers the opportunity to reevaluate the impact of socialism. I discuss how some American socialists offered coherent critiques of industrial capitalism and middle-class moral hegemony, but unlike their European counterparts they did not develop a full and clear political program. Some socialist leaders, most notably the ones who came later such as Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas, did propose clear programs, but most followers of the movement in the late nineteenth century were much more unified by

⁷ Most prominently, see John H. M. Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Failure of a Dream?: Essays in the History of American Socialism*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 1974). This same question continues to preoccupy Lipset today. See Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000).

their critiques than by their plans for action. Given this emphasis on critique rather than action, it should not be surprising that socialists were more influential in literature than they were in the formal political arena. I argue that when we look at the impact of American socialism, we should place less emphasis on the socialists who lost elections and instead pay more attention to people like Floyd Dell who helped shape mainstream modern American culture.

Migration is another historiography that this dissertation addresses, and it does so in two different ways. Despite historians' frequent references to the internal migration to the cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there has been little systemic study of the topic. The best studies of urban migration concentrate on later periods, mostly around the middle of the twentieth century, and focus on the southern diaspora. In my efforts to contextualize the lives of the Chicago Renaissance writers, I use census data to look at patterns of Midwestern migration to Chicago and the long-term career outcomes of those who moved. However, the impact of this migration is more significant in terms of culture, and I also discuss how the Chicago Renaissance changed the way novels deal with American migration stories. Such stories have been an important part of American culture, and in the twentieth century these stories became much less celebratory than the romantic, epic tales of the nineteenth century. A simple comparison of James Fenimore Cooper and John Steinbeck is enough to illustrate this point. This observation is not original, but my examination of the Chicago Renaissance helps explain how that shift occurred in popular novels.

⁸ David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (New York: Macmillan, 1955); Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons, eds., *Socialism and American Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1952).

The final point about the historiographical context of this study has to do with the broadest trend in the discipline today. A President of the American Historical Association, Lynn Hunt, wrote about how historians are not as interested in developing new fields and theories as they were in the 1970s with social history or in the 1980s and 90s with cultural history. Instead, she argues that historians are now in a period of synthesis, benefiting from the gains made over the past few decades by breaking down the boundaries between fields and putting them into conversation with one another.⁹

I see my dissertation as part of the trend that Lynn Hunt describes. Cultural studies has raised many new and interesting questions about the past, but while the field has excelled in the use of textual analysis, it often falls short when it comes to understanding the importance of context. The story of the Chicago Renaissance is an appropriate one to examine during this period of synthesis. It is a story that should be told with an eye for context, rather than just a reading of text. The movement reveals much about the relationship between culture on the one hand, and politics and society on the other. It was part of the industrialization of American culture.

⁹ Lynn Hunt, "Where Have All the Theories Gone?" *Perspectives* (March 2002).

Chapter One: Culture's Metropolis

In early 1893, Chicago writer William Morton Payne could not hide his discouragement. Even though he was trying to be a booster of his city's literary life, his doubts about Chicago becoming a cultural mecca came through clearly:

The Chicago of the present is, as the Chicago of the past has been, so overshadowed by the commercial spirit that the delicate plants of literary culture, even where they have taken root, have found it difficult to obtain the light and air necessary for their continued existence. Here, more frequently than in most communities, may be seen enacted the spiritual tragedy of the young man or woman who, after receiving the advantages of a good education...deliberately turns from them, and settles down to a life of selfish social enjoyment or of frantic money-getting.¹

Payne may have had reason to feel alienated, but he failed to understand the social and economic forces of his time that were making Chicago into a center of cultural production. He did not realize that within decades Chicago would be a center from which various writers and artists would redefine their fields and develop styles and themes that would be regarded as uniquely "American."

To understand how the broad cultural movement that became known as the Chicago Renaissance was able to develop in a city "overshadowed by the commercial spirit," it is first necessary to understand the connection between this cultural movement and the region's social and economic history. Similar to its economic ascent in an earlier period, the rise of Chicago as a cultural center depended largely on its relationship with its regional hinterlands. In *Nature's Metropolis*, William Cronon borrows from geographers to describe the regional metropolis/hinterland relationship that fueled

¹ William Morton Payne, "Literary Chicago," *New England Magazine* 7 (February 1893): 684. Payne himself came to Chicago in 1890 from Whiteside county, Illinois.

Chicago's economic development in the nineteenth century. The city created links that enabled it to draw upon the resources of its region—such as hogs, wheat, and timber—to develop its economy and become the nation's second largest city by 1890.² Similarly, the city's cultural ascent also relied on the resources of its region. The development of the public high school in the late nineteenth century Midwest would give potential writers from throughout the region the educational capital they needed to pursue literary careers. Those individuals, ironically, would come to Chicago precisely because of the commerce that Payne derided as antithetical to literary culture. Chicago's growing economy and abundance of white-collar jobs made it attractive to those who would lead the Chicago Renaissance, and the city's vast publishing industry was particularly important for drawing and developing talent in the fields of literature and graphic design. Additional social and economic developments in the city itself also nourished the new cultural movement. In the late nineteenth century, many of those Chicagoans who engaged in "frantic money-getting" developed a cultural boosterism that would create new institutions and finance an arts infrastructure. At the same time, the rise of educational institutions for the arts added to this foundation. Payne was aware of many of these social and economic forces acting upon Chicago, but he failed to understand how they were setting the stage for a broad cultural movement in the city.

The development of the public high school in the late nineteenth century Midwest was part of the regional history that would allow the Chicago Renaissance to occur. This period, in which the public high school became widespread, marked a departure from the

earlier model of secondary education in the U.S. The antebellum predecessor of the public high school was the private academy, but it usually existed only in the larger cities of the East, and only for those who could afford the expensive tuition. Those lacking money and living in the small cities and towns of the Midwest could not get comparable training. In the antebellum period, most public education in the region did not extend past the elementary level.³

However, in the 1850s there began a shift that would usher in a new era in secondary education during the post-Civil War period. The Northern middle class, especially the self-employed, became a strong advocate for the public high school. Supporters argued that it could create a meritocracy for native whites. The public high school, they said, would offer educational opportunity and status to worthy children (especially boys) of middle-class families who could not attend private academies. As educational capital became increasingly important during the nineteenth century, middle-class advocates increased their demand for publicly subsidized secondary schools. Like Horace Mann, they believed that the public high school would keep America from becoming a class-based society.⁴

The political context of the time allowed these public school supporters to succeed in the Midwest's towns and cities. In the 1850s, state legislatures throughout the North, including the Midwest, made support of public schools part of state law.

² William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).

³ William J. Reese, *The Origins of the American High School* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 1-37. For overviews of the history of education in the U.S., see also Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); David B. Tyack, *Turning Points in American Educational History* (Waltham, MA: Blaisdell, 1967).

⁴ David F. Labaree, *The Making of an American High School: The Credentials Market and the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 4.

Midwestern states such as Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska were founded in this period and were among the first to have public support of education written into their constitutions. High schools were not mandated by law this early, but the laws did set the important precedent of public support for education.⁵

Another crucial factor in the development of public high schools was the dominance of the Republican party in most of the region after the Civil War. Throughout the country, areas under Republican control led educational reform and promoted high schools, while Democratically-controlled areas lagged behind and often opposed public education initiatives.⁶ Because of these political factors, high school development flourished in the Midwest in the post-Civil War era, even in times of depression when critics across the nation derided them as “cathedrals of learning” that leached off of scarce public money.⁷

With public subsidies eliminating tuition, advocates promoted high schools as “models of meritocracy.” In these institutions, supporters argued, native whites would not be excluded because of financial status. Instead, they could have the opportunity to rise above the wealthier students strictly on the basis of merit. To middle-class whites in the North, high schools seemed meritocratic, and in some respects they were. Native whites of all income levels were able to take advantage of the institutions, and poorer

⁵ Nancy Beadie, “The Limits of Standardization and the Importance of Constituencies: Historical Tensions in the Relationship Between State Authority and Local Control,” in *Balancing Local Control and State Responsibility for K-12 Education: 2000 Yearbook of the American Education Finance Association*, Theobald, Neil D.; Malen, Betty, eds. (Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education, for the American Education Finance Association, 2000), 59.

⁶ Areas of Midwestern states with more of a Southern political influence and under Democratic control, such as southern Illinois and parts of Ohio, were more hostile to educational reform and established public high schools later than other parts of the region. Beadie, “The Limits of Standardization,” 59; Reese, *The Origins of the American High School*, 52-54, 80-102.

⁷ Ibid.

whites did not find themselves too disadvantaged when competing with their wealthier counterparts.⁸ This phenomenon made an impression on Theodore Dreiser, who remembers the period in his adolescence when he started becoming more conscious of class and his family's low social ranking, but in spite of that "In school I was shoulder to shoulder with those who were better-dressed and generally better equipped materially than we were." In one of his rarer moments of nostalgia, he writes:

Whenever I think of the American school system as it was then--the genial shepherding of millions of children after the fashion of loving parents, and with more love and much more intelligence and care than most of the poorer parents have to offer--I still hold to some slight faith in, if not democracy, at least some form of social organization which would permit of the child being as advantageously and intensively cultivated as any other living and cultivable thing."⁹

It is important to note that public high schools were not meritocracies for all citizens, as they underserved immigrant families and often excluded racial minorities. Many families that relied on child labor to supplement family income felt they could not afford to have their children focus on education. However, high schools did create opportunities for native whites, poor as well as middle-class, of the region's small cities and towns, which is why so many of the writers who led Chicago's literary movement were able to emerge from such backgrounds. Even though many of them had to work to help support their struggling families, they still attended high school, showing how much native whites in the region valued the institution.¹⁰

⁸ Larabee in particular examines the extent to which the Northern public high school was meritocratic. Labaree, *The Making of an American High School*, 36-53; Reese, *The Origins of the American High School*, xiii, 80.

⁹ Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn* (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1931, 1998), 197, 190.

¹⁰ Public high school enrollments in the nineteenth century included relatively few members of minority groups such as immigrants and offered even fewer opportunities to African Americans. Indiana and Illinois even made their exclusion *de jure* as late as the 1850s, when both states passed laws that either excluded African Americans from public schools or distributed state educational funds based only on the number of

The rise of the public high school provided the institutional training for those who would lead the Chicago Renaissance. Scholarship was a primary emphasis of the public high school in late nineteenth century, so much so that it became a lightning rod for those who opposed educational reform. The emphasis on scholarship also was manifest in the high school alumni organizations of the late nineteenth century. While many alumni groups formed for social and professional networking, others were founded mainly to provide intellectual stimulation. These organizations, which existed in towns and cities across the North, met frequently to discuss literature and engage in other activities related to scholarly interests. Their existence testifies to the scholarly emphasis of public high schools in this period, and their ability to inculcate many students with a lasting appreciation for literature and the arts. An emphasis on scholarship meant that native whites without a lot of money could receive quality training that would give them the skills to pursue literary and artistic careers. Obviously, most students did not continue literary or artistic pursuits after high school, but the institution created opportunities for those who wanted to do so.¹¹

In addition to public high schools, another developing institution in the North would help prepare Midwesterners for leadership in established fields of art and literature. The late nineteenth century was the formative period of the American public library system. This period of building libraries was taken so seriously that it changed the built environment of small towns, placing large, well-designed building conspicuously in the center of towns. Theodore Dreiser was well aware of the physical

white children in each county. By the 1880s, public high school advocates became explicit in their belief that high schools were meritocracies for native whites, but should not serve minority groups. Beadie, "The Limits of Standardization," 59; Labaree, *The Making of an American High School*, 59.

changes the library brought to Evansville in 1882 even before he was able to take advantage of its book collection. “In the centre of a great common near the heart of the city, a public library was being erected, the bequest of a deceased resident. It was of a beautiful, creamy sandstone and of not unpleasing design, and from time to time I watched with interest the placing of these blocks into on harmonious whole. Its arched doors and fluted columns and cornices remain with me to this day.”¹²

It was a crucial institution for many children and adolescents who were eager to learn more than what was offered in the classroom. In addition to providing the buildings and books that eager individuals desired, libraries also offered important guidance. Librarians during this period had a strong sense of mission and sought to take an active role in people’s learning, leading one historian to call this the “missionary phase” of American libraries. Indeed, many of those Midwesterners who would become prominent writers of the Chicago Renaissance would recall that in their town libraries they discovered not only the books that would influence them, but also the mentors who would guide their learning.¹³

The Midwest’s public education system also was important because it provided individuals with the credentials they would need to pursue literary and artistic careers. This was true for those who grew up in the late nineteenth century because college credentials were still very rare. College credentials were not necessary for pursuing any careers, except college teaching or being ordained as a minister in certain denominations. Thus the late nineteenth century was a period when the Midwest’s towns and cities could

¹¹ Reese, *The Origins of the American High School*, 182-207, 253.

¹² Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn* (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1931, 1998), 136.

offer native whites, including poor ones, what they needed to become literary and artistic leaders, such as popular writers, journalists, commercial artists, or book designers.

Regional migration was another force that allowed the Chicago Renaissance to occur. Most of those who became the leaders of the Chicago Renaissance had started life elsewhere in the Midwest. Like most of their fellow migrants, they did not plan to become well-known cultural icons. When they moved, they intended to pursue other ambitions. They arrived with the immediate goal of advancing professional careers. Thus, the movement of literary talent from the Midwestern hinterlands into the metropolis depended mostly on Chicago's growing economy and white-collar opportunities available there. As will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter, these ambitions were typical of the many young people who participated in this intraregional migration.

Being gifted writers, many of those who became Chicago's most successful novelists and poets came to the metropolis to pursue careers in journalism. Theodore Dreiser, Floyd Dell, George Ade, and John McCutcheon all moved to Chicago to find jobs at newspapers. Dell was typical of these figures who migrated there without any clear, long-term goal of becoming a literary icon; his journalistic ambitions necessitated the move. He had become a reporter in Davenport, Iowa after completing high school, but quickly exhausted the professional opportunities available in that city. After his first editor fired him, he found a job at Davenport's other established newspaper, but lost that

¹³ Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920* (New York: Free Press, 1979).

position during the panic of 1907. At that point, he moved to Chicago.¹⁴ Other migrants who became prominent writers moved to Chicago to pursue professional careers that were even less directly related to literature. Edgar Lee Masters came to Chicago to pursue his career as an attorney, and Sherwood Anderson migrated to the economic hub to work as an advertising agent.¹⁵

Many artists of the Chicago Renaissance migrated from their Midwestern hometowns because they saw Chicago as the only place in the region where they could improve their skills and support themselves through commercial art. For Ralph Fletcher Seymour, who eventually became a prominent commercial artist, artistic ambitions left him with no choice but to leave his northern Indiana hometown. His attempts to find commercial work as an artist there were fruitless, and he could find no artistic community. Efforts to gain recognition for his artistic talents—much less earn money from them—continually met with disappointment. In addition to being unable to make a living with his artistic pursuits, his love of art and painting also brought him social isolation. As he later explained:

I meant to try to introduce [paintings] and make them important in the every day life of Indiana. Three months of sitting on the front porch devising practical ways of doing this brought discouraging results. The local newspaper did what it could by sending me to Walkerton to make a chalk drawing of a railroad wreck and a stock breeder gave me a job drawing a portrait of his trotting horse; otherwise the home folks seemed to think art had no value. As they began to concede that I was well on the

¹⁴ Floyd Dell to Dale Kramer, 24 March 1963, Chicago Notebooks, 2, Dale Kramer Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; Douglas Clayton, *Floyd Dell: The Life and Times of an American Rebel* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994), 42.

¹⁵ Kenneth Lynn sees Theodore Dreiser as the embodiment of a Horatio Alger character. *The Dream of Success: A Study of the Modern American Imagination* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1955), 13-26. Sherwood Anderson's story is also similar. As a lower-class child he earned the nickname "Jobby" for his strong work ethic. Throughout his life he was proud of this nickname. He also showed his strong professional ambitions through his career as an advertising agent. Kim Townsend, *Sherwood Anderson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 14.

way to becoming an artist they treated me as a man apart, or, at least, as some one they could not understand.¹⁶

When he came to the realization that Indiana did not provide a place for an artist, he decided to move to Chicago in 1898.¹⁷ In later years the city created many art schools which drew even more people like Seymour who had artistic talent.

For the most part, the city's economic expansion and the growth of white-collar jobs lured artistic and literary talent to the metropolis from around the region. A wide variety of industries brought Midwesterners into Chicago, but the publishing industry was particularly important for attracting many of those who would lead the Chicago Renaissance. With its wide variety of occupations in fields related to art and literature, no other industry drew as many leaders of the movement, nor did any other industry do as much to shape the styles and themes that the movement would produce. The relationship between the growth of this industry and the rise of the Chicago Renaissance shows one part of the tight connection between culture and capitalism in modern Chicago.

Command of a large region far from Eastern competitors gave Chicago the opportunity to become a major publishing center. Its ascent began in the 1860s as many entrepreneurs realized that Chicago had geographic and transportation advantages over East Coast cities. The city was centrally located and served as the hub of the region's vast railroad network. These advantages meant that Chicago businesses could deliver periodicals throughout the region more quickly and cheaply than East Coast rivals, which was especially important for news services. Because of this, Chicago news organizations took over the regional distribution of newspapers in the 1860s. These businesses also

¹⁶ Ralph Fletcher Seymour, *Some Went This Way: A Forty Year Pilgrimage among Artists, Bookmen, and Printers* (Chicago: Ralph Fletcher Seymour, 1945), 30-31.

distributed their own literature unrelated to news, which they printed in Chicago. The city's advantages also had a major impact on the news service sector, as Chicago companies such as the American News Company, the Western Associated Press, and later the American Press Association were among the businesses that dominated this niche in the late nineteenth century.¹⁸

Chicago's periodicals also benefited from the city's position as regional metropolis. The number of newspapers and magazines that Chicago printed for its large local markets was substantial (more than 200 periodicals in 1890), and they gained a much wider readership throughout the hinterlands. Many Chicago newspapers even ran columns targeted at rural readers. According to Bessie Louis Pierce, a leading historian of the arts, "As Chicago read, so read most of the countryside." Other periodicals also served the region's demands. By the end of the nineteenth century, most magazines and books that Midwestern farmers read about agriculture were printed in Chicago, and the metropolis also dominated the regional niche markets of religious periodicals and the publications of ethnic groups such as Swedes. Fleming H. Revell, brother-in-law of Chicago evangelist Dwight L. Moody, created one of the nation's largest religious publishing houses. R.R. Donnelley and Sons dominated the publishing niche of railroad time tables, city directories, shippers' guides, and maps and atlases. In addition, the city's giant mail-order industry, led by Montgomery Ward's, published their catalogs in Chicago.¹⁹

¹⁷ Frank J. Piehl, *Celebrating a Century of the Book in Chicago* (Chicago: Caxton Club, 1995), 172.

¹⁸ Alfred T. Andreas, *History of Chicago from the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, 3 vols. (Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1884-86), 2: 500, 3: 706; Bessie Louise Pierce, *A History of Chicago*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937-57), 2: 404, 3: 166, 114.

¹⁹ Pierce, *A History of Chicago*, 2: 421.

As a result of these developments, by 1880 the city ranked as the nation's third largest publishing center, at a time when the national industry was growing substantially. By the early twentieth century, almost two hundred trade and technical journals had their headquarters in Chicago, and in the 1920s the city was publishing more than five hundred newspapers, magazines, and trade journals. By 1905, only New York produced a higher dollar value of book and job printing.²⁰

The technological change that enabled the printing industry to grow at an accelerated rate came at the same time that Chicago was becoming the city that published more material than any other. The invention of typesetting machines in the late nineteenth century promised to make printing easier, more affordable, and more widespread than ever. This technological promise came to fruition in the 1880s and 90s, as typesetting machines—the Linotype and Monotype in particular—came to dominate the printing industry and allowed it to grow on a much larger scale than would have been possible during the era of hand composition. With expensive machinery, printing became capital intensive, which favored large firms located in major cities where there was easier access to capital and where the volume of business justified the investment. Largely because of automated typesetting machines, the value of printing output in the U.S. increased from 39 million dollars in 1869, to 211 million in 1909. Thus, at the time that Chicago became a publishing capital, the industry itself was undergoing one of its

²⁰ Ibid; Ulf Beijbom, *Swedes in Chicago: A Demographic and Social Study of the 1846-1880 Immigration* (Vaxjo, Sweden: Davidsons Boktryckeri AB, 1971), 301; Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center from 1885 to 1920* (Totowa, NJ: Bedminster Press, 1964), 69; Claire Badaracco, "Marketing Language Products 1900-05: The Case of *Agricultural Advertising*," *Essays in Business History* 8 (1990): 132.

greatest periods of growth, compounding the impact that publishing would have on the city and its cultural movement.²¹

The city's publishing industry was crucial to the Chicago Renaissance because it played an important role in the migration that brought writers to the metropolis. First, the distribution of Chicago publications throughout the hinterlands gave Midwesterners a keen awareness of Chicago. In these publications advertisements from Chicago's stores, as well as stories about the city and advertisements for good jobs, bombarded Midwestern readers. For many ambitious individuals, these encounters gave them a fascination with the place and a desire to explore its seemingly abundant opportunities.²²

Most importantly, however, the publishing industry drew individuals who would lead the city's literary movement. Most of those who became Chicago's greatest writers in the early twentieth century migrated to the city to pursue professional careers, and the most common one was journalism. The vast number of local and regional periodicals based in Chicago meant that no U.S. city, except New York, could offer as many opportunities for people to earn a steady salary by writing. Chicago newspaper jobs were readily available to migrant reporters with relatively little experience partly because there was such a rapid expansion of opportunities in the many competing newspapers. By itself, Chicago could not fill its growing demand for writers, so newspapers had to be

²¹ Harry Kelber and Carl Schlesinger, *Union Printers and Controlled Automation* (New York: The Free Press, 1967); William Mengel, *Ottmar Mergenthaler and the Printing Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Mergenthaler Linotype Company, 1954); United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1975), 699-700.

²² I have found this to be a recurring theme in the stories of many who migrated from the Midwestern hinterlands to Chicago. Joanne Meyerowitz found the same theme in her study of female migrants in the same period. Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 13-14. The migration and the reasons for the migration will be discussed further in chapter two.

open to outsiders; they could not afford to discriminate against newcomers who lacked connections. According to Hugh Duncan, the sociologist who studied the local publishing industry, breaking into the Chicago newspaper market was relatively easy, as “any gifted youngster could be hired in the nineties for twelve dollars a week.”²³

Many who migrated to Chicago for careers in journalism have testified to the openness of the profession there. George Gissing was a British writer who arrived in Chicago in the late nineteenth century with only five dollars and with no personal connections. Nevertheless, he easily found places that paid him well for his stories. He later looked back fondly on the way that Chicago treated unknown writers, saying, “I have never come across an English editor who treated me with anything like that consideration and general kindness.”²⁴ The city’s reputation for being a good place for journalists influenced many writers to migrate there. Floyd Dell, while living in Davenport, may not have yet dreamed of becoming a well-known literary critic and novelist, but he did know what city would allow him to put his writing skills to use. As he later recalled his reason for migrating to the metropolis, “Chicago was a place where a bright young fellow could get a newspaper job.”²⁵ Many of the region’s other gifted writers shared his awareness.

The many publications printed in Chicago offered not only writing jobs to reporters, but created many other jobs for writers. They could turn out editorials and feature stories, become critics of drama, art, literature, and film, write advertising copy,

²³ Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 148. It does appear, however, that newspapers still discriminated on the basis of ethnicity and gender, as nearly all Chicago reporters were white males.

²⁴ Quoted in Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 56.

²⁵ Floyd Dell to Dale Kramer, 24 March 1963, Chicago Notebooks, 2, Dale Kramer Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

and even work on cartoons, which then included lots of writing. Chicago newspapers also were pioneers in distributing newspaper fiction and even books to subscribers, which gave fiction writers outlets for their work. Additionally, newspapers and magazines offered careers to commercial artists in fields such as advertising, graphic design, and typographic design.²⁶

Journalism was especially attractive to potential migrants because in the Midwest there were not many other options for men who wanted to pursue humanistic careers. By the end of the nineteenth century, teaching had become a female profession, and the American Protestant churches had become less concerned with scholarship and more interested in evangelism and social issues. Small-town legal practice still offered intellectuals the chance to use their literary and forensic talents, but the trend, especially in the larger cities, was toward corporate law which did not emphasize those skills.²⁷

Compared to Eastern cities, journalists received a great deal of respect, in part because they did not have to compete with an established literary group as journalists did in Boston and New York. In addition to gaining prestige from their profession, Chicago's newspaper writers developed a tight-knit, somewhat bohemian scene. As detailed in chapter four, this setting promoted social connections among reporters, provided them with intellectual stimulation, gave them a strong sense of their professional ties and the importance of their work, and boosted the reputations of

²⁶ Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 149.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 150; Thomas Goebel, *The Children of Athena: Chicago Professionals and the Creation of a Credentialed Society, 1870-1920* (Hamburg, Germany: Lit Verlag, 1996), 87.

individuals within the group. In short, Chicago's most vibrant salon scene in the late nineteenth century was the one that newspaper reporters created.²⁸

As newspapers created the most vital intellectual scene in the city, the newspaper publishing industry also influenced the direction that Chicago's literary creativity would take during the Chicago Renaissance. As chapter five describes, the work that many of Chicago's writers did for newspapers had a great effect on the literary movement they would later produce. The vernacular language that Chicago reporting used, as well as the themes that it emphasized, departed from earlier traditions of American literature and even from East Coast journalistic conventions. These styles and themes would come through clearly in the realist fiction of the Chicago Renaissance, showing further evidence of the effect that Chicago's publishing industry had upon the city's cultural movement and, by extension, on American literature.

The printing industry provided an institutional support for writers, but the city needed other institutions to make a broad-based cultural movement possible. Developing a broad cultural infrastructure seemed an unlikely prospect in the second half of the nineteenth century. Chicagoans, as Payne noted, were fixated on business; the most respected citizens of the city were men who had made great sums of money, mostly through land speculation and entrepreneurship. Artists and writers at this time received little prestige or patronage. The city had not done much to develop theaters, schools, and other institutions for the arts. Chicago's shortcomings seemed especially glaring when compared to Eastern cities that prided themselves on their support for the arts, or even Cincinnati, whose boosters called the "Athens of the West" and whose visitors often

²⁸ Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 21, 36-37.

noted its pretensions and accomplishments. The city had a philanthropic tradition, but before the 1880s little of this philanthropy from the business elite was directed toward cultural institutions.²⁹

However, in the late nineteenth century, Chicago's business elite shed its apathy for cultural philanthropy and financed the building of the institutional infrastructure that would become one of the foundations of the Chicago Renaissance. This shift toward cultural philanthropy occurred for a number of reasons in the 1880s and 90s. The first had to do with anxiety, in Chicago and throughout the nation, about urban chaos. Concern about the depravity and lack of order in the city grew in the late nineteenth century, as Chicago and other cities grew at an unprecedented scale with a wave of poor, non-Protestant immigrants. Tensions escalated as industrial workers protested their position in society, which at times led to conflict. Flashpoints in Chicago, such as the Great Fire (1871), the Haymarket affair (1886), and the Pullman strike (1894), illuminate the contest between classes during this period.³⁰

This fear of urban chaos rose at the same time that Chicago elite's role in municipal politics declined. Prior to the Civil War, Chicago's business elite saw themselves as civic boosters who guided the city's development and allowed it to

²⁹ Bernard Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters, A Critical History* (The Michigan State College Press, 1954), 6-7; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Culture & the City: Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago from the 1880s to 1917* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 36; Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788-1890* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985).

³⁰ The historiography on these events is extensive. See Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Carl S. Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864-97* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984). For a national perspective on fears about urban disorder, see Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

flourish. They were interested in serving in government posts and found themselves able to win elections and control municipal government. They also used municipal government to support their interests, and saw little distinction between their own interests and those of the city. However, this political involvement declined drastically after the Civil War, partly because the city's elite saw themselves as less dependent on the workings of the municipal government. Their declining influence in government also occurred because municipal politics during the Gilded Age became an arena for interest group competition, rather than elite hegemony. The city's immigrant groups established political machines that made it difficult for the business elite to have their way in municipal affairs and elections. Thus, at the time when Chicago's chaos seemed to be increasing, the city's business elite found they could not use politics to impose order. This lack of political power made other methods of control all the more appealing to those who feared the urban masses.³¹

It was against this background of the 1870s and 1880s that theories about the power of culture to improve society took root in Chicago. The belief in the restorative power of art was related to the rediscovery of Renaissance art that valued order, proportion, and balance. Late nineteenth century art philanthropists in Chicago and elsewhere began to subscribe to the Renaissance belief that art had the power to spiritualize people and bring about social regeneration. These beliefs had developed earlier in Britain, with John Ruskin and William Morris as its advocates, and in the East, as part of the transcendental version of idealism. This was what led to the creation of the

³¹ Robin L. Einhorn, *Property Rules: Political Economy in Chicago, 1833-1872* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Horowitz, *Culture & the City*, 61-69; John M. Allswang, *A House for All Peoples: Ethnic Politics in Chicago, 1890-1936* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1971).

New York Public Library, Central Park, Boston Public Library, and other institutions.

It they took hold of Chicago elites in the 1880s, when they began to see cultural philanthropy as a method for countering the negative trends they saw in their city.

Theories about the power of art also may have appealed to Chicago's business leaders because they offered the promise of restoring some of the hegemony that the elite had lost since ceding control of municipal politics.³²

Another reason why cultural philanthropy gained popularity in this era has to do with emerging ideas about the existence of a cultural hierarchy. As Lawrence Levine argues, the period between the 1840s and 1890s witnessed the emergence of a bifurcated cultural hierarchy in the U.S. As American elites by the 1870s placed more emphasis on the importance of "highbrow" culture, elites in Chicago became aware that their city lacked these highbrow forms of culture. This embarrassed many of Chicago's elite, as they became aware of, and often agreed with, the assessment that Chicagoans were so preoccupied with material and business concerns that they had created a cultural vacuum. Charles Hutchinson, one of the key figures in the 1880s who helped turn the city's elite toward cultural boosterism, said "We live in a materialistic age...and—I fear we must admit here in Chicago—in one of the [most] barren cities."³³

This contrast between the character of Chicago and that of Eastern cities even became a theme of the literature that emerged from the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. Some of the stories depicted polar extremes of values between the cities of Boston, which valued and supported cultural activity, and Chicago, which in the stories was

³² Horowitz, *Culture & the City*, 20-26, 61-69, 70-75; Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1986).

concerned only with making money and cared nothing for cultural fulfillment.

Chicagoans' belief that their city's reputation was suffering was also confirmed by James Ingalls, who recalled the East Coast reaction to the news that Chicago had won the competition to host the Columbian Exposition, "The original suggestion of the name [Chicago] was received with mingled derision and disdain. Its competitors affected incredulity. It was not serious. It was a frontier joke, an advertisement, a bid for notoriety."³⁴

These elites who subscribed to the highbrow view of culture wanted to make Chicago into an American Athens. They promoted a narrow definition of culture that excluded many "lowbrow" forms of drama and music, while favoring European symphony music, humanities and science libraries, and museums. By supporting these institutions and events they could boost their city's reputation, bring it some much-needed sophistication, and regain some of their lost hegemony. By the late nineteenth century, the Chicago elite had lost much of its control over politics, but culture offered a new tool for demonstrating authority and superiority.³⁵

Believing in the power of art to change society and the need to bring Chicago some highbrow culture, Chicago's business elite in the 1870s began building an infrastructure for the arts and literature. Before this time, support for cultural institutions was more limited and of a different nature; most of the cultural institutions that the elite supported, such as subscription libraries, were explicitly for those who contributed to them, and not for the benefit of a wider public. In the 1870s, the elite started supporting

³³ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Horowitz, *Culture & the City*, 75.

³⁴ Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 73, 28.

new cultural institutions that were more ostensibly philanthropic.³⁶ Most importantly, funding for these institutions came on a much larger scale than ever before. It would create an institutional infrastructure that could support the work and careers of the artists and writers who would lead the Chicago Renaissance.

The Inter-State Industrial Exposition that began in 1873 was the catalyst that started a new era of cultural philanthropy in Chicago. The city's business elite created the Exposition to celebrate the recovery from the Great Fire of 1871 and to promote commerce. Soon, however, non-commercial art and science exhibits became some of the most popular attractions at the annual event. The Chicago Academy of Design contributed painting exhibitions, which brought the institution to the attention of the event's wealthy promoters. Many of these wealthy businessmen, as a result, started to get involved in the Academy and saw the potential for it to become larger and more public. The Academy, patterned after similar institutions in the East, had been founded mainly to serve its members, but this changed after the elite, who had visions of art transforming the city, became involved in the institution's leadership. In 1882, they changed the name to the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) and gave it a more explicit mission of public education and service. This new relationship with the city's elite brought the Art Institute great financial resources, which it used to become one of the premier museums in the U.S. It would later provide support and encouragement to many of the artistic leaders of the Chicago Renaissance and ran a major art school that trained

³⁵ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*; Horowitz, *Culture & the City*, 61-69.

³⁶ Horowitz and others have correctly pointed out that even the more "philanthropic" cultural institutions tended to serve the middle and upper classes, while excluding immigrants and workers. However, the institutions that were founded and evolved in the last three decades of the nineteenth century were open to a wider array of people than the earlier institutions that only served those who contributed substantial funds

many of Chicago's professional and commercial artists. The importance of the city's business leaders and of a commercial exposition shows once again the close link between the city's capitalism and the development of its cultural movement.³⁷

Through the Exposition, the business elite also became involved in other organizations that would become the institutional foundations of the Chicago Renaissance. A stockholder in the Exposition, lard manufacturer Nathaniel Fairbank, became president of the Chicago Biennial Musical Festival, which brought symphony concerts to Chicago starting in 1877. He then persuaded fellow business leaders involved in the Exposition to join him in supporting the Musical Festival. With this aid, the Musical Festival was able to use the Exposition buildings for performances, since the Exhibition only ran for two weeks of the year. This venture did not do well financially, but the business leaders who supported it put even more effort into their next undertaking: the Chicago Grand Opera Festival that began in 1884. For this they financed a new building on the Exposition grounds and hired Chicago architect Louis Sullivan to design it. The older buildings of the Exposition were not designed for music and theater and were uncomfortable for audiences, but Sullivan's building changed this situation. As a result, the Grand Opera Festival was far more successful than the Musical Festival had been, and it even earned a profit for its backers.³⁸

Brimming with confidence, this same group of boosters financed the construction of the Auditorium building in 1888. Designed by the firm of Adler & Sullivan, the

to them. At the very least, there was a significant shift in the stated mission of these later institutions and the ideas that led to their founding.

³⁷ Horowitz, *Culture & the City*, 36-41; Debra N. Mancoff, "The Art Institute of Chicago: An Introduction," *Art Institute of Chicago, Treasures from the Art Institute of Chicago* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago:

Auditorium cost four million dollars and featured a grand hall for the performing arts with a 4,000 seat capacity, as well as a hotel, banquet facilities, studio space for artists, and office and retail space for businesses to offset some of the costs, showing once again the close relationship between culture and commerce in Chicago. At the time it was considered one of the greatest triumphs of Chicago architecture. It featured outstanding acoustics in the auditorium and its hotel received attention for its detailed, ornate beauty. Chicago historian Perry Duis has described the late nineteenth century as the “golden age of the semipublic Chicago,” highlighted by the ornate, efficient, and orderly interiors that lined the “semipublic” spaces of hotels, office buildings, restaurants, railway stations, and department stores. These were designed to stand in contrast to the chaotic street scenes outside. Duis considers the Auditorium building to be the greatest monument to this age. Its architecture, which was part of an effort to uplift the city, had the same goal as the cultural events that took place in the interior.³⁹

The Auditorium was a turning point because it assembled a core group that would provide the impetus for the construction of Chicago’s cultural infrastructure over the next thirty years. Most of those who came together to finance the Auditorium were members of the city’s elite Commercial Club and had supported the Inter-State Exposition. They would be the key supporters of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, founded in 1891, the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, the Field Columbian Museum (later the Field Museum of Natural History), founded in 1893, and the Newberry and Crerar libraries,

2000); Peter C. Marzio, “A Museum and a School: An Uneasy but Creative Union,” *Chicago History* 8 (Spring 1979): 20-23, 44-52.

³⁸ Ibid.

founded in 1885 and 1895, respectively. The Commercial Club was the place where the plan for the Auditorium was first proposed, where the idea for a new building for a revamped Art Institute was put forth, and where the University of Chicago first gained support from the city's business elite. It also may have been where the idea for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra was first proposed.⁴⁰

Cultural philanthropy gained even more momentum after the city won its bid to host the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893.⁴¹ One year later, writer Hamlin Garland wrote, "The rise of Chicago as a literary and art center is a question only of time, and of a very short time; for the Columbian Exposition has taught her her own capabilities in something higher than business." Four years after the event, Chicago novelist Henry Fuller, another member of the earlier, genteel generation of writers in the city, remarked on the event's importance, saying:

The fair was a kind of post-graduate course for men at the head of Chicago's commercial and mercantile interests; it was the city's intellectual and social annexation to the world at large. The sense of shame and peril aroused by the comments of outside censors helped to lead at once to a practical associated effort for betterment, and scarcely had the Columbian Exposition drawn to a close when many of the names that had figured so long and familiarly in its directorate began to appear with equal prominence in the councils of the Civic Federation."⁴²

When Fuller and Garland saw the 1893 Exposition as a turning point in Chicago's support for the arts and literature, they failed to see the fair as part of a larger trend that

³⁹ Horowitz, *Culture & the City*, 36-41; Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters*, 51; Perry Duis, *Challenging Chicago: Coping with Everyday Life, 1837-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 38.

⁴⁰ Horowitz, *Culture & the City*, 40-41, 56-57.

⁴¹ The historiography on the Columbian Exposition is vast. For an overview, see Timothy J. Gilfoyle, "White Cities, Linguistic Turns, and Disneylands: Recent Paradigms in Urban History," *Reviews in American History*, 26 (March 1998): 175-204.

began two decades earlier. However, these comments illustrate the impact that the event had on Chicago's artists and writers. This seems to have been the point at which many of Chicago's writers and artists identified an "upward movement" in Chicago. They were voicing a new optimism that their city was making a firm commitment to artistic and literary endeavors—an optimism that contrasted sharply with the discouragement that William Morton Payne had expressed just before the fair's opening.

For poet Harriet Monroe, the change that came with the Columbian Exposition was quite tangible. Monroe was a native Chicagoan who, like most poets, found it difficult to receive much attention, much less financial reward. Her expression of frustration met with little response before 1893, but this situation changed when Chicago prepared to open the Columbian Exposition. After she criticized the fair's original plan because of its neglect of poetry, the organizers asked her to write a poem to be read at the fair's dedication. She demanded and received a commission of one thousand dollars—a remarkable fee for a poet. In addition to bringing her a substantial amount of money, the commission also brought her a considerable amount of national publicity. However, not satisfied with her publicity and her collection of a large fee, Monroe went on to sue a New York newspaper that published her ode without permission, for which she won an additional five thousand dollars.⁴³

Chicago's elite strove to make their city even more friendly to an artistic community after the fair, and they soon succeeded in completing an arts infrastructure in

⁴² Hamlin Garland, *Crumbling Idols: Twelve Essays on Art, Dealing Chiefly with Literature, Painting and the Drama* (Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1894), 152; Henry Fuller, "The Upward Movement in Chicago," *Atlantic Monthly* 80 (1897): 534.

⁴³ Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 96; Harriet Monroe, *A Poet's Life: Seventy Years in a Changing World* (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

the downtown Loop. This infrastructure would provide institutional support and physical space for the city's nascent cultural movement. It included the Fine Arts Building, which opened in 1898 at the corner of Van Buren and Michigan. There many of the city's best artists kept their studios, including sculptor Lorado Taft and painter Ralph Clarkson. Writers Hamlin Garland and Henry Fuller also had studios there, as did cartoonist John McCutcheon. In the building there were also theaters and rooms where literary clubs and rare book dealers convened, and where drama and dancing schools gave instruction.⁴⁴ Still other buildings added to this artistic and literary geography. As one participant and booster of the Chicago Renaissance describes, a vital cultural district developed around the Auditorium:

wherein the musicians, artists, book lovers, actors, dancers and craftsmen gathered and established themselves. It became a sort of home of the arts. Other neighboring buildings were soon given over to these activities. On Michigan Avenue to the north of the Auditorium an entire building was rededicated as an artist's headquarters and named the Fine Arts Building. In those days there was an art school in the brown stone building on the corner of Van Buren and Michigan. This school was reincorporated as the Art Institute and a fine home built for it, on the site of the old Exposition building, at the head of Adams Street...West of [the Fine Arts Building] stood a plain five story brick building known as the Athenaeum and it, too, was filled with studios of dancers, musicians, artists, with art schools, shops and one of the significant, old art clubs, the Palette and Chisel. The Dial magazine ultimately moved its quarters there.⁴⁵

This infrastructure would provide institutional support and physical space for the city's nascent cultural movement. Because these institutions were concentrated spatially, the value of this cultural geography was greater than the sum of its parts. Writers and artists would thrive on the creative energy and salon scene that this vibrant cultural district

⁴⁴ Seymour, *Some Went This Way*, 49-50; Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters*, 53.

⁴⁵ Seymour, *Some Went This Way*, 13.

produced. Furthermore, this concentration of structures, as well as philanthropy from civic leaders, signaled to the populace as a whole that the arts are important.

To add to Chicago's cultural infrastructure, many educational institutions for the arts began thriving in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This development was related to the proliferation of professional education in Chicago, which by the 1890s, according to one historian, had more professional schools and students than any other city in the U.S. Chicago's professional educational system ranged from the elite schools, such as the University of Chicago and Rush Medical College, to the numerous business colleges that focused on technical skills. Professional institutions were able to flourish partly because of the migrants who came to Chicago from throughout the region in search of career opportunities. Inexpensive business college chains, like Bryant and Stratton, made strong appeals to encourage students from throughout the region to come and take classes in Chicago. Elite institutions also drew heavily from the hinterlands for their students; at the turn of the century a third of the students at the University of Chicago had come there from other parts of the Midwest.⁴⁶

Art education in Chicago followed the same pattern as professional education, albeit on a smaller scale. Not surprisingly, many of the institutions that flourished were the ones that catered to the needs of Chicago's economy. Several small schools were founded in the late nineteenth century that trained commercial artists such as illustrators. The city's printing industry made it easy to draw aspiring commercial artists from throughout the region, who would come to Chicago to receive their training as well as a

⁴⁶ Goebel, *The Children of Athena*, 6, 90; Promotional pamphlet from the Penmanship Department of the Bryant & Stratton Chicago Business College, Shorthand Institute and English Training School (ca. 1885),

job. The reliance of Chicago's art schools on students from throughout the Midwest is yet one more example of how the development of the city's cultural movement relied in part on its ability to draw upon the resources of its hinterlands.⁴⁷

Chicago art training also reached Midwesterners who were still living in the city's hinterlands. The Frank Holme School of Illustration, founded in the early 1890s, pioneered art correspondence courses and relied on long-distance students from throughout the Midwest. This school introduced formal art training to many of the people who would become Chicago's finest commercial artists. Other correspondence schools followed the Frank Holme model in the years to come, increasing the cultural influence that Chicago exerted in the region. In a more philanthropic endeavor, in the 1890s Lorado Taft and Hamlin Garland, both of whom were Midwestern migrants, established the Central Art Association with the explicit goal of spreading Chicago's art throughout the region. Taft and other leaders of the Association would go to smaller Midwestern towns and give lectures, donate art reproductions, offer suggested courses of reading, and circulate exhibitions.⁴⁸

The most important development in Chicago's art education came in 1891 when the AIC started its own art school. It offered curricula in painting, sculpture, and architecture at first, and later expanded beyond this base. It drew its students heavily from throughout the Midwest; over forty percent of its students in the 1890s came from Chicago's hinterlands. The School of the Art Institute quickly achieved the strongest

C. L. Ricketts Scrapbook, The John M. Wing Foundation on the History of Printing, The Newberry Library, Chicago; Fuller, 537.

⁴⁷ R. Hunter Middleton, "STA Graphic Design, 1927-1937," May 10, 1977, 6/1-3, R. Hunter Middleton Papers, The John M. Wing Foundation on the History of Printing, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

reputation of any school in the region, which allowed it to draw talent to the city and provide employment and stimulation for leading Chicago artists such as Lorado Taft.⁴⁹

Typographic Design in Culture's Metropolis

The School of the Art Institute continued to expand into other artistic fields, but one, typographic design (the design of letter fonts), merits particular attention. When the School opened its Department of Printing Arts in 1921, it acknowledged the legitimacy of commercial art and Chicago's prominence in the field of typographic design. Partly because of the additional momentum that the School generated, Chicago's typographic design became a ubiquitous part of American advertising in the early decades of the twentieth century. Typographic design did not have the same impact on American culture as Chicago's literature, and does not deserve the same attention, but its development provides one of the clearest illustrations of the social and economic forces that allowed the Chicago Renaissance to develop. Like the other parts of the movement, Chicago's typographic design relied heavily on regional migrants for talent, was closely tied to Chicago's printing industry, and benefited greatly from one of Chicago's most prominent cultural philanthropies.

The success of Chicago's typographic design movement had much to do with the boom in the local printing industry. As the city's printing industry grew in the 1880s and 1890s, publishers started to realize that good typographic design could distinguish their

⁴⁸ The Society of Typographic Arts, *The Book of Oz Cooper* (Chicago: The Society of Typographic Arts, 1949), 28; Fuller, "The Upward Movement in Chicago," 546.

⁴⁹ Middleton, "STA Graphic Design."

books, periodicals, and catalogs from those of their competitors. Advertisers believed even more strongly in the importance of aesthetics, and they demanded typefaces that were tailored to the kinds of messages they were trying to send. This industry, especially with its tremendous growth in the early decades of the twentieth century, would become the main supporter of many of the typographic innovations that came out of Chicago, showing once more the close ties between the city's capitalism and its art.⁵⁰

At the same time that Chicago's printing industry took off, there was a rebirth in the appreciation for fine book printing and type design. In the late nineteenth century, the English designer William Morris began the arts and crafts movement that emphasized the creation of new type designs and the printing of fine books. The movement spread quickly across the Atlantic, and became especially popular in Chicago. Bookstores such as McClurg's began specializing in fine, highly ornamented books. Soon, those who bought these books developed an interest in producing such books themselves. These bibliophiles formed the Caxton Club in 1895, which provided a social setting for the community, as well as contacts and support for the members who were producing their own fine books. Chicagoans' interest in producing fine books distinguished them from the majority of bibliophiles in other American cities, who tended to focus more on collection and less on production.⁵¹

Local industry provided the economic base for typographic design to flourish, and the Midwestern hinterlands supplied the migrants who would drive the movement. Oz

⁵⁰ Victor Margolin, "Chicago Graphic Design: A Brief History," in *Chicago Graphic Design: The Best of Contemporary Chicago Graphic Design, with Essays on Past and Future Trends*, Robert Dewey, ed. (Natick, MA: Resource World Publications, 1994), 12-19.

Cooper and R. Hunter Middleton were two of the individuals who played dominant roles in Chicago's typographic design movement. Their biographies are representative of many of the city's typographic designers, and their stories show the importance of migration, economic development, and cultural institutions in the development of the Chicago Renaissance.

Oz Cooper was born in Ohio in 1879 and grew up in Coffeyville, Kansas. At the age of fifteen, he became a printer's apprentice, and in 1898 took some art correspondence courses, which he found fascinating. After failing many of his regular classes, he dropped out of school at age seventeen and worked full time in the print shop. Three years later, in 1899, he left for Chicago to enroll in the Frank Holme School of Illustration, which he believed was the best route for pursuing his dream of becoming an illustrator. His early life illustrates how Chicago attracted those with artistic talent and strong ambitions from throughout the hinterlands.⁵²

At the Frank Holme School, Cooper did not do well at illustration, and later admitted that he was not good at it. However, he took one class in letter design and did so well that he received a great deal of attention from his instructors, who were Chicago's leading typographic designers. By 1901 he gave up illustration and focused only on lettering, and did well enough to pay his tuition by designing booklets for the school's correspondence courses—the same courses that had driven his interest in art and prompted him to migrate two years earlier. Soon Cooper was teaching the mail course in

⁵¹ Piehl, *Celebrating a Century of the Book in Chicago*, 172; Stephen Glenn Crook, "The Contribution of R. Hunter Middleton to Typeface Design and Printing in America," (M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1980), 7.

⁵² The Society of Typographic Arts, *The Book of Oz Cooper*, 1-7.

letter design himself. He became superintendent of the Holme school where he stayed until it closed when Frank Holme died in 1903.⁵³

With the school closed and his local reputation established, Cooper took advantage of the commercial opportunities available in Chicago. In 1904, he partnered to form a lettering and design service for advertisers. With the rise of advertising in Chicago, the business thrived over the next two decades and at one point employed fifty people. In 1914, he added typesetting facilities, and in 1921 moved to a new, larger location where he offered the most complete art, design, typographic, and photographic service in the Midwest. In 1924, his partner left and Cooper ran the business alone and made some of the best-selling lettering designs of the 1920s.⁵⁴

It was during the 1920s that Chicago typographic design came into full bloom. Although innovations in typographic design were underway by the turn of the century, much of the work being done by automated typesetting machines lagged behind in terms of quality. The type design that came out of the early part of Chicago's typographic movement was focused more on the printing of fine books and had limited effects on the typefaces for machine composition. As a result, the quality of many of the largest commercial presses still had not benefited from the movement, which created the conditions for the field to continue developing. It was not until after World War I that Chicago's designers began to make new typefaces for machine composition. In addition,

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

the continued growth of the advertising industry, and its desire for attractive advertisements, demanded that the artistic quality of machine typefaces improve.⁵⁵

In the earlier flowering of Chicago type design, the Frank Holme School had been the main educational institution in the movement and was central to its success, but its closing in 1903 had left a void that would last for almost two decades. However, in 1921, the School of the Art Institute started its Department of Printing Arts. This became the main training ground for typographic designers over the next decade. Those who founded the new department were concerned that printing standards were declining as publishing was becoming easier with automation and with the industry's rapid growth. They wanted to offer a curriculum that would further the art of type design and allow it to spread to large printing operations.⁵⁶

The most prominent student of the School's new printing department was R. Hunter Middleton. Although born in Scotland in 1898, Middleton grew up in Illinois, first living in Eldorado and then in Danville. In public schools he showed early talent in drawing and music. He decided to go to art school, and for him Chicago, with its institutions of art education, was the magnet that drew him in 1920. He moved to the city to take classes at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts but did not find it satisfying and transferred to the School of the Art Institute a year later. After joining the Department of printing arts, he quickly rose to the top of his class. He received the honor of helping one of his mentors create a new typeface for the Ludlow Typograph Company of Chicago, which gave him the connections to get a job there after his graduation in 1924. During

⁵⁵ James M. Wells, "The Man and His Career," chap. in *RHM: Robert Hunter Middleton, The Man and His Letters* (Chicago: The Caxton Club, 1985), 1-3.

⁵⁶ Crook, "The Contribution of R. Hunter Middleton," 7.

his service at Ludlow, he had an enormous impact on his field by designing over one hundred typefaces, including some that are still considered among the finest of the 1920s. The one that he worked on as a student at the Art Institute was Eusebius, which became one of the more popular typefaces of its time and one of the three most important of his career. Probably his finest accomplishment was Delphian (figure 1), which he created in 1928. It is a typeface that appealed to corporate clients. Its elegant lines and geometry also reflect the influence of another Chicago commercial artist, Frank Lloyd Wright, also a migrant.⁵⁷

The image shows the word "DELPHIAN" in a tall, narrow, geometric typeface. The letters are constructed from multiple parallel lines, giving them a double-outlined appearance. The design is highly symmetrical and angular, with sharp points and clean, straight lines. The overall aesthetic is modern and architectural, characteristic of the Chicago Renaissance type design.

Figure 1: Robert Hunter Middleton's Delphian typeface.

Middleton's success was considerable, but the most important typeface design to emerge from the Chicago Renaissance came from Oz Cooper. He was one of the first to create typefaces with rounded serifs (the short lines at the ends of strokes on letters) and long ascenders (the part of lowercase letters above the height of a lowercase x, such as the top half of a b or d). He began experimenting with these advertising typeface designs in the late 1910s, and his work culminated in 1922 with Cooper Black (figure 2). In many ways, Cooper's advertising typeface, which he claimed was "for far-sighted printers with near-sighted customers," came to symbolize advertising in the 1920s. Its easy-to-read design was perfect for advertisers, and its superbold face embodied the

brashness of the decade's advertisements. As Robert Hunter Middleton later recalled, "Perhaps no advertising type swept the country so completely as did Cooper Black." In magazines, on billboards, and in newspapers, there was no way to avoid the best-selling typeface. Its ubiquity prompted some to deride it as the "black menace," but most designers expressed their admiration as advertisers came to rely heavily upon it.⁵⁸

For far-sighted printers with near-sighted customers.

Figure 2: Oz Cooper's 1922 Cooper Black typeface.

Like most stories in this chapter, the development of typographic design is familiar to many of those who know Chicago history. What has not been understood is the way that various fields of art and literature developed within a regional system of cultural production. This system is similar to the one that built the city's economy in an earlier period, as Chicago ascended to economic heights by drawing upon the resources of its hinterlands. To William Morton Payne in 1893, Chicago seemed as though it was destined to be a cultural wasteland, but that is because he was not paying enough attention to regional educational reform, patterns of Midwestern migration,

⁵⁷ Ibid.; Wells, "The Man and His Career," 1-3.

⁵⁸ The Society of Typographic Arts, *The Book of Oz Cooper*, 78; R. Hunter Middleton, *Chicago Letter Founding* (Chicago: Black Cat Press, 1937), 23.

philanthropists' new interest in "highbrow" culture, and the local development of journalism and the printing industry.

However, while a regional system created opportunities for cultural projects to blossom in Chicago, it did not determine the success of individuals nor the themes and styles they promoted. Eventually it was a group of writers who had the most significant influence on American culture. With an understanding of the system that made their success possible, the rest of the dissertation turns to these writers, their industrial era influences, and the impact of their work on modern American culture.

Chapter Two: People of the Hinterlands

In 1920, Irwin Granich (better known as Michael Gold¹) could not hide his surprise when he discovered that radicalism had thrived in the late-nineteenth-century Midwest. As he reviewed Floyd Dell's semi-autobiographical novel, *Moon-Calf*, he wrote, "I will confess for hundreds of others to the sneaking suspicion that no one can be a thoroughly emancipated agnostic and Socialist American unless he was born in Europe or of immigrant stock here. Floyd Dell's novel goes a long way to remove this prejudice."² As Granich learned from the novel, Dell developed his politics under the Midwest's radical influences. Able to flourish during a period of economic dislocation, Midwestern radicalism, a critique of industrial capitalism that the writers took from the many political movements they encountered in the region, helped shape the worldview of the Chicago Renaissance writers and the writing style and themes they would bring to the fore of American literature.

Less surprising to Granich would have been the middle-class characteristics and success ethos that also shaped the lives and writing of the Chicago Renaissance authors. In spite of their downward mobility, the families of the Chicago Renaissance writers clung to their middle-class identities and the future authors developed a strong success ethos. This led them to take advantage of educational opportunities and join the ranks of ambitious Midwesterners who migrated to Chicago to pursue successful professional careers and enjoy middle-class comforts. The writers of the Chicago Renaissance were

¹ Irwin Granich's real name was Itzok Isaac Granich, though he is best known as Michael Gold, the pseudonym he used when he published *Jews Without Money* in 1930.

² Irwin Granich, "Floyd Dell Revealed in *Moon-Calf*," *New York Call*, 5 December 1920, 10.

people of the Midwest who brought the many influences of the region's industrial era to bear upon their lives, careers, and writing. To understand them and their influence on twentieth-century American culture, it is necessary to examine their childhood and youth in the late-nineteenth-century Midwestern hinterlands.

The connection between the leaders of the Chicago Renaissance and industrialization began before many of these writers were born, when their parents began suffering from the industrialization of the Midwest. One of them was Floyd Dell. Like many of the Chicago Renaissance writers, Dell came from a family that had taken advantage of the Midwest's economic opportunities in the mid nineteenth century, before the wild economic fluctuations that came later. As farmers in Madison county, in southern Illinois, Dell's grandparents lived independently and comfortably. Their son, Anthony, also took advantage of the economic opportunities available in the Midwest. After his service in the Civil War, Anthony moved with his parents to town of Barry, Illinois, near the Mississippi River, where he met his wife and started his own business. The region's brief period of prosperity during the late 1860s and early 1870s allowed Anthony's family to live in material comfort, while his war service added to the respectable, middle-class status they enjoyed. For about five years, his successful butcher shop allowed him to wear nice clothes and develop an air of dignity, and it allowed his wife to achieve her ambition of becoming part of the town's "respectable" class.

By the time they had their first child, Charles, in 1872, the Dells were off to an auspicious start. Although Floyd's description of the family's beginnings carries an air of

condescension, it shows how bright the future looked for the Dells, and how they were living the dreams of many Americans with middle-class aspirations:

Anthony Dell...was one of Barry's thriving young business men. He could look forward to building himself a fine house; and Kate Dell [his wife], with her first son in her arms, could look forward to sending him to college to become a lawyer or doctor. They were securely, as it seemed, members of the class which was, in Pike County, and perhaps all through America, called 'respectable'. 'Respectability', in Pike County, meant the appearance and presumption of belonging to the class of those who lived by their superior brains, preferably upon profits, interest or rent, rather than unambitiously and stupidly by manual labor.³

However, despite early fortunes, the Dells' middle-class paradise came to an abrupt end with the panic of 1873. The Mississippi Valley was especially prone to the economic fluctuations of the era, and the town, as well as the region, were never the same after this depression. Within a couple years, Anthony lost his cherished butcher shop and went to work for wages at another butcher shop in the town. As his youngest son later described the situation, "The family was, in fact, losing its hold upon the golden ladder."⁴

During this era of America's developing industrial capitalism, technological change displaced many workers, especially those with craft skills, and major depressions came with alarming regularity. Major depressions struck the country from 1873 to 1876, and again from 1893 to 1899. The small cities and towns of the Midwest were particularly prone to these wild economic swings, which took a harsh toll even on many of the middle-class families who had prospered in earlier decades. The Midwest was

³ Floyd Dell, *Homecoming* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1933), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5. For a study of the middle class in the nineteenth century, see Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989).

harder hit than the East because of greater debt and more mortgages during a period of deflation, which made debts grow larger each year.⁵

Floyd was born in 1887, after his family had begun its long period of economic decline. This decline would affect his worldview, his politics, and ultimately the style of realist writing he would promote. His father's employment at someone's else's butcher shop was humbling, and the situation deteriorated further when Anthony lost that job as well. He then became a foreman in the town's woolen mills—a job beneath his former status and in an industry that was declining in the Midwest due to interregional competition. Floyd's two older brothers dropped out of school because the family needed money and it was too embarrassing to go to class in ragged clothing. No longer able to plan on white-collar careers and middle-class lifestyles—dreams that had seemed plausible when the first child was born in 1872—they turned to manual labor. Dell's brothers stumbled into whatever career offered the most immediate opportunity to earn money for the family. As he later recalled, "The first jobs from which they were not fired, furnished them their trades for the rest of their lives. That was the method of vocational choice by which one of my big brothers, a sensitive artist, with a love of drawing, became a harnessmaker."⁶ Of course, the harness trade was hardly a safe economic refuge in this era of industrialization.

In the wake of the depression of 1893 and changes in the industry, the Barry woolen mills closed and the family's economic status declined further. It was hard for anyone to find a job in the town, and Anthony, by then in his fifties, was especially

⁵ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), chapter six.

⁶ Dell, *Homecoming*, 4.

disadvantaged. After sinking further into poverty during this period of unemployment, to a point where the family could not afford shoes, the Dells moved thirty miles northwest to Quincy, a larger, industrial town along the Mississippi. There the males of the family tried to find work in the factories.

For Floyd's parents, providing the necessities for the family was difficult during their economic decline, and psychological factors made the experience worse. His parents, especially his mother, were never able to let go of the high expectations they had had when they married in 1870. Floyd's mother tried to conceal the family's poverty whenever she could. In the fall of 1893, she kept Floyd, now six years old, out of school so that others would not see his impoverished condition. Her and her husband's attempt that December to pretend they had merely forgotten that it was Christmas did not fool their young son.⁷

The career of Sherwood Anderson's father, Irwin, was remarkably similar to that of Anthony Dell, and the two families experienced a similar downward mobility that framed the childhood and youth of the future writers. Irwin came from a prosperous farming family in southwestern Ohio before enlisting in the Civil War, where he served for sixteen months and fought in three states. Following the war, he decided to strike out on his own. Although his plan to seek fortune in the West did not succeed, he came back to Ohio, married, and became the owner of a saddlery and harness business in Morning Sun in 1872. With a successful business, a new family that was about to grow, and a

⁷ Ibid.

respected position in the community (he was a businessman, war veteran, and Sunday school teacher), the Anderson family was off to an auspicious start.⁸

However, industrialization was not kind to Irwin. In addition to the economic depression of 1873 that hurt his business, he also had to compete with new factories that made agricultural implements at low prices. He soon lost his business, which led to a long period of itinerancy and economic decline, all while his wife gave birth to seven children between 1874 and 1888. Sherwood was born in 1887, while the family was living Camden, Ohio, but he would spend much of his youth in Clyde and other towns. Inability to pay rent was often the cause of a move, and the family frequently had to carry their possessions because they were unable to hire a wagon. Like Dell, Anderson was born into a family with a middle-class background that had recently begun a long period of downward mobility.⁹

Unfulfilled expectations of a middle-class lifestyle had a profound influence on Anderson's family, just as it did for Dell's. Like many families in the late-nineteenth-century Midwest that experienced downward mobility, Anderson's family continued to cling to its "respectability" and the children were able to maintain ties with families that were better off. Sherwood and his older brother, Karl, had many friends who were part of Clyde's upper class, and the Anderson brothers made themselves frequent company in their friends' well-appointed homes. For both brothers, these frequent visits stirred resentment and even humiliation. The cohesiveness and loyalty of those families contrasted with their own, which lacked those qualities; their mother spent much of her time working and their father, having failed in his business, often left the family for

⁸ Kim Townsend, *Sherwood Anderson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 2.

extended periods in search of work or to try to escape his problems. As it did for Floyd Dell, Christmas highlighted the problems that plagued Sherwood's family. When he and Karl visited well-to-do friends on that day, the two envied the presents and attention that their friends received from their families, knowing that there were no such gifts or intimacy back in their own household. The problems of downward mobility were much worse when middle-class expectations remained unchanged.¹⁰

Theodore Dreiser also came from a family that established itself in the middle class and then lost its position in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Dreiser's father, Johan Paul, was a Catholic Prussian who emigrated to the U.S. in 1844 to avoid the military draft and to make money. Determined to avoid a German enclave, he chose first to settle in Massachusetts, where he used his trade skills in the woolen mills and made enough money to enjoy a middle-class standard of living. In 1849, he decided to move west to Ohio, where he married a Mennonite woman (despite his steadfast Catholicism) and earned the favor of a mill owner who became reliant on Paul's skills. In 1853, his boss opened a new mill in Terre Haute, Indiana and Paul moved with him. There Dreiser's father became even more invaluable as a worker, and his boss made a down payment of \$300 to allow him to buy a house where he settled and began having children with his wife (Theodore, their twelfth child, was not born until 1871). By 1863, Paul was the foreman of the mill, which was doing especially well making clothing for

⁹ Ibid., 2-4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

Civil War soldiers. That same year he moved twenty-five miles south, to Sullivan, where he became manager of a different mill.¹¹

Despite a couple of setbacks—the mill burned down and Paul suffered an injury during its reconstruction—the Dreiser family prospered in Sullivan. As manager, Paul shared some of the profits from the business without incurring the risks of ownership. During this period the family had their eighth child and lived in one of the most coveted neighborhoods in town. They enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle and became respected leaders in their Catholic Church and community. As it did for the families of Dell and Anderson, the Midwest's prosperity in the immediate post-Civil War period allowed the Dreiser family to live well and develop middle-class expectations.¹²

Despite its auspicious beginnings, in 1870 the Dreiser family began a sustained fall. The mill suffered severe damage from a storm later that year and was sold, leaving the father without a job. Within a year he sold the family's home and attempted to start his own business, but was unable to succeed and then moved his family back to Terre Haute. Theodore's father had suffered some setbacks in the past but had always been able to use his trade to reestablish himself. This time, however, was different. The once prosperous man sought employment as a common laborer, work that, even when available, would not allow him to provide his family with the comforts it had enjoyed

¹¹ Richard Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser: At the Gates of the City, 1871-1907* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1986), 19-21.

¹² Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 23-24. In *Dawn*, the autobiography of his early life, Dreiser wrote that the family's economic decline began when his father had his accident in 1866, and the family went into a downward spiral due to the setback of the accident, poor business decisions by his father, and business partners cheating his father. However, Lingeman's research reveals that the family remained in a solid financial position for at least three more years while they lived in Sullivan, disproving the family legend about their father's fall from middle-class status.

during earlier years. It was at this time that their ninth surviving child, Theodore, was born.¹³

Paul Dreiser was a victim of the economic instability of the late nineteenth century. Changes in the industry and in consumer tastes created havoc for the woolen mills of the Midwest. New mills in the Northeast were larger and utilized better technology, achieving greater efficiency and economies of scale. In addition to competition from better mills in the East, the Midwestern woolen mills also suffered from changing consumer demands. Midwestern woolen mills, such as the ones in which Paul Dreiser worked, produced bulky, heavy, fabrics that were fairly expensive, but well-to-do Americans no longer wanted such clothing, and industrial workers needed tough, affordable work clothes. Northeastern woolen mills made work clothes at a much lower cost. Faced with the dual pressures of Eastern competition and shifting consumer demand, Midwestern woolen mills had little chance of continuing their success through the last quarter of the century.¹⁴

Even if Midwestern mills had not faced those pressures, Paul Dreiser's hold on the middle-class dream would still have been tenuous because of other technological changes. He had established himself as a spinner, which was the most skilled and highest paid job in the mills. However, in this period of mechanization, self-activating spinners were introduced to mills, relegating people like him to little more than machine tenders and supervisors.¹⁵ As happened to the father of Sherwood Anderson, who found it

¹³ Ibid., 24-26.

¹⁴ Ibid., 33-34.

¹⁵ Ibid.

impossible to continue practicing his trade of harnessmaking, Paul Dreiser found himself displaced by technological change and shifts within his industry.

The timing of Dreiser's displacement from the woolen industry could not have been worse. After spending some time trying to reestablish himself in the industry, he realized he needed to get other work and started accepting whatever kind of job he could get. However, he began looking for other work just as the panic of 1873 started a four-year depression that hit Terre Haute especially hard. A major flood there in 1875 only exacerbated problems in the local economy, making it even tougher for Paul to find a job—even as a low-paid laborer.

This rapid fall from the middle class marked Dreiser's early childhood. Later he wrote that his early life in Terre Haute was "one unbroken stretch of privation and misery." His father was unable to find work and support his family, which lived mostly by whatever the wife could earn and what Dreiser's oldest siblings contributed. In addition to being unable to help his family financially, his morally righteous father also had frequent conflicts with his wife and children. As a result of the father's financial problems and the family's resentment toward him, his wife left him behind and moved back to Sullivan in 1880, taking her three youngest children. The mother and her children moved many times after this, finding it difficult to gain financial stability during Theodore's first eleven years. As happened to many families in the Midwest, and to most of those who would go on to become the leading writers of the Chicago Renaissance, the industrialization of the late nineteenth century treated the Dreiser family harshly, depriving them of their bourgeois status and leaving them to cope with poverty.¹⁶

¹⁶ Ibid.

Along with the experience of downward mobility, the leading writers of the Chicago Renaissance were also exposed to the many political movements that swept through the region during the era of industrialization. They did not latch on to any specific political agenda or ideology, but from their encounters with each movement they developed a worldview that emphasized a critique of industrial capitalism and middle-class society.

For Floyd Dell, his initial radicalism began, ironically, with his childhood encounters with Republicanism and the G.A.R., two institutions not normally associated with radicalism. His grandfather and father had been ardent abolitionists, in an area of southern Illinois where the Republican party and abolitionism were not welcome. Anthony Dell developed a reputation for combativeness and idealism as he debated slavery with all who were willing. After military service and time spent in a Confederate prison camp, his return to Illinois was a vindication because he had been an early supporter of the war that was now celebrated. Not willing to let his war hero status be short-lived, he spent much of the rest of his life celebrating the emancipation of slaves and the victory of the North. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, he based his identity on his status as a veteran soldier and as a businessman, but after his economic fortunes soured, he clung more tightly to memories of his participation in the Union crusade. When he encountered long periods of unemployment during the 1870s and 1880s, he occupied his time remembering the war and reading and rereading the memoirs of U.S. Grant after they were published in 1885. His historical obsession built, and he took

advantage of every opportunity to participate in the activities of the G.A.R. and to show his unflinching loyalty to the Republican party.¹⁷

Characters like Anthony Dell, who were obsessed with their identity as Civil War veterans, were not unfamiliar in the industrializing Midwest. Sherwood Anderson's first novel, *Windy McPherson's Son*, was about a Civil War veteran who spent much of his time trying to recapture his glory days of battle. His position in society gone, Windy McPherson would try to bolster himself by recounting his Civil War memories. Referring to the veterans, Anderson describes "something big and pathetic in their hungry search for auditors and in their endless war talk." He explains how difficult it was for them to return home and perform trivial labor without getting respect they desired:

Is it so strange that they could not come home and begin again peacefully painting houses or mending broken shoes? A something in them cried out. It sent them to bluster and boast upon the street corners. When people passing continued to think only of their brick laying and of their shoveling of corn into cars, when the sons of these war gods walking home at evening and hearing the vain boastings of the father began to doubt even the facts of the great struggle, a something snapped in their brains and they fell to chattering and shouting their vain boastings to all as they looked hungrily about for believing eyes.

Anderson also remembers what it was like to listen to these endless war stories, and urges others to be patient and "remember with kindness the heroism of the listeners."¹⁸

Despite the pathetic nature of Anthony's retreat into nostalgia, his memories and celebration of the Union cause had a profound influence on his son. During his long periods of unemployment, Anthony trained Floyd in the manual of arms and taught him how to march. He gave his son lectures about Republican idealism and took the young

¹⁷ Douglas Clayton, *Floyd Dell: The Life and Times of an American Rebel* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994), 6-7.

¹⁸ Sherwood Anderson, *Windy McPherson's Son* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 21-22.

boy to Decoration Day festivities. There, Floyd listened attentively to Republican speeches and admired his father's participation in the parades as a member of the Grand Army of the Republic. For the young boy, the Republicanism that glorified the good fight of the Civil War was not empty rhetoric that masked an underlying pragmatic conservatism. Instead, a belief in Abraham Lincoln and the Union cause taught him that political action based on idealism could effect positive social change. Dell had fallen under the influence of those within the G.A.R. and the G.O.P., including his father, who promoted a more idealistic, humanitarian interpretation of the Civil War than either organization wanted to endorse. He decided he wanted to become a Republican President when he grew up, later writing that "My Presidential ambition was somehow mixed up with my admiration for my father, whose political discourses I had listened to with profound respect."¹⁹ Although he later became disillusioned with the practices of the Republican party, he held on to the idealism that the party indoctrination had taught him.

Republicanism and the G.A.R. taught Dell to be idealistic because his father was involved with a faction of veterans who were fighting to control the memory of the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln. Within the G.A.R., the issue of historical memory first became important when the organization revitalized in the late 1870s and 1880s. In this period it focused on controlling history textbooks and popular memory. It attacked what it saw as increasing sympathy for the South, and sought to dispel the belief that emancipation was the reason for the Civil War. Instead, the organization pressed for an

¹⁹ Dell, *Homecoming*, 6-9.

interpretation of the war as a contest solely to preserve the union and allow the United States to fulfill its glorious destiny.²⁰

Despite the G.A.R.'s official stance on the interpretation of the Civil War, there were many within the organization's ranks who held fast to their belief that the war centered on a conflict over emancipation. Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists fought the G.A.R. over this issue, and the chief founder of the G.A.R., John Logan, also tried to focus the organization on issues of racial justice. People like Logan and Douglass, although they were not able to control the organization's official interpretation of the Civil War, nonetheless continued to participate in the organization.²¹ They attended G.A.R. events and gave speeches about the central place of emancipation in the war's legacy, and they brought attention to issues such as the rights of African American ex-soldiers. Their continuing importance in the organization became clear in 1892 when the Patriotic Instruction Committee issued its recommendations on a national holiday to mark the Civil War. Rather than making a single recommendation, the committee issued a wide-ranging list of possible commemorations, including Lincoln's birthday, Appomattox, and the Emancipation Proclamation.²² The committee's inclusion of the Emancipation Proclamation as a possible holiday shows that despite G.A.R.'s official interpretation of the war, dissenters remained active in the organization and found ways to exert their influence.

²⁰ For a history of the G.A.R., see Stuart Charles McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Mary R. Dearing, *Veterans in Politics: The Story of the G.A.R.* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952).

²¹ Although John Logan is not well remembered today, his name is still familiar in many cities that have named important locations for him, including Washington D.C. (Logan Circle) and Chicago (Logan Square). He refused the GOP presidential nomination several times, and many observers believe he could have won easily, but he regarded the G.A.R. as a more permanent power base. James Pickett Jones, *John A. Logan, Stalwart Republican from Illinois* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1982).

The G.A.R. remained important to these more idealistic veterans like Anthony Dell because it was the organization that did the most to draw public attention to the Civil War. Especially in the late 1870s and throughout the 1880s and 90s, the G.A.R. held meetings, organized public parades, and sponsored campfire meetings that allowed veterans to celebrate their role in the conflict. Even those who disagreed with the organization's official historical interpretation could appreciate how the organization portrayed the war as a fight over principles. Their participation in the G.A.R. meant that these idealists might use the organization to promote an alternative interpretation of the war that emphasized humanitarian idealism. This was a particularly useful organization because of its close link with the Republican party. Encampments occurred in conjunction with important GOP political activities, and Republicans with national ambitions could not succeed without winning the endorsement of the G.A.R. Veterans' activities in Civil War commemorations meant that the parades, meetings, and rallies of the G.A.R. and the Republican party could become forums for promoting an ideology that was more idealistic and radical than most Republican and G.A.R. leaders liked.²³

Some radicals in the Midwest seized on the idealistic, humanitarian interpretation of the Civil War that a faction within the G.A.R. promoted. Recognizing the power of this historical memory, socialist promoters even used it in their literature. In the early twentieth century, the leading American socialist newspaper, *The Appeal to Reason*, saw few positive lessons in American history other than the ones from abolitionism, the Civil

²² McConnell, *Glorious Contentment*, 213, 227.

²³ McConnell and Dearing examine the contest within the G.A.R. over historical memory, but they portray this conflict as ending in a victory by those who controlled the official policy of the G.A.R. by the 1880s. They do not emphasize the importance of those who remained in the organization and challenged its message.

War, and Abraham Lincoln. Writers for the newspaper argued that the elite had duped less fortunate people into colonizing the New World, that the founding fathers were corrupt, that the Constitution was based on deception, and that westward migration was an exile that the Eastern elite had forced upon the less fortunate, yet they still revered Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War crusade. Mythologizing Lincoln in a way that would support their cause, socialist writers cited his remarks about the need for the workers to reap the fruit of their labor, the right of the people to protect their liberties, the need to value the rights of man over the rights of property, and the menace of powerful corporations that attempted to “fleece the people.” They also celebrated Wendell Phillips and other abolitionists, and offered analogies between slave owners’ exploitation of blacks and capitalists’ exploitation of workers.²⁴

After his childhood encounters with the G.A.R. and Republican party, Dell continued to develop his Midwestern radical perspective through encounters with populists, immigrants, and socialists. Although he was still young at the time the populist moment passed, its legacy still affected him. By 1900, Dell began meeting populist farmers who, because their agrarian movement had dissolved, were beginning to identify with the region’s growing socialism. It was at this time, after a conversation with a farmer and former populist, that Dell had an epiphany and decided to commit himself to socialism.²⁵

²⁴ Janice Hume, “Lincoln Was a ‘Red’ and Washington a Bolshevik: Public Memory as Persuader in the *Appeal to Reason*,” *Journalism History* 28 (Winter 2003): 175. For an account of how John Altgeld and other progressive leaders in turn-of-the-century Chicago followed the “Lincoln ideal,” see Ray Ginger, *Altgeld’s America: The Lincoln Ideal Versus Changing Realities* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1958).

²⁵ Dell, *Homecoming*, 55.

Radical factory workers were also among the radical groups that influenced Dell's ideological development. He had come into contact with them because of his family's downward mobility and his need to perform blue-collar work. Once, when working in a candy factory as a youth, he fell in love with a fellow worker who came from a family with a long history of supporting radical causes. She and Dell shared an admiration for Robert Ingersoll, a popular lecturer who, after serving as a cavalry commander in the Civil War, gave up his allegiance to the Democratic party and became an active, idealistic Republican. In his orations he promoted idealism and a scientific rationalism that earned him the title "the great agnostic" and increased his popularity with secular leftists. Ingersoll is yet another example of the idealists who were members of the Republican party. That Dell became aware of him through a fellow factory worker also shows the influence of worker radicalism in the small cities of the Midwest. His family's downward mobility was the reason Dell, whose family had been middle-class, found himself working beside labor radicals. That same downward mobility and industrial turbulence also made him more receptive to radical critiques of society.²⁶

Immigrants also influenced Dell's ideological development. In Quincy, where he spent part of his adolescence and first encountered socialism, Germans had a strong presence. At one point they accounted for forty percent of the town's population, and their greatest influx had come during the period following 1848. There, many of the radicals Dell encountered had come from this immigrant background. Dell's next home, Davenport, Iowa, also had a large German population that swelled in the wake of 1848. In explaining why a city like Davenport, with conservative Yankee influences, could

have such a vibrant group of radicals, Dell's friend George Cram Cook later credited "the liberalizing influence exerted upon our old American Puritanism during many years by the European exiles of 1848 who settled in Davenport after the failure of the revolutions." One of Dell's most influential mentors was a Jewish rabbi named Fineshriber, who provided the adolescent with a great deal of intellectual stimulation and social settings for rigorous debates. Still another man of German origin, Fritz Feuchter, helped bring Dell into Davenport's Socialist party local, where the youth played a central role in lively debates. Dell later recalled that he respected Feuchter more than anyone else he met in Davenport.²⁷

The form of socialism that the Germans and others offered, Cook maintained, resonated particularly well with the region's future intellectuals because this radicalism emphasized aesthetic appreciation. "Some of [the immigrant radicals]," he reported, "were not only fighters for freedom, but men of culture."²⁸ For Dell, socialism was appealing in part because it provided a stimulating intellectual environment. This was at a time when Dell had become interested in learning and took advantage of the local library and public high school, where he received a classical education. He had joined the socialist gatherings after being told that "socialism was not a matter of economics

²⁶ Clayton, *Floyd Dell*, 14-15, 18. For a biography of Ingersoll, see Orvin Prentiss Larson, *American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll, a Biography* (New York: Citadel Press, 1993, 1962).

²⁷ Clayton, *Floyd Dell*, 13-15; George Cram Cook, "Davenport Has Never Done Anything to Help Its Writers—Intellectual Currents of 1912 Not Flowing Here 'Writers Accident,'" clipping, publication and date unknown (probably from 1912 Davenport newspaper), 3-71, Floyd Dell Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; Dell to Ralph Cram, 14 March 1940, Ralph Cram Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago. For the radical influence of post-1848 immigrants in the Midwest, see Howard Quint, *The Forging of American Socialism: Origins of the Modern Movement* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1953); Bruce C. Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

²⁸ Cook, "Davenport Has Never Done Anything to Help Its Writers."

only, but of a different kind of life.... 'It is the kind of world a poet would want to live in.'"²⁹ When he discovered their cultural appreciation, he began following socialists to their saloons. There he engaged in political debate and impressed them with his sharp, young mind. The socialists appealed to the political ideals he had developed as well as his strong educational values and intellectual curiosity. From this point forward, he declared himself a believer in radical politics.

The cultural side of Davenport's socialist community also allowed Dell to pursue a career that would be mentally stimulating, even if it might give the appearance of being bourgeois. At the time that he became engaged in Davenport's Socialist party, Dell was doing factory work and occasionally losing his job. Feuchter told him to give up factory work, arguing that it was a lame effort to live a "romantic proletarian" life. Instead, the mentor counseled, Dell should become a member of the "intellectual proletariat." Feuchter's advice meshed well with Dell's own aspirations to be a writer, and he soon got a job at the *Davenport Times*.³⁰

In their memories of Davenport, neither Dell nor his close friend Cook portrayed themselves as having felt like outcasts of their communities because of their political beliefs. Quite the contrary, Dell and Cook remembered their Davenport years nostalgically because of the strong network of radicals that offered them support. In 1924, long after Dell had left the Midwest and established himself in New York, Cook approached him about returning to Davenport and creating, or recreating, a vibrant intellectual scene in that city. In 1924, Dell brushed this aside as a rather foolish wish,

²⁹ Dell, *Homecoming*, 55.

but then reflected on how, when he lived there at age nineteen, “I seem to remember that our poetry and our youth did not fail to find something of old Athens in Davenport.... When I hear about the drab life of the middle west, I think to myself, ‘Davenport was not like that!’ I remember that I was out of a job and looking for work at times; but I found beauty there, and the splendor of ideas, and friendship, and love.”³¹

Dell’s comfort with the radicalism of the Midwest’s hinterlands showed itself even more when he moved to Chicago, and later in life when he lived in New York. Although he liked the energy of Chicago and found many other things to appreciate about the place, he found that the local socialist groups there did not provide him with the same degree of stimulation as had the radicals of Davenport. He found himself bored when he attended their meetings, and soon abandoned this clique.³² As chapter three will discuss, the intellectual community that he built in Chicago consisted largely of other people from similar Midwestern backgrounds, including some who were also from Davenport. Later he became a central figure in Greenwich Village’s bohemian scene, but his years in New York were marked mainly by his conflict with that community. In many ways, Davenport and Quincy were the places where Dell found his most satisfying niche, and his beliefs, as well as the beliefs of other Chicago Renaissance writers, must be understood within that late-nineteenth-century small town Midwestern context.

Carl Sandburg also developed his political perspective while he grew up and came into contact with many of the Midwest’s radical groups. Born in 1878, he grew up in

³⁰ Clayton, *Floyd Dell*, 28-9. This information about Feuchter’s urgings comes from *Moon-Calf*, which was an autobiographical novel in which the character Franz Vogelsang is Dell’s rendering of Fritz Feuchter.

³¹ Dell to Ralph Cram, 14 January 1924, Ralph Cram Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

Galesburg and was the son of a Swedish immigrant and a blacksmith who worked for the railroad. For his family, economic struggle was not new and, like many children of laborers, he began working early in life to help support his family. The first radical to have an impact on him was a Swedish tailor named Sjodin, whom Sandburg described as an anarchist, Socialist, and Populist. In 1887, when Sandburg was nine, he remembers hearing Sjodin tell him about the execution of the Haymarket anarchists. He started listening carefully to the man and his descriptions of the unjust treatment of workers. It was a turning point that brought him onto the side of radicals in the region. The next year, when railroad engineers in Galesburg went on strike against the C. B. & Q. line, Sandburg sided with them. He later wrote, "I took a kind of joy in the complete justice of the cause of the strikers."³³

As populism gained momentum in the Midwest during the 1890s, it became the movement that most influenced Sandburg in his adolescence, even though he lived in a small city and did not come from a farming family.³⁴ In Galesburg, at the age of eighteen, he attended a speech of William H. "Coin" Harvey, the free silver advocate, and

³² Clayton, *Floyd Dell*, 43-47

³³ Penelope Niven, *Carl Sandburg: A Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991), 1-14; Carl Sandburg, *Always the Young Strangers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), 99 (quote), 132; Bernard Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters, A Critical History* (The Michigan State College Press, 1954), 210-12; Dale Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance: The Literary Life in the Midwest, 1900-1930* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966), 583. Although he missed going to high school, he later attended Lombard College in Galesburg. After serving in Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War, he was guaranteed admission and free tuition to that college, even without a high school diploma.

³⁴ For a history of the populist movement in the Midwest, see Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Jeffrey Ostler, *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880-1892* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Normal Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought* (1962). For populism's impact on Chicago, see Chester McArthur Destler, *American Radicalism, 1865-1901* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1966, 1946), 166-254. For the impact of populism on other parts of the urban North, see Michael Cain Pierce, "The Plow and Hammer: Farmers, Organized Labor and the People's Party in Ohio," (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1999); Martin J. Klotsche, "The 'United Front' Populists," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 20 (1937): 375-389; Leon Fink,

after that joined Harvey's secret organization, the Patriots of America. He developed a strong belief in the populist cause and admired the idealism he saw in William Jennings Bryan's presidential campaign and read books such as Thomas Watson's *The People's Party Campaign Book*. He was convinced that Bryan was the harbinger of a new era. Recalling the effect that the politician had on him in 1896, he wrote:

At home [and at work], I read several times William Jennings Bryan's 'Cross of Gold' speech that swept the Democratic National Convention and swung to Bryan the nomination for President. I followed his speeches across the country and I heard him speak in Galesburg and in Monmouth. He was my hero, the Man of the People who spoke for the right, and against him were the Enemies of the People. He opened his mouth and the words pouring out were, for me in that year, truth and gospel.

Bryan's word meshed well with the radical critique Sandburg had learned from Sjodin. Populists bolstered Sandburg's beliefs about how corporations and the rich conspired against workers and farmers. With such a strong faith in Bryan, Sandburg became disillusioned after the crushing electoral defeat of his hero. He quit his job and became a vagabond, occasionally working as a laborer on farms and railroads. These travels through the countryside stiffened his populist perspective.³⁵

Like many Midwesterners who had supported Bryan and the populist cause, Sandburg soon saw promise in the growing Socialist party. In 1902, he was working as a traveling salesman in the region and while in Wisconsin he encountered the progressive populism of Robert La Follette. There he also came into contact with Winfield P. Gaylord, leader of the Wisconsin Social-Democratic party who, in 1908, recruited Sandburg to work as a district organizer. Sandburg, who had previously tried to build a

Workingmen's Democracy: the Knights of Labor and American Politics (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

career on the Lyceum and Chautauqua lecture circuits, made stump speeches, wrote articles, and organized workers for the party. During this time he also met and married a young radical teacher, Lilian Steichen. By 1912, however, he became disappointed that the Social-Democratic party was not living up to its ideals, and so he moved his family (now with three children) to Chicago where he began working as a journalist. There he started writing his poetry under the influence of the Chicago Renaissance.³⁶

Unlike the other members of the Chicago Renaissance, Sandburg moved beyond a critique of industrial America and engaged directly in the political process. However, even though he differed from his literary cohort in his desire to take political action, his critique of industrial American society was similar to theirs. Like them, he developed a Midwestern radicalism while living in the hinterlands and then came to Chicago and joined the literary movement.

Edgar Lee Masters, who was born in 1869 and grew up in central Illinois, was the other Chicago Renaissance writer who became most involved in formal politics. His family lived frugally, but his father was a lawyer and he did not experience the same kind of downward mobility as others members of the Chicago Renaissance. Although he did not have a major political awakening early in his life, there were a couple early influences that probably affected his decision later to embrace populism. His father, whom he later described anachronistically as a “rock-ribbed liberal,” was a staunch, active Democrat

³⁵ Niven, *Carl Sandburg*, 31; Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance*, 58; Sandburg, *Always the Young Strangers*, 246 (quote).

³⁶ Carl Sandburg, *Ever the Winds of Chance*, Margaret Sandburg and George Hendrick, eds., (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 123-124, 136-137; Niven, *Carl Sandburg*, 64-207; Philip R. Yanella, *The Other Carl Sandburg* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 3-24; Van Wienen, Mark W., “Taming the Socialist: Carl Sandburg’s *Chicago Poems* and Its Critics,” *American Literature* 63, 1 (March 1991): 90; Sally M. Miller, “Casting a Wide Net: The Milwaukee Movement to 1920,” in *Socialism in the*

who ran for many local and state offices, including one successful bid for state attorney. In his political career, Hardin Masters benefited from the support of Germans in Menard County who had emigrated after 1848, and suffered later when he lived in a more conservative area where voters punished him for his continuing opposition to prohibition. In addition to his father, Masters also recalled being affected by Robert Ingersoll, the man who was popular in that part of the state and also influenced Floyd Dell. At the age of sixteen, Masters read Ingersoll's *Mistakes of Moses*, which led him to develop a secular idealism and reject all religious authority.³⁷

The major turning point for Masters's politics came later in life. He migrated to Chicago in 1893 and was troubled to see the pain that workers felt during the economic depression that year, especially when he saw it contrasted with the wealth of the city's elite. The following year he was especially disturbed to see the use of federal troops to put down the American Railroad Union strike. These experiences prepared him well to join in the Populist effort of 1896. That year he attended the Democratic convention with his father, who had come as a delegate for William Jennings Bryan. There they listened to speeches by John Altgeld and David Bennett Hill and witnessed Bryan's famous address. Masters later remembered the event as a turning point, making him more committed to radical political causes. He later wrote of the convention, "A new life had come to me as well as to the Democracy. And at night, at the apartment, my father and I talked. Bryan would sweep the country, and it would be reclaimed from the banks and

Heartland: The Midwestern Experience, Donald T. Critchlow, ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 30; Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance*, 210-12.; Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance*, 58.

³⁷ Edgar Lee Masters, *Across Spoon River* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991, 1936), 21-22, 80-81 (quote); Herbert K. Russell, *Edgar Lee Masters: A Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 21-23.

the syndicates who had robbed the people since 1861 and whose course had made it so impossible for a young man to get along in the world, save by allying himself with the financial oligarchs.” He tried to contribute to the campaign effort by writing a pamphlet, *Bimetallism*, which he read aloud in the town square when he went back to visit the town where he grew up. However, despite his enthusiasm, his oratory skills were lacking and he did not find a place for himself in the campaign.³⁸

Bryan’s defeat at the polls dealt Masters a crushing blow. He wrote, “It was hard for me to take up life again after that Bryan campaign.” After some time spent detached from politics, he again found a cause that moved him in 1898, as he joined the anti-imperialist opposition to the Spanish-American War. Like populism, this also convinced him of the conspiracy of reactionary, moneyed interests that controlled the Republican party and the U.S. government. His involvement in the anti-war effort brought him into contact with Clarence Darrow, whom he later joined as a law partner. He described himself as a radical and built a personal relationship with William Jennings Bryan, helping the former presidential candidate in his efforts to bring the Democratic party back to populism. In 1905, he founded the Jefferson Club in Chicago, which was “devoted to the radical movement in the Democratic Party” and hosted many banquets in honor of Bryan, who was also a member. He later abandoned the Democratic party when he felt it had abandoned Bryan’s principles, but he retained the populist idealism that he had taken from the 1896 campaign.³⁹

³⁸ Masters, *Across Spoon River*, 209-10 (quote); Russell, *Edgar Lee Masters*, 47; Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance*, 149-50; Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance*, 77.

³⁹ Masters, *Across Spoon River*, 210-12 218 (first quote), 237-239; Russell, *Edgar Lee Masters*, 47-49, 54 (second quote).

Theodore Dreiser was the writer who made the most effort to conceal his political views and radical influences. However, an examination of his life and his early writing reveals a strong radical influence that shaped his view of society, even if it did not compel him to take action. After a difficult adolescence due to poverty and a series of scandals that beset his sisters (see chapter three), he moved away from his family and started a career as a reporter. His early experiences in journalism taught him more lessons about the harsh nature of the nation's new economy. It was at this time that he began to subscribe to a radical critique of industrial capitalism, similar to the ones that the other Chicago Renaissance writers adopted. This critique explained the poverty that he saw as a reporter, and it provided a framework for understanding his family's economic history and his own difficulties during his early career.

Dreiser started working as a tramp reporter in 1894, during the most severe depression of the era. This meant that when he worked on stories he frequently witnessed appalling poverty among families. He also experienced the depression on a more personal level since he had a harder time finding work. When he did manage to get a job, the pay was lower than it had been in the past. That year he took a great interest in Coxey's "Industrial Army" of the unemployed who were marching to Washington to register their dissatisfaction and demand jobs.⁴⁰

Theodore's brother, Paul Dresser,⁴¹ also shared a radical critique of industrial capitalism. Early in Dreiser's career in journalism, his brother advised him to do more to show readers the problems that workers faced. He told Dreiser, "Sometime you ought to

⁴⁰ Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 126; Carlos A. Schwantes, *Coxey's Army: An American Odyssey* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

⁴¹ Paul Dresser, who pursued a career in popular entertainment, Anglicized his name.

write about these things.... The rich are getting control. They'll own the country pretty soon. A writer like you could make [readers] see that." Dresser's own career as a popular songwriter (he was one of the most successful songwriters in the country in the late 1890s) suffered in the early years of the twentieth century in part because his social conscience made it hard for him to continue writing the sentimental ballads that had created his success.⁴²

Most of the time, Dreiser expressed his critique of industrial capitalism privately. After observing the living conditions of unskilled steel workers, he formed a bond with a reporter who covered labor issues. This reporter pushed him to become more aware of unjust labor conditions in factories, but the two expressed mutual frustration with mainstream newspapers that restricted their reporting. He also worked for a magazine in New York called *Success*, which, as its title implies, extolled a middle-class faith in an individual's ability to succeed in a capitalist world through diligence and virtue. Most of Dreiser's articles did not challenge this view, such as one flattering story he wrote about George Pullman in 1894 that did not even mention his labor policies and the strike against his company. Dreiser later explained his practical choice, saying "If you will look at the magazine you will understand why a denunciation of Mr. Carnegie would have lost me \$100."⁴³

Even though he usually catered to his publisher's demands at *Success*, at times his more critical views crept into his articles. In 1894, despite working for an antilabor newspaper in Toledo, he wrote a story that sympathized with striking streetcar workers.

⁴² Theodore Dreiser, *Newspaper Days*, ed. T.D. Nostwich (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 449; Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 393

⁴³ Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 126, 187 (quote).

When Dreiser worked on a story for *Success* on the wealthy corporate lawyer Joseph H. Choate, the latter told him he had never met a great man who was born rich. In his interview and in the story, Dreiser commented on the irony of this statement, pointing out that Choate came from a distinguished New England family, attended Harvard, and used connections to get his first job in a Boston law firm. In this and other articles Dreiser offered subtle criticism of the middle-class success credo, often taking care to point out that privilege played a role in the success of many people; success was not just a matter of pluck and luck. He also commented on how the rise of corporations made it more difficult for individuals to build their own success, a point which Andrew Carnegie conceded to him.⁴⁴ In 1897, when working for the magazine *Ev'ry Month*, he articulated his criticism more clearly. He wrote, "The drudges are so numerous. It looks so often as though they were held down by lack of advantages."⁴⁵ Dreiser did not use Marxist ideology to build his critique of industrial capitalism. Instead, he was upset because corporate power was antithetical to his American belief in individualism.⁴⁶

Dreiser's sympathy with the poor became even stronger after the turn of the century when he was down on his luck. In 1902 he submitted three articles to *Success*, but they were about the unemployed, the crippled, and tenement dwellers. No longer able to repress his own views, he decided that he needed to write serious stories that

⁴⁴ Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 126, 188; Dreiser, "The Real Choate," *Ainsless's* 3 (April 1899): 324-33, reprinted in Yoshinobu Hakutani, ed., *Selected Magazine Articles of Theodore Dreiser: Life and Art in the American 1890s* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1985), 145-57 Dreiser, "A Monarch of Metal Workers," *Success* 2 (3 June 1899): 453-54, reprinted in *Selected Magazine Articles of Theodore Dreiser*, 158-69.

⁴⁵ *Theodore Dreiser: A Selection of Uncollected Prose*, Donald Pizer, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 319.

⁴⁶ Ray Ginger argues that inequality of opportunity upset Dreiser because it was out of sync with the Lincoln ideal. The Lincoln ideal that Ginger describes has even deeper roots in American culture, going back at least to Jefferson. Ginger, *Altgeld's America*, 13.

would inspire altruism toward victims of the “economic fact.” In 1904 his writing focused even more on the plight of the poor. At this time Dreiser was not doing well financially or mentally, which seemed to affect his sympathy for the unfortunate. After a difficult period that included a visit to a sanitarium to treat neurasthenia, he started writing on his own a series of articles called “The Toil of the Laborer,” which interested him so much that he began turning it into a book. He had a hard time deciding whether to write it as an autobiography or a novel, which showed his identification with the working class despite his white-collar career.⁴⁷

During this period, Dreiser also took inspiration from Abraham Lincoln. He was moved by Ida Tarbell’s biography of the man and identified with the hero’s childhood poverty. He went so far as to compare Lincoln to an even more legendary martyr, saying, “Lincoln and Christ; somehow these two are naturally associated in my mind. They were both so kind, so tender, so true. Oh that we could all be great, noble and altogether lovely.” Years later, when he took a trip with Masters to the poet’s childhood home in Illinois, Dreiser was fixated on seeing all the places associated with Lincoln. It is not clear how much the mythology of Lincoln affected Dreiser in his youth, but it definitely influenced him as he began his career as a novelist. In his study of the impact of the Lincoln ideal in the era of industrialization, Ray Ginger focuses on Dreiser, along with Clarence Darrow, John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, and John Algeld.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 320-21, 381-82.

⁴⁸ Dreiser, *American Diaries, 1902-1926*, Thomas P. Riggio, ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 110; Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 355; Ginger, *Altgeld's America*. This was also around the same time that the Lincoln mania of the era led to the Lincoln Memorial and the Lincoln coin, both in 1909, the 100th anniversary of Lincoln’s birth.

As he wrote for magazines during much of his early career, Dreiser tried to suppress his criticisms of industrial America. However, after the turn of the century, he became bolder and, like his brother, found that expressing his beliefs was bad for his career. When he wrote “The Toil of the Laborer” stories, he could not find anyone to publish them. They only came into print a decade later when they appeared in a socialist newspaper—not the kind of publication nor the remuneration he had wanted. However, in 1905 he became the editor of *Smith's*, which gave him more freedom of expression than other magazines had allowed. It was also financially successful and paid him well. There he was able to criticize the pursuit of the “almighty dollar” and demand that working conditions for laborers “be at one with moral health and national honor.” He also wrote about government reform and authored one article about “The Coming Socialism” that predicted changes in working conditions and living standards.⁴⁹ Still, Dreiser did not embrace the political solutions that some radicals championed, and never joined any political cause even though he shared a radical critique of America’s industrial capitalism.

Sherwood Anderson, like Dreiser, also does not present the most obvious example of radicalism, yet he too shared the social critique common to all these writers. Despite maintaining a faith in a Horatio Alger success ethic, as will be discussed later in the chapter, there were moments during his adolescence when he showed his frustration with the injustice of industrialization. This manifested itself most clearly when he worked in a bicycle factory at the age of seventeen. Even though he was known for his work ethic, he had a hard time tolerating the job and often feigned headaches and other problems so that

⁴⁹ Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 381-2.

his fellow workers would sympathize and cover for him while he took time off. At the factory he also witnessed a great deal of crudeness among fellow workers, as they continually bragged about their sexual exploits. Anderson was appalled by their demeaning attitude toward women, but rather than become angry at the workers, he reasoned that they bragged about their own virility and sexual exploits to compensate for the dehumanizing nature of factory work. Remembering this job, he wrote:

The men seemed everlastingly anxious to assert their manhood, to make it clear to their fellows that they were potent men able to do great deeds in the realms of the flesh. . . . There were days as I worked in that place when I became physically ill and other days when I cursed all the gods of my age that had made men—who in another age might have been farmers, shepherds or craftsmen—these futile fellows, ever more and more loudly proclaiming their potency as they felt the age of impotency asserting itself in their bodies.⁵⁰

It is interesting how he sets up the language in this quote. “Another age” seems to refer to any time before the era of industrialization, showing his bifurcated view of history. His appellation for his own time is “the age of impotency,” which demonstrates his belligerent attitude toward the industrial capitalist system that dominated his region in the late nineteenth century.

Anderson went on to pursue a successful career in advertising and business, as a later part of the chapter will discuss. However, even during the peak of his business career, from about 1907 to 1912, he often offended colleagues by arguing in favor of workers’ rights and criticizing capitalism and the American business ethic. He developed an idea of what he called “Commercial Democracy,” which would consist of factories with many amenities for workers, including showers and park-like settings with large

⁵⁰ Sherwood Anderson, *A Story Teller's Story*, ed. Ray Lewis White (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1968), 199-200.

lawns and fountains so that workers would be allowed to take breaks and relax. He wanted to bring a stronger sense of altruism to manufacturing. This plan was not truly radical, since he also envisioned himself as the president driving up to the factory in a large automobile, but he seems to have taken his ideas further in a book called *Why I Am a Socialist*. Anderson claims to have written this book while he was a company president, but it was soon destroyed and no evidence of it exists. Thus the contents of the work are not known, and Anderson never said much about it, but the title itself is provocative, especially coming from the president of an Ohio company, and shows his growing discontent with industrial capitalism.⁵¹

Although his socialist book did not survive, in his memoirs Anderson recalls his growing discomfort with the unfair system of rewards under industrial capitalism during that period in his life. During the peak of his career in Ohio, he looked back to some of his earlier days in business, when he worked for a brief period of time in Chicago. He realized that earlier in life he had worked much harder and made much less money, and the injustice of this troubled him:

The amount of real energy put into work by the average man of business must be small. I knew about that because, after my earlier life, making my way by physical labor, I had got into business. This before I became a manufacturer. This when I was a Chicago advertising writer. I knew about the men who got the most money from advertising, the solicitors, salesmen, contact men. These men going to the Chicago Athletic Club, going off to play golf with clients. Coming back to hurry into the office. "I am so busy."

Busy hell!

We others doing the work. Now, for the time, I had others to do the work. I had others to keep my books, write my letters, direct the men in my factory. Schemes for getting more money, by one slick dodge or

⁵¹ Townsend, 61-63; Anderson, *A Story Teller's Story*, 303, Rex Burbank, *Sherwood Anderson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964), 33. Although Townsend's is the best overall biography of Anderson, Burbank offers the best analysis of Anderson's politics.

another, kept flashing into my head, the inventive passion in me thus kept alive, it constantly being corrupted just the same, a curious feeling of dirt following the success of each of my schemes.⁵²

During this uncomfortable period when he was an executive in Ohio, he immersed himself in writing his first two manuscripts. Although they do not offer any socialist political solutions, the two novels show how Anderson had developed a critique of industrial capitalism in line with that of the region's radical movements. The first novel, *Windy McPherson's Son*, later published in 1916, echoes the criticisms of business executives contained in his memoirs. The main character is a somewhat autobiographical figure who builds a successful business career and leads a respectable bourgeois lifestyle. However, the hero's epiphany comes as he turns his back on his lifestyle and even the family that represents it, and decides to spend the rest of his life "seeking truth." Seeking truth lay not in a business career, but instead in physical labor, philanthropy, bartending, and organizing workers to fight the businesses that restricted their lives.

His second novel goes even further in its critique of industrial capitalism. *Marching Men*, later published in 1917, is the story of an unsympathetic character who expresses disdain for workers. As a youth, the main character witnesses the National Guard as it puts down a miners' strike. He admires the troops' efficiency and curses the miners and "their brutish and pathetic lives." When he moves to Chicago, the protagonist's hatred of the disorderly workers increases, but then his views change when he returns to his hometown for his mother's funeral. There he witnesses the miners marching behind his mother's funeral carriage and for the first time he sympathizes with them. In this epiphanic moment he decides that "someday a man will come who will

swing all of the workers of the world into step like that. He will make them conquer, not one another, but the terrifying disorder of life....Someone must teach them the big lesson just for their own sakes, that they also must know. They must march fear and disorder and purposelessness away.”

Based partly on labor leader John L. Lewis and partly on Abraham Lincoln,⁵³ Anderson’s hero in *Marching Men* leads a movement in which hundreds of thousands of industrial workers gather before and after work, and simply march. The successful hero came up with his plan out of a desire to improve the lives of workers, but also to put business leaders back in their proper places. After spying a well-to-do businessman for whom he quickly develops contempt, the hero ponders what this individual and others like him deserve in life, and concludes that, “I should like to frighten them so that they would throw their cigars away and run about like ants when you kick over ant hills in the fields.”

The novel’s protagonist scorns politicians and politics, and the movement adopts no formal platform or explicit ideology. In both novels, the protagonists fail to do much that changes society or the political system, but they are heroes for sacrificing their comfortable lifestyles and registering their dissatisfaction with the state of industrial America. Although Anderson built a career that for a time made him appear like a George Babbitt, the radical critique of industrial capitalism had a strong influence on his worldview.

⁵² Sherwood Anderson, *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs: A Critical Edition*, ed. Ray Lewis White (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 248.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 186. It is also possible that the book was influenced by Coxey’s Army, though there is no direct evidence for this. Schwantes, *Coxey's Army*.

The political biographies of Anderson, Dell, Masters, Dreiser, and Sandburg offer a useful way to reexamine the legacy of radicalism in the U.S. Why socialism “failed” in the U.S. has dominated much of the historiography about the movement.⁵⁴ This historiography begins with the premise that socialism should be judged by its success in elections and other formal political processes. While the question of what effect socialism had on formal politics is an important one, it fails to understand late-nineteenth-century socialism in its own terms. Socialism in the United States was about much more (and some might say much less) than party politics and formal political action. As Richard Schneirov, Martin Sklar, and others have argued, socialism had an “extra-party reality,” and it is unfair to judge it solely based on success in party politics.⁵⁵ Some who shared the socialist critique would abstain from politics, some would become involved in political movements to effect reform, and others would follow alternative paths. When we study the legacy of radical movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rather than focusing only on those who lost elections or won minor offices, we should also look at people like Floyd Dell, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, and Theodore Dreiser. They did not run for office or start

⁵⁴ The 1974 collection of essays edited by John H. M. Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset had an especially powerful impact on the field. *Failure of a Dream?: Essays in the History of American Socialism*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 1974). Although the history of socialism does not garner as much attention as it did three decades ago, the theme of failure is still important and Seymour Martin Lipset continues to expound on that theme. Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000). A similar theme of disappointment characterizes the historiography of populism. The most important study that sets this tone is Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

⁵⁵ Schneirov, 351; Sklar, “Thoughts on Capitalism and Socialism;” Sklar, *The United States as a Developing Country*; Sklar, “Capitalism and Socialism in the Emergence of Modern America”; Sklar, *The United States as a Developing Country*.

a revolution, but their radical critique influenced the themes and styles that they helped bring to the forefront of twentieth-century American culture.

Success Ethos

Despite their leftist social critique, the writers of the Chicago Renaissance made life decisions based on a success ethos they developed in the Midwestern hinterlands. Most of them came from families that, in spite of their downward mobility in the late nineteenth century, clung to their middle-class aspirations for their children. Coming from such families, the writers of the Chicago Renaissance joined the ambitious native whites from the small cities of the Midwest who tried to pursue middle-class dreams through education, hard work, professional careers, and migration to the regional metropolis where the best opportunities were. It was because of these middle-class ambitions and values that the writers of the Chicago Renaissance found themselves in a position to lead an influential literary movement, and the clash between their leftist ideals and their pragmatic decisions may help explain the conflicted messages of the literature they produced.

Like many Chicago Renaissance writers, Dell came from a family that had taken advantage of the Midwest's economic opportunities of the mid nineteenth century. Although he was born after this prosperity ended, his mother clung to her middle-class values and success ethos, which she used to raise her sons. She placed a high value on Dell's education and took pains to cultivate her son's literary taste. Dell also benefited from the strong educational infrastructure of the Mississippi River towns. Despite his

family's downward mobility, he was able to go to a public junior high and high school where he rose above his wealthier classmates. He excelled as a student, organized a literary society, and even was chosen to give a graduation speech for his class. Aside from the solid education he received from public schools, he learned from the age of six to take advantage of the public library, where he read Daniel Defoe, Victor Hugo, Jules Verne, and others. There he also met two librarians who became mentors and had a significant impact on his education. Max Eastman, one of New York's radical intellectuals, would later say "there is hardly a better educated man in the United States than Floyd Dell." This suggests that his family's educational values, as well as the region's schools and libraries, served him well.⁵⁶

In pursuing education as a means to succeed in the industrializing economy, Dell was following a trend in the region. As discussed in chapter one, middle-class whites increasingly turned their attention toward their children's schooling, realizing the value of educational capital in professional and other white-collar careers. They pushed for public high schools in the North, and they were also the ones who took advantage of it. Many professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, and engineers, increasingly needed educational credentials for certification. Educational credentials also benefited those who tried to climb the corporate ladder, and even mattered for some lower-level white-collar jobs. For those who attended public high schools in the region, the supposedly meritocratic

⁵⁶ Clayton, *Floyd Dell*, 13-14; Dell, *Homecoming*, 16; John E. Hart, *Floyd Dell* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971), 62 (quote).

system also reinforced the middle-class belief in one's ability to succeed through hard work and good judgment.⁵⁷

For writers, educational credentials did not matter as much as it did in other professions, but training in scholarship was important. As discussed in chapter one, those who attended public high schools went through a classical curriculum. Even many of the native white Midwesterners in the late nineteenth century who did not attend high school had access to the region's new public library system, which put them on a more even footing with their wealthier counterparts who previously had benefited from greater access to books. It is because of these new educational opportunities, as well as educational values, that children of middle-class families were poised to join the children of the upper class as the nation's leading writers.

Once he received his high school diploma, Dell had the credential he needed to pursue a career in writing. He became a reporter in Davenport after completing high school, but quickly exhausted the professional opportunities available in that city. After his first editor fired him, he found a job at Davenport's other established newspaper, but lost that position during the panic of 1907. At that point, he joined the migration of ambitious Midwesterners to Chicago. As he later recalled, "Chicago was a place where a

⁵⁷ For studies that show this same faith in education among the middle class in the late nineteenth century and the increasing importance of education credentials in professions during this era, see Thomas Goebel, *The Children of Athena: Chicago Professionals and the Creation of a Credentialed Society, 1870-1920* (Hamburg, Germany: Lit Verlag, 1996), 12-13, 53, 60, 67; Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 121; Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: Norton, 1976); Frederick Roger Dunn, "The Central Y.M.C.A. Schools of Chicago," (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1940), 65; Samuel Haber, *The Quest for Authority and Honor in the American Professions, 1750-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

bright young fellow could get a newspaper job.”⁵⁸ Like most of the writers of his movement, he moved to Chicago because of practical economic considerations and professional ambitions, not because he dreamed of becoming a national literary figure.

Dell quickly built a successful career in Chicago. It was from his initial job as a reporter that he moved into his position as a literary critic, eventually becoming the influential editor of the *Friday Literary Review* that appeared in the *Chicago Evening Post*. It was a job that shows many of the ironies of his life. He tried to write his essays from a critical, leftist perspective, yet by building his career this way he was practicing a success ethos that seemed to reflect the values of Andrew Carnegie and individualism rather than of radicalism. In addition, Dell was also working for a publication that was supported by and catered to a conservative element of society. The *Evening Post* created its literary review because its readers were mostly well-to-do people involved in business and finance, and the publisher wanted to cater to their emerging highbrow taste. Dell may have fashioned himself as a radical, but more conservative influences also had a powerful effect on him and his career choices.

Among Chicago’s ambitious writers, no one lived by a success ethos better than Sherwood Anderson. His family was one of the poorest in the town of Clyde, Ohio, due to economic dislocation and his father’s inability to take responsibility for his family. However, despite a prolonged period of downward mobility, the family’s identity and values remained middle-class. Anderson remembers his family referring to itself as the “respectable poor,” showing how they would not deign to associate with the working class whose economic situation was similar to theirs. Many of the best friends of the

⁵⁸ Dell to Dale Kramer, 24 March 1963, Chicago Notebooks, 2, Dale Kramer Papers, Midwest Manuscript

Anderson children were members of the town's elite, which contributed to the family's reluctance to identify with the working class.⁵⁹

Early in life, Anderson earned the nickname "Jobby" for his work ethic. He constantly sought to make money by mowing lawns, sweeping, fetching water for laborers, selling newspapers, doing farm labor, driving a grocery carriage, and working in a print shop, a bicycle factory, and a livery stable. Throughout his life, he was immensely proud of this nickname, which embodied the success ethos that rewards hard work, honesty, and thrift. There was one way, however, in which the youth did not follow common wisdom about success in the industrial age. Unlike Dell and others, Anderson did not devote himself fully to his studies and was never a standout student. Although he was not a particularly poor student, he was more focused on practical work than on education. After skipping the fourth grade, he had to repeat the fifth because he had missed so many days in order to work—a choice he made himself. He also did not continue straight into the public high school, though a few years later he returned to complete his secondary education.

Like many ambitious Midwesterners in their adolescence, Anderson realized that the best opportunities for upward mobility lay in the region's metropolis. In 1896, a year after his mother died, Anderson decided to pursue his dreams in Chicago. There he joined his brother, Karl, in a West Side boardinghouse run by a family they had known in Clyde. Like his younger brother, Karl was also one of the ambitious Midwesterners who

Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

⁵⁹ Anderson's biography presents some difficulty because many things that he wrote about his past were exaggerated or false. Because of this, I have been especially dependent on secondary sources in this section. Except where noted, this section draws from Kim Townsend's wonderful biography, *Sherwood Anderson*, as well as Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance*, 37-51.

migrated to Chicago for better professional opportunities. The city's cultural offerings attracted him, and he first went there to study at the Art Institute, then became a successful commercial artist as he worked for magazines. His life illustrates the role of Chicago as culture's metropolis, with its upward movement infrastructure, its ability to draw talent from throughout the hinterlands, and the close connection it created between commerce and art.

When he first moved to Chicago, Sherwood Anderson succeeded in finding various jobs, but was frustrated as many of them offered little chance of promotion and his work ethic did not earn him as much recognition as it had in Clyde. His lack of educational capital seemed to hold him back. Two years later, still feeling frustrated, he volunteered for the Spanish-American War. He served with the militia of Clyde for a number of months, and although he did not see any combat, he earned veteran status and reaped the rewards when he returned to Clyde with his regiment. Many in the town believed he had given up a successful career in Chicago when he joined the army, and Anderson did not disabuse them of this notion. After his return from Cuba, he received a hero's welcome, along with the rest of the regiment, and then took advantage of educational benefits given to veterans. At the age of twenty-three, he went to the town of Springfield, Ohio, where one of his brothers was living. There he enrolled in Wittenberg Academy and completed the equivalent of a senior year in high school.

At Wittenberg, Anderson did well as a student and gained an educational credential that would help advance his ambitious business career. There he also worked to establish relationships with the businessmen who lived in his boardinghouse. One whom he impressed soon moved to the Chicago office of the Crowell Publishing

Company, and there arranged for Anderson to get a job as an advertising solicitor in 1900. With his high school diploma and a new job in business, his second migration to Chicago was more auspicious than his first. Anderson was devoted to his employer and served his company so well that he quickly attracted the notice of some executives there. Moving through the ranks, he built his career as an advertising copy writer; not only was he building the middle-class career, but he was doing it in the developing medium of advertising that exemplified and promoted the new urban middle- and upper-class culture. In 1903 and 1904 he wrote columns for *Agricultural Advertising* that set forth many of the middle-class doctrines that he cherished. As one of his biographers has noted, some of this writing “rivals the most sanctimonious blandishments of George F. Babbitt and his ‘poet’ friend Chum Frink.”⁶⁰

The success ethos that Anderson and other Chicago Renaissance writers practiced was consistent with many of the teachings of the success manuals that flourished between 1870 and 1910. These manuals, rather than celebrating the American Dream, offered a dire assessment of the industrial era, arguing that it was a brutal struggle for survival. However, despite their pessimism, these manuals argued that people could still succeed by their virtues of honesty, frugality, industry, reliability, and loyalty. Force of character was especially important, or, as in the oft-repeated phrase, “character is capital.” Although these values came from an earlier era, the success manuals adapted to a new industrial age. The new ideal man was an employee engaged in white-collar work who used those pre-industrial virtues to serve the best interests of his employer. Most often, these manuals were dedicated to the “discouraged,” “doubters,”

⁶⁰ Rex Burbank, *Sherwood Anderson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964), 31.

and the “faint-hearted”—the people who were most pessimistic about the promise of success. Their readers were mostly “native-born, Protestant, rural and small-town farmers, mechanics, clerks, and storekeepers of modest means—people at the epicenter of economic shock produced by the new industrial order.” It is a profile that fits most of the families of the Chicago Renaissance writers who subscribed to this success ethos despite their hard times and downward mobility.⁶¹

The folklore that emphasized hard work and frugality also extended to the biographies of successful capitalists, which became a topic of fascination for many Americans, especially the middle class. There may have been robber barons who started their careers from positions of privilege, but popular biographies tended to show people rising from humble origins to become captains of industry. The most famous was Andrew Carnegie, who advertised his life story as an example of the fortunes one can gain through honesty, hard work, selflessness, and determination. *Success* magazine, which Dreiser edited for a time, was just one of the publications that catered to the demand for this kind of story. Another popular publication in the late nineteenth century was local history books that mainly featured biographical portraits of the city’s leading citizens. Those portraits also emphasized the story of honest, self-made men rising from humble origins.⁶² In addition, the Chicago Renaissance authors grew up during the time of Horatio Alger novels. Although the heroes in these novels often succeeded more by luck, which was not consistent with the teachings of success manuals that emphasized

⁶¹ Judy Hilkey, *Character Is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 11.

⁶² For an example of one particularly popular collection, see Alfred T. Andreas, *History of Chicago from the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, 3 vols. (Chicago: A.T. Andreas, 1884-86).

character above all else,⁶³ Alger's protagonists deserved such breaks because of their hard work and good judgment. There is no evidence that Anderson and his cohort read these success manuals, Horatio Alger novels, or biographical collections in their youths, but their actions suggest that, one way or another, they absorbed some of success discourse of the era.

As he built his business career, Anderson married Cornelia Platt Lane in 1903, whom he met through a connection in Clyde. She was from a well-to-do Toledo family where her father was the head of a wholesale firm for over fifty years and was considered a community leader. The couple lived in Chicago until 1906, when they moved to Cleveland where Anderson became president of a beleaguered mail-order company. It was a risky move, but he took it because it gave him the opportunity expand his business experience beyond advertising. Unable to save the company, in 1907 he moved to Elyria, Ohio, twenty miles from Cleveland, to become president of another, more stable business.

As president of a successful company, Anderson and his wife filled the role of a respectable well-to-do couple in Elyria. They had three children between 1907 and 1911 and climbed the local social ladder. Anderson became accustomed to wearing fine clothes, joined the town's elite social, literary, and country clubs, and exhibited all the trappings of a comfortable Babbitt lifestyle.

It was at this point that Anderson began his famous rebellion against middle-class norms, which culminated in 1912 when he walked out on his family and his job, and was not found for three days. After the incident, he again moved to Chicago (but without his

⁶³ Hilkey, *Character Is Capital*, 127.

family), joined the bohemian literary scene, and became one of the most important members of the Chicago Renaissance (see chapter three). His final flight to Chicago shows the extent to which he had become disgusted with his middle-class lifestyle and values, but it is also interesting to note that when he went to Chicago and joined the literary bohemia there, he also reestablished himself in business. On his third migration to Chicago, despite his professed disgust for business and the middle-class lifestyle, he once again chose the city because of its professional opportunities. He went back to work for his former employer, the advertising agency of Frank B. White, where he once again wrote advertising copy, worked hard, served his employer well, and had a successful career. Even when he became a prominent author he continued with his job writing advertising copy. In spite of all that he said and wrote about the corporate world and the middle class, he could not leave behind the material comforts that his business career gave him. His success ethos and middle-class expectations were too deeply ingrained in him.

In his rise into the middle class, Theodore Dreiser appears to have benefited the most from luck, but he too exhibited a success ethos that served him well. Growing up he attended good public schools along with the children of prosperous families. The parts of Indiana where he lived gave particularly strong support to public education, and Terre Haute was a leader in the public high school movement in the 1870s.⁶⁴ Dreiser came under the influence of his seventh-grade public school teacher in Warsaw, Indiana, in 1884, and from that point forward he devoted himself to his studies. He then took

⁶⁴ William J. Reese, *The Origins of the American High School* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 87.

advantage of the town's small public library where he enjoyed the novels of Hawthorne, Cooper, Poe, and others.⁶⁵

After growing up in poverty and then finding himself socially outcast due to his siblings' behavior (see chapter three), Dreiser was determined to establish a more successful, middle-class life for himself. In 1887, before he finished high school, he fled his family's problems in Indiana and joined the migration of ambitious Midwesterners to Chicago. Lacking educational credentials and without other major advantages, he struggled initially and could not endure the tedious unskilled jobs that paid him little and offered few opportunities for advancement. As he was on the brink of leaving the city and being weeded out from this migration, he encountered a stroke of luck when he ran into one of his favorite former high school teachers. The man took pity on Dreiser and, realizing the youth was not yet prepared to succeed in the big city, paid for him to attend Indiana University for a year.

When he enrolled, Dreiser felt insecure about his own abilities, but the experience exposed him to a new intellectual crowd that he found invigorating. After a year, he had more confidence and education and felt equipped to return to Chicago. His long-term goal was to become a poet and playwright, but he found immediate employment in the city's booming newspaper industry. He entered it through a temporary job for a newspaper's Christmas charity campaign and immediately fell in love with the glamour that Chicago journalism enjoyed in the 1890s. He thought that a newspaper career could be his entry into a world of fame and fortune, as, in fact, it turned out to be. After struggling through lower jobs at the paper, he became a cub reporter at the *Globe* when

he was twenty-one years old. He first made a name for himself in the profession with a set of feature articles about West Side slums. Then, starting in 1892, he spent a number of itinerant years working at various newspapers in St. Louis, Toledo, Cleveland, Buffalo, and Pittsburgh before settling in New York for a while where he started editing magazines. Because of the combination of luck and pluck that gave Dreiser his opportunities, Kenneth Lynn has described him as the epitome of a Horatio Alger rags-to-riches story.⁶⁶

The writer who came from the most financially stable family was Edgar Lee Masters, which makes his success ethos and professional ambitions the least surprising. His father was an attorney and his grandfather, who lived close by, was a “farmer gentlemen.” With this family background, Masters was in a good position to succeed even though he was from a rural area that did not have the same kind of quality public schools as those found in the region’s towns and small cities. After trying a few different jobs as a young man, he decided to follow his father into the legal profession. Soon, however, he found himself wanting better opportunities than he could get in Lewistown, Illinois and, like many ambitious young professionals in the region, he decided to migrate to Chicago in 1892.⁶⁷

There he initially tried to get a job at a newspaper, but quickly fell back into his legal career. Although the city was crowded with lawyers at that time, within a year he joined a law firm that enabled him to build his career while writing poetry in his spare

⁶⁵ Except when noted, the details of Dreiser’s life come from Richard Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser: At the Gates of the City, 1871-1907* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1986).

⁶⁶ Kenneth Lynn, *The Dream of Success: A Study of the Modern American Imagination* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1955), 13-26.

time. A year after that, he was already arguing a case in front of the state supreme court, and in 1898 he climbed further up the city's socioeconomic ladder as he married into a wealthy family. His ascent through the ranks of society by following a success ethos and building a professional career was typical of the leading Chicago Renaissance writers.⁶⁸

Middle-Class Migration

The writers of the Chicago Renaissance were not alone in their migration from the Midwestern hinterlands to Chicago. They were part of a much larger group of ambitious Midwesterners who, at the end of the nineteenth century, were drawn to the large industrial cities that offered the best professional opportunities. No city promised as much as Chicago and as a group Midwestern migrants became remarkably successful over the long term. It is worth taking a look at the profile of these Midwestern migrants as a way of understanding how these authors were part of a larger movement of ambitious, successful individuals.

The development of Chicago's economy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was crucial for drawing these people from the hinterlands. Despite its intermittent booms and busts, the era between the Great Fire of 1871 and the Great Depression was when Chicago became the nation's "second city." Midwesterners who migrated there and stayed over the long term were very successful. As Table 2.1 shows,

⁶⁷ Edgar Lee Masters, *Across Spoon River* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991, 1936), 3-22, 132; Herbert K. Russell, *Edgar Lee Masters: A Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 11-21, 31.

many of Chicago's Midwestern migrants⁶⁹ moved into the white-collar positions of Chicago's industrial economy. Except for 1880, all census samples from this period show that roughly forty percent of Chicago's Midwestern migrants had white-collar jobs. By contrast, for the total male population of Chicago, the percent of males in white-collar occupations after 1880 was only around twenty-three (Table 2.2).

Table 2.1. Occupational Class of White Male/Native Parents Midwestern Migrants in Chicago

		Year			
		1880	1900	1910	1920
Occupational Class	White Collar	55.1%	41.7%	44.0%	43.4%
	Blue Collar	21.3%	30.6%	31.9%	32.7%
	Service Work	9.0%	2.8%	3.2%	5.5%
	N/A (blank) or Other	14.6%	25.0%	21.0%	18.4%
Sample Size		89	72	248	869

Source: Steven Ruggles and Matthew Sobek, et. al., Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 2.0, [Http://www.ipums.umn.edu](http://www.ipums.umn.edu): Minneapolis: Historical Census Projects, University of Minnesota, 1997.

Table 2.2. Occupational Class of Chicago's Total Male Population

		Year			
		1880	1900	1910	1920
Occupational Class	White Collar	17.9%	23.6%	23.3%	23.0%
	Blue Collar	37.0%	36.6%	38.6%	37.9%
	Service Work	3.5%	4.3%	4.9%	4.3%
	N/A (blank) or Other	41.5%	35.4%	33.1%	34.8%
Sample Size		3080	1182	5052	16198

Source: Ruggles, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series.

⁶⁸ Russell, *Edgar Lee Masters*, 18, 31-38; Masters, *Across Spoon River*, 235-45

⁶⁹ Because the census only records state of birth (not city or county), I have selected Midwestern migrants by choosing those born in Midwestern states other than Illinois. Unfortunately, there is no way to differentiate between those born in Chicago and those born elsewhere in the state. This necessary exclusion also means that the census cannot be used to find the total number of Midwestern migrants in the city. I have also limited my sample of migrants to males (because they have better employment statistics) with native white parents.

A more detailed breakdown of occupational statistics shows that even the Midwestern migrants with blue-collar jobs were in the best blue-collar occupations, using more skill and earning more money than most other workers. Throughout the period, over half of all blue-collar Midwestern migrants were craftsmen, who earned as much or more money than many white-collar workers. After 1880, only about ten percent of those blue-collar workers were unskilled laborers (Table 2.4). Out of all Midwestern migrants (white-collar as well as blue-collar), less than five percent worked as unskilled laborers after 1880 (Table 2.3).

Table 2.3. Job Category of White Male/Native Parents Midwestern Migrants in Chicago

		Year			
		1880	1900	1910	1920
Job Category	Professional and Technical	9.0%	2.8%	8.1%	10.8%
	Managers, Officials, & Proprietors	15.7%	8.3%	11.3%	10.4%
	Clerical and Sales	30.3%	30.6%	24.6%	22.2%
	Craftsmen	11.2%	16.7%	17.3%	19.4%
	Operatives	4.5%	11.1%	11.7%	8.6%
	Laborers	5.6%	2.8%	2.8%	4.6%
	Service Workers	9.0%	2.8%	3.2%	5.5%
	N/A (blank) or Other	14.6%	25.0%	21.0%	18.4%
Sample Size		89	72	248	869

Source: Ruggles, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series.

Table 2.4. Job Category of Blue Collar Midwestern Migrants (white males with native parents)

		Year			
		1880	1900	1910	1920
Blue Collar Job Category	Craftsmen	52.6%	54.5%	54.4%	59.5%
	Operatives	21.1%	36.4%	36.7%	26.4%
	Laborers	26.3%	9.1%	8.9%	14.1%
Sample Size		19	22	79	284

Source: Ruggles, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series.

Statistics on unskilled Midwestern migrant workers contrasts sharply with the total male population of Chicago. If we include all males in the city, regardless of race or birthplace, about thirty percent of the city's blue-collar workers were classified as unskilled laborers throughout the four census samples, which was two to three times the percentage for Midwestern migrants (Tables 2.4 and 2.5). This divide was probably even greater than it appears, since the male population as a whole had a much higher percentage of people whose job category was left blank (N/A or Other) on census forms. People whose job category was left blank were likely to be at the lower rungs of society (Tables 2.1 and 2.2).

Table 2.5. Job Category of Chicago's Total Blue-Collar Male Population

		Year			
		1880	1900	1910	1920
Blue Collar Job Category	Craftsmen	42.3%	42.0%	37.9%	45.1%
	Operatives	27.5%	28.6%	32.8%	27.9%
	Laborers	30.2%	29.3%	29.4%	27.0%
Sample Size		1140	433	1952	6140

Source: Ruggles, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series.

A look at Midwestern migrants in white-collar occupations provides more information about this group's occupational success. For most of the period after 1880, about forty-three percent of Midwestern migrants performed white-collar work (Table 2.1). With the exception of 1900,⁷⁰ almost half of white-collar Midwestern migrants made it into the two most elite tiers of white-collar workers—professional and technical;

⁷⁰ The anomaly of 1900 could be due to the small sample size of white-collar workers that year.

and managers, officials, and proprietors—while slightly more than half filled Chicago’s clerical and sales positions (Table 2.6).

Table 2.6. Job Category of White Collar Midwestern Migrants (white males with native parents)

		Year			
		1880	1900	1910	1920
White Collar Job Category	Professional and Technical	16.3%	6.7%	18.3%	24.9%
	Managers, Officials, & Proprietors	28.6%	20.0%	25.7%	23.9%
	Clerical and Sales	55.1%	73.3%	56.0%	51.2%
Sample Size		49	30	109	377

Source: Ruggles, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series.

Not all Midwestern migrants were part of the elite middle class. As most of the occupational statistics in Table 2.3 show, those who were in the top two job categories (professional and technical; and managers, officials, and proprietors) accounted for about twenty percent of the male Midwestern migrants, while craftsmen accounted for another ten to twenty percent. Many migrants were in the lower rungs of the white-collar category of clerical and sales. However, even clerical and sales positions took the kind of education and experience that the towns and small cities of the region offered. Midwestern migrants were gaining more educational opportunities at a time when the other migrant streams into Chicago—from the South and from Europe—were filled with people who had little educational capital and would not be able to compete for professional and other white-collar jobs. Most of those other migrant groups also faced employment discrimination, giving Midwestern migrants even more of a competitive advantage. Educated, native white Midwesterners, despite facing hard times in their towns and smaller cities, were well positioned to move to places like Chicago and compete in the industrial economy.

Midwestern migrants did exceptionally well at getting white-collar positions and entering the swelling ranks of America's urban middle class, but by the time of the Chicago Renaissance, after 1900, they were not breaking into the highest strata of society. Studies of Chicago's elite show that almost eighty percent of its wealthiest citizens in 1920 were native or had arrived before 1900. Over time, and especially after 1900, the profile of Chicago's wealthiest businessmen was considerably less Algeristic. By the time the Chicago Renaissance writers came to the city, Midwestern migrants were not the ones who became the leading captains of industry. They were, however, very successful at establishing themselves in Chicago's middle class.⁷¹

One of the reasons why Chicago's Midwestern migrants were so successful over the long term was because this migration weeded out many who were not well-equipped for success. The weeding process started as soon as migrants set foot in the city. Most Midwesterners arrived by train at the West Side terminals of the Northwestern, Union, and B & O stations, a gritty part of town. Even for those who had visited the city before, entering and settling in Chicago was usually a disorienting experience. As one migrant described, "The city struck me like a blow in the face. I was completely bewildered and did not know what to do when I came out of the Union Station. The terrible grinding roar and screech of the elevated train—which looked as if it were about to fall on me at any moment—simply scared me stiff. Everybody seemed to wear an expressionless cold mask for a face, and were all breaking their necks to run over someone else. The grimy

⁷¹ Ghent and Jaher, 298, 303, 328.

buildings and the smoke! Ugh! How thoroughly disgusting.” Such an experience often humbled migrants in a way they had not expected.⁷²

After arriving in Chicago, their first task was to find a place to stay. For those with family or friends to greet them, the adjustment to the city was much less difficult. A close friend or family member could help a greenhorn navigate the city, provide free room and board, and also help them get a job. Most other streams of migrants relied heavily on their family and ethnic community for support, especially during the initial period of adjustment.⁷³

The story of a rural migrant coming to the city and living with family has become well established in fictional literature and is part of American folklore. However, Richard Sennett has found that this was somewhat rare, and my own research into migrants' stories agrees with his conclusion. Most of the time, Midwestern migrants were not offered a place to stay or they did not ask for one. Even for those who relied on family in Chicago, the hospitality could be less gracious than expected. Edgar Lee Masters moved to Chicago as an aspiring lawyer with only twelve dollars. To save money he stayed with a relative, but was surprised to find that this person charged him a regular rate for room and board. For most Midwestern migrants, there was not much of a familial support network. Without such a support network, Midwestern migrants were

⁷² W. P. Carter, “1/15/26, Elmer L. Setterlund Notes,” 87-5, 1, Ernest W. Burgess Papers, University of Chicago Manuscripts (hereafter UCMSS).

⁷³ The literature that shows the importance of reconstituted support networks for European and African American migrants coming to Chicago is too vast to list. For some examples, see the collection of essays in Melvin G. Holli and Peter d'A. Jones, eds., *Ethnic Chicago: A Multicultural Portrait*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

under pressure to earn money quickly in order to pay the cost of living in an expensive city.⁷⁴

Without a familial support network, housing was a major problem for Midwestern migrants. It helped make this migration selective and resulted in the most successful and ambitious people remaining in the city over the long term. Most Midwestern migrants who arrived at the West Side train terminals were told to go a few blocks west, to the hotel area around Halsted and Marion, which was Chicago's most transient area. Even many of those who tried to start out in a decent hotel in another part of town soon found themselves needing to move to the cheaper facilities on the West Side. According to a 1911 YMCA hotel investigation, "It is the green man, respectable, but unused to the city, who finds it hardest to get along and who goes broke the quickest and flattest; thus he is soon forced into the 10 and 15 cent lodging houses."⁷⁵

The cheap facilities that sprung up in the booming metropolis did not offer much to Midwestern migrants. There were hotels known as "flop houses" in Chicago and other large cities where patrons, about half of whom were new arrivals, slept on the bare floor with only a newspaper beneath them. With no privacy they slept next to each other, side by side, sometimes in places that could pack in over a thousand travelers. More common for migrants, and slightly better, were "cell houses." The tiny "cells" in these places were divided by corrugated iron that did not extend to the ceiling. Each "cell" came equipped with little more than a straw mattress. One hotel investigation confirmed that

⁷⁴ Richard Sennet, *Families Against the City: Middle Class Homes of Industrial Chicago*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970, 1984), 77; Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance*, 73.

⁷⁵ "Lodging House Investigation," *The Official Bulletin of the Young Men's Christian Association of Chicago*, May 1911, 16.

Midwesterners made up a large portion of the clientele in these places, which showed a preference for native white migrants.⁷⁶

Hygiene was a serious issue in the cheaper housing facilities that migrants used. One YMCA investigator who visited a cell house reported that, “the sheets are not changed oftener than once a week and the other bedding never. The pillow is made of feathers and covered with a dark and greasy pillow case, often so dirty that it lifts much like lead and is harder than the mattress. The entire outfit is generally filthy, dusty from the dry sweeping, and alive with vermin.” Bathroom facilities were inadequate and poorly maintained, which added to the foul odor of the buildings. Investigators often found no more than one uncleaned bath for an entire hotel, with only a few common towels and no soap. They believed that such conditions probably spread diseases, including tuberculosis, to migrants who stayed there.⁷⁷

In addition to the unsanitary conditions, many Midwestern migrants did not like having to live in close contact with the hoboes and poor immigrants who inhabited the West Side. One migrant noted to an interviewer that in the first West Side hotel where he stayed “There were a lot of bums.” More shocking would have been the vice that permeated the area. A naïve newly arrived migrant looking for a hotel might walk into one of the brothels labeled “Men’s Sleeping Quarters,” and many of the hotels turned a

⁷⁶ John Nuveen Jr., “The Road to Fortune,” A paper read before the Chicago Literary Club, 3 May 1937, Chicago Historical Society (hereafter CHS), 11-12, 14; “Lodging House Investigation,” 16; Investigation of West Side Hotels and Lodging Houses, 1920, 22, 5-3, YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago, CHS.

⁷⁷ Nuveen, 11-13.

blind eye to prostitution occurring in their facilities. Cheap hotels also offered little social interaction, which made them lonely places for new migrants.⁷⁸

YMCA investigators, who were trying to show why the organization needed to build its own hotel, may have had some incentive to exaggerate the conditions in the city's West Side, but other accounts support many of their claims. One labor radical, Len De Caux, wrote a colorful description of a restless night he spent in a Chicago lodging house:

Instead of sheep, I counted the shufflings, mutterings, cussings, as each cubicle was occupied. In this tune-up, I noted the remarkable acoustics of the big hall's thinly tintinnabulating partitions.

The symphony began. It started pianissimo with the winds—belches, groans, farts, incipient snores. It rose in a crescendo of tubercular coughing, bibulous slurping, snorting and snoring, a vomit, and many-stringed cot-creaking. After a climax of nightmare yells, partitions-pounding, and cries of protest, a brief intermission called by the night clerk. Then on again, till dawn's early light brought the quiet of windless exhaustion.⁷⁹

In addition to reporting on the conditions of lodging houses, YMCA records also provide stories of unsuccessful Midwestern migrants. These cases show how the filtering process of the Midwestern migration operated. Many of those who came to the YMCA Hotel without good job skills, education, money, or connections left Chicago after only a short period, usually to return to the place from which they came, or to move on to another destination. One business counselor who interviewed a recent arrival from the Midwestern hinterlands made the following note, "Arrived in Chicago today—broke....

⁷⁸ Ibid., 15; Arthur Percival Butler, "A Study of a Young Men's Christian Association Dormitory," (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1924), 40; *Untitled Table with Statistics Showing the Data from the 1911 YMCA Hotel Investigation*, 16-7, YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago, CHS; *Survey of West Side Hotels*, 1921, 11-1, YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago, CHS; Emmet Dedmon, *Great Enterprises: 100 Years of the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1957), 193-96.

⁷⁹ Len De Caux, *Labor Radical: From the Wobblies to CIO, a Personal History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 56.

Weak—little promise. Only eight years of school.” As the quote indicates, those without educational capital and without the financial resources to sustain themselves in the early part of their migration had little chance of succeeding or even continuing to live in the city.⁸⁰

The YMCA discouraged those who did not appear capable of building successful careers and joining the middle class. Expressing the organization’s beliefs, one branch secretary said, “I cannot but feel that we must have in mind the fact that a vast number of these men who seek to become factors of the city are not fitted of city life, and we should do everything within our power without offense to lead such men to understand this fact.... Where men can live more efficiently on the farm and in the small town, I take it to be the business of such a work as this to do what we can to lead them to discover that fact.”⁸¹

The YMCA Hotel’s Social Services Division singled out those who appeared to be less promising migrants and urged them to return home, often lending them money in order to do so. According to one article about the YMCA Hotel, “A few boys reach the city every month who ought never to be there, the secretaries realize. Keen eyes are on the alert for such a young man, and one of the ‘friendly chats’ by which the hotel is becoming influential, lays open the difficulties and suggests the remedy. In a few days, possibly with the cooperation of parents, the boy is back on the farm or in a small town store, safe from the pitfalls of the city.” Descriptions of social service cases show that migrants who did not find good jobs and who lost their money quickly needed little

⁸⁰ “Chicago Business ad Professional Men Interview Young Strangers,” *The Official Bulletin of the Young Men’s Christian Association of Chicago*, September 1927, 13.

⁸¹ Address to Board and Fellow Secretaries, ca. 1917, 5-3, YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago, CHS.

prodding to return home. Many felt trapped in the city after running out of money, and only wanted enough money to buy a return train ticket.⁸²

Stories from outside the YMCA paint a similar picture of migrants giving up and leaving Chicago if they were not able to start themselves on a successful career path. One family that applied for help from the United Charities of Chicago found that it was harder to be poor in Chicago than elsewhere, and soon headed for the countryside after only a brief stay. A man raised on a farm near Mason City, Iowa came to Chicago and got an unskilled job handling freight at a depot, but found city life difficult and started drinking heavily. He told his interviewer that he planned to return to Iowa and start farming or working in a town as soon as he was able to do so. It is easy to see why even steadily-employed laborers found working-class life more palatable in the smaller, safer, and less expensive hinterlands of the Midwest than in Chicago.⁸³

Despite the difficulties that Midwesterners faced when they entered Chicago, they still had many advantages that other migrants groups lacked. Scholars who study migration often focus on the adjustment experience, but as James Gregory points out, adjustment is not nearly as difficult for internal migrants who already speak the language, have the privileges of whiteness, share most aspects of a common culture, do not come

⁸² Paul Patton Faris, "Rooms for Rent—Mission Plan," *The Continent*, 12 July 1917, 866. See also Nuveen, 43; "The Y.M.C.A. Hotel Growing," *The Official Bulletin of the Young Men's Christian Association of Chicago*, July 1916; Report of the Manager to the YMCA Hotel Board of Directors, February 14, 1929, 4-11, YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago, CHS; "Y.M.C.A. Hotel Incidents," *The Official Bulletin of the Young Men's Christian Association of Chicago*, November, 1916.

⁸³ Francis H. McLean, "Survey of the United Charities of Chicago, Appendix I: Summaries of 105 Case Records," 1917, p. 30, 7-5, United Charities of Chicago Records, CHS; Nels Anderson, Case Document 94, 127-1, Ernest W. Burgess Papers, UCMSS. For a set of vivid articles that describe the difficulties of everyday life in Chicago during this period, see Perry Duis, *Challenging Chicago Coping with Everyday Life, 1837-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

from far away, and do not have a strange accent.⁸⁴ However, although Midwesterners did not face as many obstacles as other migrant groups, their adjustment experience was particularly important for this migration. It was easy for Midwestern migrants to return home, and many of them did so because of the difficulties they faced during the adjustment experience. Immigrants and poor internal migrants may have had an even harder time adjusting to Chicago, but those difficulties were less likely to convince them to abandon the city. Unlike Midwestern migrants, they often could not afford to return to a faraway home. Even if they did have the option of returning they might face political persecution or even worse economic conditions than they encountered in Chicago. Midwestern migrants who wanted to return home had a short distance to travel, did not face political persecution, and would not have to face the kind of poverty found in the rural areas of the South and southern and eastern Europe. The Midwestern migration had an especially strong weeding process simply because it was easy to return home when life became difficult in Chicago.

In addition to the unsuccessful people who were weeded out of this migration, many of the unskilled workers who came to Chicago from the Midwest were itinerant farm laborers who never had plans of staying. Many went to the city during slack periods, which happened most often during the winter. Industries such as timber also relied on seasonal workers who made trips to Chicago during slack periods, and many

⁸⁴ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How Black Southerners and White Southerners Transformed 20th Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 9.

seasonal laborers had to visit Chicago employment offices to be placed in jobs throughout the region's hinterlands.⁸⁵

Midwesterners who set out for Chicago were more diverse than they appear to be in samples of census data, but those who stayed over the long term tended to be very successful at making it into the city's growing middle class. A powerful weeding process was one of the factors that distinguished Midwestern migrants from other groups of people who were pouring into the city at this time. The weeding of Midwestern migrants, along with the group's educational background, doctrine of success, and racial privileges, helps explain why these people had such extraordinary success over the long term.

Among those successful Midwestern migrants were the individuals who would lead the Chicago Renaissance. When they came to Chicago, they brought with them the perspectives, values, and ambitions they had developed in the Midwest's smaller cities and towns. They arrived with their troubled economic experiences, their radical critique of industrial America, their success ethos, and their middle-class, professional ambitions.

⁸⁵ Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003). The Chicago Bureau of Charities also reported that many migrant laborers from the region spent some of their slack winter months in Chicago. Chicago Bureau of Charities, "Non-Resident Unemployed Men in Chicago," *Fifth Annual Report* (1899), p. 31, CHS.

They were people of the hinterlands, and soon they would bring those influences to bear on American literature.

Chapter Three: Challenging Victoria

[The minister] thought of his wife and for the moment almost hated her. "She has always been ashamed of passion and has cheated me," he thought. "Man has a right to expect living passion and beauty in a woman. He has no right to forget that he is an animal and in me there is something that is Greek. I will throw off the woman of my bosom and seek other women. I will besiege this school teacher. I will fly in the face of all men and if I am a creature of carnal lusts I will live then for my lusts."

Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*

Despite their bourgeois tendencies discussed in chapter two, the writers of the Chicago Renaissance fostered an antipathy toward the middle class and its morality. Their criticisms came from the disenchanted, leftist perspective that informed their analysis of industrial capitalism. They developed a strong critique of the middle-class lifestyle, values, and especially its views of sexuality and its coercive efforts to impose those views. For some of the writers, an ambivalence toward the middle class developed before their migration to Chicago. They saw the middle class as the cause for some of their hardships in the region's hinterlands. Other writers came to their critique later. When the movement took shape in Chicago, these writers set forth to undermine the moral hegemony of the middle class. Adopting a bohemian lifestyle, they disregarded sexual taboos. Most importantly, they challenged Victorian moral codes in their literature by focusing on sexuality, treating the topic in a frank and nonjudgmental way. This was their most original innovation and left the movement's most noticeable mark on American writing.

Theodore Dreiser's crusade against moral authority developed at the youngest age of any of the Chicago Renaissance authors. In his childhood it was his father and the Church that provoked him. His German father was a staunch Catholic whom Theodore remembered as "a man of...iron conventionalism and moral intolerance." The father was obsessed with the sins of his children, in part because he believed he himself would be punished for their sins, and in part because he feared any gossip that would embarrass the family. He became a harsh disciplinarian with his children, whom he sent to Catholic school to reinforce a strict regimen. However, Dreiser saw his father's methods backfire and drive his older siblings into trouble. His oldest brothers flirted with burglary, con artistry, promiscuous women, and alcoholism, and Theodore blamed his father for their predicaments.¹

Dreiser came to despise Catholic school and the Church in general—the other moral force that caused problems for him and his family during childhood. He believed that the school's emphasis on morality was counterproductive and only served to deprive him of the better and more classical education that he later received at a public school. During his first eight years, his father and the Church came to embody a rigid moral authority he detested.

In his adolescence, Theodore continued to resent moral authority, but the target of his anger changed. By that time, his father could no longer provide for the family due to an industrial accident. His mother decided to take the youngest children and move away from the rigid father. Living with his mother and some of his siblings (he was the

¹ Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn* (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1931, 1998), 10, 12, 25. For a source on the educational philosophy of Catholic schools in the nineteenth century, see Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975).

youngest of ten living children), Dreiser was free from the religious force that he loathed. Despite this welcome escape, he encountered another moral authority that punished him and his family. Instead of facing his father's rage, Theodore confronted social ostracism when his struggling family continually violated the taboos of Victorian America.

Without a male breadwinner, Theodore's family was poor, and poverty made it difficult to be "respectable," something that would have been hard to achieve anyway without a male head of household. The first place the shrunken family lived during a long itinerant period was Vincennes, Indiana, where the mother was so pressed for money that she accepted an offer to live—for free—in a building that also was used for prostitution. She was uncomfortable with the situation, but as the family would learn again and again, respectability was a luxury they could not afford.

The family's association with prostitution became even closer a few years later, and the relief that its income afforded them undermined the teachings of Victorian morality. In 1882, Dreiser's older brother, Paul Dresser, came back to Indiana after making a name for himself as an entertainer. After reuniting with the family, he took his mother and youngest siblings to Evansville. There, he established a relationship with the madam of the town's upscale brothel. In an effort to impress Paul, the madam put up most of the money for the Dreisers to purchase a nice house. Theodore, with his mother and the dependent children of the family, moved into a house with many amenities the family had not had since the decline of the region's woolen mills and the family's financial collapse. It was hard for Dreiser, or anyone else in the family, to condemn the business of their benefactress when she was the one shielding them from poverty.

However, when the madam ended her relationship with Paul, the Dreisers were forced, once again, to move, and returned to their previous economic condition. While the “respectable” avenues of earning a living had failed his family during this period of industrialization, their only refuge from poverty had come from the hand of a woman of ill repute.²

In poverty again, the family’s conflicts with Victorian morality became more serious. These conflicts shaped Theodore’s adolescence and defined one of the themes he would bring to the fore of American literature. Three of his older sisters learned how to use their sexuality to create opportunities that would otherwise elude women of their background. Flings with well-to-do men were the best way for them to experience a more comfortable lifestyle, even if only temporarily. However, romance between “sporting men” and lower-class girls rarely endured, and one of the first affairs led to pregnancy. As was often the case, the better-off man refused to take responsibility or to make the pregnancy legitimate through marriage. This created anxiety for the family and for the sister, who failed in her attempt to get an abortion and save the family from embarrassment. Only the child’s stillborn delivery allowed the Dreisers to avert public attention.

This episode, among others, led Dreiser to resent the moral codes that penalized his family. However, this time his resentment was not directed narrowly toward his father or even the Church. His belief became that, “America, and especially the Middle West, was at that time miasmatically puritanic.”³ In his struggle against the self-

² Richard Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser: At the Gates of the City, 1871-1907* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1986), 50-58.

³ Dreiser, *Dawn*, 15.

righteous, Dreiser developed his own moral relativism (though he never used that term himself). As he begins telling the story of his sister's ill-fated pregnancy in his autobiography, he writes, "There are those who dully and naïvely divide the world into evil and good. I wish to present the following complication and paradox for their solution."⁴ He did not blame his naïve sixteen-year-old sister for entering into the relationship, nor did he blame his mother for failing to keep her daughter out of this trouble.

Instead, he writes, "Poverty having wrecked the spirit or esprit de corps of our family, it remained only for the easy and yet natural sympathy of my mother, preyed upon as it was by the natural desires of her children to have something in the form of pleasure, to undo what little opportunity for social, if not virginal, integrity presented itself."⁵ Showing his frustration with the social pressures of Victorian America, he continues, "I wish it were possible for those who see life only as an orderly procedure, and from a moralistic or religious point of view, without regard to the law of contrarities which tried every individual growth by its power to survive in conflict with other growths, to consider the case of our family."⁶

A later incident involving another sister gave Dreiser the material for his first novel, *Sister Carrie*, and reinforced the moral relativism that helped make his book a watershed in American literature. Two of his older sisters, Emma and Sylvia, were itinerant, learning about life in the fast lane in Chicago, followed by periods with the family in Indiana where they caused scandal. Emma's main escapade came after she left

⁴ Ibid., 13-14.

⁵ Ibid., 71.

⁶ Ibid.

the family for good and moved back to Chicago. She had an affair with a forty-year-old married clerk named L. A. Hopkins. The story of *Sister Carrie* seems sensational to many who read it today, but in fact it is very similar to what actually happened to Emma Dreiser. After his wife discovered the affair, Hopkins stole \$3,500 from his employer's safe and fled with Emma to Canada. They stayed there for a short time, then became nervous and returned most of the money to his employer and moved to New York City. They made a good living by running a bedhouse that catered to prostitutes and their clients, while Hopkins's relationship with Tammany Hall ensured that the police did not threaten their operation. Business was good enough to allow Emma to enjoy the urban consumer culture that was developing in that period, with its many material goods and amusements.⁷ She lived much better than she ever had in Indiana, and Theodore could not condemn his sister for doing what was necessary to create opportunities for herself. In this era and with the lack of opportunities for the family, he could not blame her for exploiting her sexuality.

When Hopkins and Emma took off from Chicago, the story attracted a great deal of attention from the city's scandal-driven/sensationalist press. However, while the newspapers uncovered the facts about Hopkins, they never learned Emma's identity and the Dreiser name never made it into print. Chicago detectives went to Warsaw and interviewed the Dreiser family, and so Theodore and his mother knew what had transpired, but this never became public knowledge in Warsaw.

Although this scandal did not lead the family to suffer public humiliation, it led Theodore to question accepted standards of decency. The plot of his first novel, which he

⁷ Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 67-68.

wrote fifteen years later, came straight from Emma Dreiser's experiences in Chicago, those that led her to flee the country and eventually settle in New York City. Even the final downfall of the novel's main male character had its own basis in reality, as Emma's lover, Hopkins, fell into financial despair as a result of being ousted from Tammany Hall, enduring a corruption investigation, and being unable to find other work. After he had been unemployed for years, Dreiser's sister left Hopkins. Hopkins then lived on the streets for about a year before his death, which may have been a suicide.⁸

Rather than tell this tale as a lesson to young women to warn them against breaking the Victorian code of morality, Dreiser wrote *Sister Carrie* in a nonjudgmental way that would bring him censure and lead to the suppression of the book's initial publication. Other novels told similar tales of women, but Dreiser's sin was that he never condemned Carrie, nor did she have to suffer for her moral transgressions. After the novel gained attention from literary critics, his accepting attitude toward sexuality helped set one of the main themes of modern American literature.

Although Sylvia's story in Chicago and New York did not become public knowledge at the time, her earlier indiscretions in Warsaw did attract attention. When she and her sister Emma joined the family in Warsaw in 1884, they quickly earned reputations as "loose women." They paraded through the small town in flashy clothes and stayed out late with many different men. Finally, the family kicked Emma out of the house, and she went to Chicago, while Sylvia stayed in Warsaw and entered a period of melancholy.⁹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 66.

For the thirteen-year-old Theodore, the scorn that his sisters brought upon the family threatened the pleasant social acceptance he had begun to enjoy. In Warsaw he had excelled academically and, despite his family's poverty, become popular and established friendships with classmates from well-to-do families. His happiness, however, declined considerably once his sisters' behavior drew the attention and the teasing of his classmates. The punishment he received for his sisters' behavior did not seem at all fair to him. He did not blame his sisters, nor did he even pity them. In an industrial society that offered them so few opportunities, he saw their use of sexuality as a form of empowerment, despite the problems that it eventually caused. "Most of the time I had a feeling that they were their own masters, or might be if they would. Also that perhaps they enjoyed being playthings. Why not? And through it all ran the feeling that good, bad, or indifferent as individuals or things might be, life was a splendid surge, a rich sensation, and that it was fine to be alive."¹⁰ Rather than accept the Victorianism of the Middle West, he challenged it with moral relativism.

Dreiser and his family would suffer their worst social punishment after a scandal inspired by his sister Sylvia. In Warsaw she had a sexual affair with one of the town's well-to-do womanizers. Naively, she had expected the relationship to lead to long-term happiness, but found herself abandoned when she became pregnant. Terrified of the scorn that the pregnancy would bring upon the family, Theodore's mother sent Sylvia away to her sister Emma, who was by then running the bedhouse in New York City with L.A. Hopkins. Sylvia joined them there, delivered her baby, and enjoyed far greater comfort than she ever had experienced. Because of her desire to continue this lifestyle,

¹⁰ Dreiser, *Dawn*, 173.

she refused to return to Indiana. She also refused to be burdened with the care of her infant, leaving her mother to take care of the child. Although Dreiser's mother told others that the baby was a distant relative, no one believed her fabrication and the family's social status plummeted.¹¹

For Theodore Dreiser, the condemnation could not have come at a worse time. Prior to this incident he had been enjoying Warsaw. The main threat to his happiness had come from censure of his sisters' moral transgressions, and this incident proved far more catastrophic than the previous ones. "Although hitherto there had been...some inclination to receive us--we three younger children at least--into the best school society of the town, all this was now quickly ended by the rumors.... We were a scandal."¹² He then decided to quit school and leave Indiana permanently, choosing to move to Chicago by himself. There he would become a leading figure of American literature while openly questioning Victorian sexual norms, middle-class moral hegemony, and the genteel tradition of American literature.

While Dreiser's complaints about the middle class focused on sexual morality, Sherwood Anderson's critique was broader. His revolt against middle-class trappings became apparent as he started a family and reached the apex of his Ohio business career. Although he enjoyed high social status and could afford all the luxuries his family desired, he became unhappy and frustrated by his inability to be happy. It seemed to him that the expectations and responsibilities of middle-class life imposed an unfair burden on him. Just as he saw the factory as psychologically harmful to working-class men (see

¹¹ Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 68.

chapter two), Anderson believed that the family and the unsatisfying work of business were stifling middle-class men such as himself. Although the work of business was unfulfilling, the expectations of the middle-class family—and especially of wives—compelled men to persist in their unsatisfying careers. This assessment would be the basis for his challenge to the core values, expectations, and practices of the American middle class.

Anderson's view of the middle-class life as confining comes through most clearly in his earliest novel, *Windy McPherson's Son*, which he wrote while he still lived in Ohio. In the book he includes a monologue, spoken by a female character, that reveals his own views about why the middle-class ideal oppressed men. The words he puts in her mouth match what he later wrote in his autobiography about his early views of middle-class women and the demands they made of men. The speech shows his low esteem for these women, whom he held responsible for the unfair expectations they put upon middle-class men. Speaking to the protagonist, who has just proposed to her, she says:

You are able and you have a kind of undying energy in you. I want to give both my wealth and your ability to children—our children. That will not be easy for you. It means giving up your dreams of power. Perhaps I shall lose courage. Women do after two or three have come. You will have to furnish that. You will have to make a mother of me and keep making a mother of me. You will have to be a new kind of father with something maternal in you. You will have to be patient and studious and kind. You will have to think of these things at night instead of thinking of your own advancement. You will have to live wholly for me because I am to be their mother, giving me your strength and courage and your good sane outlook on things. And then when they come you will have to give all these things to them day after day in a thousand little ways.¹³

¹² Dreiser, *Dawn*, 264.

¹³ Sherwood Anderson, *Windy McPherson's Son* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993; 1916), 189.

As one contemporary reviewer noted, it is nearly impossible to imagine a woman making such a speech in this situation. It did not fit the pragmatic character Anderson had built for her, nor was her dramatic and formal language realistic.¹⁴ Ironically, Anderson wrote this during his early phase of realism, when he was making his best efforts to create realistic characters, settings, and dialogue. In life, as in his novels, Anderson used misogyny to express his antipathy toward the middle-class lifestyle. As he loathed the kind of life he found himself leading, he blamed women for his discontent.¹⁵

In his memoirs, Anderson shows the personal resentment that he developed toward his own wife and children. He blamed them—especially his wife—for his discontent and sought to distance himself from them as much as possible. He later admitted that he resented his wife not because of anything specifically she did, but because she represented the lifestyle that confined him. “I confused her with something I had begun to hate. She had come out of a middle class family and I credit her with having impulses she may never have had. I thought that she also wanted me to go on in the individualistic business world into which I had got, that she believed in it and that, if she was unhappy, it was because she felt the resistance to it arising in me and wanted to put it down.”¹⁶ Anderson’s resentment toward his wife showed his gendered conception of what it meant to be middle-class and respectable. Anderson believed that the pressure of an “ideal” family life and a business career—which to him were the two bedrocks of

¹⁴ Hart Crane, magazine clipping, publication and date unknown, though it may be *The Dial* or *The Little Review*, ca. 1920, Volume 1 Scrapbook, 113-1, Sherwood Anderson Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

¹⁵ On Victorian domesticity, see Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966).

the middle-class lifestyle—prevented men from leading a more satisfying and fulfilling life. It was a life that made him very unhappy in Ohio.

Anderson also resented children for the pressures they imposed upon middle-class fathers. He treated his own children coldly, usually choosing to ignore them, and eventually abandoned them with few signs of remorse. As his adult life progressed in Ohio he spent less and less time with his family and in a confessional letter decades later, he recalls how he had detached himself from his children when they were young, saying that he had become “hardened to the smell of baby manure.” His discomfort with his family led Anderson to create a sanctuary where he tried, literally, to cleanse himself. Each time he entered he first washed himself thoroughly with soap and then put on fresh clothing. He would not let anyone else enter, and was furious when a maid attempted to clean it. There he wrote his first novels in which he expressed his opposition to the values of America’s bourgeoisie, as he created heroes who act on their idealism and give up their middle-class families and careers.¹⁷

Windy McPherson’s Son features a mostly autobiographical character who builds a successful business career and leads a respectable bourgeois lifestyle. However, the hero’s epiphanic moment comes when he turns his back on his lifestyle and even the family that represents it, and decides to spend the rest of his life “seeking truth.” Seeking truth lay not in a business career, but instead in physical labor, philanthropy, bartending, and, above all, organizing workers to fight the businesses that restricted their lives.

¹⁶ Sherwood Anderson, *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs: A Critical Edition*, ed. Ray Lewis White (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 260.

¹⁷ Sherwood Anderson to Marion Anderson Spear, March 1933, Sherwood Anderson Collection, Digital Library and Archives, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Blacksburg, VA. Kim Townsend, *Sherwood Anderson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 63-64.

Whereas the professional business career, family life, and conservative, individualistic outlook had been vacuous and restrictive, the character's newfound life was fulfilling in every way. He was able to lead it only because he chose to reject the politics, social values, and lifestyle of the middle class.

The other novel Anderson wrote in Ohio was *Marching Men*, and it too featured a hero who gives up his bourgeois lifestyle and dedicates himself to a better purpose. This protagonist did it to lead a marching movement of working-class men trying to reclaim their dignity. Although neither of his books' protagonists succeeded in their quests, he portrays both of them as heroes as they give up their comfortable lifestyles and dedicated themselves to improving the lives of oppressed people. This was the type of person whom Anderson respected and wanted to be. He could find nothing good about the lives of those who followed the middle-class ideal.

Partly following the model of the heroes he had created, Anderson gave up his bourgeois trappings, suddenly abandoning his job and his family in 1912. One day that November, he left his office, disappeared for three days, and was finally discovered in a different city, in the same clothes, and incoherent. He and others have described this episode as a nervous breakdown that came suddenly and uncontrollably, but there are reasons to doubt this, especially since the experience was so similar to that of the main character in *Windy McPherson's Son*. That he followed so closely to the script of his novels makes the incident appear premeditated rather than the result of some sudden,

unexpected mental breakdown. He rejoined his family for a brief period, but this only lasted for a few months before he left to go to Chicago.¹⁸

Antipathy toward the middle-class would help unite Anderson with the other writers of the Chicago Renaissance who were engaged in a similar crusade. While adolescent and early adult experiences led some of the Chicago Renaissance writers to resent the middle class and what they perceived as its norms, all the major writers of the movement joined in the rebellion against the middle class once they became part of the city's bohemian literary salon. Anderson would seek to challenge middle-class culture in both his writing and in his lifestyle, though in the latter category he was not completely successful. He had blamed his family for pressuring him to pursue an unfulfilling business career, yet after he abandoned them and was living alone in Chicago, he still chose to work for an advertising agency to fulfill his desire for material comfort. While he did not manage to break from the career side of his former life, he joined Chicago's bohemia that challenged Victorian norms of family and sexuality.

Midwestern Bohemia

Anderson's ambivalent views of the middle class helped him to fit comfortably into the salon of the Chicago Renaissance. He fled to the city in 1913, where he helped the movement reach what one of its chroniclers has called its apex.¹⁹ There he found

¹⁸ Most Anderson biographers have accepted this incident as a nervous breakdown, but the most recent and best biography disputes that assessment and says Anderson was in a "fugue state," taking whatever action necessary in order to run away from his problems. Townsend, *Sherwood Anderson*, 77.

¹⁹ Dale Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance: The Literary Life in the Midwest, 1900-1930* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966), 309.

fellow writers who were also dissatisfied with middle-class norms and expectations. Most of them were primarily concerned with the way the middle class enforced a rigid, Victorian code of sexual morality. This middle-class Victorianism, according to their view, emphasized sexual repression and punished those, such as Dreiser's family, who did not follow strict guidelines. With their bohemian lifestyles and frank depictions of sexuality in their literature, they mounted their assault on Victorian sexual morality. Their battle against middle-class moral hegemony was more coherent, directed, and successful than any challenge they posed to America's political economy. It was their most obvious and lasting legacy for modern American writing.

To build a literary bohemia required breaking from the social traditions that an earlier generation of Chicago writers had established. That generation had joined enthusiastically with wealthy civic boosters in what came to be known as the city's "upward movement" (see chapter one). This was a time when the city's moneyed elite was insecure about their reputation and status in other parts of the country. The problem, as they saw it, was that their city had become known for cultivating business and neglecting culture. In an attempt to gain social respectability for themselves and their city, these boosters sponsored individuals and institutions engaged in "higher" forms of culture, such as art and literature.

Chicago's earlier generation of writers, which included Hamlin Garland, Henry Fuller, William Morton Payne, Robert Herrick, Francis Fisher Browne, and others, eagerly joined the society of wealthy philanthropists and took advantage of new opportunities for patronage. Writers and artists had studios in the illustrious Fine Arts Building that local boosters had funded in 1898. The city's literati also participated in

“The Little Room” which functioned mainly as a social club and brought them into close contact with some of the city’s leading philanthropists. At meetings they shared their work with some of the city’s leading cultural philanthropists, mainly women who were married to magnates such as William Armour and Potter Palmer. The group met on Friday afternoons following a performance of the symphony that the cultural philanthropists also supported, an example of how The Little Room’s literary members sought to emulate the lifestyle of the upper class, as well as reap the benefits of elite philanthropy. These philanthropists formed a Contributor’s Club to fund the publications of Little Room members, and they provided financial support for Harriet Monroe’s journal, *Poetry*. During the upward movement, Chicago’s leading writers were careful to cultivate a close relationship with the elite and enthusiastically joined the local genteel society.²⁰

However, cultural philanthropy declined in the early 1900s, and the next generation of Chicago writers had little contact with their predecessors. In part, this was because many of the earlier writers had left the city by the time the next generation arrived, but it was also because of a cultural divide, as the newer generation flouted the wealthy philanthropists and the obsequious writers who sought their patronage. Edgar Lee Masters was one of those who looked down on earlier writers who participated in the upward movement. He believed they had been part of a self-congratulatory system that produced little quality writing. He later wrote, “I saw in the Little Room the self-

²⁰ Account Book, 1910-1917, 2-22, Little Room Records, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; Business Records, Autograph Book, 1898-1931, 2-25, Little Room Records, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; Bernard Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters, A Critical History* (The Michigan State College Press, 1954), 51-54; Hugh Dalziel

importance with which mediocrity and amateurism always invest themselves.” He also complained about the ties between business and art in Chicago, writing, “One of [Chicago’s] worst phases is that it has been dominated by a mind as insignificant and fraudulent as Victor Lawson’s; and by influences as corrupt and arrogant as the Pattersons and McCormicks, who are the Hapsburgs of Illinois.”²¹

In addition to Masters, Carl Sandburg also resented the city’s elite patrons. On at least one occasion he attended an event where he was honored, but purposely antagonized the wealthy philanthropists present. As Masters recalled, “he came in his work clothes, since a dinner coat is the sure sign of capitulating to the rich, and he and I and his wife, and two others sat at the same table. Well, he began to mutter curses to himself, and to call the people around him vile names, and to growl like a mad dog.”²² This breach of gentility contrasted with the literary scenes in cities such as Philadelphia, where the leading writers were eager to gather in and benefit from well-endowed institutions such as universities.²³ This break from the social and cultural traditions of America’s genteel complemented the way in which the Chicago Renaissance challenged literary and cultural conventions in their books and poetry. It helped set a new direction for modern American literature that challenged the values and worldview of the upper and middle classes.

Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center from 1885 to 1920* (Totowa, NJ: Bedminster Press, 1964), 36-37, 104.

²¹ Edgar Lee Masters to Agnes Lee Freer, 8 June 1925, 1-3, Agnes Lee-Edgar Lee Masters Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 139-40.

²² Edgar Lee Masters to Agnes Lee Freer, 9 September 1924, 1-2, Agnes Lee-Edgar Lee Masters Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

²³ Robert M. Crunden, *American Salons: Encounters with European Modernism, 1885-1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 102.

The bohemian writers of the Chicago Renaissance chose not to utilize most of the institutions that had been built during the upward movement of the previous two decades. They avoided institutions that cultural boosters had supported, and even limited their contact with the University of Chicago—which Masters said “rose upon the nutriment of capitalistic imperialism”²⁴ Of the main institutions that served the bohemian Chicago Renaissance writers—the *Friday Literary Review*, *The Little Review*, and *Poetry*, only the latter was funded by wealthy cultural philanthropists. The writers also made use of the Newberry Library which, despite its genteel patronage, offered useful research material.

Of course, despite their indignation, the Chicago Renaissance writers did not separate themselves completely from Chicago’s commerce. Most of them had moved to the city because of the opportunities available in the growing publishing business, especially newspapers (see chapter two). Also, as discussed in chapter four, the city’s unique brand of journalism nurtured the innovative style that would help the movement bring ordinary characters, language, and landscapes to the fore of modern American literature. Nonetheless, Edgar Lee Masters was unwilling to acknowledge the ties between Chicago’s literature and its industries, writing that, “Chicago will have a literature in spite of the *Tribune* and the *News* but never with their aid.” He failed to acknowledge that the *Friday Literary Review*—arguably the most important publication of the Chicago Renaissance—was part of the *Chicago Evening Post*. The *Evening Post*

²⁴ quoted in Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 51. At first glance the lack of connection between the Chicago Renaissance and the University of Chicago may seem curious, but these writers did not have college degrees and did have the same background as most academics. In Boston or New York, the literati were more likely to have been college students.

targeted an audience of business and financial professionals and included the literary supplement to cater to its customers' highbrow cultural pretensions.²⁵

In spite of their hypocrisy, the Chicago Renaissance authors were able to undermine the moral hegemony of the "respectable" classes and bring an alternative perspective to the fore of American culture. They did this first by creating a social scene that rejected the gentility of the upward movement and instead built upon the more raucous social traditions of the city's journalists. As Chicago reporters and columnists brought new innovations to newspapers and became the first celebrity journalists in the late nineteenth century (see chapters one and four), they built their own social scene apart from the literati involved in the Little Room and the upward movement. People like Opie Read and Finley Peter Dunne were not comfortable with that scene, and they were not acceptable to the writers of the Little Room who looked down on journalism. Even if the newspaper writers had been accepted and had wanted to join the genteel literary society, it would have been difficult for reporters, who worked long hours, to find the leisure time necessary that high society demanded.²⁶

The alternative that Chicago journalists created in the 1870s was institutionalized with the Whitechapel Club (later merged with the Press Club). This was more rowdy than bohemian, leading one chronicler to associate the journalists' establishment/society with the western "triad of liquor, fast horses, and loose women."²⁷ During their gatherings journalists discussed politics and expressed opinions that they had to suppress

²⁵ Edgar Lee Masters to Agnes Lee Freer, 9 September 1924, 1-2, Agnes Lee-Edgar Lee Masters Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; Douglas Clayton, *Floyd Dell: The Life and Times of an American Rebel* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994), 51.

when writing for their conservative newspapers, and they engaged in satire, making fun of politicians and the elitist socialites who made the news. In addition to their bacchanalia, they spent much of their time talking about writing and what constituted literary quality, and they pushed each other to improve and honored the journalists who produced the best work. This social scene encouraged much of the journalistic innovation that distinguished Chicago and contributed to the writers of the Chicago Renaissance. Although women and sex were a part of the Whitechapel and Press Club scene, the journalists did not intellectualize sex as a political statement or analyze gender issues. Their gatherings differed sharply from those of the genteel literati, but they were also more bacchanalian than intellectual.²⁸

Although the Chicago Renaissance salon differed significantly from the journalist scene that had begun in the late nineteenth century, the newspaper writers who participated in the Whitechapel and Press clubs paved the way for the bohemia to come. They were responsible for rejecting the genteel society and creating a milieu that was different and more encouraging of literary creativity. Since many of the Chicago Renaissance writers came to Chicago as journalists themselves, they entered a profession that had already distanced itself from the genteel literati. Masters, Sandburg, Dreiser, and others would often join the newspaper social crowd, and the scene would continue in the 1920s with leaders such as Ben Hecht and Lloyd Lewis.

²⁶ Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 55, 115; Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance*, 143; Bessie Louise Pierce, *A History of Chicago*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937-57), 3: 410-11.

²⁷ Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance*, 144.

²⁸ Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 66, 112-13.

Free-love radicalism also influenced the Chicago Renaissance by providing another alternative to follow. The free love movement in the U.S. originated in the 1830s along with many other radical efforts that aimed to revolutionize American society. Middle-class radicals attacked institutions such as slavery and marriage that they saw as oppressive. By the 1850s, free-love radicals had developed a network across the northern U.S. and were repudiating Christian orthodoxy and calling for the abolition of marriage. Other reform movements of the mid-nineteenth century also joined in the criticism of marriage, even though they were not as radical as free-love advocates. Owenism and Fourierism both offered secular alternatives to holy matrimony, and some religious revivalists viewed marriage as part of middle-class life that inhibited the intense, personal experience of redemption.²⁹

The free-love movement continued into the post-Civil War era, but took on a different base of support. Whereas most advocates in the antebellum period were middle-class, in the postwar period they were mainly immigrants. By the turn of the century some Russian Jews were responsible for keeping free love ideology alive in the U.S. They saw a correlation between political revolution and erotic emancipation. One of them, Emma Goldman of New York, was the most famous free-love advocate, but Chicago's anarchists also built a vital free-love community.³⁰

The early-twentieth century bohemia of Chicago and New York represented the third phase of American free-love movements. Writer intellectuals were at the forefront in both cities, and they learned directly from the immigrant free lovers who preceded

²⁹ John C. Spurlock, *Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America, 1825-1860* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 2-22, 73, 74.

them. New York's Greenwich Village developed its bohemia first, but Chicago was an important influence on the Village's new community. Hutchins Hapgood, one of the leading free-love advocates in New York, traveled to Chicago in 1905 to write a study of an American worker. His goal was to understand the politics of radical immigrants, and the months he spent there were eye-opening. They gave him material for two books, *The Spirit of Labor*, a biography of the labor leader Anton Johanssen, and *An Anarchist Woman*, about a love affair between two people in the radical labor circles. He was sympathetic to the Chicago radicals he studied, and claimed they had changed his ideology.³¹

Although Hapgood had intended to focus on issues of politics and labor during his stay in Chicago, he became enthralled with the vibrant free-love scene that he encountered there. Despite being one of New York's most "liberated" intellectuals, he had never encountered such extreme sex radicalism in Greenwich Village. He reported feeling like a naif when he encountered Chicago's radical immigrant free lovers, who changed their sex partners on a whim and exhibited none of the inhibitions that he had seen among free lovers in the East. He found the trip liberating and instructive, and the books that he wrote from it reflect his fascination. They were his most original works and focused more on sex than on labor issues, which was the topic he originally intended to research. What he learned from Chicago he brought back to Greenwich Village and began developing a much more liberated scene there.³²

³⁰ Ibid., 2, 73; Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 279.

³¹ Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of Labor* (New York: Duffield & Company, 1907); Hapgood, *An Anarchist Woman* (New York: Duffield & Company, 1909).

³² The story of Hapgood's experience in Chicago comes from Stansell, *American Moderns*, 281-4.

The Chicago Renaissance had created its own thriving bohemia by the early 1910s, learning from Greenwich Village intellectuals, local immigrant radicals, and the Chicago journalists who disdained gentility.³³ Floyd Dell and other leaders corresponded with New York intellectuals about their community and used it partly as a model for their own social scene. In his memoir, Edgar Lee Masters recalled joining the free love scene of Chicago's Russian Jewish intellectuals, talking about sex, free love, and the folly of marriage. Floyd Dell also credited the anarchists for influencing the free-love philosophy of Chicago writers.³⁴

In addition to the urban free-love influences, the Midwestern hinterlands exposed many of the Chicago Renaissance writers to free-love ideology before they migrated to the city. Most of the socialists Dell knew in Davenport were not sex radicals, but his friend Jig Cook had experimented with free love in San Francisco and brought it to Davenport. Cook's wife offered to sleep with Dell, with Jig's consent, but Dell was afraid of endangering his relationship with his best friend. There was also a wild side to hinterland life that was part of the Midwest's heritage. Dreiser's siblings exposed him to the more deviant part of Midwestern life, and other writers from downwardly mobile families witnessed similar behaviors in their towns. Their experiences defy the stereotype of the naïve migrant arriving in the big city.³⁵

³³ Leaders of the Greenwich Village scene also used Paris as a model, though their image of European bohemia was more a product of a fiction and of an older bohemia that had existed in the mid-nineteenth century than anything that existed at the time. Stansell, *American Moderns*, 13-14; Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989).

³⁴ Edgar Lee Masters, *Across Spoon River* (New York: 1936), 183-186; Floyd Dell to Dale Kramer, 12 April 1963, Chicago Notebooks, 2, Dale Kramer Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

³⁵ Clayton, *Floyd Dell*, 39; Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance*, 144.

With these traditions and ideas in mind, the writers of the Chicago Renaissance built a bohemia. When conjuring images of Paris's Left Bank or New York's Greenwich Village, most people begin by thinking in spatial terms, since these communities were clearly demarcated. Chicago's bohemia, however, was different in that it was not grounded geographically. Meeting places shifted frequently, even going from one end of town to the other when key individuals moved to new apartments where they hosted their parties. It was hard to find a part of Chicago with which bohemians identified for any length of time, and this group never established a part of town that outsiders would identify as the bohemian quarter. Because of its lack of spatial identification, it did not garner the attention or notoriety of its more visible counterpart in New York.

Although Chicago's bohemia came after New York's and proved more ephemeral, there was a symbiotic relationship between the two places in the early part of the century. Chicago borrowed from the ideas of Greenwich Village intellectuals, and New York's bohemia became much more vibrant in the late 1910s when the writers of the Chicago Renaissance began moving there, bringing their energy and philosophy with them. By the end of the decade, Floyd Dell was one of the most important figures in Greenwich Village. He was Edna St. Vincent Millay's first lover and the person responsible for educating her in the tenets of free-love radicalism. It was only after the Chicago Renaissance had ended that the city's bohemia, without the literati to sustain it, all but disappeared and left Greenwich Village without a counterpart.

The bohemians in New York and Chicago sought to identify themselves with workers and distance themselves from the middle class. Dell credited working-class

anarchists as his free-love predecessors while disregarding the middle-class radicals who came before them in the mid nineteenth century. For intellectuals who wanted to rebel, one of the benefits of liberated sex was that it allowed them to identify with workers and distance themselves from the bourgeoisie. Like Dell, Hutchins Hapgood and other New Yorkers also ignored their middle-class forebears. As Christine Stansell notes of Hapgood during his voyeuristic experiences in Chicago, “Sex became the means to escape his ‘leisure class’ psychology and propel him into a heartfelt identification with the working class.” He reflected that his first couple months in Chicago “have meant a great deal to me. They have made me see the real sadness of things more deeply than I ever did before and they have removed almost the last vestige of snobbishness of the ‘class’ feeling that I had.”³⁶

The liberated communities also used a new vocabulary, borrowed from Europe, that was intended to show their distance from the middle and upper classes. The term “intellectual,” which earlier generations of writers had not used to describe themselves, originated in France in 1898, referred to people who did not come from genteel backgrounds. The term “bohemia” did not take on its modern meaning until the nineteenth century, when it was used to refer to “youthful libertines who despised bourgeois respectability and material success.”³⁷

Even though bohemians were trying to identify themselves in opposition to the middle class, there is some evidence to suggest that their communities were part of an effort to escape the general malaise plaguing the urban middle class in this period. T. J.

³⁶ Floyd Dell to Dale Kramer, 12 April 1963, Chicago Notebooks, 2, Dale Kramer Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; quoted in Stansell, *American Moderns*, 284.

Jackson Lears describes this problem facing the middle class, at times diagnosed as neurasthenia, which was on the minds of at least two of the leading Chicago Renaissance figures. Dreiser himself entered a sanitarium in 1903 for treatment of neurasthenia, and Sherwood Anderson was very afraid of the psychological problems that a white-collar, bourgeois lifestyle created. Using words that could have come from Teddy Roosevelt, Anderson complained, "In the early days of our country the adventure into the West, the opening up of new lands, the fighting of Indians, and the exploring of the wilderness kept the spirit of adventure alive. To-day this opportunity is gone." He was concerned that the U.S. was "becoming a bourgeois nation" and was failing to give its youth the correct kind of authentic experiences and challenges that shaped a person's character. As a corrective, Anderson, who had served as a corporal in the Spanish-American war, suggested mandatory military service for young men—not for reasons of patriotism, but as a way to offer rugged authentic experiences that would shape character. As Christine Stansell suggests, many intellectuals probably also saw bohemianism as an antidote to the problems plaguing the middle class. Those who could penetrate working-class culture and explore their sexuality in an uninhibited way could have the type of authentic experience that was missing from the middle-class lifestyle.³⁸

Chicago's scattered and inconspicuous bohemia was grounded in the parties hosted in studios and apartments. There the writers of the Chicago Renaissance were able to air ideas about literature, read their work, elicit criticism, discuss politics, and

³⁷ Stansell, *American Moderns*, 18, 43. The term, of course, comes from the name of the western Czech province often thought of as the home of the gypsies.

³⁸ T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 305; "Corporal-Novelist Favors Military Enlistment," *New York Sun*, magazine clipping, ca. 1917 (undated), Volume 1

practice a lifestyle that satisfied their libido as well as their desire to escape middle-class morality. The gatherings moved between different studios and apartments of the city's writers and artists, and reached their peak in 1913 when Floyd Dell and his wife Margery Currey moved to the South Side's Jackson Park and became the unofficial hosts of the literary bohemia. Currey was a leftist schoolteacher from Evanston whose independence and radicalism attracted Dell. The couple maintained separate spare apartments near each other in Jackson Park and Currey hosted the parties that the couple held, proving adept at doing so. Although Dell left much of the work of the hosting to his wife, his vision and reputation laid the groundwork for the social scene. He had already been the editor of the *Friday Literary Review*, which had given him fame and the connections and reputation to attract the local literati. His goal was to bring even more energy and direction into the city's literary community and he believed that a vibrant bohemia would further the kind of innovative writing that Chicago was fostering.³⁹

The Dell/Currey salon succeeded because the two were so adept at pulling in writers. Sherwood Anderson arrived in Chicago not long before Currey and Dell moved to Jackson Park. He was shy about joining the scene there, but had sent one of his manuscripts to Dell, who was instantly attracted to Anderson's realist style (this was before *Winesburg, Ohio*, when he departed from realism). One night while wandering around Jackson Park he bumped into Currey, who befriended him instantly and made him

Scrapbook, 113-1, Sherwood Anderson Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; Stansell, *American Moderns*, 39.

³⁹ Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 141; Clayton, *Floyd Dell*, 68, 85-88; Ruth Raymond to Dale Kramer, 4 February 1964, Chicago Notebooks, 1, Dale Kramer Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; Notes from Dale Kramer's Interview of Floyd Dell, May 1963, Chicago Notebooks, 1, Dale Kramer Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago. Descriptions of Chicago's bohemian social scene are plentiful. Readers wanting more of the details should look first to Dale Kramer's *Chicago Renaissance*.

feel comfortable enough to join her social gatherings. Margaret Anderson joined the gatherings, and the group was especially successful at pulling in writers from the hinterlands who wanted to become part of the bohemia. Vachel Lindsay would come from Springfield; Jig Cook, Susan Glaspell, and Arthur Ficke took trips from their Davenport homes to attend many of the gatherings, and Dreiser, who had moved to New York, joined the scene during his frequent stays in Chicago.⁴⁰

In terms of drinking, the gatherings were relatively tame, with the focus instead on intellectual matters—ranging from their own writing to discussions of Freudian theory—and on sex. As bohemians, these people tried to work through their theories on sexuality, marriage, free-love, and gender, and used this social scene to experiment with their ideas. Freudian theory about sexual repression also had a lot to do with the free love ideas of the Chicago Renaissance. By the early 1910s many of the Chicago Renaissance writers were interested in many of Freud's theories and often analyzed each others' dreams at parties and wrote many autobiographical and biographical pieces that were heavily informed by Freudian theory. The writers who believed in Freud, especially Dell and Sherwood Anderson, used the theories about sexual repression as part of the basis for their belief in free love.⁴¹ Accompanying the idea of repression was the desire to get away from possessiveness. It was their belief that people were autonomous and that the concept of monogamy was about possessiveness, which prevented people from fulfilling their own personality. Having the autonomy and freedom allowed people to find themselves as they experimented freely; for them, sex was transformative. Yet at the

⁴⁰ Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance*, 242; Clayton, *Floyd Dell*, 90; Floyd Dell to Ralph Cram, 13 February 1926, Ralph Cram Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

⁴¹ Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance*, 292.

same time they did still believe in true love between committed couples (married or otherwise), and, despite the troubles that developed in most of their marriages, they thought that after an adventure it was healthy for the person to return to their beloved.⁴²

Along with sexual liberation, the Chicago Renaissance bohemians also advocated the liberation of women in other ways as well. Just as the issues of sex, marriage, and women's equality went together in the free-love movement of the nineteenth century, the Chicago Renaissance bohemians also linked the three issues in their theories. Floyd Dell was the one who best articulated the group's views on gender. In 1913 he wrote a series of articles called "Women as World Builders," that offered flattering portrayals of ten women who represented what he called the feminist movement: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jane Addams, Emmeline Pankhurst, Olive Schreine, Isadora Duncan, Beatrice Webb, Emma Goldman, Margaret Dreier Robins, and Ellen Key. In these articles he celebrated liberated women, and professed that men should prefer them over their more obsequious counterparts. He and other men in the movement also treated their female counterparts with the same respect they showed men. In particular, Margaret Anderson and Susan Glaspell were accepted into the Chicago Renaissance as intellectual peers. The group did not seem to have treated them any differently than it treated male authors.

Although women could prove themselves and earn positions as peers in the Chicago Renaissance, their position could become far more complicated when they became romantically involved with the men of the movement. Margery Currey provides an excellent illustration of this. On the one hand, she embodied the liberated attitudes toward women and sex. She was an intellectual woman who could hold her own in

conversation and debates with members of the Chicago Renaissance, she built a successful career in journalism, and she was older than the man she married. However, while she played a crucial role in building the bohemian social scene, she was also responsible for playing hostess while her husband did little work. She and Dell maintained separate apartments, but she was the one who hosted their joint parties, and took sole responsibility for preparations beforehand and the cleaning afterward. According to a friend, she also was never completely happy with her husband's free-love experiments, and said, "I can forgive what he is doing but I can't live with the man those doings are making of him." When they ended their marriage, Currey sent him a letter that betrays the inequality of their relationships. She wrote, "I do feel that one should not continue to annoy a man when he doesn't care and never will. I'd like to be in your presence—I found the whole of you so delicious—but it wouldn't be fair to you to let me love you when you knew you couldn't.... You just didn't hit the right woman (confound my meagerness!)."⁴³

Another woman central in the Chicago Renaissance bohemia was Tennessee Mitchell. A sculptor, she was very attractive and became an object of lust within the group, a role which hardly fit the image of the liberated woman making her way by the merit of her intellect and skill. She first was the mistress of Masters, then married Anderson, and frequently was the lover of Dreiser. She prompted jealousy and fights among the writers—which was not supposed to be part of the free-love lifestyle. Dell

⁴² Notes from Dale Kramer's Interview of Floyd Dell, May 1963, Chicago Notebooks, 1, Dale Kramer Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

⁴³ Ruth Raymond to Dale Kramer, 4 February 1964, Chicago Notebooks, 1, Dale Kramer Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; Margery Currey to Floyd Dell, undated, Floyd Dell Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

believed that she suffered because of her attractiveness and relations with these men.

He later wrote, "I thought of her as too fine a person to deserve the fate of being one of the wives of Sherwood Anderson. I didn't know about her affair with Edgar Lee Masters, but from his autobiography it would appear that it was not great treat to be his girl, either.... The hallmark of 'genius' in those days was selfishness, I don't know why girls put up with it—but they did; and I suppose it could be said that an inordinate worship of the masculine 'genius' was characteristic of many young women."⁴⁴

Dell's criticism of the way male writers treated women seems fully warranted. Edgar Lee Masters held to the double standard that only allowed the husband, not the wife, to have outside affairs. Theodore Dreiser's attitude toward women was even more offensive. He once asked a woman he was seeing if she previously had had an affair with Edgar Lee Masters. When he found out that the woman had resisted Masters's entreaties, he became angry, saying, "I can't imagine any woman not being GLAD to give herself to such a great man." He believed that women should feel privileged to sleep with great writers. In a column he despaired about the neglect of young geniuses, and went so far as to argue that American heiresses should marry and support them rather than seek European dukes. Dell disliked Dreiser's attitudes toward women and the way that, after he moved to New York, he would come to Chicago and look for a new woman there "like going down to the minors for tryouts." Dell also admitted that he had not treated women well himself. Reflecting on his time at the head of Chicago's bohemia, he said he was

⁴⁴ Floyd Dell to Dale Kramer, 16 July 1963, Chicago Notebooks, 2, Dale Kramer Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

“callous...hypocritical in my relations with women,” and that he had been

“unsatisfactory as a lover; intolerable as a husband.”⁴⁵

As Christine Stansell says of the bohemians in New York, experiments in sexual liberation and gender equality did not completely dispose of older notions of sexual hierarchy. She argues that in the bohemian milieu in which women were ascending more rapidly than men, men had the psychological need to take actions to preserve their privileges and status—even if that contradicted their ideals of gender equality.

According to her, part of the dynamics between liberated women and men were shaped by unstated desires and actions guided by men’s subconscious. She states, “The man of feminist principles nods toward the female voice at the same time he suppresses it. He applauds the New Woman and blames himself for his traditional expectations of her, even as he posits those expectations as normal and unobjectionable.”⁴⁶

The topic of gender has received a fair amount of attention in studies of the Chicago Renaissance.⁴⁷ Margaret Anderson and Floyd Dell in particular produced interesting pieces on the subject, and the contradictory ideals and practices found within the movement can be fascinating to explore. However, it is difficult to argue that their views on gender had a significant impact on American culture. The movement was not a

⁴⁵ Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance*, 163-4; Dorothy Dow, “Edgar Lee Masters: An Introduction to Some Letters,” (1950), 1-1, Dorothy Dow-Edgar Lee Masters Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago, 19.; Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 171; Notes from Dale Kramer’s Interview of Floyd Dell, May 1963, Chicago Notebooks, 1, Dale Kramer Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; quoted in Clayton, *Floyd Dell*, 100.

⁴⁶ Stansell, *American Moderns*, 227, 262, 306.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Francis, *The Secret Treachery of Words: Feminism and Modernism in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Lisa Woolley, *American Voices of the Chicago Renaissance* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 2000); Holly Ann Baggett, “Aloof from Natural Laws: Margaret C. Anderson and the *Little Review*, 1914-1929,” (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 1992).

watershed event in women's history; it did not usher in any significant change in the role of women or in attitudes about gender.

Writing Away Victoria

The Chicago Renaissance's treatment of sexuality and morality did leave an indelible mark on modern American culture. It set forth one of the defining issues that came to distinguish American culture in the twentieth century from that of the nineteenth century. The most important book was the earliest of the movement, *Sister Carrie*. In it, Dreiser laid the foundation of the movement's revolt against morality. In the book, the main character, Carrie Meeber, uses her sexuality to get ahead in Chicago. Although references to her sexuality are veiled and sex scenes are never completely explicit, the story makes clear that she had illicit affairs with the two main male characters, Charles Drouet and George Hurstwood. The affair with the latter was particularly provocative because the well-to-do manager was married.

While other books, particularly the dime novels, reveled in stories of illicit affairs, *Sister Carrie* departed from the moral tone of contemporary fiction. It was permissible for stories to portray titillating scandal as long as they taught a moral lesson, showing the character suffering as a result of her transgressions. Dreiser, following the lessons he learned while growing up and watching his sisters and the rest of the family suffer as a result of scandal, chose not to condemn Carrie Meeber for her moral transgressions. On the contrary, Carrie moves further up the socio-economic ladder each time she has an affair with a man. Even though the men were both much worse off as a result of their

relationship with Carrie, she made it as a star actress in New York. In addition to her success, she showed little, if any, guilt, benefiting from all of her actions that appeared so immoral in the eyes of the respectable middle-class society.

The story of *Sister Carrie*'s publication is as interesting as the novel itself and reveals a great deal about American publishing just before the Chicago Renaissance helped to disrupt its comfortable conservatism. Dreiser wrote the novel quickly in 1899 and early 1900, and was eager to see it published quickly, in part due to his need for money as well as his desire for literary recognition. However, his timing and the climate of the publishing world did not portend well for his first novel. By this time, New York had supplanted Boston as the unquestioned capital of American book publishing, but the conservative standards of the industry had changed little over the previous four decades. The major firms realized that their safest bets for publication were books that stuck to the established traditions of romantic fiction, historical romance, westerns, and uplifting stories of contemporary life. This made them less receptive to a writer like Dreiser who was experimenting with a newer style of realism that had not yet won over a mass readership.⁴⁸

In addition to choosing books that fit well-established genres, the industry also adhered to a strict Victorian moral code. Publishers believed it was in their best commercial interests—and many also saw it as their moral obligation—to offer books that would protect “family” audiences from corruption. Stories were judged best if they taught moral lessons, did not offend Christian religious beliefs, and avoided any explicit references to sex or sexuality. Publishers screened manuscripts closely and were quick to

⁴⁸ Stansell, *American Moderns*, 154-55.

run from anything with the potential to cause controversy. They wanted to cater to the most conservative tastes of their mass audiences, and many of the company leaders also believed it was their civic and religious duty to uphold moral standards. It was not until the 1900s and the 1910s that newspapers in Chicago and elsewhere flouted church censorship as a means of boosting circulation and making more money. The book publishing industry itself would continue to try to resist offending material until the 1920s, when the profits to be made from controversy became too obvious and tempting.⁴⁹

With a novel that offered no clear moral judgments, offered innovations in its style and themes, and gave fairly clear depictions of the protagonists sexual affairs, Dreiser was off to an inauspicious start when he started showing his manuscript to the New York publishers. He first submitted the work to Harper & Brothers, where he had an influential friend, and one reviewer's report, written for the publisher, praised many qualities of the manuscript. The reviewer declared that *Sister Carrie* was "a superior piece of reportorial realism," and admired the way Dreiser elicits sympathy for the main character as she confronts hard choices and difficult situations. However, the review then went on to warn about the way the book handles the theme of Carrie Meeber's sexual relations. Referring to that issue, it argued, "There remains the feeling that the author has not risen to the standard necessary for the efficient handling of the theme. His touch is neither firm enough nor sufficiently delicate to depict without offense to the reader the continued illicit relations of the heroine."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid., 154-155; Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 132.

⁵⁰ Unknown reviewer's report on *Sister Carrie* for Harper Brothers, 2 May 1900, Theodore Dreiser Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

The rejection from Harper prompted Dreiser to undertake a major revision of his novel. In trimming more than 40,000 words from the hefty manuscript, he sought to improve the quality of his writing and conform more closely to the sensibilities of the publishing industry. He removed frank references to sex and downplayed that theme. To do so, he deleted one scene that showed a prospective employer ogling Carrie, another that questioned whether Carrie had sex with Hurstwood, and removed references to Drouet “living with” Carrie as well as any explicit mention of Drouet’s philandering.⁵¹

After his rejection from Harper & Brothers, Dreiser took his revised manuscript to the new firm of Doubleday, Page & Co. It initially accepted the novel based on the strong recommendation of its editorial reader, Frank Norris, who lauded the book. He declared that it was “the best novel I had read in M.S. since I had been reading for the firm.”⁵² Walter Hines Page, then the junior partner in the firm, also was excited about publishing the novel and made an agreement with Dreiser. However, Frank Doubleday soon returned from a vacation and decided that the firm could not publish it. The author later claimed that Norris and one other employee of the firm told him that Doubleday’s wife had persuaded him to do so. She was a social worker active in moral reform, and supposedly read the story herself and deemed it scandalous. Others have found reason to

⁵¹ Theodore Dreiser, “The Early Adventures of Sister Carrie,” *Calaphan*, Part 5 (1931), Theodore Dreiser Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania; Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance*, 131-136; Nancy M. Shawcross, “Sister Carrie: “A Strangely Strong Novel in a Queer Milieu,” <http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/dreiser/index.html#toc:22> September 2006; Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 280.

⁵² Frank Norris to Dreiser, 28 May 1900, Theodore Dreiser Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

dispute that account and believe that Frank Doubleday made the decision based on his own reading.⁵³

Whether it was he or his wife who concluded the book was immoral, Frank Doubleday decided to withdraw the offer his firm had made. However, when Dreiser demanded that the firm honor its agreement with him, Doubleday relented and printed the 1,000 copies agreed upon in the contract, but did not give the book the publicity that was customary and necessary for something coming from his firm. Despite the firm's suppression of the book, Norris still felt obligated to promote it as best he could, and so he sent 127 copies to literary figures and reviewers, which earned the novel many favorable reviews. However, it did not get reviewed in many of the most important literary publications of the time, which was before the Chicago Renaissance brought new review publications to the forefront of American letters that encouraged this kind of innovative work. Without promotion from its publisher, *Sister Carrie* languished. It sold less than five hundred copies in its first two years. Dreiser then tried to get another firm to publish his book and did manage to get a condensed version printed in England, but that failed to get the novel much attention in the U.S.⁵⁴

The ordeal of *Sister Carrie* shows the power of Victorian morality in the infrastructure of American culture in the period before the Chicago Renaissance. Any authors who tried to challenge that moral hegemony did so at their own peril. Even in its revised form, with explicit scenes deleted and the theme of sex downplayed, *Sister Carrie*

⁵³ Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance*, 131-136; Ronald Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 58; Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 295; Shawcross.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

could not gain the acceptance by mainstream publishers in 1900 that was necessary for it to reach mass audiences.

The Chicago Renaissance played a major role in reversing the fate of *Sister Carrie* and challenging the morality fears of American publishers, allowing modern American culture to follow a new course. Dreiser's efforts led to a reprinting of the book in 1907 by B. W. Dodge and Co., in which he had a small financial stake. This was not a major firm that could get him the mass audience that he needed, but he did get enough notice to attract the attention of Harper and Brothers, the same firm that had turned down the first, more risqué version of the novel. The company reprinted *Sister Carrie* in 1912. By then the Chicago Renaissance had emerged, and its members were earning respect for their innovative works and literary criticism.⁵⁵

By this time, Floyd Dell had become one of the most respected literary critics in the nation. He used his columns and his influence to resurrect *Sister Carrie* and promote Dreiser as one of the leading writers in the U.S. Having Dell as an advocate was especially important, since William Dean Howells, who had been one of the most important figures in American realism, did not like the novel. Along with H. L. Mencken, Dell was one of the two people most responsible for promoting Dreiser. And more than promoting Dreiser to a national audience, Dell helped make him a model for the movement. Even though it was written twelve years earlier and Dreiser had long since moved to New York, the writers of the Chicago Renaissance looked adopted *Sister Carrie* as a model and sought to build upon his innovations with realism and his theme of sexuality. Dreiser soon became a member of Chicago's bohemia, as he made frequent

⁵⁵ Ibid; Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 300, 415-17.

and extended stays in Chicago, especially as he conducted research for his trilogy of novels about Chicago traction magnate Charles Yerkes. And after Dell began promoting Dreiser, the other major authors quickly adopted him as their own also, making him the most revered figure within the movement. When he was in town, the other members of the Chicago Renaissance bohemia doted on him and continually sought his advice about writing, and when he was in New York, they corresponded frequently with him. Even though personal disputes sometimes hurt their relationships with the difficult man, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Dell, and Margaret Anderson revered Dreiser and all, at times, tried to imitate his writing in some ways.⁵⁶

A story from Margaret Anderson shows Dreiser's tremendous influence on the movement and the way in which the resurrection of *Sister Carrie* helped to focus the writers of the Renaissance on the theme of sexuality and morality. In 1912, while writing for the religious, family-oriented *Continent*, she penned a favorable review of *Sister Carrie*, judging it "a fine piece of work." According to her autobiography, "This might have passed if I had stipulated that its subject matter was immoral. Since this hadn't occurred to me, letters began to pour in protesting that readers (particularly fathers) had given this fine work to their daughters, whereas I could easily have prevented such catastrophes." Her editor urged her to keep writing for the magazine, but to "say so" when a book was immoral. The fallout from her review produced an epiphany for Anderson and made her ally herself with Dreiser and the rebellion against moral codes. It was after this incident that she joined the bohemia of the Chicago Renaissance, and began

⁵⁶ Clayton, *Floyd Dell*, 127; Duffey, *The Chicago Renaissance*, 158-59; Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 413.

thinking about a new publication, the *Little Review*. It became one of the nation's most innovative and respected literary journals and a showcase for the influence of Dreiser.⁵⁷

Sherwood Anderson's writing, after he moved to Chicago, also shows the influence of Dreiser and was part of the effort to open the theme of sex and question the prevailing morality in popular American culture. There have been those, including Floyd Dell, who question whether Anderson even deserves to be considered a part of the Chicago Renaissance. An early admirer of Anderson, Dell welcomed him into the local salon and took it upon himself to promote Anderson's first two novels, *Windy McPherson's Son* and *Marching Men*, because they exemplified the kind of realism that Dell was trying to move to the forefront of American literature. Partly responsible for launching Anderson's career, Dell touted the recently arrived writer as Chicago's "great unpublished author" and an "unrecognized genius," and went so far as to label *Windy McPherson's Son* as one of "the best novels ever written about American life." Anderson felt indebted to Dell for all of this, and they became good friends. He even referred to Dell as "my literary father," and in his memoirs credited Dell with bringing vital energy into the literary scene and making Chicago's bohemia a leading force in American writing. "Floyd walked up and down before us . . .," Anderson recalled. "When he was on the subject of literature he talked, I thought, brilliantly. I had never before heard such talk. How it flowed from him. What vast fields of literature he covered."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Margaret Anderson, *My Thirty Years War*, 33-34; Elizabeth Francis, *The Secret Treachery of Words: Feminism and Modernism in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 47.

⁵⁸ Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance*, 242; Clayton, *Floyd Dell*, 94; Floyd Dell, "A New American Novelist," *The Masses*, Volume 1 Scrapbook, 113-1, Sherwood Anderson Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs*, 243.

However, Anderson's next book, and the first that he wrote after his migration to Chicago, took a sharp turn away from that realist style. *Winesburg, Ohio*, published in 1919, was more surreal than real, and included many other elements that Dell found frustrating. Many of the book's stories focus on abstractions and consist of narrow, intense examinations of characters. There is little of the social detail and physical description that the other Chicago writers were promoting. Its rejection of realism led Dell to become a critic of Anderson, rather than an admirer. He would hold a grudge against Anderson for decades, long after the movement ended, calling him a "phony realist" and deploring what "seemed to me an abandonment of simple truth."⁵⁹

While *Winesburg, Ohio* represents Anderson's shift away from realism, it also exemplifies the kind of frank depiction of sexuality and rejection of Victorian middle-class morality that was a hallmark of the Chicago Renaissance. One of the book's stories features a man who lives in shame for most of his life because his caring nature and innocent caressing led to unfair accusations of homosexuality and pedophilia. The town's moral middle class, bent upon enforcing sexual taboos, is the clear antagonist of the story. Another story in the book features a minister who is troubled by his own lack of religious passion. He discovers it only when he is able to start spying on a naked woman who has not closed her windows. Anderson was an admirer of Dreiser, as well as Dell, and his treatment of delicate topics in *Winesburg* shows the influence of both men.

The views that Anderson articulated in his essay, "An Apology for Crudity," were also in line with Dell's literary criticism, showing the need for honesty in dealing with taboo and unpleasant aspects of people's lives. He argued that too much of American life

was not making it into literature simply because authors were afraid of appearing crude. He wrote, "For a long time I have believed that crudity is an inevitable quality in the production of a really significant present-day American literature.... If one would avoid neat, slick writing, he must at least attempt to be brother to his brothers and live as the men of his time live. He must share with them the crude expression of their lives."⁶⁰

The critical reception of *Winesburg* shows the way in which readers—or at the very least, critics—picked up Anderson's discontent with middle-class norms and respectability. One reviewer noted this probing of small-town respectability as central to the novel that made Anderson famous by saying, "There is outward repose over Winesburg, a garment of respectable repose covering alike the infinite pain, the grief, the agony of futile groping, the momentary flare of beauty or passion of which the citizens are ashamed." The reviewer praised Anderson for unmasking the side of the small towns that inhabitants knew well, but which neither they nor other novelists cared to acknowledge publicly. He wrote, "Every middle westerner will recognize Winesburg, Ohio, as the town in which he grew up." Another reviewer, writing for the *New York Times*, agreed that Anderson was one of the writers who was challenging the Victorian moral hegemony in American culture, "The narrow, gossiping, and venomous population of Caxton, Ind., is typical of most of our small Western towns, and the window is held up to nature with amazing certainty." Despite his abandonment of realism, with *Winesburg, Ohio* Sherwood Anderson was one of the Chicago Renaissance writers who offered a

⁵⁹ Clayton, *Floyd Dell*, 126; Notes from Dale Kramer's Interview of Floyd Dell, May 1963, Chicago Notebooks, 1, Dale Kramer Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

⁶⁰ Sherwood Anderson, "An Apology for Crudity," *The Dial*, November 1917, 437-38.

coherent critique of middle-class morality and by doing so helped set a new course for modern American literature.⁶¹

The writers of the Chicago Renaissance were not the first to challenge Victorian moral hegemony in American culture. Over the previous half-century, radicals, from the working class as well as the bourgeoisie, had flouted sexual norms and advocated free love. There had also been novels sold in America that were far more salacious than anything produced during the Chicago Renaissance. However, prior to this literary movement, those who tried to challenge the Victorian moral code found themselves on the margins of American politics, society, and culture. Anthony Comstock and other reformers portrayed themselves as crusaders engaged in an epic moral struggle, but in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America, they did not find it difficult to keep their enemies marginalized.⁶²

This situation changed with the Chicago Renaissance. The authors of this movement became the leaders of American literature: one of the most popular, and “respectable,” media of the era. Their writings swayed highbrow critics, influenced other authors to imitate, and made their way into middle-class homes. This was the first group

⁶¹ “A Country Town,” newsprint clipping, date, author, and publication unknown, 114-3526, Sherwood Anderson Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; *New York Times* (October 8, 1916), Volume 1 Scrapbook, 113-1, Sherwood Anderson Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

⁶² Spurlock; Sears; Passet; Ian Hunter, David Saunders, and Dugald Williamson, *On Pornography: Literature, Sexuality, and Obscenity Law* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); Lynn Hunt, “Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity,” in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York: Zone Books, 1996); Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Peter Wagner, *Eros Revived: Erotica of the Enlightenment in England and America* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1988); Anna Louise Bates, *Weeder in the Garden of the Lord: Anthony Comstock's Life and Career* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995); Richard Christian Johnson, “Anthony Comstock: Reform, Vice, and

of writers to bring the topics of sex and sexuality to the forefront of mainstream American literature, where it has been a fixture ever since. It was a watershed in the history of American culture.

the American Way," (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1973); Heywood Broun and Margaret Leech, *Anthony Comstock: Roundsman Of The Lord* (New York: A. & C. Boni, 1927).

Chapter Four: Industrialization

Products of the late-nineteenth-century Midwest, the Chicago Renaissance writers helped industrialize American culture. In addition to their questioning of Victorian morality and sexual taboos, their literature made two major contributions to American letters, both of which show the influence of their Midwestern experiences. The first was that they brought ordinary characters, common landscapes of big cities and small towns, and urban vernacular to the fore of American literature. The second was that they changed the way American novels dealt with migration stories by abandoning the epic tradition of the nineteenth century and problemizing modern urban migration.

Both of these contributions relate to the experiences that the Chicago Renaissance writers had as they came of age in the industrializing Midwest. Downward mobility, middle-class ambitions, class conflict, populism, Republicanism, socialism, sex radicalism, and regional migration all affected the literature they would later produce. With these varied influences of the age of industrialization, their literature was also replete with contradictions that blunted their political messages and left their work open to a wide range of interpretations. The wrenching changes of this period of economic and social change shaped their outlook, and they, in turn, industrialized American culture.

Vernacular language, ordinary characters, and urban and small-town landscapes were some of the most striking changes that the Chicago Renaissance helped bring to the forefront of American literature. A focus on the ordinary represented a clear rejection of the American romantic tradition that featured bucolic scenery and exceptional characters

who spoke the language of the upper classes. Part of the reason for commonplace scenes, characters, and language has to do with the writers' political and socio-economic backgrounds in the industrializing Midwest. Unlike Emerson and Thoreau, these writers had not experienced the genteel lifestyle or spent time in the upper-class, bucolic countryside homes of the Northeast. In addition, leftist politics led some of them to focus on the less privileged members of society.

Another important contingency in this break from the romantic tradition was Chicago's unique journalism. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Chicago had the most innovative newspapers in the country, and unlike Eastern cities, it did not have an entrenched literati that looked down on journalism. Most of the important members of the Chicago Renaissance, including Dell, Dreiser, and Sandburg, made their living as journalists, and never encountered blatant discrimination from novelists and poets because of their profession. The result of this was that there was not a clear boundary to prevent journalists from crossing over into fiction and poetry. This meant that journalism could have far more influence over the local literary scene in Chicago than in cities like New York and Boston.¹

While the lack of an entrenched literati opened opportunities for journalists to try other kinds of writing, two unique features Chicago journalism affected the styles and themes of the city's literary movement. The first was that Chicago newspapers, unlike those in other cities, emphasized feature writing and literary style which created a journalistic culture that placed a premium on literary quality. This was because feature stories required better writing than the "bare facts" reporting that was most common in

the U.S. at the time. Chicago's editors saw literary quality as one of the keys to their newspapers' success, and they pushed journalists—especially the popular feature writers—to improve their writing style and avoid bland description. With this incentive, Chicago journalists developed their own culture that emphasized professionalism and writing ability. Dreiser and other reporters tried to imitate Charles Dickens and other novelists, and they judged each other based on literary quality. In their social clubs they often debated what was and was not good writing, praising reporters whose stories showed literary talent and berating those who failed to uphold high standards. In Chicago there was a belief that good writing was as important for journalists as for novelists and that the same standards should apply to each.²

Because of its emphasis on feature writing and columns, Chicago created the nation's first celebrity journalists. Newspaper writers in Chicago had the unique opportunity to win recognition and accolades from wide audiences as well as their colleagues and editors, which gave them even more incentive to develop a unique and interesting literary style. Eugene Field was the first to earn his fame, and he started his humorous column called "Sharps and Flats" for the *Chicago Daily News* in 1883. He became the model for later famous Chicago columnists, such as Peter Finley Dunne and George Ade.³ Another who idolized him was Theodore Dreiser. Showing the importance of these literary journalists in the development of the literary movement,

¹ Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center from 1885 to 1920* (Totowa, NJ: Bedminster Press, 1964), 21-30, 56.

² Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 113; Elmer Ellis, *Mr. Dooley's America: A Life of Finley Peter Dunne* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 51; Theodore Dreiser, *A Book About Myself* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922).

³ Lewis O. Saum, *Eugene Field and His Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

Dreiser devotes the first paragraph of his professional autobiography to discussing the influence of Field:

During the year 1890, and perhaps a little before that, I had been getting my first clear notions of what it was I wanted to do in life. There was one man who was writing on one of the Chicago papers...—Eugene Field, no less—whose work interested me greatly. For two years and more I had been reading “Sharps and Flats.”... I was beginning to understand that I wanted to write.⁴

Feature writing gave Dreiser freedom for his literary development. It allowed journalists to choose topics not related to current news and freed them from “bare facts” reporting, giving them the opportunity to experiment with literary styles. He dissociated feature writing from “labor” because it allowed him to write “idle stuff” that was more like “creative writing” than reporting. He also enjoyed the position because editors placed fewer restrictions on feature writers, giving them more freedom in choosing topics and content of their columns, and usually did less rewriting or even editing for features. Chicago did have plenty of reporters whose jobs would have been no different at Eastern newspapers, but the emphasis on feature writing made Chicago journalists aspire to be more innovative.⁵

While the style of Chicago newspapers helped develop the talent of Chicago Renaissance writers, the content of Chicago newspapers helped define one of the themes of the movement. The turn of the twentieth century was a time when booming metropolises fascinated Americans. While most American novels failed to make the scenes of the city come alive, Chicago newspaper publishers understood that feature stories about Chicago—with an abundance of local color—sold newspapers. They

⁴ Dreiser, *Newspaper Days*, ed. T.D. Nostwich (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

pushed their writers to convey the scenes of the street as well as to depict the city with all its enchanting and gruesome characteristics. Publishers profited by fulfilling the demand for urban stories that popular novels were neglecting. This allowed writers to work on stories based on daily observation and features about the “streets and town.” Thus many of the Chicago Renaissance writers who started in journalism were trained to write about the city in a way that resonated with audiences. All of Chicago’s famous columnists commented on urban life, with Field satirizing the packinghouse aristocracy, Dunne focusing on an Irish bartender in Bridgeport, an Irish enclave in the near southwest side, and Ade portraying the country greenhorn trying to find his way in a regional metropolis.⁶

Dreiser, who came from a humble background, had found it hard to relate to the respected, romantic literature that he encountered earlier in his life. The scenes and characters that American novelists were focusing on at the time were mostly foreign to a person like Dreiser, and he felt no connection to them. As he explains, “Nothing else that I had read so far—books, plays, poems, histories—gave me quite the same feeling for constructive thought; for the subject of [Eugene Field’s] daily notes, poems and aphorisms was Chicago and America, whereas nearly all the others dealt or concerned themselves with foreign lands.”⁷ Chicago’s newspaper columnists inspired Dreiser in part because they wrote about topics that he could understand and found fascinating. Their ability to depict this city captivated him, and he wanted to learn to write the same way they did. He became enamored with Chicago’s columnists largely because of their

⁶ Carl S. Smith, *Chicago and the American Literary Imagination, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 24, 70.

⁷ Dreiser, *Newspaper Days*, 3.

ability to depict this new, multifaceted city in a way that resonated with his own experience in the streets. Notice how the following excerpt describes his feelings at the time and also offers an example of the type of urban description that he learned from Chicago columnists:

This local life, these trenchant bits on local street scenes, institutions, characters, functions all moved me as nothing hitherto had. For to me Chicago at this time had a peculiarly literary or artistic atmosphere. It is given to some cities, as to some lands, to suggest romance, and to me Chicago did that daily and hourly. It sang, or seemed to, and in spite of what I deemed my various troubles I was singing with it. These seemingly drear neighborhoods through which I walked each day, these somewhat ponderous regions of huge homes where new-wealthy packers and manufacturers dwelt, these curiously congested foreign neighborhoods of almost all nationalities, and lastly that great downtown area (surrounded on two sides by the river, on the east by the lake, and on the south by railroad yards and railroad stations, and set with these new tall buildings, the wonder of the western world) fascinated me.⁸

It was this kind of writing that would win him accolades with his first book, *Sister Carrie*, and make it such an important part of American literary history. As a Chicago-trained journalist, Dreiser learned to give his reader a vivid picture of the sprawling metropolis, complete with all its grime, noise, poverty, as well as luxury, leisure, and magnificence. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser used those skills to describe the many parts of Chicago, both the magnificent and the horrible, as his main character tries to make her way. In one example of his urban description, he writes:

In the central portion was the vast wholesale and shopping district, to which the uninformed seeker for work usually drifted. It was a characteristic of Chicago then, and one not generally shared by other cities, that individual firms of any pretension occupied individual buildings. The presence of ample ground made this possible. It gave an imposing appearance to most of the wholesale houses, whose offices were upon the ground floor and in plain view of the street. The large plates of window glass, now so common, were then rapidly coming into use, and

⁸ Ibid.

gave to the ground floor offices a distinguished and prosperous look. The casual wanderer could see as he passed a polished array of office fixtures, much frosted glass, clerks hard at work, and genteel men in “nobby” suits and clean linen lounging about or sitting in groups. Polished brass or nickel signs at the square stone entrances announced the firm and the nature of the business in rather neat and reserved terms. The entire metropolitan centre possessed a high and mighty air calculated to overawe and abash the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep.⁹

Sister Carrie shows the fascination with the department stores, fine restaurants, and other luxuries of the Loop, the depressing atmosphere of the factories where the main character tries to find work, the refinement of the wealthy neighborhoods, and the pace of life in the dynamic neighborhood of Union Park. Dreiser and other writers of the Chicago Renaissance learned to describe modern city and deal with its meaning in a way that American literature had been failing to do, and Chicago journalism played a key role in teaching them how to do it.¹⁰

This urban description gave Dreiser’s first novel its force, which the other Chicago Renaissance writers praised and made central to their literary movement. As described in chapter three, it was Floyd Dell who resurrected *Sister Carrie* and the career of Dreiser. Using his powerful influence as a literary critic, Dell made Dreiser’s urban description a model for other writers to follow. In 1912 Dell wrote of *Sister Carrie*, “The poetry of Chicago has been adequately rendered, so far, by only one writer, and in only one book.... Mr. Dreiser has not looked to see the badness of the city, nor its goodness; he has looked to see its beauty and its ugliness, and he has seen a beauty even in its

⁹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), 12.

¹⁰ Dale Kramer, *Chicago Renaissance: The Literary Life in the Midwest, 1900-1930* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966), 32-34; Ronald Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 62; William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 34-35, 41.

ugliness.”¹¹ It was this ability to show the darker side of industrialization, simultaneously mixed with the wonders of the city, that made Dell promote *Sister Carrie*. This brought the innovations of Chicago journalism into novels. It was a turning point in American fiction.

Most of the other Chicago Renaissance writers followed Dreiser’s example of portraying the urban street scenes—a skill that some of them had also developed during their careers in journalism. Always their concern with the city was with the industrial qualities: the grit, the affluence juxtaposed with poverty, and the various accents of the migrants who came for economic opportunities. One American writer of the era, Hart Crane, speculated that roots in the small towns of the Midwest gave writers a keener ability to notice the unique qualities of the city that lifelong urbanites could easily overlook. Writing about Sherwood Anderson, he suggests that this is what made that writer’s urban description so insightful, “It is his love for rows of corn on flat lands, fields bending over rolling Ohio hills, and the smell of barns under the warm hours of noon, that has given Anderson’s descriptions of modern city life with its mechanical distortions of humanity such thrust and bite.”¹²

The urban description of Chicago journalism also affected the poetry of the Chicago Renaissance. Carl Sandburg was well ensconced in the Chicago newspaper scene, coming to the city as a reporter in 1907 and then writing for various mainstream and socialist publications, and was a member of the Chicago Press Club in 1912, a central

¹¹ Floyd Dell, “Theodore Dreiser’s Chicago: Chicago in Fiction: The Fifth Paper,” *Friday Literary Review*, 23 February 1912.

¹² Hart Crane, magazine clipping, publication and date unknown (probably from *The Dial* or *The Little Review*), ca. 1920, Volume 1 Scrapbook, 113-1, Sherwood Anderson Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

institution in Chicago's newspaper scene. Sandburg has not written about the influence of Chicago journalism on him, but his poetry, like the newspapers of the city, focused on the grit and grime of the metropolis. His most famous poem, "Chicago," first published in 1916 in Chicago's *Poetry* magazine and soon after as part of *Chicago Poems*, derived its success from its urban description. The most well-known lines of the poem, which open and close the first stanza, both emphasize the grit of Chicago: "Hog Butcher for the World," and "City of the Big Shoulders." This is a far cry from the romantic tradition of American poetry that sought to emphasize the pastoral, genteel, and romantic. His adjectives for describing the city include "wicked," "crooked," and "brutal." Like Dreiser, Sandburg also saw reason to celebrate the city, "Come and show me another city with lifted head singing/so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning." Sandburg's achievement was to bring the same kind of urban description to poetry that Dreiser introduced to American fiction.

Another poem that represents the influence of journalism is Sandburg's "Fish Crier." Much like an article about the streets and the town from columnists like George Ade, Peter Finley Dunne, and Theodore Dreiser, Sandburg's poem delights in the details of street scenes:

I know a Jew fish crier down on Maxwell Street with a
 voice like a north wind blowing over corn stubble in January.
 He dangles herring before prospective customers evincing a joy identical
 with that of Pavlowa dancing.
 His face is that of a man terribly glad to be selling fish, terribly glad that
 God made fish, and customers to whom he may call his wares,
 from a pushcart.

This type of gritty urban scene is so commonplace in today's poetry that it is easy to forget how different it was from American romantic verse that preceded Sandburg. However, his celebration of the grit and working-class images was not without precedent. Walt Whitman's "Chants Democratic," which celebrated common workers, came more than fifty years earlier and had by the time of Sandburg already become one of America's most celebrated works of poetry.

Dreiser and Sandburg, with their rich descriptions of Chicago, are well remembered today for bringing the physical and social realities of industrialization to American literature. However, others in the movement also made key contributions to this effort. Sherwood Anderson's *Marching Men*, rarely remembered today, garnered a great deal of attention in 1917 due to its focus on the lives and frustrations of factory workers. One review in the *New Republic* portrayed the book as a key part of the effort to bring industrial realities into the nation's highbrow literature. "The chief fact about *Marching Men*...is its apprehension of the great fictional theme of our generation, industrial America. Because the subject is barbarous, anarchic and brutal it is not easy for its story to be told. But the restless vitality of the thing itself is beginning to be felt, through layers of professorial censorship. Harsh voices, wild tongues of fire, ominous multitudinous mutterings, are at last striving up our horizon."¹³ Although Anderson is best remembered today for his 1919 novel, *Winesburg, Ohio*, his early efforts focused more on the topic of industrialization and contributed to the efforts that the other Chicago Renaissance writers were making.

¹³ "To American Workingmen," *The New Republic* (19 September 1917), Volume 1 Scrapbook, 113-1, Sherwood Anderson Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

Anderson's early foray into the topic of industrialization stemmed from the leftist political influences discussed in earlier chapters. Aside from Dell, he was the one who most clearly articulated the goals of his writing and the direction that he thought American literature needed to go. In his 1917 article, "An Apology for Crudity," he argued that American literature needed to stop focusing on the elite members of society and the scenes and lifestyles of an earlier, preindustrial era. Instead, it must grapple with the issues facing workers in the industrial age. He cautioned that it was not acceptable for writers to be isolated in their elite societies without a connection to the experiences of ordinary people in this time of economic transformation. "By such a road we can hope only to go on producing a literature that has nothing to do with life as it is lived in these United States." He chided other writers for not adjusting their work to fit the changing times and remaining stuck in a type of writing that had lost its relevance. "Twain and Whitman wrote out of another age, out of an age and a land of forests and rivers. The dominant note of American life in their time was the noisy, swaggering raftsmen and the hairy-breasted woodsman. To-day it is not so. The dominant note in American life to-day is the factory hand. When we have digested that fact, we can begin to approach the task of the present-day novelist with a new point of view."¹⁴

Like the other writers of the Chicago Renaissance, Anderson believed industrialization was shaping life in the small towns as well as the big cities. The industrialism that he saw did not produce the bucolic sights that had been so prominent in American writing. This is why he joined Dreiser, Dell, Sandburg, and others in their effort to portray the less pristine side of modern America:

¹⁴ Sherwood Anderson, "An Apology for Crudity," *The Dial*, November 1917, 437-38.

Who, knowing our America and understanding the life in our towns and cities, can close his eyes to the fact that life here is for the most part an ugly affair? As a people we have given ourselves to industrialism, and industrialism is not lovely. If anyone can find beauty in an American factory town, I wish he would show me the way. For myself, I cannot find it. To me, and I am living in industrial life, the whole thing is as ugly as modern war.¹⁵

This quote shows how Anderson agreed with the other Chicago writers about the need to put industrialization and all its grime into American literature, but it also reveals an interesting difference between him and his cohort. It reveals how Anderson held a more simplistic view of industrialization than Dreiser and Sandburg. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser shows the underbelly of the modern industrial city, but he also shows a side of the city that evokes fascination and beauty. For Sandburg, the grime of Chicago could itself be the subject of celebration. His poem, "Chicago," was filled with adjectives about industrialization, like "fierce," "cunning," "crooked," "terrible," but was nonetheless celebratory—a veritable anthem for one of America's most industrial cities. While Sandburg's portrayal of the city's grime was celebratory, and while Dreiser strove to portray both the horrors and the fascinations of industrialization, Anderson's view was more uniformly negative. However, despite this difference in tone, they all shared the same project. They all sought to bring industrialization to the forefront of American writing. It was one of the major imprints they would leave on modern American literature.

In addition to this project, the Chicago Renaissance writers also pioneered the use of urban vernacular in their writing. Here again, the innovation of Chicago newspapers influenced the style of the Chicago Renaissance. Around the turn of the century, Chicago

¹⁵ Ibid.

journalism went the opposite direction of newspapers in the East, which were becoming more conservative with language. This was when the *New York Times* first instituted a formal policy that forced its writers to use standard British English exclusively. Use of “proper” English was a method of claiming legitimacy, especially on the East Coast where the literati scoffed at journalism.¹⁶

While the Eastern newspapers were becoming ever more conservative with language, Chicago’s publishers were heading in the opposite direction, allowing its journalists the freedom to experiment with the vernacular. Many of its most famous writers, such as George Ade and Peter Finley Dunne, made vernacular speech a mainstay of their columns, doing their best to capture the type of language heard in the streets. This was a key part of their popularity, which led other reporters, like Theodore Dreiser, to admire and imitate their use of language. Ring Lardner and other Chicago innovators in sports reporting also helped lead the way in the development of vernacular writing. Of course, Mark Twain earlier had portrayed vernacular speech in his novels, but his characters did not speak the language of modern urban America that journalists depicted in Chicago.¹⁷

Taking his cue from these columnists, Dreiser captured the urban vernacular in *Sister Carrie*, especially with the speech of Charles Drouet who utters lines like, “You didn’t do me right, Cad.” One Dreiser scholar writes that only George Ade, also a Chicago journalist of the late-nineteenth century, was as successful in capturing the

¹⁶ Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 175-80; Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 155.

¹⁷ Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 175-80; Richard Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser: At the Gates of the City, 1871-1907* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1986), 255.

speech of ordinary Americans.¹⁸ Dreiser, however, was the first to successfully take this modern urban speech out of the newspaper and into an American novel.

Others in the movement followed Dreiser's lead in using the vernacular. Margaret Anderson's *Little Review* required, among other things, that people who submit pieces to the journal "must write as though you are talking instead of writing."¹⁹ The Chicago Renaissance also produced the poet of the American vernacular: Carl Sandburg. He, like the Chicago Renaissance prose writers who portrayed vernacular speech, was defying highbrow convention. This may have been due to his lack of training, as some critics have argued, but it was a move toward democratizing verse for modern America. His use of descriptors like "Stormy, husky, brawling" were words that resonated with urban working-class audiences, as well as others. He also used less formal verse, defying many conventions of language, making his poems closer to spoken language. Sandburg's critics, both at the time and still today, sometimes complain that his poems are more prose than poetry—prose broken up into lines only to give the appearance of a poem. Some people look at his work and see innovation, while others see debasement. Whatever the merits, his writing is part of the vernacular contribution of the Chicago Renaissance. And for all of his detractors, there are plenty of supporters who celebrate him as an American poet, still one of the best-known today.

need to include section here on Edgar Lee Masters—write it in December

Distance from the major book publishers of the East Coast also helped the Chicago's writers to be more innovative because they were further from the conservative influence of those companies. These large publishing houses stuck to safe writing that

¹⁸ Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 255.

would not risk offending any of their audiences. This conservatism led them to favor romantic fiction, historical romance, westerns, and uplifting stories. It was a formula that worked and they saw little reason to change it. By the 1910s their standards had changed little over the past four decades, as they still adhered to a Victorian moral code, and their taste for topics and writing style was equally conservative.

Eastern publishers also took a conservative approach to language that would have worked against vernacular innovation. Like the newspapers of the region, Eastern book publishers saw themselves as protectors of the English language, guarding against slang, vulgarity, and “foreign” words. This hostility to non-standard language was wrapped up in nativist fears about immigration and the corruption of Anglo-Saxon culture. Although the writers of the Chicago Renaissance were not immigrants and did not face xenophobic prejudice, their realism, which favored the vernacular, was still a challenge to the standard English movement.²⁰

The publishers in Chicago—most importantly, newspapers—encouraged writers to innovate rather than conform. This was the influence that most affected these authors as they wrote their manuscripts. Being hundreds of miles from the fervent conservatism of the East Coast book publishers was an advantage for those who were eager to experiment.

One story of an earlier Chicago writer demonstrates the conservative influence of Eastern publishers and the Eastern literary scene. In the late 1880s and early 1890s, Hamlin Garland created what one critic today calls “the finest work of early Midwestern realism,” which included his greatest achievement, *Main-Traveled Roads*. However, he

¹⁹ Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy*, 92.

quickly abandoned his innovative realism in the mid 1890s, only six years after adopting it, and turned instead to writing romantic novels in the genteel, Eastern tradition of the nineteenth century. The most popular explanation for why he did this is because he had been living in Boston and sought approval from the literary crowd there. There he learned, by observation as well as explicit instruction, that respected writers were gentlemen who followed conservative traditions. To please these people, Garland adopted a more European, conservative dress, discarding his Western style, and started a family while settling into a more conservative middle-class lifestyle. This was when he abandoned his experiments in realist writing, choosing the genteel romantic style that was more widely accepted among the established literati and publishers of the East. Given the timing of the change, it is not hard to believe that the conservative Eastern literary scene influenced him to give up his most innovative and important work.²¹

This story of conformity to Eastern standards contrasts sharply with an anecdote from Floyd Dell, who was living in Chicago some years later and was able to rely on the city's more developed salon. Unlike Garland, he had the security of a strong cohort, a local literary establishment that encouraged innovation, and a job at a newspaper where the publisher encouraged him to be bold and defy conventions. From this safe perch he had the freedom to mock Boston's conservative character. He identified it as the place that "created the American literature of the past," and described its powerful Puritanism as "that spiritual myopia which prevents a frank recognition and confession of the

²⁰ Stansell, *American Moderns*, 154-55.

²¹ Weber, *The Midwestern Ascendancy*, 48; Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center*, 107.

situation.” It would have been much riskier for Dell to challenge the national literary establishment without the safety that Chicago afforded him.²²

In addition to their experiments with the vernacular, ordinary characters and common street scenes in cities and towns, the writers of the Chicago Renaissance also challenged the mythological stories of migration that were central to American literature. George Pearson and James Gregory have written about the centrality of migration stories in American culture, and prior to the Chicago Renaissance the stories of American migrations were celebratory. These epic sagas focused on the heroic aspects of the westward movements. The romantic tradition of American literature was well-suited to these tales of conquering the frontier while striving to make the country greater, as shown by James Fenimore Cooper.²³

Challenging this tradition, the Chicago Renaissance was the first literary movement to portray American migration as something other than heroic or epic. Instead, it depicted the nation’s urban migration as complicated and problematic, born out of defeat as much as opportunity. Chicago writers did not characterize the urban migration as uniformly negative, since in some instances they emphasized the benefits that cities offered to small-town and rural migrants. However, they were different from their literary predecessors in that they refused to overlook the negative side of American migration.

²² Floyd Dell, “The Case of Mr. Howells,” May 9, 1913, in *Essays from the Friday Literary Review, 1909-1913*, Sautter, R. Craig, ed. (Highland Park, IL: December Press, 1995), 202.

²³ George W. Pearson, *The Moving American* (New York: Knopf, 1973), chapter 3; James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How Black Southerners and White Southerners Transformed 20th Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 43-44.

When they departed from the romantic tradition of American novels, the writers of the Chicago Renaissance were expressing the misgivings that many people already had about the end of frontier expansion and rural-to-urban migration. Beginning with Jefferson, many Americans saw yeoman farmers and westward expansion as creating a national character featuring opportunity, ambition, independence, and optimism. However, the closing of the frontier and the migration to cities threatened what many saw as the basis of America's greatness. The writers of the Chicago Renaissance were following in the footsteps of social scientists, urban reformers, dime novelists, and other observers who had already expressed deep anxiety about the closing of the frontier and urbanization. Those who expressed this concern most clearly were Frederick Jackson Turner, Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission, and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). The sensational white slave narratives of the era also show popular fears about rural-to-urban migration.²⁴

In the wake of popular anxiety about urbanization and the closing of the frontier, the Chicago Renaissance was the first respected, mainstream literary movement to focus on rural-to-urban migration. Its writers were not ones to be swayed by fears of moral decline or Jeffersonian concerns about citizenship, but they nonetheless highlighted the issues related to modern migration—such as a shift in moral values—that scared many

²⁴ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1800); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Harvard University Press, 1950); David M Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893); *Report of the Commission on Country Life* (New York: Strugis and Walton Company, 1911); William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900-1920* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1974); Allan Stanley Horlick, *Country Boys and Merchant Princes; The Social Control of Young Men in New York* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1975); Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt, eds., *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Katie N. Johnson, *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900-1920* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006).

contemporaries. Led by Theodore Dreiser, the movement established a narrative model that used realism to capture the problematic nature of modern migration. It marked a transition in American migration stories, as it turned away from the romantic, epic tales of the nineteenth century, and set the stage for the realistic, more troublesome migration stories of twentieth-century American literature.

The most important work in changing the portrayal of American migrations in mainstream literature is Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Here again, Dreiser led the way while the other writers promoted and imitated his work, thereby allowing it to have its impact on modern American literature. The novel is neither a tale of triumph nor complete despair. It is about a young woman who leaves her fictional hometown of Columbia City, Wisconsin, for Chicago. After encountering difficulties in the city, the main character, Carrie Meeber, creates opportunities by capitalizing on her sexuality. First, she establishes a dubious relationship with the salesman Charles Drouet. He provides her with an apartment, treats her to fine meals and other urban luxuries, and even arranges her first acting opportunity, which would eventually lead her to a famous career. Carrie moves further up the social ladder by dumping Drouet in favor of an even more well-to-do man, George Hurstwood, who provides her with better opportunities and luxuries. As Carrie uses him to her advantage, Hurstwood is destroyed in her wake, as he loses his wife and family, commits robbery, becomes a pauper, and eventually commits suicide.

Success in the modern city, after she had left the protective confines of Wisconsin, required Carrie to compromise her principles and destroy the lives of others. Dreiser does not condemn her for her actions, but she was hardly the heroic figure of

earlier American migration romances. She finds material success, especially after moving to New York, but Dreiser never makes it clear whether the reader should view her story positively or negatively. Readers concerned about hinterland-to-city migration are left to draw their own conclusions. This was far different from the romantic migration stories of the nineteenth century that left no room for doubt in their optimistic, triumphalist tales.

In addition to showing the potential dangers of the city, Dreiser's book also shows the push factors that made youth want to leave the region's small cities, towns, and farms. The family economy of the Wisconsin hinterlands offered little to Carrie, and her story highlights the lack of possibilities that young people—especially young women—found in the hinterlands. This was a reversal of the nineteenth-century romantic migration tales of ambitious Americans making their way on the frontier, and this development was unsettling to many Americans. Although Carrie's eventual material success in the city was exceptional, the historian of "women adrift" in Chicago considers Carrie Meeber typical in that she moved to the city because of dissatisfaction with the family economy in the hinterlands, even though she was able to escape that family economy much more easily than most of the women she represents.²⁵ Dreiser captures the limitations of the hinterlands that failed to keep many youth from leaving, ending the optimism that American literature had long associated with the frontier.

Other Chicago Renaissance novels also portrayed a problematic migration, but their importance is not equal to *Sister Carrie*'s. Dreiser's cohort was most significant for the way it promoted *Sister Carrie* and its alternative migration narrative. Floyd Dell, as

we have seen, helped resurrect *Sister Carrie*. One of his reasons for doing so was because the book had made migration from the hinterlands central to the story of modern Chicago. He writes, “The true story of adventure in Chicago begins somewhere else. Not to tell how it felt to leave the old town is to omit something of a distinct relevance to the story of Chicago.” Dell believed that *Sister Carrie* had treated this topic particularly well, and he would later use this same migration theme in his first two novels, written years later. For Dell, the migration that Carrie Meeber represented was the story of the modern age. He writes that Dreiser “has given us, there is little doubt, the Chicago of the whole middle West—a beacon across the prairies, . . . the place toward which the young faces turn and the end of the road along which the young feet yearn to tread.”²⁶

By rejecting heroic tales, the Chicago Renaissance marked a turning point in the way that mainstream American literature depicted national migration. After this group of writers gained prominence, most important novels have problemized the topic of migration. This is true of subsequent portrayals of the rural-to-urban (and small town-to-big city) migration, as well as the Southern diaspora (African Americans, Okies, and Appalachians), and includes John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. The literary movement developed a style of realism that highlighted many of the unpleasant characteristics of society. It is difficult to imagine Steinbeck writing *The Grapes of Wrath* without following in the realist tradition that Dreiser and the Chicago Renaissance popularized. Americans in the modern era were no longer wanting to

²⁵ Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 19-20.

²⁶ Dell, “Theodore Dreiser’s Chicago: Chicago in Fiction: The Fifth Paper,” *Friday Literary Review*, 23 February 1912.

celebrate the migrations that were shifting their society, and the Chicago Renaissance gave novels a form—realism—to reflect this change in attitude.²⁷

It is important to note that there are important differences between *Sister Carrie* and the popular migration novels that followed it in the twentieth century. Its tone was not nearly as bleak as novels such as *The Grapes of Wrath* or Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Dreiser, as well as the other Chicago Renaissance writers who promoted and imitated him, insisted on presenting facts and withholding judgment. However, while Dreiser's opaque morality did not set a trend, his rejection of romanticism and his style of realism created a model that later migration writers would follow. Later migration writers would become more transparently pessimistic, but *Sister Carrie* and the promotion of it marked the rejection of the celebratory migration tale, and it was a shift that would not be reversed in twentieth-century American literature.

In addition to literary concerns, the relationship between politics and literature was on the minds of many Chicago Renaissance writers. Not surprisingly, the movement's leading literary critic and most outspoken radical, Floyd Dell, considered carefully how literary styles and themes could affect politics. He argued that realism meant the portrayal of ordinary life, rather than the exceptional or extraordinary, which is why he promoted the literature of his movement that emphasized vernacular language, ordinary landscapes and the grit of the modern city, and characters who were not from the upper classes and did not show extraordinary talents or achievements (his first novel was

²⁷ For studies that focus on the problematic, rural-to-urban migration stories of twentieth-century America, see Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*, chapter 2; Lawrence R. Rodgers, *Canaan Bound: The African-American*

called *Moon-Calf*, which refers to someone who is simple-minded). Because of his belief that ordinary life in industrial America was not pretty, his assumption was that realistic literature would reveal the many problems and disorder of society. He wrote, “The masters of prose fiction and of poetry...have...exalted the individual with his follies, his crimes and his intractable aspirations, above that conception of order.” He believed that realism would help readers to recognize the problems plaguing their society, which, in turn, could inspire them to take action. He saw realism as the means for allowing fiction to become a force for social change.²⁸

However, while he wanted literature to show social problems, he cautioned radicals not to condemn the injustices they chronicled. Iniquity, he believed, spoke for itself. He even thought that radical writers should be cheerful about unacceptable conditions, because they empower forces of change. He argued that realities such as “starvation and diamond dog collars...are not depressing to the Socialist; they are, on the other hand, encouraging. They are, to him, the signs of change. He believes that when society has come to such a state as that it must be on the point of a revolution.”²⁹

need to include section here on Edgar Lee Masters—write it in December

Not all the members of the CR were as willing to talk so explicitly or excitedly about the relationship between their politics and their literature, but their work shows the socialist critique of industrial America. Sherwood Anderson’s first two novels, especially *Marching Men*, take the side of workers against the oppressive power of industrialization. Carl Sandburg, in his most famous poem, celebrates Chicago for its

Great Migration Novel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Carla Cappetti, *Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography, and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

²⁸ Dell, “Literature and Life,” *Friday Literary Review*, June 6, 1913.

working-class characteristics. And when it comes to politics, the most complicated and interesting case is that of Theodore Dreiser.

Dreiser was the most cynical member of the movement, and claimed that there was no relationship between his politics and his prose. He said he was too absorbed in writing to pay any attention to “such minor things as politics,” and that he never really believed in socialism.³⁰ However, we should not accept his rhetoric at face value. He claimed his agenda was not socialist, but his writing shows that he viewed the world through the same lens as Dell and other radicals. In *Sister Carrie*, he focuses on the poor conditions facing workers when his main character gets her first job in Chicago. He assumed these conditions would soon be a thing of the past, and noted to his reader, “Under better material conditions, this kind of work would not have been so bad, but the new socialism which involves pleasant working conditions for employees had not then taken hold upon manufacturing companies.”³¹ It was the kind of socialist optimism that would be expected of someone like Floyd Dell. Later in the novel, Dreiser also sympathizes with striking streetcar employees. His focus on gritty street scenes, vernacular language, flawed characters, and his undermining of Victorian morality fell in line with Dell’s socialist perspective and agenda, making the literary critic very pleased with Dreiser’s writing. Perhaps Dreiser was sincere that he had not intended to bring politics to bear on his writing. If that is the case, and he really wasn’t aware of the influence that leftists had had on his view of the world, maybe it is fair to call him an unconscious socialist.

²⁹ Dell, “Joseph Medill Patterson’s Chicago,” *Friday Literary Review*, February 16, 1912.

³⁰ Quoted in F. O. Matthiessen, *Theodore Dreiser* (New York: Sloane, 1951), 218; Lingeman, *Theodore Dreiser*, 322.

Dreiser's claims about being an apolitical writer may have been disingenuous, but the production of literature does not always determine its reception, or in this case, its political effect. The leftist politics in the Chicago Renaissance writing were often too subtle for audiences to grasp. Reviews of the Chicago Renaissance novels show how these books could become popular with broad audiences of readers and critics only when their politics were subtle enough to ignore. The most overtly political novels of the movement were Sherwood Anderson's first two, *Marching Men* and *Windy McPherson's Son*. Both received considerable criticism for their politics and moralizing tone, undermining praise for other elements of the writing. One contemporary critic began with praise for *Windy McPherson's Son*, but lamented that Anderson's social conscience lent a political tone to parts of the novel. The unknown critic was disappointed that "the joy of the artist in his creation seems to have been flattened out by the heavy pressure of the moralist." Another reviewer, Hart Crane, was more harsh and direct, arguing that artistic and political concerns are antithetical, and that each time Anderson writes with politics in mind, the quality of his novels suffers proportionately. Crane argued, "There has always been the propagandist threatening the artist in Anderson; and in [*Windy McPherson's Son* and *Marching Men*] the propagandist comes out too dangerously near a victory to satisfy us despite the much brilliant description these books contain." Had Anderson given his readers a better opportunity to ignore the author's political beliefs, his first two novels would have been better received.³²

³¹ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, 30.

³² Review of *Windy McPherson's Son*, newsprint clipping, date and publication unknown, 114-3526, Sherwood Anderson Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago; Hart Crane, magazine clipping, publication and date unknown, though it may be *The Dial* or *The Little Review*, ca.

Anderson did not make the same mistake with his third novel. *Winesburg, Ohio*, published in 1919, earned a warmer reception than his first two books. It had a much different style, departing from the realism of his first efforts, and shows how Anderson had improved as a writer since living in Chicago. Today, critics still consider it his best work. Although the style and writing quality are important reasons for its more popular acclaim, its more subtle political message was also a factor in its success. *Winesburg, Ohio*, like the most popular works of the movement, does not engage in much direct discussion of politics. There are more subtle political points in it—for example, it attacks Victorian morality and middle-class social pressures, as discussed in chapter three—but it does not introduce directly the topic of socialism as *Marching Men* had done. This insulated it from the criticisms his first two books received; reviewers were able to praise it without caveats about its politics. They were more comfortable when they could overlook or ignore a book's political message. It is not hard to believe that the same was true of a wider public audience.

A similar, but more surprising story about politics and audience reception comes from the publication of Floyd Dell's first novel. Few people today have heard of *Moon-Calf*, but when it was published it in 1920, it earned widespread praise from American critics. Heywood Broun called it "a literary sensation."³³ Robert Garland, writing for the *Baltimore News*, appreciated Dell's willingness to focus on "the sort of young man often met in our national life, but seldom dealt with seriously or adequately in our national

1920, Volume 1 Scrapbook, 113-1, Sherwood Anderson Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

³³ Heywood Broun, "Books," *New York Tribune*, November 19, 1920.

fiction.”³⁴ The realism of the novel also resonated with the Brooklyn *Eagle*, which proclaimed that, “here is an authentic voice from the prairies, a spokesman for the non-reading, unbookish millions whose voices are more commonly heard through the weekly and daily newspaper than in literature.” The review went on to hail the author as one of the Midwesterners who was changing the style of American literature.³⁵

Despite glowing reviews of the novel, Dell must have been dismayed by the reception of *Moon-Calf*. In this book he followed his own advice to refrain from explicit political preaching. Instead he tried to present conditions as they were, without comment. His assumption was that readers would come to the same political conclusions as he did. Reviews, however, show his assumption was naïve and that his book could become popular partly because readers and critics alike were able to ignore the politics behind it. H. L. Mencken, who had disdainfully considered Dell part of the “red-ink crowd,” noted approvingly that *Moon-Calf* did not seem to contain political propaganda. Many leftists made the same observation, though without the Mencken’s enthusiasm. One reviewer, Forrest Reid, noted that the main character falls into Socialist circles. He warned that this is a “nuisance,” but that the book was still very good because Dell had confined the political theme to only one part of the novel. That this conservative critic was still able to recommend the book shows how politically impotent it was. Those who read Dell’s *Moon-Calf* next to Anderson’s *Windy McPherson’s Son* and *Marching Men* today would have a hard time arguing that Dell’s novel is superior in its writing style or narrative.

³⁴ Clipping from the New York *Call*, 5 December 1920, 22-164, Floyd Dell Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

³⁵ Clipping from the Brooklyn, NY, *Eagle*, 11 December 1920, 22-162, Floyd Dell Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

While Dell, and perhaps others, may have claimed to write with political goals, it appears as though their novels could succeed only if their political mission proved impotent.³⁶

Later in life, Dell admitted that audiences and writers alike had joined his challenge to Victorian sexual norms without understanding its link to a broader political agenda.³⁷ The same could be said for his entire project of realism. Conservative readers, except those who found sexuality shocking, could enjoy the fiction of the Chicago Renaissance without feeling that it threatened their political assumptions. American writers who came after the movement could even adopt its themes and realist style without believing in leftist political causes.

Perhaps this reflects the authors' conflicted relationship with radicalism. Each of them, with the exception of Sandburg, was very careful to build a middle-class, bourgeois life for themselves in spite of a contempt for the bourgeoisie and American middle-class values (see chapter two). Their priorities may partly explain why the politics in their literature was so subtle. If it is fair to call Dreiser an "unconscious socialist," then perhaps it is equally fair to call Dell an "unconscious bourgeois," concerned with building his popularity and protecting his career. In spite of their sharp differences about the relationship between politics and literature, they produced works with similarly veiled political messages. It seems as though life experiences affected them and their writing in similar ways, despite their protests to the contrary.

³⁶ Clayton, *Floyd Dell*, 192; Judith Nierman, *Floyd Dell: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Sources, 1910-1981* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984), xii; Forrest Reid, "A Harvest from America," newsprint clipping, date and publication unknown, 114-3526, Sherwood Anderson Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

The Chicago Renaissance did not effect a political revolution, but in some ways it democratized American literature. It brought ordinary characters, vernacular language, common landscapes, and the grit of the modern city to the fore of American writing. In addition to challenging many of the genteel elements of American literature, they also established a new, more critical model for chronicling migration, one that would accommodate Americans' new concerns. Most of their writing has not stood the test of time, as they were eclipsed by the talented writers who came soon after them, but they popularized a set of themes and styles that proved far more significant, and lasting, than their novels and poems. Their movement helped industrialize American culture.

³⁷ Floyd Dell to Dale Kramer, 12 April 1963, Chicago Notebooks, 2, Dale Kramer Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

Epilogue

In 1926, less than a decade after twice declaring Chicago “the literary capital of the world,” H. L. Mencken changed his mind and let his crankiness come forth. He contacted Samuel Putnam, who lived in Chicago, and asked him to write a disparaging article about the city’s literature. Mencken’s subsequent correspondence instructed Putnam on what criticisms to make and which people to insult. After the derisive piece came out in the *American Mercury*, Mencken wrote his henchman, “You gave all the fakes a salubrious and much needed shaking up.”¹

Part of the reason for Mencken’s newfound disgust with the city was that its best writers had moved to the East Coast. Furthermore, most of the Chicago writers, with the exception of Dreiser, peaked in the 1910s and were unable to sustain their momentum into the next decade. However, the other probable reason for Mencken’s abrupt reversal was that he, like many critics, was reevaluating the movement. Most of its writers built their reputations by innovating with new styles and themes, but their prestige declined as their transitional works, by the measures of most critics, paled in comparison to the great novels of the 1920s. Since that time, most of the accomplishments of the Chicago Renaissance have been forgotten. Literary quality, however it is judged, makes a more lasting impression than innovation.

Critics who care only about literary quality may have reason to cast aside the Chicago Renaissance, but those interested in history ought to pay more attention to the movement. It helped end many of the nineteenth-century traditions in American

literature, including romanticism, Victorian morality, and epic stories of migration.

The writers of the movement popularized a newer set of themes and styles that have since dominated American literature, including the frank examination of sexuality, gritty urban landscapes and mundane Midwestern towns, ordinary characters from humble backgrounds, urban vernacular, a more troubling view of American migration, and literary realism.

The Chicago Renaissance made these changes at an important moment in American cultural history. Reading was still the dominant medium of American culture, despite competition from popular theater, vaudeville, nickelodeons, and silent films.² Poetry and fiction enjoyed a popularity and an importance that they would never again experience. In the following decades, literature lost its status within popular culture to the new, modern media of motion pictures, radio, and television. The Chicago Renaissance helped set a new direction for literature at the last moment that writing dominated American mass culture. Had it occurred later, it would not have mattered as much. This dissertation may prompt questions about how changes in literature in the early twentieth century affected the developing modern media.

In addition to looking at the impact of the Chicago Renaissance, this study has focused especially on the relationship between social, political, and cultural history. Chicago was able to become a center of American culture due to the cultural geography of the Midwest which included educational reforms in the hinterlands, regional migration patterns, the economic development of Chicago (in particular the rise of the newspaper

¹ Samuel Putnam, *Paris Was Our Mistress: Memoirs of a Lost and Found Generation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1947, 1970), 46.

and publishing industry), and local cultural philanthropy. At the same time that regional and local developments made the success of a movement possible, political, economic, and social forces in the region affected the individuals who would lead the Chicago Renaissance. Those influences included the region's radical and idealistic political traditions, social and economic displacement, and the persistence of the middle-class doctrine of success.

If the 1930s, as Michael Denning has argued, witnessed the "laboring of American culture," then the influences that affected the Chicago Renaissance reflect a wider range of an earlier era's political, economic, and social forces.³ This group of writers, rather than representing only one perspective from the late nineteenth century, often held views and abided by principles that seem paradoxical. They experienced downward mobility and subscribed to the leftist critique of industrial America, but at the same time they continued to live by the optimistic, middle-class doctrine of success. By representing the diverse influences of an era of economic transformation, the writers of the Chicago Renaissance helped industrialize American culture.

² Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 160.

³ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: the Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

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VITA

Jeffrey A. Brune earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in History from Colorado College. At the University of Washington he received his Master of Arts degree in History as well as his Ph.D. in History in 2007. He has taught at numerous institutions, including the University of Washington, the University of Puget Sound, and Colorado College. Currently he lives in Washington, D.C., where he is a faculty member at Gallaudet University.