

urbanization in fiction

changing models of heroism in popular american novels

1880-1920

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In the late nineteenth century, urbanization shook the individualistic foundations of American culture and altered the meaning of heroism. As long as individualism remained linked to ideas of virtue, responsibility and self restraint, heroism involved the application of an exaggerated but benevolent individualism to communally sanctioned goals. The hero, in taking matters into his own hands and in acting selflessly, merely followed the dictates of his culture. Both morality and individualism defined heroism.¹

The growth of urban lifestyles severed the link between individualism and benevolence, and undermined the popular conception of the individualistic hero. The social changes accompanying urbanization were reflected in late nineteenth and early twentieth century popular culture, and spawned various responses. Popular artists concerned themselves with the problems arising from the shift of conventional values and assumptions into an urban *milieu*. In popular fiction, an important theme in many widely read novels was the demise of the hero, a fall which reflected the culture's growing reservations about the compatibility of individualism and the public welfare in the industrial city.²

The United States became an urban nation during the nineteenth century. When the War of 1812 ended, less than 3% of the people lived in towns larger than 25,000; by the end of the century, over one fourth of the nation lived in communities that size, and nearly half the people lived in urban places of all sizes. This massive shift in residential location, from farm to town and more importantly from small communities to larger centers, affected all areas of American life, altering physical and

institutional relationships and shifting the dynamic center of American culture from the rural crossroads to the bustling downtown.³

While the towns were central to antebellum growth, their importance stemmed from their control of economic, political and information services for the largely rural population.⁴ City life—the culture created in and by the urban environment—touched relatively few Americans. The new nation's cultural values were nurtured in a predominantly rural environment.⁵ But urbanization both changed the cities as cultural environments and altered their role in the national culture. As the nineteenth century waned, the towns lost none of their economic or political importance—in fact, their influence expanded. Now, however, urban lifestyles became quite common. More and more of the nation was aware of, and affected by, urban styles of thought and value. Thus the complex of social changes which accompanied urbanization became, by the last decade of the nineteenth century, central to American culture.⁶

As the city became the focal point of American life, conventional assumptions and values were questioned. The concern was not a new one, nor was it uniquely American. It was instead part of a long conflict between “urban” and “pastoral” (or sometimes “rural”) values which industrialism rekindled throughout the western world. In America, the importance of the yeoman in the young nation's political theory, and the frontier's hold on the national imagination, added spice to the larger controversy.⁷ Thus Thomas Jefferson's oft-cited view that cities were like “sores on the body politic” was a warning to his countrymen that a trans-oceanic evil might invade the United States and debase her values and institutions.⁸

Jefferson's views met the needs of an expansive, rural nation, and formed an important support for linking “good” American traits and institutions with the early Republic's rural setting. By the Jacksonian years, this link was a generally accepted social truth. Politicians, essayists and artists alike publicized the superiority of simplicity to refinement, of Nature to City. The popular conception of Republican virtue, whatever its correlation with reality, was basic to the mythic personification of the good American, the hero.⁹

A mixture of individualism and virtue supported the neoclassical ideal of community-oriented heroism typical in the early United States. Theodore Greene, in his careful analysis of heroic models in popular magazines, notes the neo-classicism of the early Republic. Heroic figures were upright, public-spirited men of the upper-middle class. They were not individualistic, and their heroism was not the heroism of deeds. They displayed the unselfishness and virtue which the editors (and presumably their audiences) assumed suited the new nation. Imposed upon the culture from above by an elite which assumed a hierarchical social structure, the neo-classical hero nevertheless symbolized values which remained important throughout the nineteenth century, and which were incorporated into later heroic models.¹⁰

As the nineteenth century wore on, heroes began to exhibit power as well as character, and were revered for what they did in addition to what they stood for. For nearly a century, Greene notes, the prevalent heroic style stridently asserted man's control over his environment. These new heroic models were increasingly individualistic, and perhaps even "folkstyle," reflecting authentic values coming up from the culture rather than models imposed upon the popular sensibility. Nevertheless, "older conceptions of the successful life maintained an influence well into the nineteenth century." Even at the height of the craze for individualistic heroes, heroic figures like Andrew Carnegie and Horatio Alger taught that individualism had to be tempered by virtue and attention to public duty.¹¹

These remnants of neo-classical heroism proved remarkably hardy. They rested upon an amalgamation of neo-classicism and individualism already visible by the time Alexis de Toqueville reported on Americans' perceptions of themselves. Americans presented to the Frenchmen a public face of moderation, characterized by the notion of "self-interest rightly understood." Free institutions impressed upon them that it was "the duty as well as the interest of men to make themselves useful to their fellow creatures." Free institutions, which rested on a rough equality of condition, tempered selfish tendencies in a society based on self-interest. Individualism thus acquired a community orientation.¹²

Whatever the relationship between these sentiments and the realities of antebellum American life, they do summarize the culture's self image. What Tocqueville called "self-interest rightly understood" was actually individualism tempered by the morality and rhetoric of Protestant virtue. Put simply, "man serves himself in serving his fellow creature . . . his private interest is to do good." As long as these sentiments softened individualism, the concept of "self-interest rightly understood" would remain central to American culture, and to the notion of the hero. But the fragile balance of opposites which supported this view was shattered when equality of condition and dominance of the small communities began to wane. With the emergence of the industrial city, the conditions supporting "self-interest rightly understood" were replaced by a thoroughgoing materialism. By the 'eighties, this change had progressed far enough to undermine seriously the compromises which supported the contemporary heroic model, and which sustained Carnegie and Alger in their assertions of virtuous individualism.¹³

Beginning at the fringes of popular culture, a number of what we would now call "image-makers" grappled with the fate of the individualistic hero in an urban age. Theodore Greene notes that the magazine biographies analyzed in his book, while celebrating Napoleonic individualism throughout the eighties and nineties, also reflect an increasing undertone of discomfort with the conventional heroic model. And Marshall Fishwick sees the simultaneous shift from "folkstyle" (authentic) to "fakestyle" (merchandised) heroism, which began in the late

nineteenth century, as symptomatic of the inadequacies of virtuous individualism in the urban-industrial age.¹⁴

Similar undertones gathered strength in popular fiction. While most late nineteenth century authors continued to work with the conventional heroic *formulae*, a succession of immensely popular books appeared between the end of Reconstruction and the beginnings of the Jazz Age in which individualism seemed selfish, rather than heroic, in urban society. These authors wrote for large audiences—the first generation of Americans to include a mass market for literature. Their novels revolved around familiar themes such as religion, political life, initiation into a new social setting or a new stage of life.¹⁵ They were not merely a reflection of contemporary social trends, nor did the writers' increasing use of realistic technique ensure that their treatments of social ideas would be well-focused pictures of popular thinking. But an examination of three types of romances—the utopian, the western, and the business romance—provides an interesting reflection of the relationships among urbanization, individualism, and heroism as depicted for a mass audience.

These three types of novels portrayed conventional characters trying to cope with conventional problems in an unfamiliar culture. The utopian novels, which enjoyed an immense vogue after the 1888 publication of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, explored the possibilities of escape from a dreary and threatening present into a well-designed future. Given free reign to develop any social organization they wished, the utopians, while devising a variety of solutions to the problems they identified in their America, all agreed that individualism was no longer compatible with the public good.¹⁶ Western tales provided another avenue of escape, into the past, where the hero could ostensibly rediscover the environment and the values which had nurtured him.¹⁷ And the popular business romance forced the hero to confront his fate and examine his values in the contemporary world.

Within these three areas of popular fiction, individual authors and novels were selected for discussion both because they were popular in their time and because they represented notions expressed in a large body of similar fiction. Popularity is an appropriate selection criteria because it defines the range of widely accepted contemporary responses to fictional situations. It is of course a truism that popularity measured by sales does not ensure a wide acceptance of the ideas and viewpoints contained in a book. (John Cawelti made this point clearly when he noted that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an exciting romance/melodrama regardless of the readers' opinion of slavery.¹⁹) And it is equally evident that popular fiction does not embrace the universe of generally accepted perceptions of, feelings about, or responses to social change. But it does exclude those responses which are either antithetical to widely held views or lack an intriguing imaginative dimension. Thus we do not have to go as far as Russel Nye, who contends that "Popular art confirms the experience of the majority. . . . For this reason [it] has been an unusually sensitive and accurate reflector

of the attitudes and concerns of the society for which it is produced," to agree with him that the popular author "corroborates . . . values and attitudes already familiar to his audience; his aim is less to provide a new experience than to validate an older one."²⁰

Because of its tendency to reaffirm or "corroborate" conventional notions, popular fiction reflects a culture coping with social change. To keep his audience, the popular novelist must remain current and incorporate changing social realities into his fiction. But he must also restrict himself to a fairly narrow range of responses to new and trying situations. Defined by these two pressures, currency and faithfulness to generally accepted values, popular fiction can mediate between conventional mores and unconventional circumstances. It is difficult to judge the popular novel's formative influence in synthesizing popular awareness of changing conditions. But these novels clearly reflect shifting and often complicated reactions to major social changes such as those accompanying urbanization.

In a further effort to increase the representative nature of the material studied, novels of unique form, content, or value-orientation have been excluded in favor of fiction broadly representative of the popular novels of the period. There were, of course, turn-of-the-century novels which more or less successfully integrated the individualistic hero into the city: John Hay did it in *The Breadwinner*; the hard-boiled detective novel was partly the result of the individualistic hero's transmigration into the urban age; naturalists like Dreiser continued to create individualists pulled along by destiny; many elite artists rescued heroic individualism by removing their heroes from social interaction, turning to introspection instead. These were among the many responses to the conjunction of individualism, heroism and urbanization. But concentration on them has obscured the unsuccessful efforts of most popular novelists to import conventional individualistic heroes into the urban age.

i

By 1880, the conventional heroic model was well defined. Whatever his style, whatever his *milieu*, the hero was expected to combine two traditions—one grounded in notions of public duty and "character," the other stressing individual success and power to control surroundings—and thus produce a hero who tempered individualism with personal virtue and a sense of public duty, and thus avoided selfishness. Yet increasingly, in the popular novels of the 1880's and 90's, the emerging urban culture proved an inhospitable environment for individualistic heroes. The nineteenth century's confident heroes gradually disappeared as a central convention in popular fiction.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century middle class fiction typically suggested the hero's unsuitability to the city. For example, in Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column*²¹ qualities previously thought heroic

destroy the city. Urban culture is symbolized by Prince Cabano, the epitome of capitalist individualism and the symbol of all that the revolutionary Brotherhood fights against. Cabano selfishly co-opts the freedom of the streets, exploits the available young women, and monopolizes the world's most beautiful and luxurious furnishings. His immense riches represent a self-indulgent monopoly. In his complete freedom the Prince becomes a stereotypic villain and—because of his limitless power—an excellent foil for revolution. But Cabano is more than an inordinately wealthy and selfish man. His riches and total individual freedom are merely the logical fulfillment of every striving capitalist's ideal. Likewise, his raw individualism exaggerates an acceptable capitalist world-view, a perspective which is truly at home in the city.

Donnelly's evil Prince, and to a lesser extent a host of other native middle class businessmen in non-utopian fiction, fulfilled the first condition of heroism: they embodied an exaggeration of their culture's central principle. Heroes had enlarged the system's values and transcended their limitations, because they embodied vital, community-oriented norms. In other words, the traditional hero here was able to do good because he could use his culture's individualistic values as a powerful base on which to build an "other-directed" world-view. This foundation then allowed him to operate outside conventional channels to achieve traditionally sanctioned goals. But Cabano could not fulfill the final conditions of heroism because the formula no longer fit. In an advanced, urbanized society with a powerful capitalist-industrial component, enthusiastic application of society's values did not result in selfless heroism. Cabano could not be a hero because the values for which he stood led to the brutal excesses of turn-of-the-century American life. The exaggeration of urban America's norms produced widespread villainy instead of heroism.

Cabano was the satanic product of an exaggerated application of capitalist virtues in an urbanized society. *Caesar's Column* underscored the impossibility of heroism in urban culture. Donnelly's tale of revolt and derringdo was heroic, and seemingly provided ample scope for a non-individualistic heroism to develop in the city. But only by breaking the shackles of urban culture did the Brotherhood become heroic. The sympathetic, humanitarian values which it represented did not purify urban life, but destroyed it: the successful rebels set up an agrarian Utopia. The most heroic act possible for the late-nineteenth-century urbanite was to escape to the more hospitable pre-urban age.

Surprisingly, not Donnelly but the Utopian authors who dreamed of an adjustment to the city presented the strongest case against the urban hero. Their systems made heroism anti-social, and their novels excluded the traditional hero. Both Edward Bellamy's Julian West, and Solomon Schindler's Young West were merely narrators, not heroes, and the tales of *The Diothas* and *The Crystal Button* were recounted by unheroic participant observers. Similarly, William Dean Howells' Mr. Homos can-

not be described as a traditional hero. The pattern persisted throughout the remarkable outpouring of late nineteenth century Utopian fiction: only novels which promised a general exodus to the countryside included heroes. And even these were pre-urban: their goal, like that of Donnelly's rebels, was to achieve Utopia and lounge idyllically under neat rows of fruit trees.²²

The hero never appeared in Utopia because he had nothing to do there. In a social system cultivating cooperation, mutual respect, amity, and the death of self-aggrandizement, there was little evil to fight. In such a society a man could not develop traits which led to heroism because no foil to such traits existed. The Utopians deliberately omitted heroes from their novels because the individualistic values which supported traditional heroism were proscribed in Utopia. The urban Utopians like Bellamy, Schindler, Chauncy Thomas, and Bradford Peck discouraged all forms of individualism. The Utopians despised individualism because it stressed personal gain, and they believed that the urban *milieu* heightened the individualism and selfishness inherent in capitalist society. The rush to get ahead in the world led to intricate forms of competition and the duplication of services solely for profit. The mass demands of an urban population increased the problem. Confusion resulted, and only after the millenium did men realize the futility of the old ways. Thus Julian West, awakening in 2000 A.D., immediately notices that the centralized distribution methods of the new order are the main organizing mechanism in Utopia, and a great improvement over the competitive system of his own day.²³

The plethora of individual entrepreneurs, who "worked and saved, hoarding up what they considered to be wealth" and the bevy of women so selfish that "they sapped the essence of everything for self only" characterized the pre-Utopian era. Their actions shaped urban culture as much as the activities of the great capitalists whom they aped. In such a self-centered society, after one faltering step the citizen, having nowhere to turn for help, ". . . becomes discouraged . . . falls into bad company," and quickly slides downhill.²⁴ Unrestrained individualism leads to social stress and then to immorality.

The Utopians hoped to undermine the individualistic ethic which they blamed for these horrid contemporary conditions. This individualism had been the foundation of the traditional conception of heroism. Now, in the Utopian view, traditional heroes like Prince Cabano could only go astray in urban America. Their individualism had to be subordinated to community goals. But writers like Donnelly did not think that selfishness could be controlled in the city: they identified the city too closely with individualism for the two to be separated. And they recognized that, since subordination of individualism to community goals would destroy heroic individualism, Utopia would have to exist without conventional heroes.

Donnelly's position, however, was not typical of most Utopian novelists who hoped that urban society could be purified and saved. Since the major Utopian writers hoped to reform urban society by institutionalizing both heroism and individualism out of existence, the difference between agrarian- and urban-Utopians can be exaggerated. In concentrating on their different visions of Utopia, it is possible to ignore the similarity of the novelists' response to the changes they observed in late nineteenth century America. Because they hoped to control individualism through institutionalization, the urban-oriented Utopians have often been criticized for their "authoritarianism." The extent of their belief in rigid state control of the individual is debatable. They even tried to counter the charge before it was made: Bellamy, for instance, carefully noted the similarities between his coercive labor army and the coercion practiced by the armed forces. But, despite disclaimers of evil intent, the Utopians unmistakably emphasized institutional and environmental structuring. They hoped to direct the people's energies into formal social structures, and they left little room for individualism because they had seen its evil effects.²⁵

In order to eliminate the individual who transcends the system, the Utopians created a set of socialistic institutions designed to encompass the citizen's every physical, social and psychological need. This began with education. Children attended nursery school and continued through the grades until they reached adulthood and joined the industrial force. The Utopians generally endorsed progressive, Dewey-style educational systems which indoctrinated the students into a morality suitable for the new order. At the same time, the educational system identified the child's talents and predilections and trained him for a productive adulthood. Upon graduation, the Utopian began a life-long affiliation with the adult world's institutions, from which he received his rewards and punishments.

By affording everyone the necessities of middle class life, the Utopians hoped to do away with the need for heroism except in times of emergency. A web of cooperative organizations formed the boundaries of the citizens' existence. Individual drive was rewarded through moral approbation, badges, and honoraria. Those citizens who, in an individualistic age, would have become either villains or heroes became exemplary citizens in Utopia. Achievement and self-assertion, which had been so important to traditional heroism, now drove men into complete participation in the new society's organizational structure, a structure designed to benefit the community, not the individual.

Utopia, then, can be seen as an exaggerated response to the problems of individualism and dependence in an urbanizing society which lauded responsible individualism, but neglected charity, cooperation and social responsibility. In an urban society, large heterogeneous masses of anonymous people, coupled with the potential abuses of the limitless power conferred by the industrial system, made individualism dangerous. Hero-

ism, based on individualism, became a threat in a society separated from the concept of charity. Therefore, privatism had to be replaced by a public commitment to virtue; heroism had to give way to institutionalized dependence as a means of doing good. Thus, in Utopian fiction, the hero not only failed to redeem urban society, he ceased to exist within it. At best he could hope to destroy urban-industrial culture and organize an arcadian society which made heroes extinct. More typically he entered a society which entangled him in a maze of institutional restraints and channeled his impulses through a bureaucracy dedicated to the common good.

ii

Both in their great popularity, and in their suggestion of an escape from contemporary urban reality, western tales underscored the tension between heroism and urbanism. Authors and public figures alike helped to create the larger-than-life western popular hero. Men like Owen Wister and Theodore Roosevelt found their heroic models outside of the city, reflecting the popular difficulty in locating heroes in the towns. Wister and Roosevelt both believed that a temporary escape from the city would recharge their moral batteries with wilderness-inspired virtue. Their belief both shaped and reflected the increasingly popular notion that urban man had to have contact with nature. As America lost contact with the wilderness and with nature, her litterateurs sought a visible home for the traditional values of virtue, disinterestedness and individualism which had always been closely associated with the west. This search energized the turn-of-the-century outpouring of popular western fiction, and signified the hero's retreat from urban America.

In Harold Bell Wright's 1911 novel, *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, the west typically functioned as the arena appropriate to heroism and personal growth. The story's site in southeastern California was mean, bleak, beautiful country. Wright stressed the setting's isolation in creating the story's atmosphere. Rubio City was "where the thin edge of civilization is thinnest." The road into the area "led toward those mountains that lifted their . . . shoulders . . . across the way as though in dark and solemn warning to any who should dare set their faces toward that dreadful land of want and death that lay on their other side." Wright deliberately contrasted this landscape with the city of San Felipe, which tingled "with the electricity of commerce as men from all lands, driven by the master passion of human kind—Good Business—seek each his own." The Kings Basin Desert was an explicit rejection of urban culture, walled off from it by mountain ranges and a nearly uncharted desert.²⁶

Wright's characters moved between these settings. The story focused on the foundling Barbara Worth (the free spirit in touch with the beautiful desert) and her benefactor, the banker Jefferson Worth; her cowboy "uncles" who had found her alone in the desert, Texas Joe and

Pat the Irishman; assorted townspeople; and an eastern businessman, James Greenfield. Most important, however, were the novel's three potential heroes: Abe Lee, Willard Holmes and "the Seer."

Abe Lee, a foundling brought up and trained by the Seer, represented the wilderness where he had been born and raised. Wright described him as

made of iron. Hunger, cold, thirst, heat, wet, seem to make no impression on him. He can out-walk, out-work, out-last and out-guess any man I ever met. He has the instincts of a wild animal for finding his way and the coldest nerve I ever saw. His honesty and loyalty amount almost to fanaticism.

This young superman was trained not as a gunfighter or a privateer but, significantly, as a frontier-bred engineer. His teacher, the Seer, was also a surveyor, a man obsessed with "the possibility of converting the thousands of acres of the Kings Desert Basin into productive farms." He, Abe and Barbara all dreamt of the great day when irrigation would make the desert bloom, and the basin would be sprinkled with family farms. Wright fervently believed in bringing civilization to the wilderness; so did the desert people.²⁷

Willard Holmes, also an orphan, was a different sort of surveyor, trained at the best Eastern schools, and ward of a wealthy financier. The most "casual of observers could not have hesitated to pronounce Holmes a thoroughbred and a good individual of the best type that the race has produced." He represented urban culture entering the Kings Basin Desert country disguised as a development scheme. Most of the novel's plot concerned the desert reclamation project and eastern capitalists' efforts to defraud the settlers. Through the conflict between the settlers and Capital, Willard Holmes emerges a hero. When Willard arrived in the West, with his dandified clothes and supercilious airs, he tried to impress Barbara Worth with such irrelevancies as his ancestry, social standing, and training. His western experience would release traits "buried under the habits and customs of the life and thought of the world to which he belonged—buried so deeply that the man himself scarcely realized that they were there." Wright asserted the city's power to cover up character and breeding, and portrayed Holmes as the stereotypical easterner or tenderfoot. To win Barbara Worth, Holmes would have to rise above his urban past, and re-emerge as a hero. Barbara herself saw his true merit. "Beneath the conventions of his class the girl felt the man a powerful character." Like many other young lovers, "She wanted him . . . to wake up."²⁸

Wright placed Holmes in a delicate position. He arrived in the West to oversee the interests of Capital. But as he became attracted to Barbara's world Holmes lost faith in the capitalists' amoral methods, symbolized by a shabbily constructed irrigation sluice. This weak link in the reclamation project threatened to flood the entire valley. Holmes argued with

Greenfield about fixing it; finally, he left the company rather than continue in opposition to the settlers' interests. Now closely identified with the people, and with the morality of "self-interest rightly understood" which they hope to plant in the desert, Holmes significantly joined with Abe Lee to make a dangerous, all-night ride with a large amount of money. The local and urban hero-figures had united to save the valley.

When the intake sluice finally broke, Holmes' ineffectual replacement could not stem the flood. Holmes took over and subdued the raging river, completing his transformation into a hero. His companions,

remembering the man who had come out from the East . . . wondered at the transformation. Then Willard Holmes was the servant of Capital that used people for its own gain. . . . Now . . . he was a master who used the power at his command in behalf of the people. He had come to look upon his work as a service to the world. . . . It was as if in this man, trained by the best of the cultured East—trained as truly by his life and work in the desert— . . . the best spirit of the age and race found expression.

Holmes had to leave urban culture to find a value-structure able to support his heroic potential. He found this in the West symbolized by Barbara Worth.²⁹

The new Holmes was superior to the native hero, Abe Lee, because he combined the advantages of civilization with those of a pre-urban value-structure. Barbara Worth formally acknowledged this in choosing Holmes as a lover. He and Abe Lee competed for Barbara throughout the novel, but in the end Holmes won. When he says that he had often feared that she really loved Abe, she was shocked at his blindness: "Oh! . . . But that . . . *that could not be.*" Wright then added that "Barbara's words rightly understood, make the end of my story."³⁰ The novel thus emphasized in closing that a reformed urbanite was a more desirable hero-figure than a symbol of the struggling, self-tutored west. Heroes might exist only in the west, but they required a civilized background.³¹

The Winning of Barbara Worth also contrasted Holmes, the new heroic type, with Texas Joe, the cowboy "uncle" who finds Barbara in the desert. Texas Joe had the same stalwart traits as Abe Lee, yet he played a minor role in Wright's saga. He was an echo of the past, an aging representative of the halcyon days of the wild west dramatized a decade earlier in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. Texas Joe represented the traditional western hero, but in Wright's fiction the hero works with urban civilization, not as a herder or farmer. Abe Lee, Willard Holmes, and the Seer were civil engineers, opening up the new country and introducing civilization and progress to the Kings Basin Desert country.³²

Ironically, however, heroes such as Willard Holmes, by introducing eastern culture and organization into the wilderness, made the west itself as obsolete as Texas Joe. In so doing they destroyed traditional heroism, which was already dead in the city. Heroes played similar, ambivalent

roles throughout turn-of-the-century western genre novels. The Virginian, Zane Grey's riders on the Utah border, and a host of others tamed the wilderness for the coming of civilization, but were tamed themselves in the process. The semi-primitive typically became a community leader who read Shakespeare.³³ Wright's heroes merely exaggerated the trend. They were not violent men of the plains and deserts, but courageous, cerebral types. The new heroes were engineers, pitting their professional skill against the environment rather than their gun-hands against the forces of evil.

iii

Had Willard Holmes remained in the east, he would never have achieved heroic stature. Few easterners managed to do so in American fiction. Booth Tarkington was characteristic in his treatment of potential heroism in the city. In both *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *The Turmoil*, the would-be mavericks, George Amberson Minafer and Bibbs Sheridan, returned to placid lives after attempting to escape the city through either elitism or poetry. Their longings for escape were irrelevant in contemporary conditions. Once returned to reality they fit into their society, but they never approached heroic stature. The best that they could do was to use the system to alleviate the suffering of the more unfortunate. For example, George labored to support his Aunt Fanny, and Bibbs quietly acquired stock in a useless utility company to enhance the value of some friends' holdings. The boys rose above the squalid level of contemporary mores, but they overcame the limitations of their *milieu* by imposing upon it the mores of a bygone era. They never became heroes because they could not adapt contemporary social values to charitable or communal ends. Traditional heroism was now only possible in the elusive western settings favored by Wright and Grey, where exaggerated individualism might still be in the community interest.³⁴

Tarkington's implicit rejection of heroism became explicit in *The Turmoil*, where he presented two potential urban heroes, Father Sheridan and his oldest son Jim. The older man was identified with the city in such a way that the accomplishments of Sheridan's business career approached the kind of symbolic embodiment of the era's values which turned Ignatius Donnelly's Prince Cabano into a stand-in for "Capitalism."³⁵ But Father Sheridan was no hero. He believed above all in self-aggrandizement, and he did nothing to alleviate the horrid conditions of urban life. He could not apply his force and ability to such problems because his society's values had destroyed the ideal of personal responsibility in the Midland town.

Sheridan's failings were those of the turn-of-the-century business culture. And his middle son, Jim Jr., who represents the potential urban hero, was a sad, shallow character. Jim was the Sheridan clan's hope for the future because he retained his father's faith and his dedication to

progress. The elder Sheridan loved to boast that his sons would “make two blades of grass grow where one grew before.” Of the three Sheridan boys, Jim tried hardest to fulfill these hopes.³⁶

Young James Sheridan personified the energy, optimism and faith in technology characteristic of businessman-heroes in native middleclass fiction. He would tackle any job, and complete it faster and better than anyone else. His father said, “Jim’s a wizard.” But the young man finally tried to push the technology and drive which support his success beyond their limits. He attempted to build two warehouses for his father, championing a new and swift, but untested, construction process. If he could galvanize capitalism’s values and methods to transcend its problems, he would approach heroic stature within his culture. But the new construction process failed, and the warehouse roof collapsed while Jim was inspecting the building, killing the proto-hero. His death threw the Sheridan family into chaos, but more importantly it ended Tarkington’s only attempt to create an urban hero. The roof falling in on Jim Sheridan symbolized the fragility of the value structure which he represented. Urban culture could not support a near-hero, much less someone who would use Jim’s ability and society’s power for the common good. And, of course, this sense that urban-industrial culture’s self-directed and private drives could not produce a hero was a major cause of the turmoil affecting the characters in the novel.³⁷

Tarkington’s inability to concoct an urban hero was typical of native middle-class fiction outside of the detective genre. Only in certain specific and formalized situations were individual heroism and city culture compatible. One such situation was the aftermath of a disaster. Popular fiction abounded with scenes like the bravery and rescue work of Robert Herrick’s characters after the City is decimated in *A Life for a Life*, the reactions of Lemuel Barker to the fire at the St. Albans Hotel in William Dean Howells’ *The Minister’s Charge*, and the courage of Young West after a mine disaster in Solomon Schindler’s *Utopia*. These were the times when heroism reasserted itself in the city. But as a general rule, individualism became divorced from moral responsibility as America urbanized, and heroism became difficult if not impossible in the city. Except when catastrophe distorted or removed the city’s normative structure, selfishness was more typical than heroism.³⁸

iv

In a wide range of popular literature written between the end of Reconstruction and the First World War, popular American novelists portrayed the decline of traditional heroism in an urbanized society. As materialism, industrialism and a visibly stratified urban social structure undermined the rough equality of condition so central to antebellum America, “individualism” changed. As it came increasingly to refer to selfishness, the individualistic hero became, increasingly, an anachronism.

In an urban society, virtue and social responsibility could be ensured only through the institutions characteristic of that society. Individualism did not lead to heroism in the materialistic cities, and so urban novelists relegated the individualistic hero to either the frontier or the junk heap. Some, like the Utopians, replaced him with an institutional structure which fostered self-identification within the community. Others, like Tarkington, searched for social responsibility in personal relationships, or even in a sense of mutual dependence among city-dwellers. But whatever the specific solution, American popular novelists increasingly reflected, through the demise of the hero, the understanding that in the urban age individualism was incompatible with public welfare.

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footnotes

1. The starting place for studying heroism in American culture is Marshall Fishwick, *A Bibliography of the American Hero* (Charlottesville: Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1950). The following general treatments have been helpful: Kenneth S. Davis, *The Hero: Charles A. Lindbergh and the American Dream* (Garden City, New York, 1959); Marshall Fishwick, *American Heroes: Myth and Reality* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1954), and *The Hero, American Style* (New York, 1969); Theodore P. Greene, *America's Heroes: Changing Models of Success in American Magazines* (New York, 1970); Theodore L. Gross, *The Heroic Ideal in American Literature* (New York, 1971); Leo Gurko, *Heroes, High-brows, and the Popular Mind* (Freeport, New York, 1971, c. 1953); Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History* (New York, 1943); Orrin Edgar Klapp, *Heroes, Villains, and Fools: The Changing American Character* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962); Dorothy Norman, *The Hero: Myth, Image and Symbol* (New York, 1969); Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America* (Ann Arbor, 1963). An interesting comparative perspective is provided by Mario Praz, *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian England* (London, 1956).

2. Jehudi Arieli's *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1964), is a difficult but important treatment of individualism's place in American culture. The destruction of the culture of the small community, which supported nineteenth century American individualism, is an important theme in Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order* (New York, 1965) and in Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955). The rise of the city, the triumph of selfish materialism, and the demise of virtue were continually associated in fiction such as Robert Herrick's *A Life for a Life* (New York, 1910) and Reverend E. P. Roe's immensely popular *Barriers Burned Away* (New York, 1872). Roe's novel, which sold over 375,000 copies in the 1870's and was reprinted in 1886 and 1900, was only one of several best-sellers he turned out which featured similar themes.

3. *Statistical History of the United States, from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, 1965), 14.

4. Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier* (Chicago, 1964), throughout; George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution* (New York, 1951), 388-92, 75-80, 43-45.

5. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York, 1964), throughout; Daniel Aaron, *Men of Good Hope* (New York, 1951), 1-7; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1950), esp. 1-35.

6. Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *The Private City* (Philadelphia, 1968); Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *The Urban Wilderness* (New York, 1972); Neil Harris, "Four Stages of Cultural Growth: The American City," in Indiana State Historical Society, *Lectures, 1971-1972: History and the Role of the City in American Life* (Indianapolis, 1972), 24-49; Roger Lane, *Policing the City* (New York, 1971); Robert Bremner, *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in America* (New York, 1956); Nathan Huggins, *Protestants Against Poverty* (Westport, Connecticut, 1971); Marvin Lazerson, *The Origins of the Urban School* (Cambridge, 1971).

7. Brian Berry, *The Human Consequences of Urbanisation* (New York: St. Martin's, 1973), 1-26; Wiebe, *The Search for Order*; for an excellent sampling of late nineteenth century popular culture materials see Neil Harris, *Land of Contrasts* (New York: Braziller, 1970).

8. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York, 1973), esp. 1-54; Merrill Peterson, *Jeffersonian Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1962), 67-111; Smith, *Virgin Land*, 16-19.

9. Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual vs. the City* (Cambridge, 1962), throughout; Charles N. Glaab and Theodore Brown, *A History of Urban America* (New York, 1967), 53-82.

10. Greene, *America's Heroes*, 35-58.
11. *Ibid.*, 14; Marshall Fishwick, *Hero American Style*, 240-260; John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago, 1965), ix-x.
12. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York, 1945), II, 132; 112.
13. *Ibid.*, 129; 134-135; Greene, *America's Heroes*, 110; Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, 101-24, 167-200.
14. Greene, *America's Heroes*, 110-165; Marshall Fishwick, *The Hero American Style*, 84-104.
15. John Hart, *The Popular Book* (New York, 1950).
16. On Utopian fiction see Aaron, *Men of Good Hope*, 55-173; A. Boggs, "Looking Backward and the Utopian Novel," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, LXIV, 1960; Vernon L. Parrington, Jr., *American Dreams* (Providence, Rhode Island, 1947). There were anywhere from 46 to 65 Utopian novels published in the aftermath of *Looking Backward*, depending upon the definition of the genre. Daniel Aaron discusses the Nationalist movement, a quasi-political surge in response to Bellamy's Utopian vision which was very popular among literate Americans.
17. Western tales were consistent best-sellers after Owen Wister's success with *The Virginian* (New York, 1902). Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes* (New York, 1947), 312-315; A. P. Hackett, *70 Years of Best Sellers: 1895-1965* (New York, 1967), places westerns in the "top ten" novels for the years 1902, 1903, 1906, 1908, 1911-13, 1915, etc. On the perceptions of men like Wister and Roosevelt of the west and of the wilderness' importance, see White, E. G., *Eastern Establishment and the Frontier Experience* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1968). The notion of the wilderness was tamed for middle class consumption by conservationists, suburban developers, and Boy Scouts, as recounted in Peter Schmitt, *Back to Nature* (New York, 1969).
18. Kenneth Lynn, *Dream of Success* (Boston, 1955); Cawelti, and Van R. Halsey, "Fiction and the Businessman: Society through all its Literature," *American Quarterly* XI: 3 (Fall, 1959), 391-402 are useful both for the business romance and for discussions of literature as a source for social analysis. Also see John Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago, 1976), which appeared after completion of this essay.
19. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, x.
20. Russel B. Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America* (New York, 1970), 4. The controversy over whether "popular" or "elite" culture affords a clearer insight into a culture is involved and inconclusive. A recent salvo is Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture* (New York, 1974).
21. Donnelly's own public role with the People's Party acted out the cultural trauma of urbanization. See Martin Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly* (Chicago, 1962).
22. John McNie, [Ismar Thiussen] *The Diothas, or a Far Look Ahead* (New York, 1883); Chauncy Thomas, *The Crystal Button* (Boston, 1891); William Dean Howells, *A Traveler From Altruria* (New York, 1894), in which Mr. Homos is as tentative and unheroic as the genteel country hotel society in which he is placed. Donnelly, in *Caesar's Column*, pits the heroic "Brotherhood" against Cabano, but there is no evidence of heroism continuing into the Utopian era.
23. Bradford Peck, *The World a Department Store* (Boston, 1900) is typical of Utopian thinking in choosing the department store as a central image. Bellamy's Julian West had set the tone in marvelling at Utopia's distribution system and its effective shipping methods; Peck takes this to its logical conclusion, fashioning his new world on the gaudy retail houses coming into vogue in the late nineteenth century.
24. Peck, *The World a Department Store*, 56; *Ibid.*, 56; *Ibid.*, 104.
25. The criticism is general. Its implications are discussed by Erich Fromm in his introduction to the New American Library paperback edition of *Looking Backward* (New York, 1960), pp. XVI-XVIII. As Fromm points out, twentieth century totalitarianism has given potentially authoritarian schemes a bad odor, even if they are "Utopian." Cf. Aaron, *Men of Good Hope*, 921-32. Bellamy actually calls his Utopian labor force the "industrial army," *Looking Backward*, 57.
26. Harold Bell Wright, *The Winning of Barbara Worth* (Chicago, 1911), 12; 13; 12. Mott, *Golden Multitudes*, 225-32 detail Wright's life career.
27. Harold Bell Wright, *Barbara Worth*, pp. 81; 98.
28. *Ibid.*, 101; 136; 136; 136.
29. *Ibid.*, 476.
30. *Ibid.*, 510-11; 511.
31. Scene, form and the hero in the western genre are discussed in John G. Cawelti, *The Six-gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1971). Some treatments of the specifically western hero include: David Brion Davis, "The Ten-gallon Hero," in Henning Cohen, ed., *The American Experience* (Boston, 1968); Joe B. Frantz, *The American Cowboy: The Myth and the Reality* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1955); Julie Todey McCann, "The Theme of the Frontier in Children's Literature," (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1971); J. P. Sisk, "The Western Hero," *Commonwealth* LXVI (July 12, 1957), 367-9; Kent L. Steckmesser, *The Hero of the American West in History and Legend* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1965); Jules Zanger,

"The Frontiersman in Popular Fiction," in S. F. McDermott, ed., *The Frontier Re-examined* (Urbana, Illinois, 1968). The imagery of the west is the subject of Edwin S. Fusell, *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1965), while Smith, *Virgin Land*, relates to the western idea to a wide range of literature and literary types.

32. Owen Wister's *The Virginian* took the reading public by storm. It was the best-selling novel of 1902, and placed fifth on the following year's list. Wister's romanticized cowboys, his scenario for taming the west, and his symbolic mating of the cowboy with a Vermont-bred schoolmistress all echoed throughout western fiction. His heroes, however, were western men, fighting evil with their guns. When trouble came, it was in the form of an outlaw rather than a raging river; the hero gained his education in the west, rather than bringing it with him.

33. The Virginian courts Molly by reading Shakespeare and becomes a power in the Wyoming territory; Harold Bell Wright's own Grant Matthews, in *The Shepherd of the Hills* (New York, 1907), follows a similar course.

34. Booth Tarkington, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (New York, 1918); Booth Tarkington, *The Turmoil* (New York, 1915).

35. This character-type reappears throughout turn-of-the-century fiction. Greenfield in *The Winning of Barbara Worth* is a classic example, as in Alexander Arnold, the grasping capitalist who symbolized urban business culture in Robert Herrick's *A Life for a Life*.

36. Tarkington, *The Turmoil*, 48.

37. *Ibid.*, 116.

38. Herrick, *A Life for a Life*; William Dean Howells, *The Minister's Charge* (Boston, 1887); Solomon Schindler, *Young West* (Boston, 1894), a sequel to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* in which Julian West's son rises through the Utopian ranks to the presidency. Although completely socialized by Utopian education and institutions, Young West retains the ability to react to emergencies.