

“Where are the ladies?” Wharton, Glasgow, and American Women Naturalists

Donna Campbell, *Washington State University*

Twenty-one years ago, in an essay called “Women Writers and Literary Naturalism: The Case for Ellen Glasgow,” Nancy Walker listed the usual “roster of writers commonly associated with naturalism in American fiction”—Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser—before posing her principal question: “But where are the ladies? . . . Are there no female counterparts to Stephen Crane or Frank Norris?” (133). In the years since Walker’s essay, some fiction by women writers has been designated as naturalistic, most commonly Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Ellen Glasgow’s *The Descendant*, and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*. But Wharton, Chopin, and Glasgow have often been relegated to the “and also” category of naturalistic authors—those who “also” wrote a naturalistic work or two, and, like difficult-to-place writers like Harold Frederic and Hamlin Garland, occupied some nebulous middle ground between realism, regionalism, and naturalism before moving on to historical romances or novels of manners. No American woman writer is as thoroughly identified with the naturalist movement as is, for example, the Spanish novelist Emilia Pardo Bazán, whose controversial manifesto *La Cuestión Palpitante* (1883) defended Zola’s naturalism and was, according to W. D. Howells, “one of the best and strongest books on the subject” (Howells, *Selected Literary Criticism* 270). Moreover, no American woman author of naturalistic works wrote theoretical justifications of the genre that became as widely known as Frank Norris’s weekly letters for the *Chicago American* and his pieces for the *Boston Evening Transcript*. To find “the ladies,” as Walker calls them, thus requires more than identifying the elusive figure of a female Norris or an American Pardo Bazan. Instead of reassessing those works by Wharton, Glasgow, and

Chopin typically classed as naturalistic, then, I want to examine four novels in light of recent trends in criticism on naturalism: Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's *The Portion of Labor* (1901), Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1925), Edith Summers Kelley's *Weeds* (1923), and Edith Wharton's *Summer* (1917). In addition to their use of characteristics broadly identified as naturalistic, all four writers challenge the connections between maternity and women's work by presenting a naturalistic perspective on women's bodies *at* labor and *in* labor, emphasizing the connections between laboring bodies and reproduction both mechanical and human. Both kinds of labor and reproduction are represented through a naturalistic lens in which the creation of life is as futile and dehumanizing as is factory or farm work.

Recent criticism has extended the boundaries of naturalism in ways that facilitate a rereading of these works as naturalist texts. The first of these trends is an emphasis on naturalism's relationship to sentimentalism, one that challenges the traditional split between the masculine world of naturalist fiction and the feminine world of domestic and sentimental fiction. For example, in disputing the Zolaesque objectivity long considered a hallmark of naturalism, Francesca Sawaya argues that novels such as Frank Norris's *The Octopus* operate under the narrative logic of "naturalist sentimentalism" (58). In naturalist sentimentalism, naturalism feminizes itself by taking the part of the vulnerable professional artist at the mercy of a female consumer representing market forces to make male professionals, not women, figures of sympathy. Jennifer Fleissner likewise posits a sentimental basis for naturalist narratives by demonstrating the ways in which Dreiser reverses the terms of the typical gender relations between seducer and seduced in *Sister Carrie*. According to Fleissner, the logic of sentimental narratives requires that women beg for money and for love, but the professional New Women Trina McTeague and Carrie Meeber transform McTeague and Hurstwood into the pathetic figures of the "begging old man" that Fleissner sees as recurrent in naturalist texts. In addition, unlike realism with its investment in ethical choice and second chances, sentimental fiction, as Hildegard Hoeller points out, "is not interested in second chances, new beginnings; it is contained, overdetermined, relentlessly logical in its narrative and emotional necessities" (29), a statement of inexorable consequences that applies equally to naturalism.

A second thread extends the traditional naturalist preoccupation with objects, commodities, and the marketplace to naturalism's representation of repetitive action and habit. Bill Brown, in *A Sense of Things*, proposes

that characters' obsession with repetitive gestures in relation to objects, a pattern first examined by Barbara Hochman in *The Art of Frank Norris, Storyteller*, becomes a central premise of naturalist texts like *McTeague*. Like Hochman, Brown contends that habit, rendered in *McTeague* as compulsion or pathological repetition, becomes "a symptomatic effort to stabilize and possess the physical world . . . to achieve stability or stasis" (67). This engagement with the world of things, or "quotidian animism" (64), at its worst represents "the human thingified as a result of habit" (63). Fleissner, too, finds repetition fundamental to naturalism, seeing the characteristic movement of naturalism to be not the classic plot of a man's decline but a proliferation of details and gestures that constitute the modern woman's "stuckness in place" (11). Monika Elbert locates a similar dynamic in the short fiction of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, whose heroines' incessant shopping and cleaning, and with those activities the fetishizing of objects, place her in the ranks of naturalist writers since the fetish is "the overriding symbol of the Naturalist text" (198). Cleanliness in Freeman's fiction is not next to godliness but to an unhealthy obsession born of the frustrated desire and insatiable consumption fed by mercantile capitalism. If fetishism and the "sexual impulses" (199) that drive its expression are the province of women as well as men, according to Elbert, "[i]t is time that Freeman be seen as a sexual writer, as sexual and sexy as any Naturalist writer of her age" (198). Such a categorization also releases characters from the stereotypical sisterhood of cooperative local color spinsters and allows their more Darwinian traits to emerge.

Related to the idea of repetitive action and an obsession with objects is a third theme: representing the body at work in ways that transform naturalism's traditional preoccupation with the physical facts of existence into an interest in issues of social justice and the subject matter of benevolence literature. In *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism*, Sharon Harris identifies Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" as "one of the earliest renderings of naturalism in American literature" (29), noting that it uses naturalistic tropes such as the caged bird, the drifting lives of characters, the indifference of nature to human troubles, the plot of decline, and the capitalists' control of workers' voices. Undeterred by the story's religious conclusion, Harris places it at the heart of a reconfiguration of realism and naturalism, a strategy that enlarges the range of the personal and political permitted in a naturalist text.¹ Arguing that the traditional naturalistic ideal of authorial objectivity has been overemphasized, Katherine Joslin contends that Zola's concept of the "experimental mor-

alist” has been neglected, for “[t]he moral task of the writer, in Zola’s paradigm, is to expose the conditions that cause human misery” (278). Joslin argues that Jane Addams’s writing, a type of naturalism, “turns Émile Zola’s theory inside out”; instead of investing fiction with clinical objectivity, as Zola does, Addams uses the techniques of fiction to dramatize the clinical facts of documentary evidence. Most pertinent to this issue of reclaiming the social and ethical dimensions of naturalism is Donald Pizer’s call for a renewed recognition of “the powerful radical center of naturalistic expression” (“Late Nineteenth-Century American Literary Naturalism” 191). Discussing Crane’s and Garland’s “investigative journalism” for *McClure’s* in 1893–94 and Hurstwood’s rejection of class solidarity during the strike in *Sister Carrie*, Pizer emphasizes “the deep roots of late nineteenth-century American naturalistic writing in the failings of the nation’s industrial system” and reminds readers that naturalism was a “threat to the established order because it boldly and vividly depicted the inadequacies of the industrial system which was the foundation of that order” (201). Pizer’s approach also reanimates the longstanding connections between journalistic and naturalistic practices, both in technique and subject matter. Like Joslin’s exploration of Addams’s insistence on the affective and emotional as well as the clinical dimension of writing about urban life, Pizer’s reinstatement of naturalism’s radical past opens the door to a broader consideration of writers who treat urban and industrial conditions, even if, as in the case of Davis, the objectivity of authorial presentation is compromised by sentiment.

A fourth approach builds on the long-standing naturalist practice of setting the action amid rural and western landscapes. Naturalist writers have always made good use of the West’s inhospitable landscapes, as in the spectacle of McTeague urged on by his instincts in Death Valley or London’s Malemute Kid trekking through the white silence of the frozen landscape, both scenes epitomizing the conflict between man and an indifferent universe. More recently, critics have asserted that naturalism in western settings also has gender implications: for example, Amy Kaplan has linked the 1890s masculinity crisis, which pervades naturalist texts such as Jack London’s *The Sea-Wolf* and Norris’s *Moran of the “Lady Letty,”* to anxieties over empire and the closing of the frontier. Unlike Kaplan, Mary Lawlor identifies naturalism as a counterweight to what she terms “romantic westernism”: romantic visions of the West might promise a limitless frontier, but “in the naturalist mode the West was pictured as a limited and often limiting geographical space that lacked

the psychological and geographical colorings of a truly open frontier" (2). The effects of these limiting naturalistic spaces are not confined to men. Mary Hallock Foote's "The Maverick" and "The Fate of a Voice" depict women as doubly restricted, trapped both by gender and by the "landscapes of isolation" that reinforce their powerlessness (Gruber 354). And as Ann Raine points out, the "naturalist landscape of mysterious forces" contributes to the "melodrama of uncertain agency" in Mary Austin's *The Ford* (256). Moreover, linking naturalism to spaces outside the urban jungles with which it is so strongly associated radically alters the dynamic between woman and landscape beyond the model available in regional fiction. Freeman's *The Portion of Labor*, Kelley's *Weeds*, Wharton's *Summer*, and Glasgow's *Barren Ground* link the physical environment to representations of labor, sexuality, and maternity in ways that make a viable case for women's naturalism.

In *The Portion of Labor*, Freeman approaches the radical expression of naturalism described by Pizer. Unlike *Jane Field*, *Pembroke*, and *Jerome, a Poor Man*, however, *The Portion of Labor* is not an extended local color story but a regional novel set in a mill town. Although W. D. Howells defended Freeman's portrayal of the laboring poor,² later critics took issue with her treatment of the subject, which was, according to Granville Hicks, a "strange mixture of insight into New England character and childish ignorance of industrial conditions" (65). Freeman's novel tells the story of Ellen Brewster, a working-class child whose beauty leads Cynthia Lennox, an upper-class, childless woman, to kidnap her for a few days before Ellen is able to escape. As Ellen grows into a young woman, she is torn between accepting the education at Vassar that Cynthia Lennox offers and working in the shoe factory that provides occupation for everyone in the town. Increasingly radical in her sentiments, Ellen first incites the factory workers to strike but later, in the novel's climactic moment, convinces them to back down. Despite Ellen's capitulation, in creating a heroine who agitates for the workers' autonomy and leads a strike, Freeman foregrounds class antagonism, poverty, and violence in a manner different from that of her earlier work and in keeping with Pizer's assessment of naturalism's radical roots. Like the near-naturalistic "grim realism" of *Pembroke* and *Jerome*, *The Portion of Labor* also exhibits another feature of second-generation naturalism: the self-awareness of the main character, sometimes expressed as an ironic consciousness at odds with the traditional view of naturalistic characters as little more than Zola's "human beasts." As Pizer points out in "American Naturalism in Its Perfected State: *The Age of Innocence* and *An American*

Tragedy,” the mature phase of American naturalism in these 1920s novels allows for a “tragic irony inherent in the conflict between a character’s felt belief in his autonomy and a social contingency that does indeed shape his destiny” (165). *The Portion of Labor* is structured around three major episodes in which the heroine, Ellen Brewster, tries to maintain a sense of autonomy despite being the center of controversy and class conflict. Each episode culminates in a decisive moment during which Ellen must choose between the town’s aristocracy, the class to which she rightly belongs, and its laboring classes, the class into which she is born.

The first episode, Ellen’s abduction, employs that most common trope of desire in naturalism, the plate-glass window of a store that separates a character from the goods that entice her. Like Carrie Meeber, Ellen escapes from her drab surroundings into the color and light of the downtown streets where she stands bewitched in front of the “great expanse of plate-glass” that frames a market’s tableau of meats and vegetables. Although Leah Blatt Glasser traces Ellen’s social consciousness and political activism to the “maternal thinking” she learns through repeated loving relationships with women (185), the true birth of Ellen’s empathic social conscience occurs in this moment of desire. The hypnotic effect of the “dazzling mosaic” recedes as Ellen, noticing the hanging bodies of dead rabbits and partridges, learns “the hard actualities of things,” her heart swelling “to the size of a woman’s . . . with the sight of helpless injury and death” (19). It is as striking a moment as Frank Cowerwood’s recognition that “things lived on each other” (5) after watching the lobster kill the squid in Dreiser’s *The Financier*, but Ellen, unlike Frank, pities the helpless rather than admiring the strong. As if to complete this lesson, she is then literally carried away by the wealthy Cynthia Lennox, whose “unassuaged longing” (23) for a child causes her to hide Ellen in her house for two days despite the town’s frantic search for her. The theft of Ellen by the grey-haired yet oddly youthful Cynthia illustrates the novel’s theme of perverse maternity. There are no entirely fit mothers here: Ellen’s grandmother, Andrew’s harshly critical mother Mrs. Zelotes, is indeed a zealot, one of Freeman’s old-family New Englanders who withholds affection and money unless her wishes are obeyed; Ellen’s mother, the aptly named and highly emotional Fanny Loud, understands only a portion of the person her daughter is capable of becoming; Ellen’s false mother Cynthia burdens Ellen with the expectation that she will not be revealed as the kidnapper; and Fanny’s sister Eva first protests being a mother at all, since children drag working families into poverty, and then tries to cut her daughter Amabel’s throat with

a carving knife.

Even more salient is the economic parable underlying the episode: a child representing the strength, future, and capital of the working class is stolen to satisfy the needs, in this case the perverse maternal instincts, of a preternaturally youthful upper class whose vitality is sustained by the bodies and labor of others. Trapped in Cynthia's house against her will, Ellen is transformed into an object, indeed a physical fetish, in an experience that simultaneously evokes a Cinderella-like transformation into a realm of wealth and the unspeakable act of child imprisonment and seduction. Never letting Ellen act for herself, Cynthia "washed her and dressed her, and curled her hair" (43) before subjecting her to the "tenderest violence"; her presence a "soft smother of violets," she presses Ellen "against the soft red silk over her bosom, and kiss[es] her little, blushing cheeks with the lightest and carefulest kisses" (42). In the eroticized language of possession that describes the encounter, Cynthia becomes an emotional seducer in the best sentimental tradition, a Lovelace in grey hair ignoring Ellen's cries of "I want my mother" as she manipulates Ellen into self-betrayal by promising "treasures and pleasures which made her [Ellen's] mouth twitch into smiles in spite of herself" (44). Throughout this episode, Freeman makes it clear that Cynthia knows she is committing a crime, but like any naturalistic character, she is driven by physical and emotional impulses beyond her control. Significantly, she gives Ellen a doll that through "the sentiment of emulative motherhood in her childish breast console[s] her for the loss of her mother" (45), thus replacing a natural relation with an artificial one. When Ellen escapes and is taken home, the doll serves as the token of her silence about the abduction, the artifact of the moneyed class's attempt to purchase the future and subvert the natural relationship between parent and child.

Cynthia enters Ellen's life once again at Ellen's graduation from high school, and once again Ellen must choose between class solidarity and upward mobility. Her valedictory address, delivered in front of stiffly disapproving mill owners and enthusiastic mill workers, calls for "the laborer, and the laborer only, [to receive] the reward of labor" (192), a sentiment that seems "almost anarchistic" (193); as Cynthia's friend and later husband Lyman Risley jokes: "She may have a bomb somewhere concealed among those ribbons and frills" (194). Although Cynthia has lost interest in Ellen, since she is no longer a child to be cuddled and kissed, she offers to send Ellen to Vassar as atonement for her actions. Ellen rightly sees this as a threat as well as an opportunity, and as she

looks at the doll Cynthia had given her, she feels a “vague sense of injury . . . as if in some way she were being robbed instead of being made the object of benefit” (244). At some level Ellen understands that her commitment to her class is being undermined. The narrative confirms this when, after accepting the offer, in a classic expression of transferring her allegiance from the true mother to the false one, from the class that nourishes her to the one that exploits her, she realizes that she loves Cynthia “with a fervor which was strange to her” (252). After her aunt Eva tries to kill her daughter, however, Ellen decides against Vassar, choosing instead to work at Lloyd’s, the shoe factory, to pay for Eva’s treatment in an asylum. Like Dreiser, in whose world “determinism rules . . . and there are no chance events” (Lehan 138). Freeman emphasizes a causal chain that governs her characters’ fates, and in a mill town, all actions spring from management’s treatment of the workers. Thus Ellen’s chance at an education is ruined because Eva’s husband Jim, moved by management from job to job “as if he was a piece on a checkerboard,” starts “to act as if he wasn’t a man” (285). He later asserts his masculinity by turning to drink and leaving Eva; this, in turn, causes her to go mad and try to kill Amabel, a name ironically suggesting the “good love” that the system has destroyed. In another blow to her aspirations, Ellen, like Carrie Meeber, experiences the aching muscles and emotional fatigue that accompany repetitive, boring physical work, and she also learns that the novel she attempts to write is “trash” because it fails to “see things and people the way they really” are (368).

The very idealism that causes her novel to fail makes Ellen the perfect leader for the third confrontation, the workers’ strike against the Lloyd factory that pits her against Robert Lloyd, Cynthia’s nephew, who is in love with her. Early in the novel, the fight between capital and labor for Ellen’s soul had been cast as a struggle between Cynthia and Fanny, her false and true mothers; now she is torn between Robert Lloyd, the factory owner, and Granville Joy, a working-class man who has loved her since childhood. By rights Granville should be the romantic hero of the story: he is intelligent, he brings Ellen small tokens of his affection and defends her against harm, and he gives her her first kiss; moreover, he is the boy whom an old folk charm predicts that Ellen will marry (163). But Ellen loves Robert, in part because he alone has guessed the secret behind her possession of the doll since it was his doll when he lived at Cynthia’s house. As it does in Freeman’s “The Reign of the Doll,” the doll here serves as a complex symbol. It stands in for the many faulty mother-child relationships in the story, and Ellen both mothers it and

identifies with it, dressing it in poor clothing like her own. It also signifies Ellen's treatment at Cynthia's hands and allows Robert to equate Ellen with Cynthia, for when he recognizes the doll, he asks jokingly, "Are you a child kidnapper?" (216). Its muteness echoes Ellen's silence on her abduction, its never-explained presence in the Brewster home is a continual reminder of the power that Cynthia wields, and its existence brings Robert and Ellen together as fellow recipients of Cynthia's obsessive mothering. In addition, its treatment shows the difference between Robert and Ellen, and thus between the two classes, for when he owned the doll Robert had "burned her head with the red-hot end of a poker to see if she would wake up" (216), leaving a scar that Ellen had often kissed. Another sign of Robert's insensitivity is that he, like Cynthia, wears a sable coat. Freeman links the wearing of fur, already a symbol of capitalist power and luxury, to the helpless dead animals Ellen sees in the first few chapters by having Amabel ask Robert how the animal keeps warm if Robert has its fur. Robert explains that the animal was "shot for his fur," and Amabel asks, "To make you a coat?" (380). Her distress at the injustice of stealing from the weak to cover the strong, a situation analogous to that of the factory hands, is mitigated when Robert wraps her in the coat, much as Ellen, who has been acting as a surrogate mother to Amabel, softens at the idea of the power and protection that Robert can provide. Yet when Robert cuts wages because of an economic slump, declining to explain his reasons to the workers, Ellen rouses them to action by telling them that the "great capitalists" have made the workers' hard times "by shifting the wealth too much to one side." After calling the workers to unite so that none must suffer, she concludes, "If I were a man . . . I would beg, I would steal—before I would yield—I, a free man in a free country—to tyranny like this!" (478). The workers strike, and in retaliation Robert closes the factory.

As in *Sister Carrie* the inspiring principle of solidarity in the cause of better wages crumbles before the realities—of starving strikebreakers like Hurstwood in Dreiser's novel, and of girls driven to prostitution and suicide like Ellen's workmates Mamie Bemis and Mamie Brady in *The Portion of Labor*. Sympathy for the weak and appreciation for the reality of suffering had earlier intruded on Ellen's aesthetic appreciation of the shop window in which dead animals were hanging, and a similar recognition now pierces her idealistic stance. "I did not count the cost," she admits to a group of strikers. "[T]he cost is a part of principle in this world" (516). She leads a parade of workers back toward the factory through a crowd shouting "scabs!" and throwing stones becoming a

heroine whose finest action, despite the book's foreshadowing, lies in capitulation. Freeman wraps up every plot line in a happy ending: Eva is cured and comes home; Andrew's worthless mining stock is revealed to be worth a fortune; Cynthia Lennox marries her longtime suitor, Lyman Risley, after he is shot and blinded by a striker; and Robert, showing his compassion by meeting the workers halfway on the wage issue, becomes engaged to Ellen. The seemingly contrived concluding chapters defy the logic of what has gone before: after the strong foreshadowing of Ellen's interest in Granville Joy, he is rejected at the end of the book, and Ellen's fiery denunciations of capitalism and the factory owners disappear as she joins their ranks through marriage, a conventional ending for domestic fiction (see Berkson). Given the last word, Ellen's father, Andrew, reflects that "the portion of labor" is the "growth in character of the laborer," an oddly philosophical view for one whom the system threw out to starve. Ellen's conciliatory gestures and charismatic ways render her as a sort of Christ figure, and *The Portion of Labor* mutes its radical message through the Christian consolation that constitutes its ending, a false note that calls attention to its own artifice. Yet the ending fails to negate its naturalistic content, much as the Quaker ending of "Life in the Iron Mills" cannot erase the searing descriptions that have gone before. Freeman's use of such devices as the fetish, the desiring subject in consumer culture, the language of determinism, scenes of poverty and implicit pleas for social justice, and above all the complicated, class-inflected relationship between women's bodies that labor and those that nurture—all position *The Portion of Labor* as a contender for the naturalist canon.

A later generation of rural and regional novels, such as Kelley's *Weeds*, Glasgow's *Barren Ground*, and Wharton's *Summer*, further extends the range of women's naturalistic fiction. Although they represent life on the farm and in small villages as stultifying, even dangerous, for those with no means to get away, the principal issue in each is not what Carl Van Doren called the "revolt from the village" of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett*, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*. Rather, *Weeds* and *Barren Ground* seem more closely allied with the sweat-and-toil prairie realism of Hamlin Garland in picturing the brutal effects on farm women of unceasing work, bad weather, failed crops, endless debt, and incessant childbearing. Kelley's and Glasgow's novels also share an unexpected concern of popular novels like Edna Ferber's *So Big* and Jack London's *Valley of the Moon* and *The Little Lady of the Big House*: the restoration of exhausted cropland through modern methods of farming, including the

transfer of labor from human and animal bodies to machines. In London's novels, the worn-out cropland is the fault of New Englanders transplanted to California, who "work out" farms and strip the land of nourishment, unlike the Chinese and Japanese farmers, who have the "savvy" to grow "two crops at one time on the same soil" and to market crops efficiently (London 340). For writers like Glasgow and Ferber, it is men's shortsighted and linear thinking that has led to the land's demise, and their novels suggest that a woman's longer and more cyclical view can restore the land to its true fertility. This is not simply the result of some mystical, romantic connection between women and the land because of woman's place in nature; rather, Glasgow's Dorinda Oakley, like Ferber's Selina Peake DeJong, reclaims the land through a combination of drive, intelligence, and self-education in the latest farming methods. Both *Barren Ground* and *Weeds* contain earnest digressions about the deleterious effects of tobacco on soil, the positive effects of plowing under nitrogen-fixing crops to replenish the land, and the stubbornness of poor white farmers who fail to grasp this connection. Though not as striking as representing the lives of the urban poor, this quasi-didactic impulse suggests one way in which such naturalistic representations of farm methods nudged closer to radical expression.

Weeds is the story of Judith Pippinger Blackford, a Kentucky girl with a talent for drawing whose poverty and narrowly circumscribed life on a tobacco farm leave her little time to appreciate beauty, much less capture it through her art. A neglected classic, "*Weeds* is a quintessential example of female literary naturalism," according to Charlotte Margolis Goodman (365), and the book's themes and events bear out her assessment. For example, like Ellen Brewster and later Frank Cowperwood, Judith experiences the classic naturalistic scene of recognition: an epiphany about the brutal nature of the world. After she rescues a kitten being tortured by some boys, she is horrified a few days later to see the kitten "fish[ing] up a live minnow with its paw and crunch[ing] it mercilessly between its small, strong jaws" (21). Her recognition, like Cowperwood's, is that "the big fishes eat the little ones" and the strong devour the weak, a fit preparation for the cycle of birth and death she experiences on the farm. Like Ellen Glasgow, Kelley presses hard on Darwinian themes: Judith's father, an indifferent farmer, would have made a fine blacksmith if circumstances had been different, and the preacher who speaks at her mother's funeral had "been elbowed into this remote corner by the law of the survival of the fittest" (51). A Darwinian anomaly in her family and community, Judith herself is ill-suited to the life she must

lead, for in addition to having intelligence and imagination, she is a tom-boy who has little use for the domestic arts. Neither a “human beast” nor a character of “mature naturalism” who can view her situation with ironic detachment, Judith yearns after beauty but finds that only old Jabez Moorhouse, another sensitive soul equally trapped in this uncongenial place, can understand her. She finds beauty in nature and in realism, preferring “something that was real, vital and fluid” in the barnyard to the “deadening negation of life” (57) implied by domesticity. But petty domesticity inevitably rules her actions, for each time she acts in accordance with her nature, she is reigned in by domestic and social constraints. For example, although she and Jerry Blackford consummate their relationship before their wedding, she does not immediately get pregnant as the logic of the sentimental or conventional romance would demand; yet when Jerry mistakenly “publish[es] abroad his sexual achievements” (184), she is ashamed before his friends.

Weeds is also naturalistic in its emphasis on the boredom, poverty, hard work, and filth of country life. Like Hamlin Garland, Kelley acknowledges the beauty of nature on a farm but debunks the romantic view of farm life as it appears in the magazine her friend Hat swears by, *The Farm Wife’s Friend*. As Hat takes her husband’s overalls, “stiffly encrusted with mud and axle grease and many other varieties of filth and soused them up and down in the dirty, stinking, mouse-gray water,” poems about the nobility of washing clothes, like “Be a Beam of Sunshine” and “And the Wind is Right to Dry,” persuade—or delude—her about the worth of this task (132). Also punctured are visions of the honesty of country people, for Hat’s husband steals Jerry’s tobacco plants, and the most admired man in the county, the symbolically-named Uncle Sam, takes great delight in cheating Jerry and others through his horse trading, an action seen as smart rather than larcenous by the farmers. The authorial voice reinforces this disparity between sentimental illusions about and the reality of the rural people described:

There is an idea existing in many minds that country folk are mostly simple, natural and spontaneous, living in the light of day and carrying their hearts on their sleeves. There is no more misleading fallacy. No decadent court riddled with lust of power, greed, vice, and intrigue . . . ever moved under a thicker atmosphere than that which brooded over the little shanty where these four fresh-faced young country people stood stripping tobacco. (152)

The novel is at its least sentimental in treating sexuality and maternity; sexual expression is treated as a natural, animal right that Judith can

enjoy without experiencing Edna Pontellier's crisis of self-knowledge. Late in the book, Judith attends a revival meeting and is drawn to the young preacher, who some nights later comes "up to her where the alfalfa field spilled its subtle fragrance into the warm night air" (272) and kisses her, an embrace that she returns "with an ecstasy transcending anything that she had ever felt in her life" (272). The two meet in various spots in a lushly described, fecund landscape that symbolically reinforces the theme of Judith's awakening of the senses and becoming "intensely conscious of her body" (272). But reality intrudes when an uneasy sense of time passing and a subsequent revulsion toward the preacher begins to "awaken her from her dream" (276). Finding herself pregnant, she tries to self-abort by stabbing herself with a knitting needle, brewing "nasty smelling decoctions" of pennyroyal (286), and riding her mule wildly across the field, finally miscarrying after wading into a pond and accidentally cutting her foot. She, like Edna Pontellier, tries to drown herself, but her instinct for life is strong and manifests itself in her almost-lost ability to swim to shore. Although the community understands what she has done and disapproves of it—Aunt Maggie Slatten, who comes to care for her during her illness, comments that Judith was "kinder lookin' fer it [the miscarriage] right along" (289)—the narrative voice here and elsewhere holds no sentimental brief for children and their place in Judith's life. Indeed, when pregnant with her second child, Judith feels the baby kick and reflects that "she hated them both, the born and the unborn, two greedy vampires working on her incessantly, the one from without, the other from within . . . bent upon drinking her last drop of blood" (208).

The idea of the child as parasite or vampire, and of nature working its will on the woman's body without her consent, is most strikingly portrayed in "Billy's Birth," a chapter deleted before publication. Kelley had intended this graphic description of pain-wracked childbirth to be the twelfth of the novel's twenty-six chapters and thus nearly central to the text, but it was omitted as being "too typical to be of real interest" (Casey 107). As Janet Galligani Casey demonstrates, the chapter disrupts the seemingly simple relation between Judith's rediscovery of her sexuality and her renewed connection to the earth during her affair with the preacher, for it "disallow[s] the potential role of communal earth mother that Judith's closeness to the land might encourage in a more culturally orthodox text" and "suggests that motherhood is but *pure labor*" (108, 109). In fact, the description of Judith during labor strikingly recalls the monstrous and out-of-control Mary Johnson of Crane's *Maggie*: "Her

eyes were closed now, her face a dark purple with dreadfully swollen veins and salient muscles; her body driving, driving, driving with the force and regularity of some great steel and iron monster" (345). *Weeds* suggests that the process renders all mothers as laboring machines, a stripping away of humanity that implicitly marks women with the vestiges of a primal force not entirely covered by the pious fiction of maternal instinct. Despite the sentimental ending of the novel, in which Judith and Jerry are brought together over the sickbed of their daughter after a long estrangement, the novel presents a world of Darwinian profligacy in which reproduction and labor of all sorts yield only more organisms to struggle and die.

As a brief examination shows, Wharton's *Summer* and Glasgow's *Barren Ground* likewise connect labor, sexuality, and maternity. Their plots are parallel: the heroine falls passionately in love with a well-educated but ultimately weak young man of higher status who promises to marry her but deserts her to marry someone of his own social station. Both heroines, too, early understand that they are trapped by circumstances. The first words that Wharton's Charity Royall utters are "How I hate everything!" (159), a statement that responds to her entrapment in the aptly named North Dormer and is occasioned by the contrast between it and a remembered trip to the larger town of Nettleton where, like Ellen Brewster and Carrie Meeber, she had "looked into shops with plate-glass fronts" (160) and awakened to a larger world of consumer goods and desire. Glasgow's Dorinda Oakley similarly recognizes that she is "caught like a mouse in the trap of life. . . . She was held fast by circumstances as by invisible wires of steel" (44). More significantly, like Ellen Brewster both women represent the idea of a class mixing recast as racial interbreeding within the Darwinian framework of the novels. In *Barren Ground* Dorinda is the result of a union in which her mother has high aspirations of becoming a missionary until, jilted by her lover, she marries Josiah Oakley, who has the handsome and seemingly spiritual head of John the Baptist but only a poor white's incapacity for success. By bloodline a member of the degenerate "old stock" of the outlaws on the Mountain, by training a civilized village girl, Charity Royall, according to Jennie Kassanoff, "embodies the conflation of town and Mountain, legal and illegal, daughter and lover—blurrings that curiously serve Wharton's conservative purposes" (134).

The naturalistic theme of antagonistic nature also appears in these novels, particularly when nature, here rendered as sexuality, comes from within as well as from without. Both heroines meet their lovers and con-

duct their affairs within a lushly described summer landscape that represents their sexuality, and, by autumn, each young woman is pregnant. Each, too, experiences a shattering moment in which she recognizes that her lover is lost to her: for Dorinda, it is the sight of Jason Greylock driving Geneva Ellgood back to Five Oaks, the home of his domineering father; and for Charity, it is her friend Ally's acknowledgment that Lucius Harney is engaged to Annabel Balch. The shock is accompanied by an encounter with a naturalistically rendered grotesque body as a counterpoint to the pleasures of the flesh they have previously experienced with their lovers. After a visit to an abortionist, Dr. Merkle, who confirms her pregnancy, Charity heads toward the Mountain and finds that her mother has just died. Wharton depicts this as another scene of the monstrous mother, this time described in naturalistic detail:

A woman lay on it, but she did not look like a dead woman; she seemed to have fallen across her squalid bed in a drunken sleep. . . . One arm was flung above her head, one leg drawn up under a torn skirt that left the other bare to the knee: a swollen glistening leg with a ragged stocking rolled about the ankle. The woman lay on her back, her eyes staring up unblinkingly. . . . [Charity] looked at her mother's face, thin yet swollen, with lips parted in a frozen gasp above the broken teeth. (289–90)

This rendition of the motionless body of a woman, the figure often at the heart of the naturalist text,³ recalls the representation of other grotesque bodies, notably Mary Johnson of Crane's *Maggie*. In *Barren Ground*, the grotesque body is that of Jason's father, Dr. Greylock, whose "bloated paunch, which hung down like a sack of flour" and "fiery little eyes, above inflamed pouches of skin," show both his alcoholism and his malignant nature (117).

Abandoned by their lovers, both women marry men who are no one's idea of a romantic hero, and each solves the troublesome question of her sexuality by denying it. In a quasi-incestuous union, Charity marries her guardian, Lawyer Royall, whose advances had earlier repelled her, although he is gentlemanly enough to sleep in a chair during their first night together. Having miscarried after being struck by a cab, Dorinda works in the city before returning to reclaim the fields of her family's farm. She turns work into her salvation and enters into a sexless marriage of convenience to a local farmer, Nathan Pedlar. Governed by instincts, emotions, and hereditary traits that they view as significant, Charity and Dorinda survive by adapting and working within environments they understand, even when that means embracing the fate they had initially most feared—Charity by marrying Mr. Royall, and Dorinda by caring

for the wreck of a man she had once loved. The endings of both novels are unsettling, echoing the theme of promise missed rather than promise fulfilled, a fitting refutation of the romantic ideal that naturalism was in part formulated to fight.

To find “the ladies” in American literary naturalism, then, requires little redefinition beyond that already current in theories of naturalism. In addition to facilitating readings of Wharton, Glasgow, Cather, and Chopin as naturalists, current naturalist theory encourages a further search for those women naturalists previously overlooked in areas that, strictly construed, would not have been considered part of naturalism. For example, a recent essay by Sarah Britton Goodling, the articles in Jill Bergman and Debra Bernardi’s collection *Our Sisters’ Keepers*, and William M. Morgan’s *Questionable Charity* all explore the connections between realism and women’s benevolence literature, and Jennifer Fleissner has classed as naturalistic even overtly political work by Rachel Grimké and others. More comprehensive still is Elizabeth Ammons’s contention in “Expanding the Canon of American Realism” that realism “means attention to the multiple realities figured in the work of the broadest possible range of authors writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (100). Extended to issues of gender as well as of race, Ammons’s definition of realism serves as a model of what a newly reconfigured naturalism that includes women authors might look like. It is a model that treats the occasional lapse into, or even structural use of, sentimentality as no more a disqualifier for Mary Wilkins Freeman than for Frank Norris; one that would not exclude such bleak and brutal stories as Mary Hallock Foote’s “Maverick” or Elia Peattie’s “After the Storm”; and one that would extend the period of time as well as the range of practitioners to investigate the “grim realism” of some 1880s women writers and women’s regional rural novels of the 1920s as literary naturalism quite as potent as, if less celebrated than, for example, John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy. Such an examination would have the auxiliary benefit of expanding the context in which we read classic naturalists like Norris, Dreiser, Crane, and London, but its primary benefit would be to deepen and broaden the way in which we understand American naturalism itself.

NOTES

1. In a contrasting view, Jean Pfaelzer sees the characters’ understanding of “their natural rights” and the story’s insistence on “a moral referent” at odds with the techniques of naturalism (35).

2. Howells replied to a reader's assertion that Gerhart Hauptmann's industrial play *The Weavers* was superior by noting that "[m]isery for misery, the average mind prefers that which is foreign" (*Criticism and Fiction* 343).
3. For a discussion of this figure, see Campbell 251.

WORKS CITED

- Ammons, Elizabeth. "Expanding the Canon of American Realism." *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: Howells to London*. Ed. Donald Pizer. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. 95–114.
- Bergman, Jill, and Debra Bernardi. *Our Sisters' Keepers: Nineteenth-Century Benevolence Literature by American Women*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2005.
- Berkson, Dorothy. "'A Goddess Behind a Sordid Veil': The Domestic Heroine Meets the Labor Novel in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's *The Portion of Labor*." *Redefining the Political Novel: American Women Writers, 1797–1901*. Ed. Sharon M. Harris. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1995. 149–68.
- Brown, Bill. *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003.
- Campbell, Donna M. "The 'Bitter Taste' of Naturalism: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and David Graham Phillips's *Susan Lenox*." *Twisted from the Ordinary: Essays on American Literary Naturalism*. Ed. Mary E. Papke. Knoxville, TN: U of Tennessee P, 2003. 237–59.
- Casey, Janet Galligani. "Agrarian Landscapes, the Depression, and Women's Progressive Fiction." *The Novel and the American Left: Critical Essays on Depression-Era Fiction*. Ed. Janet Galligani Casey. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2004. 96–117.
- Dreiser, Theodore. *The Financier*. Cleveland: World, 1946.
- Elbert, Monika M. "The Displacement of Desire: Consumerism and Fetishism in Mary Wilkins Freeman's Fiction." *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 19 (2002): 192–215.
- Fleissner, Jennifer L. *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004.
- [Freeman], Mary E. Wilkins. *The Portion of Labor*. New York: Harper, 1901.
- Glasgow, Ellen Anderson Gholson. *Barren Ground*. 1925. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Glasser, Leah Blatt. *In a Closet Hidden: The Life and Work of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1996.
- Goodling, Sara Britton. "The Silent Partnership: Naturalism and Sentimentalism in the Novels of Rebecca Harding Davis and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps." *Twisted from the Ordinary: Essays on American Literary Naturalism*. Ed. Mary E. Papke. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2003. 1–22.
- Goodman, Charlotte Margolis. Afterword. *Weeds*. New York: Feminist, 1996. 353–75.
- Gruber, Laura Katherine. "'The Naturalistic Impulse': Limitations of Gender and Landscape in Mary Hallock Foote's Idaho Stories." *Western American*

- Literature* 38 (2004): 353–73.
- Harris, Sharon M. *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991.
- Hicks, Granville. *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature since the Civil War*. New York: Macmillan, 1933.
- Hoeller, Hildegard. *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2000.
- Howells, W. D. *Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays*. Eds. Clara M. Kirk and Rudolf Kirk. New York: New York UP, 1959.
- . *Selected Literary Criticism: Volume II: 1886–1897*. Eds. Donald Pizer, et al. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993.
- Joslin, Katherine. "Turning Zola inside Out: Jane Addams and Literary Naturalism." *Twisted from the Ordinary: Essays on American Literary Naturalism*. Ed. Mary E. Papke. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2003. 276–88.
- Kaplan, Amy. *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002.
- Kassanoff, Jennie A. *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.
- Kelley, Edith Summers. *Weeds*. New York: Feminist, 1996.
- Lawlor, Mary. *Recalling the Wild: Naturalism and the Closing of the American West*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2000.
- Lehan, Richard Daniel. *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in an Age of Transition*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2005.
- London, Jack. *The Valley of the Moon*. 1913. Berkeley: U of California P, 1998.
- Morgan, William M. *Questionable Charity: Gender, Humanitarianism, and Complicity in U.S. Literary Realism*. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 2004.
- Pfaelzer, Jean. *Parlor Radical: Rebecca Harding Davis and the Origins of American Social Realism*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1996.
- Pizer, Donald. "American Naturalism in Its 'Perfected' State: *The Age of Innocence* and *An American Tragedy*." *The Theory and Practice of American Literary Naturalism: Selected Essays and Reviews*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1993. 153–66.
- . "Late Nineteenth-Century American Literary Naturalism: A Re-Introduction." *American Literary Realism* 38 (2006): 189–202.
- Raine, Anne. "'The Man at the Sources': Gender, Capital, and the Conservationist Landscape in Mary Austin's *The Ford*." *Exploring Lost Borders: Critical Essays on Mary Austin*. Eds. Melody Graulich and Elizabeth Klimasmith. Reno: U of Nevada P, 1999. 243–66.
- Sawaya, Francesca. *Modern Women, Modern Work: Domesticity, Professionalism, and American Writing, 1890–1950*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2003.
- Walker, Nancy. "Women Writers and Literary Naturalism: The Case of Ellen Glasgow." *American Literary Realism* 18 (1985): 133–46.
- Wharton, Edith. *Summer. Novellas and Other Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1990. 157–311.

Copyright of *Studies in American Naturalism* is the property of International Theodore Dreiser Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.