

BACKGROUND BOOKS

SOCIAL MOBILITY IN AMERICA

Unlike many European writers, the American novelist rarely speaks of class. As Lionel Trilling once observed, "the great characters of American fiction, such, say, as Captain Ahab and Natty Bumppo, tend to be mythic . . . and their very freedom from class gives them a large and glowing generality." In the United States, he believed, "the real basis of the [English] novel has never existed—that is, the tension between a middle class and an aristocracy."

American novelists were more interested in the frontier; their protagonists fled from civilization on whaling ships, on the open road—even on river rafts, as in Mark Twain's **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn** (1885). Yet Huck and Jim's escape from St. Petersburg, Missouri, floating down the Mississippi on a raft, and their encounters with "white trash," scoundrels, and local gentry also say a lot, in passing, about class sensibilities and social mobility.

Thus, American novelists, especially between the Civil War and the 1950s, did not *ignore* such matters. Indeed, after the turn of the century, many of them illuminated (variously) American visions of success and failure, tensions between classes, and the continuing drama of individual strivings to move up the socioeconomic ladder.

No writer spread the American gospel of success more widely than Horatio Alger (1832–1899). Beginning with **Ragged Dick** (1867), Alger wrote some 130 novels, which preached that hard work and cheerful perseverance would put "a young gentleman on the way to fame and fortune." His tales influenced several generations of young readers, future achievers, and memoir-writers, from Andrew Carnegie to Malcolm X.

Most serious writers, however, dismissed the Alger stories as fantasy. And William Dean Howells and Theodore

Dreiser, among others, saw a dark side to the American Dream. In **The Rise of Silas Lapham** (1885), Howells tells the story of a Vermont farmer who becomes a wealthy paint manufacturer. Lapham moves his family to Boston, where he builds a mansion and expects to take his rightful place in Boston's high society. But he mismanages his money, and his wife and children fail to impress the Brahmins. Lapham turns down an opportunity to pass on his financial woes to someone else. In the end he returns to Vermont, sadder, poorer, but wiser.

Clyde Griffiths, the amoral protagonist in Theodore Dreiser's long-popular **American Tragedy** (1925), is eager to rise in life—by any means. He is a poor but handsome lad living in upstate New York. Employed in his uncle's collar factory, Clyde enters into a liaison with a working-class girl, Roberta Alden. Shortly thereafter, he starts to court Sondra Finchley, the daughter of a wealthy local notable. Roberta informs Clyde that she is pregnant, and she demands that he provide for her. To free himself for Sondra and his dreams of a brighter future, Clyde plans to kill Roberta; she drowns in an apparent accident, but Clyde is tried for murder and condemned to death.

In their fiction, Dreiser and Howells blamed human failure on personal weaknesses. But other writers, such as socialist Jack London, saw working-class people as victims of society; in London's view, their difficulties stemmed not only from upper-class *hauteur* but also from the capitalist system.

As an oysterman in San Francisco Bay, and as a miner in the Klondike, London came to know the harsh life of the manual laborer. His hero in **Martin Eden** (1909) is a sailor who becomes a writer in order to win the love of Ruth Morse, a well-to-do college graduate.

A BRIEF SAMPLING OF THE RESEARCH

Of the many historical studies of social mobility in the United States, the best is Stephan Thernstrom's **Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970** (Harvard, 1973). Edward Pessen's anthology of scholarly essays, **Three Centuries of Social Mobility in America** (Heath, 1974), is illuminating but marred by some contributors' determination to depict the United States as a land of intractable inequality. Useful as an overview of research is **Social Mobility in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Europe and America in Comparative Perspective** (Berg, 1985), by Hartmut Kaelble.

Thomas Kessner's **Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915** (Oxford, 1977) is among the most vivid chronicles of the immigrant struggle to "make it" in the United States. For a general survey of immigrant group experiences, readers may consult **American Ethnic Groups** (Urban, 1978), edited by Thomas Sowell.

Scholarly interest in mobility blossomed during the 1950s. In **Social Mobility in Industrial Society** (Univ. of Calif., 1959), Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix inaugurated several debates, arguing, for example, that industrialization had equalized opportunities on both sides of the Atlantic.

In recent years, scholars have returned to the subject, producing landmark studies such as **Opportunity and Change** (Academic Press, 1978), by David L. Featherman and Robert M. Hauser. Unfortunately, few laymen will be able to decipher the jargon, regression analyses, and loglinear models now employed in this and other academic studies in this field.

An exception is Greg J. Duncan's **Years of Poverty, Years of Plenty** (Univ. of Mich., 1984). Based on a study of 5,000 families, he concludes that about 25 percent of all Americans slip into poverty at some point in their lives, but seldom for long. Other scholars contend that, for various reasons, a large number of today's poor are unable to progress out of poverty. In his once-controversial **The Unheavenly City** (Little, Brown, 1970), Harvard's Edward Banfield argued that the new urban "lower class" simply lacked key "attitudes, motivations, and habits" of respectable working-class people. In effect, **The Underclass** (Random, 1982), by journalist Ken Auletta popularized Banfield's thesis, while William Julius Wilson and Charles Murray analyzed it in **The Declining Significance of Race** (Univ. of Chicago, 1980) and **Losing Ground** (Basic, 1984), respectively.

The American ideal of upward mobility pervades the discussion of many social issues. In the *Wilson Quarterly*, relevant background books essays include "Money and the Pursuit of Plenty in America" (Autumn 1977), "The Public Schools" (Autumn 1979), "Jobs in America" (Winter 1980), "Immigration" (New Year's 1983), "Teaching in America" (New Year's 1984), "Blacks in America" (Spring 1984), "The War on Poverty: 1965-1980" (Autumn 1984), "The Irish" (Spring 1985), "Miami" (Winter 1985), and "The Struggle for Literacy" (Spring 1986).

But no magazines will agree to buy Martin's writing; at her parent's instigation, Ruth deserts him. The young man eventually writes a book which wins him wealth and fame (of course), and she returns. But his love for her fades when he realizes that she is only "worshipping at the shrine of the established."

Indiana's Booth Tarkington wrote less about Americans who were struggling up the social ladder, than about those who were sliding down it. Tarkington's best-selling **Magnificent Ambersons** (1918) chronicles the gradual decline of a prominent midwestern family. In **Alice Adams** (1921), Tarkington tells the story of a girl who falls in love with the wealthy Arthur Russell. To attract him, she fabricates a web of lies to suggest that her family is well-off too. But Arthur discovers on his own that Alice, her father (who runs a small glue-making factory), and the rest of the Adams clan are faring badly, and he leaves her.

Elsewhere, writers dwelt on other tensions in American life—between Northerners and Southerners, between city folk and country folk, and between the intellectual and the money-minded middle class, what Baltimore columnist H. L. Mencken called the "booboisie."

Sinclair Lewis's **Babbitt** (1922) assailed the small-town, materialistic mentality. Lewis's "extremely married and unromantic" George F. Babbitt was the kind of fellow who worshipped "Modern Appliances" but "disliked his family." And Nathanael West's **Cool Million** (1934) presented "Shagpoke" Whipple, ex-president of the Rat River National Bank. Shagpoke, as another character described him, "ain't no nigger-lover, he don't give a damn for Jewish culture, and he knows the fine Italian hand of the Pope when he sees it."

Several generations of American writers drew portraits of the robber baron, a favorite villain during the country's late

19th-century industrial surge. Dreiser did so in his three-part fictional biography of Frank Cowperwood, **The Financier**, **The Titan**, and **The Stoic** (1912, '14, '47), based on the life of Charles T. Yerkes, the Chicago traction [streetcar] magnate. And F. Scott Fitzgerald described Nick Carraway's fascination with bootlegger Jay Gatsby in **The Great Gatsby** (1925).

Yet Cowperwood and Gatsby, like many businessmen in American fiction, were tragic figures. Gatsby had started life as a poor North Dakota farm boy, and wound up as proprietor of a Long Island estate. He made the mistake of thinking that his (ill-gotten) riches would win him true happiness, in the person of lovely, upper-class Daisy Fay. In pursuing "the green light, the orgiastic future," Gatsby learned, he had "committed himself to the following of a grail."

The Depression years saw the first novels that presented, often in vaguely Marxist colors, distinct classes in American life. In his mammoth, kaleidoscopic **U.S.A.** trilogy (1930-36), which covered the first 30 years of this century, John Dos Passos saw two Americas: one privileged, rich, and corrupt, the other poor and powerless.

A genteel Harvard graduate, Dos Passos sympathized with his more optimistic characters. In **The Big Money**, Charley Anderson returns to New York as a World War I hero. He first plans to organize workers in an airplane factory, but ends up getting corrupted by booze, gambling, women, and shady business deals. More than anything, as Alfred Kazin has written, **U.S.A.** sought to show that "the force of circumstances that is twentieth century life is too strong for the average man."

A number of new writers described the working class from the inside looking out. Some of their novels rank among the better examples of modern American literature. These include Abraham Cahan's **Rise of David Levinsky**

(1917), about the Americanization of a Jew living on the East Side of New York; Henry Roth's **Call It Sleep** (1934), a portrait of Manhattan's slum dwellers; and James T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan trilogy (1932-35), the story of a poor Irish Catholic boy growing up on the South Side of Chicago.

American writers paid some attention to the other side of the tracks too. John Marquand, for example, slyly poked fun at the Anglophile snobism of moneyed Bostonians in **The Late George Apley** (1937). The shrewd efforts of shipping magnate Moses Apley, George's grandfather, have made the family rich—and, rather quickly, “old Boston.”

Inherited wealth eases George's path through life, from Hobson's School on Marlborough Street (where he meets “the scions of his own social class”), to Harvard College and Harvard Law, to the gentle wooded slopes of Pequod Island, Maine. “Nothing is more important than social consideration,” writes George's father to his son, summing up the acquired Apley sensibility.

John O'Hara detailed Americans' social life in a more dramatic vein. A Manhattan newspaperman-turned-novelist from Pottsville, Pennsylvania, O'Hara reported on the manners and morals of lower-, middle-, and upper-class Americans in the Northeast.

In his “Gibbsville” novels, such as **Appointment in Samarra** (1934), **A Rage to Live** (1949), and **Ten North Frederick** (1955), O'Hara's perceptions of small-town life were particularly acute. “The small town, like my invention Gibbsville,” O'Hara observed, “has it all; the entrenched, the strivers, the

climbers, the rebellious . . . they interest me so much, it's hard for me to know when to stop.”

For the most part, however, the post-World War II American novel has said little about upward (or downward) mobility or class friction. One reason may be that the increasing material well-being of middle- and upper-middle class Americans, as Wesleyan's Richard Ohmann said, has led to “a truce in class conflict,” if not an end to Getting Ahead.

Moreover, movies and television have taken over much of the contemporary story-telling function. Significantly, John Sayles, the author of **Union Dues** (1977), and one of the most promising young writers of working-class life, has turned his talents to writing and directing films such as *Matewan* (1987), which chronicles the West Virginia coalmine wars of the 1920s.

Today's serious novels, for the most part, are written by and for college-educated people. And, perhaps reflecting the current *Zeitgeist*, most of the critically acclaimed novels by writers such as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, J. D. Salinger, and John Updike focus not on money, status, work, or ambition, but on the personal problems of educated, often affluent Americans: sex, love, marriage, the meaning of life.

Lionel Trilling, it seems, saw the trend coming nearly four decades ago. “I think it is true to say,” he observed in 1948, “that money and class do not have the same place in our social and mental life that they once had. They have certainly not ceased to exist, but [not] . . . as they did in the nineteenth century, or even in our own youth.”

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Michael Denning, assistant professor of American studies at Yale University, suggested several ideas and book titles for this essay.*