

THE POLITICS OF POVERTY:  
CONSCIENCE AND JUSTICE IN THE  
MODERN NOVEL

Jake Elijah Struebing  
Washington and Lee University

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*For my parents, who instilled in me a passion for justice.*

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# I. THE POLITICS OF POVERTY: AN INTRODUCTION

## A Note on the Politics of Poverty

*Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists, there is no true freedom.*

—Nelson Mandela, “Make Poverty History,” February 3, 2005

As a student of literary theory, I am fascinated by how literature explores and elucidates ideology and its concomitant social and cultural impact in the real world—a sort of meta-ideology. With a background in poverty and human capability studies, I am particularly interested in ideological change that substantiates social justice and rectifies morally arbitrary inequality. The novel itself, of course, cannot directly cause social and cultural change in an absolute sense—clearly, it is not as if you read a novel and the world miraculously changes. At the very least, however, literature can correlate or relate to social change. But, can a novel tangibly inform and empower real-world change? Can literature convey conscience, a feeling of ethical obligation to do justice in the name of equality and liberty? Can this conscience, in turn, actually lead to justice?

I answer these questions in the affirmative and, in doing so, offer a theory that will hopefully fill a void in the way we qualitatively assess the social impact of novels. The theory—what I term the *politics of poverty*—attempts to show how conceptual understandings of conscience in literature lead to real-world manifestations of justice, alleviating hardship and oppression. This thesis examines Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1838) and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) using this theoretical framework. Did Dickens’s narrative convey a conscience that substantiated justice for poor in the workhouses? If so, did this conscience reflect ideological changes that manifested in the reform periods of the 1850s and 1860s? Did Wright’s portrayal of racial oppression and discrimination contain a conscience that revealed the dialectics of American social organization? If so, did this

conscience contribute to the resistance and subsequent liberation of the Civil Rights movement? I address these questions, at length, through a literary and sociopolitical analysis in the ensuing chapters. First, a few definitions and clarifications are in order. What does *politics* mean in the politics of poverty? The conceptual understandings of conscience and justice must be applied in the real-world political realm. Accordingly, the *politics* of poverty concerns the theory and practice of alleviating impoverishment through public discourse, affairs, policies, institutions and transformative movements. This definition is purposely broad, encompassing ample room to effect social change through a number of various methods. Being overtly political in nature, the *politics* of poverty is also partisan, setting social and economic classes in opposition and challenging the moral arbitrariness of certain social arrangements. To unite theory and practice requires an act of justice—an act that establishes the positive liberty of individuals through the enforcement of *both* negative and positive rights.<sup>1</sup>

*Poverty*, on the other hand, is also broadly defined because human hardship transcends simple classification. Poverty entails more than economic deprivation; boosting income over an arbitrary line does not guarantee an end to hardship. Poverty extends to social inequalities, ranging from subjugation, including but not limited to segregation and discrimination, to deficits in social goods such as education and health. Although we should be skeptical of a “culture of poverty,” culture still plays an important role. As we will see in the *Native Son* chapter, an oppressive, even hegemonic culture exacerbates and perpetuates existing hardship. Poverty can even manifest in the form of political repression, including disenfranchisement and the suppression of negative freedoms. This comprehensive, even holistic view recognizes poverty in all its complexity. These derivations of

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<sup>1</sup> Negative rights ensure freedoms that already exist in nature, such as bodily integrity and free speech. Positive rights ensure freedoms that are constructed through human will and consent, such as public education and a minimum wage in many developed countries. Together, both rights contribute to the positive liberty of an individual or, in other words, the ability to live a meaningful life free of hardship and oppression.

poverty are all inextricably linked—complicating causality—but it is the only way to conceive of poverty in its relation to humanity.

In this relationship to humanity, we should universalize our conception of poverty. Suffering and hardship may vary from person to person, society to society, but poverty always implies a violation of positive liberty insofar as it impedes human flourishing and well-being which, in turn, degrades self-worth and dignity in the larger context of a community. Justice, consequently, is of special moral importance because it restores positive liberty—the freedom and agency to live a life of well-being. In fact, justice provides for fair equality of opportunity and a normative range of functioning to alleviate poverty in a meaningful and lasting sense, a holistic escape, in other words, from all the determinants and derivations of poverty.<sup>2</sup> In a democratic society, especially, premised on the liberties of equal citizenship, the fair equality of opportunity and a normative range of functioning allow us to properly function in the social arrangement, participating in the life of the community, meeting reciprocal duties with citizens, and pluralistically engaging in the democratic process for its healthy perpetuation. Oliver, the destitute orphan, in *Oliver Twist* and Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, as we will see, are denied positive liberty by grossly unjust social and cultural forces.<sup>3</sup> These novels, although fictional, shed insights on the realities of these forces that inform the pursuit of justice.

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<sup>2</sup> I purposely borrow the language of John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*, 1971) and Amartya Sen (*Inequality Reexamined*, 1992 and *The Quality of Life*, 1993) because both theories transformed political liberalism and human welfare in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Rawlsian idea of “justice as fairness” espouses the fair equality of opportunity, part of his second principle, which eliminates truly arbitrary inequalities, stemming from social contingencies in liberty, opportunity, income, education, health, etc. in a way that does not equalize social outcomes. Capabilities, on the other hand, are the ability to achieve essential functionings in society like nourishment, health, education, etc. I should, however, note an important distinction. Rawls merely provides the means to achieve positive liberty through a fair process in institutional and distributive justice. He remains neutral on what well-being should look like and he only advises a reasonable “conception of the good.” The capability approach, however, espouses an Aristotelian “conception of the good,” especially in Martha Nussbaum’s elaboration on the theory (*Creating Capabilities*, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, I would be hard pressed to say that Victorian England was a legitimately democratic society. As the nation was modernizing, however, it engaged in a gradual democratization process through the Reform Acts of 1832, 1867, and 1884, which, to varying extents, all extended rights to previously disenfranchised citizens and reapportioned representation in Parliament in fairer ways. Notably, this democratization was spurred on by ideological changes and social agitation, best characterized in the Chartist movement, after the French Revolution.

## The Politics of Poverty in Literary Theory

I want to briefly focus on the relationship between ideology and the politics of poverty, which is a nebulous, but, nonetheless, important one. Ideology is simply a way of looking at the world in which a collective set of ideas, beliefs, and practices have an impact on society and culture. In literary and cultural theory, many theorists of Marxism and New Historicism posit that ideology can be hegemonic, concentrating power in the hands of a few to the point that it becomes oppressive and domineering. The mere expression of this dominant ideology and power, however, exposes flaws which oppositional ideologies can resist and, hopefully, secure justice for the oppressed. In *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Raymond Williams suggests that residual, dominant, and emergent cultural forces leave adequate room for liberation from hegemony: “What has really to be said, as a way of defining important elements of both the residual and the emergent, and as a way of understanding the character of the dominant, is that *no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order...ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention*” (1285, author’s emphasis).

In literature, the politics of poverty seeks to challenge morally arbitrary hegemonies through conscience. This conscience, an ethical obligation to do justice in the name equality and liberty, results from ideological consciousness as opposed to the false consciousness perpetrated by a dominant power. Williams defines false consciousness as a “subordinate class” having “*nothing but* this [dominant] ideology as its consciousness (since the production of all ideas is, by axiomatic definition, in the hands of those who control the means of production) or, in another version, has this ideology imposed on its otherwise different consciousness” (1277, author’s emphasis). Conscience, however, becomes an ideological force itself—a counter to structures of oppression and

hegemony—by converting ideological consciousness into progressive thought and action.<sup>4</sup> The politics of poverty does not necessarily have to be radical nor revolutionary. As a liberal and progressive theory, however, it is concerned with making a reality of what ought to be, that is, the flourishing of human life.

How can the aesthetic experience of reading a novel actually lead to the elucidation of ideology? This is the proverbial “million dollar question” which we will probably never know the answer to—and, paradoxically, that should be reassuring because it keeps the need for interpretation alive. In the interest of this study, I suggest a few possible answers that are relevant to the development of the politics of poverty. In *The Ethnic Myth* (1971), a rather famous sociological theory that challenges the orthodoxies of race and poverty, Stephen Steinberg quotes Robert Weaver, the first African-American to hold a cabinet position in the U.S. government. Referring to the race riots of the 1960s, Weaver exhorts, “The ills of our society must be dramatized. In this sense the riots aroused conscience, or guilt, or fear that resulted in *action*. We need to ‘galvanize’ society and government” (qtd. in Steinberg 218, author’s emphasis). This “dramatization” of social problems naturally leads to thoughts of theater and spectacle as an art form. Perhaps the aesthetic experience of dramatic and artistic display can “galvanize” society and culture through conscience as an imaginative possibility.

Art is often times a reflection of the cultural context, creating new insights into the vast meaning of social constructs and human affairs. In the art form of literature, the novel can be widely read through its mass production in a literate society. Consequently, the novel’s exploration of the interaction between human beings and ideologies in the prevailing social order becomes public knowledge. Reading, to borrow from Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of *heteroglossia* in “Discourse in the

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<sup>4</sup> NB: I use the terms “ideological consciousness” and “social consciousness” somewhat interchangeably. The difference is that “social consciousness” means to be conscious of a material effect of ideology in society and culture, whereas “ideological consciousness” means to be conscious of immaterial, conceptual forces in society and culture.

Novel,” requires a sort of “living hermeneutics” needed to decipher meaning in society, resulting in an assimilation of consciousness (578 and 580). Discerning readers can link the aesthetics of narrative to ideas and institutions in order to gain a new understanding and awareness of the cultural context. Humanist philosopher Jürgen Habermas asserts, “The aesthetic experience then not only renews the interpretation of our needs in whose light we perceive the world. It permeates our cognitive significations and our normative expectations and changes the manner in which all of these moments refer to each other” (1954). In this sense, the social value and efficacy of literature relies on its ability to move a readership to revelation through consciousness. The resulting profundity can either inspire change or inform progress, and, in some cases, do both.

Perhaps, then, the novel can lead to consciousness. But, how does consciousness incorporate conscience? How does an individual feel an ethical obligation to do justice? Martha Nussbaum believes that literature makes better “citizens of the world,” but she stops short of concluding that “sympathy” and “literary imagining” can “immediately effect political change” (90 and 97). Research in developmental psychology and discourse processing reveals that correlations exist between the cognitive imagination of hardship and consequent altruistic behaviors (Harrison 258-61). Although a suggestive assertion, the validity and significance of these psychological studies are beyond the scope of this project. The politics of poverty does not rely on empirical evidence because it merely attempts to associate the social novel with real-world manifestations of justice in a substantive way. Notably, in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), Suzanne Keen remains skeptical of the “empathy-altruism hypothesis,” as applied to narrative empathy, beyond “immediate feeling responses” (vi and ix). She agrees, however, that the lack of causation between long-term prosocial behaviors and reading cannot take away from the beneficial experience of reading literature that might include empathy and its subsequent internalization: “Still, novel reading does a lot for readers. Few would doubt that a habit of consuming narrative fiction in prose improves the vocabulary and

informs the reader about subjects, times, people, and places (real and imagined) in a way that extends knowledge beyond individual experience” (xv). This extension of knowledge beyond individual experience is profound in and of itself. Worldly informed and knowledgeable citizens make good citizens and good citizens, in my view, recognize their obligation to cooperate in the social arrangement, seeking acceptable solutions to problems that affect the well-being of the community. We begin to see, at the very least, how aesthetic experiences and imaginative possibilities in a widely read social novel create the opportunity for conscience. Whether readers actually do something with conscience in the real world is another story, but social literature creates a public forum for us to broaden our perspectives and understand (either sociologically or psychologically) the experience of hardship. For some, perhaps, this will inform the pursuit of justice when they realize that certain hardships are unjustifiable and morally arbitrary.

### **The Politics of Poverty in Literature**

*We must come down from our heights, and leave our straight paths, for the byways and low places of life, if we learn the truths by strong contrasts; and in hovels, in forecastles, and among our own outcasts in foreign lands, see what has been wrought upon our fellow-creatures by accident, hardship, or vice.*

—Richard Henry Dana Jr., *Two Years Before the Mast*, 1840

Numerous novels made real-world contributions the politics of poverty by advancing a conceptual understanding of conscience and justice: Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848), Harriet Beecher’s Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862), and, more recently, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962). Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, convinced Eleanor Roosevelt to hold congressional hearings on the conditions in migrant camps, which led to new federal labor laws. Why, then, did I choose Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* for this project?

I wanted to choose a modern novel so I could explore conscience and justice in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century tropes, including the unconscious assimilation of ideology. Although it comes after the great modern novels, *Native Son* gave me a platform for this exploration. In fact, *Native Son* has an intriguing historiographical positioning. Written in 1940, on the verge of two of the most momentous social changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—World War II and the Civil Rights movement—the novel carried the potential to be an impetus for change on a massive scale. *Native Son*, however, does not have any direct, let alone perceptible connections to concrete reforms in policy. The politics of poverty offers a solution for evaluating *Native Son*'s impact by merely gauging the novel's relation to social and ideological change. On a personal note, I was also drawn to not necessarily redeem *Native Son* from dismissive critics, but to show *why* and *how* it is an important novel in the American literary canon, when so many critics merely assume its value.

*Oliver Twist* is, admittedly, not a modern novel. Why, then, did I include it in this thesis? To ignore Dickens in a thesis on the social novel would be a sacrilege, disrespecting, arguably, the most prolific social novelist. Nevertheless, Dickens moves toward modern themes—perhaps more so than any other socially conscientious writer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He concerns himself with the low places of life and, in doing so, explores the effect of crime and poverty on the human psychology. He expresses interest in how hardship manifests in the individual psyche and what it tells us about our nature. This may be an extrapolation, but the more and more I read the epigraph to this thesis's chapter on *Oliver Twist*, a quotation from Dickens on the composition of the novel, I cannot help but think that his sentiments represent a modern interpretation of poverty, in which *the truth needs to be told* precisely because people cannot fully assimilate consciousness and reality—akin to the modern experience of fragmentation.

Furthermore, I choose to write on *Oliver Twist* and *Native Son* because of their narrative sophistication in illuminating the complexity of ideology as it relates to poverty. Dickens

understands how the 19<sup>th</sup> century theories of political economy and utilitarianism could be construed to dehumanize the indigent. Wright, similarly, realizes how racial oppression and cultural power work to subvert the flourishing of life. Both authors, consequently, call for a liberation from these false and unjust ideologies. According to the politics of poverty, this literary conscience is conceptual and, in fact, does not narrowly conceive of justice, but rather changes the way we look at impoverishment in the larger context of culture and society. In turn, this conceptual influence on progressive ideology can lead to tangible social change through public affairs and policy—real-world contributions to the politics of poverty—because conscience in literature begins to inform an ethical imperative to do justice.

In beginning to lay the background for the politics of poverty in literature, I provide two helpful comparative case studies in this introduction. These case studies build upon the theory and elaborate on the notion that ideological consciousness and conscience can lead to justice in the real world. First, I pair Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) with Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* in order to point out stylistic similarities, but to also contrast differences in their respective literary consciences. *Two Years Before the Mast's* conscience is inherently limited in its advocacy for the common sailor, never approaching the ideological consciousness of Dickens's work. Next, I compare Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) to Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Both novels share similarities, including being overwritten in the naturalistic style, which especially undermines the efficacy of *The Jungle's* conscience. Nevertheless, *The Jungle* makes a contribution to the politics of poverty, but perhaps a less politically and historically profound one than *Native Son*.

At one time a staple in the American literary canon, the relatively obscure *Two Years Before the Mast* is the firsthand account of Dana's experiences aboard a shipping brig named the *Pilgrim*. A member of a prominent Boston Brahmin family, Dana dropped out of Harvard College at age 19 after a severe case of the measles damaged his eyesight. He embarked on a two-year sea voyage,

working as an ordinary crew member, in the hopes that it would restore his vision. The journey not only improved his sight, it awakened in him a new vision—a vision of social justice for the common sailor. Dana made a vow to provide a voice from the forecabin: “if God should ever give me the means, I would do something to redress the grievances and relieve the sufferings of that poor class of beings, of whom I then was one” (106). *Two Years Before the Mast* reveals the gross injustices committed against sailors and the deplorable conditions in which they lived and worked. Dana describes the sailor’s life as “at best a mixture of a little good with much evil, and a little pleasure with much pain. The beautiful is linked with the revolting, the sublime with the commonplace, and the solemn with the ludicrous” (41).

Interestingly enough, as a social reformer, Dana was a contemporary of Charles Dickens. In 1841, the two authors dined in Boston along with Harvard Professor Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and future abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner (Spencer xxxv). It comes to no coincidence, then, that that *Two Years Before the Mast* shares striking similarities with *Oliver Twist*. Both narratives render hardship with riveting detail, their tones are political and candid, and both portray authority as abusive and morally repugnant. Analogous to how Dickens illustrates the inhumanity of the New Poor Law in England, Dana describes the gross inhumanity of corporal punishment at sea. He documents an act of flogging through the narration of an exchange between the ruthless captain of the *Pilgrim* and a crew member:

‘Will you ever be impudent to me again?’

‘I never have been, sir,’ said Sam.

‘Answer my question, or I’ll make a spread eagle of you! I’ll flog you, by G—d!’

‘I’m no negro slave,’ said Sam.

‘Then I’ll make you one,’ said the captain; and he came to the hatchway, and sprang on deck, threw off his coat, and rolling up his sleeves, called out the mate—

‘Seize that man up, Mr.—! Seize him up! Make a spread eagle of him! I’ll teach you all who is master aboard!’ (102)

The injustice of the flogging, made worse by the captain’s wild rage, disturbed and shocked Dana. Given his own background (he had been cruelly beaten by two schoolmasters during his upbringing), Dana considered resistance and retribution. But, there was little recourse, as Dana goes on to describe, leaving the common sailor in a perilous moral hazard:

A man—a human being, made in God’s likeness—fastened up and flogged like a beast. A man, too, whom I had lived with and eaten with for months, and knew as well as a brother. The first and almost uncontrollable impulse was resistance. But what was to be done? The time for it had gone by. The two best men were fast, and there were only two beside myself, and a small boy of ten or twelve years of age. And then there were (beside the captain) three officers, steward, agent, and clerk. But beside the numbers what is there for sailors to do? If they resist, it is mutiny; and, if they succeed, and take the vessel, it is piracy. (103)

Dana did everything in his power to shed light on the everyday hardship and abuse endured by working-class sailors in the hopes that it would reach the public consciousness—just as Dickens in his efforts to expose the plight of the poor, lobbying the public through print media.<sup>5</sup> Dana’s literary conscience, almost immediately, produced hoped-for effects. In response to the novel, the *New York Review* called the life of a common sailor “the most undesirable of asylums” and William Clark Russell, a British author of maritime stories, credited Dana for “seizing the pen for a handspike” in prying open “the sealed lid under which the merchant-seamen lay cavered” (qtd. in Spencer xxxiii and xxxiv).

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout his career, Dickens contributed to and edited multiple periodicals and literary journals. He began his career as a journalist working for the *Morning Chronicle*, reporting on the Reform Act of 1832 in Parliament. Later in life, he wrote many social and political commentaries for intellectual journals like *The Examiner*.

Dana firmly believed that the sailor's condition was a violation of natural law—an impediment and degradation to the moral development of the individual. Similarly, Dickens saw the conditions in the Victorian workhouse as a violation of Christian morality and human dignity. In portraying the harsh realities of sea life, moreover, Dana rejected the romantic ideology that revered individualism and the sanctuary of nature. Rather than abandon the public and retreat back to his comfortable bourgeois station in life, Dana perceived of justice in a social context. In an appeal to his readers, he invoked an ethical imperative to alleviate the poverty of sailors:

If it shall interest the general reader, and call more attention to the welfare of seamen, or give any information as to their real condition, which may serve to raise them in the rank of beings, and to promote in any measure their religious and moral improvement, and diminish the hardships of their daily life, the end of its publication will be answered. (4)

Dana's advocacy, when he put it to work, encountered great success. In 1850, only ten years after the original publication of *Two Years Before the Mast*, flogging was banned in the U.S. Navy by an act of Congress. Personally, Dana had a prolific career as a social reformer. After his voyage, he attended Harvard Law School and became an expert in maritime law and, more importantly, the most well-known legal advocate for the rights of sailors. Dana successfully tried abusive captains in the courts, he helped found the Free-Soil Party, and, following the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, he offered *pro bono* legal counsel to runaway slaves (Spencer vi). Later, he was appointed District Attorney of Massachusetts in 1861 by President Lincoln and, in 1863, he won a case before the U.S. Supreme Court, defending the Union blockade of Confederate ships; he served in the Massachusetts state legislature in 1867; Dana would have even become the Ambassador to England in 1876, but the Senate refused to confirm him after he was accused of plagiarism in a legal textbook (Spencer xi-xii). Dana was an intrepid advocate for the politics of poverty in 19<sup>th</sup> century America.

Poignantly, Edward Waldo Emerson, whose father taught Dana, remembers him as “the counsel of the sailor and the slave,—persistent, courageous, hard-fighting, skillful, but still the advocate of the poor and the unpopular” (qtd. in Spencer xxxvi).

*Two Years Before the Mast* is a helpful parallel case-study for Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*. Grounded in social ethics and moral agency, both authors appealed to conscience through the realism of a sailor’s hardship and an orphan’s plight. The narratives informed the public of abusive conditions endured by working-class sailors and workhouse paupers. Consequently, literary conscience substantiated justice as the treatment of sailors improved and reforms were gradually instituted in the workhouse system—all real-world contributions to the politics of poverty. However, the politics of poverty in *Two Years Before the Mast* was inherently limited in its scope and magnitude. The novel’s impact was narrowly tailored to alleviating hardship for a comparatively small number of workers in the American shipping industry. Dana did not conceive of widespread moral, ideological change in the way Dickens repudiated the entire theory underlying the New Poor Law’s political economy. Dickens’s advocacy for the poor, espousing humanizing grace and compassion, represented a drastic deviation from unsympathetic, even ruthless ideological power in culture and society. The politics of poverty associated with *Oliver Twist*, as a result, had a greater impact, challenging society’s outlook on social welfare. Dickens’s conceptual understanding of conscience and justice also has contemporary ramifications, teaching us, at the very least, to question the morality of kicking an individual off welfare or blaming the poor for their idleness.

*The Jungle*, correspondingly, conceives of ideological change, albeit in a much more radical and, at times, distasteful vein. Unlike *Two Years Before the Mast* and *Oliver Twist*, *The Jungle* treats human hardship from the standpoint of literary naturalism. In fact, Upton Sinclair’s fictional account of American wage slavery in the meatpacking industries of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chicago can be overly

deterministic at the expense of human agency and liberal social change in oppressive environments.

Of use here is Charles Child Walcutt's definition that a naturalistic novel is:

...a tragedy in which a human being is crushed and destroyed by the operation of forces which he has no power to resist or even understand...And if the victim's lot is sordid, the need for reform is 'proved.' The more helpless, the character, the stronger proof of determinism; and once such a thesis is established the scientist hopes and believes that men will set about trying to control the forces which now control men. (qtd. in Overland 111)

Sinclair subjects Jurgis Rudkis to the harsh economic forces in Packingtown, leaving Rudkis to degenerate in poverty and alcoholism as his family and friends succumb to hardship. Likewise, in *Native Son*, Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas falls prey to oppressive forces that segregate the South Side of Chicago. Accordingly, *The Jungle* shares striking similarities to *Native Son* insofar as both novels attempt to assimilate consciousness through naturalistic depictions of the social order. Both Sinclair and Wright negatively portray the labor and racial caste systems in America and, in doing so, evidence an anonymous existence of "pessimistic materialistic determinism" in the margins of society (Becker 35). Paradoxically, however, pessimistic determinism is countered by hope for human progress. Jurgis's conversion to socialism enables him to break from his economic determinism as a Lithuanian immigrant and Boris Max's legal defense reveals the social forces that prevent Bigger's self-realization and consign him to a life of poverty. These disruptions constitute a break from the hegemonic status quo and, perhaps, in some cases, a progressive break in the course of human history. Understanding the cultural and social dialectics represented in these novels lends insight into the very nature of social change.

Specifically, the muckraker Sinclair set out to expose the conditions existing between capital and labor and, in doing so, he hoped to transform America's political ideology. *The Jungle*, however,

failed to achieve its ideological goal. Sinclair himself poignantly quipped, “I aimed at the public’s heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach” (qtd. in Kraft 157). He did reveal the repulsive conditions in which laborers produced America’s manufactured food:

Worst of any, however, were the fertilizer-men, and those who served in the cooking-rooms. These people could not have been shown to the visitor,—for the odor of a fertilizer-man would scare any ordinary visitor at a hundred yards, and as for the other men, who worked in tank-rooms full of steam, and in some of which there were open vats near the level of the floor, their peculiar trouble was that they fell into the vats; and when they were fished out, there was never enough of them left to be worth exhibiting,—sometimes they would be overlooked for days, till all but the bones of them had gone out to the world as Durham’s Pure Leaf Lard!

(Sinclair 105)

*The Jungle* did not revolutionize the proletariat in America and, needless to say, such a goal was unrealistic and misguided. Sinclair did not help his cause either. In the novel, the reader struggles to distinguish reality from artistic embellishment in the novel’s overwritten passages, thus undermining the assimilation of consciousness. Somewhere between the novel’s melodramatic evolution and communist propaganda (Jurgis’s conversion to communism is remarkably contrived), we lose sight of what an ethical imperative to do justice really means. Does justice mean a radical overturning of the political system or does it entail a pragmatic remedy for arbitrary inequality that accords with American values? My sympathies lie with the latter. Perhaps this is why *Native Son* succeeds where *The Jungle* fails, that is, in justifying ideological change. Although Wright himself was a communist for nine years, the conscience in *Native Son*, as I will show, appeals to liberal equality and opportunity and, historically, was directed at the much more efficacious ideology embodied in the Civil Rights movement. Nevertheless, it is hard not to see why passages in *The Jungle*, like the one above, shocked

middle and upper-class readers out of their complacency, exposing them to ills that affected the entire society. As critic G.S. Balarama Gupta astutely points out, “In analyzing this internal disease, the author may be offering remedies which may not be acceptable. But while we discover the remedies to be unpalatable to us, it would be an act of critical honesty to recognize the wisdom of the diagnosis” (10). In other words, socialism may not be a desirable response to failures in sanitary food production, urban sustainability, and the labor market. Sinclair’s diagnosis of these failures, nonetheless, serves an important purpose in awakening the public conscience.

Despite criticism for its socialist inclinations and lackluster artistry, the novel still played a momentous role in the politics of poverty—serving as the impetus for the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act and the Federal Meat Inspection Act. Sinclair saw an opportunity to take advantage of the novel’s publication as a means to achieve social reform. He allowed his publisher to advertise *The Jungle* as “a searching expose of...fragrant violations of all hygienic laws in the slaughter of diseased cattle...and the whole machinery of feeding a world with tainted meat” (qtd. in Bloodworth 16). He set up a publicity office in New York to release daily reports on the battle between the American public and the Beef Trust. He even implored President Theodore Roosevelt to make a push for the pending legislation to the extent that Roosevelt purportedly said, “Tell Sinclair to go home and let me run the country for a while” (qtd. in Bloodworth 16). This time, Sinclair’s efforts succeeded and the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Federal Meat Inspection Act were passed into law in June of 1906, only four months after the original book publication of *The Jungle*. These acts not only heightened the public awareness of tainted food, but they also enforced ways to prevent food-borne disease by mandating refrigeration and pasteurization for certain foods, the use of pesticides, and better care for livestock. Thanks to Sinclair’s work, conscience was converted into justice as *The Jungle* helped to ensure health and sustainability at the outset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America.

Despite the similarities, *Two Years Before the Mast* and *The Jungle* cannot live up to *Oliver Twist* and *Native Son* as social novels. The artistry in *Oliver Twist* and *Native Son* generates complexity, illuminating the relationship between poverty and ideology in society and culture. The historical and sociopolitical positioning involves a more challenging and wide-ranging context. Dickens's portrayal of the New Poor Law's inhumanity dwarfs Dana's concern for the common sailor. The politics of poverty in *Oliver Twist*, and other Dickensian novels, enlightened reform efforts throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, even today, can inform the pursuit of justice since welfare continues to be a divisive and complicated issue. As we debate the future of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, for example, the ideological tension between classical political economy and Christian philanthropy in *Oliver Twist* can teach us how to reconcile economic incentives with humanitarian treatment. Furthermore, Wright's contemplation of racial discrimination and its effects on human existentialism transcends Sinclair's straightforward narrative that had a limited impact in terms of the politics of poverty. The novel's context is also more impressive, serving as an implicit warning to America about the status of race relations as the nation was about to take its place on the world's stage.

Consequently, the main chapters of this thesis seek out conceptual understandings of conscience and justice that led to real-world contributions to the politics of poverty. The second chapter explores Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, examining how the ideology behind the New Poor Law exacerbates poverty. First, I examine the sociopolitical context of Victorian England and its social problems leading up to the novel's publication. I then analyze Dickens's satirical response through a series of close readings that expose the corruption of the New Poor Law's administration, the dehumanizing treatment of paupers, and the deteriorating physical conditions in the slums of London. In particular, I show how Dickens uses the symbol of the Good Samaritan to espouse social cooperation over self-preservation, and Christian social ethics over unrestrained capitalism. To Dickens, political economy could coexist with human dignity—the central underpinning of the

novel's conscience. I conclude with a reflection on the novel's social impact, assessing whether this conscience contributed to institutional reforms and policy changes in England's welfare system.

The third chapter of this thesis reconsiders the story of Bigger Thomas in Wright's *Native Son*. The novel was widely disseminated to the American public through the Book of the Month Club, making it ripe for a profound social impact. I begin with an analysis of the oppressive and discriminatory cultural discourse that affects the lived experience of Bigger Thomas. I then examine the *politics* of this discourse by reconciling Bigger's sociological determinism with his existential being. Specifically, I show how the novel's conscience seeks to restore the positive liberty of individuals, like Bigger Thomas, by revealing an oppressive cultural discourse and an uncompromising dialectic between the segregated white and black worlds. I conclude with a discussion of *Native Son's* conscience and how it foreshadows the ideological change of the Civil Rights movement.

The final chapter is an epilogue in which I appeal to conscience and justice in art and literature at the beginning of this century. I firmly believe that we must liberate ourselves from certain pitfalls inherent in postmodernism. As you read, ask yourself if literature can compel justice through conscience, or, if mere words on a page fall short of such a lofty hope. I believe the former but, admittedly, I have already stacked the deck in its favor. No matter. I have an evidentiary duty to show you the politics of poverty in the modern novel.

## II. “THE GOOD SAMARITAN”: SOCIAL CONSCIENCE IN *OLIVER TWIST*

It is emphatically God’s truth, for it is the truth. He leaves in such depraved and miserable beasts, the hope yet lingering behind, the last fair drop of water at the bottom of the dried-up weed-choked well. It involves the best and worst shades of our common nature, much of its ugliest hues and something of its most beautiful; it is a contradiction, an anomaly, an apparent impossibility, but it is a truth. I am glad to have had it doubted, for in that circumstance I find a sufficient assurance that it needed to be told.

—Charles Dickens, Preface to the Third Edition of *Oliver Twist*, 1841

Originally published between 1837 and 1839 as a serial piece in *Bentley’s Miscellany* and only three years removed from the passage of the Poor Law Amendment Act in Great Britain, Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* broadened the scope of prose fiction to social protest. Unsurprisingly, given Dickens’s work for the *Morning Chronicle* in the Reporter’s Gallery of Parliament in the early 1830s, the narrative conveys an investigative and journalistic angle. Like a modern muckraker, he documents the evils of the New Poor Law in an attempt to inform the public. The subtitle of the novel, *The Parish Boy’s Progress*, an allusion to John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), evokes the image of the man with the “muck-rake in his hand.” Similarly, Dickens “could look no way but downwards,” asking why “the earthly things, when they are with power upon men’s minds, quite carry their hearts away from God” (Bunyan 206-7). He examines the New Poor Law of 1834 from this perspective, contrasting Christian social ethics against Benthamite and Malthusian political economy. His concern is with the low places of life, with crime and poverty, their effects on humanity, and how the New Poor Law exacerbates, rather than alleviates existing hardship.

Accordingly, the art work of Dickens, mainly his poignant and scathing political satire, responds to the problems of the New Poor Law and the workhouses. A closer examination of the sociopolitical circumstances preceding the 1834 New Poor Law, Dickens’s satirical response to these

circumstances, and the resulting efforts at reform, reveals the tangible impact Dickens had on the perception of the poor in society. However, to limit *Oliver Twist* to the realm of satire, or to reduce it to theatricality—in which the characters draw upon cultural stereotypes and act out a Victorian melodrama on a narrative stage—undermines the novel’s complexity. For in fact, *Oliver Twist* is fraught with ideological tension as Victorian society clashes with the onset of industrial capitalism and the social problems it would bring. A series of close readings reveals this complexity and proves that Dickens is able to reconcile this tension, between social commentary and satirical posturing, in a way that promotes humanistic morality over the indifference of individualism. Specifically, he exposes the corruption and hypocrisy of the New Poor Law administration, concluding that the law is incompatible with Christian charity and compassion; he portrays the appalling social conditions that lead to Oliver’s starvation and the deterioration of lower-class neighborhoods, finding them to be demeaning to human life; he even shows how the incentives of unrestrained capitalism are applied in London’s criminal underworld, emphasizing self-preservation over social cooperation.

Dickens’s satirical exposure of the New Poor Law’s inhumanity has a powerful impact on a compassionate audience, but his social criticism may be limited. According to Steven Marcus, Dickens’s “determined, aggressive satire” cannot “in any convincing sense be assigned to partisan allegiance,” and, as Jill Muller points out, nor does it conceive of “any specific reforms” (Marcus 60, Muller xxv). In fact, the New Poor Law would persist for years after the novel’s publication. *Oliver Twist*, despite its penchant for hard-hitting social commentary, did not inspire the quick fix captured by *The Jungle* or *Two Years Before the Mast*. The efficacy of Dickens’s portrayal encompasses a conceptual understanding of conscience and justice. If we are to gain this understanding, we must go beyond Dickens’s criticism of policy to find his repudiation of the theory underlying the New Poor Law. The philosophy that the poor are *fully* blameworthy for their station in life is reductive, rejecting the significance of social and economic forces. The idea that this culpability justifies

inhumane and degrading treatment, moreover, is unjust because it violates the liberal conception of positive freedom. The politics of poverty requires a much more holistic response to remedy extreme privation. Dickens comprehends this and that is why he attempts to reclaim the Good Samaritan, the parochial symbol that Mr. Bumble so proudly wears, as a positive force that champions the common good. According to Dickens, the telling of such a story “would be a service to society” (Preface to the Third Edition 14). Consequently, the conscience of *Oliver Twist* seeks to improve the lot of the poor through the humanistic morality that is lost upon 19<sup>th</sup> century political economy. This morality became increasingly evident to the public and, in time, allowed *Oliver Twist* to play a substantive role in the gradual demise of the New Poor Law.

Before establishing Dickens’s satirical response as a precursor to social reform, significant questions remain unanswered: What impending social problems does *Oliver Twist* expose? How do these problems stem from the Victorian social order? The social consciousness of Dickens’s literature is inseparable from the historical context that defined it. Consequently, the appropriate place to start is in the social history of England, viewing the beginning of the Victorian age in the 1830s as a time of turbulent agitation and transformation. In the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, England emerged victorious from the Napoleonic Wars, but that did not prevent the onset of devastating social problems. In those days, indigent veterans were not properly cared for, many returned unemployed or homeless, and, even worse, thousands of women were widowed and left without any kind of social assistance. This was an antecedent to the London waif crisis, an overabundance of orphaned children in Victorian England, which underlies *Oliver Twist*. The wars also created disastrous food shortages. Henry Mayhew, author of *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861),<sup>6</sup> “estimated that three wet days could bring 30,000 people in London alone to the brink of starvation” (Morris 22). Moreover, historian Ruth Richardson remarks, “Along with the high food

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<sup>6</sup> Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861) was originally published in the 1840s as a series of articles in the *Morning Chronicle*.

prices and poor weather, the end of the war brought with it an industrial slump, as demand vanished for battle supplies like iron for armaments and textiles for uniforms. Industrial districts were pitched into recession, and workers from these often found their way to London, seeking work where artisans were already unemployed” (43). Those unable to find work in this environment were met with hostility, cast off as idle and inept. This became the backdrop to *Oliver Twist*'s criminal underworld, where people inhabited urban slums and existed in the margins of society.

The consequences of the wars were bad enough. To make matters worse, however, when the economy was revived, it failed to secure prosperity for all. The emerging capitalist, industrial complex adversely affected the working poor—highlighting structural inequalities deeply entrenched in British society. The growth of sophisticated commerce and manufacturing in the wake of the industrial revolution “outran social improvement” and could not remedy pervasive social ills (Dunn 3). Despite an “economic miracle” in the beginning of the Victorian age, with gross national income increasing from £340 million in 1831 to approximately £523 million in 1851, “this period of capitalist triumph was not a smooth upward surge of economic expansion for all, but a familiar pattern of boom and depression” (Morris 40). Any misfortune, personal illness, or market fluctuation “would plunge even the most respectable working-class families into extreme poverty, and all faced destitution in old age” (9). In fact, during the third year of the New Poor Law there was a severe winter and, in the fourth year, a trade depression hit, causing scarce food and high prices (House xiii). *Oliver Twist* recognized that economic hardship could not always be attributed to individual faults or character flaws; Oliver himself is revealed to be from a respectable background whose mother falls upon difficult times—the fallen woman trope. Even Dickens himself grew up in this environment, personally experiencing economic misfortune when his father was committed to the Marshalsea debtors’ prison in 1824.

England, equipped only with antiquated, parish-based modes of poor relief rather than any egalitarian idea of welfare or social safety nets, failed to cope with the swelling populations of cities and growing inequality. Parliament did rectify “inequitable political representation” through the Parliamentary Reform Bill of 1832, helping to empower the middle class (Dunn 3). From an economic perspective, policy reform was advanced by the development of political economy—still deeply connected to the more established discipline of moral philosophy. Political economy was influenced by Thomas Malthus’s classical thinking on catastrophic population growth and the “Shiftless Man.” This derogatory term was construed to relegate the pauper into both anonymity and culpability. In his *Essay on Population* (1798), Malthus writes that the Poor Law’s workhouse “forces more would-be industrious and able-bodied poor to become dependent,” so much so that “the poor laws are strongly calculated to eradicate the spirit of independence” (qtd. in Ziliak 160). Although social reform appeared inevitable by the 1830s, questions remained regarding the methodology of these reforms and how they would rectify inequality. The New Poor Law would attempt to instill Malthus’s “spirit of independence” by abolishing charity and coercing the poor into productivity through a punitive workhouse system.

Much to Dickens’s dismay, the British Parliament’s response to debilitating poverty and unemployment embodied this classical economic philosophy, classifying the pauper as idle and uncivilized—a standard that even applied to children in practice. Nassau Senior and Edwin Chadwick authored *The New Poor Law Report* for Parliament, concluding that the old system was irreversibly broken: “But in by far the greater number of cases, it is large almshouses, in which the young are trained in idleness, ignorance, and vice; the able-bodied maintained in sluggish sensual indolence” (qtd. in Ziliak 161). Therefore the new legislation abandoned outdoor relief, where parishes distributed food and other resources, for indoor relief that required labor to be performed in a workhouse in return for housing and food. This new system “repudiated traditional

responsibilities towards the poor, refusing all help unless it be inside a workhouse, where families were separated, and harsh conditions were deliberately cultivated so the poor would not seek to enter” (Richardson 15). In effect, the workhouses functioned as a prison, punishing poverty rather than alleviating it.

The new system also called for centralized authority and a rigid, utilitarian calculus in administering relief; charity became “a matter of pounds, shillings, pence, dietaries, and allowances, not of spontaneous, freely-given compassion and care” (Patten 210). In the workhouse, the diet for an able-bodied man consisted of meat on three days a week and one and a half pints of gruel per day; women were mandated to have less and children over nine received the same amount as women (House xiii). The main thrust of Dickens’s satire is directed at this system, criticizing the utilitarian method for its futility in alleviating poverty and its susceptibility to corruption. The New Poor Law, with its infamous bastardy clause, also punished unwed mothers in an attempt to discourage illegitimate pregnancies. The clause effectively denied mothers most forms of relief and placed the burden of maternity solely on them. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens indicts the New Poor Law commissioners, one of whom ironically remarks that “the law is a bachelor,” for fabricating a cultural expectation in which women are to blame for sexual licentiousness (Dickens, *OT* 399).

Perhaps most importantly, the New Poor Law “privatized poverty,” relating it to “individual conscience” rather than a shared morality within the community (Zlotnick 133). Thus, the underlying theory “embraced a vision of human subjectivity in line with the psychological realism of the mid-Victorian novel” (133). Ironically, however, rather than considering each individual situation, this view categorically ostracized the poor from mainstream society. The New Poor Law “tried to conflate poverty and depravity,” treating the poor’s supposedly universal and maligned character as discrete and irreconcilable with the civil order (133). Dickens detested the elite’s monopoly on good character and, in time, he would go to great length to show that this was false.

The orphan Oliver, an exemplar of childhood innocence and Christian heroism, became Dickens's counter to the misguided theory of the New Poor Law.

In his letters, Dickens asserts that he opposed the New Poor Law “to the death” (qtd. in Zlotnick 132). Dickens counsels a humanitarian reply to what he thinks is a dangerously irresponsible and inherently untrue disparagement of England's poor. Oliver's story fits this mold perfectly, even if the endearing orphan is really nothing more than a symbolic actor subject to the cultural forces at play in Victorian England. Critics condemn Oliver's underdeveloped character, construing the orphan as a human pawn used to interact with Mr. Bumble and the commissioners of the welfare state, Fagin and the underworld of London, and bourgeois altruism of Mr. Brownlow and high society. Admittedly, Oliver is an archetype—the poor and helpless, yet innocent child making his way in an unfamiliar, domineering world. But, Oliver's movements between these sectors of Victorian London, controlled by oppressive external forces, subvert the idea of the “Shiftless Man” as an individual, responsible actor. Dickens blames the political economists for the mischaracterization of the poor, like Oliver, and despises the cold empiricism of the emerging science: “My satire is against those who see figures and averages, and nothing else—the representatives of the wickedest and most enormous vice of this time—the men who, through long years to come, will do more damage to the real useful truths of political economy, than I could do in my whole life” (qtd. in Henderson 142). Dickens instead advocates a human element in policymaking, endorsing social consciousness as a means to elucidate the true condition of the impoverished. In doing so, however, he goes about it circuitously. Rather than frame a constructive counterargument to the New Poor Law's inhumanity by justifying the import of Christian social ethics, Dickens engages in caustic satire and challenges the negligent bureaucracy of the New Poor Law Commission. According to critic Steven Marcus, Dickens's character portrayals and literary descriptions are so devoid of humanistic compassion that, paradoxically, he confronts “injustices so

directly and without equivocation that he was able to bring before a large and extremely partisan public one of the most sensitive issues of the time, the problem of the poor” (60). His language, though not partisan, adopts an overtly political tone, striking at the source of institutional incompetency.

Right from the very beginning, as we are introduced to Oliver leaving the workhouse where his mother has died, Dickens highlights the abusive and corruptive treatment of children at the hands of their supposed guardians:

...parish authorities magnanimously and humanely resolved, that Oliver should be ‘farmed,’ or, in other words, that he should be despatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor laws, rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female, who received the culprits at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week. (OT 4)

This witticism is characteristic of Dickens’s long, protracted sentences that are seemingly exhaustive to the material at hand. Yet, the genius of Dickensian satire stems not from superficial commentary, but from subtlety. The “consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny,” which Dickens goes on to say that “a great deal may be got” for it, does not accord with the “inconvenience of too much food” (OT 4). The elderly caretaker appears to be appropriating the “greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use,” skimming money from state funds allotted for pauperism (OT 4). Accordingly, Dickens implies that elements of fraud and wrongdoing are present, which he later confirms, noting that the elderly woman finds “in the lowest depth a deeper still; and proving herself a very great experimental philosopher”—alluding not only to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), but also to the philosophy of political economists (OT 4). The abject poverty of the children alone represents an egregious

violation against humanity. The supervisor's fraud at the expense of the children reveals an even deeper hell, though, proving classical economics may not be a "very great" social experiment after all. Dickens also develops a metaphor of "farming," quipping that the system would not "produce any very extraordinary or luxuriant crop" (OT 5). In addition to suggesting that the workhouse system cannot generate positive results, he implies that human beings cannot be treated as crops cultivated through a uniform, standardized protocol. Through his satire, Dickens demonstrates the law's arbitrary classification of the poor. The New Poor Law superficially appears to uphold human equality through its uniform treatment of the waif children. That equality, however, fails to ensure a just outcome when Dickens reminds us that relief is not only inadequate, but also corrupt.

To Dickens, the fraudulent administration of the New Poor Law is incompatible with traditional Christian ethics, contravening notions of charity and compassion. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, when the commissioners of the New Poor Law invoke Christian charity in their attempt to repress the poor, Dickens responds with scathing satire. In a conversation with Mr. Sowerberry, an undertaker who employs Oliver, Mr. Bumble, the parish beadle, proudly brandishes an image of the Good Samaritan, only to denigrate a British jury for criticizing the parish's treatment of a homeless man. Dickens complements this exchange with multiple references to Christian Scripture:

"Yes, I think it is rather pretty," said the beadle glancing proudly downwards at the large brass buttons which embellished his coat. "The die is the same as the parochial seal—the Good Samaritan healing the sick and bruised man. The board presented it to me on New-year's morning, Mr. Sowerberry. I put it on, I remember, for the first time, to attend the inquest on that reduced tradesman, who died in a doorway at midnight."

“I recollect,” said the undertaker. “The jury brought it in, ‘Died from exposure to the cold, and want of the common necessities of life,’ didn’t they?”

Mr. Bumble nodded.

“And they made it a special verdict, I think,” said the undertaker, “by adding some words to the effect, that if the relieving officer had—”

“Tush! Foolery!” interposed the beadle. “If the board attended to all the nonsense that ignorant jurymen talk, they’d have enough to do.” (*OT* 24)

Here, Dickens exposes Mr. Bumble’s hypocrisy and perversion of Christian doctrine. The image of the Good Samaritan as “the parochial seal” is especially ironic in the context of “the inquest on that reduced tradesman.” In Christ’s parable responding to the question “And who is my neighbor?” the Good Samaritan shows compassion for the beaten and left-for-dead traveler: “though outcast, heretic, and enemy,” it is the Good Samaritan who “came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him” (Luke 10:29, Patten 209, Luke 10:34). Mr. Bumble, however, defies any human impulse for selfless benevolence, refusing to acknowledge the similar plight of the “reduced tradesman.” The man who dies from exposure to the cold in a doorway at midnight, moreover, refers to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In this parable, Lazarus, a poor beggar, comes to door of a rich man’s house asking for scraps of food, but is denied. Lazarus dies and the rich man is subject to torment in hell (Luke 16:19-31). In Dickens’s rendition, however, the “reduced tradesman” is not a poor beggar, but a working class man who has fallen upon difficult times. Presumably, he dies at the door of a workhouse asking for relief and, as the jury suggests, the board of parish commissioners could have done more to offer assistance.

Dickens’s progressive intention, however, transcends this simple parabolic account. His real-world objective is much more substantive, establishing the calculus of poor law relief as the

antithesis to Christian virtues embodied by the Good Samaritan. Dickens appeals to common biblical knowledge and, in writing to a predominantly religious audience, evokes moral sentiments in Christian ethics. In fact, by combining “horrific social documentation with the Good Samaritan story,” Dickens wants to “recall his readers to a fresh sense of what the officially current values of a Christian country should mean in the actual urban setting” of a modernizing London (Larson 56). The inquest jury, perhaps moved to compassion by their findings, opines that the New Poor Law commissioners have erred and are, to some extent, negligent—even disregarding of “the common necessities of life.” Without any compulsory form of legal recourse under the law, however, the jury is left to its own conclusions and the New Poor Law commissioners are free to ignore this grave injustice. Mr. Bumble goes on to remark that juries are “ineddicated, vulgar, grovelling wretches” and “haven’t no more philosophy nor political economy about ’em than that” (Dickens, *OT* 24). It is precisely this lack of “political economy,” however, that allows the jury to see beyond the self-interested individualism of the New Poor Law legislation. The jury sees, as does Dickens, that the workhouses’ insensitivity is “undeniably” a “violation of humanity, in its offense against life” (Marcus 59). Consequently, in accordance with the social ethics of Christianity, Dickens’s satire of Mr. Bumble’s misrepresentation substantiates justice for the poor beggar.

Dickens desires to “show in little Oliver the principle of Good”—a nod to the recurring motif of the Good Samaritan—“surviving through every adverse circumstance and triumphing at last” (Dickens, Preface to the Third Edition 13). Beyond Dickens’s insinuations regarding the corrupt and duplicitous implementation of the New Poor Law, however, Oliver’s virtue is subject to much worse. Oliver is soon apprenticed to Mr. Sowerberry, remaining under the paternalistic purview of the New Poor Law administration. Despite Oliver’s escape from the confines of the workhouse, Dickens portrays the conditions in the bowels of London as so deplorable that they are irreconcilable with the dignity of human life. In one of the most repulsive passages of the entire

novel, Dickens is compelled to personally interject when Oliver is presented with “a plateful of coarse broken victuals”:

I wish some well-fed philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him; whose blood is ice, whose heart is iron; could have seen Oliver Twist clutching at the dainty viands that the dog neglected. I wish he could have witnessed the horrible avidity with which Oliver tore the bits asunder with all the ferocity of famine. There is only one thing I should like better; and that would be to see the Philosopher making the same sort of meal himself, with the same relish. (*OT* 28).

What is so horrifying about this passage is not the “well-fed philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him,” or that Oliver is fed leftover food rejected even by the dog. It is Oliver himself, tearing “the bits asunder with all the ferocity of famine” and with “horrible avidity” in such a manner that he seems to be relishing his disgusting meal. Dickens’s satire succeeds in dehumanizing Oliver as he devours animal scraps in extreme starvation and malnutrition. Due in large part to the conditions promulgated by the New Poor Law and the lack of proper care, Oliver’s humanity is utterly lost to his bestial instincts. But, because the principle of good in Oliver stems from what Linda Lewis signifies as “original innocence,” his ill-treatment becomes a sacrilegious offense committed by the false Samaritans associated with the New Poor Law (Lewis 25). The idea of an innocent, even angelic child is quintessentially “bourgeois, Protestant, and New Testament,” and the synoptic gospels, which include the Gospel of Luke and the parable of the Good Samaritan, embrace children in the kingdom of God (qtd. in Lewis 24, see Luke 18:16). By giving Oliver the qualities of a Christian protagonist, Dickens makes any offense against the child look like an act of desecration that violates the principles of the Good Samaritan parable and, by extension, the humanity of Christian social ethics.

Understandably, to the skeptical reader, Dickens's satire appears overly exaggerated. A young boy "clutching at the dainty viands that the dog neglected" appears unreasonable, if not improbable. But, the extreme privation Oliver faces, even under apprenticeship and outside the workhouse, would not have been unfamiliar to Dickens's audience. Historian Ruth Richardson documents the details of an inquest, which was widely reported to the public at the time, "on the bodies of two young girls, who had been apprenticed out 'on-liking' from two London workhouses, St. Martin's and Cripplegate, and who had been starved and maltreated to death in 1829 by their employer, Esther Hibner, in a domestic manufactory" (203). An artist's rendition of the inquest even depicts the Coroner's jury "viewing with horror the emaciated body of one of the girls who died from the maltreatment" (204). Given Oliver's emaciation, which induces him to savagely consume the meat scraps, the case may very well have been on Dickens's mind, especially only a few years removed from the publication of *Oliver Twist*. Even more disconcerting, "there was no oversight of the fate of these children once they were apprenticed out" and the system resembled a form of human trafficking (205). The real-life brutality and sadistic cruelty lend a sickening, but accurate context for Oliver's plight. Dickens's direct attack on this cruelty exposes horrifying conditions and malicious complicity between New Poor Law commissioners and employers in the community. Mr. Bumble not only turns a blind eye to these abuses, he also encourages them. In response to Mrs. Sowerberry complaining about Oliver's misbehavior, Mr. Bumble observes, "You've overfed him, ma'am. You've raised a artificial soul and spirit in him, ma'am, unbecoming a person of his condition" (Dickens, *OT* 46). Denied any form of humanity, Oliver's innocence is threatened by universal, systematic structures of oppression. His exploitation comes at the hands of the New Poor Law administration, the terrible conditions the law promulgated, and members of the community complicit in the oppressive scheme. Social conscience can break these hegemonic systems and that is precisely what Dickens attempts to do in exposing this cycle of abuse and coercion.

In this oppression, Oliver's heroic resilience keeps the hope for justice alive. This time, Oliver escapes from his apprenticeship only to run away to London's criminal underworld, where he meets the Artful Dodger and gang of juvenile pickpockets, and is taken in by the grotesque Fagin. In this world, where the New Poor Law bureaucracy lacks jurisdiction and standing, Dickens still finds a way to ridicule the parallel system of the criminal underground, satirizing its capitalist philosophy and adherence to self-interested individualism. As critic Robert Patten observes, though "ostensibly at war with this system, in reality the thieves to whom Oliver falls captive are exponents of it, nighttime or underworld petty capitalists" (210). Fagin, explaining the incentives on which the criminals operate, expounds on the concept of "number one":

"To be able to do that, you depend on me. To keep my little business all snug, I depend on you. The first is your number one, the second is my number one. The more you value your number one, the more careful you must be of mine; so we come at last to what I told you at first—that a regard for number one holds us all together, and must do so, unless we would all go to pieces in company." (Dickens, *OT* 328)

Fagin's promotion of a "number one" espouses a Hobbesian state of nature, in which competitive individuals can only be held together when rational incentives align. The juvenile pickpockets get what they want—money and a sense of self-worth that had formerly been denied to them—as long as they support Fagin's "little business." Fagin, on the other hand, provides the boys with safe harbor and food in return for their labor on the streets. The criminals even organize their activities on capitalist terms, each specializing in a different pickpocketing skill—a sort of comparative advantage. Oliver, the least trained, has to start with an unskilled task, removing embroideries from stolen handkerchiefs. This laissez-faire capitalist reasoning is precisely the same logic the philosophers employ in the study of political economy, in which "the entire economic system

depends on the unfettered exercise of self-interest, interpreted as a psychological as well as an economic law” (Patten 211). Consequently, in keeping with a social conscience and the Good Samaritan theme, Dickens goes beyond the New Poor Law itself in order to expose the cruelty of its theoretical foundation in classical economics.

Although repressed by the exact same capitalist system, the criminals practice its principal tenet: “the beautiful axiom that self-preservation is the first law of nature” (Dickens, *OT* 66). The natural law of self-preservation promises the criminals material success and self-worth in return for strict conformity and obedience to the rules of the capitalist game. Pam Morris theorizes that this acquiescence is a form of Marxist “interpellation”—ideology which manifests in social institutions and discourse, constituting the identity of individual subjects. Interpellation thus serves as a means of “social control” over the “marginalized or excluded” (9). It is precisely the criminals’ adherence to the laws of self-preservation that impose “a powerful inhibition upon the claims of the marginalized for greater social justice” (9). Pursuant to this form of indoctrination, any disadvantage or sense of vulnerability cannot be attributed to the economic system itself, but falls squarely on the individual. Beyond the collective nature of their enterprise, any notion of the common good is lost on the criminals. Fagin and the pickpockets fail to recognize the shortcomings of unregulated self-interest, including the social indifference and moral depravity that define a purely economic existence. They see their “little business” as a legitimate trade, merely conforming to the prevailing social order in which economic interests take precedence over humanitarian concerns. The political economy of capitalism and, by extension, the New Poor Law, act as a form of ideological control on the criminals, exploiting their nature rather than alleviating poverty.

Oliver had yet to be “theoretically acquainted” with this ideal of self-preservation despite being “brought up by philosophers” (Dickens, *OT* 66). At various points in the novel, Oliver relies on the dubious good will of others for his sustenance and shelter—including the infamous parish

official in the white waistcoat, Mr. Bumble, Mr. Sowerberry, Fagin, and, worst of all, Bill Sikes. In fact, Dickens highlights the false pretenses of the New Poor Law policy, implying that the law does not instill individual enterprise but, ironically, engenders dependency in an uncompromising economy. Oliver cannot exercise his individual freedom in a system that marginalizes paupers' claims to social equality and maligns their right to human dignity. Richard Patten points out that the only way to avoid "the metamorphosis into a 'philosopher'...is to abandon altogether the pursuit of wealth" and instead adopt a "practical humanist kind of Christianity" (214). In a truly just society that promotes social ethics, compassion and charity are put on an equal footing with wealth and affluence. Mr. Brownlow, Oliver's primary benefactor, embodies this compassion; he hangs a portrait of the Good Samaritan above his mantle. Even Harry Maylie renounces his material accomplishments and ambitions before marrying Rose. Granted, this vision of humanity is easily achieved in the security and prosperity of upper-class Victorian England. The contention here, however, is more conceptual. Capitalism and compassion must coexist if a society is to recognize the fundamental humanity of the poor—even if that means deconstructing the principles of classical economic thought to transcend individualism.

Furthermore, lost in London's underworld and the melodramatic evolution of the narrative, it is easy to overlook the Dickensian depiction of the city landscape. Even when compared to the brilliant illustrative descriptions in *Hard Times* (1854) and *David Copperfield* (1850), *Oliver Twist* succeeds in capturing the physical squalor of poverty. If the criminals' acquiescence to capitalist structures of oppression is implicit, then the structures are overtly reflected in the economic decay of London's lower-class neighborhoods. Dickens employs poignant, extravagant imagery to reveal that the dilapidated buildings and blighted neighborhoods of Jacob's Island were once bustling centers of commerce:

Crazy wooden galleries common to the backs of half-a-dozen houses, with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath; windows, broken and patched, with poles thrust out, on which to dry the linen that is never there; rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter...dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations; every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot, and garbage...the warehouses are roofless and empty; the walls are crumbling down...Thirty or forty years ago, before losses and chancery suits came upon it, it was a thriving place. (*OT* 382)

The deteriorating foundations of the buildings on Jacob's Island illustrate the extreme boom and bust cycles of modernizing capitalism. Due to unrecoverable "losses" and "chancery suits" in courts of equity, businesses have either shut down or moved elsewhere, leaving behind "every repulsive lineament of poverty." The "small," "filthy," and "confined" rooms evoke a sentiment of paralysis, trapping the inhabitants and cementing their social stratification. Even the "squalor" of "filth, rot, and garbage" evidences the poisonous byproducts of former industry, augmenting the physical suffering of the poor as they waste away in an environmental malady. This is not the apocalyptic vision of Malthusian political economy, but an illustration of London's netherworld against a backdrop of unprecedented economic growth as England nearly doubled its gross national income between 1831 and 1851. Isolated by the Thames River and tidal ditches, the inhabitants of Jacob's Island are cut off from the urban centers of London and forgotten in their crime-ridden slum. The vile conditions substantiate the inhumanity of poverty in the era of the New Poor Law—suggesting that the conditions are so degenerate and miserable, that they are anathema to the individual morality championed by the "philosophers."

Interestingly enough, the literary description of Jacob's Island had a real-world impact. The original purpose of Dickens's depiction was to do nothing more than expose inhumane conditions—a sort of “truth-telling” component in “traditional satire” (Manning 52). However, a chain of events forced Dickens to reconsider the efficacy of his Jacob's Island portrayal. In 1848, a Public Health Act was passed, but it effectively excluded most of the London metropolis. Given the readily apparent conditions in the London slums, Dickens asked why, “of all places under heaven,” the act had failed to incorporate the areas in most dire need of sanitation (Dickens, Preface to the First Cheap Edition 19). Meanwhile, the local Metropolitan Sanitary Commission failed to effect any real change in the blighted areas of London. Then, Sir Peter Laurie, an alderman in London, went on record, in a speech to a vestry, saying Jacob's Island “ONLY existed in a work of fiction, written by Mr. Charles Dickens ten years ago” (qtd. in Dickens, Preface to the First Cheap Edition 20, author's emphasis). In reality, the poor were so isolated in their urban squalor that a prominent London official actually had no idea their municipality even existed. No wonder the first wave of social reforms failed to improve sanitary conditions.

Dickens, using this idiocy as an impetus, launched an excoriating attack in the preface to the 1850 edition of *Oliver Twist*. Dickens satirically berates the “sagacious vestry,” consisting of “members of parliament, magistrates, officers, and chemists,” for believing the speech (Preface to the First Cheap Edition 20). Referring to Sir Peter Laurie, Dickens admits to being “restrained by a very painful consideration—by no less a consideration than the impossibility of *his* existence” (Preface to the First Cheap Edition 21, author's emphasis). Simply because the alderman was previously satirized in Dickens's *The Chimes* and thus appeared in a work of fiction, his existence was impossible pursuant to this flawed logic. According to Sylvia Manning, Dickens's premise, however, “is not to show the wickedness or stupidity of Sir Peter Laurie or many others like him—though that is made very clear on the way—but to show the immediate importance of sanitary reform” (51).

Thus, as *Oliver Twist* goes on to explore the relationship between capitalism and compassion, Dickens, in the 1850 preface, begins with an appeal to reform:

I was as well convinced then as I am now, that nothing effectual can be done for the elevation of the poor in England until their dwelling-places are made decent and wholesome. I have always been convinced that this reform must precede all other Social Reform; that it must prepare the way for Education, even for Religion; and that, without it, those classes of the people which increase the fastest must become so desperate, and be made so miserable, as to bear within themselves the certain seeds of ruin to the whole community. (Preface to the First Cheap Edition 19)

Dickens's political objective is clear: sanitation and housing are the most immediate and effectual reforms in the context of the novel's exposé of social problems. Dickens finally conceives of specific reforms to complement the narrative, resolving that they are the proverbial low-hanging fruit in reducing poverty, even preceding "Education" and "Religion." There is a marked change, however, in Dickens's tone at the end of his assertion. Rather than demonstrating the humanity of the poor or invoking Christian ethics, he appeals to the civil order of the "whole community," cautioning that if "those classes of the people" become "so desperate" and "so miserable," then they will lay the "seeds of ruin" to the *entire* community—a theme he further addresses in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859).

Although a morbid assessment of self-preservation in the context of the larger community, Dickens's warning is also a moral plea to social conscience. Critic John Reed contends that the Jacob's Island commentary bridged the gap between fiction and reality: "It is notable that Jacob's Island did not exist in Sir Peter Laurie's, 'real' London," but, because of Dickens's description, "Ever after it was emphatically what it had been obscurely before—a real part of London" (24). Thus, Dickens's account of Jacob's Island became a testament to the "power of fiction" and its impact in the real-world (24). Here, that power is attributed to Dickens's ability to bridge the gap

between a *fictional* narrative, caught up in dialogue and plot, and a *real* setting. The literary description of Jacob's Island allows the community to see a manifestation of what is real—physical squalor and actual poverty. The political satire of the 1850 preface supplements this description, pointing out what is illusory—ignorance and denial of these deplorable conditions. The end result is a socially conscious readership that identifies community in its entirety and realizes reform is inextricably linked to the community's collective survival. In practice, this appeal to justice contributed to lasting social change on Jacob's Island. According to the London City Mission, by 1876, the area was redeveloped and sanitation was improved: "The foul ditch no longer pollutes the air. It has long been filled up; and along Mill Street where 'the crazy wooden galleries' once hung over it, stands Messrs. Peek, Freaan, and Co.'s splendid biscuit bakery" (qtd. in Thornbury and Walford 116). In time, the area would be further redeveloped into warehouses and stockyards for London's thriving shipping industry. In light of Dickens's literary description, consciousness of the area's distress and subsequent redevelopment succeeded in achieving social justice—ultimately affirming that capitalist economics could coincide with humanistic compassion. If the theory underlying the New Poor Law was at odds with social cooperation, then this manifestation of justice proved that the two could work in tandem.

The New Poor Law, on the other hand, failed to alleviate the poverty of England's growing pauper and waif population. Retrospectively, one report concluded that the theory of the New Poor Law was sound, but the real "tragedy" was the practical failure of its design: "the Able-bodied Test Workhouse, designed to discipline the wastrel and the loafer, is not in fact applied to them. The persons actually subjected to this stern regimen have not been these men at all...it is the debilitated weakling, the man genuinely without alternative, the honestly destitute man" who is driven to workhouse by "dire necessity" (qtd. in Ziliak 178). By the 1850s and 1860s, reformers instituted new policies and methods of implementation that directly led to improved conditions. Louisa Twining

founded the Workhouse Visiting Society, which was funded by Angela Burdett Coutts, “a philanthropist with whom Dickens worked closely for many years” (Richardson 290-91). In effect, the society established a voluntary and charitable association of women to give care to impoverished paupers. Through simple acts of compassion and prayer, the society responded to the perversion of Christian doctrine that Dickens highlighted in the hypocrisy of the New Poor Law commissioners. Through simple acts of care and healing, the society also countered the ruthless self-preservation of classical economics, satirized in the criminal underground of *Oliver Twist*. Never before had the destitute received humanizing treatment under the New Poor Law; this treatment acknowledged their fundamental dignity of human life, regardless of the circumstances.

If *Oliver Twist* inspired reformist attitudes, then its author also took a participatory, hands-on role in reform. Along with John Stuart Mill and Florence Nightingale, Dickens sat on the governing board of Dr. Joseph Rogers’s Association for Improving Workhouse Infirmaries. The organization’s work “began to pay dividends by the end of the decade, with significant improvements in several of the larger poor law unions” (Brundage 99). As an appointed New Poor Law Medical Officer, Dr. Rogers was aware of the law’s mistreatment of children, characterized so well in Dickens’s horrifying account of Oliver’s hunger and starvation. In response to the inadequate food supply and the appalling conditions promulgated by the New Poor Law, Dr. Rogers wrote to the Poor Law Board in his district in order “to urge a more humane diet” (Richardson 293). He was subsequently informed that he had the power to implement new dietary requirements, “a power which,” he later wrote, “I did not hesitate to use” (qtd. in Richardson 293).

By the mid-1860s, new medical ideas on specialized treatment were beginning to emerge. These considerations explicitly called for health and sanitary improvements in the conditions of workhouses, seemingly in answer to Dickens’s appeal for sanitation reform in the 1850 preface to *Oliver Twist*. After an official government inquiry discovered most workhouses “lacked light,

ventilation, and space” in addition to suffering from “insufficient sanitation,” Parliament passed the Metropolitan Poor Act in 1866 (Richardson 297). The government finally realized the physical squalor and lack of sanitation that the poor lived in, thus corroborating Dickens’s descriptions of place in *Oliver Twist*. Perhaps more importantly, the act recognized the differences between various forms of poverty—especially intrinsic differences between impoverished children needing nourishment, able-bodied paupers needing work, and those with a mental illness or permanent disability needing medical care. In exposing the utilitarian method of poor relief, underwritten by fraud and corruption, *Oliver Twist* showed that poverty could not be alleviated through empiricism and standardized protocols. A more holistic view of poverty was needed and, as a result, general workhouses were replaced for separate facilities that acknowledged the varying derivations of poverty. Between 1867 and 1883, 155 new sick wards and infirmaries were constructed, conforming to these new standards of treatment. In the same time period, 175 homeless wards, 14 mental asylums, and 57 children’s wards and schools were also built (Brundage 121). Aggregate poor relief expenditure in England and the amount spent per pauper doubled between 1870 and 1905, foreshadowing expansive, redistributive changes to the economic order in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Brundage 133). Transformative social change, directed at the social problems Dickens satirized in *Oliver Twist*, was finally codified at the national level. No longer was the pauper cast in the image of the “Shiftless Man.” Instead, the pauper was seen as being afflicted by poverty in all its complexity, with each individual malady requiring a specialized remedy. Collectively, however, these remedies shared a common moral obligation to elevate the human condition. This was, and continues to be, the social conscience in *Oliver Twist*.

To what extent, however, can these manifestations of social justice actually be attributed to *Oliver Twist*? Did Dickens actively facilitate these transformative changes, or is his work merely correlated to efforts at reform? It would be a generalization and, perhaps, an overstatement, to

conclude that *Oliver Twist* dramatically affected the New Poor Law. After all, the law was not repealed until 1930, some 92 years after the novel's original publication. With good reason, literary and social critics alike are hesitant to give Dickens too much credit for the reform of the New Poor Law and they remain skeptical of Dickens as a progressive visionary. Social historian Anthony Brundage reminds us that Dickens was a traditional conservative who was eclipsed by a far more radical conception of liberalism:

Figures as different as William Cobbett, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Charles Dickens all championed tradition and the wisdom of the local community in opposition to abstract theory and centralized authority. From the 1830s, however, there emerged a radicalism far less tethered to traditional rights than that of Cobbett. The Chartists, in their spirited opposition to the New Poor Law, operated from a democratic egalitarianism that was itself the product of abstract reasoning. By the turn of the twentieth century, democratic and socialist advocates of a forward looking national system of social services had become more than a match for those still grounded in philosophical individualism and laissez-faire economics. (156)

At first glance, *Oliver Twist*, promoting charity and compassion in response to the modernizing social order, shows that Dickens was more of a conservative moralist than a progressive reformer. The emergence of modern liberalism, first embodied by the Chartist working-class movement in England, was also “far less tethered” to Dickens’s idea of Christian social ethics in the local community. The abstract theories of political economy and the centralized authority of the New Poor Law gave way to the abstract theories of “democratic egalitarianism” and the centralized authority of the modern welfare system. In fact, the individualism of the New Poor Law “was being eclipsed by collectivist and communitarian values,” rather than the morality and humanism advanced by *Oliver Twist*. (Brundage 133). The magnitude of this shift was reflected in “New Liberalism” and

the redistributive programs it instituted, including the Old-Age Pensions Act of 1908 and the National Insurance Act of 1911. The “combined effect of old-age pensions and sickness benefits” reduced “the number of paupers by nearly 20 percent, from 916,377 in 1910 to 748, 019 in 1913” (143). In three short years, a national network of government services had achieved what Dickens had only dreamt of: the demise of the New Poor Law and the alleviation of widespread poverty.

If *Oliver Twist* did not envision this progressive transformation, then what did it do? Does the satire and humanity of *Oliver Twist* really perceive of a larger, conceptual vision of social ethics and justice? Or does it simply promote Christian conservatism and community morals in response to practical concerns, such as sanitation in the workhouse? After all, Oliver returns to his rightful place in the upper echelon of Victorian society. The result may be just, but it certainly cannot be construed as a result for the common good. Upon deeper reflection, however, *Oliver Twist* did have a substantive impact, assimilating the realities of poverty in the era of the New Poor Law into the social consciousness of its readership. Dickens strived to show the inhumanity and complexity of real poverty. In a world where all were “weak and erring,” he asked why the compassion of the Good Samaritan could not coexist with the new economic order (Dickens, *OT* 415). His impact was so strong that, during the original serialization of the novel, the *Morning Chronicle* reported, “Boz has produced so strong an impression...that in Chelsea, for instance, people have gone about lecturing for the purpose of counteracting the effect of his writings” (qtd. in Richardson 284). The impact, however, was not immediate and required a gradual assimilation to take hold. Into the 1840s, Dickens continued to report on the evils of the New Poor Law system. In particular, writing for *The Examiner*, Dickens conveyed “the disastrous events of 1849, in which hundreds of neglected and malnourished London workhouse children died when cholera broke out at an overcrowded and insanitary baby farm run by a private contractor, Drouet, at Tooting, south London” (Richardson

284). Consequently, a conscious and well-informed public began to recognize the social order's disposition to the poor and the problems it created.

In turn, that understanding was integrally connected to a social conscience—an ethical obligation to do right in the name of justice. To take Steven Marcus's theorization of the abstract narrative in *Oliver Twist* a step further, conscience in the novel is also conceptual rather than applied, emanating “from what we might call a generic imagination—an imagination, that is, which is primarily employed in the dramatization of symbolization of abstract ideas” (63). If the imaginary injustices in *Oliver Twist* become real through consciousness and empathy, then it is conscience that seeks a remedy. Conscience moves people to action, generating social change. Marcus inadvertently touches upon social conscience when he notes that “relations between men have been reduced to abstract calculations, and men themselves have been transformed into isolated and dehumanized objects” in the modernizing society of *Oliver Twist* (64). It is precisely the ethic of conscience that returns us to a proper relation to humanity in order to solve the problems that come with a social existence. Accordingly, the first and most fundamental step in elevating the human condition is the recognition that human beings—whether they are members of the criminal underground, the working-class, or even the workhouse—cannot be treated as “dehumanized objects.” Only then can justice and the common good follow. In this vein, *Oliver Twist* continues to advocate for a morally conservative, yet socially progressive response to the poor. Dickens honors the Good Samaritan by demonstrating the need for social ethics and he indicts what was passed as liberal and enlightened thought—unregulated economic self-interest that, in practice, functions as negligence to our fellow man. Reproving the theoretical foundations of the New Poor Law for committing this error, Dickens summarizes it best: “political economy is a mere skeleton unless it has a little human covering and filling out, a little human bloom upon it, and a little human warmth in it” (qtd in Henderson 149).

### III. “MEN CAN STARVE FROM A LACK OF SELF-REALIZATION”: THE POLITICS OF DISCOURSE IN *NATIVE SON*

But, because the blacks were so *close* to the very civilization which sought to keep them out, because they could not *help* but react in some way to its incentives and prizes, and because the very tissue of their consciousness received its tone and timbre from the strivings of that dominant civilization, oppression spawned among them a myriad variety of reactions, reaching from outright blind rebellion to a sweet, other-worldly submissiveness.

—Richard Wright, “How Bigger Was Born,” 1940

In Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), the narrative tells the story of Bigger Thomas’s lived experience—a black male and his environment. To understand Bigger’s existence requires an understanding of his environment which, in turn, entails an understanding of the discourse in racially segregated America. In the epigraph, Wright describes consciousness as a reaction to this environment in which the dominant civilization’s “incentives and prizes” and the “tone and timbre” of its “strivings” work to oppress the black race (“How Bigger Was Born,” 438). These incentives, signs, and interactions constitute the cultural discourse. Lived experience is then mediated through cultural discourse, shaping how people perceive reality. Discourse pervades individual psychologies and social institutions, and because it affects political practices, discourse affects material policies—such as housing and education—that constitute the social reality itself. In the case of the blacks in pre-Civil Rights America, however, such discourse was not their own, but an oppressive and discriminatory discourse emanating from a foreign world. According to scholar John Reilly, whoever frames the discourse controls lived experience. In the context of *Native Son*, he explains the role of discourse in propagating white hegemony:

Social power expresses itself in monopoly upon the right to define meaning. Thus, on the obsessive American topic of race, the dominant population—those who

chose to call themselves white in order to distinguish their status from that of the people whose slavery and subordination were justified on the basis of skin color— have accorded to themselves the right to compile documents and relate the tales that define blackness, thereby controlling the circumstances of discussion while suppressing the humanity of the people objectified in stories and documents as ‘other.’ (36-7)

Imprisoned by poverty and deprived of civil rights, blacks living in the world of *Native Son* could not shape the discourse that controlled the experience of their lives. We must read the story of Bigger Thomas with this in mind.

Admittedly, discourse in *Native Son* appears Foucauldian in its perception. The hegemonic power of white elites—systematically transmitted through institutions, ideas, practices, and beliefs—constructs discourse in an attempt to regulate social life for the continuance of that power. Resistance to oppressive discourse becomes futile because the masses cannot differentiate between what *truly* governs lived experience and what *merely* imitates lived experience. The murders committed by Bigger Thomas may be a temporary form of resistance, but they do nothing to challenge social power. Foucauldian discourse, however, is too quick to deconstruct liberal principles of human agency and freedom. After all, how did Richard Wright break free from a *panoptical* social environment in the Jim Crow South and Chicago to tell the tale of Bigger Thomas? Discourse in *Native Son*, as I argue, is actually Bakhtinian, leaving room for liberation from these hegemonic systems that control black life. Mikhail Bakhtin despises authoritative discourse because it denies the existence of those who are underrepresented and disadvantaged in terms of power. He terms the “carnavalesque,” a literary interpretation of social change, because carnivals and their celebration of life erode socioeconomic and authoritative status. In *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin writes, “This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative

nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things” (34). Consequently, the carnivalesque liberates cultural discourse from hegemonic power through disorder and subversion. This is precisely what Wright does in part three of *Native Son*, titled “Fate,” when he depicts Bigger’s failed self-realization in the context of his sociological condition. The conflict and turmoil of the trial scene allow us “to realize the relative nature of all that exists” after we see Bigger’s life marginalized by the white world. Wright therefore leaves open the possibility to correct for arbitrary inequalities existing in the relative nature of society.

Accordingly, this chapter attempts to answer a series of related questions: How does oppressive discourse manifest in the lived experience of blacks? If lived experience is controlled by the social environment, what does that mean for the self—the individual as an autonomous actor? What do the politics of discourse mean in terms of conscience and justice? This chapter first establishes the cultural discourse in *Native Son* that influences the lived experience of Bigger. In particular, how these discursive signs and symbols are imposed on Bigger by the white world go a long way in explaining why Bigger’s self-realization is manipulated and, ultimately, prevented by the social environment. This chapter then examines the *politics* of this discourse by primarily focusing on the scholarly debate surrounding *Native Son* as it pertains to the divide between Bigger’s sociological condition and his existential being. Sociology informs the Marxist interpretation, which contends that Bigger as a signifier for blacks in America, and humanism informs the existential interpretation, which portrays Bigger as an individual looking for agency. Through a series of close readings that make use of the dialectical analysis in Max’s controversial “Guilt of the Nation” speech, I reconcile these interpretations. This reconciliation attempts to promote the ideological consciousness of *Native Son*, evidencing how oppressive discourse and racial discrimination impede positive freedom and, as a result, self-realization in America. *Native Son*, as a result, can be read as a cultural warning to the internal danger confronting the American project, that is, the danger of maintaining a racial caste

in society based on democratic equality and civil rights. I conclude with an ethical interpretation of Bigger's fate, which leads to a normative and historical justification for the conscience of *Native Son*.

Right from the very beginning of book one in *Native Son*, titled "Fear," Wright shows how the oppressive discourse of the white world materializes in Bigger's life. After another warning from his mother that he will have to find a job or the family's relief check will be cut, Bigger leaves his apartment complex and sees a group of men pasting a huge poster on a signboard across the street. The poster is for the State Attorney Buckley's reelection campaign, yet Bigger cannot turn himself away from the sign's message:

He looked at the poster: the white face was fleshy but stern; one hand was uplifted and its index finger pointed straight out into the street at each passer-by. The poster showed one of those faces that looked straight at you when you looked at it and all the while you were walking and turning your head to look at it it kept looking unblinkingly back at you until you got so far from it you had to take your eyes away, and then it stopped, like a movie blackout. Above the top of the poster were tall red letters: YOU CAN'T WIN! (Wright 13, author's emphasis)

In a contrived fashion, Wright foreshadows Bigger's prosecution in "Fate." Of greater significance, however, the message transmits an omnipresent quality; whether exiting his apartment or simply walking down the street, Bigger cannot avoid Buckley's gaze, nor can he stop thinking about it while he is in its purview. Wright suggests that the political sign becomes part of the cultural discourse when it pervades Bigger's life and constantly reminds him that he cannot win in a prejudiced legal system. Bigger responds to the sign, saying "'You crook,' he mumbled, shaking his head. 'You let whoever pays *you* off win!'" (13). Bigger knows enough to realize that this discourse is oppressive—the law can be bought by the highest bidder. But, he exhibits no understanding of why this discourse is categorically unjust, working to subjugate an entire race. In this context, Craig Werner points out

that the experience of modernism—one of pervasive cultural signs broadcasted through the growth of journalism, film, and advertising—creates “a disorienting texture of competing discourses” that, channeling T.S. Eliot, comprises an “urban waste land” (122). Wright implies that all blacks are confined to this waste land because the African-American community is excluded from participating in the discourse which, in turn, leads to the fragmentation and alienation of the modern experience. Consequently, Bigger must acquiesce to oppressive discourse because it defines his day-to-day interactions with the surrounding environment and emanates from a foreign world in which his race has been denied inclusion.

Bigger, however, encounters discourse that goes far beyond denying him access to a fair justice system. He is consciously affected by a much more insidious discourse that operates, albeit inactively, to repress his self-realization. In line with the modern experience of fragmentation, Wright depicts why cultural symbols remind Bigger that he is unable to realize the dignity and meaning found in a life of fulfillment. Smoking a cigarette outside the poolroom with Gus, Bigger notices a plane writing a message in the sky. In a rare moment of self-reflection with nothing more than illusory aspirations, Bigger tells Gus:

‘I could fly one of them things if I had a chance,’ Bigger mumbled reflectively, as though talking to himself.

Gus pulled down the corners of his lips, stepped out from the wall, squared his shoulders, doffed his cap, bowed low and spoke with mocked deference:

‘Yessuh.’

‘You go to hell,’ Bigger said, smiling.

‘Yessuh,’ Gus said again.

‘I *could* fly a plane if I had the chance,’ Bigger said.

‘If you wasn’t black and if you had some money and if they’d let you go to that aviation school, you *could* fly a plane,’ Gus said. (Wright 16-7, author’s emphasis).

Ironically, the plane’s message turns out to be an advertisement for a brand of gasoline. This time the message has no real bearing on Bigger’s life, but the plane itself is a symbol that tells him what he can and cannot do, what he is and is not capable of. Wright wants us to realize that Bigger could piloted a plane given the opportunity, but social forces and institutions, manipulated by the same outside world that controls the discursive environment, dictate otherwise. Bigger carries “a feeling of being forever commanded by others” that contributes to his disaffected, wayward existence (Wright 331).

Another way of conceptualizing Bigger’s aspirational limits is through what Houston Baker, Jr. calls the “Dynamics of Place,” what Desmond Harding calls “The Power of Place,” and what I call the discourse of place. This theorization of the discourse of place, although similar to scholar Zayde Antrim’s use of the term in human geography, is more concerned with how hegemonic systems control the physical environment through cultural discourse, using the delineation of space and place to prevent a sense of belonging and permanence for the disadvantaged minority. As Baker observes, “Airplanes and their soaring capabilities are, in one reading of the scenes, signifiers of American industrial/technological arrangements that make traditional Afro-American geographies into a placeless place” (86). This interpretation lends a spatial dimension to Bigger’s lack of opportunity; the “soaring capabilities” of airplanes, signaling the progress of American industry and ingenuity, have not worked for the advancement of the African-American community. But, how could an African-American place really be placeless? For the freedom on *space* to become a functional *place*, Baker argues that place must be imparted with value and agency so its inhabitants can maintain both physical and social boundaries within their community (87). Extending this interpretation, I argue that agency and value must complement place because the ability to

participate in the life of the community brings a sense of belonging and permanence which, in turn, leads to self-worth and fulfillment. Bigger's place in life, however, is determined by the outside world; he is told where to live and how to live there. This lack of spatial autonomy, then, is evidenced by the discourse of place. In the African-American community, place can be oppressive, preventing mobility and reinforcing the inequality of opportunity.

The discourse of place, moreover, encompasses Bigger's physical environment as it relates to the ghettoization of the "Black Belt," located on the South Side of Chicago. In fact, Desmond Harding extends Baker's theorization of place to what he calls "architectural determinism" (96). The dilapidated tenement buildings and the run-down neighborhood blocks, in other words, physically marginalize the African-American community on the outskirts of the city and entrap its inhabitants in a cycle of poverty. Later on in *Native Son*, Bigger stumbles upon this ghettoization discourse when viewing a sign from Mr. Dalton's business. He becomes aware that place, especially for blacks, is oppressive:

He looked around the street and saw a sign on a building: THIS PROPERTY IS MANAGED BY THE SOUTH SIDE REAL ESTATE COMPANY. He had heard Mr. Dalton owned the South Side Real Estate Company, and the South Side Real Estate Company owned the house in which he lived. He paid eight dollars a week for one rat-infested room. He had never seen Mr. Dalton until he had come to work for him; his mother always took the rent to the real estate office. Mr. Dalton was somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god. He owned property all over the Black Belt, and he owned property where white folks lived, too. But Bigger could not live in a building across the 'line.' Even though Mr. Dalton gave millions of dollars for Negro education, he would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the city tumbling down from rot. (Wright 174)

Taking Harding's "architectural determinism" a step further, the segregated "line" physically relegates Bigger and the black community to otherness. Blacks are assigned and then confined to inhabit the "corner of the city tumbling down from rot," evoking images of overcrowded urban squalor and blighted tenement buildings. Even Mr. Dalton's elevated stature, "somewhere far away" and "high up," reinforces the black community's isolation. This oppressive discourse also has material applications in social policy. Wright implies that the South Side Real Estate Company charges exorbitant rent for a one room slum and, later on in the novel, he reveals that people of the Black Belt pay more for a loaf of bread (344). Blacks pay taxes but, presumably, live with unequal schools and inadequate public services. Wright, however, does not have Dickensian, reformist intentions in exposing the discourse of place for the black community. Wright, like Dickens, advocates for institutional reforms and humane treatment, but he believes that treatment should encompass the well-being and agency that comes with a dignified existence in the community. He shows why ghettoization not only exacerbates Bigger's underlying poverty, but also inhibits his effective freedom to pursue self-realization. Bigger's right to self-determination, however, is much more complicated in this oppressive environment and, consequently, we begin to see why Bigger would act out, rebel, and even murder to express his agency. Only separated by arbitrary line, Bigger is so close to civilization. Yet, the otherness of his lived experience, a result of oppressive discourse and discrimination, increases the true distance of that boundary.

Wright makes clear the manifestations of discourse, but significant questions remain: What do the *politics* of this discourse in *Native Son* have to say about Bigger's lived experience? Is Bigger's existence socially determined or does he maintain individual autonomy? Does *Native Son* conceive of conscience and justice and, if so, what are the ramifications for the politics of poverty? Wright responds to these questions in book three of *Native Son*, appropriately titled "Fate." As the narrative comes to a close, the state unsurprisingly convicts Bigger for the murders of Mary Dalton and Bessie

Mears. Bigger's death sentence, however, complicates the narrative, creating ambiguity about Bigger's fate as he attempts to reconcile his humanity with his sociological condition. Two critical schools of thought, by and large, attempt to assess this outcome in "Fate." One theory, supported by novelist James Baldwin and critic George Kent, among others, posits that "Fate" is aesthetically unsophisticated, reducing Bigger's existential crisis to a sociological problem. Like Baldwin's contemplation of the Negro in America, this view rejects Wright's stationing of Bigger Thomas in the "social arena" because he becomes an issue of "statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence" (Baldwin 48). This sociological interpretation results in an "endless cataloguing" of dichotomous wins and losses that do not really contribute to social justice; Bigger's station in life is "analogous to disease"—a disease that, according to Baldwin, can only be lessened but never fully cured (49). Wright denies Bigger a human existence, according to Baldwin, and, surrounded by foreign discourse and oppressive forces, Bigger dies unable to assert his humanity. The second theory, however, takes a slightly more optimistic perspective. Scholars such as John Reilly and Barbara Foley espouse the Marxist interpretation of Bigger's condition, highlighting the vital role of the trial scene in attributing the crime to a history of staggering black poverty and institutional oppression drawn along the lines of race. Bigger's "Fate" thus reflects a much larger context than his own particular destiny. Perhaps realizing this for himself, Bigger comes to grips with his own human existence despite still being restricted by social reality. These two theories carry a profound tension with important repercussions: Does the social novel subvert the artistic exploration of the self? Can social justice do anything for the self-realization of the individual?

The answers to these questions require a reconciliation of the divergent theories. Unfortunately, critical inconsistencies and contradictions abound in both. If we accept Wright's portrayal of "Fate" as undermining Bigger's right to self-determination, then how do we interpret the real influence of external social forces beyond Bigger's control? In this sense, Baldwin's

characterization appears reductive because he is too quick to dismiss the discursive power of the social order. He moves dangerously close to a vision of futility for the black individual in America, missing the larger point that Wright's sociology, at the very least, assimilates social consciousness and, perhaps, leaves open the possibility for social improvement. Granted, this improvement is not the revolutionary change that Wright desires, but progress is nonetheless a solid starting point to counter the status quo. If, on the other hand, we accept a Marxist interpretation of Bigger's plight in "Fate," then how do we reconcile it with a liberal, even humanistic interpretation of Bigger's condition? Too much emphasis on socioeconomic forces can be self-defeating, undermining the agency to break free from social determination. For this reason, Harold Bloom remains reluctant to accept the ideological consciousness of *Native Son*:

The critical defenders of *Native Son* must choose. Either Bigger Thomas is a responsible consciousness, and so profoundly culpable, or else the white world is responsible and culpable, which means however that Bigger ceases to be of fictive interest and becomes an ideogram, rather than a persuasive representation of a possible human being. (*Modern Critical Interpretations* 2)

Bloom may have a legitimate point, but his exhortation, like Baldwin's, is limiting considering the cultural importance of *Native Son* in the American literary canon. Tellingly, Bloom retracts from his original rigid assessment, concluding that Wright's novel "transcends the concerns of a strictly literary criticism, and reminds the critic of the claims of history, society, political economy, and the longer records of oppression and injustice that history continues to scant" (*Modern Critical Views* 2). Why, as interpreters of *Native Son* in a new modernity, can we not have it both ways? Why can we not view Bigger's fate as socially determined while still recognizing his individual existentialism?

Bigger is a social effect, as I argue, which may undermine his own agency, but it does not prevent him from self-realization as it relates to the plight of what Baldwin calls "the Negro in

America.” The interrogative discourse in the final pages of the narrative represents a profound, almost metaphysical exploration of the interaction between the individual and the social order—proving that Wright’s intentions are much more sophisticated. In fact, the attorney-client relationship, as Max, a representative of the Communist Party, spends time with Bigger in his final days, is a means to contemplate Bigger’s relation to the social order. In the famous courtroom scene, Max launches an unorthodox defense of Bigger’s crime. Notably, Max’s closing argument, sometimes called the “Guilt of the Nation” speech, comes during the sentencing phase of the trial—a time to introduce mitigation evidence as life and death hang in the balance. His discourse, contrary to the belief of prejudiced critics, is not an insertion of propaganda nor does it even espouse a radical socialist ethic. He demonstrates a dialectical understanding of the social forces that mitigate Bigger’s individual culpability. Max contends that Bigger’s crime must be considered in terms of a collective psychology—one of uncontrollable impulses that are almost universally experienced by an oppressed and subjugated people:

Multiply Bigger Thomas twelve million times, allowing for environmental and temperamental variations, and for those Negroes who are completely under the influence of the church, and you have the psychology of the Negro people. But once you see them as a whole, once your eyes leave the individual and encompass the mass, a new quality comes into the picture. Taken collectively, they are not simply twelve million people; in reality they constitute a separate nation, stunted, stripped, and held captive *within* this nation, devoid of political, social, economic, and property rights. (Wright 397, author’s emphasis)

Bigger is a signifier; all black Americans who exhibit this psychology are members of the racial caste. As Max poignantly tells Bigger, “Well, this thing’s bigger than you, son. In a certain sense, every Negro in America’s on trial out there today” (Wright 368). The identity of this “separate nation” is

indeed on trial, but blacks cannot possibly win “devoid of political, social, economic, and property rights.” The state’s prosecution of Bigger, moreover, is not just about the murders, but an attempt by the District Attorney, Buckley, to cement the relationship between race and criminality. The Negro people supposedly have a propensity for crime because their collective identity embodies an alleged history of savagery and impertinence. The result denies blacks a *personalized* interpretation of character and spreads unwarranted fear about their inherent nature. If effective, this discourse succeeds in relegating blacks to otherness, in which they can be oppressed because *they* are different. According to Peter Ramadanovic, “It is this ‘they’ that Baldwin, misunderstanding Wright’s philosophical idiom, wants to see identified” (112). But, it is precisely because of this otherness that Wright cannot completely individualize Bigger and the people he represents. When Bigger is denied a free existence, it becomes that much harder to liberate identity from repression.

Max, on the other hand, shows that the relationship between crime and race, if any, is a social determination fashioned by a historical legacy of oppression and discrimination. Max goes beyond the superficial language of the state’s case and describes what Bigger’s existence really means to white hegemony: “This Negro’s boy’s entire attitude toward life is a *crime!*” (Wright 400, author’s emphasis). In the next passage, Max concludes, “*His very existence is a crime against the state!*” because Bigger’s “hope” for advancement is construed as an “insurrection” and every “dream” is a “conspiracy” (400, author’s emphasis). These seditious words, ideas, and actions inspire fear—a fear that only perpetuates the attitudes that construct such discourse. Addressing Bigger’s discursive awareness, Max notes that this “instrument of fear” determines “the mode and the quality of his consciousness” (402). The real separation of the races, however, stems from *how* this pervasive fear manifests in society and *why* it takes hold. Wright brilliantly alludes to an implicit irony that underlies the discourse of the courtroom. The psychology of the Negro people is, in fact, not that far off from the psychology of the white mob outside the courtroom. Both races “hate because they fear, and

they fear because they feel that the deepest feelings of their lives are being assaulted and outraged” (Wright 390). Reacting to the incentives of white America—mainly self-determination in a democratic society—black fear results from being unable to access and attain such freedom, cultivating an impulse to lash out in the name of self-preservation. Bigger’s violent outbreak represents a singular incident in this much larger pandemic. Acting out of their own self-interest, whites, much like Bigger, fear what is foreign. The potential for a black way of life threatens traditional notions of purity and civility. Fear may manifest in different practices, but the emotion still emanates from a universal, human psychology.

The brilliance of Max’s rhetoric, however, lies in his ability to explain *why* this fear persists and intensifies in modern times. Based off of a simple premise, but not a simplistic argument, Max attributes the separation of the races to the social order. In a lengthy, yet salient passage, he explains the dialectic between the white superstructure and its control of the black base:

If only ten or twenty Negroes had been put into slavery, we could call it injustice, but there were hundreds of thousands of them throughout the country. If this state of affairs had lasted for two or three years, we could say that it was unjust; but it lasted for more than two hundred years. Injustice which lasts for three long centuries and which exists among millions of people over thousands of square miles of territory, is injustice no longer; it is an accomplished fact of life. Men adjust themselves to their land; they create their own laws of being; their notions of right and wrong. A common way of earning a living gives them a common attitude toward life. Even their speech is colored and shaped by what they must undergo. Your Honor, injustice blots out one form of life, but another grows up in its place with its own rights, needs, and aspirations. What is happening here today is not injustice, but *oppression*, an attempt to throttle or stamp out a new form of life...Unless we grasp

this problem in the light of this new reality, we cannot do more than salve our feelings of guilt and rage with more murder when a man, living under such conditions, commits an act which we call a crime. (Wright 391, author's emphasis)

Simply put, the sheer magnitude of injustice committed against blacks has forced them to “adjust” their places, adopting new “laws of being” and “notions of right and wrong.” The result is a new way of life, emphasizing self-preservation over self-determination, which is in direct tension with the order of the superstructure. The effort by whites to “stamp out” this “new form of life” constitutes oppression because it attempts to control the base through institutional and discursive discrimination. The justification for this oppression is based on a false ideological consciousness—propagated by the political and economic power of the superstructure—that constructs lies about black inferiority. In this vein, *Native Son* becomes a testimony on why the social forces work to segregate the races.

Consequently, Wright takes “command of the racial discourse by sweeping away the historical structures of rationalization and the mystifications of language, thereby laying bare the dialectic of the social system and its ideology” (Reilly 53). The racial discourse is no longer justifiable when Max exposes the reality of this dialectical relationship between the races. Wright informs the reader that Bigger’s crime cannot be separated from the conditions he endures living in poverty. During Max’s examination of witnesses, we find out that Mr. Dalton’s company owns the blighted apartment building in which Bigger’s family rents out a cramped, almost unlivable slum. Wright even insinuates that Mr. Dalton engages in a price fixing scheme; lower rent prices would mean that Mr. Dalton was “underselling” his competitors and breaking the “code of ethics in business” (Wright 328). This is the kind of context the reader needs to assimilate consciousness and understand the social forces that work to repress Bigger and others like him. As Barbara Foley points out, that is why “[t]he author feels compelled to include a character who tells us what the protagonist’s life

means because he can't just assume that his readers' experience will enable them to provide Bigger with an appropriate context" (196). Most readers have presumably never set foot in the Black Belt of Chicago and, even if they did, their charity, despite good intentions, would resemble Mr. Dalton's donation of 12 Ping-Pong tables to the South Side Boy's Club. The alleviation of poverty and racial oppression requires a much more meaningful response. In other words, it requires the politics of poverty—a holistic intervention to remedy widespread hardship and promote the *positive liberty* of individuals in a democratic society. Social consciousness, nevertheless, begins to set the moral framework for justifying such an intervention.

But, how is this a valid legal argument for lessening Bigger's culpability or, at the very least, explaining the reason for the crime? Better yet, how can we even be sure that the Marxist interpretation actually shows the *true* reality? Max is, after all, a partisan with political motivations as a member of the Communist Party. Critic George Kent does not reject Max's argument just because he is a socialist, but he does see Max's speech as an attempt to score political points for New Deal liberalism in 1940s America:

Wright scores debater's points on jobs, housing, and equal opportunity. The famous courtroom speech that the attorney Max makes in behalf of Bigger hardly rises above such humanitarian matters. Thus a novel that resounds in revolutionary tones descends to merely reformist modulations that would make glad the heart of a New Deal liberal. (95)

The speech falls short of revolutionary fervor in its politics, but its legal justification is actually more well-grounded than we may realize. Interestingly enough, the speech accords with the legal realism movement—the idea of sociological jurisprudence—of the 1920s and 1930s, positing that the law cannot ignore social and political discourse. In an insightful essay titled “*Native Son* and the Legal Means for Social Justice,” scholar Mark Decker explains how “several parallels exist between

the Marxist critic of bourgeois conceptions of law and the Legal Realist's conception of law as a social construct...Legal realism thus offered Communists a socially accepted praxis that loosely conformed to their own ideological critique of capitalist society (181). Despite Bigger's guilt, this view recognizes that harsh economic forces and racial oppression have a bearing on his crime, understanding why Bigger reacted the way he did. Wright himself subscribes to this school of social-psychological interpretation. In *Black Boy* (1945), Wright describes how intensive research spurred his development as a writer:

...the most important discoveries came when I veered from fiction proper into the field of psychology and sociology...I studied tables of figures relating population density to insanity, relating housing to disease, relating school and recreational opportunities to crime, relating various forms of neurotic behavior to environment, relating racial insecurities to the conflicts between blacks and whites... (278)

The list goes on, but the point is clear: empirical research substantiates the portrayal of Bigger, lending insight into the real social structures and forces that affect the narrative. Even if Max's speech reads as a justification for New Deal liberalism, it espouses a sociological solution to a social problem (Decker 183). Given his unemployment, poor housing, and poverty contributing to his lack of self-realization, Bigger's situation is certainly a social problem. This might not change his conviction, but it could mitigate his death sentence—a sentence that society has already imposed.

The purpose of Max's speech, as a result, is to elucidate the false correlation between race and criminality through a dialectical analysis of social conditions. Even if readers are somewhat skeptical of *Native Son's* sociological merits—although I do not think there is cause to be—John Reilly offers an alternative and equally valid justification for why Bigger's condition evidences a much larger social problem. He writes, “Max's speech derives its corroboration from the fictional narrative” because we seek confirmation of his argument not just through “empirical research or

testimony,” but also through “the artistic representation of Bigger’s life” (58). As readers, we cannot possibly know what housing statistics or crime rates really mean without the psychological experience of reading fiction, allowing us to understand Bigger’s thought, emotion, and spirit “unknown in the experience of real life” (58). Lending anecdotal validity to the sociological interpretation of Bigger’s crime provides insight into the reality of social conditions. The brutality of Bigger’s crime, coupled with the novel’s tragic resolution, confirms just how powerful these social forces really are. The better criticism, of course, is that *Native Son*’s social protest undermines a humanistic interpretation of Bigger’s individualism. James Baldwin posits, “The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended” (qtd. in Gibson 101). Baldwin is right, to a certain extent, about the protest novel’s rejection of life. Wright’s social protest is, after all, a clear repudiation of the life’s circumstances in a racial hotbed of poverty and hardship. Max cannot save Bigger—his life has been rejected by the social order—he can only protest why Bigger’s life and fate are unjust. Is it the case, however, that Max’s social protest relegates Bigger to anonymity? Does Wright really deny human “dread” and “power” to the point that we lose sight of Bigger’s existential crisis—the coming to terms, in other words, with his own fate?

After Max’s “Guilt of the Nation” speech, Bigger is sentenced to death and we observe him during the solitary and introspective hours that a dying man spends awaiting his fate. Bigger finds a voice, contrary to Baldwin’s theory, and transcends the categorization of others by producing his own understanding of his situation. Bigger attempts to reconcile his actions with his fate, looking for Max’s approbation to give him a shared, human consolation. Here, we see Bigger come to grips with human dread and suffering, lending insight into his identity:

‘They wouldn’t let me live and I killed. Maybe it ain’t fair, and I reckon I really didn’t want to kill. But when I think of why all the killing was, I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am...’

Bigger saw Max back away from him with compressed lips. But he felt he had to make Max understand how he saw things now.

‘I didn’t want to kill!’ Bigger shouted. ‘But what I killed for I *am!* It must’ve been pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder...’

Max lifted his hand to touch Bigger, but did not.

‘No; no; no....Bigger, not that....’ Max pleaded despairingly.

‘What I killed for must’ve been good!’ Bigger’s voice was full of frenzied anguish. (Wright 429-30, author’s emphasis)

In “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright explains how he wanted to show Bigger “living dangerously, taking life into his own hands, accepting what life had made him” (461). This passage is the closest we get to that acceptance as Bigger takes responsibility for his own salvation—something that, at the end of the day, only the individual can do. Notice that Bigger “felt he had to make Max understand how he saw things now.” Bigger is no longer a passive, reactionary actor to the discourse of the white world; he begins to feel and think independently. Bigger, in effect, creates his own discourse even if it is a depraved, troubling rationalization of his crime. Nonetheless, it gives Bigger a sense of liberation from the oppressive discourse he has encountered his entire life. He manipulates language to tell his own tragic story and, in doing so, exhibits agency and consciousness. Bigger finally displays his own existential relation to the external world. We can argue whether this relation is misguided or even dangerous to the human community. Desmond Harding argues that Bigger’s “attempt to separate the Self from the community in order to come into a new sense of conscious history is nothing more than a tragic fallacy” (103). This is precisely Wright’s point, however, in

making Bigger's reconciliation a flawed self-realization. The tragedy is that Bigger cannot separate "the Self from the community" because the community actively represses his full self-realization through oppressive discourse and material hardship. The consciousness Bigger finds is an isolated, solipsistic relation that will last until the human community decides to let him in.

Ironically, Bigger reverses roles with Max, whose actions become reactionary. Max tries to touch Bigger and communicate on a humanistic level, but Bigger's revelation causes Max's eyes to become "full of terror" and "Several times his body moved nervously, as though he were about to go to Bigger" (Wright 430). Max's response draws sharp condemnation and numerous critics cite it as proof of Bigger's failed reconciliation to the outside world. George Kent asserts that Bigger "is tortured by the knowledge that his deepest hunger is for human communion, and by his lawyer's briefly raising it as a possibility" (94). Bigger does look for understanding in Max and, arguably, fails to receive it. Notably, however, Max does leave their final encounter in tears, evidencing a reciprocal human respect for the suffering Bigger has endured in his plight. Craig Werner offers a better critique: "Reflecting the limitations of Marxist analysis presented in the 'Guilt of the Nation' speech...Max shows little sense of the complexity of Bigger's consciousness, responding only with 'a casual look, devoid of the deeper awareness that Bigger sought'" (138). Consequently, "Max withdraws, abandoning Bigger to the modernist solipsism which has been an undercurrent of his experience throughout" (150). There is no doubt that Bigger is metaphysically, or existentially, isolated from the rest of humanity at the end of the novel. But, is this really Max's fault or a product of the social reality that Bigger starts to scratch the surface of?

Bigger may never attain the self-realization he yearns for in the beginning pages of the novel, gazing at the plane in the sky, but he understands his identity as it relates to the social order that has subverted this self-realization. Bigger himself remarks that he "always wanted to do something"—a something which, as Wright implies, entails a contribution to the community and flourishing of the

self (Wright 427). Bigger understands that his isolation as a black man in a white world could have been remedied if only he had the opportunity for a *meaningful* existence, living and working in a post-racial America. That is why, when Bigger murders Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears, he feels free for the first time in his life—he does *something* when he murders. In a perverse way, the murder becomes meaningful because it gives Bigger “a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him” (274). Rather than living an anonymous existence in the fringes, Bigger slowly realizes that the murders give him an important role in the social order—he becomes the felon and fugitive to the law and order of the community. The murders also allow Bigger a sense of “moral guilt and responsibility” (274). He can claim responsibility for the act that he has committed and, in doing so, find agency and expression. This is what Bigger is getting at in his final conversation with Max, when he says, “What I killed for must’ve been good!” Bigger exerts individual agency for the first time in his life; he voices his defiance of the society that attempts to repress his voice through oppressive discourse, leaving hope for others like him.

Consequently, Bigger finds an identity, an existential relationship to the social reality that holds serious implications for Baldwin’s critique of Wright’s sociology. Baldwin believes that Bigger is denied humanity, but, if Bigger comes to recognize “the synthesis of social reality and individual experience,” then his stories, relayed by Max, become “genuine instruments of defense and authentic expressions of his life’s importance” (Reilly 55). What is more human than the acknowledgment of Bigger’s authenticity and dignity? Bigger achieves this synthesis through his new consciousness of the self *and* society; he sees himself as a killer and takes individual responsibility, but he knows that social forces prevented his full self-realization. Still unable to fully articulate this discovery, Bigger can only allude to it in his dialogue with Max, leaving the reader with an interpretive obligation to read between the lines. He says, “They wouldn’t let me live and I killed. Maybe it ain’t fair, and I reckon I really didn’t want to kill. But when I think of why all the killing



boy I depicted in *Native Son* is either a Communist or a Fascist. He is not either. But he is a product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man; he is all of this, and he lives amid the greatest possible plenty of earth and he is looking and feeling for a way out. (“How Bigger Was Born,” 447)

Bigger, exhibiting a potential for violent, revolutionary action because of his degenerate condition, represented, and continues to represent, a danger, with its own potential for devastation, to the American social order. Bigger’s “heritage”—a long history of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and poverty—leads him to become this “dispossessed and disinherited man” (“How Bigger Was Born,” 451). But Bigger’s heritage is incompatible with the American heritage of opportunity for all and, according to Wright, the “idealism” of civil liberty embodied by the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution (451). As Max tells the jury in *Native Son*, “When we said that men are ‘endowed with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,’ we did not pause to define ‘happiness.’ That is the unexpressed quality in our quest, and we have never tried to put it into words” (Wright 398). *Native Son* shows that these qualities are empty for Bigger, who could barely conceive of such freedom without a meaningful existence in a society that would not even recognize, let alone enforce minority claims to civil rights and justice. Bigger, and many others like him, were thus relegated to a racial caste underwritten by the hypocrisy of this American ideal. By revealing the oppressive discourse and uncompromising dialectic existing between the segregated white and black worlds, however, *Native Son* served as a cultural warning to the internal danger confronting the American project. In short, this is the ideological consciousness of *Native Son*.

In the context of American history, *Native Son* also contains a profound social conscience. Historian Irving Howe defines the importance and the impact of Wright’s greatest literary achievement: “The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever...it made

impossible a repetition of old lies. In all its crudeness, melodrama and claustrophobia of vision, Richard Wright's novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture" (63). When viewed from a longitudinal perspective, *Native Son* did much more than expose the social reality of race relations. After 1940, the year of the novel's publication, a paradigmatic shift occurred in race relations in the successive aftermath of World War II. As the triumphant and preeminent world superpower and a bastion of human rights and democracy, America gradually began to change its disposition to the African-American community. During the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement attacked the sources of racial oppression and discrimination seemingly in answer to *Native Son*'s story. Wright's work carried a prophetic vision of the violence and hostility that would be played out on the political stage during the sit-ins, freedom rides, and, later on, the race riots. Unlike Bigger's violent outbreak, which was an expression of his social insignificance, the Civil Rights demonstrations were attached to the cause of justice. There was a reason, in addition, that the Civil Rights movement focused on political and civil equality before economic improvement. According to critic Petar Ramadanovic, the trial in *Native Son* "represents the culminating phase—the phase in which we still live—in the long history of American racism, where the legal sphere becomes the primary site of the regulation and definition of race, as opposed to the social or economic spheres" (109). Bigger's fate is indeed decided in the courtroom—not the marketplace nor some social institution—because it is in the courtroom that the bonds of the racial caste are either codified or abolished. As Wright contends throughout *Native Son*, Bigger needs more than a New Deal job or a philanthropic benefactor in Mr. Dalton to escape his debilitating poverty. This is the central underpinning of the politics of poverty: a holistic response is needed to break a deeply entrenched racial caste constructed by discursive oppression and discrimination. Bigger needs the law to recognize his human dignity, enforce equal protection, and provide for fair equality of opportunity, so, at the very least, he will have the capability for a full

self-realization. As a matter of justice, the politics of poverty champions policies that advance this positive liberty because justice demands that equal citizens be given the opportunity to pursue well-being in a democracy that requires their participation and engagement. Before material progress can be made, however, these abstractions of equality and justice must be validated in the legal sphere.

In his brilliant essay “Richard Wright’s Blues,” Ralph Ellison explains how civil rights and liberties are the antecedents to social justice:

Men cannot express that which does not exist—either in the form of dreams, ideas or realities—in his environment. Neither his thoughts nor his feelings, his sensibility nor his intellect are fixed, innate qualities. They are processes which arise out of the interpenetration of human instinct with environment, through the process called experience, each changing and being changed by the other. Negroes cannot possess many of the sentiments attributed to them because the same changes in the environment which, through experience, enlarge man’s intellect (and this his capacity for still greater change) also modify his feelings—which in turn increase his sensitivity, i.e., his sensitivity to refinements of impression and subtleties of emotion. The extent of these changes depends upon the quality of political and cultural freedom in the environment. (137)

In short, Bigger’s “sensitivity” to oppressive cultural discourse modified his feelings—making him angry, violent, fearful—which, in turn, diminished his intellect and the ability for the self to flourish. As Ellison emphasizes, Bigger needed “political and cultural freedom” in his social environment, freedoms positively enforced in the legal sphere, in order to realize his repressed dreams and ideas. Ellison may be primarily addressing the artistic and intellectual experience of the Negro community, but his account, whether he realizes it or not, acknowledges that individual freedom is integrally tied to social justice for all blacks struggling to liberate their race and themselves.

In “The World and the Jug,” another insightful essay that hits on all the salient issues of the scholarly debate surrounding *Native Son*, Ellison goes to great lengths to rebuke Irving Howe’s exalting assessment of Wright’s novel. He believes there is a divide between the ideological novel and the artistic novel that Wright cannot quite transcend. Ellison may very well be right, although, as I argue, the tension between Bigger’s sociological and individual existence is more imaginatively sophisticated than we realize. Ellison, moreover, is skeptical of social justice, as he should be, if it involves “abstractions” imposed “upon American reality” by “councils of power” in which he is not represented (170). Ellison is threatened by these abstractions because they “move with missile speed” and “are too often fired from altitudes rising high above the cluttered terrain” upon which the individual struggles (170). The individual rights of equality and opportunity, however, that have been denied to the black race at-large are not radical abstractions, but ethics that constitute American reality itself—ethics that have been with us since the Founding and define liberal democracy. Ultimately, Ellison believes “that true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core. Thus they would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject” (162). *Native Son* does a lot of destroying and a lot of rejecting of human life. But, if you accept that *Native Son* contains a conscience directed at rights and equality, then the novel is a celebration of not only the dignity of life, but also of life’s actual *realization*.

In *Native Son*, Wright understands the complexity of life and the modern experience in the American social order before World War II and the Civil Rights movement. His story of Bigger Thomas is an expression of that understanding, an individual finding a way in an environment in which prejudice and classism work to *repress* life for an entire race. He therefore calls for a liberation from the dominant modes of discourse and ideology. Wright then advocates for the realization of agency and freedom in a democratic community because it leads to the *positive expression* of life.

Charles Dickens, likewise, comprehends the complexity of life in its relation to the social order. Writing in the emergent stages of modernity and the proliferation of print media, Dickens saw that the theories of political economy and utilitarianism as anathema to the flourishing of human life and, consequently, he too calls for a liberation from the dominant ideology in *Oliver Twist*. He calls for Christian social ethics to treat London's poor with compassion and charity. Although this remedy may appear superficially conservative in its moral justification, it is actually a liberal break from the status quo in its recognition of human dignity. That is not to say that other social novels, including Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* do not appreciate the expression of life—they certainly do. The sophisticated narratives of Wright and Dickens, however, transcend *applied* justice for the sailors and the consumers of America. Wright and Dickens apply conscience and justice in a more *conceptual* way, changing the way we look at the impoverished individual in the larger context of culture and society. Their conceptions, perhaps consciously or unconsciously, return us to the very framework of enlightenment principles—human progress, freedom, equality, rationality—that are too easily lost in the modern and, now, postmodern experience. The politics of poverty is formulated to complement this conceptual understanding—a material application of conscience and justice through public policies, discourse, and affairs. Ultimately, conscience in literature and culture should advance the politics of poverty because, as we have seen, when conscience leads to justice, it can improve the human condition and promote the well-being we all desire in real, not just apparent ways.

## IV. EPILOGUE: CONSCIENCE AND JUSTICE IN THE POSTMODERN CONTEXT

*It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.*

—Robert F. Kennedy, “Day of Affirmation Speech,” June 6, 1966

I turned my television off at the end of the Winter Olympics closing ceremony in Sochi, only to turn it on again in the morning to find that a revolution had occurred in Ukraine, the Russian flag was flying atop the statehouse in Crimea, and the political landscape had shifted in Eastern Europe—all seemingly overnight. This same news cycle covered a controversial religious freedom law in Arizona that was fiercely contested in the world of social media and the World Bank’s postponement of a loan to Uganda for its passage of national anti-gay legislation. These acts may constitute justice or injustice, depending on your own perspective, but, as I argue, they are represented in the postmodern context. *What could that possibly mean?*

Postmodernism (some theorists now call it metamodernism or transmodernism) is the deconstruction of reality that leads to metaphysical and epistemological skepticism, approaching nihilism in its most cynical form. The end of ideology has not occurred, contrary to the belief of critics in the Cold War, but postmodernity has fragmented and disfigured the effects of ideology on our society and culture. Globalization and the advent of technological communication and social media have given us the ability to assimilate consciousness across transnational boundaries at a much faster rate. But, the concomitant loss of human interaction and the proliferation of continuous, ubiquitous change can make us apathetic to conscience and perhaps, at its worse, make justice seem ineffectual.

Fredric Jameson's theorization of postmodern "late capitalism," in which the "Marxist distinction between economic base and cultural superstructure dissolves," contends that the service and finance economy in developed countries are in the business of creating "culture for everyone" (Richter 1211). If so, I question the consciousness of this culture, especially culture's overly artificial and contrived elements that can alienate individuals from the truth and reality of their own well-being and self-worth. Society, however, depends on the consciousness of these individuals to maintain a democratic equilibrium and keep inequities in check. The resulting uncertainty and futility of postmodernism threatens to undermine the fundamental structure of civil society: "the collective engagement of a concerned citizenry for the public good" (Benhabib et al. 3). Humanist philosopher Jürgen Habermas seeks "a way to recuperate the Enlightenment ideal of a just and rational society within the context of late capitalism" (Richter 1212). Habermas believes that this society would seek "the end of coercion and the attainment of autonomy through reason, the end of alienation through a consensual harmony of interests, and the end of injustice and poverty through the rational administration of justice" (qtd. in Richter 1212). Like Habermas, I am unwilling to give up on the project of the Enlightenment and, more specifically, the American project (which is intrinsically the same) because it is cynically shortsighted and reductive to accept the intransigence of the postmodern condition. Nevertheless, I worry that the marginalization of a postmodern, globalized world will disaffect conscience and justice. The politics of poverty, consequently, begins the 21<sup>st</sup> century in an inauspicious place.

Fortunately, there has been no end of ideology or history after the Cold War, thus reaffirming the need for conscience and justice. Liberal democracy and free-market economics are here to stay, but moral, humanitarian concerns must always be reconciled with injustice and inequality. Claims to human rights demand resolution in a world still dealing with extreme poverty and underdevelopment. With the emerging anonymity of globalization, human freedom and agency

are impeded by actors and actions that occur halfway around the globe. I posit, in response, that postmodernism only strengthens our ethical obligation to do justice. In a world where outcomes can change almost instantaneously, we need to advocate for the one thing that we know will remain constant: the human being. The course of history and ideology ebbs and flows, but our *nature* never really changes. In this sense, we are all liberals of Enlightenment thought and we must *liberate* ourselves from postmodernism, as a matter of justice, to ensure the freedom, agency, and well-being of individuals in a very real, not illusory society. This will be the challenge for my generation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as our contribution to the course of human history remains to be seen. A good starting point, nonetheless, is to ensure that art and literature advance conscience in culture and society. If literature informs our culture and society, then literary conscience can surely inform the realization of a just society.

Jake Elijah Struebing  
Lexington, April, 2014

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