I dedicate this dissertation to my family--for my mother Karrie Pappas Westaway who taught me that equality in the world is viable, for my father Barry Westaway who taught me to revere the work of the Civil Rights movement and its legacy, for my brother Kyle Westaway who taught me to speak truth with kindness, for my sister Karoline Westaway who taught me to turn off my inner critic, for my sister Kristen Westaway Stump who taught me about confidence and hard work, and for David Stump who offered me nothing but encouragement.
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This project is founded on the belief that literature can change the world. It’s a simple premise that literature has been and can continue to be a force for positive social change. The author of a political novel weaves the information about social injustices throughout the story. Great possibilities lie in the reader’s response to such injustices. The dissertation explores four novels, *The Jungle* (1906), *Native Son* (1940), *The Armies of the Night* (1968), and *The Color Purple* (1982); these American literature classics were award-winning, top-selling, and groundbreaking in their contemporary context. All of these novels address important social issues, and the issues are inextricable from the stories themselves. These books deserve special attention because each of their authors was ostensibly interested in social change. We will inquire how the author worked to inspire social action in his/her reader, and will frame this question within the bounds of the novel format. What is it that occurs that makes a story dissolve into reader activism? How should “reader activism” be constructed? That special alchemy of reader involvement is what we will seek in the literature considered.

Literature already has played a key role in progressive social movements of the 20th century. For instance, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* was directly connected to the passing of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, which laid the foundation for our modern FDA. But such
direct links between books and dramatic social changes are rare; much more often the effect of the political novel is to support grassroots change across a large body of readers. The novels we will review are a part of ongoing social conversations. Rather than becoming activists per se readers become witnesses. Readers, rather than being activated to join a particular social movement, may become enlightened and inspired readers, a variant form of activism. In order for political fiction to move the reader it must, like all effective fiction, jump off the page and capture the reader’s imagination. We will survey the extent of a reader’s participation and the bounds of a reader’s empathy. Throughout the dissertation, we will foreground the reader’s role in a political novel.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This project is founded on the belief that literature can change the world. It’s a simple premise that literature has been and can continue to be a force for positive social change. The author of a political novel weaves the information about social injustices throughout the story. Great possibilities lie in the reader’s response to such injustices. The dissertation explores four novels, *The Jungle* (1906), *Native Son* (1940), *The Armies of the Night* (1968), and *The Color Purple* (1982); these American literature classics were award-winning, top-selling, and groundbreaking in their contemporary context. All of these novels address important social issues, and the issues are inextricable from the stories themselves. These books deserve special attention because each of their authors was ostensibly interested in social change. We will inquire how the author worked to inspire social action in his/her reader, and will frame this question within the bounds of the novel format. What is it that occurs that makes a story dissolve into reader activism? How should “reader activism” be constructed? That special alchemy of reader involvement is what we will seek in the literature considered.

Literature already has played a key role in progressive social movements of the 20th century. For instance, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* was directly connected to the passing of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. But such direct links between books and dramatic social changes are rare; much more often the effect of the political novel is to support grassroots change across a large body of readers. The novels we will review are a part of ongoing social conversations. Rather than becoming activists per se readers become witnesses. Witnessing is more than “merely a passive act of reading the text and reacting to it; rather, witnessing in the gospel ideology calls for the subsequent act of testimony in word and deed. . . . To be a witness, an auditor must be inspired or moved to transformation by the testimony he or she has heard and
then return to the community to testify about this transformation” (Huskey 99). Readers, rather than being activated to join a particular social movement, may become enlightened and inspired readers, a variant form of activism.

In chapter one, we will survey the four novels of this dissertation and their political implications. These novels have political intentions, yet they are works of worthy literature as well. There is that special quality to a political novel that can tell a story and make a political statement. In each of these four novels we can witness the “intellectual fluidity, the richness of absorbed life, the complex interplay between emotion and ideology, that distinguishes the political novel at its best” (Howe, Politics 227). Truly, it is an art to communicate political ideas via the vehicle of narrative, and we will discuss several books that have done this successfully. No doubt these are complex novels to unravel, but because there are often real world consequences of such novels, it is a meaningful task.

Critics like Irving Howe and John Whalen-Bridge note that readers and scholars sometimes have problems with the “literary merit” of political novels. Some believe that flagrant insertion of politics, especially politics bent towards activism, ruins the artistic flow of the narrative. There are consequences for the novel that “gets its hands dirty” and engages “with actual political struggle and affiliation, that which is deemed likely to inspire readers to take sides in a political controversy” they are “frequently given sub-literary status by critics, scholars, and other taste-makers” (Whalen-Bridge, Political 2). When political novels do achieve popularity they may be discredited with the accusation of propaganda. Even though parts of novels such as The Jungle and Native Son have been accused of containing propaganda, their core story is far from that. Even if they could be viewed as propagandistic, that does not invalidate the overarching power of their story. We will look at the passages that have been
deemed propagandistic and question that charge. Some critics use the term “propaganda” with the hope of marginalizing and dismissing the novel. It’s notable that in a dissertation about the power of political novels a whole chapter must be devoted to justifying the study of political novels. In this first chapter the critics who say politics and literature shouldn’t mix will be challenged. And it will be necessary to quiet the critics who would paint any political interlude with the broad brush of propaganda and thus seek to discredit it. This chapter’s higher claim is that politics enrich a story.

Throughout this dissertation we will be examining the unique influence of the narrative over that of more direct political communications like manifestos, political speeches and nonfiction political books. Why do politics fall into the purview of narrative? The answer to this is simple: politics are wrapped up in human lives, the very stuff of novels. This attests to the power of the novel. As envisioned by Martha Nussbaum, novels have inimitable qualities in their “sense that what happens to individuals in the world has enormous importance; [their] commitment to describe the events of life not from an external perspective of detachment . . . but from within, as invested with the complex significances with which human beings invest their own lives” (Poetic 32). This idea that a novel can get inside a story is an enormous advantage to political novels. A novel is simply made to deal with the complexities of a sociopolitical issue.

The world of a novel is an inviting, permeable world. Fiction as a genre “permits the reader to cross existing boundaries, explore other worlds, and try out new identities” (Fluck 23). This is one way fiction is said to move people; a reader can try on another reality. A narrative is an apt way to make such a connection. All the novels in the dissertation take a complex political topic and show how it manifests on the personal level. There is also great political power in the imagination: “As a latent force, imagination can be tapped, not to find new forms of cultural
anesthetic, but in order to transform the habits and conventions of everyday life” (Beck 55). As Beck suggests, the power of a story is rooted in more than its entertainment quality but is indeed transformative. The political novel entails both political and aesthetic motives.

This begs the question: how do novelists elegantly transfer a particular political vision into a story? For in order for political fiction to move the reader it must, like all effective fiction, jump off the page and capture the reader’s imagination. We will survey the reader’s role in a political novel—what is the extent of a reader’s participation and where are the bounds of a reader’s empathy? A successful story “efficiently arouses and so tightly interweaves the audience’s cognitive, emotive, and ethical responses” (Phelan 14); which encapsulates the rhetorical triangle. Novelists use a host of rhetorical and literary tools to reach readers. An author can manipulate point of view to tell a sympathetic story (Hartveit). For instance, The Jungle is told through the working class immigrant character, Jurgis Rudkus which opened up the life of an impoverished worker, a cog in the capitalist machine. Upton Sinclair wanted to allow his readers to feel all the hardships of a life of abject poverty. It makes sense that Sinclair would use this point of view because he hoped to move his readers to take up the cause of the common worker. Another form of rhetorical persuasion at the disposal of political novelists is the use of characters who serve as moral examples (Hartveit). Celie, the protagonist of Alice Walker’s The Color Purple serves as a moral example of a womanist. Throughout the story Celie moves from a repressed, abused, self-loathing woman to a self-actualized, independent, confident womanist. Celie serves as an example to readers who might be looking for a way towards gender equity and self-esteem in their own lives.

In political novels characters represent more than an individual—their meaning is embroidered over a larger issue. For instance, the frustrations and deprivations of living as an
African American in 1930s Chicago are embodied in the protagonist of *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas. Charismatic characters help readers take the leap from their known, comfortable existence to the often difficult lives of the disadvantaged. In political novels characters have a dual role; there is “a pull in certain characters between their rights as ‘individuals’ and their functions as representatives” (Hartveit 133). So Walter Teague, the young idealist in *The Armies of the Night*, becomes every young enthusiastic activist, and Tom Joad, the indigent farmer from *The Grapes of Wrath*, becomes every impoverished young man. In *The Color Purple* Walker has a cast of female characters who are significant on their own but who also represent women “as a group oppressed” (Roller 6). The dual nature of this indicates that the political novel sets up unique and persuasive conditions for its characters. These characters contain within them big ideas.

Political change is sometimes the outcome of political novels. It is clear that as a political novel *The Jungle* “exercised significant disruptive power against a large scale oppressive form of power” (Hanne 20), as is evident by the legislative change of food purity standards that followed the publication of the novel. Political novelists create an opening for big changes. For example, in *The Color Purple*, “the attitudes toward change and the ideas of progress inherent in th[is] novel[] require[s] for [its] fulfillment an economic, social, and political restructuring of society” (Roller 6). The ideas in the story create a vacuum of sorts which can only be filled with sociopolitical action. We will be looking at how the four novelists write towards this vacuum. The oppression embodied in the narrative of *The Color Purple* changed the conversation of feminism. Not only does Walker deal with the taboo topic of sexual abuse but also intra-racial and intra-gender acts of oppression. Walker begins to shape the conversation of feminism in
regards to her novel by using new nomenclature. Her term “womanism” sparked a debate of the limitations that race placed on traditional feminism.

In chapter two we will look at Upton Sinclair’s turn of the century novel, *The Jungle*, in which he addressed America’s blindness to their food’s history and to the factory conditions that the working class endured. Sinclair used many of the tools of a novelist--documentary realism, lively characters, panoramic settings, and plot twists--to tell a compelling story about the workers in Chicago’s Packingtown. He begins by using the documentary style associated with naturalism. His novel is filled with horrific, but accurate portrayals of unsanitary food processing and the wretched lives of the workers who did such work. Sinclair layered gruesome detail upon gruesome detail so that the readers make a difficult journey through the lives of the poor, disenfranchised stockyard workers. Sinclair plugs into his readers’ logos by making observations about the social and economic (dis)order of the Rudkuses’ world. In this way, he weaves documentary elements with political commentary.

The Lithuanian family through which Sinclair depicts the troubles of the working class makes his work something more than mere documentary. He enriched his story with empathetic characters, focusing on the Rudkus family. Jurgis Rudkus is Sinclair’s protagonist and through him we see the progression from eager immigrant who believes in the American dream to broken worker who is used up by the capitalist machine. For in Packingtown men and women are "like animals to be processed, exploited and used for profit in so many different, but always degrading ways" (O'Shea 147). Sinclair uses pathos especially when describing working conditions in the stockyards.

Sinclair’s pathos had a purpose. He strategically used the slaughterhouses as the staging grounds for workers’ rights. He was able to demonstrate that not only were workers being
mistreated, but Americans were being duped. By talking about their food supply Sinclair appealed to the readers’ self-interest. Sinclair hoped that if he could horrify readers about the unsanitary conditions of their food processing that he could also rally readers around the issue of workers’ rights. For the most part, this strategy did not work. Sinclair is often quoted as saying, "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach" (The Autobiography 594). So The Jungle has become famous as a book that missed its mark.

Certainly, Sinclair meant to persuade his readers to take up the cause of the common worker. But he also aimed to rally the workers themselves. Through his tale, where the workers’ plight is told with compassion and sympathy, Sinclair hoped to inspire workers. The Jungle was one of the first proletarian novels, and it took up the troubles of the worker with gusto. In the pages of his novel, Sinclair promoted unions and Socialism as tools to empower workers. And his novel was endorsed by Eugene Debs and Jack London.

By merely including Socialist ideology Sinclair’s novel has been labeled propaganda. And this charge of propaganda is enough to discredit the literary merit of the entire book. David Karsner proposes that "Americans as a whole . . . feel that Sinclair is primarily a pamphleteer, a tract maker, and not a novelist all--certainly not an artist" (265). It is a common belief that propaganda and literature are mutually exclusive. But this does not have to be the case. First of all, it’s highly questionable that the ending of The Jungle where Jurgis listens to a Socialist speaker is even propaganda at all. American critics are far too quick to label the polemic as propaganda. There is also a long-standing prejudice against Socialism in the U.S. Certainly, Sinclair includes some real life Socialist ideology, but it works within the greater narrative arch. Even if it is propaganda, as many critics assert it is, it doesn’t mean that the novel disinherits the literary kingdom.
Sinclair is more than a pamphleteer. Sinclair has written an inviting story, peopled with believable characters and a complex plot line. Besides being socially significant, this is a decent novel in its own right. Sinclair was no doubt a crusading novelist. He offered unions and Socialism as much-needed medicine to the wounded state of the common worker. It is well within the authors’ right to prescribe a solution to the problems that populate their novels. Why shouldn’t authors be passionate about a resolution to the harrowing problems that their novels take up?

Sinclair’s novel did not bring forth a Socialist revolution but it did effect political change.

Sinclair was an activist-author, so he meant for his novel to make news. Both Sinclair and Doubleday publicist Isaac Marcossen worked tirelessly to promote *The Jungle*; they did more than the traditional book marketing, rather they endorsed the novel as a news event. Sinclair spent most of 1906 writing newspaper rebuttals to ensuring the veracity of his book. He also used the media to keep the issue of food safety alive and encouraged Teddy Roosevelt to push for better food safety standards and legislation. This is one method of turning books into action.

When considering the legislation associated with *The Jungle*, one must look at what came before the novel. Before *The Jungle* was released issues of food safety garnered some public attention through A. M. Simon's 1899 Packingtown pamphlet and Charles Edward Russell's 1904 articles about the meatpackers (Harris, *Upton 69*). There was also some food safety legislation languishing in Congress without much support. The release of *The Jungle* synthesized these events and gathered momentum for food safety legislation. So *The Jungle* was essentially the right book at the right time. It did what political novels can uniquely do, it coalesced interest in a political topic. The novel was catching the wave of interest in consumer protection. And it did what the newspaper articles, congressional bills, and pamphlets could not: it told a compelling
story. Sinclair exploited the novel form to educate and energize readers in regards to their food processing.

Sinclair’s novel was largely responsible for bringing forth legislation on food safety. And it happened quickly; the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Bill were passed in 1906, the same year *The Jungle* was published. These food purity laws were the foundation for the modern American Food and Drug Administration. Because of these far-reaching effects, Sinclair has been called the father of the U.S. Consumer Protection movement. So this book, in effect, started a social movement. *The Jungle* clearly had an activist agenda and brought forth progressive social change. The link here between novel and social action is strong. This is how social protest novels work optimally: the book causes public outrage and inspires redressive action.

*The Jungle* was influential beyond the halls of Congress. This novel has been noted for its ability to inspire and radicalize future leaders like George Bernard Shaw and Dorothy Day. There’s no reason to believe its radicalizing influence will end any time soon. As the years have passed the issues of food safety depicted in the novel are not as urgent because contemporary readers (mistakenly) believe the FDA takes care of all food safety hazards. Thus, the issues of workers’ rights come to the fore in the story. So Sinclair didn’t miss his mark after all; the tribulations of the common worker shine through. Harvey Swados believes that Sinclair meant to "fill us with compassion for all who must strain like beasts of the field. . . . To the extent that it fulfills this function, this book will persist as a force in the spiritual and social lives of a new and, it is to be hoped, a responsible generation of readers" (11). Sinclair’s story and message have lasted because they’re in the novel form. Other contemporary muckraking books by Lincoln
Steffens and Ida Tarbell have not enjoyed the long-lasting popularity of *The Jungle*. One contention of this dissertation is that novels have unique influence and staying power.

Chapter three is concerned with the critical reception and the literary afterlife of *Native Son*. When *Native Son* was published in 1940, Ralph Ellison wrote more than a book review in *New Masses*; he worked to immediately place *Native Son* within the tradition of African American literature. Ralph Ellison saw it as a departure from previous African American literature of the Harlem Renaissance, writing which he saw as “timid,” “technically backward,” and “apologetic.” Ellison found that this Harlem Renaissance writing addressed mostly middle class concerns, ignoring the vast black working class (“Recent” 11). *Native Son* made no apologies and was utterly working class and real for the majority of the U.S. black population of the day. Ellison claimed that Richard Wright discussed the panoply of problems of Jim Crow life. He believed that Wright wasn’t writing for a white audience like the writers of the New Negro movement. Margaret Perry contrasts Wright with black writers of the Renaissance like Charles Chestnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar who “had sometimes succumbed to the same easy habits of white writers in portraying the Negro in caricature” (Perry 63). Wright’s novel presented three-dimensional, verisimilitudinous black characters. Ellison wrote that Wright’s work was original and “strives to attain an organic place in the lives of the Negro people, and if less prolific than negro post-war [WW I] fiction it has been more full of the stuff of America” (“Recent” 11). Wright was connecting the plight of African Americans to the rest of America. *Native Son*, Ellison argued, was an important landmark in African American literature and a way forward for African American literature.

The Depression years out of which *Native Son* sprang influenced Wright’s depiction of black poverty. The Depression also made poverty, a major theme of *Native Son*, a relevant and
pressing topic. The problems of the working class along with the idea of Communism as a solution were also timely topics ripe for discussion when Native Son was published.

Membership, specifically black membership, in the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) was growing during the time Wright was laboring over Native Son. The advent of the Great Depression and the popularity of Communism in the U.S. awakened the proletarian impulses in the black community. Both poverty and Communism were major themes taken up by Native Son, making it truly a product of its times.

The controversial subject of race relations played a part in the novel’s popularity. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah deemed Native Son a truly original work of African American literature, for “never had the brute force of racism’s crushing impact upon a black consciousness been revealed before in fiction, certainly never with such starkness” (xii-xiii). This unveiling of the black experience by Wright was significant; he described in raw detail the horrors of racism. And the novel’s popularity, spurred on by its acceptance as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, furthered its message. One review in June of 1940, a few months after the book’s publication, discussed the novel’s popular reception: “It is discussed by literary critics, scholars, social workers, journalists, writers to the editor, preachers, students and the [wo]man in the street” (Brown, Opportunity 95). This demonstrates the book’s immediate wide-ranging impact.

Wright was viewed as an exposer, an opener of eyes—sometimes eyes that wished to remain tightly shut; Native Son awakened the “indolent, indifferent public [to] the organic weaknesses of the American social order” (Chicago 63). Wright wrote passionately about race relations, and Keneth Kinnamon called Native Son “a major document of the American racial dilemma” (The Emergence 143). Kinnamon endowed the novel with sociopolitical import when he refers to it as a document. For clearly, it was more than a novel; it launched a discussion about
civil rights in America. Not only was Wright writing about complex race issues in literary terms he was also addressing present and ongoing racial problems: his was a probing of an open wound. The contemporary failed discourse about pressing problems of racism in the U.S. made Wright’s book relevant, even exigent, for his readers.

Richard Wright mentored James Baldwin early in his career and then was severely criticized by Baldwin as Baldwin gained stature in the literary world. In an essay written after Wright’s death in March 1961 entitled “Alas, Poor Richard,” Baldwin did not fashion Wright into a saint; he characterized Wright as someone who could not bear being disagreed with. Baldwin did allow that he didn’t mean to betray Wright or unsettle all of black protest literature when he wrote “Everybody’s Protest Novel”: “Richard thought that I was trying to destroy his novel and his reputation; but it had not entered my mind that either of these could be destroyed, and certainly not by me” (611-12). The quarrel between Baldwin and Wright was summarized by Baldwin: “’What do you mean, protest!’ Richard cried. ‘All literature is protest. You can’t name a single novel that isn’t protest.’ To this I could only weakly counter that all literature might be protest but all protest was not literature” (Baldwin, “Everybody’s” 612). Baldwin could not come to terms with the political side of Wright’s writing. Baldwin admitted that “I was always exasperated by his notions of society, politics, and history, for they seemed to me utterly fanciful” (“Everybody’s 606). He never believed in the potential of Wright’s novel to provoke the social conscience. Baldwin and Wright were very different writers; Gerald Green starkly addresses the differences between Baldwin and Wright: “When I read [Baldwin] I am moved by one fellow’s special problems. When I read Native Son, the whole raging storm of black hate and white stupidity roars at me. I flinch, shiver, and sweat—and I learn” (521). In Green’s terms,
Wright has more power and social significance as a writer than Baldwin. Wright’s story was more than Bigger; it reached out to all humanity.

Ralph Ellison at first championed Wright and his literary activism on behalf of civil rights. At the time of the book’s release Ellison saw Wright was an influential part of the fight for civil rights. It also can’t be overstated that Wright was not writing about any ordinary community; he was depicting an oppressed nation. But in later decades as activist literature fell out of fashion Ellison concurred with Baldwin about Wright’s “misguided” revolutionary impulses. In 1963 in his essay “The World and the Jug,” Ellison disparaged Wright’s attempts to further civil rights through his writing. Ellison saw Wright’s use of naturalism and Communist ideology as crude and propagandistic. In Ellison’s view, the fact that Native Son meant to work towards civil rights made it more of a tract than literature.

Yet, part of the vigor of Native Son was its revolutionary vision. Howard University professor Sterling Brown “thought Native Son would stir the national conscience if any book could” (Rowley, Richard 192), and he was right. Native Son brought forth a national conversation on race relations. Its long-reaching influence can be seen in this letter one U.S. citizen sent to J. Edgar Hoover at the Department of Justice on August 20, 1940; the writer was angry about Native Son: “this kind of literature subtle and inflammatory . . . can cause more harm than bombing squadrons” (qtd. in Gayle, Richard 119). But the effects of Native Son reverberated well past the 1940s. The novel experienced a renaissance during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Critics began to resituate Bigger’s rage as a precursor to race politics in the 1960s and 70s. In 1968, Ronald Sanders noted the novel’s prescience; Native Son offered “prophetic glimpses of the ghetto revolt of the sixties” (34). Leroy Jones and Eldridge Cleaver credited Native Son in part for their radicalization. And James Smethurst claimed that
Native Son was “enormously important” to the Black Arts Movement. Native Son’s rebirth in the 1960s and 70s demonstrates the long-lasting power of political novels.

Chapter four centers on Norman Mailer’s The Armies of the Night about the Siege of the Pentagon in the fall of 1967 which was a watershed event in the Anti-war movement. Mailer paints a picture of the country when it was divided over the U.S. campaign in Vietnam using the March on the Pentagon as his canvas. One of the themes of this nonfiction novel is the tension between groups present at the march and the polarization and internal strife of America in the late 1960s. Mailer wrote about struggles that were mythic and symbolic, be they slogans shouted at the rally or physical clashes on the Pentagon green.

The hybrid genre of New Journalism served as an answer to political conflict which couldn’t be captured by simply defined fiction or nonfiction. This self-conscious fusing of genres was a reaction to postwar society when full immersion in either fiction, in which the author is in complete control circumscribing the world and its characters, or historical nonfiction, in which most useful novelistic devices are eschewed, prove insufficient. Mailer addresses the literary void that remains and why literary nonfiction necessarily fills it. Through his narrative of this historic event he works beyond the limits of a traditional historic account, for the story of the march had both sociopolitical and literary significance. New Journalism provided a useful way to record the less tangible aspects of the March on the Pentagon. We see Mailer utilizes New Journalism to “recount[] the aspects of human history which are not verifiable, the emotions, moods and symbolic overtones that provide color, intensity, and depth to experience” (Gutman 190). Thus, his literary style is not merely an accounting of fact but a necessary means to depict the scenes of the weekend of protests and demonstrations.
Mailer was both a participant in and recorder of this historic event. Through the genre of New Journalism Mailer places himself in the story. Mailer becomes a character and guide through the story as he marches with protestors, even gets arrested with demonstrators. By joining the protesters he was able to give a multi-tonal perspective of the Anti-war movement. In the course of the story, Mailer becomes an activist and he asks the same of his readers; this is one way he seeks to activate his readers. Mailer acts as a perception center where readers can experience the many injustices that plague the anti-war protestors. The idea of novelist as subject was a main tenet of New Journalism.

Mailer’s account of the march was aiming for a more expansive literary context than could be tapped by traditional journalism. In form as well as style, Mailer uses New Journalism to capture a historic event—he utilizes the many literary methods available to a nonfiction novelist in service of recording the story in a more durable format than a newspaper story. Mailer believed that “fiction [or in this case, literary nonfiction] could bring us closer to the truth than journalism” (Mailer, Some ix). One is aware that a novelist, not a journalist or a historian, is capturing the weekend’s events. Although his telling of the story would use historical techniques, Mailer delivers as a novelist. Mailer was alert and empathetic enough to capture the temper of the evening at the Pentagon: “Somebody lit his draft card, and as it began to burn held it high. The light... traveled through the crowd until it found another draft card someone else was ready to burn and this was lit, and then another in the distance. In the gathering dark it looked like a dusting of fireflies over the great shrub of the Mall” (Mailer, Armies 262). Mailer uses novelistic techniques to introduce those outside of the anti-war movement to the hippies, the feminists, the civil rights activists, and the Communists of the movement. It is his ability to see beyond the gleam of bayonets and the smoke of joints to view events in the larger scope of the movement.
Mailer uses a nonfiction framework, augmented by the literary devices of a novel, to capture the details of the March on the Pentagon and of the multi-valanced Anti-war movement.

Since *Armies* was a nonfiction novel, it had the potential to affect readers in a unique and pressing way. Unlike a purely fictional novel, in a nonfiction novel readers realize the happenings in the book are true. In a nonfiction novel readers read “over the edge” of the novel, and reckon their own existence with the true-to-life occurrences in the novel. Daniel Lehman calls these types of readers implicated readers (4). The readers are implicated in the story, and so readers of *Armies* were thinking not only of the protestor characters in the pages of the novel, but also of the ongoing contemporary Anti-war movement. One can see how implicated readers could easily be sympathetic towards and maybe even activated on behalf of the Anti-war movement.

This was one of the first exposures of the Anti-war movement in the media. Mostly the Anti-war movement up until that point was either ignored or disparaged by the media. Mailer doesn’t take a rosy view of the Anti-war movement. He explains its failings and inner schisms. Mailer’s observations and tough questions carefully examined the anti-war cause and its place within American society. However, he was working counter to the mainstream press which was decidedly pro-war during the time when Mailer was writing his story (Streitmatter, *Voices* 197). Into this atmosphere Mailer propels a book about the Anti-war movement. But this media blackout of the Anti-war movement created the perfect opening for a novelist: “Discerning the meaning of historical events,” writes Joseph Wenke in *Mailer’s America*, “falls quite naturally within the province of the novelist when objective sources of information prove unavailable or inconclusive or when an understanding of the issue or event requires a revelation of the national character” (140). Our novelist indeed questions the reliability and objectivity of the mainstream
press, and certainly Mailer had by 1967 proven his eagerness and his deftness in studying the
ambiguous character of this country.

The violence that demonstrators endured often went unreported. Through the abuse of
protesters, Mailer shows what the protestors were willing to risk in the name of peace. While
protestors were pigeonholed by the labels of “draft dodger” and “rabble rouser,” Mailer depicted
them as patriots willing to risk their personal safety and their futures for the cause of peace. By
depicting the gruesome abuse of protestors, Mailer garners, perhaps for the first time, sympathy
for the Anti-war movement. The book was one of the few widely read sources in 1968 that
supported the Peace movement. The march was more than mere history when the book released
just seven months after the event—the controversy over the Vietnam still raged on.

Using a technique that dates back to John Dos Passos’ naturalism in the *U.S.A.* trilogy,
Mailer uses news clippings of the time to demonstrate how the anti-war protestors were being
discounted and derided in the press. In this way Mailer collapses the story with everyday reality.
Mailer understood the power that his novel had, and he felt that novels uniquely “exacerbate the
moral consciousness of people” (Mailer, *Advertisements* 384); he meant to address the reader’s
moral impetus. It’s difficult to trace how many readers’ sympathies were swayed on behalf of the
Anti-war movement. We know he reached a widespread popular audience as is evident by his
receipt of the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize in 1969. It is also clear he touched those
within the Anti-war movement, for Jerry Rubin called *Armies* “the Bible of the movement”
(Manso 461). This is one direct way that we can connect a political novel with a political
movement, proving that novels can effect positive progressive change. An easier deduction to
draw is that Mailer used his power as a novelist to make readers feel present at the event, thus
making them more apt to reflect on the meaning and implications of the Pentagon protest.
There is genuine historic value to Mailer’s novel because he did record this tumultuous American moment. This was one of many marches, one of hundreds of rallies on government properties, one of numerous demonstrations in which military and police (if not military police) clashed with protesters. These marches may blend in the modern mind from photos or scenes in films, but Mailer’s novel has frozen the March on the Pentagon as “one of the most lasting testaments to the activism of the sixties” (Dearborn 236). Readers are made aware of the inner schisms of the New Left, the (dis)organization of the leadership and spent nobility of protesters, those beaten, those just high, the police who smashed in faces of women, and the MP’s who caved in and joined the protesters. Andrew Gordon asserts that the book’s popularity and critical acclaim did much to instate the March on the Pentagon in the national memory and place it on the historic timeline of the sixties: “If it is remembered at all today, it is primarily because Norman Mailer was there and wrote about it” (194). It is important to have such moments of dissent in our country’s history recorded. By recording the events, Mailer extends the greater Anti-war message of the march into literary record, capturing it for posterity, perhaps inspiring future generations of activists.

In the final chapter, we examine The Color Purple where Alice Walker spells out her philosophy of womanism. Walker’s prior work In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (1983), (most of it written in the 1970s) foreshadowed the story of The Color Purple. In contrast to the feminism that was common in the 1970s, Walker brings to life her philosophy of womanism. Womanism takes into account class differences and race issues. One of the problems with traditional feminism for black women was that feminism was perceived to be mostly white and middle class. Feminists were also thought to be anti-male, and if black women were to turn against the men in their lives it would be divisive to the black community, which needed the
bonds of unity to fight racism. So Walker turns her critique of traditional feminism into a movement of her own, womanism. Walker’s womanist philosophy was revolutionary: “Its goal is change and its target the ‘splits’ of race, sex, and class that divide humanity” (Allan, Womanist 83). Walker seeks a more united world, one that validates diversity of race, class, nationality, and creed but is not circumscribed by those differences.

Walker uses story rather than feminist theory to craft the contrasting facets of womanism. Walker takes on systems of oppression within the bounds of her narrative. Barbara Christian alleges that The Color Purple doesn’t just embody womanism; it redefines it; it “is a further development in the womanist process [Walker] is evolving” (“Alice” 469). If we remember that Walker lays out her simple philosophy of womanism in In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, (which was composed before The Color Purple), then we can see that the storyline of The Color Purple exacerbates such philosophy. Womanism is infused in the character development and the plot lines of the novel. Celie’s life is a hub for womanist issues—domestic abuse, lookism, and female sexual pleasure. In her story, Walker draws on feminist thought from the 1970s like Anne Koedt’s essay “They Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” which argues for the magnitude of women’s sexual pleasure that Walker’s protagonist is denied in her heterosexual relations. In such ways Walker utilizes feminist theory without creating a traditional theoretical construct.

The Color Purple was attacked for being anti-male. This is primarily because Walker refuses to ignore the sexism prevalent in the black community. Walker also does not disregard the problems of physical and sexual abuse in the black community. Womanism was created to take on this type of oppression. And Walker is explicit about including men in the work of womanism. In her definition of womanism Walker specifies that womanism is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people male and female” (Walker, In Search xi). Furthermore,
sisterhood in the novel improves men; Walker shows redemption in her male characters. She uses them as examples of how men can free themselves from sexist male privilege and enjoy relationships based on gender equality.

Walker shows men and women in nontraditional gender roles; for instance, Harpo relishes cooking for his club, and Sofia roofs a house. Celie and Mr. ______ puzzle out what it means when people free themselves from traditional gender roles: “Sofia and Shug not like men, he say, but they not like women either” (Walker, The Color 269). Breaking away from such stifling and strict gender roles is a step on the path to gender harmony.

Further removing Walker from the charge that she is anti-male is the women-on-women abuse she features in the novel. Walker’s is a complex sisterhood, where as is true to reality, women oppress each other. For instance, a confused and oppressed Celie encourages Harpo to beat his wife Sofia. It was necessary for Walker to “reconstruct, if not destabilize, the oppressive subject in order to account for nonmasculinist circuits of power use, such as localized forms of female self-sabotage” (Allan, “Womanism” 90). Women can be as oppressive of themselves and other women as men. Walker narrativizes this form of self-sabotage in order to educate her readers.

Walker employs an epistolary style, which is traditionally a woman’s genre. Celie writes her letters to god and then to her sister. She tells of her oppressive life and details how she is a victim of sexual and mental abuse. These letters form a journey of freedom for Celie; they are “a complex means of restructuring herself, an active process in which she moves toward a self-realization through the mediation of language” (Wall, “Lettered” 84). By writing about her abuse she frees herself from abuse, with the help of the women in her life. From the many entangling webs of gender, sexuality, race, and class, Celie makes her way clear partly because she was able
to testify in her letters to the gruesomeness of oppression that ensnared her. Walker, with her use of the epistolary style, emphasizes that some knowledge comes from within women themselves, that women need not go to the patriarchal world for all of their validation and intelligence. The more Celie writes, the closer to freedom and self-actualization she comes. These missives become her autobiography but also her declaration of independence.

Celie’s letters serve several didactic purposes for her readers. Celie shows the reader the redemptive power of journaling. Writing is actually a means to escape prevailing oppression: “once women acquire lexical power, they create a self-derived definition of themselves that leads to greater control of their lives” (Babb 85). By writing about one’s oppression one can seek to cut it off at the root and find redemption in one’s own existence.

The second point Walker seeks to make through Celie’s correspondence is a model for freedom. As Celie becomes a self-aware woman, an emergence which is depicted in her letters, readers might also look at themselves in relation to systems of oppression. Celie as an abused and timid woman records her own self-actualization. And her readers who may be similarly marginalized may be inspired to seek their own freedom. *The Color Purple* is demonstrative without being pedantic; it “is a textual act of testifying and witnessing to inspire the reader to transform his/her life and the terms in which he/she thinks about the self” (Huskey 95). Celie records her own journey perhaps as a guide for readers, like the Greek myth in which Theseus uses a ball of string to find his way out of the labyrinth. So too can readers use the story to free themselves from the labyrinth of patriarchy.

Walker captures men in the throes of oppression. Oppression is everywhere for Celie, yet Walker uses the redeeming values of womanism to pull Celie through to an independent, confident, self-aware, sentient, loving woman. The bonds of sisterhood save Celie. She shares
love with her sister, learns independence from Sofia and Shug, and practices sexual freedom with Shug. The love she shares with these women acts as a recuperative for Celie. She is able to address some of her abusive past, especially her sexual abuse. Shug reacquaints Celie with her own body, has her actually look at and own her vagina. It is essential that Celie repossess her vagina since it has been the site of past abuse: “Walker also invokes instances when the subject chooses to inscribe her body by and through culture as an act of agency” (Eddy 55). For Celie, this involves repossessing her vagina; she looks at and learns to appreciate her vagina.

*The Color Purple* was meant to have a revolutionary effect on its readers. The novel has far-reaching impacts as it “exemplif[ies] the breaking of women’s forbidden stories into literary history—an event that reverberates far beyond [her] heroes’ individual histories to reshape our sense of cultural past and its possible future directions” (Froula 141). The story did direct the future of womanism as it was taken up in the academy by theorists like Clenora Hudson-Weems. And the fact that stories of sexism, physical and sexual abuse received such wide readership and critical acclaim to win the Pulitzer Prize is meaningful. Celie’s story becomes validated by the reader if the reader compassionately witnesses the story. Such engagement with the narrative happens when the novelist produces a compelling tale and the reader is willing to do some self-reflection as well as stocktaking of the world as it exists today: “The end of the novel sends the message that positive change is possible. The negotiation of human relationships under the umbrella of womanism may be an arduous task, but the reward is a more tolerant, more just and happier society” (Fraile-Marcos 128). Walker through her story, suffused with an authorial voice which seeks to undermine racism, sexism, and heterosexism, hopes to activate her readers. Walker never uses the term womanism in her novel. She doesn’t have to be that explicit; rather she lets the tale of empowered women speak for themselves.
We will see that each of the four novelists seeks to activate their readers through similar means. All of the novelists utilize the rhetorical triangle, appealing to their readers’ logic, ethics, and emotion. Yet each of their stories is different. Their characters inhabit entirely distinct worlds and their plots bear off in widely divergent directions. Each of these novels makes connections and misses connections with various social movements. But all of the novels in this dissertation represent something more profound than the average novel. They are constructed to interrogate, engage, enrage, and inspire their audience. And what is fascinating is that the morals of their stories are still unfolding for readers today.
CHAPTER 2
“LOUD AND VULGAR”: THE MODERN SYMPHONY OF LITERATURE AND POLITICS

Politics in a work of literature is like a pistol shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar, and yet a thing to which it is not possible to refuse one’s attention.

— Stendhal

As Stendhal points out, politics can shoot through a novel, and its trail leaves an indelible mark on the story. What Stendhal failed to mention was that, in some cases, far from being a "loud and vulgar" interruption, politics is at the heart of the composition or even inspires the concerto itself. Politics can not only be a part of great literature but also should be a part of our literary experiences. Storytelling is an ancient and necessary human act; storytelling is a significant part of all of our lives--it’s what we do around the dinner table, in pubs, in the blogosphere, in the classroom, and in town hall meetings. Stories border so many areas of our modern existence--the psychological, the philosophical, the social, the historical, the sexual--that it’s natural they would cross over to the political. Politics concerns some of the most elemental of human struggles, which not surprisingly compose the most compelling plotlines.

Political novels have much to offer, for “the reader who wants a vivid record of past events, an insight into the nature of political beings, or a prediction of what lies ahead can find it in the political novel” (Blotner 1). The novels we will examine in this dissertation each offer their share of history, insight, and predictions. We will look at four novels which could be termed political novels, since each has an investment, via its subject matter and catalyzing rhetoric, in different issues. All of these novels intervene in the public conversation about a given political topic—some influence movements, some influence legislation, some move individual readers. I will be examining Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) for its description of unsafe and unsanitary food processing, Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) because of its place in the Civil
Rights movement, Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* (1968) for the role it played in the Peace movement of the 1960s, and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) for its embodiment of the philosophies of womanism. Together they contribute to 20th-century discourses about consumer safety, racism, war, and sexism.

Before these books are addressed, this chapter will look at both the value and vilification of political novels. A distinct prejudice emerges in discussion of novels that could be considered political. In *The American Political Novel* (1966) Gordon Milne claims that “many political novels are inartistic” (6). This declaration figures politics as some invading force, something that battles with literature. In this view, politics is extraliterary. Investing a narrative with a political position could result in its erasure from literary and critical debate and invalidate it as serious literature. James Hans asks the important question: “is it inevitable that for a writer to be canonized he/she be denuded of all value, stripped of any concerns but literary ones?” (4). There appears to be a special resistance to novels that do more than feature politics but actually propose a political position, or even worse, engage with a reader’s politics. Even in a book that would seem to be respectful of the impact of political novels like *Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel Since 1945*, there is opposition to current politics breeding with literature: “It is vital to read a novel as a novel, not as an effort to take a position on an issue of current interest” (Boyers 8). We will examine what befalls novels that take a position, or even appear to take a position on a political issue.

The problem with political novels is a uniquely American aberration. In an interview in 1988, E. L. Doctorow explains, “There’s no critical fraternity today that has that much regard for the political novel in America. But when political novelists come along from other countries, the value of their work is recognized. It’s almost as if we’re too good to need political novels in this
country” (qtd. in Whalen-Bridge, “Some” 187). We should examine why we are willing to accept, even honor politics in international political novels. Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits*, Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* all speak straightforwardly about politics in Chile, the Czech Republic, and South Africa. But in reviews and critical discourse about these novels one doesn’t hear the charge that they’re “too political” because they are talking about the politics of countries outside the U.S. Americans have little tolerance for politics in their literature.

Let’s look at a recent example, Jonathan Franzen’s novel *Freedom* (2010), which received on the whole great reviews and for which he was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine with the headline “Great American Novelist.” But repeated critique of the novel surfaced when the reviewers felt that politics were encroaching on the story. One reviewer found that *Freedom* “contains a few too many lengthy dialogues about the correct approach to environmentalism,” as if the fate of our planet was not fit for literary parsing (Walker, “*Freedom*”). It’s as though political information must stay on the opposite side of the fiction-nonfiction divide. In order to wade into political waters a book must be clearly nonfiction and safely stowed in the Current Events section of the bookstore. A *New Republic* critic finds a character committed to a cause odious: “It hardly seems an accident that Walter [the protagonist] chooses to embrace population control as his pet cause . . . attempt[ing] to make not having children into the next fad among good liberals. The stretches of *Freedom* in which all this plays out are the most plodding and gratuitous in the novel” (Franklin). To call writing about a political cause gratuitous makes it sound like Franzen is playing a cheap trick on his readers. Rather, it’s an innovative way to open up a conversation about a problem like overpopulation. A third critic lodges a familiar accusation for political novels: the charge that characters turn into mouthpieces for the author: “when . . .
[Franzen] uses Walter as a mouthpiece to lecture about, say, deforestation, the lengthy
digressions and backstories that so beautifully developed character in the first book now come
across as excuses for broad harangues” (Yabroff). Does Jennie Yabroff want characters stripped
of all political entitlement? These three examples show the range of critiques novelists may face
if they choose to include politics in their novel. This represents a long American tradition of
politics “g[etting] shoved over to the side as something that didn’t belong in art, and if you
started putting it in your work, you were somehow sullying yourself” (Whalen-Bridge, Political
17). This was true for Franzen’s Freedom, and the same criticism affects the four novels we will
be surveying in this dissertation.

Another reason that there is critique of political novels, particularly those novels with clear
political intention, is that a connection between literature and politics is viewed as literary
indecorum. Marge Piercy, a political novelist, has faced this type of criticism: “There’s a general
assumption on the part of American critics and academics that anyone who writes fiction or
poetry that is politically conscious must be kind of dense – that by its nature the work is cruder
than work that simply embodies currently held notions” (103). This merges with the deceptive
notion that political writing is not real literature, that it is uncivilized. We can see this idea
echoed in Milne’s warning that “‘exposure literature’ obviously tends toward the didactic and
polemical, it runs the severe risk of being inartistic” (6). Some believe that politics taint the
story, that it is a poison to the verdant world of narrative discourse. This places novelists in an
awkward position: “the political novelist must incorporate ideologies and theories into his[/her]
action, and American novelists have long felt that abstract ideas contaminate fiction” (Prigozy
253). Similarly, in the seminal work Politics and the Novel (1957), Irving Howe takes issue with
“the notion that abstract ideas invariably contaminate a work of art and should be kept at a safe
distance from it” (Politics 20). The contamination theory consigns politics to the extraliterary realm, but politics need not be segregated from the story. Sometimes there is a perception that politics weighs down a story and damages an author’s literary reputation. A political novel that talks politics is “frequently given sub-literary status by critics, scholars, and other taste-makers” (Whalen-Bridge, Political 2). I will be examining this prejudice against political literature throughout this dissertation, questioning whether politics degrade or invalidate literature and who is making such claims.

One rationale for the censure of political discourse within novels is the association of politics with propaganda. Propaganda is positioned by some critics as the archenemy of decent literature. Milne warns that “dogma must be introduced unobtrusively, and without distortion or exaggeration, and the writer must think of his[her] craft first” (183). Certain political novels can be slapped with the deadly labels of “propaganda” or “agitprop” and thus stand as something other than, and lesser than literature. But American critics are far too sensitive and reactionary towards anything that could be called propaganda. At any point in a story when an author inserts political thought or even pure research this nonfictional information then can be referred to as propaganda. For instance, the ending of Richard Wright’s Native Son has been called “transparently propagandistic” (Margolies 80). The section to which most critics refer to as propagandistic is Bigger’s lawyer’s closing arguments. Critics and scholars see the closing arguments as distinct from the rest of the book, an “absurd switch to didacticism” (Sullivan 396), but Paul Siegel argues that Max’s closing speech is not “obtrusive” but rather furthers the themes and imagery found throughout the novel (519). In this excerpt Bigger’s lawyer, Boris Max, asks who fanned the hysteria of the race mob who wants to lynch Bigger:

The State’s Attorney knows, for he promised the Loop bankers that if he were re-elected demonstrations for relief would be stopped! The Governor of the state
knows, for he has pledged the Manufacturers’ Association that he would use troops against workers who went out on strike! The Mayor knows, for he told the merchants of the city that the budget would be cut down, that no new taxes would be imposed to satisfy the clamor of the masses of the needy! (Wright, Native 386)

Critics claim Max is a Communist espousing the party line. Boris Max is not a Communist; he is just called one by the investigators who mean it as an epithet. So Max should not be conceived as a Commie preaching CPUSA ideology. At the closing of the novel, as is true throughout, the conversation is about race, and Max’s argument “serves as a vehicle for Wright’s deeply felt ideas about racism, but it is not primarily, or even significantly, a statement of Communist ideology” (Redden 113). Critics are uncomfortable at how passionately Wright constructs Max’s discourse. Yet, Boris Max’s speech is of course persuasive; he is a lawyer arguing before a judge for his client’s life. In actual fact, critics and scholars use the term propaganda to undermine literature with a political message.

Another danger to the place of political novels in the literary canon is that critics view them as attempting to manipulate human behavior. Carl Tighe takes on this misconception in Writing and Responsibility:

What little power literature has exercised [has been] not through force and coercion, but through . . . culture, through questioning, affecting the way people think and feel, by saying things that have not been said before, by dragging to light emotions and reactions that were previously invisible, and by plugging into or expressing what is merging. Writing works not through the direct exercise of political power, but through discussion, discrimination and dissemination of values. (26)

Literature alone is able to work not to coerce but to awaken people by all the important means Tighe enumerates. Rather than manipulating, political literature juxtaposes the world of the text and the world of the reader. In straddling the worlds inside and outside the text, the novelist uses distinctive tools of narrative which exploit what nonfiction and other propagandistic prose might not. Isabel Allende declares in “Writing as an Act of Hope” the great possibility of a novel: “We
can use everything: testimony, chronicle, essay, fantasy, legend, poetry and other devices that might help us to decode the mysteries of our world” (45). Political books, such as those found in the Current Events section of a bookstore, are necessary to foster public political discussion, but they can never replace political novels. One aspect of what makes the novel unique in its ability to create and shape sociopolitical discussion is its format: a novel is singular in its capability to (re-)present issues within a narrative. A novelist gives these complex issues room to spread out in a text and creates a functioning world around an issue—a setting, multiple perspectives, characters, and plotline. Most importantly, the political novelist sets the imagination afire. Marge Piercy, believes political literature is no different than other literature in that “writing that is politically conscious involves freeing the imagination” (104). The imaginative part of our cognition is as important as the analytical when it comes to thinking about political ideas. It would be simplistic to believe that politics enter the mind only through the Little Red Book or the latest Noam Chomsky monograph. Rather, ideas can be considered through the action of a narrative. While literature will not replace pure forms of ideology like manifestos and political position papers, it is a necessary adjunct to it. The literary will never eclipse the currency of political ideas and philosophies, but “it can demonstrate the limits of ideology by offering scattered, diverse, and conflicting meanings.” We will discuss the means by which novels open up a venue for political ideology and how they may become “yet another arena for struggle” (Hanne 26). The struggle is often engaged in stories of sociopolitical consequence like the four novels of this dissertation.

Politically based journalism is also essential as a part of public political conversation, especially in terms of timeliness; it is able to relay the most recent information more quickly and more often, but journalism cannot replace political novels either. For instance, The Grapes of
Wrath began as a newspaper series, but in the end John Steinbeck felt it was also important to use fiction to expose the plight of the impoverished. Novels do have an edge on news media: “The novelist can present more information and achieve more reader involvement than any newspaper using columns of factual accounts, brilliant editorials, and four-color Sunday supplements” (Blotner 93). In some ways a piece of fiction is more powerful than nonfiction or journalistic pieces in its ability to fully portray a social issue. Unlike nonfiction or a news report, in a narrative a reader is able to think of the information differently and consider it as a whole story. Often in a novel a political issue is shown over a period of time in characters’ lives or a political problem is worked out on a societal level, so that the many effects and implications of one social dilemma reverberate in various and sometimes unexpected ways. The true enters the realm of the imaginative, and what happens is a singular amalgam of fact plus the effects of fiction.

The novel also provides a far more durable format than news broadcasts or print journalism, which may broach the same social issue. The book form is not as ephemeral as a newspaper or magazine article or a blog; furthermore, the news media may not yet consider the social issue newsworthy. These novels can coalesce many conversations that are ongoing on Capitol Hill, on Main Street, or in the universities, taking a subject that has been simmering and bringing it to full boil. Similarly, a political novel may tap into a conversation which is already occurring in the mass media, bringing to the surface an issue which has been milling in the collective conscious and putting the information together in a coherent picture as well as giving it a narrative life. We can see this with the contemporary issues of race that Richard Wright brings to light in 1940 through his protagonist Bigger Thomas in Native Son. Furthermore, political novels can usher in discussion on a given political topic, topics whose time needed only
the advent of the story. This is the case with Alice Walker’s womanist philosophy which
challenged predominantly white feminism of the 1970s in her novel *The Color Purple.*

Carl Tighe contends that through a narrative a novelist demystifies the political world (24),
crafting a story to include a sociopolitical issue. In a story, the elements of politics can be
reframed. Literature reveals a world in which political crises can be played out imaginatively. In
literature, one sees the potential open-endedness of political situations; there’s room for politics
to work into a storyline, to entwine itself with the lives and fates of characters. Political novels
are uniquely able to communicate political affairs. For instance, when teaching about complex
global issues, sometimes novels trump textbooks. For example, social work classes read Dorothy
Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* to better understand poverty. The special province of political
novels has been recognized by professors of psychology, social work, and medicine who utilize
literature to “convey general knowledge and theoretical frameworks concerning social justice
and human behavior to students, while helping them to develop empathy and understanding of
individuals in specific situations” (Viggiani et al 57). It is remarkable that these novels are used
to bring depth to a wide array of disciplines.

Definitely, novels that have political concerns distinguish themselves as something more
than the average novel. A political novel uniquely affects its reader, bringing political ideas to
life. One special potential of a political novel is to change the reality of its readers, for “the
power to arrest the reader’s attention and in so doing make him/her aware of the true nature of
reality is perhaps one of the criteria of the novel as an art” (Hartveit 136). That Hartveit views
this readerly enlightenment as elemental to the novel’s worth as art attests to the significance of
the novel’s twin role as entertainer and educator. This theory seems to align the intentions of
politics and narrative, even posing the view that the “art” of the novel is tied to its politics.
Moreover, literature “cannot claim relevance until when made to intervene poignantly in the underpinnings of politics and interplay of forces shaping society” (Obajemu 10). The very relevance of a novel is fixed to its intervention in politics. Adebayo Obajemu understands the necessity for political thought to be a part of our literature and a part of our lives.

Irving Howe advances the concept that political ideas are endemic to modern life and engage not only our reason but also our emotions. The novel brings out the human elements of a political idea, but this does not have to be mutually exclusive from its rational aspects, nor divorced from its factual content. Just as a compelling character can appeal to a reader, so can a well-constructed political idea. Certainly, a meaningful connection must be made between the reader and the narrative. By following the narrative to its conclusion, a reader has made a journey. And through accessing both the imagination and sense of reason, the author taps into the cognitions and feelings of his/her reader. After the style of the rhetorical triangle, political authors must appeal to their readers’ sense of logic, ethics, and emotion. These author/orators must address themselves to the reader by proving their case, conciliating themselves with the reader, and exciting the reader (Okechukwu 53); in this way an author infuses his/her story with a political argument. I disagree with George Goodin who asserts that “literature may not do us much good politically” (195) because novels capture political ideas like light and show them refracted through the prism of the story. Whether a novel is constructed within the bounds of a single political issue or a whole political philosophy doesn’t matter, for “ideas, be they in free isolation or hooped into formal systems, are indispensable to the serious novel. . . . In modern society ideas raise enormous charges of emotion” (Howe, Politics 20). Politics in a story can tap into the emotions that are traditionally considered the purview of narrative discourse.
Walter Rideout reminds us that “the novel, whatever its formal ideology, is essentially a humanizing force” (Rideout 290); the humanism of novels, combined with the facts of social problems, makes them remarkable and compelling entities. Nussbaum writes that “the novel as a genre, is strongly in league with a certain norm of rationality; namely, in its insistence on the fundamental role in its own construction of a general notion of the human being” (“The Literary” 241). Novels give human proportion to political ideology, as for example, with feminism. Judi Roller notes that the political story of women is not necessarily “told in congresses, in political campaigns, or in revolutions. It is told in their daily lives, in their marriages, in their awakenings” (27). Roller gives credence to the importance of telling about lives rather than exclusively politics. One might ask what Susan Faludi’s Backlash (1991) misses about the lives of those women whom it claims to represent and advocate. Backlash was an essential feminist manuscript, but novels explore the deeper parts of lives, which are just as connected to political issues as participation in a historic political rally. Novels sound the details and minutiae that compose a life, details that political theory does not have the means or space to explore.

A story concerned with political ideas piques a reader’s mind. The relationship between reader and author operates differently in political novels: “writer and reader enter an uneasy compact: to expose their opinions to a furious action, and as these melt into the movement of the novel, to find some common recognition, some supervening human bond above and beyond ideas” (Howe, Politics 24). This process so well described by Irving Howe is worth exploring in the contexts of the four 20th-century novels of this dissertation—The Jungle, Native Son, The Armies of the Night, The Color Purple—in which politics “melt” into the narrative. Howe seems to be gesturing to the great possibility for human connection that politics brings to novels. The processing of the narrative through the reader’s complex empathies is part of the narrative’s
journey of meaning. It is true that “texts [have] . . . meanings in process, meanings which cannot be dissociated from a novel’s public impact” (O’Loughlin 4), and so the conversation within the pages continues after the book is closed.

The very act of reading is an intimate and connectional exercise between author and reader. By attaching herself to a text, the reader makes an investment in the story, and qualities of intimacy (between author and reader) and receptivity (to the world the author creates) are manifest in a responsive reader. The flow of information is not one way. Fiction, by virtue of its imaginary realm, gives a reader a voice with which to answer back to the text, and this conversation is different for every reader. In *New Literary History*, Winfried Fluck writes that “fiction is a mode of communication in which an individual perspective is authorized through performative means, that is, by how strong it is as an aesthetic experience” (27). Thus, by imagining oneself within the bounds of a story, a reader is communicating with the text; an exchange has occurred. But the remarkable thing about political novels is that they bring teller and listener together so that a reader might do more than just absorb; she might *witness* all the aesthetic and political potential of a narrative.

The merger of teller and reader is made possible by the power of the genre of the novel. Fiction is a singular experience which is remarkable in its force to affect people. Fiction is potent because of the “potential which fiction possesses in principle, its ability to articulate an interiority that cannot be represented in any other way.” It is interesting to think about how this works, for “by requiring a transfer for their actualization, fictional texts engage this interiority, thereby providing the possibility of articulating something radically subjective, while at the same time representing this dimension of interiority in a way that opens up a way for public recognition” (Fluck 25). The novel juxtaposes the thoughts of the reader with the reader’s
imagined position within the political conversation of the story, so the reader’s subjective thoughts are exposed to the possibility of public debate. Indeed, fiction evokes the personal reflection of readers upon topics of public significance. The inclusion of politics in the text leads to a more multivalent reading experience, for “a reading which separates the work of literature from its social and political context can only dull and inhibit the reader’s critical and emotional response to the text, and perhaps more important, to the social and political circumstances in which she or he lives” (Kelly 2). Without its sociopolitical context readers just aren’t getting the full story.

A few theoretical concepts dovetail with the reading of political novels. These theories can help explain the way political novels are read and how they are sometimes deployed. First, we will look at reader response criticism in order to sound the reader’s role in processing a political novel. According to tenets of reader response theory, the reader uniquely performs by her individual reading of the text. Stanley Fish finds that “meaning is not somehow contained in the text but is created within the reader’s experience” (Habib 733). Martha Nussbaum emphasizes how important each individual reading of a text is and how readers become validated through reading: “it is brought home to readers that the story is in certain ways their own story, showing possibilities for human life and choice that are in certain respects their own to seize, though their concrete circumstances may differ greatly. . . . for the text portrays them as social agents responsible for making a world that is either like or unlike the world within its pages” (Poetic 31). In reader response theory, a reader may become activated to some extent by her reading.

Wolfgang Iser suggests that ambiguity in a text opens it up to reader participation—how interpretation of a text leads to a reader’s involvement. The way an author allows for such interpretation is by building into the text a certain amount of indeterminacy. “The significance of
our own experience in the realization of a text” is partly effected through the level of indeterminacy, and indeterminacy is so valuable because of the bonding agent it becomes for the author and reader; “the indeterminate elements of literary prose . . . represent a vital link between text and reader. They are the switch that activates the reader into using his[/her] own ideas in order to fulfill the intention of the text” (Iser 7, 28). Indeterminacy in a text essentially hands off the text’s meaning to the reader. Texts with greater indeterminacy require more from a reader and offer the reader a fuller reading experience:

Every literary text invites some form of participation on the part of the reader. A text that lays things out before the reader in such a way that [s]he can either accept or reject them will lessen the degree of participation, as it allows him[/her] nothing but a yes or no. Texts with such minimal indeterminacy tend to be tedious, for it is only when the reader is given the chance to participate actively that [s]he will regard the text, whose intention [s]he himself[/herself] has helped to compose, as real. (Iser 10)

A reader must feel that he/she is doing more than just receiving a message. This is in some sense people’s problem with propaganda, which is a literary experience that offers fewer textual choices and thus necessitates very little participation from the reader. This is why propaganda is not generally effective in furthering a political message. When a reader is given too little choice he/she feels walled in. In each of the novels we will be studying we will keep in mind the degree of freedom that a text allows a reader.

Because a reader is given a multiplicity of choices when reading a rich narrative, he/she actually becomes more devoted to the text. There is great power when a reader is in dialogue with a text; it creates the opportunity for empathy, and Gloria Steinem has said that “empathy is the most revolutionary emotion” (Revolution 37). Empathy can enlighten and activate readers politically. More than empathy, reading can closely tie together readers and the narrative world:

[Novels] construct and speak to an implicit reader who shares with the characters certain hopes, fears, and general human concerns, and who for that reason is able to form bonds of identification and sympathy with them, but who is also situated
elsewhere and needs to be informed about the concrete situation of the characters. In this way, the very structure of the interaction between the text and its imagined reader invites the reader to see how the mutable features of society and circumstance bear on the realization of shared hopes and desires—and also, in fact, on their very structure. (Nussbaum, Poetic 7)

There’s an ownership in the unique meaning the individual reader carves from her singular reading experience. If the reader is generating meaning while she is reading the text, this forms a bond between the reader and the text. Likewise if a reader is composing the meaning of a text then she may become a stronger ally of the text and more likely to put into action the political ideas entwined with the narrative. This phenomenon of readers inspired to action is something we will be looking at in all four novels but will be most clearly seen in readers’ enthusiastic political reaction to The Jungle.

Closely connected to reader response studies is reception theory. The overarching idea in reception theory is that books offer many readings, some that are at odds with each other, but each in turn is generally meaningful. This idea of textual openness is integral to a political text’s influence. Hanne describes how this openness works: “It is just this slipperiness of narrative fiction, the uncertainty of the claims that a work of fiction makes on its readers, that provides a key to understanding the social and political influence of which it is capable” (35). The freedom presented to the reader in a narrative allows that reader to forge her own understanding of the novel and mimics the freedom of a democratic society where the individual has the opportunity to create change and alter the (inter)national narrative. Reception theory is based upon the importance of the reader as meaning maker, as actor. And I will be looking at how readers of the four novels not only make meaning but generate action in response to these narratives.

Reception theory depends upon a reader’s expectations, and I plan to consider these expectations when evaluating the political climate in which each novel was published. One variable that is challenging to deal with when looking at political action inspired by novels is the
reader’s “horizon of expectations,” which is a varied and shifting entity, so one cannot draw a straight line from political book to political action. However, it is a political novelist’s task to bring a reader down a path of understanding about a sociopolitical issue, from whatever point or with whatever expectations a reader first begins the novel.

One way a political novelist fosters a strong connection between the reader and the text is by cultivating a reader’s identification with the characters in the story. The social ills that these characters may endure or sociopolitical problems that characters embody hint at something larger. A novelist can make the most of his/her characters by using “the methods of scholarship to document his[her] case and then supplement them with heroes and villains who add an emotional appeal to the intellectual one” (Blotner 6). For example, Walker’s philosophy of womanism is acted out through her characters who through much travail, including physical and sexual abuse, become self-actualized womanists themselves. The individual struggles of characters remind us that “human problems are collective as well as individual” (Roller 5). While reading of one family’s poverty, the reader is thinking of the legions of poor families. And this identification defies the confines of space and time; for instance, while reading about Bigger Thomas’ struggle against race, class, and partisan issues, a reader cannot help but reflect on what it is like to be poor and black in America, not just during the Depression, but also today. This is the power of a story to comment on larger issues while engaging a reader’s empathy for a character’s situation. (Even Bigger’s name suggests he is meant to represent something bigger than himself). It is worth asking whether this character projection is what makes these four novelists so effective: is it their ability to make characters into archetypes? Perhaps because the authors create characters which represent more than themselves, the reader takes the story at
more than its narrative value. Any political story with a moral purpose must create characters that bear that message.

In such a way, novels must develop a story of the individual before the book can become representative of a people or issue and then possibly of a social movement. The characters as emblems serve “the dual function of character as individual and representative of [hu]mankind as a whole [which] is often emphasized by the novelist. Through emphasis and design [hu]mans [are] shown to transcend [their] limitations at certain moments and achieve universal significance” (Hartveit 138). In the well-known, canonized books that we will be exploring, it’s easy to see how the characters rise above the limitations of their story life and come to represent not only many people, but also an entire sociopolitical issue that they seem to personify or move within throughout the narrative. Let’s look at one ideology: feminism. In feminist novels, “struggles between individuals, especially between individual men and women, illuminate or suggest the power relationship existing between groups” (Roller 5). In The Color Purple, Alice Walker not only uses her cast of characters to demonstrate the power dynamics between men and women but also those existing between and amongst women. Through unique female characters at odds and in sympathy with each other, Walker seeks the roots of oppression perpetrated by women on women. This is indicative of characters’ ability to stand for greater representative interrelations and dynamics. Through the relationships in The Color Purple, circumstances and constructs of feminism emerge from the page.

The small world of a story is an entrée into the greater world outside the text. It is essential that rather than “refusing to go outside of the text, we need to see the text as part of the outside” (Hans 13). The private world of one individual like Bigger Thomas in Native Son, or a segregated Southern village as in The Color Purple, is cantilevered open to the realm of public
discourse, and although the characters are fictional, the poverty or racism or sexism that runs through their tales exists in our world. Contemplating such dire situations is not easy in “literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction”—how does one deal with the strong emotions that come with reading such desperate stories? Martha Nussbaum maintains that such stories do indeed “cut through those self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront,” but there is a salvo, literature itself, which makes “this [identification] process palatable by giving us pleasure in the very act of confrontation” (Poetic 5). The inspiration in the act of empathetic reading of a compelling story can help assuage the emotional difficulties which that story may arouse. In fact, the story is in some cases all the more effective because it dares to touch on the raw emotions of the reader.

The sexism and racism portrayed in The Color Purple are examples of the groups of the disadvantaged group of peoples that novels of social justice depict, and the story of those put-upon communities must be told carefully in order to avoid further exploitation. A question must be asked of novels depicting issues of social justice: what authority does the author have to tell such a story? What is the perspective presented, why should readers trust it, what is left out, and who might be being exploited? These questions ask about the authority and capability of a novelist to tell a story of social injustice when the novelist often is positioned outside the direct sphere of that injustice. The novelist’s relation to or familiarity with a particular social issue is varied throughout the four novels I am studying; for instance, in The Armies of the Night Mailer marches and supports peace activists for a few days, but he still refers to himself as a “revolutionary-for-the-weekend.” Regardless of the stance an author takes in relation to a particular social issue, the author must tell the details of an unjust situation to inform and awaken readers.
It is essential to find the balance between information and exploitation in the novels we will be exploring. This is a line that must be worried before considering any positive influence political novels might have. What does a reader do with the pain of the characters? Even the ostensibly pure emotion of empathy presents difficulties. In the reader’s performance, “the difficulty and slipperiness of empathy” (Hartman 18) must be acknowledged. For there is something worrisome about a reader who so effortlessly wears the mantle of another’s pain. Saidiya Hartman asks important questions of us as readers of political prose: “Does the pain of the other merely provide us with the opportunity for self-reflection?” (4). Certainly, authors like Steinbeck, in his novel The Grapes of Wrath, want readers to contemplate their lives in relation to indigent farmers and to consider the implications of such poverty on American life. But there is the risk of a backlash, a reader who submerges the pain of the disadvantaged below the surface of his/her own curiosity or oh-so-painless armchair conjecture. This is a danger readers and authors of sociopolitical novels must confront.

Without ignoring the risk of defeasance of the underprivileged, a reader must to a certain degree become attached to characters in the novel and invested in the resolution of the narrative. It is usually through characters that the poignancy of social injustices comes to life. Reading becomes more than a literary exercise, and the “aesthetic experience is thus a state ‘in-between’ in which, as a result of the doubling structure of fictionality, we are . . . ‘both ourselves and someone else at the same time’ so that, in reading, we can be inside and outside a character at once” (Iser qtd. in Fluck 24). Once one has “become” a character, the book can become an event in the reader’s mind—it is through empathetic processes that a story is made real. And yet this is a forged reality. A reader who looks at a story of struggling evicted farmers in The Grapes of Wrath through the protagonist Tom Joad is a reader who is actually seeing double; the vision is
blurred by an overlay of the reader’s own experience. The indigent experiences of the Joads are simply not accessible from the reader’s comfortable situation. This places the reader in a vexed position because he/she begins to react to the experiences of the Joad family, and the troublesome “slipperiness of empathy” as Hartman has characterized it is set in motion. Does a reader try out the experience of poverty, “slumming it” as a sort of tourist? If so, the lives of the disadvantaged and the greater sociopolitical issues become merely a form of entertainment.

It is a thorny situation when the painful experience of characters within a novel ostensibly meant to arouse indignation instead becomes a spectacle. At this crossroads, Hartman points to “the precariouslyness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator” (4). For a novel about social injustice, there is a world of difference between a reader who witnesses and a reader who spectates. For contemporary readers, it is easy to suppose that spectating would be comfortable, given our voyeuristic culture of web cams, tell-all biographies, and reality TV. In political novels, if an author is trying to move his/her reader to action, as I assert some of the following authors do, the novelist needs the reader to be present, to witness, not simply to be entertained. Entertainment is something that happens from a distance--it’s something a reader gets from the story--while a reader who witnesses is giving of herself to understand the (often heartrending) story. Reading has a way of fostering understanding, for “fiction [is] one way of persuading people to cross those borders of alienation and mistrust into the existence of someone in whose mind and body a reader may find it enlightening to spend some time” (Piercy 114). In this way literature can be a witnessing and empathetic experience in which a reader can raise his/her consciousness.

Despite the difficulties of reading about disadvantaged populations, these stories of the downtrodden are important. Sometimes political novels have a trigger effect, as the books
themselves may represent untold or undertold stories. Michael Hanne sees the trigger effect as quite powerful: “It is in this capacity to trigger related stories among a vast readership that the political force of the work has been located” (16). If *The Color Purple* triggered related stories about physical and sexual abuse, then these new stories create a “highly charged consciousness” (Hanne 15). The group of books we will analyze aired issues that needed public discussion at the time. This explains how literature gives a voice to minorities whose stories might have otherwise gone unnoticed. Literature articulates and amplifies those stories. Telling the untold stories may “positively empower oppressed people and diminish the offensive power of their oppressors” (Hanne 13). All four novels represent oppressed people, and to some degree are telling untold stories, and we will evaluate how these untold stories were received.

This dissertation is also interested in what happens after those untold stories are told. We are concerned with the connections between books about social justice and the activism books excite on behalf of a particular social cause. Politically conscious fiction allows a book to rise from its place as literary art and become a catalyst for change. One way to begin to draw connections between novels and social activism is to look at how a novelist piques a reader’s conscience. In some political novels a reader is “altered and ‘enriched’ by the work—perhaps to the point of moving into the political arena him[her]self” (Milne 8). There is by no means a clear trajectory between social message and reader activism, and in some cases it may not be possible to map reader reactions. In all of the texts we will be appraising the literary apparatus novelists use to unsettle and trouble the mind of a reader, and we will also try to identify the rhetorical devices a novelist uses to incite a reader to action, whether that action is changing a law or changing a mind. So the guiding question may not in all cases be what social change was effected by a particular novel but how can a novel act as a catalyst for social activism?
Each of the novels we will be studying is an attempt at “incalculation of value” in the reader; each author hopes “the reader is made to undergo some kind of moral education. Based on the moral equipment [s]he possesses initially [s]he is enabled to respond to the moral issues raised by the novel. In the process his[/her] moral horizon and awareness are often widened so that [s]he can cope with the new situation and fulfill his[/her] task as a moral touchstone” (Hartveit 137). By inculcating a set of values within their readers, the four novelists hope to morally educate their readers, so by appealing to a reader’s moral senses, the author is in this way persuading a reader. By having his/her morals swayed, a reader is moved and affected, which could make these books valuable to their particular political movements. The novel becomes a potentially powerful story that opens or changes a reader’s mind on a given issue.

Throughout the novel, authors are using their tools of persuasion; the act of writing a novel is itself a persuasive endeavor. The basic elements of the novel are part of winning the reader. Hartveit explains the particular necessity of the novel genre:

The various components of the novel are only ‘metaphors’ for a vision which is concerned with a ‘reality’ that cannot be reached by the language of plain facts. The whole novel is metaphorical in that it deals with something which is primarily not of this world. The real main characters are abstracts, inaccessible except in metaphorical or allegorical language. The reader therefore has to be won over from the position of a doubting Thomas – by the sheer skill of the author as persuader. (117)

So it comes down to the ability of an author to create a metaphorical world (a much different world than that of a nonfiction work) in which the readers can lose themselves and connect with characters and themes that stand for abstract ideas. The key for a political novelist who hopes to disseminate any political concepts is always to tell an engaging story.

When considering the verisimilitude of a story, all four novels owe a debt to Emile Zola’s naturalism. The naturalist aesthetic was important in creating lifelike, and in some cases, life-changing stories. Naturalistic stories often tell of tales of social injustice; it almost seems the
genre was created in the 19th century for this reason. Naturalism has a rich tradition of drawing characters from the working class, and certainly all the characters in the three of the four novels I am considering are at least working class if not impoverished. The setting in naturalistic writing is often contemporary, and each of these novels (except *The Color Purple*) takes place in a time contemporaneous with publication, making the impact of the story more intense, as the novels’ events are either ongoing or recent history. Finally, naturalism has a documentary quality so naturalist authors often do research to become knowledgeable about the community they portray, and in all of these novels the authors—Sinclair, Wright, Mailer, and Walker—either had first-hand life experience of their subject or did thorough on-site investigative research. For example, Mailer joined the anti-war movement, going so far in his commitment as to get arrested, and Sinclair drew on his body of painstaking research in the slums and stockyards of Chicago. All of these naturalist components make novels about social justice more convincing. In order for novelists to compose a convincing story of social injustice, they must express the realities of such injustices, which is possible through naturalist techniques.

Without the realistic techniques found in naturalism, how could a political author presume to address a reader’s sensibilities, let alone promote moral or political action? Now we’ll consider how books become action. Cecilia Tichi writes about such action:

> Leveraged by books, certain popular groundswells for change have ample precedent in recent American history. Who knew that mid-twentieth-century American women would read Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and be energized for gender-based social change? Who expected Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* to initiate the environmental consciousness movement, which would hold firm as a national value into the twenty-first century. (59)

Political movements have been ignited by novels as well. For instance, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* inspired the passing of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. *The Jungle* provides a story with political meaning, but it also promoted a public debate which was then turned into action.
Ida Tarbell’s *The History of the Standard Oil Company* was instrumental in breaking up the early 20th century oil monopoly. But such direct links between books and social changes are rare; the novels in this dissertation are instead part of ongoing social conversations.

By fusing ideology and private sympathy for a cause or issue, a political novel exceeds the limits of more traditional narratives (Howe, *Politics* 22). The interplay between ideology and emotion transforms novels into occasions not only for political debate but also political action or praxis. These novels take the immediacy of practical life and induce the reader to consider the imagined world of the book in relation to his or her own political views. Through what Irving Howe calls “internal warfare” (*Politics* 22) a reader must maintain a personal ideological viewpoint while also considering the sociopolitical reality of the time and place in which the text is being read. It is then that the novel becomes something more than a simple text: rather it provides a critical reader with a simultaneous apprehension of both past and contemporary reality.

Furthermore, political fiction invites the reader to define her role within the larger society. Novels are uniquely able to join “together symbolically social justice and . . . ‘individual justice,’ a mode of reconfiguring reality that ‘does justice’ to the expectations and self-perception of the individual . . . (the smallest social unit in society)” (Fluck 19). Although one’s response to a work of social protest fiction may seem numerically insignificant, millions of readers’ individual small reactions have a cumulative effect of major social impact. This is a grassroots way of thinking about reading. For instance, thousands of readers of *The Jungle* wrote letters to President Theodore Roosevelt demanding changes in food processing. In this way average citizen-readers can influence those in power. Sometimes political novels render necessary the discussion of an issue that those in positions of privilege and power were, until the time of
publication, happy to ignore. For example, I will argue that Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* first brought a favorable view of the anti-war movement to middle-class, middle-American readers; the publication of Mailer’s story and its critical recognition gave the anti-war movement its day in court.

One way a book can initiate social action is simply by its physical existence. A novel has a sense of permanence and durability which the binding of the pages and backing of a publisher provide. Somehow its very existence as a professionally bound and distributed text lends credence to the story inside. The physical qualities of a book support its role within a social movement. A book is can be passed around and referenced in a way that a *New York Times* article cannot. What happens when a book is recommended or passed on? Even though reading is a solitary act, afterwards the reader becomes a member of a club. One may share the metaphor and message of a novel with fellow readers, and this builds the foundations of an interpretive community. John Beck asserts in *Writing the Radical Center* that rather than isolating a single reader, the “reading itself becomes a form of immediate contact; it is itself an experience that connects the self with the world” (54). Not only is a reader connected to the characters in the narrative, but also to fellow readers who have weathered the experience of reading a difficult and affecting political novel like *Native Son*. As such, the dialogue of author and reader and reader with reader “generates new meanings and is thus a form of creative community building, making connections rather than severing them” (Beck 54). Is this the missing link between reading and activism: the sense of community that is formed between readers who have similar reactions to a novel? It is easy to see how reading communities might emerge in the age of the Internet and social networking media. Throughout this dissertation we will be able to look at what a novelist might do to inspire such interactions.
A novel, despite its author’s greatest efforts and despite its readers’ commitment to a cause, is not guaranteed to build connections or to move people politically. What comes of a novel is spontaneous; “the meanings a text takes on in the public cannot be predicted by the formal qualities or even an author’s assumed audience. . . . These meanings must be accounted for as novels interact within complex social and historical formations” (O’Loughlin 3). The novel cannot stand on its literary merit alone. It must be more than moving literature; it must move. For example, the sociopolitical consequence of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and *The Jungle* “was not an inherent trait of these novels. These works were made significant by those who deployed them in the public sphere” (O’Loughlin 4). Clearly, there must be readers who read these books and become inspired to take action. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Jungle* are exceptional because of the books’ momentous public impact and because they were each employed effectively in bringing about great social change. Novels about social justice can become “literary texts [which] play an unprecedented role in public conflicts as they became both the subject and means of debate” (O’Loughlin 1). Not only did *The Jungle* provide a story with political meaning, but it allowed the coalescence of ongoing public discussion about consumer safety and worker’s rights; the novel was then used to motivate government action. As O’Loughlin points out, novels can help shape public debate and then perhaps help inspire political change.

But when it comes to fostering any sort of progressive change in the world, what sway do novels really hold? Martha Nussbaum argues for the supremacy of the imagination in empathy: “an ethics of impartial respect for human dignity will fail to engage real human dignity [and] will fail to engage real human beings unless they are made capable of entering imaginatively into the lives of distant others and to have emotions related to that participation” (*Poetic* xvi). Is she
suggesting that to accord all humans dignity one must first do the work of imagination? Such work can certainly be done through reading a narrative: novels are the vehicle to pique the imagination which allows us to understand “distant others” and make ethical choices based on that imagined closeness. Imagining is more than some flight of fancy; it actually can tap into the ethical capacities. Imagining makes readers charitable, and the charity of imagination “is preparation for greater charities in life” (Nussbaum, Poetic 236). Nussbaum is arguing that the position of the reader (as one who connects and sympathizes with disadvantaged characters) is congruent with the position of the citizen. Robert Stone, a political novelist, looks at how a novel can move someone, can galvanize them to act out politically: “A political situation is an ideal subject for a novel. . . . One sees people caught up in things that transcend the personal” (31). Readers who are “caught up” in the political aspect of the book are likely to care and maybe even act on behalf of a political cause. This places novels well within the province of human rights campaigns.

One way to think about the effect of novels is by considering the effectiveness of language and the reader’s intentional act of consuming the novel. Richard Weaver asserts that “every use of language, written or oral, exhibits an attitude, and an attitude implies an act” (qtd. in Golden, Goodwin and Coleman 317-18). This would encompass the reading of political novels, so the reader is also taking action. Reading is the first political response to a novel. Whether a reader then decides to act politically after being so moved by a political novel is a secondary type of action. While a reader by definition takes primary political action, the secondary political action, whether it’s changing one’s ideological frame of reference or joining a political movement is in no ways certain to occur. But a great deal can take place in the dialectic between author and reader.
A political novel, like any novel, asks for the participation of the reader, an investment in the story. It is difficult to resist the power of a well told story and the hold that a narrative has on our hearts and minds. In *The Power of the Story*, Hanne suggests that such an investment is tantamount to role playing, that just as in educational or psychological contexts, it “can be enormously influential on the person doing it” (27). Role-playing can be a poignant experience for a reader when it comes to a pressing social issue—in some sense it is as if the reader has become personally involved in the story’s political concerns. So potent is the reader’s personal involvement via role-playing that it may lead to a “radical reframing of a familiar situation” or, in this case, the reader’s reconstruction of a given social issue (Hanne 27). Role-playing accords a reader a means to personalize a political story (literally to take it personally), and consequently, the reader has something at stake. Because of this, a story may trigger personal action such as political action on an issue. It may be helpful to see how we arrive at this possibility.

In this dissertation, we’re clearly looking at political ideas that exist outside the pages of a novel and how a reader becomes an activated reader-citizen. We’re interested in exploring the connection between political novels and the political motivation of readers, especially as it corresponds to a social movement. The question remains: does anything change after a reader has consumed the narrative? The answer is yes, it has happened as “the phenomenal success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* reveals that the right novel appearing at the critical time can exercise wide and lasting influence” (Blotner 93). But it is still a valid contemporary question whether one can connect reader reaction to reader activism. We will be surveying the importance of certain novels in relation to various progressive social movements, but it is certainly not easy to draw a cause/effect relationship between books and political action, for that veers more into the realm of sociology.
How does one begin to measure the political effect of a novel? This is an important question, and it goes to the core of the dissertation; for each of the novels in this dissertation has a political outcome, usually within a given political movement. Several measures will be used to assess each novel’s impact. The first will be contemporary reviews: what did the critics at the time of publication have to say about it? These reviews are valuable because they often introduce a book to its audience and set the tone for its reception. I will be sure to include a wide survey of reviews and take note not just of adulation but of the critique of these novels as well, for reviews can often be conflicting. The publication in which the reviews are published will also be considered because it can give a clue about the audience reading the review and, therefore, the audience who might read the novel. Also of importance is the general press coverage the book receives; I will be asking “Did it make news?” Such coverage is often indicative of a novel that raises new, profound, or controversial questions. I will also look in academic journals to see if there was intellectual debate about the book. I will consider any noteworthy nominations, awards, or prizes the books received: these can serve as an establishment stamp of approval. Awards can increase a novel’s readership and play a role in its canonization. Finally, I will survey the novels’ aesthetic and political influence over time. These books are all canonized, which says something about their significance and influence over the years. They all have had decades in which they were influential (perhaps more influential in some decades than others). This will be especially important to contemplate as I look at Native Son because we are trying to surmise how the book was “rediscovered” during the Civil Rights movement.

What is it in a narrative that captivates an audience and possibly opens them up to make political change after reading it? People are uncomfortable with where a political novel leaves them after reading it. The novel has done something to what may have been a simple political
construct before the reading of the novel. The fictional must then be taken seriously; the
complexity of a political issue has been exacerbated by the narrative. In certain political novels,
“the problem of justice is given a face and a voice, a density of feature that plays havoc with any
uniform scale of measurement and brings to every act of judicial weighing the shape the very
domain of the shadow of unweighable residue” (Dimock 10). Perhaps the reader must grapple
with the realization that the fictional must now merge with the factual, so into a reader’s “judicial
weighing” or simplistic “solving” of a sociopolitical issue comes this story that complicates,
confuses, and maybe rejects the simplistic view. How authors give social justice issues a face
and voice and how readers react will be explored in terms of the social justice quandaries raised
by the following four novels.

We could ask what happens when one subtracts all political concerns from the novel: “the
attempt to shield literary interpretation from political analysis paradoxically sells literature short,
cutting off a major wellspring of its power, and reducing it to divertissement” (Kelly 1). Novels
are worth far more than their entertainment value. I will be looking at four political novels whose
ideas’ time had come—the time was ripe for the sociopolitical discussion these novels evinced.
Perhaps, it’s time, as T.V. Reed suggests, that we ask “what can ‘literary’ strategies tell us about
the kinds of political strategies needed by movements today?” (xii). Maybe it’s time activists
literally take a page from a novelist’s book. In these novels we will be examining, politics is the
backbone, some may say even the purpose, of the story. Through these stories, the authors hoped
to move people and because of this, their novels ended up playing a part in a range of social
movements: the Consumer Rights movement, the Black Power movement, the Anti-war
movement, and the Feminist movement. These four novels set up a literary arena where causes
of conscience are played out, so that literary experience translates into political courage.
Literature sets up a climate in which social issues are aired, this climate may in turn become part of a given social movement. Even if one cannot draw a straight trajectory from book to political action, the book is a part of the mental and cultural environment in which social change is wrought. In the consumption of these novels lies a way forward, for although “novel-reading will not give us the whole story about social justice . . . it can be a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision” (Nussbaum, Poetic 12). Be it a struggle against the indignities of consumer exploitation, the inhumanity of racism, the hubris of American military imperialism, or the constrictions of gender bias, the vision that the following novels share is one of a fairer world at the final end of their struggles.
CHAPTER 3
PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE JUNGLE

In *The Jungle* (1906), Upton Sinclair captured a distinct period of American history, when America was changing from an agricultural to an industrial country. People were moving away from family farms to urban areas, and Americans were relying more and more on manufactured food. In a sense, this period changed the American dream: "The beginning of the 20th century definitely called for some reformulation of the dream, because America ha[d] undergone drastic changes. . . . Urban and industrial development threatened the well-being of the nation and its future" (O'Shea 141). Sinclair questioned what industrialization was doing to this country; he focused on Chicago slaughterhouses but more generally on the “nation’s exploding mass-production system . . . and the social implications of such work” (Barrett 8). His view of the meatpacking industry was from the perspective of the worker, and it applied to workers across America, not merely the Chicago meatpackers. Although *The Jungle* is famous for its depiction of unsanitary food processing, the novel also deployed a spectrum of workers’ rights issues.

He revealed the human cost of capitalism run amok; "the historical significance of *The Jungle* lies in Sinclair's attempt to bring working-class life into fiction without censoring any of the oppressiveness of that life as he observed it" (Bloodworth 60). And we will discuss how many contemporary readers turned away from the class issues in the story. Readers, who found Sinclair’s version of the American dream repugnant were able "to miss the basic point of . . . Sinclair[‘s] writing [which] requires strong motivation on the part of the reader. To look at what Sinclair was trying to teach is to discover what Americans were determined not to learn about themselves" (Yoder 45). Whether it was working conditions in slaughterhouses or ingredients in potted beef, many Americans were happy to be blind to these unpleasantries.
Sinclair is able to see the human side of a story that could have been all about the meatpacking machine. But the novel is grounded in the stories of lives of the poor workers. In preparing for *The Jungle* Sinclair says that

I sat at night in the homes of workers, foreign-born and native, and they told me their stories, one after one, and I made notes of everything. In the daytime I would wander about the yards, and my friends would risk their jobs to show me what I wanted to see. . . . I went about the district, talking with lawyers, doctors, dentists, nurses, policemen, politicians, real estate agents. . . . I got my meals at the University Settlement, where I could check up my data by the opinions of men and women who were giving their lives to this neighborhood. (Sinclair, *American Outpost* 154-55)

Sinclair never forgot that he was dealing with real lives, not mere characters, and he was dedicated to telling their story with authenticity. Sinclair was deeply affected by the workers he was writing about; he maintains in his *Autobiography* that "I wrote with tears and anguish, pouring into the pages all the pain that life had meant to me" (112). He didn’t mean to take the stance of impartial observer. This has consequences in terms of narrative construction, for Sinclair was building a story around a sociopolitical issue. So he had something greater than literary greatness for which to strive. As a crusading novelist (in the image of crusading journalist) Sinclair had more on his mind than plot turns and character development. We will be looking at various ways *The Jungle* supported the cause of social justice.

Sinclair, for all his investigative journalism, was not a reporter. For Sinclair "fiction served fact" (Folsom 245); first and foremost he had a political story to tell. "Sinclair never claimed to be a disinterested chronicler of what he saw. He felt obligations to his subject were different than a reporter's" (O'Loughlin 211), so he earns the title of crusading novelist. Some did not appreciate Sinclair’s crusading; one reviewer scorned the "facile glitter of contrast and exaggeration that is characteristic of the school of young writers that have set out to deliver us from the evils of capitalism" (*Jurgis* BR 128). This *New York Times* journalist was disparaging
muckrakers just before President Theodore Roosevelt gave a speech coining the term. In 1937, Vernon Loggins wrote that "Sinclair's political and social theories may belong elsewhere; but his unsurpassed mastery of the simple emotional style and his powerful realism cannot be dismissed from American literature" (Loggins 271). Sinclair’s authorial poise can be felt throughout the story in which he is a third-person omniscient narrator. Through his use of documentary detail he positions himself as a reliable narrator who depicts the treachery and misery that is the landscape of his protagonist’s life. From this position he is able to argue against a multitude of social ills that intersect with the Rudkuses’ existence in Packingtown (an area of Chicago where meatpacking plants and their workers were in close proximity). One can clearly hear Sinclair’s arguments against wage slavery throughout his tale. Sinclair’s narration of the horrors of life in Packingtown helped frame the story and carefully depicted the detailed reasons why life was so difficult for the blue-collar workers in the meatpacking business.

Sinclair’s story seethes with real and horrifying details. He did his best to turn the stomachs of his readers while he meant to turn their hearts and minds. This functions in interesting ways in the narrative, revolting the reader while drawing on the reader’s sympathies for the unfortunate cogs in such a system of oppression. Here is a typical example of Sinclair disgusting his audience:

> There were cattle which had been fed on ‘whiskey-malt,’ the refuse of breweries, and had become what the men called ‘steerly’—which means covered with boils. It was a nasty job killing these, for when you plunged your knife into them they would burst and splash foul-smelling stuff into your face; and when a man’s sleeves were so smeared with blood, and his hands steeped in it, how was he ever . . . to clear his eyes so that he could see? (Sinclair, *The Jungle* 94-95)

Many were utterly resistant to the unpleasant topics that Sinclair broached. Note the condescending tone in this review: "there is nothing spontaneous in the book save his imaginative descriptions of human disappointment and misery" ("Jurgis” BR 128). But Sinclair
wasn’t aiming to be spontaneous he was capturing the desperate lives and times, and was obligated to describe the horrifying conditions because those conditions made up the lives of many workers in this era. An author should be able to critique culture with impunity. In these nauseating portrayals is sympathy: "what gives unity and strength to The Jungle . . . is the strong note of Sinclair's compassion for the lowly and the disinherited. . . . Sinclair's primary inspiration comes from his pity for his fellow [humans] and his ultimate purpose is the accomplishment of human welfare" (Gupta 130). So if Sinclair has to portray awful conditions, it is worth it if his descriptions work to better understanding of those hard lives he has so thoroughly described. Sinclair had altruistic motives driving his disturbing imagery.

Empathetic characters help Sinclair tell a compelling story; Sinclair’s characters easily garnered the reader’s empathy. For example, Jurgis’s wife’s cousin Marija’s troubles at work are depicted with care: “[she] lost her grip on her slimy knife, and gave herself a poisoned wound— that was the new life that unfolded itself before Marija. But because Marija was a human horse she merely laughed and went at it; it would enable her to pay her board again, and keep the family going” (Sinclair, The Jungle 103). A reader’s empathy has an important role in narrative construction. Sinclair was relying on readers to engage empathetically with the characters he created. Such persecuted characters, like the protagonist Jurgis Rudkus, were an entry into the class struggle that was playing out in the Chicago stockyards: Sinclair was scrutinizing the whole working economy around the meatpackers and he deftly “used Jurgis' initial innocence and gradual disillusionment as foil and technique of discovery" (Folsom 243). Jurgis is certainly a plagued character, and he is an Everyman "experiencing either directly or indirectly all of the horrors to be found in Chicago's Packingtown" (O'Loughlin 212). Jurgis was a super-Everyman because he experienced plagues like Job and was continuously broken under their burden.
Through Jurgis one experiences all the misery and vileness of life as a trifling worker in the capitalist machine.

Sinclair’s characters—characters who experience near-biblical plagues—have been regarded as composites. Composite characters are problematic only if one looks at *The Jungle* as a piece of journalism. But Sinclair did not have to adhere to the stricter standards of journalism. Yet readers and critics saw *The Jungle* as journalism because so much of it was nonfictive, and they held Sinclair’s composite characters against him. It hurt the credibility of his story because it is unlikely one family would bear all the terrible burdens the Rudkuses bore (multiple deaths, on-the-job injury, graft, prostitution, etc.), and "some readers find their compassion for Jurgis and his family and friends giving way to incredulity at such an implausible accumulation of disasters" (Arthur 52). Yet Sinclair was a novelist with all the power that that station granted him, so he could create characters as he saw fit. And although it is true Sinclair could be accused of creating composite characters, his characters still were based on documentary evidence, for “his picture of everyday life in ‘packingtown’ was firmly grounded in conversations with physicians, settlement house workers, and Socialist Party intellectuals who knew the neighborhood well” (Barrett 10). Sinclair was simply trying to accurately depict all the troubles that befell the workers in Chicago’s Packingtown; the problem is, he makes them all happen to the same family.

Perhaps Sinclair risked his reliability by telescoping all the social problems of the novel into a single family, but at the same time the Rudkus family takes on the quality of a cog in a machine, which is meaningful when considering their position in the great capitalist machine of the food processing business. In case the cogs become too indistinguishable or the masses become too anonymous, "this group of lay figures with Jurgis at their head, these mere capacities
for infinite suffering, finally do come to stand for the masses themselves, for all the faceless ones
to whom things are done" (Rideout 35). There is a symbolic quality of the composite Rudkuses;
they represent all the suffering of their impoverished fellow workers. Critics over the years have
simply been close-minded about the range of characters a book like *The Jungle* could conceivably offer:

It is surprising that studies of *The Jungle* have . . . merely repeated the charge that Sinclair was unable to create convincing characters. Within the limited scope that characterization had in his novels, in view of his declared objectives, these characters are sufficiently developed to merit notice. . . . Quite a few characters of Sinclair are like the characters of John Galsworthy, who belong to humble stations and are unable to overcome their social and economic handicaps. (Mookerjee 54)

It is a part of the very essence of Sinclair’s characters that they are burdened with so many of the woes of the destitute. But they are more than troubled; they are representative of what it is to be a poor, disenfranchised worker in America.

More than a story of the lives of a poor immigrant family, *The Jungle* is one of the first American proletarian novels, preceding writers like John Dos Passos and Edward Dahlberg. *The Jungle* was filled with left-wing values and depicted working class life, but it pre-dated the heyday of proletarian novels which occurred around the Great Depression, 1929-1941. The power of the plight of the proletariat is strong in Sinclair’s story, as Eugene Debs, who was then a leader in the Socialist Party of America, writes in a review: "The pulse of the proletarian revolution throbs in these pages. It is a novel of the impending crisis, and will prove a powerful factor in precipitating it. *The Jungle*, as a masterful literary achievement, will mark a luminous epoch in the social revolution" (4). It is impossible to connect *The Jungle* to a proletarian revolution. Sinclair did not get to see the progressive changes in working conditions he hoped for, but "for Sinclair, the inauguration of what he termed 'a proletarian literature in America' was the lasting good to come out of *The Jungle.*" *The Jungle* was more than telling the workers’
story; it was meant to be a part of that very workers movement: "In pushing into the public sphere, however unsuccessfully, the cause of exploited laborers, *The Jungle* launched the beginnings of a self-consciously proletarian literature which was not only political in subject, but was part of political struggle itself" (O’Loughlin 239, 244). Sinclair, and many in the Socialist party, saw that literature could be part of the class struggle. Sinclair was using literature to tell the story of the worker in trouble. Through *The Jungle*, "the world became aware that industrial America in its toil, its misery and its hope had found a voice" (Dell 106); Sinclair was truly giving a voice to a sector that had mostly known silence in America. *The Jungle* was emblematic of its Progressive times, typifying "the crusading spirit of the Progressive Era [and] invit[ing] students to enter vicariously into the immigrant experience.” Through his novel Sinclair was able to “mak[e] working-class history come alive” (Phelps, “How” B11). Over the past century, students and readers alike have been able to see a proletariat struggle play out in the pages of *The Jungle*.

Although it was Sinclair’s stated goal to have the reader empathize with the plight of the impoverished characters in his novel, the grisly depiction of the meatpacking processes caught as many readers' attention. Many Americans were more interested in the unsanitary meat processing that the novel vividly depicts than in the plight of the victimized workers. Sinclair apparently missed his mark; he is famous for his statement "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach" (Sinclair, "What Life" 594). Readers were greatly offended, but not at the state of the proletariat. Sinclair meant "to publicize the conditions of workers in the packing industry to move people to action" (O'Loughlin 231), political action that would ease class tensions. This book was meant not only for the workers themselves as a rallying cry against their oppression. But it was also meant to provoke a revolution, enraging the middle and upper
class readers on behalf of the workers. Rather than empowering readers to help change the conditions for the poor, he inspired them to change the conditions of their food supply, an achievement that should not be disparaged, but it was not the primary interest of Sinclair.

But Sinclair was not oblivious to the effects that the details of the revolting conditions in Chicago’s slaughterhouses would have on his readers. In fact, one critic argues that he used the information on unsanitary food processing to reach more readers: "Sinclair made a calculated decision to use Chicago's slaughterhouses as the setting for his book because doing so would broaden his base of readers and appeal to their self-interest" (Arthur 44). Perhaps Sinclair was hoping that readers would still have room in their heart to care about the poor as well as the purity of their own food supply. Sinclair was actually using his information about the slaughterhouse offenses tactically to anger his readers; he "wanted to show that not only did the Beef Trust exploit the lives of the workers, it also exploited the ignorance of the middle-class public. Food and its processing could therefore be used politically and rhetorically as a means of bridging class differences.” This move had political implications because it made the book relevant to all readers whose food supply was being tainted. Sinclair made the book matter to middle and upper class readers who were being deceived by food manufacturing corporations, the same corporations who were abusing workers. Sinclair hoped to link the outrage over food corruption with the outrage over the living conditions of his poor masses working in those disgusting factories which produced the adulterated food, for "once the sickening facts of meat processing were served up, he could move on to the struggle for survival that his characters were inexorably losing" (Bloodworth 60, 59). The issue of food wholesomeness was only meant to be an entry into the greater story of the lives of poor workers.
The gap between Sinclair’s readers and Sinclair’s impoverished characters was perhaps too great: "the largely middle-class Americans, mostly women, who bought and read books in the early 1900s were not likely to demand the end of ‘wage slavery.’ Workers' problems for these readers were mostly distant and theoretical concerns, no matter how vividly described" (Arthur 44). Though The Jungle may not have achieved legislation to help improve working conditions, it may have helped inspire workers themselves. Sinclair had proletarian goals for the book; he hoped to inspire and bolster the common working person:

As a piece of imaginative writing, The Jungle was tremendously successful in one sense: It made thousands of workers and wage earners in America conscious of their conditions and gave them an awareness and hope of a better deal. Addressing its readers, the worker's organ of the times, Young Worker, had said of The Jungle: 'it is more than just a story. It is an epic . . . [of our] struggle in America. If you haven't read it yet, don't eat your lunch tomorrow and buy this book.' (Mookerjee 59)

The Jungle allowed workers who were being exploited in all manner of business to understand that they were not alone, that their struggle had massive proportions. Such widespread worker oppression could best be taken on through its own political movement, and Sinclair suggested just the movement: the American Socialist party.

The potential for this book to be passed around a community of workers and that these workers could be energized by other workers’ plight is significant to the meaning of this book. Both Debs and Jack London saw this book as a unifying and inspiring work for the common worker. Through the working class characters workers could see their struggle clearly depicted: “the packers took on more hands. There were new men every week it seemed—it was a regular system; and this number they would keep over to the next slack season, so that every one would have less than ever” (Sinclair, The Jungle 107). The injustice of the workers’ lot set against a capitalist system which devalued and even killed off workers made evident the fact that the workers truly only had each other. The sense of worker unity this novel could engender was truly
powerful. One way to awaken the power of the worker was through unions. *The Jungle* praised the unions. In fact, Sinclair was awarded the Social Justice Award by the United Automobile Workers for his exposure of "the inhuman exploitation of labor in American industrial jungles. . . . [and for] contribut[ing] immeasurably to the extension of the frontiers of Social Justice" (Sinclair, *Autobiography* 324). It was mainly through his work on *The Jungle* that Sinclair earned such a distinction.

Besides being politically significant, how did *The Jungle* stand as a work of literature? In effect, was it a good book? Some people feel that *The Jungle* does not measure up as a work of literature, and critics claim that *The Jungle* has only been canonized because of its historical political impact. There seems to be this idea that political content and good literature are at odds or that they don't belong together in the same book. This is a peculiarly American view because, as discussed in chapter one, there is a prejudice against politics in American literature. Sinclair could be both activist and novelist at once: "The Voltairean tradition of the literary man as a fighter against wrong, a champion of the oppressed, still survives in Europe. It is not an offense against good taste (as it would be in our politer American literary world)" (Dell 12). Is American society too polite for a crusading author like Sinclair? John Whalen-Bridge views this as an American literary obstacle; “the most politically serious postwar writers have, upon examination, had to steer a course between the Scylla of literariness and the Charybdis of political engagement,” a narrow course indeed (9). In his time, Sinclair was at least recognized literally abroad. For instance, in 1931, a Nobel Prize committee proposed Upton Sinclair for a Nobel Prize in literature for his "greatest novels," one of which was *The Jungle*, and "for their mastery of fact, for their social vision, for consistent, honest and courageous thinking, for humanitarian passion, and for vitality and sweep of creative art," but he was never awarded the prize in part
because of the strong protestations of an American academic (Sinclair, *My Lifetime* 60). Regardless, *The Jungle* endures as more than a mere time capsule of food production problems and early industrial worker exploitation, for "there is indeed a timelessness about the novel and its characters" (Mookerjee 37). *The Jungle* is a classic story of oppressed peoples laboring for their freedom, a story that never goes out of style. There is a reason *The Jungle* is still in the canon, and it is not simply because of the political mark it left in its day.

Like other critics, Karen Olsson calls the writing in *The Jungle* sentimental, but she admits “its pace and panoramic quality keep the pages turning.” And sentimental style was simply a product of Sinclair’s literary era. Furthermore, sentimental literature tradition had proven useful in other political movements. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) was overtly sentimental but still achieved the goals of abolitionism. Rather than viewing Sinclair’s writing as one-dimensional and flawed, one could consider its simplicity; he “gear[ed] his prose style to a level at which his common reader would have no difficulty in understanding . . . [so he] could easily establish communication. This partly explains the lack of any particular brilliance in his language.” This simplicity may have proven advantageous to address the tragedy that Sinclair was depicting, for “on occasions, [his writing] even attains the somber dignity and sublimity equal to the human suffering and tragedy it sought to express" (Mookerjee 55). Sinclair’s writing is simple, to be sure, but not one dimensional as when the Rudkuses are foreclosed upon: “Their home! Their home! They had lost it! Grief, despair, rage, overwhelmed him—what was any imagination of the thing to this heart-breaking, crushing reality of it—to the sight of strange people living in his house, hanging their curtains in his windows” (Sinclair, *The Jungle* 170). Whatever his weaknesses may be, they pale in comparison to his powerful fiction,
accuracy and compassion for the less fortunate. His writing and his message are amalgamated to form a strong story.

One part of *The Jungle* that is critiqued even by its proponents is the novel’s ending. In his *Autobiography*, Sinclair talked about his difficulty with the ending: "I did the best I could--and those critics who didn't like the ending ought to have seen it as it was in manuscript! I ran wild at the end, attempting to solve all the problems of America; I put in . . . everything I knew and thought my readers ought to know" (114). At the time Sinclair was finishing up the novel his advance had long run out and he was in financial trouble, so he claimed he “had to hurry through it, finish it somehow” (Gupta 131). Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin claims "Lack of money did not force Sinclair to ruin the ending of *The Jungle*”; rather it was Sinclair’s didacticism, “his inability to leave well-enough alone and trust his readers to draw their own conclusions from the material presented, as well as his compulsive need to preach" (259). It’s true that Sinclair wanted not only to depict the problem of wage slavery but also to prescribe an antidote. Sinclair recognized that the latter part of the novel was "episodic and preachy, and he disliked the happy ending for Jurgis that he had felt compelled to provide" (Arthur 52). It seems Sinclair was not satisfied with his position as preacher; there was no simple solution or natural happy ending.

The common complaint about Sinclair’s ending is that it’s merely Socialist propaganda. Michael Folsom claims the ending "is psychologically unconvincing and seems to serve only the demands of Sinclair's didactic purpose. . . . These chapters begin a new and qualitatively different kind of narrative" (256). Listen to the tone of the Socialist speaker who first converts Jurgis: “To you, working-men! To you, the toilers, who have made this land, and have no voice in its councils! To you, whose lot is to sow that others may reap, to labor and obey, and ask no more than the wages of a beast of burden, the food and shelter to keep you alive from day to day.
It is to you that I come with my message of salvation’” (Sinclair, The Jungle 287). Truly, the last third of the book does little to advance the plot or to complete the story of Jurgis. The protagonist, Jurgis Rudkus, recedes when Sinclair begins his propagandistic appeals; Jurgis becomes the listener, and we can safely assume that Sinclair wants his readers to follow suit. Sinclair sets up places for Socialist rhetoric through speeches Jurgis hears and through mentor Socialist characters that Jurgis meets. As Jurgis is being educated, so too, is the reader. For example, Jurgis goes to listen to a Socialist speaker "where he hears all the arguments for the Industrial Republic which Sinclair wants his readers to know" (Rideout 34). Sinclair is not subtle with his Socialist ideology. And it’s no surprise the novel has its roots in Socialism. The Jungle was first published in serial form in the Socialist papers Appeal to Reason and One-Hoss Philosophy. It was the editor of Appeal to Reason, Fred Warren, who gave Sinclair a $500 advance and suggested to Sinclair the idea of a novel about the Chicago slaughterhouse workers (O'Loughlin 210).

Critics have noticed Jurgis’s disappearance from the final pages: "In the last chapter, in final ignominy and social insignificance, Jurgis virtually disappears from the novel, swallowed up in the parlor debate of the Socialist intelligentsia" (Folsom 258). The readers who have previously identified with Jurgis tend to feel abandoned. They’ve followed the life and struggles of their protagonist Jurgis only to find him absent from the final pages. Yet, other critics view the ending as a type of salvation for Jurgis: "Sinclair has his hero face what he believed was the one way out of the corrupt society into which he had brought his hopeful Lithuanian" (Overland 19). But Sinclair is not just educating Jurgis; he is looking to give his readers a device to help the poor that industrial America has left behind, and that tool is Socialism. Sinclair moves the struggle from one Lithuanian family, from just immigrants, from just poor Americans to a global
level—moving it from one family into an international family (Overland 20). So Jurgis is lost as a character in order that the greater good for the most people could be enacted which is the essence of Socialism. So the narrative structure leads into the political terrain of Socialism.

A reviewer of *The Jungle* in the *New York Times* claimed his duty was to evaluate *The Jungle’s* "quality as literature and its efficiency as polemic" ("Jurgis" BR 128). When the reviewer writes “polemic,” some may read “propaganda.” Some feel that *The Jungle* is simply propaganda from start to finish. But just because Sinclair is polemical and makes sociopolitical observations doesn’t mean the whole story is propagandistic. Others feel it’s just the last third of the novel with its teachings on Socialism that amounts to propaganda. I don’t feel like the novel takes up anything that might be considered propaganda until the last 4 (of 31) chapters. Even if his last four chapters are judged to be propaganda, it doesn’t deteriorate the literary achievements of the novel. For propaganda can be decent literature. Let’s look at the greater purpose of the final four chapters. It is in these chapters that Sinclair offers Socialism as a sort of solution to the problems of inequity and poverty he describes throughout the novel. Sinclair was excoriated for daring to offer such a solution, but this solution does not devalue the rest of the story.

Some critics can’t endure what they consider to be a toxic combination of political ideology and literary narrative. *The Jungle* has been called the “sometimes awkward combination of propaganda and literature” (Barrett 7); others "fault the book for being a political tract masquerading as fiction" (Phelps, "Welcome"). I don’t believe Sinclair’s fiction is masquerading; it is clear that Sinclair is invested in the story of the workers he depicts. His work creates a whole inhabited world around the issue of poverty, a feat political tracts can hardly manage. Balarama Gupta claims that Sinclair is trespassing with his propaganda: "The artist's job is only to suggest a possible solution . . . to the problems posed by him[/her], and not to impose
any of them on the reader with vehemence, as Sinclair does" (132). Why shouldn’t Sinclair be 
vehement about a solution he believes will stop such human misery that his whole novel is based 
upon? It seems critics (London and Debs are notable exceptions) have distaste for politics that 
aren’t contained by the covers of a book, and also for artists who dare to suggest solutions to 
problems they present. It may be productive to consider what the novel stands for; *The Jungle* 
really could be analyzed as "a measure of the manner in which literature and politics could 
coincide" (O'Loughlin 204). It is notable that such important questions are raised by this novel. If 
social justice is one’s goal then political literature can be an effective tool towards such an end. 

Sinclair believed art and propaganda should be linked; he wrote in *Mammonart*, his book 
of Socialist literary criticism, that art should be "a representation of life modified by the 
personality of the artist, for the purpose of modifying other personalities, inciting them to 
changes of feeling, belief and action" (10). This runs counter to the belief that propaganda and 
literature cannot mix. However, Sinclair felt that art “is for life's sake. It is for [hu]man's sake, 
for the sake of freedom and justice, and ultimately for [hu]man's betterment. Sinclair is positive 
in his outlook to art. Not only does he believe that all art is propaganda--deliberately or 
unconsciously--but he also insists that it should be propaganda” (Gupta 126). Sinclair wanted his 
novel to make change just the way a propagandist wants to effect change. And this hope should 
not undermine a novel’s artistic distinction, as I argued in chapter one. Sinclair believed that art 
could bring forth a more just world, and he wrote from this position. 

Through his novel, it is clear Sinclair hoped to inspire people to action. The question is 
how specifically did Sinclair mean to sway his readers? The answer is simple— with pathos, an 
appeal to the emotions of the readers. The facts of his story were gruesome enough to register 
with most readers’ pathos. Sinclair threw a spotlight on the actual conditions of slum life; “he
made extensive use of the device of packing his narrative with the minutest details and of piling up massive word pictures, so popular with naturalists like Dreiser and Norris. Sinclair's account goes on and on until the reader has the impression of being completely enveloped by the atmosphere of this horror-filled world” (Mookerjee 49). Sinclair hoped to awaken his audience by his piling of ghastly detail upon detail. The readers were made to take a long journey through the terror and poverty of the lowest classes in American society. For example, we see how one character’s work ruins his health:

The winter came, and the place where he worked was a dark, unheated cellar, where you could see your breath all day, and where your fingers sometimes tried to freeze. So the old man’s cough grew every day worse, until there came a time when it hardly ever stopped . . . He worked in a place where his feet were soaked in chemicals, and it was not long before they had eaten through his new boots. Then sores began to break out on his feet, and grow worse and worse. . . . He asked the men about it, and learned that it was a regular thing—it was the saltpeter. . . . The sores would never heal—in the end his toes would drop off, if he did not quit. Yet old Antanas would not quit. (Sinclair, *The Jungle* 76-77)

His readers’ imaginations became Upton Sinclair’s finest tool to motivate people for positive change. For Sinclair, "*The Jungle* was a full expression of faith, an intense personal attempt to bring modern Socialism into literature and thereby fuse it with the narrative and empathetic powers of fiction" (Bloodworth 44). He was quite effective at combining the basic philosophy of Socialism with the narrative landscape of the story.

It’s interesting to consider the full “empathetic powers of fiction”; it may be the very genre of fiction that really sells Sinclair's political ideas. Sinclair's *The Jungle* had a "terrific impact on public consciousness" in a way that traditional muckraking books did not because *The Jungle* was in "popular fictional form" (Downs 146). Although *The Jungle* has been called muckraking literature, it was different from books like Ida Tarbell’s *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904) which wasn’t a narrative: "muckraking exposes like Tarbell's book on Standard Oil or Lincoln Steffens’ *The Shame of the Cities* [1904] were no competition for bestselling
novels like *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come* [1903]. . . . Only through fiction could writers concerned about social problems and ideas hope to reach the widest audience" (Arthur 46).

Sinclair although he was in sympathy with the goals of Steffens to bring forth a more just world where wealth was distributed more equitably, he took a different tack than Steffens. Through narrative Sinclair was able to plug into his readers’ imaginations not just their logocentric thinking: “Poor Jurgis was now an outcast and a tramp once more. He was crippled—he was literally crippled as any wild animal which has lost its claws, or been torn out of its shell” (Sinclair, *The Jungle* 267). While Steffens took a nonfictional approach to show economic disparity, Sinclair employed all the pathos of lives riddled with poverty. The novel has had staying power other muckraking books did not. For instance, Karen Olsson believes that Sinclair’s tale has “endured in large part because it’s a novel.” In contrast, she wonders how many teachers would really assign one of Sinclair’s contemporaries like Ida Tarbell’s *History of the Standard Oil Company* whose story was less narrative in scope (Olsson). Fiction is a powerful medium for a message. Fiction preserves the story, preserves the political issue. Sinclair’s story allows us to still have conversations about workers’ and consumers’ rights. As Martha Nussbaum maintains, “literature and the literary imagination are subversive” (“The Literary” 224). It’s easy to see the compelling protagonist, Jurgis Rudkus, as a major subversive element in Sinclair’s novel.

Sinclair’s work was much more than fiction, although it was able to use all the literary techniques of fiction. From the beginning *The Jungle* was treated as something more than mere entertainment, more than narrative. Doubleday, Page and Co. offered to publish the book provided they could be satisfied as to its truth. Hence, from the beginning, “the novel was taken to be an exposure of actual conditions rather than a piece of fiction unrelated to factual reality”
(Mookerjee 40). Before Doubleday would publish it, they sent an editor to Chicago to talk to Dr. W. K. Jacques, a former chief of meat inspection, "who had been fired because of his insistence upon a drastic scrutiny and condemnation of diseased meat." He fully backed Sinclair’s reports from the slaughterhouses (Downs 147). It wasn’t until Sinclair’s editors "had the facts investigated to their own satisfaction" (Overland 3) that the book went to the presses. The facts of the novel weighed heavily on the minds of Sinclair’s editors, as they soon would on the minds of his readers. Sinclair wrote dozens of articles about *The Jungle* (particularly about its veracity) for months after the book was released. Doubleday advertised the book as "'a searching expose of . . . the flagrant violations of all hygienic laws in the slaughter of diseased cattle . . . and the whole machinery of feeding a nation’" (qtd. In Bloodworth 57). *The Jungle* was treated as more than a novel but as a piece of investigative journalism by the press and its readers, so the book really had a dual appeal, as a work that was both fact and fiction. The book represents the unique relationship between imagination and fact. The imagination brings the story to life, using all the facts that Sinclair scrupulously collected, the imagination sets these facts in context and gives them narrative worth. Without the narrative that ignites the imagination, the facts have little pathetical power. In *The Jungle*, logos and pathos meet to produce a consequential narrative.

*The Jungle* was first published as a novel on February 16, 1906; it was popular, selling 25,000 copies in one week, became a bestseller in 1906, and was translated into 17 languages (O’Loughlin 223). Both Sinclair and Doubleday publicist Isaac Marcossen worked hard to promote *The Jungle*. Marcossen didn’t simply try to market the novel, but endorsed *The Jungle* as a "news event." Sinclair and Marcossen "worked closely together to promote the book and to promote the controversy surrounding it" (O’Loughlin 227). The story of *The Jungle* "exploded on front pages from coast to coast" (Downs 147). Sinclair had great support from the Socialist arena
when it came to the promotion of his book. Fellow Socialist Jack London predicted great things for the novel; "he wrote a rousing manifesto, calling on the socialist movement to rally to the book which he called 'the Uncle Tom's Cabin of wage slavery'' (Sinclair, Autobiography 115). Unfortunately, the novel didn’t free the wage slave. It did, however, have other political implications for one social justice movement.

One way Sinclair hoped to achieve social justice was through consumer protection. Evidence does suggest that most readers were not activated to help the poor, but were instead moved to pass legislation regulating their food and drugs (Young 468). "Food preparation was never [Sinclair's] primary concern in writing The Jungle. However, once it became clear that food purity was going to be an issue, Sinclair wholeheartedly embraced the controversy" (O'Loughlin 229); he took up the food protection fight with the president and in the media. Towards this end, Sinclair became one of the principal figures in early consumer protection. Morris Dickstein calls him “the father of the consumer protection movement in America.” A later figure to take up this movement is Ralph Nader, who lobbied for seatbelts and helped create OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration), a whole government organization dedicated to protecting workers. The legislation that emerged after The Jungle shifted the idea of just what government is designed to do: "in addition to eliminating some of the worst evils in the drug and food trades, the legislation extended the scope of the federal administrative rule and enlarged the whole concept of a national duty and power to police and protect" (Harris, Upton 90). From the novel emerged foundations of the concept that consumers sometimes need to be protected from business. The novel abounds with examples of corporate turpitude, and so Sinclair sets in motion the question of how workers and consumers might be protected from businesses which care for nothing but profits.
This dissertation focuses on the ways novels stimulate progressive political change. In Sinclair’s novel the correlation between the message of the novel and the resulting political action is straightforward. In this way The Jungle was a success and is a “classic example of the American social reform novel” (Grover 208). Let’s look at how The Jungle effected sociopolitical change on behalf of consumers. President Roosevelt was eager to make changes that would end the food poisoning and adulteration described in The Jungle, and, perhaps partially in response to Sinclair’s prompting, ended up pushing for the legislation regulating the meatpacking businesses. "Middle-class readers were so upset by The Jungle that they wrote scores of letters to Roosevelt" (Phelps, "Welcome"); these letters called for a governmental response to the horrors they read in The Jungle: "for many people Sinclair's novel had an overwhelming impact, and . . . the sentiment for President Roosevelt's reform legislation owed a great deal to the climate in part created by the novel" (Homberger 43). Sinclair was able to create an atmosphere where legislation to regulate these powerful Beef Trusts was actually a possibility. The New York Times reported that Sinclair himself "called the attention of the President to the need of action on [meat inspection]" ("Sinclair Demands" 2). With his novel, Sinclair certainly caught Roosevelt’s attention; copies of The Jungle were sent to President Roosevelt by both Sinclair and his publicist.

In March of 1906, Roosevelt sent Sinclair a letter saying "I have now read . . . a good deal of your book, and if you can come down here . . . I shall be particularly glad to see you" (Sinclair, My Lifetime 11). Roosevelt may have been more inclined than any other president to believe the claims Sinclair made in The Jungle. Roosevelt himself had experienced tainted meat during his time in the army (Young 468); "there was a scandal of the tinned beef that was fed to the soldiers [in the Spanish-American War]--they called it embalmed beef or poisoned beef--and
this was in the air at the time, but no one had been able to establish the facts about meat production until . . . [The Jungle] came out" (Dickstein). With Roosevelt’s Progressive leanings and his personal experience with tainted beef, legislation for sanitary and safe meat regulations was surely on its way. This was a serendipitous combination of factors; who knows what would have come of The Jungle if an industrialist was in the White House?

It’s useful to consider what information on food purity was available prior to the publication of The Jungle. Before Sinclair took up the topic of unsanitary meat production, there were other stories of problems with adulterated and spoiled meat. So, in a sense, the public was ready to hear more details of how such spoiled meat came to market. There was the U.S. Army’s embalmed beef scare: "Beginning in 1899, the Hearst newspapers ran a series of articles on the hazards of what they called 'embalmed' beef: canned meat preserved with formaldehyde and other chemicals, said to be responsible for killing more American soldiers in Cuba than had died fighting the Spaniards" (Arthur 45). There was a senate investigation of this scandal in which Teddy Roosevelt "testified he would as soon eat his old hat as the canned goods shipped under government contract to the soldiers in Cuba" (Harris, Upton 69). Before Sinclair's expose of the meatpacking horrors in Chicago, several preceding documents discussed the unsavory side of meatpacking like A. M. Simon's 1899 Packingtown pamphlet and Charles Edward Russell's 1904 articles about the meatpackers (Harris, Upton 69). Sinclair himself had written some about the meatpackers; in the summer of 1904, he reported on the "unsuccessful strike in the Chicago meat packing industry" (Bloodworth 45). So it wasn’t as though the trouble Sinclair depicted in Chicago’s slaughterhouses was unearthing brand new information for the American readers; he did, however, give more detail than any of the preceding journalistic pieces or government
investigations, and he did so uniquely in the novel form—and that distinction of genre changed everything.

*The Jungle* was not the inception of all food purity legislation; legislators were thinking of necessary changes to food and drug regulation before Sinclair wrote his novel. For instance, "languishing in Congress" before *The Jungle* hit the shelves was a bill proposed by Dr. Harvey W. Wiley, "'Father of the Pure Food and Drugs Act' to tighten the laws and to protect consumers against unscrupulous manufacturing and business practices" (Downs 145). Also Senator Albert J. Beveridge, a former conservative, was trying to promote his new Progressive agenda; "even before reading Sinclair’s book, the senator had pondered sponsoring a bill to extend to the domestic market the 1890, '91, and '95 meat inspection laws," but after reading the book "the senator asked the President if he might introduce such a law" (Young 469). Sinclair was really catching the wave of interest in greater government control in terms of consumer protection. *The Jungle*, although it is closely linked with the Pure Food and Drug Act, was not the only impetus for such legislation: "The chief contribution of *The Jungle* had been in dramatically setting forth issues and fears of long standing; it did not set in motion the drive to pass the Pure Food and Drug Act, though it persuaded many people of the need for such legislation" (Arthur 83). Others like Morris Dickstein point to *The Jungle* as a unique catalyst in American literature; he finds it "hard to think of another book in American literature that led to legislation, major legislation, within such a very short period, within less than six months" (Dickstein). It is difficult to imagine any novel triggering such rapid legislative progress today. We are no longer in the Progressive Era during which *The Jungle* enjoyed success. Now, business lobbies make such progressive changes quite difficult.
But before legislation there were official reports on the meatpacking industry ordered by President Roosevelt, one of which Sinclair argued for. First, staff from the Agriculture Department's Bureau of Animal Industry "conducted an investigation . . . on the manner in which the meat-inspection work is carried on at that place [Chicago] . . . because [of] discussions during the past several months regarding the conditions existing at the Union Stock Yards." The Bureau chief claimed that these discussions were made by "certain persons who had apparently made only a superficial inquiry" (qtd. in Hussey 406), presumably referring to Sinclair. But Roosevelt thought there might be a conflict of interest in government inspectors who might not want to talk about their own department's failings in this matter, so Roosevelt thought "it was best to have an investigation by outside individuals who could not be charged with being in any way interested in the matter" (qtd. in Hussey 33). When Roosevelt told Sinclair he was having the Department of Agriculture investigate the meatpacking plants, Sinclair wrote to him that "that was like asking a burglar to determine his own guilt" (Sinclair, *Autobiography* 118). So, in accordance with Sinclair's urgings, Roosevelt dispatched an independent commission sending James Bronson Reynolds and Charles P. Neill to investigate the slaughterhouses of Chicago (Hussey 33). Sinclair met with both men before they went to Chicago debriefing them, and then with over $1000 of his own money ($24,690 today) Sinclair sent Socialist leader Ella Reeve Bloor and her husband to meet Reynolds and Neill and help point them in productive directions around Packingtown (Harris, *Upton* 86). What the inspectors found in Chicago mirrored Sinclair’s findings, and "their report contained passages as disgusting as any in The Jungle" (Phelps, “How” B11). Neill and Reynolds’s investigation found that "even though the packers had been provided with weeks of time for literal whitewashing, and despite the packers' constant shepherding, the conditions described by the commissioners [were] . . .
revolting" (Young 470). The two sociologists Charles P. Neill (also the commissioner of labor) and James B. Reynolds turned in an account that "confirmed every allegation in *The Jungle*" (O'Loughlin 225). In the *New York Times* Sinclair claimed that their report was "absolutely impregnable at every point" ("Report" 2). This is evidence of Sinclair’s constant involvement with the process of meatpacking regulation legislation. Sinclair kept up momentum for the cause of his novel while the government considered legislation.

Sinclair kept the story of *The Jungle* alive; "all the while Roosevelt was fighting for the Pure Food and Drug Act, Sinclair plagued him with letters, magazine articles and newspaper interviews" (Harris, *Upton* 88). On May 27, 1906, the *New York Times* reported that Sinclair "demanded the publication of the report made to President Roosevelt by Messrs. Neill and Reynolds on the evil conditions in the packing houses of the Meat Trust," and in the article Sinclair avers that "the interest of the public is superior to that of any group of business men, and the public should have the report" and that once the public read the report they would understand "that the Government is powerless to protect them against the local slaughter house abuses" ("Sinclair Demands" 2). Still, Roosevelt held confidentially Neill and Reynolds’s findings, hoping to hold it over the Meat Trust’s head so that they would agree to food purity laws. The Neill and Reynolds’s investigation was withheld from the public until Sinclair leaked their findings to the *New York Times*; only then did Roosevelt ask Neill and Reynolds to write up a report which he submitted to Congress (Young 475).

The publication of *The Jungle* had a serious backlash from the meatpacking industry. In March, a month after *The Jungle’s* release, "a series of articles under Ogden Armour's [a meatpacking titan] name in the widely read and influential *Saturday Evening Post* had sought to discredit Sinclair's book and to burnish the image of meatpackers." The article was actually
written by Post author Forrest Crissey (Arthur 78)—this is just one example of how newspapers rallied to protect the great Meat Trusts. The meat industry spent a good deal of money on advertising to "counteract in the public mind the revolting picture of the stockyards presented in The Jungle" (Downs 149). The Jungle struck at the credibility of all the meatpacking companies. So a broadside by Elbert Hubbard denouncing The Jungle was reprinted by the meatpackers, and those million copies were mailed all over the country (Arthur 78). Critics condemned The Jungle for being too simple and "constructing a picture of society so oversimplified as to be false" (Becker 71), and others attacked it for being too embellished; "the impression persists . . . that the horrors of life are exaggerated" (Marsh 101). Critics were attacking Sinclair’s writing when they were really assailing his content. The Jungle was being assaulted from all sides, but it certainly wasn’t being ignored.

During this time American meat sales plummeted. Specifically, canned meat dropped 17%, and an agent that Sinclair was in touch with claimed "that Armour & Co.'s business has fallen off 30 or 40 per cent" ("Sinclair Demands" 2). With such scenes from The Jungle it’s no wonder canned meat was not in high demand: “Jurgis learned a few things about the great and only Durham canned goods. . . . [Devilled] ham was made out of the waste ends of smoked beef that were too small to be sliced by the machines; and also tripe, dyed with chemicals so that it would not show white; and trimmings of hams and corned beef . . . and finally the hard cartilaginous gullets of beef, after the tongues had been cut out” (Sinclair, The Jungle 95). This meat sales decline was not just restricted to America; "the effect of this government confirmation of Sinclair's worldwide best seller was a precipitous drop in American meat sales in Europe" (Harris, Upton 89). "The Germans cited the book as an argument for higher import duties on American meat" (Kazin, On Native 119), and the German Butcher's Association called for a
decrease in American beef imports, and part of their petition "included 'copious extracts from Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle.*” Around Europe there were repercussions for the Beef Trust; the *London Daily Telegraph* “supported British import duties that would favor British colonies' meat products over those from the United States” (Hussey 34). Sinclair’s novel was causing political turmoil far outside Chicago, and it’s remarkable that it was specifically *The Jungle* and not news reports that prompted Europeans to refuse American meat. This demonstrates the extraordinary power of novels to depict social justice issues. The power of the narrative, rather than the scope of usual media reports, incited Europeans to change their view of American meat products.

Congress held hearings about the state of the meatpacking business. On June 11, 1906, about four months after *The Jungle* was released, the *New York Times* published a letter Sinclair wrote to Representative James Wadsworth, Chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture which read: "Your hearings were held, not to elicit any facts, but solely in order to whitewash the packers. . . . A paid agent of the Beef Trust was received by you with open arms; you heard his tricky and dishonest statements with cordial approval" ("Sinclair" 4). Sinclair also pointed out that Neill and Reynolds were browbeaten at the hearings. Sinclair’s letter is one example of how Sinclair kept the issues of *The Jungle* in the news while legislation was forthcoming.

One of the bills spurred by *The Jungle* is the Meat Inspection Bill Beveridge attached as a rider to the agricultural appropriation bill (Crunden 187). The Pure Food and Drug Act was in some ways weaker than the Meat Inspection Bill; it moved the cost of inspection from the meatpackers to the government. The Meat Inspection Bill passed in May of 1906, and the Pure Food and Drug Bill passed in June of that year. Sinclair originally castigated the Pure Food legislation "as drafted on behalf of the meat packing industry for the purposes of public relations" (O'Loughlin 232). *The Jungle* was so damaging to the reputation of meat distributors
that the meat industry needed a symbolic statement, in this case, new laws, to allay the public’s anger towards and fear of the meat industry. Nevertheless, even decades later, Sinclair was still associated with food purity and wholesomeness; in 1967, Sinclair was invited to the White House to be at the signing of the Wholesale Meat Act which furthered the regulations of the Pure Food and Drug Act (Downs 151). Sinclair still represented a public face to consumer protection. What Sinclair did by exposing the evils of the meatpacking business was certainly significant, for "the [Beef] Trusts were a power in the land; by taking them on so boldly and so devastatingly, Sinclair came close to the real sources of power in the United States" (Homberger 42). He took on these dominant business interests and was able to effect change in their business practices.

An article in the New York Times claimed that the Meat Inspection Bills’ "passage [are] the direct consequence of the disclosures made in Upton Sinclair's 'The Jungle'" ("Meat" 1); a strong claim that The Jungle was the impetus for the food purity legislation. These food purity laws paved the way for the modern American Food and Drug Administration; in fact, the FDA website states that “FDA’s modern regulatory functions began with the passage of the 1906 Pure Food and Drugs Act” (“About FDA”). The federal consumer protection laws which were prompted by The Jungle continue to protect consumers and affect political decisions today. So it is no exaggeration to say that the story of The Jungle lives on in nearly every American meal we consume. This is a fascinating legacy for a novel to have; "the impact of The Jungle in the public sphere was, and continues to be, an important part of its meaning" (O'Loughlin 206). How do the political effects of The Jungle affect its literary reputation? This goes back to the belief that a novel cannot be both literary and politically effective. However, the fact is that besides being socially significant, The Jungle is a decent novel.
The Jungle exists as more than a literary tome in the canon, and "remarkably, the book still seems applicable as social criticism 100 years later" (Phelps, "Welcome"). It seems the story cannot be divorced from its political impact, nor need it be. This is the claim of this dissertation, that politics and narrative can effect profound change. Sinclair’s biographer, William Bloodworth, believed that The Jungle “stirred the conscience of the world, influenced the course of national legislation, and produced a permanent impact on American life” (155). And this impact is still being felt today, inspiring books like Fast Food Nation (2001) and spurring tighter restrictions on food purity. With additives, chemical pesticides, preservatives, and food poisoning like e. coli, the politics of food production today is rife with some of the same problems depicted in The Jungle, which "simply in terms of what it did to national eating patterns . . . was a rhetorical achievement of remarkable dimensions" (Bloodworth 57). The politics of consumer protection, rampant capitalism, and workers’ rights that concern The Jungle are struggles still being worked out today. Historically and politically, The Jungle remains a significant text. The Jungle is a popular choice of educators, a “syllabus all-star” (Olsson), and it’s “among the top five supplementary texts assigned in the U. S. undergraduate history survey" (Phelps, “How” B10), attesting to its educational value and its ability to precisely capture a period of American history.

How is The Jungle interpreted today? Even though Karen Olsson of Slate.com claims “then, as now, it’s much easier to interest people in contaminated hamburgers than in injured workers,” I think the opposite is true. Perhaps today the plight of the worker is more compelling than the food purity issues. For today readers assume (incorrectly) that all of the revolting and illegal food processing described in The Jungle is being prevented by the FDA, so readers are more able to focus on the story of the Rudkus family and the thousands of other workers who
were exploited by the corporate meat interests. The story of those immigrants comes into sharp focus these days, in a way it did not in the first few decades after the book’s release. So the lives of workers that Sinclair so badly wanted his readers to empathize with are finally being noticed.

One way to look at the long-lasting effects of *The Jungle* is to look at its impact on influential people. How did the novel stir the passions of cultural leaders? *The Jungle* has proven to have “inspired intellectuals, artists, and activists throughout the world” like Nadine Gordimer, George Bernard Shaw, and Dorothy Day (Barrett 7). In fact, Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, was a "girl awakened to an emotional radicalism in part by *The Jungle" (Rideout 111). If one considers all that Gordimer, Shaw, and Day have done in the name of social justice and the fact that part of their inspiration came from this novel, then the novel has proven to be an effective tool for social justice in and of itself. Sinclair was "determined to use the public sphere in order to highlight conditions he saw being ignored" (O'Loughlin 222); he refused to hide the inhumane conditions he encountered in Chicago and, in fact, wove them into a story that underscored them. This is how novels of social protest work optimally: they use the public staging of a story to depict a social injustice, and the story of that injustice touches readers, in some cases inspiring political reactions.

Upton Sinclair’s impact with *The Jungle* has been celebrated throughout the 20th century. The American Newspaper Guild presented Sinclair with the Page One Award in Letters in 1962 to the "author of hundreds of books and papers, including *The Jungle* . . . all of which contributed immeasurably to the advancement of democracy and public enlightenment" (Sinclair, *Autobiography* 323). It’s clear Sinclair’s work is a legacy in the service of social justice. *The Jungle" prompted political reform in a way few successful American novels can match" (Phelps, "Welcome"), and it set the tone for how future novels would effect change and give the voiceless
a voice. One thing to remember about Sinclair’s writing is that "the essential spirit behind [Sinclair], as in Dickens, was one of intense humanitarianism and brotherly love" (Mookerjee 54). Sinclair truly wanted progressive change; he wanted to work to bring social justice to the people, and through *The Jungle* in some small measure, he accomplished that.
CHAPTER 4
RICHARD WRIGHT’S *NATIVE SON* AND CIVIL RIGHTS

*Native Son* (1940) is an essential book in African American literary history. Richard Wright was the first black writer to contract a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Healthy sales of *Native Son* made Wright a best-selling African American author at a time when these terms were oxymoronic (Rowley, *Richard* 191, 192). When *Native Son* was first published “the literary world talked of little else. ‘What do you think of *Native Son*?’ became almost a greeting cry”--people were talking about this new African American novel and its author (Rowley, *Richard* 194). However, Richard Wright was far more than a novelist; he was a guiding spirit for black American literature and politics. Wright thought African American literature should not ignore the sociopolitical struggles of African Americans; he reasoned that “a simple literary realism which seeks to depict the lives of these people devoid of wider social connotations, devoid of the revolutionary significance of these nationalist tendencies, must of necessity do a rank injustice to the Negro people and alienate their possible allies in the struggle for freedom.” So, without forthright African American literature, Wright believed the freedom of African Americans would be circumscribed. Wright envisioned a break between African American writers of the past and writers of his generation; he felt “a new role is devolving upon the Negro writer. He is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die” (“Blueprint” 101, 102). Wright insisted that African American writers like himself were essential to the lives and the labors of the African American people. It was in this spirit that Wright crafted *Native Son*.

*Native Son* was something more than the average novel; “the book has . . . been treated as an extra-literary product, as a bellwether for the American social climate” (Ward 40). So it’s interesting to see how the views of *Native Son* changed over the years. We will look at its impact
in each of three decades the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. It is in these first three decades of the book’s existence that race relations in the U.S. were changing most rapidly. In each decade the novel engages in the sociopolitical discussion of race a little differently, and in each decade the response to the novel shifts.

In the first half of this chapter we will reconstruct the social, political, and cultural world that birthed *Native Son*. To fully appreciate the distinctiveness of *Native Son* it’s important to see it within the greater world of African American literature. We will start with looking at its connection to and rejection of the writing tradition of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was a period when the black arts flourished and artists could actually earn a stable living from their crafts. This was a time when black artisans of every genre earned popular critical acclaim. However, unlike Wright’s works, “the majority of renaissance writing was not polemical”; rather, the writing of the Harlem Renaissance could in a word be called “romanticized” (Jackson, “Harlem”), often ignoring the everyday racial problems of African Americans. Some critics also claimed that Renaissance writers pandered to white readers. Alain Locke, though he helped usher in the Harlem Renaissance, was still critical of it: “The black writers of the 1920s had failed to deliver relevant artistic products because of their alienation from black audiences,” and these writers catered to a “gallery of faddist Negrophiles” (qtd. in Jackson, *The Indignant* 76). These “negrophiles” sometimes viewed black artists as nothing more than a trendy diversion. In 1937, three years before *Native Son* was published, in his essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing” Wright accused the black writers that had gone before him of not connecting with the black community: “One would have thought that negro writers in the last century of striving at expression would have continued and deepened this folk tradition, would have tried to create a more intimate and yet a more profoundly social system of artistic
communication between them and their people” (99). Wright understood literature as a medium of communication within the black community. He viewed African American writing as an extension of black nationalism, for “a nationalistic spirit in Negro writing means a nationalism carrying the highest possible pitch of social consciousness” (“Blueprint” 101). For Wright, black writers had an obligation to uplift their community. Wright ensured that a social consciousness was at the heart of his most popular novel.

Wright critiqued the art that came out of the Harlem Renaissance, claiming that it “went a-begging to white America.” Rather, he wanted African American writing to mean something to African Americans: “Rarely, was the best of this [Renaissance] writing addressed to the Negro himself [herself], his [her] needs, his [her] sufferings, his [her] aspirations” (“Blueprint” 98). Wright would make sure that his work depicted the affliction and aspirations of the common African American. Especially in his seminal work *Native Son* Wright spoke of and to the black community. Wright criticized the darling of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston; he saw her work as playing on the “minstrel show tradition and clichés about Black life” (Zirin). This was a rejection not only of Hurston, but also the Harlem Renaissance conventions.

Wright himself represented the shift in literature from the Harlem Renaissance going forward: “Wright’s literary work manifests the transition of the racial realism from its romantic, peaceful, and idealistic folk origins in the Harlem Renaissance to maturity by the start of World War II as radical, violent, and pessimistic” (Jarrett 131). Wright would come to be a major influence on the direction of African American writing in the post-Renaissance period. Wright himself was no son of the Harlem Renaissance; to him it was a cultural moment that emphasized the primitive and exotic aspects of black characters (Wald). He was hoping to compose characters that were *of* the people, characters that did not exoticize the existence of African
Americans. Wright was responding to certain racism in the works of the Renaissance where black writers would depict some of the same racist stereotypes as white writers. The time when black authors would imitate white authors or court white patrons was on the wane. Whites lost interest in the “New Negro” trend, and white patronage dried up as the Great Depression began to take hold.

Geographically there was a shift too—the center of literary production moved away from Harlem to other large cities like Chicago. Wright, along with Nelson Algren, William Attaway, and Gwendolyn Brooks, was a part of the Chicago Renaissance that ran from 1935-1950 (Wald).

The Chicago-based South Side Writers’ Group were “champions of socially committed art” that included Frank Marshall Davis, Theodore Ward, and Margaret Walker led by the “guiding spirit” of Richard Wright (Bone, “Richard” 446-47). Chicago represented a unique geographical and cultural influence for black writers who “respond[ed] to the incredible poverty of the South Side slums—and noting, through their close contact with sociologists, the roots of some of the poverty—[and] promoted the Marxist cultural politics that encouraged social realism” (Jackson, The Indignant 71). The real life environmental conditions of African Americans became part of the literary terrain of Chicago Renaissance writers. Not only were writers collaborating in Chicago, but writers were looking at the findings of renowned local sociologists. The “Chicago School” of sociology was particularly influential on black novelists. Wright admits to using the findings of sociologists of Robert E. Park, Robert Redfield, and Louis Wirth in both Twelve Million Black Voices and Native Son (Bell, The Contemporary 118).

Sociologists would borrow from Wright as well. The struggles of poverty and racism Richard Wright portrayed were real, so much so that “several journalists and sociologists cited Native Son in discussions of poor housing in Chicago and elsewhere” (Kinnamon, Introduction 23). The
novel’s verisimilitude reached beyond fictional slum conditions into the reality of the study of racism in America.

When Alain Locke looked back on the Harlem Renaissance in 1938 he criticized the writers for being “exhibitionist instead of going documentarian” and for going “jazz-mad and cabaret-crazy instead of getting folk-wise and sociologically sober” (Stewart 272). In the 1930s with the advent of the Great Depression and the increased interest in the proletariat, black writers were certainly getting sober. During the Great Depression writers logically wrote about the world around them—a world of unbridled and abject poverty. The depression hit the African American community particularly hard as jobs disappeared (white households could no longer afford to hire domestics), and blacks were dismissed from the low-wage jobs so that whites could take their place. Writing during these trying times had a great impact on the content of black writers. The writers felt a brother/sisterhood with their audience: “This new generation of creators felt themselves to be of as well as for the poor and working-class masses of African Americans, often construing themselves as ‘cultural workers’” (Morgan, *Rethinking* 5). Cultural workers were united with traditional workers, which led to a proletariat literature. Black authors wrote about what they saw, about what they knew. Poverty as a topic was alive for Wright personally. Wright’s impoverished childhood and struggles during the depression focused Wright on the issue of class struggle.

There of course were the depressing fortunes of African American authors after the Harlem Renaissance when white patronage and interest diminished. One way that black writers survived during the depression was through the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP). The FWP was founded in 1935 as a division of the Works Progress Administration. Wright was financially supported by his work for the FWP, specifically the Illinois Writers’ Project, and this gave him the time and
means to work on his own fiction writing. It also put him in contact with a community of writers like Claude McKay, Chester Himes, Ralph Ellison, Arna Bontemps, Zora Neale Hurston, and Frank Yerby. Within the FWP was established a board of Negro Affairs headed by Sterling Brown. The FWP was uniquely connected to black writing; for instance, Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy used the materials gathered during their time on the Illinois Writers’ Project to write *They Seek a City* (1945) (Bone, “Richard” 449). The advantage of the FWP was that it was the starving artists’ salvation, and it created an expansion in the arts communities of both blacks and whites. At the same time Communism, the great uplifter of the poor masses, was taking root in the black community.

While class issues were coming to the fore because of the Great Depression, issues of class were also being brought up by the increasingly popular CPUSA. If the Harlem Renaissance finally sputtered out around the mid-1930s, the National Negro Congress set a new direction for artists. They inaugurated the “Negro People’s Front” which was a branch of the Popular Front and promoted black culture as it took up Communism. The Communist Party offered a way to unify race and class consciousness in the African American community. The Sixth Communist International conference issued new directives to reduce racism in the U.S. and to attract black members; one way they went about doing this was to integrate workers unions (Jackson, The *Indignant* 24). The Communist Party took on black social issues and “consciously positioned itself at the forefront of such issues as tenants’ rights, antilynching campaigns, [and] the celebrated trials of Angelo Herndon and the Scottsboro Boys” (Morgan, *Rethinking* 14). The Communist Party was making itself useful to the black community. There was certainly some strategic essentialism in the unification of the CPUSA and the African American community; each of these communities needed the other. And both sought to uplift exploited peoples.
The CPUSA was more than politics and legal battles; it also supported black literature. The black journal *Challenge* (later *New Challenge*), which was closely allied with the Communist Party, set forth its goals which were to delve into “the life of the Negro masses [using] folk material . . . as a source of creative material” (“Editorial” 3-4). This showed the CPUSA’s interest in the everyday lives of black Americans. It also demonstrates the CPUSA’s commitment to finding authentic material, like folk material, to express the American black experience. Furthermore, the integrated Communist John Reed Clubs gave black writers a chance to meet other writers and to work on their own writing. The locals of the John Reed Clubs issued small publications that fostered writing with Communist sympathies and gave new writers exposure. Wright also attended the Communist Party’s Writers Conference in New York where he met other left-wing writers. Wright wrote for the Chicago John Reed Club, and honed his writing skills at the Communist *New Masses*. He also wrote for the *Daily Worker* newspaper, so he knew how to apply Communist ideas to everyday life on the street. And through his CPUSA experiences his star was on the rise, for “in a remarkably short period of time, Wright irrevocably shaped the course of the river of the black writers’ movement that emerged using modernist techniques in the promotion of liberal racial attitudes and political justice” (Jackson, *The Indignant* 28). Wright’s ideas of political justice were based in Communist ethics. Wright was a leader among his Communist intellectual colleagues through is reporting for Communist papers and in circles like the John Reed Clubs and the South Side Writers’ Group.

Wright was in good company in the CPUSA; Langston Hughes was a Communist writer too, and his Communist ideas were evident in stories like “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria,” “Good Morning Revolution,” and his provocative poetry for *New Masses*. W. E. B. Du Bois, greatly respected in the black community of the 1930s, urged blacks to carefully
contemplate Marxist principles and organizations as an answer to black marginality and poverty. James Baldwin describes this shift out of the Harlem Renaissance towards Communism: “In the thirties, swallowing Marx whole, we discovered the Worker and realized . . . that the aims of the Worker and the Negro were one. This theorem . . . became, nevertheless, one of the slogans of ‘class struggle’ and the gospel of the New Negro . . . . and it was Wright who became his most eloquent spokesman” (“Many” 77). Wright felt strongly that the Communists and the black community had parallel goals for a more just society. James Giles sees Wright as being torn between writing about class issues and writing about race issues in Native Son (72). But I think Wright did an impressive job of balancing these two important concerns. Wright captured the spirit of his times where race and class issues were coming to the fore in black America.

Wright was not shy about citing the influence of the Communist Party on his writing career; he noted that “without the support of the Party he never would have had the chance to become a successful writer.” But that does not mean that he was following lock-step with every tenet of CPUSA ideology. From his early days at New Masses he “argued with Party officials over what kind of art should be produced by communist writers” (Zirin). Wright did not think that literature should read like propaganda. He had Communist principles, but an artist’s spirit that yearned to be free from the control of Party administrators. It was Wright’s skillful use of narrative that was noted in the press. Ben Davis, a black Communist leader, praised Wright for his use of the novel genre: “Wright has made use of the art of fiction to burn this problem and responsibility for it deep into the conscience of the American people” (“Richard” 69). Wright exploited the power of the novel, using its alluring format to create not only the racial quandaries of Bigger, but the living world of Bigger. Wright adeptly melded the political with the aesthetic; C.L.R. James pronounced Native Son “not only a literary but also a political event” (Wald). So
Native Son was seen as vital in the world of black Communism and beyond. The dual function of the novel was clear—it was something more than literature, less than propaganda.

Besides the political currents in 1930s black culture, there were distinct literary tides as well. The difficult financial times fanned the fire of naturalist writing: “As a result . . . of the precipitous decline of the Harlem Renaissance and the onset of the Depression, a more sobering vision of the experiences of urban black Americans began to appear in the naturalistic works of African American novelists” (Bell, The Contemporary 117). This was just the sort of shift Wright was proposing in his “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” Naturalism became a common style used to capture the bleak socioeconomic circumstances of the black community. Ralph Ellison noted the impact of the Great Depression on African American writing; far from the “exoticism and narrow Negro middle class ideals” that characterized the literature of the 1920s was “the sobering effect of the depression” which made black writing “realistic” (“Recent” 11). This realistic writing fostered the ideal environment for the genre of naturalism. The genre of naturalism surfaced as writers attempted “to come to terms” with widespread poverty. Unlike the works of the Harlem Renaissance, naturalist writing is guided by the precepts that human character can mostly be understood by looking at a person’s socioeconomic circumstances. Wright “immers[ed] himself” in the work of naturalist Theodore Dreiser (Wald) and followed in the footsteps of Dos Passos; he used naturalism to depict the realities of race and class warfare. Wright was apparently influence by Emile Zola, the founder of naturalism, particularly Zola’s La Bete. Like Zola, Wright saw society as disintegrating, “degenerate[ing] into an environment of fear which blocked [hu]man’s most deeply creative impulses, thereby bringing on terrible acts of self-destruction” (Butler, “Wright’s” 100). Bigger’s whole narrative arc is based on his self-destruction. Wright’s own naturalism would have a ripple effect, influencing many writers in the
decade following *Native Son* such as William Attaway, Carl Offord, Chester Himes, Curtis Lucas, Ann Petry, and Willard Savoy.

In 1940, Sterling Brown pointed out Wright’s unique take on naturalism. He expounds on the differences in Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* and *Native Son*: “A naturalist, Dreiser piles detail upon detail to gain verisimilitude; but Wright, seeking truth to a reality beyond naturalism, makes use of the devices of the symbolic novel.” Brown discusses how Wright does a lot in minimal space and has symbolic characters who engage with Bigger—a passionate young communist, the do-gooder Communist attorney, the white liberal philanthropist couple (“Insight” 54). Naturalism came naturally to Wright because of the poverty and oppression he faced in his own life. Wright knew that a person’s social environment had a vast and lasting impact on their life. Wright’s protagonist, Bigger, is awash in socioeconomic oppression, and is lost to even those like Max and Jan who would try to help him. Bigger, so beaten down by the racist and classist world he lives in, stands mute in court; it is Max who makes an eloquent argument using naturalist theories as Bigger’s defense.

Wright clearly uses naturalist techniques when he is portraying Bigger’s environment—outside forces crushing his life—his broken home, his joblessness, his ghetto neighborhood, his impoverished living conditions:

Light flooded the room and revealed a black boy standing in a narrow space between two iron beds. . . . From a bed to his right the woman spoke again:

‘Buddy, get up from there! I got a big washing on my hands today and I want you-all out of here.’

Another black boy rolled from bed and stood up. The woman also rose and stood in her nightgown.

‘Turn your heads so I can dress,’ she said. (Wright, *Native 3*)
From the first page of the novel we see the devastating weight of Bigger’s life as poor black man in America. The very title of the book suggests that Bigger is the offspring of American society; Bigger himself is a comment on racist America. Perhaps this is best summed up by Boris Max, Bigger’s lawyer, who argued that “the unremitting hate of men has given us a psychological distance that will enable us to see this tiny social symbol in relation to our whole sick social organism” (Wright, *Native* 383). The whole sick social organism was Wright’s conception of a racist society. Bigger is ravaged by his environment where the precepts of racism literally drive him to rape and kill. Wright drew a picture of the hatred and violence that filled Bigger’s life: “He had killed twice, but in a true sense it was not the first time he had ever killed. He had killed many times before, but only during the last two days had this impulse assumed the form of actual killing. Blind anger had come often and he had either gone behind his curtain or wall, or had quarreled and fought” (*Native* 239). Through Bigger, Wright demonstrated what impact racism could have on an individual life. And the murders that Bigger commits and his general aggression towards all that life brings his way are contextualized as a logical consequence of his broken environment. Robert Washington grouped *Native Son* in the naturalistic protest school where authors “depict[ed] blacks as alienated and embittered victims of white racial oppression—by thrusting black literary discourse into a radical politics of race relations—they shocked mainstream white America into an awareness of deep-seated black anger” (159). Bigger becomes “bigger” than the confines of his character and comes to represent the anger that many African Americans felt toward white America. Wright too was growing larger, outgrowing the confines of naturalism. Naturalism had some limitations when it came to the politics and possible solutions of racism.
While *Native Son* clearly takes up the tradition of naturalism, perhaps a more specific genre for the novel to plug into would be social realism. Social realism is really a distillation of all the naturalist and socially engaged writing that went before it. J. Saunders Redding wrote for *Opportunity* in the 1930s condemning “sloppy representations of black characters by whites and championed social realism by blacks” (137). It seemed the remedy to caricatures and other unrealistic images of black Americans could be found in social realism. Sterling Brown also fostered social realist writing he “stressed over and again fidelity to realistic portraits of life as an antidote to the corrosive influence of racist stereotypes. His standard of excellence was realism” (Jackson, *The Indignant* 37, 41). Social realism, more so than naturalism, looked for answers to the problems that it presented in the pages of a given novel. Social realists stepped out of the sometimes elitist world of the arts and “into the realm of concrete leftist activism.” This is perhaps what most sharply divides them from naturalist writers. Social realists blended culture and activism; they “address[ed] social crises through both cultural work and corollary forms of political mobilization . . . hallmarks of the social realist movement” (Morgan, *Rethinking* 18). By introducing readers to ideas of human rights the work of social realists became tantamount to political activism.

Wright specifically mentions his affinity for realism in his autobiography *Black Boy* (1945): “All my life had shaped me for the realism of modern novels and I could not get enough of them” (274). For Wright, social realism would recreate the struggles of the disenfranchised on the novel’s page. Wright urged his fellow writers “to develop class consciousness,” and he linked racial issues with class issues, inviting his compatriots “to become more sensitive to the psychological disunity of the proletariat, as well as to express the lore of this group through racial realism” (Jarrett 118). One thing that social realists excelled at was bringing the working
class and the impoverished to the center of their storylines – they used indigent settings and vernacular speech to render the domination of the lower classes. Wright wrapped up this shame and terror of such disenfranchisement in his protagonist Bigger Thomas: “The car sped through the Black Belt, past tall buildings holding black life. Bigger knew that they were thinking of his life and the life of his people. Suddenly he wanted to seize some heavy object . . . and grip it with all the strength of his body and in some strange way rise up and stand in naked space . . . and with one final blow blot it out” (*Native 70*). Wright wanted to see all the unfairness, all the injustice, all the racism embodied for readers by the pen of black novelists.

Because of the triumph of naturalist novels like Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* and John Dos Passos *USA* trilogy (1930-1936) and the emergence of the proletarian novel in Mike Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (1930), social realists had a continuing confidence in the power of the novel. Social realists looking back at the rich literary history of naturalism and proletarian writing, understood that novels could move the masses. They also had the examples of Frank Norris’ *The Octopus* (1901) and Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) as evidence of novels that could bring about social change. And both of these novels exposed the treachery of capitalism, another preferred theme of social realists, a topic that was especially relevant during the Great Depression. Social realists could certainly be inspired by the sociopolitical success of *The Jungle*, which inspired the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act leading to better food safety standards and paving the way for the modern FDA. Black social realists built upon this fertile tradition and added the reality of black life in America.

Social realists following the naturalist tradition used documentary detail. Wright is a perfect example of such a social realist, and there were several outside influences that lead to his use of documentary features. As a journalist, Wright was used to the reportorial standard of facts
first. Surely, his journalistic experience went into crafting Bigger’s neighborhood. Also, social realists like Wright were sharing information with contemporary sociologists who had bleak tales to tell about urbanization and industrialization in America. Finally, Wright and other social realists like William Attaway and Willard Motley worked for the Federal Writers Projects which were fact-collecting enterprises, as they produced guidebooks for American cities (Morgan, *Rethinking* 244). The combination of journalism, sociologists, and the FWP created a nexus which strongly fostered documentary writing in social realists.

Stacy Morgan found that many African American writers of the 1930s were doing something more than naturalism. This generation of writers began to place heightened emphasis on the role of the creative artist as an agent of democratic consciousness raising and social change. While not conceiving of art as strictly a ‘weapon,’ almost all of the participants in the movement of social realism seem to have shared a profound faith in the capacity of cultural work to leverage transformations in the social and political sphere on behalf of America’s poor and working class. (Morgan, *Rethinking* 2)

The social realists were working for a specific class of people, those left behind by the dictates of capitalism. These writers saw the possibility for progressive social change within the realm of their novels. Social realists like Wright hoped to “harness their individualized artistic sensibilities to social vision in order to render art more attentive to the issues of their time” (Wald). The works of social realists would have more than just literary consequence, they would have sociopolitical importance.

But social realism was not all political pamphleteering. Social realists like Wright used modernist techniques after the style of someone like Dos Passos who in his *USA* trilogy intermixed news reports in his narrative. These reports were both literary and documentary and brought in outside perspectives to the story, essentially setting up another character voice. Wright does something similar with his excerpts from the newspaper. Wright used the
newspapers’ racist descriptions of Bigger and their manner of whipping up readers into a racist frenzy to show the racist thought of his day. For example, Bigger while on the run reads some of the racist fear-mongering that was printed in his local newspaper: “NEGRO CHAUFFER DISAPPEARS. FIVE THOUSAND POLICE SURROUND BLACK BELT. AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME. . . . He paused and reread the line, AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME. . . . To hint that he had committed a sex crime was to pronounce the death sentence” (Wright, Native 243). This inclusion of newspaper reports was a piece of modernist flare in Wright’s social realist novel.

Alain Locke wrote positively about this new genre with reviews in Opportunity entitled “The Saving Grace of Realism” (1934) and “God Save Reality” (1937). But Locke was careful to shun propaganda; he “called for a brand of realism that would offer social commentary in symbolic, sublime, or even ironic tones” (Morgan, Rethinking 7). It seems just as soon as a work or in this case a genre is branded political, critics begin bandying about the term “propaganda.” Because some social realists were writing for Communist publications and were members of the Communist Party, critics were quick to call their writing propaganda the moment they took up the cause of the proletariat. But even Samuel Sillen, who called attorney Boris Max’s speech overly “didactic,” wrote “only a critic whose esthetic senses are blunted or whose social prejudices are unalterable will attempt to shout this novel down with the old cry of ‘propaganda.’ And yet, like The Grapes of Wrath, it will jar men and women out of their routine ways of looking at life and sweep them toward a new conception of the way things are and the way they ought to be” (“Richard” 32). Sillen draws attention to the fact that often in socially aware novels the label of propaganda is a pejorative and used to discredit the novel.
Wright’s work also wasn’t effective propaganda because of Wright’s ambivalence towards Communism. Most apparent is Wright’s killing off a Communist character, Mary Dalton. And it’s obvious his Communist characters are flawed. Jan and Mary clumsily handle race issues, like forcing Bigger to eat with them to prove they aren’t racist. They also have no sophistication, and push Communism with all the refinement of religious zealots:

‘I got some stuff here I want Bigger to read. Listen, Bigger, I got some pamphlets here. I want you to read ‘em, see?

‘O.K.’

‘I really want you to read ‘em, now. We’ll have a talk ‘bout ‘em in a coupla days.’

(Wright, Native 80)

Bigger rejects the Communist philosophy that Jan and Mary try to discuss with him. These Communists are working for economic and racial justice, but Communism isn’t something that Wright allows Bigger to grasp.

Many critics have held up Max’s courtroom argument as an example of Wright’s Communist propaganda, but even early reviews of the book disagree that Native Son is actually an example of propaganda. Henry Seidel Canby, writing in Book-of-the-Month-Club News, overtly stated that Native Son was not propaganda; rather it was a book “whose point and purpose are not race war or propaganda of any kind, but to show how a ‘bad nigger’ is made from human material that might have become something very different” (23). This is the sentiment that Max substantiates in his closing argument: “‘This Negro boy’s entire attitude toward life is a crime! The hate and fear which we have inspired in him, woven by our civilization into the very structure of his consciousness, into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality, have become the justification of his existence’” (Wright, Native 400). Max’s closing arguments have been critiqued for being unliterary and unnecessary, essentially a re-hashing of what the story already portrayed. Even Samuel Sillen, writing for the
New Masses, called Bigger’s attorney’s speech didactic, an “artistic weakness”: “it is a lengthy rhetorical restatement of the issues which the novel has already stated in powerful dramatic terms. It is a set speech which makes one feel that Wright, a little uncertain that his meaning has been communicated, interpolated what amounts to a summary draft of the story” (“The Meaning” 85). Max’s argument is important; it forcefully places blame where blame is due. It’s also an interesting stylistic choice for Wright who moves from a narrative representation of racism to a theoretical one. Barbara Foley also sees the value in Max’s speech; “rather than destroying the force or subtlety of the novel’s aesthetic impact, [it] is crucial to its representational rhetoric.” Max makes new connections to Bigger’s situation bringing up the fact that the state’s attorney may be using Bigger’s trial as a distraction and a cathartic release against the city’s inability to offer public assistance to its citizens during the darkest days of the Depression (Foley 317). Max’s speech is not a Communist diatribe, but rather necessary to bring Bigger’s story full circle and to place Bigger within the larger framework of a racist and classist society.

Now that we have placed the novel within its historical and cultural context, we can look at how the novel was received throughout its first three decades. We will recount and measure the evolution of American response to Native Son, looking at coverage from both black and white publications. And we will consider the changing impact of this work on the populace over the decades. Native Son clearly demonstrates that consideration of a work isn’t static; reactions change, and there are varying receptions in different interpretive communities. We will ask, how was Native Son received by various segments of the population? It is also important to bear in mind that Native Son stayed in print across a period of dramatic change in race relations. Beyond this, the study of the individual and the cultural response to Native Son’s is significant because
“in the case of a work so centrally concerned with a major social problem as *Native Son*, the matter of its public reception is of special importance” (Kinnamon, *The Emergence* 143). We will examine the relationship of this novel to race relations over this 30-year period. Finally, we will postulate the novel’s revolutionary potential.

Original reviews of the novel were mixed, with the greater part being positive. Wright was positively compared to Theodore Dreiser, John Steinbeck, even Fyodor Dostoevsky. One aspect reviewers commented on was Wright’s dedication to the craft of novel writing. The *New York Times* praised Wright’s skill, noting how his “dialogue goes crackling down the page” (Poore 26). Samuel Sillen plainly admires Wright’s art in what he calls Wright’s coining of “dramatic realism” (“Richard” 32). The writing in *Native Son* was so innovative that Sillen viewed it as the founding of a new genre. Apparently, whether it’s categorized as social realism or dramatic realism, *Native Son* was venerated for its unvarnished depiction of reality. Mike Gold believed that Wright’s literary craftsmanship was part of a greater good; he thought *Native Son* “could not have accomplished its revolutionary miracle if he had not had his mastery of the art form, in which he was working” (7). But the initial reception to *Native Son* was not all positive. Clifton Fadiman took issue with the writing calling Wright a repetitive and melodramatic writer. Unlike the reviewers who praised Wright’s craftsmanship, Robert Littell in the *Yale Review* discounted the book for its predictability (98). Howard Mumford Jones wrote that “the story is about as complicated as ‘Three Blind Mice’” (“Uneven” 28). Marshall found certain aspects of *Native Son* flawed including the too “lightly sketched” characters (66). Beyond the critique of Wright’s writing style, the issue of race was in every way entangled in the book’s public response and in its success.
In 1940, there wasn’t a public, ongoing discussion of race, at least not in the mainstream media. In one of the several articles he wrote about *Native Son*, Mike Gold, a proletariat writer himself, found that *Native Son* was an important entrée into a national debate on race. Gold stated clearly the racism that pervaded the cultural conversations in this country at the time: “One thing we must thank Dick Wright’s book for is that it is stirring up a national discussion on the tragic status of Negro America. . . . But our American press rarely utters a word about this great evil in our own front-yard. The great crime of Negro oppression is taken for granted. It is not a major political issue. They ignore it” (7). It was into this intolerant environment that *Native Son* was born. *Native Son* was exceptional because it revealed for the first time in a popular novel by a black author how racism affected black Americans. The novel was a “milestone” because Wright was able to capture on a visceral level “for the first time, the shame, the terror, the rage, and the self-hatred many Negroes experience” (Margolies 19). *Native Son* offered an in-depth look at the creature of racism and its victims.

With his graphic description of the beast of racism Wright hoped to do more than inform; he sought also to outrage his readers. Wright offers an excerpt from a Jackson, Mississippi, newspaper to give a national view of Bigger’s crime: “Our experience here in Dixie with such depraved types of Negroes has shown that only the death penalty, inflicted in a public and dramatic manner, has any influence upon their peculiar mentality. Had that nigger Thomas lived in Mississippi and committed such a crime, no power under Heaven could have saved him from death at the hands of indignant citizens” (Wright, *Native* 280-81). Wright’s narrative had to have the power to touch even indifferent readers with the ramifications of American racism. Some readers were shocked by Wright’s protagonist, Bigger Thomas, and disturbed by the awful details of life as a poor black man in the 1930s, but “Richard Wright wanted to write not a book
but a bomb. He wanted to tell what happened to Negroes under the hates and hurts of American life and to tell it with such hard, cold realism that people could not get away from it” (Embree 25). He wanted a book that people could not turn away from, and he wanted his readers to do something more than just read the novel. Wright received fan mail in which readers asked Wright what they as readers could do to bring about racial harmony (Fabre 180). Such fan mail is proof that Wright engaged readers and inspired them to seek a solution to racism. Wright wanted action from his readers, and he sought it through naturalistic portrayal of the roots of racism, documentary details of the misery of black poverty, and he offered his Communist philosophy as an answer to such racism and poverty. Hazel Rowley understood Wright’s commitment to inspiring his readers: “Wright passionately believed in the revolutionary potential of writing; his words were going to ‘tell’ and ‘march’ and ‘fight’” (“The Shadow” 89). If his readers did not go out and march in the streets at least Wright could help to make them more politically aware—this was his key objective. We know that Wright believed in awakening readers to the realism of racism because he spells out the responsibility for such action that lay with every black writer in his essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing.”

The white and black press understood this awakening of America as Wright’s ambition. Notable Communist critic Samuel Sillen praised Wright for being a politico and an artist: “There is no writer in America of whom one can say more confidently: He is the creator of our better world and our greater art” (“Richard” 33). Like other reviewers, Sillen applauded the revolutionary potential of Native Son. In fact, even the mainstream bastion, the New York Times, called Wright “a champion of [his] race” and praised Native Son for its radical promise: “The measure in which it shakes a community is the measure of its effectiveness” (Poore 25, 26). To quantify the very efficacy of a novel by its revolutionary impact is an indicator of the popularity
of social realism at the time. *Native Son* was actually praised for its politics, a sentiment that would die after World War II only to be reignited during the Black Arts Movement (BAM).

Reviews rolled in noting how the novel was shaking the white community. The verisimilitude in Wright’s novel, a logical component of his social realist style, was noted by critics. Margaret Wallace wrote for the *New York Sun*, “If you have a conscience sensitive to questions of social injustice it may remain to trouble you long after you thought you were through with it. In no case will you be able to put aside and ignore it. It has a factual quality as hard and real as a paving stone” (29). Both literary and realistic as a paving stone: the novel was doing double duty as a lively narrative and a sociopolitical apparatus. *Native Son* Locke asserted was powerful in the themes it took up; the novel was more than art, perhaps the art was in a sense eclipsed by it sociopolitical implications. Alain Locke found the story and its racial significance a pressing matter: “Indeed in the present crisis, the social import of *Native Son*, with its bold warnings and its clear lessons, temporarily overshadows its artistic significance. Its vivid and vital revelations should be a considerable factor in awakening a social sense and conscience” (“Of Native Sons” 20). *Native Son* was not only timely, it was a notable and necessary contribution to the conversation on race in America. Like many of the initial reviewers, Locke seemed convinced that *Native Son* would have some sociopolitical weight.

In examining the racial element of this novel it’s essential to reflect on its reception in the black community. African American critics of *Native Son* supported the novel with positive reviews. The *Chicago Defender*, a black newspaper, compared Wright to Alexander Dumas. Writing for *Interracial Review*, Theophilus Lewis called *Native Son* “one of the strongest novels written by a Negro author” (88). But there were certainly negative reviews in the black press as well. Lillian Johnson was the first black critic of *Native Son*, and she wrote in the *Baltimore*
that she did not believe Wright had “written a book that will do anything constructive for his people as a race. I am of the opinion that the book could do a great deal of harm” (qtd. in Rowley, Richard 192). Readers responding to Johnson’s criticism worried “they will believe him [Bigger Thomas] typical of all of us. They so easily lump us into one classification” (Rowley, Richard 193). Interestingly, according to Wright’s biographer Constance Webb, Wright worried about the same thing; he wondered “would not such a brutal portrait [of Bigger] give whites the opportunity to say that all Negroes were like animals and reinforce their prejudices?” (170). Wright created an anti-hero in his construction of his protagonist Bigger Thomas: “These were the rhythms of his life: indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger” (Native 29). Bigger put readers in an awkward position: African American readers were of two minds, on the one hand they were proud of Wright’s literary achievement and on the other hand the “antisocial black protagonist, so near the bottom of the social ladder” might give credence to white stereotypes of the black brute (Fabre 179). There was the danger that for some his character Bigger would come to represent the whole of the black race. Ben Davis viewed as a shortcoming the use of Bigger as a synecdoche for the entire African American population. This is a reductive way to view Wright’s protagonist, and eventually this would not be the lasting impression of Bigger. But Wright saw the greater good of his dark character, Bigger Thomas, and so did the black press. The Chicago Defender worried about the negative publicity that could come from the book but was hopeful about its transformative potential: “we, who belong to the world of social proscription, of frustrated hopes, of organized discrimination out of which came Bigger Thomas . . . fervently hope that Native Son shall not only focus attention upon the evils which are visited upon us, but that it shall, by the very urgency of its message, transform a rotten
social, economic system into a living democracy for all” (*Chicago Defender* 64-65). These were high expectations for an African American novel in 1940 to create a “living democracy.” Clearly, there were great hopes this book would stimulate progress to counteract racism.

One of the most famous critical essays on the novel of the 1940s was “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949) by a young James Baldwin, a friend of Wright’s whom Wright mentored and helped find a writing fellowship. In this influential essay, Baldwin compared *Native Son* with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by which he referred to the novel as more of a pamphlet rather than a fully realized work of art. Baldwin thought Bigger Thomas was too simple a character who didn’t mirror the complexities of contemporary black lives. Baldwin felt that Wright crafted Bigger as a black brute which confirmed the vast majority of whites’ opinion of African Americans. Baldwin disagreed with the effectiveness of the very genre Wright was using, the naturalist protest fiction. The genre according to Baldwin is written with the hopes of uplifting the broken and exploited—it is empathetic writing—but this empathy only takes one so far because it cannot rise above the trauma of the oppressed.

Baldwin believed a novelist should make a “journey toward a more vast reality” (‘Everybody’s” 221) and away from protest literature. Baldwin was of course critiquing Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” in which Wright calls for every black writer to employ the form of protest fiction. Baldwin did not interpret his “responsibility” as a black writer (nay, a black citizen) was to write in the protest model. Baldwin suggested that protest novels were often “both badly written and wildly improbable” (“Everybody’s” 223). In “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin “point[ed] out the limitations of *Native Son* as a moral vehicle” while Wright was originally hailed as a success on this front (Gayle, *Richard* 223). One must recall the time in which Baldwin was writing was an era when protest literature had fallen out of favor. Finally,
Baldwin directly took on the tough circumstances of Bigger’s life: “Bigger’s tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry . . . but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth” (“Everybody’s” 226). Much of the tragedy of *Native Son* and its power as a message against racism is based upon “those brutal criteria bequeathed” to Bigger by virtue of being African American. In this struggle lies the power of the novel, not its weakness. Baldwin hesitated to embrace *Native Son* as a piece of protest literature, but protest is a major element of the novel, and that does not mean that it undermines its standing as art.

It’s interesting to see the social and critical life of a novel throughout various eras. In its second decade, *Native Son* was put to different tests, and made to represent new ideas. Wright and his protest literature were going stale: “In the 1950’s literary opinion makers were in a great hurry to clear the stage of Richard Wright and to make room for more art-conscious black writers” (Kent, “On” 366). Protest literature had lost its shine, and Wright by then an expatriate in France who was producing his less popular works was decidedly “out of sorts with the nation’s taste for Cold War and its middle-America WASP consensus” (Lee 111). It was from this perspective that Wright was viewed by some Americans in the 1950s. But *Native Son* was not dead. In 1950, the book was made into a film directed by Pierre Chenal, with Wright starring as Bigger Thomas. The film, shot in Argentina, was banned in several U.S. cities—*Native Son* still was stirring up controversy in its filmic version. Charles Nichols, writing in the 1950s, believed that it was Wright’s exceptional writing that made *Native Son* a classic by 1950: “*Native Son* has achieved a permanent place in American literature not only because its theme is universal, but because its prose is instinct with life, shorn of pretense and flabbiness, with all the
freshness and tang of people talking” (378). It was rather early to be calling the novel a classic, but in the condensed world of African American literature, Wright’s Native Son was seen as a landmark.

One of the main critical essays of the 1950’s was Baldwin’s “Many Thousands Gone.” It was only eighteen months after Baldwin wrote “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” and he was critiquing Native Son again, proving that this book had continuous critical interest. Published in the Parisian Review in 1951, “Many Thousands Gone” had Baldwin criticizing Bigger Thomas as unrepresentative of the multifaceted existence and difficult labor that is black life in America. Where, Baldwin wondered, was Bigger’s humanity? One can see Bigger become endowed with humanity at the end of the novel when he realizes the nobility of Max’s motives: “He [Bigger] stepped over to Max. Max was leaning against the window. ‘Mr. Max, you go home. I’m all right. . . . Sounds funny, Mr. Max, but when I think about what you say I kind of feel what I wanted. It makes me feel I was kind of right” (Wright, Native 428). In contrast to Baldwin, the American Literary Review found Wright’s novel “artistically viable and capable of expressing the humanity of black people” (Kinnamon, A Richard 379). This flies in the face of critics who suggested that Bigger had no humanity as a black man. And in the broad sense of the term Bigger had great humanity because in his struggle he is united with all oppressed people everywhere. Wright used his story to make a case for the injustice that racism brings to all members of a society.

In 1951, Baldwin knew the eminent place Native Son held: “the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet had of what it means to be a Negro in America is unquestionably Richard Wright’s Native Son” (“Many” 80). But the picture of the African American life that Wright created through Bigger did not sit well with Baldwin. Baldwin blamed
Wright’s black stereotypes not on Wright but on the terrible sway that the white mainstream racist culture had on Wright’s literary creativity (Warnes 76). Baldwin believed Wright’s view of the African American experience was limited. Wright created a solitary character, and Baldwin criticized the fact that Bigger was divorced from a fully functioning and multifarious black community. Several other critics picked up on what they believed to be a flaw in the story—the introverted life Bigger lived, divided from the black neighborhood. The strength derived from one another was a palliative against the damages of Jim Crow life critics claimed, an aspect of minority life which Wright ignored. Mike Gold thought creating a whole community of activists around Bigger would be distracting: “The critics believe that Wright should have included Negro Communists, militant and intellectual Negroes. . . . It might have drawn attention away from the story Wright started to tell—the story of Bigger” (7). The story of Bigger is that of a desperate man against the world, and that was a real enough picture of black life in and of itself.

Baldwin also criticized white America’s pride at Native Son’s success:

The feeling which prevailed at the time of its publication was that such a novel, bitter, uncompromising, shocking, gave proof, by its very existence, of what strides might be taken in a free democracy; and its indisputable success, proof that Americans were now able to look full in the face without flinching the dreadful facts. Americans, unhappily, have the most remarkable ability to alchemize all bitter truths into an innocuous but piquant confection and to transform their moral contradictions, or public discussion of such contradictions, into a proud decoration, such as are given for heroism on the field of battle. (“Many” 80)

This called into question how much Wright really accomplished in the name of civil rights if the book’s success would be used to soothe the guilty conscience of the white American majority.

However, bringing the everyday battle of racism to the forefront of the American conversation was an important accomplishment for Wright. And if he was to write realistically about the lives of African Americans, it was going to include a dark picture of racism in action. So if some
white Americans were a little too proud of *Native Son’s* popularity, at least there were surely many more whose eyes and consciences were open to the blunt horror of American racism.

One might ask why if *Native Son* was published in 1940 Baldwin would feel sanctioned to critique it in two major essays in 1949 and 1951. To begin with, *Native Son* was obviously the outstanding work of the black literary culture, and it had taken hold in both black and white readerships. But secondarily, Baldwin was hoping to make a name for himself, to establish his literary independence. He wrote these essays before his own novels like *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) or *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) became popular. Baldwin was in effect trying to shrug off the anxiety of influence, trying to step out from behind Wright’s looming literary shadow. Baldwin had to prove how he was different, better, newer than Wright. One might not criticize Baldwin too harshly for his severe reviews of Wright because this was a time when the American literary public (racist as it was) could accept only one prominent black writer at a time. So Baldwin was forced to depose the reigning king of black literature. Baldwin later admits his complex entanglement with Wright: “I had used his work as a kind of springboard into my own. His work was a road-block in my road, the sphinx, really, whose riddles I had to answer before I could become myself (“Alas” 612). Over the next few decades Baldwin did become a successful writer in his own right, but was it necessary to trample his forefather in his pursuit of literary enfranchisement?

The 1960s saw a whole new set of critiques and interpretations of *Native Son*. Because of the sociopolitical atmosphere of the 1960s, the novel experienced a rebirth. According to Robert Shulman, *Native Son* was being viewed through a new lens: “under the pressure of the black urban uprisings of the 1960s, *Native Son* again came into prominence” (33). *Native Son* saw something of a renaissance as race issues of the era dovetailed with the racial implication of
Native Son. Wright was viewed as a visionary in some circles: “By calling attention to the frightening conditions facing black people . . . Wright’s books also helped clear the way for the emergence of Martin Luther King Jr., the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the myriad others who fought segregation in the United States in the 1950s and 60s” (Cassuto). Wright’s novel became an argument for the Civil Rights movement. In the 1960s, Native Son turned out to be timely, and Edward Margolies claimed that “Native Son retains surprising power . . . the ‘Negro problem’ has once more intruded itself onto the national consciousness” (85). The same problems of race that Wright addressed in 1940 were being opened again in the 1960s. Native Son was regarded for its inspiration of the Civil Rights movement. Notably, Bigger was considered as something he’d never been called before: a role model. Addison Gayle, Jr. described Bigger Thomas as “in our own day, he is part Malcolm and Stokely, part Rap Brown and Martin Luther King, Jr.” (The Way 217). Native Son in the 1940s seemed to anticipate the worlds of civil disobedience and Black Power of the 1960s.

The reception of Native Son in the 1960s proved once again that this novel was more than a piece of American literature. It was social rather than literary trends that brought sustained attention to Native Son over two decades after its publication:

Racial events totally independent of the literary fashion, began to bring Wright’s work back into the limelight. As the civil rights movement tended more and more toward Black Power, its leaders became increasingly aware of the relevance of Wright’s message. . . . Bigger was rediscovered, not only as a monster to be kept at a distance but as a forerunner of the Watts rebels, the adolescents whose profound human dignity Wright had evoked along with their frustrations and violence. (Fabre xxiii)

In his novel, Wright adroitly captured the dissatisfaction of oppressed black youth: “There was just the old feeling, the feeling that he had had all his life: he was black and had done wrong; white men were looking at something with which they would soon accuse him. It was the old feeling, hard and constant again now, of wanting to grab something and clutch it in his hands and
swing it into someone’s face” (*Native* 219). Bigger was recast as a proponent of Black Power, though the Black Power movement was not even in existence when Wright wrote his novel.

Bigger was taken up by the Black Power movement: “The generation raised on Civil Rights and then marches like that into Selma and inner-city explosions and the rhetoric of Malcolm X and the Panthers seized on him as an exemplary spokesman for Black Power, an early standard-bearer of either-or black militancy” (Lee 111). This militancy about the everyday problems of black existence in America is espoused by Bigger’s lawyer in his defense of Bigger’s crime and in an attempt to save Bigger’s life:

> “What is happening here today is not injustice, but *oppression*, an attempt to throttle or stamp out a new form of life. And it is this new form of life that has grown up here in our midst that puzzles us, that expresses itself, like a weed growing from under a stone, in terms we call crime. 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, Native* 391)

Bigger’s lawyer, Boris Max, tried to allow the jury to see Bigger’s crime in the greater context of Bigger’s life as a second-class citizen, as a black man in this racist country. Max’s courtroom arguments were still ringing true in the 1960s. Even the play of *Native Son* was revamped and updated to address issues of the Black Power movement. The playwright Paul Green made changes to the 1968 version of his play of *Native Son*: “The desire to make *Native Son* relevant to a climate marked by many forms of American dissent and especially the Black Power movement is quite noticeable in Green’s outrageous insertions of references to . . . Black Power and the Black Muslims” (Ward 44). The revision of the play to include ideology of Black Power parallels the book’s reception at the time—a time in which people were reading *Native Son* and applying it to issues of civil rights.

Wright was also taken up in the 1960s, a forerunner of the Black Arts Movement (BAM). BAM interpreted the struggles of civil rights through art and created a working cultural center
around the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Native Son was a natural fit for the politically based BAM with its writings that were ground in aestheticism and social engagement. Native Son was part of the foundation upon which BAM was built: “As the young black writers came to be heard, it was obvious that they had read and understood him” (Fabre xxiii). Unlike Baldwin and Ellison who sharply critiqued Wright, BAM writers like LeRoi Jones and Nikki Giovanni drew inspiration from this socially engaged literary forbearer. James Smethurst believes that “Native Son was enormously important to BAM. You have to remember that Wright was still probably the best known African American writer of the twentieth century and Native Son probably still the most widely read book by a black author in the early 1960s when BAM began to emerge despite the critical attention paid to Invisible Man. And Wright was a self-identified revolutionary when he wrote it.” Wright’s revolutionary ideas were reignited through BAM. The 1960s fostered an acceptance of the revolutionary politics in Native Son which was lacking in the book’s first few decades:

Whereas post-World War II critics were likely to view Wright’s aggressive politics as an aesthetic liability, critics from the mid-sixties onward, particularly those connected with the Black Arts Movement, saw him as a model of the politically engaged writer. (While earlier critics were likely to view a character like Bigger Thomas as a dangerous stereotype of the ‘bad nigger’ who would make people think twice about integration, critics now were apt to hail Bigger as a prototype of the revolutionary black hero who was not interested in assimilating into the mainstream). (Butler, Introduction xxxiii)

Black autonomy and non-assimilation were major themes of Wright’s novel: “’Every time I think about it I feel like somebody’s poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain’t. They do things and we can’t. It’s just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I’m on the outside of the world peeping in through a knothole in the fence’” (Wright, Native 20). The 1960s was a time when Wright’s non-assimilation was celebrated.
At the same time as the Black Power movement and BAM were occurring, Black Studies programs were being built up in the universities, and Native Son played a part here as well: “In the 1960s and 1970s, newly established black studies programs rehabilitated Native Son” (Goldstein 128). Native Son received greater attention as these programs looked for black classics to stock their syllabi. Furthermore, the text was read within a new social context. In the 1960s and 1970s, “The Black Power movement gave rise to a new black aesthetic. . . . this shift . . . ‘made it possible for literary-critical and literary theoretical investigators to . . . include previously “unfamiliar” objects in an expanded (and sharply modified) American art world’ . . . [this] justified the reinterpretation of . . . Native Son as [a] novel[] of liberation” (Goldstein 130-31). This flew in the face of past critics who had dismissed the novel as a propagandistic pamphlet. Now the novel was being accepted by activists and scholars alike. This increased educational attention to African American literature was connected to the sociopolitical atmosphere of the times. Native Son’s “widespread introduction into American college and university classrooms” and the popularity of Wright’s novel for its academic import represented “a particular moment in American life during the late 1960s, a period of pervasive student unrest on college campuses and of black militancy and black rebellion in many of America’s cities. . . . In this context, Wright’s achievement gained a new status, and Bigger Thomas. . . . became a powerful signifier of the depths of black alienation and rage that seemed so palpable in the nation’s cities” (Miller, Approaches 11). Wright’s main character again is seen as a symbol, an inspiration. But Wright had always seen the revolutionary potential of his protagonist, Bigger Thomas. The problems of black life were spelled out in Bigger. Let’s look at how Bigger’s attorney depicts Bigger’s fraught life:

“Consider, Your Honor, the peculiar position of this boy. He comes of a people who have lived under queer conditions of life, conditions thrust outside the normal
circle of our civilization. But even in living outside of our lives, he has not had a full life of his own. We have seen to that. It was convenient to keep him close to us; it was nice and cheap. We told him what to do; where to live; how much schooling he could get; where he could eat; where and what kind of work he could do. We marked up the earth and said, ‘Stay there!’ But life is not stationary.” (Wright, Native 393-94)

Wright had captured the experience of discrimination in Native Son, and this book became a foundational text in the scholarly study of African American society. Black Studies programs heralded the literary and sociopolitical significance of Wright’s novel.

There was a shift in the critical view of the novel as well. In 1963, Irving Howe took on Baldwin’s critique of Wright in his famous essay “Black Boys and Native Sons.” Unlike Baldwin, Howe believed that writing about the black American experience automatically led to a literature of protest. Howe asked, “How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without some impulsion to protest?” (“Black” 354). Howe was directly opposed to Baldwin, who saw major flaws in Wright’s protest. Howe thought Wright’s political protest was a vital part of the novel. Wright’s message, according to Howe, was one which his colleagues would rather ignore: Wright “told his contemporaries a truth so bitter, they paid him the tribute of trying to forget it” (366). In Baldwin’s essays, we can see how he tried to bury Native Son, to put it behind him. Howe emphasized the confrontational nature of Native Son: “He forced his readers to confront the disease of our culture” and “pummel[ed] his readers into awareness” (“Black” 355, 356). Howe viewed Native Son as a wake-up call; in a passage that was often reprinted, Howe wrote: “The day Native Son appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies. . . . 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” (“Black” 354-55). Howe celebrated the possibility for Native Son to affect society. He also
placed Baldwin’s critique of Wright in a Freudian context: “The kind of criticism Baldwin wrote was very fashionable in America during the post-war years. Mimicking the Freudian corrosion of motives and bristling with dialectical agility, this criticism approached all ideal claims, especially those made by radical and naturalist writers, with a weary skepticism” (“Black” 359). In this way, Howe cast Baldwin’s critique as passé.

In 1963, Ralph Ellison wrote “The World and the Jug” in response to Irving Howe’s “Black Boys and Native Sons” (1963). This was an influential essay and was reprinted in a popular book of essays by Ellison called Shadow and Act in 1964, so Ellison’s critique of Wright was heard far and wide. Ellison criticized Howe for demonizing James Baldwin and himself in Howe’s “Black Boys and Native Sons.” Ellison disputed Howe’s claim that Wright was the “spiritual father of Ellison, Baldwin and all other Negroes of literary bent to come” (“The World” 144). There seemed to be an urge by Ellison and Baldwin to disown Wright that harkens back to an anxiety of influence. Both Ellison and Baldwin stood to gain a great deal in their professional lives by rejecting Wright. Wright represented a literary forefather that Ellison and Baldwin could not disown: “Their protests to the contrary, Baldwin and Ellison were influenced by Wright; one might even argue that a significant part of their drive to write derived from a desire to ‘humanize’ Bigger” (Stepto 67). Rather than being disappointed in Wright, Baldwin and Ellison may have been inspired by him. Native Son was a part of the rich tradition upon which Ellison and Baldwin would build.

Ellison originally raved about Native Son when it was first published in 1940. Ellison saw Native Son as a departure from previous African American writing, and he considered the novel a way forward for African American literature. Also notable in the review is Ellison’s celebration of Wright’s social agenda: “There must be no stepping away from the artistic and
social achievements of *Native Son* if the Negro writer is to create the consciousness of his oppressed nation” (“Recent” 18). In 1940, Ellison believed in Wright’s politics and thought the novel was an influential part of the fight for civil rights. In 1963, Ellison felt that the type of political novel Wright wrote was not a proper model for African American literature. This later critique came after the wild success of *Invisible Man* (1952) when Ellison was no longer beholden to Wright for literary enfranchisement. Ellison turned his back on Wright mostly over the debate of art versus propaganda. He felt *Native Son* fell into the latter category and thus, could not be viable literature. Ellison stood against the techniques of naturalism and the philosophies of Communism in an African American novel. He felt African American novels could be realistic without either of these liabilities. Ellison believed that the naturalist and proletarian style of *Native Son* was to deterministic to portray the variety and equivocality of the rhythms of life. Finally, Ellison summed up his problem with Howe: “Howe would designate the role which Negro writers are to play more rigidly than any Southern politician—and for the best of reasons. We must express ‘black’ anger and ‘clenched militancy’; most of all we should not become too interested in the problems of the art of literature” (“The World” 151-52). Howe never thought clenched militancy was divorced from the art of literature; Howe was simply praising the power of Wright’s righteous anger. However, in Howe’s insistence on protest as a natural black generic distinction, he was dictating the terms on which a black writer might write. The situation where a white critic might presume to tell a black author how to write was understandably offensive to Ellison.

In the late 60s, many black cultural leaders aligned behind *Native Son*. In a 1966 essay entitled “Black Writing,” LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) wrote that black writers had a unique African American story to tell, and he held Wright up as an example of a successful black writer.
LeRoi Jones wrote a poem in his 1969 collection about *Native Son* in which he refers to Bigger Thomas as “my brother” (*Black Magic* 161). In *Soul on Ice* (1968) Eldridge Cleaver maintained that Wright had the ability to shrink the greater issue of racism into the parameters of a narrative: “Of all black American novelists, and indeed of all American novelists of any hue, Richard Wright reigns supreme for his profound political, economic, and social reference. Wright had the ability, like Dreiser, of harnessing the gigantic, overwhelming environmental forces and focusing them . . . on individuals and their acts as they are caught up in the whirlwind of the savage, anarchistic sweep of life . . . across the face of a nation and the world” (108-09). Wright was able to apply his story to the larger problem of racism in American culture. Wright’s politics endeared him to Cleaver who, unlike Ellison and Baldwin, viewed Wright’s political writing as a valuable part of Wright’s literature. *Native Son*, to Jones and Cleaver, helped define the black American experience.

Gerald Green in his article “Back to Bigger” viewed *Native Son* as the pinnacle of the social novel genre and thought it absolutely timely: “Nothing that happens in Watts or Harlem can ever be incomprehensible to us once we know Bigger Thomas” (523). Other critics in the 1960s viewed *Native Son* as a sort of racial premonition. Bigger’s helplessness and utter frustration at his own disenfranchisement is apparent in a conversation with his friend Gus:

“I could fly a plane if I had a 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, *Native* 17)

The same kind of social, educational, and financial subjugation was happening to blacks in the 1960s. In a 1969 essay George Kent asserted that “Wright now appears to have anticipated the urban upheavals, the alienation and the violence of our times” (“On” 366) and that Wright “seems now all too prophetic, all too relevant” (“Richard” 95). Wright paid dearly for being one
of the first black novelists to depict the hard reality of racism. And he died in 1960 before he really had a chance to see the renaissance of *Native Son*.

This chapter explores the sociopolitical import of *Native Son*, and the dynamic politics surrounding the novel make it more than a merely fictional story: “The turbulent politics of race, particularly as they evolved through the civil rights era and after, would seem to have claimed him as part of a black American pantheon which reaches well beyond things literary” (Lee 115). Truly, the politics are as alive, if not more so, than the novel’s characters. His work was able to inspire people to work to end racism. For instance LeRoi Jones claimed that “Wright was one of the people who made me conscious of the need to struggle” (“WBW”). This shows how influential Wright was on the founder of the activist Black Arts Movement.

After scores of criticism on *Native Son*’s effect on race relations we can wonder what did *Native Son* actually accomplish: “*Native Son* did not start a war, as Lincoln claimed *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* did, or directly affect legislation, as *The Jungle* did, but it did alter the social as well as literary sensibilities of many of its readers” (Kinnamon, Introduction 24). It’s difficult to track a shift in social sensibilities, but by following the popular and critical conversation surrounding *Native Son*, we can see how it impacted the discussion of race relations in the US. Keneth Kinnamon claimed *Native Son*’s success on this front: “from the available evidence it seems safe to claim that Wright’s intention to shock his readers into a new awareness of the terrible dimensions of American racism was to a large degree accomplished” (Introduction 23). This indicates that this book was a successful crusading or activist text. *Native Son* ignited a conversation on race from its first day of publication and was a part of the different turns that conversation took through the Civil Rights era and beyond. In 1940, Margaret Wallace foresaw the sweeping influence of this novel: “Some novels . . . have a kind of life of their own, a
peculiar vitality which amounts almost to independent being. They add something to the reader’s mind which was not there before, and which cannot be lost or taken away. Usually they father other books in turn and may end by coloring the thinking of a generation which has scarcely heard of them. ‘Native Son,’ by Richard Wright, at a fair venture, is such a novel” (29). Native Son certainly added something to readers’ minds: an awareness of the burden that is racism. Wright gave a voice to those who were suffering under the burden of racism. In this way Wright did more than entertain his readers; he enlightened them.

Native Son impacted all of subsequent African American literature. But more than that, it changed the American conversation on racism. It inspired readers to enact the principles of civil rights. From 1940-1970 one could claim that Native Son was an influential part of the Civil Rights movement. Native Son demonstrates the great possibility for books to become the muse for social action. From social workers who used the novel to prove the crisis of urban poverty to the black cultural leaders like LeRoi Jones who found inspiration in the strength of Bigger, the book made a positive social impact. The dark and desperate life story of Bigger Thomas brought to its readers the urge to change the racism that confined such a life. Wright’s fiction had an effect on the very culture it condemned in the pages of the novel. Native Son is a shining example of books-into-action, where books shape culture.
On a weekend in October of 1967, tens of thousands of demonstrators amassed in Washington, D.C., to protest the war in Vietnam. Intending The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History (1968) to record and commemorate this eventful weekend, Norman Mailer enlarged the March on the Pentagon’s meaning, working as a novelist to make it more than a four-day set of tremors in the nation’s capital. Some consider the march a watershed moment, “the first in a chain of events that led to Lyndon Johnson’s decision . . . to deescalate in Vietnam” (Small 70). The Armies of the Night is worth exploring for both for its stylistic and topical elements, so I will consider how Mailer stretches the new genre of the nonfiction novel to report on and merge with a social movement; through New Journalism Mailer is able to lend credibility and increase accessibility to the story of the anti-war movement. I will look at this book as a seminal nonfiction novel in the New Journalism school, in which the tools of fact and fiction are brought together to tell a true story. Mailer uses the nonfiction novel to capture history more evocatively and provocatively than traditional journalism or literature alone. One way he does so is by placing himself in the story. Through Mailer’s dual role as a demonstrator and narrator, readers are provided a rich witness to the many obstacles that were set before protesters in the form of a biased media and corrupt government officials, including the military and police whose physical abuse is featured in the novel.

Armies is also concerned with a sweeping view of American culture vis-a-vis the march, for this is a “literary project . . . radically committed to a rendering of the American reality” (Scott 18), and Armies becomes Mailer’s attempt to expand upon the march’s implications for the national character. When Armies was published, the country was divided over the war in Vietnam; according to a 1967 Gallup poll, when asked whether “the U.S. made a mistake
sending troops to Vietnam” 46% said yes while almost an equal amount, 44%, answered no (Gallup 2087). Mailer hones in on this rift; in fact, Sandy Vogelgesang believes that Mailer “may have come closer than any other American to expressing the significant mood of the 1960s” (179). Mailer addresses the division over the war and also the disparaging of anti-war protestors in the mainstream press which created a gulf between mainstream America and the anti-war movement. Mailer works to familiarize the populace with these voices of dissent and to humanize them. The book highlights the fight between the military and the protesters (our “ignorant” armies of the night), although at some points in the novel it seems the match is the Pentagon vs. Mailer. These conflicts epitomize the volatility of the U.S. at that moment, the rips within the social fabric during the escalation of the Vietnam War.

I will also consider how this novel might have acted as a catalyst for activism for some contemporary readers and how it worked to coalesce support for the anti-war movement, addressing those Americans who were either ambivalent towards or even appalled by the anti-war protesters and challenging readers to see the efficacy and patriotism of the marchers’ cause. It is difficult to gauge the novel’s effectiveness on this front, but I will consider media coverage and popular reaction to the marchers and to the book itself. It is in the novelistic form that Mailer shares this moment in history, and he has said that the reading of novels “is a noble pursuit, that it profoundly changes the ways in which people perceive their experience” (Mailer, Interview 133). Mailer understood the great possibility of his novel to effect change and the opportunity he had to shape readers’ understanding of what it meant to protest the war in Vietnam.

Mailer does not open by championing the anti-war demonstration. In fact, he initially resists joining the protesters for the weekend of anti-war events, which would culminate in the March on the Pentagon. He admits his reticence to participate in such public protestations by
naming previous anti-war demonstrations “idiot mass manifestations.” So early in the book Mailer reveals ambivalence towards the New Left. Mailer is borne along to this Washington weekend of activism not altogether willingly or happily, certain that it was going to be a “wasteful weekend” (Mailer, Armies 10). This resistance allows the reader to see Mailer’s skepticism about the protest and distances Mailer from suspicion that he was a writer-for-hire working for the coalition of Leftist groups. Like Tom Wolfe in Radical Chic, Mailer is fully capable of exposing the contradictions and hypocrisy within New Left politics, but Mailer did not “revel in condemnation of dissident groups” like Wolfe did (Chomsky). Far from searching for a new book topic, Mailer pushed this one off, for he had already written about the Vietnam War in Why Are We in Vietnam? (1967). Believing the march on the Pentagon to be another in a seemingly ceaseless, fruitless chain of leftist demonstrations; he ironically wonders, “When was everyone going to cut the nonsense and get to work, do their real work? One’s own literary work was the only answer to the war in Vietnam” (Mailer, Armies 9). Rather than withdrawing from the movement, Nigel Leigh views Mailer’s seeming exasperation as a “radical endorsement of the power of the artwork and the cutting edge of style upon national consciousness” (136).

However, the writing of Armies would require more than the usual “literary work” from Mailer; more than mere writing, Armies would entail symbolic political action, even civil disobedience. It was Mailer’s combination of writing and political action that would shape his prose and affect his readers.

Instead of writing more about Vietnam, Mailer originally intended to support the draft resisters with informal speeches and planned to lend his fame to the event by leading the actual march along with other famous figures. However, once Mailer became involved in the various acts of civil disobedience, he saw a whole story that needed to be told. Prior to writing In Cold
Blood, Truman Capote “went looking for a ‘true’ event worthy of being immortalized in a ‘nonfiction novel,’ [but] Mailer came into his materials rather against his will” (Merrill 109), testifying to the magnitude of the event itself and a writer who found it so compelling that he must not only write about it but also bridge two genres to do so. Mailer was plugging into the new phenomenon of New Journalism, combining journalistic techniques with conventions from the literary world. For instance, rather than including a single snapshot or quotation from a fellow marcher, Walter Teague, Mailer features Teague as a character: “he had chatted just enough with Teague to recognize the other man’s philosophy . . . that the revolution needed people who would work, sleep, think and eat revolution,” and later Mailer returns to Teague: “He [Teague] was wide awake now, he had slept for the cause, had gathered his energies, and was now conducting a free school in the dormitory” (Mailer, Armies 160, 178). Teague represents a sustained portrait of a protester willing to be arrested for the cause, and the nonfiction novel format afforded Mailer the space (space not usually afforded news articles) to feature such a character. In fact, Mailer originally planned to write a piece about the march for Harper’s Bazaar, but found that the story he needed to tell exceeded even the substantial 20,000 word limit for the article.

It is Mailer who leads us through the weekend of the march and the arrests of the protesters. As was common in the emerging field of New Journalism, Mailer tapped into his own subjectivity, which offered a “freedom from the formulas and ‘objectivity’ of conventional reporting.” At the same time, his participation in the weekend’s protest events allowed for what Tom Wolfe, an originator of New Journalism, calls “saturation reporting,” where the writer installs him/herself within the actual events which (s)he is reporting (Gutman 90, 32). It’s important to distinguish between Mailer’s relationship with the story as it changes from Book I
to Book II. In Book I, *History as a Novel*, Mailer is both narrator and protagonist; he is taking his own journey through the march, and he is the hero. In Book II, *The Novel as History*, Mailer recedes, as his character appears only in the jail sequences. In the second half of the book, he is acting as a historian or journalist reporting on the events and the circumstances leading up to the march. The wedding of the two books “make for an astonishingly effective unity” (“Norman” 1050).

In both halves of the book, Mailer places himself as a character in or narrator of the tumult of unfolding events, and Mailer’s personalizing of the event puts him in a decisive role. Seymour Krim notes that *Armies* brings up ideas about “the literary artist being in the center of history and shaping it with his voice” (Manso 470); as actor, witness, and writer, Mailer acts as “a center of perception” and a nerve center where readers’ vicarious feelings and emotions can be processed, and his “greater role will be to reveal the meaning in the events he observes” (Begiebing 154). Mailer is the reader’s entrance into the march, and the story is experienced through the Norman Mailer protagonist/narrator/author triumvirate. Mailer has been praised for his “ability to use one’s own point of view as an entry into the reality of a subject” (Piazza 53), and this is typical of New Journalism; for instance, Hunter S. Thompson also used himself as to enter into the topic he was covering, whether it was the Hell’s Angels or the Kentucky Derby. Because Mailer was an active participant in the weekend events planned by the National Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam, it lent credibility and authority to his novel by proving Mailer’s dedication to the story.

Mailer gives us an intimate view of this protester community by marching with the protesters: “They were a pleasant group. They had a self-reliant humor which was sufficiently subtle and private to suggest it had been forged in other campaigns in other places . . . [like they]
used to drive all day from one Deep South town to another, rallying, organizing, slipping messages back and forth across the state, packing a piece or two” (Armies 61). And later through Mailer’s arrest we get an inside view of civil disobedience in the 1960’s.

As in Black Like Me, when John Howard Griffin changed his skin pigmentation to pose as an African American, Mailer also takes on his own role change; he attempts to infiltrate the ranks of the anti-war activists and become one himself, if only for a weekend. Griffin believed that “the best way to find out if we had second-class citizens and what their plight was, would be to become one of them” (9), but there was critique of Griffin’s transformation from a white to a black man; critics attacked Griffin’s lack of authority. Furthermore, it was considered by some “little more than a novelty book that put off many blacks because its very premise tended to mistake the black stigma for the entire black experience” (Steele 54). How could a white man change his skin pigmentation and then attempt to tell the story of life as a black man in the South? While changing roles brings Mailer closer to his subject and follows the tenets of the emerging New Journalism, concerns arise about his authority.

Mailer was neither a perennial anti-war demonstrator nor an active member of the New Left, so his marching and his arrest are essentially a temporary, assumed role for him. From such a position, how can he tell the inside story of the activists of the anti-war movement? And what does it mean for the movement and those represented that Mailer situates himself in the middle of what should be “their story”? Mailer seems to unite their story with his own, and we will discuss the complexities of this further.

It’s also important to ask what it means to address people who weren’t there. Mailer has a profound responsibility to tell the full story, to historicize it faithfully for those who weren’t present. It is a pressing duty to try to capture a historic event in literary terms, and to try to
address those contemporary and future readers whose experience of the event might lay only in brief media reports or historical accounts. This remains the only nonfiction novel to focus on the March on the Pentagon, so Mailer’s story still dominates.

Mailer makes gestures to eschew a single dominant authorial perspective by reprinting excerpts from the mass media, trying to distance himself as author from Mailer the character, and by diversifying this Mailer character, thus producing many Mailers. Mailer writes uniquely from both a first-person and a third-person limited perspective, following the exploits of the protagonist, whether for reasons of honesty, vanity, or comedy Mailer becomes a single character named variously as the Ruminant, the Beast, the Existentialist, the Historian, the General, the Participant, the Protagonist, the Novelist, and Mailer, Prince of Bourbon. These diverse personalities “attest[] to the diversity of his behavior, to the fact that all along he is at will improvising identities the better to accommodate himself to the multifariousness of American society” (Whalen-Bridge, “Norman” 224). Norman Mailer seems always to keep his diverse audience in mind as he frames the story, whether he takes the first or third person stance. Malini Johar Schueller argues that Mailer “question[s] the autonomy of [his] own voice . . . [and] decent[ers] [his] own voice” in an attempt to oppose “dominant culture” (5). In order to avoid becoming an authoritarian (as he considered the mass media to be), Mailer took steps to include multiple media accounts of the march, and we will discuss how Mailer works to discredit these accounts. Furthermore, although many critics believe Mailer distances himself by discussing his actions in the third person, frankly, moving from first to third person is not a great leap towards objectivity. Whether Mailer couches the events in first person or third person, we understand it is ultimately always Mailer the author who is crafting the narrative.
Although Mailer brings in differing perspectives, one must keep in mind that this is essentially only one person’s experience of an event attended by tens of thousands of people. Mailer’s cannot be the whole story, although Mailer sometimes writes as if it were. To address those who were not there is in a sense to say “I am an expert,” or to claim “since I was there, I have earned the right to translate it for you” and to insist that history is somehow refracted intact through the author’s memories and biases; in writing *The Novel as History*, Mailer takes such liberties. Why should readers listen to his story? Mailer is really relying on basic element of rhetorical appeal, his ethos (earned from his actual time at the march, his previous anti-war writing, and the strength of his nonfiction storytelling) to establish himself as the dominant voice from the march.

Throughout the story we are invested in “the self as the point of entry into political truth” (Miller, “No Success” 381), but it does not have to be exclusively Mailer’s self. His character also represents a proxy self through which readers may insert themselves into the fray of the march and subsequent demonstrations, a common literary device. Furthermore, the nonfiction novel makes this possible differently than in a fictional context. In this nonfiction milieu, it is more than the character of Mailer with which readers can make ready connections. Readers may become what Daniel Lehman calls “implicated readers”: they are more invested and involved than the ideal or the implied reader (4). Lehman’s theory is that in nonfiction novels readers read “over the edge” of the page and become more invested because the story possesses the same reality as their own lives. Implicated readers associate with their own existence outside the text. If *Armies* readers’ interest spills over the edges of the narrative, they would come up against their own (mis)conceptions of the anti-war movement.
Mailer could be called an “implicated author,” for though he is well within the bounds of the story, he is also positioned outside the text. He mixes narration, internal monologue, and dialogue, allowing for a dynamic change of perspectives:

He could hear the sound of his own voice, and it offended him. It seemed weak, plaintive . . . so he shut up.

A silence.

‘You know, Norman,’ said Lowell in his fondest voice, ‘Elizabeth and I really think you’re the finest journalist in America.’

Mailer knew Lowell thought this—Lowell had even sent him a postcard once to state the enthusiasm. But the novelist had been shrewd enough to judge that Lowell sent many postcards to many people. (Mailer, Armies 20-21)

In this exchange with Robert Lowell, it is evident that Mailer narrates and also embodies the narrative. Robert Scholes defines this as a “double perspective,” which is seen in other works of New Journalism such as The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, where Tom Wolfe’s stance ranges from “strong empathy” to “detached skepticism” (Hollowell 132). Similarly, Mailer’s double perspective on the anti-war movement is a main theme of Armies.

Mailer picks up on another feature of New Journalism in which authors reach out to their readers through their own imperfect humanity by placing themselves, flaws and all, within the story. Like Hunter Thompson, Mailer builds intimacy with his readers as he discusses the defects of his character, one of which is his social awkwardness. In this instance, Mailer watches himself at a cocktail party: “boldness, attacks of shyness, rude assertion, and circumlocutions tortured as arthritic fingers working at lace, all took their turn with him, and these shuttling of moods became most pronounced in their resemblance to the banging and shunting of freight cars. . . . He therefore exerted himself to push up a synthetic exaggerated sweetness of manner” (Armies 17).

Early in the book, Mailer presents his fears and faults so that a reader soon grows quite intimate with and forgiving of the “many internal contradictions of the quotidian Mailer, having enjoyed
the humor and candor with which he has, however calculatedly, exposed his own foibles to public scrutiny. And given the tendency for omniscience to engender forgiveness, when the Beast reveals himself at the Ambassador theatre the evening before the march, one understands and accepts” (Wenke 145). Shrewd readers are critical of such generous honesty in a narrator. Yet, Mailer’s self-revelation in this New Journalistic style almost inevitably builds sympathy for the Mailer who will later lead us through the March on the Pentagon, where he is one of the protestors, and allow the reader to believe more of what the Mailer narrator/character reports about the march and his observations of a divided country.

The political divide was so great in America in the late 1960s that Mailer may have felt obliged to explain one faction to another, to use The Armies of the Night as a didactic tool; he was teaching about a counterculture, from which many Americans were insulated. Scott MacFarlane measures the social turmoil of the times “at a level unseen since the Civil War. The book reading public was clamoring for insight into what was happening on the streets of America” (MacFarlane 133). Armies was a new window onto the anti-war movement. We will discuss how the mainstream media kept Americans in the dark about the anti-war movement. Readers were witness to Mailer’s own perspective of the counterculture which was not always exhortative: “It was the children in whom Mailer had some hope, a gloomy hope. These mad middle-class children with their lobotomies from sin, their nihilistic embezzlement of all middle-class moral funds, their innocence, their lust for apocalypse, their unbelievable indifference to waste” (Armies 34). Mailer does not form saints out of the anti-war camp, and one could not accuse Mailer of being an outright defender of the counterculture. But through his intimate sketches of the activists and his own experience as a fellow marcher, we do see images of
greatness, of self-sacrifice and patriotism. Most importantly, our narrator/protagonist was able to give Americans outside the march a sense of what it was to be a demonstrator.

At the crux of the novel is the division of the demonstrators from the ranks of police and government representatives sent to regulate the march. Mailer delineates each group’s view of the other in succinct terms:

The demonstrators, all too conscious of what they consider the profound turpitude of the American military might in Asia, are prepared (or altogether unprepared) for any conceivable brutality here [at the Pentagon protest]. On their side, the troops have listened for years to small-town legends about the venality, criminality, filth, corruption, perversion, addiction, and unbridled appetites of that mysterious group of city Americans referred to . . . [as] hippies . . . the troops do not know whether to expect a hairy kiss on their lips or a bomb between their knees. Each side is coming face to face with its own conception of the devil! (Armies 255-56)

Though the media worked to separate the “establishment” from the demonstrators, Mailer was particularly concerned with engaging the clichéd images each faction had of the other. In discussing these stereotypes, he piques the stereotypes in his readers’ minds. In case the marchers seemed a faceless mass, Mailer looks for the individuality within what most of America at the time would have see as “a bunch of hippies.” Mailer illustrates the diversity within the anti-war movement, noting how students and faculty representing universities from across the country were a part of the march. Mailer recalls the demonstrators as “a citizen’s army not ranked yet by height, an army of both sexes in numbers almost equal, and of all ages, although most were young. Some were well-dressed, some were poor, many were conventional in appearance. . . . The hippies were there in great number . . . many dressed like the legions of Sgt. Pepper’s Band” (Armies 91). Politically the marchers were also diverse: groups at the march ranged the Leftist gamut, from Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), Women Strike for Peace, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), American Friends Service Committee, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and many other groups who joined together under the
auspices of the National Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam and worked together on the
march (Mailer, *Armies* 94).

Mailer reports on the stressed relationship between the protesters and soldiers, bringing the
reader to a dramatic scene late in the evening in the darkness on the Pentagon green: “The U.S.
Army looking out on a field of fires heard demonstrators talking in low voices, ‘Why do you stay
in uniform? Do you like the helmet on your head, is that it? Do you like obeying officers you
hate? Join us. We have everything. Look. We are free. We have pot, we have food we share, we
have girls. Come over to us, and share our girls’” (*Armies* 270). Mailer stands the hawk vs. dove
positions in sharp relief when featuring such an interaction between the marchers and the
soldiers. However, he also reveals the fracture between men and women in the anti-war
movement—woman were subservient to the men, who could offer them as sexual tokens. The
women in this transaction are objects like food and pot. Women were a powerful part of the anti-
war movement, as Mailer observes that in the masses of protesters men and women were there in
equal number. And we will witness how the women were singled out for abuse at this
demonstration; Tom Wells writes in *The War Within* that though “many activists were clubbed
by U.S. marshals—women apparently bore the brunt of their anger” (202-3). In the face off
between the marchers and soldiers that Mailer captures, it appears women were the sacrificial
lambs.

Mailer doesn’t just focus on the differences; he also addresses the connections between
two seemingly opposed factions, the MP’s sent to “protect” the Pentagon and the protesters out
to invade it: “the rhetoric of the Left had been consistent in referring to these troops as innocent
victims of the military machine, and there is the real possibility that some fraction of the soldiers
may have been secretly sympathetic to the demonstrators” (*Armies* 256). If Mailer proposes that
the soldiers could be swayed by the commitment of the demonstrators then he opens the door to the reader, who might also be open-minded about the message of the anti-war movement. In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer seems to thrive on the challenge of his material, and Joseph Tabbi contends that “to negotiate a path of communication that would bridge the gap and liberate the energies contained within a polarized society had become perhaps the primary political motivation for Mailer as an author” (246). Mailer uses the energy found in the confrontation between the establishment vs. the counterculture, the military vs. the marchers, and the hawks vs. doves, and redirects it to fuel a narrative which might lead to greater understanding between groups.

Mailer links the lives of these disparate groups. This is most clear when young protesters face young MP’s at the Pentagon; he observes how even the government saw the danger of such a relationship: “Now soldiers were being rotated rapidly, sometimes by the half-hour—no relationship between troops and soldiers was permitted to grow” (*Armies* 269). Jerry Rubin, an organizer and participant of the march, recalls that the soldiers and the marchers “grew up in the same country, and we’re about the same age. We’re really brothers” (79). The marchers and their concern for and connection to the soldiers at home and abroad epitomizes the purpose of their demonstration at the seat of American military power. Mailer also writes about the meaning of drugs to students and soldiers alike: “a peace pipe was passed. It was filled with hashish. Soon the demonstrators were breaking out marijuana, handing it back and forth, offering it even to the soldiers here and there. The army after all had been smoking marijuana since Korea, and in Vietnam—by all reports—were gorging on it” (*Mailer, Armies* 263). Here Mailer finds another connection between the marchers and the soldiers at the Pentagon and the soldiers in Vietnam. A metaphorical peace pipe is passed between those in the anti-war movement and those soldiers
that ostensibly need the drug to anesthetize themselves to the effects of the war. Mailer attempts to tie the marchers to American soldiers marching and fighting in Vietnam. If the marchers were as committed to the country as the soldiers, then images of patriotism could be invoked in regard to the anti-war demonstrators, who had been painted as disloyal and even treasonous by critics.

The dialogue or debate between protesters and soldiers may have been revelatory to Mailer’s middle-class readers—allowing readers disconnected from or cynical of the anti-war movement to look inside the struggle. So, in this story both protestors and foot soldiers begin to have real profiles and complexities. Mailer’s comparison of the two groups brought credence to the anti-war movement. When his readers are able to liberate the demonstrators from the catchall image of “hippie” or “rabble rouser,” the urgency of the anti-war movement’s message of peace could be evaluated on its own terms.

It is difficult for the quieter acts of protest (like a marcher steadfastly holding up a placard denouncing LBJ) to be heard amid the voices of the powerful who had easy access to media channels. One of the most compelling voices deriding the demonstrators was the President. *Armies*’ reprinting of President Lyndon Johnson’s censure situates the government’s anti-war propaganda alongside the many opposing experiences of the demonstrators themselves. Mailer reports President Johnson’s pointed comments about the march:

> I know that all Americans share my pride in the man in uniform and the civilian law enforcement personnel for their outstanding performance in the nation’s capital during the last two days. They performed with restraint, firmness and professional skill. Their actions stand in sharp contrast to the irresponsible acts of violence and lawlessness by many of the demonstrators. (*Armies* 285)

The assumption “that all Americans share my pride” might not be made by Mailer’s readers, for they have read about military/police action, which was neither outstanding nor commendable. In contrast to the many cases of vicious police and military violence perpetrated against the protesters (which the readers have experienced via their narrator/protagonist), the President’s
comments seem deceptive and propagandistic. In fact, the President received great support for coming out against the protesters; specifically, Mailer points to the fact that “Lyndon Johnson stood ten percentage points higher in the popularity polls—he had ridden the wave of revulsion in America against demonstrators who spit in the face of U.S. troops” (Armies 286). It was politically expedient to castigate anti-war protestors because American public opinion was so easily turned against the anti-war camp: “from late 1967 into 1968 when Mailer wrote this book, open season on the ‘hippie’ had been tacitly declared” (MacFarlane 131).

One of Mailer’s main tasks as an author is to acquaint his readers with the character of the marchers themselves, so a primary concern of The Armies of the Night is media bias as it affected the American public’s sentiments about the acts of resistance happening all around them—though the image of the anti-war movement events and the frequency of coverage was mediated by the mainstream press. But the mainstream press was hawkish: before the Tet Offensive in January of 1968, “not a single major newspaper or television network call[ed] for the end to the war” (Streitmatter, Voices 197). In fact, the mainstream media plainly opposed the anti-war effort “in the heady days early in the war when American correspondents doubled as government handmaidens, they openly condemned anti-war protesters as traitors” (Streitmatter, Mightier 201). This was the atmosphere in which Mailer attempted to tell a moving tale of the anti-war movement.

Mailer’s critique of the media begins with Mailer’s reaction to his own press coverage. Mailer opens the novel with Time magazine’s unflattering report of himself at the Ambassador Theater; after the excerpt Mailer writes, “Now we may leave Time in order to find out what happened” (Armies 4), inferring that his own version of the story is more reliable. Mailer did not disguise his general disregard for the press; he upbraids reporters not only for their inaccuracy
but also for their insensitivity: “One came to live with the recognition that the average reporter
could not get a sentence straight if it were phrased more subtly than his own mind could make
phrases. Nuances were forever being munched like peanuts” (Armies 66). The very genre Mailer
chose, New Journalism, suggests going beyond traditional reporting.

Mailer had another reason to renounce conventional journalism: he didn’t trust the media
to analyze the anti-war movement fairly. Media studies of the time show that “throughout the
various stages of escalating involvement, mainstream American journalists supported the effort,
serving as exuberant cheerleaders for the military” (Streitmatter, Voices 184). Mailer frequently
points out the unfair coverage that the press gave to the actions of the demonstrators and how
“emphasis was put on every rock thrown, and a count was made of the windows broken. (There
were, however only a few.) But there was no specific mention of The Wedge [a brutal crowd
control technique, which resulted in beating of the marchers]. Indeed, stories [of police brutality]
quickly disappeared” (Armies 285). This becomes evident as Mailer distinguishes the reporting
of mainstream press from that of the alternative press. The alternative press (such as the Catholic
Worker, I.F. Stone’s Weekly, National Guardian, and Ramparts) was critical of the war going
back in some cases to the 1950’s when troops were first deployed to Vietnam (Streitmatter,
Voices 184).

The mass media presented anti-war protestors as interlopers. Jimmy Breslin’s coverage for
the New York Herald Tribune, while mostly evenhanded concerning the message of the protest,
was critical of the protesters who stayed late at the Pentagon:

The mob on the grass in front of the soldiers began chanting. ‘Hold that line, hold
that line.’

There was no humor to it. These were not the kind of kids who were funny. These
were the small core of dropouts and drifters and rabble who came to the front of
what had started out as a beautiful day, one that would have had meaning to it.
They turned a demonstration for peace, these drifters in raggedy clothes, into a
sickening, club-swinging mess. At the end of the day, the only concern anybody could have was for the soldiers who were taking the abuse. (Mailer, *Armies* 260)

Although Breslin contextualizes his criticisms by emphasizing it was only a small percentage of the marchers who were militant (a few hundred out of the estimated 35,000 demonstrators at the Pentagon), he is still forgiving of the violence done to the protesters by the military.

One of the most damning charges in the book is the brutality perpetrated against the marchers, who were for the most part peacefully protesting; some protestors “had been clubbed until they were broken and bloody” (Zaroulis and Sullivan 138). The abuse was amplified by the fact that it often went unreported. Mailer foregrounds the fact that “charges of brutality came from eyewitness accounts which described the ferocity with which Marshals and soldiers went to work on [the protesters]” (*Armies* 272). For the reports of police violence, Mailer relied upon outside sources because he had been arrested early in the demonstration before most of the violence occurred. Yet he gains credibility when integrating outside witnesses and reports into a book that was mostly reported from his standpoint, and these external sources may have lent more authority to the charge that protesters were abused. It must be noted that for any journalist there was difficulty in covering something as large as the march on the Pentagon: “because of the extensive terrain in question and the rapid movements of the protestors and soldiers” (Small 72).

In some instances, Mailer does not specify the media source he is referencing, perhaps implying how one source was meant to stand in for many mainstream sources, but he seems to focus on Leftist accounts of the march, perhaps because they had the most detailed reports of the violence. In one segment, Mailer draws from the *Washington Free Press*:

Suddenly, the troops which had been in single rows in front of the crowd formed into a wedge. . . . Their tactic apparently was to split the group [of protesters] in two and force them to move back. No explanation was given for the sudden action. Paddy wagons rolled up, soldiers with tear gas guns appeared among the troops. . . . Slowly the wedge began to move in on people. With bayonets and rifle butts, they moved first on the girls in the front line, kicking them, jabbing at them again and
again with the guns, busting their heads and arms to break the chain of locked arms. The crowd appealed to the paratroopers to back off, to join them, to just act human. (*Armies* 272-73)

It’s vital for Mailer to illustrate the chaos and brutality that met these acts of peaceful civil disobedience so that the American public could understand the deleterious actions of its police forces as well as the risk these marchers were willing to take in the name of peace.

Acting as a novelist-journalist, Mailer collects varied media accounts of the march and weaves them into the narrative; here he features one Leftist perspective of the march, identifying the witness as “Harvey Mayes of the English Department at Hunter”:

One soldier spilled the water from his canteen on the ground in order to add to the discomfort of the female demonstrator at his feet. She cursed him—understandably, I think—and shifted her body. She lost her balance and her shoulder hit the rifle at the soldier’s side. He raised the rifle, and with its butt, came down hard on the girl’s leg. The girl tried to move back but was not fast enough to avoid the billy-club of a soldier in the second row of the troops. At least four times the soldier hit her with all his force. (*Armies* 276)

Mailer was obliged to portray the graphic scenes from the march which were missing in many media reports. Perhaps the stories of abuse were reported on more by the Left media because the Left journalists were among the protestors, down in the tussle, while mainstream reporters observed from a safe distance, avoiding a potential encounter with violent police.

Mailer also gave accounts of “the [mainstream] press [who were], in the aftermath, antagonistic to the March” and so included passages of an article from *The New York Times* which stated that “it is difficult to report publicly the ugly and vulgar provocation of many of the militants. They spat on some of the soldiers in the front line at the Pentagon and goaded them with the most vicious personal slander. . . . Many officials here are surprised that there was not much more violence” (*Armies* 285). Notice that the *Times* does not mention any specific violence of the MP’s. Numerous commentators condemned not the beatings meted out to the demonstrators, but the protest itself; David Brinkley called it a “course, vulgar episode” (Wells
202-3). Maurice Isserman, one marcher, remembers the marchers for the most part as peaceful remaining “pretty true to Gandhian principles” (B15).

Throughout the text, Mailer works to demonstrate the biases in both the mainstream press and Leftist media:

Each side would claim a great victory for its own principles, the press would be naturally on the side of authority (although much which was favorable to the other side would be leaked) and the Left Wing and underground press and word of mouth would be sure to distort, enrich, ennable, purify, and finally transpose the real history of the events to their own need. (Armies 266)

In revealing the shortcomings in the Leftist media, Mailer grows in esteem as a less biased observer. Overall, however, he spends more time revealing the biased accounts in the mainstream media, perhaps because these were the images captured for the world to see, whereas the Leftist media reached far fewer readers.

Mailer is unwilling to let the picture that the mainstream press drew of demonstrators become the only permanent record, and “he scolded the press for their lies, and their misrepresentations, for their guilt in creating a psychology over the last twenty years in the average American which made wars like Vietnam possible” (Armies 79). Mailer understands that the press is pivotal in a nation’s critique of its culture and policies, and he takes the press to task for their failure to cultivate an informed public. While collecting various outside reports of what went on at the Pentagon protest, Mailer inserts himself as a consumer of mainstream media reports of police violence:

That same newspaper story had quoted a Pentagon spokesman’s reaction to charges of brutality by Pentagon marchers: ‘We feel,’ said the spokesman, ‘our action is consistent with objectives of security and control faced with varying levels of dissent.’ Consistent with objectives of security and control! levels of dissent! . . . The spokesman was speaking in totalitarianese . . . which succeeds in stripping itself of any moral content. (Armies 284)
Mailer takes this opportunity to answer back to the autocratic government voice, a voice which was thunderous and far-reaching because it had the power of the press and the credibility of authority behind it.

In looking beyond Mailer’s collection of media accounts of the march, it is clear that he wasn’t exaggerating the bias against anti-war activists. The *New York Times* reported that Robert McNamara felt his soldiers showed “restraint . . . under provocation” (Reston 1), and in one article the protesters were referred to as “scum of the universe” (Roberts 45); another report called the demonstration “mass paranoia[. . .] elicit[ing] a great deal of foolishness” (Baker 45). What the press wrote about the protestors was not always so disparaging, but rarely was the message of the marchers given much time, and this sort of mainstream coverage was the only information readily available to the general public about the anti-war movement. Some of the first reports of the march on and the siege of the Pentagon were missing reports of police violence because the reporters went home late Saturday night before the police began employing more militant tactics. But on Monday in another story of the march the *New York Times* still ignored “the bloody military sweep of early Sunday morning” (Small 76); *The Washington Post’s* Monday coverage was similar in that it “continued to emphasize the violence of the protestors, not the defenders of the Pentagon” (Small 78). *Time* came out with its story a few days after the march on October 27 in which they marginalized the protestors as “left-wing radicals, hippies, acid heads, and people with painted faces in bizarre costumes” while at the same time “applaud[ing] the government for its restraint” (Small 79-80).

During their time in jail, Mailer shows how the protestors respond to being misconceived in the major media. While imprisoned overnight, Mailer and fellow marchers were read newspaper accounts of their resistance in the Sunday papers, and their overwhelming reaction to
the supposed news is “Bullshit!” (Mailer, Armies 201)—hardly an objective reply, but a heartfelt reaction to their misrepresentation in the paper. Mailer sounds a similar cry as he explains how “the mass media which surrounded the March on the Pentagon created a forest of inaccuracy which would blind the efforts of an historian; our novel has provided us with the possibility, no, even the instrument to view our facts and conceivably study them in that field of light” (Armies 219). The novel acted as an “instrument” to parse the eyewitness accounts of marchers from the newspaper stories which seemed to have an agenda to invalidate the marchers and the significance of the march.

Eventually, Mailer’s Armies would stand with media accounts as a record of the event. Before Armies was published as a book in 1968, it appeared in periodicals (almost the whole issues of Harper’s and Commentary were given over to this story). So he responded to the mass media’s “forest of inaccuracy” first in popular periodicals and then in book form. A contemporary review in the Saturday Review claimed that Armies was “probably the truest picture we have of what has been happening in America,” a testimony to both Mailer’s documentary and literary talent (Resnik 25). And according to Dick Fontaine, a British filmmaker who was filming a documentary of Mailer over the weekend of the march, “Norman remembered, with frightening accuracy, minutes and minutes, pages and pages, of the dialogues he was having with the others, let alone, of course, the brilliant descriptions of time, place and mood. . . . His memory and interpretations of [these events] are truly breathtaking.” This speaks well of Mailer’s journalistic sensibilities and his hope to avoid a forest of inaccuracies himself. To this end, it’s important to recall that Armies won a Polk Award for excellence in journalism. Vogelgesang believes Mailer’s version of the events has stood the test of accuracy and time: “Future historians must consult Norman Mailer’s The Armies of the Night to understand how and
why the American Intellectual Left moved to ‘resistance’ against Johnson’s Vietnam War and, in fact, to comprehend the radicalized intellectual consciousness of the 1960s” (131). Mailer’s novel serves as a time capsule of this tumultuous era in American politics.

Despite the many inaccuracies in the mainstream press about the protestors, the marchers needed the media to ensure that their demonstration was witnessed around the world. Mailer understood the concept that the “protest movements depend upon the interest they arouse in the mass media. . . . Active civil disobedience was therefore essential to give glamour and publicity to the demonstration—a page-one story for Washington must instead become a page-one story for the world. . . . [and then] the peace movement would seem far from subsiding into the tapestry” (*Armies* 232-33). Mailer positions his book as a vehicle to further the demonstrators’ message. He undertakes his own civil disobedience, getting arrested in hopes of gaining publicity and offering credence to the cause of the march, and he understands that his symbolic action must be captured by the press to multiply its effect.

In the second part of the book, Mailer takes the readers where no reporters could go—inside the prison walls. In a minimum security prison in rural Virginia, we see the sacrifices the protesters make, giving up freedom and some measure of comfort as well as enduring unfair sentencing and fines. Would Mailer’s arrest win respect from his reader, perhaps piquing readers to dissent in their own lives? If the readers need to see even greater sacrifice, Mailer presents the Quaker contingent. Mailer contrasts his own time in prison, which he described in all its boring detail, with the more desperate and extended conditions of the Quakers’ time in prison. Mailer illuminates the inhumane treatment of some of the Quaker demonstrators, who by refusing to vow not to return to the Pentagon for six months as a condition of their release from prison, ended up staying in prison for much longer than the other protesters and under far worse
conditions: “They lived in cells so small that not all could lie down at once to sleep. For a day they lay naked [they refused prison clothes and so were stripped of their own] on the floor, for many days naked with blankets and mattress on the floor. For many days they . . . [would] not eat nor drink” (Mailer, Armies 287). These details most surely affect the conscience of his readers. The treatment the Quakers endured contradicts the cherished conceptions of how citizens were to be treated in an American democracy. Their conditions constituted cruel and unusual punishment and a deprivation of their right to due process.

Mailer is able to designate the marchers as patriots, a far cry from the criticism that labeled them “draft dodgers,” “communists,” and “rabble rousers.” In contrast, Mailer describes draft resisters as moral and courageous: “by handing in their draft cards, these young men were committing their future either to prison, emigration, frustration, or at best, years where everything must be unknown, and that spoke of a readiness to take moral leaps . . . [and a] faith in one’s ability to react with grace” (Armies 74). Draft dodgers are recast as draft resisters, those willing to risk their lives for peace rather than war. And does it prick the conscience of readers who wonder what moral leaps they themselves are willing to take?

Furthermore, Mailer aligns the march itself with America’s long tradition of ostensibly just and triumphant empire-building conflict. He describes the March on the Pentagon as a rite of passage and connects this to a collection of American moments that could be understood as similar rites of passage, for “each generation of Americans had forged their own rite, in the forest of the Alleghenies and the Adirondacks, at Valley Forge, at New Orleans in 1812, with Rogers and Clark or at Sutter’s Mill, at Gettysburg, the Alamo, the Klondike, the Argonne, Normandy, Pusan” (Mailer, Armies 280). Such a comparison implies that without undergoing such crises the U.S. would not have become a sovereign republic, and so the March on the Pentagon is figured
as another historic challenge for the country. This lofty rhetoric is meant to stir a reader’s patriotic sympathies, and Mailer is determined that his audience will see the marchers not as subversives but as patriots within the traditions of American democracy. Mailer himself was following in the footsteps of writers like Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King, Jr. who defied the government and went to jail for their principles.

Mailer venerates the March on the Pentagon and argues for its inclusion beside these historic American events because “it came to the spoiled children of a dead de-animalized middle class who had chosen most freely, out of incomprehensible mysteries of moral choice, to make an attack and then hold a testament before the most authoritative embodiment of the principle that America was right” (Armies 280). Mailer glorified the idea of dissent, counting protestors as veterans of a moral war. “The battle that the book records ends in defeat, or at best, a stand-off” as the book closes with hundreds of protestors imprisoned and many others recovering from their beatings, and “yet the book sings with triumph” (Fremont-Smith 41). What is the triumph? Is it the fact that the story has been told, or that the message was heard even in the sanitized halls of the Pentagon and the insulated walls of the White House?

By telling of the physical abuse of the marchers and the Quakers’ dire prison circumstances, he not only gains sympathy for peace protestors but also raises the ante on the reader, asking, “What are you willing to do for peace?” Mailer wonders what the Quaker toll means for America: “the end of the March took place in the isolation in which these last pacifists suffered naked in freezing cells, and gave up prayers for penance, then who was to say they were not saints? And who’s to say that the sins of America were not by their witness a tithe remitted?” (Armies 287). By including stories of “saintly” Quakers, quiet marchers, and combative protesters, Mailer describes a series of activist identities for readers to consider. Mailer suggests
that those in the anti-war movement were far more heroic than Americans who called themselves patriots while blindly supporting an unjust war in Vietnam. He seems to point to these dedicated peace activists as saviors of the American soul—intimating the force of their protest could presumably counteract the brutality of the war in Vietnam.

Mailer understood that “to affect consciousness is thus to shape power” and that his words were shaping people’s perception of the anti-war movement (Mailer, “Existential” 202). Just the reading of Armies was a form of empowerment, for his story “met a common need among American intellectuals to clarify identity through confrontation, whether physical or spiritual” (Vogelgesang 133). The book represented an opportunity for people to raise both their consciousness and their fists. If his readers were persuaded to believe in a peaceful resolution to the Vietnam War, what would these readers do with this new consciousness, a consciousness which was “itself a central ingredient in power” (Miller, “No Success” 394)? It is difficult to measure how the readers enacted their power, but we can watch how Mailer enacts his own. When writing the story of The Armies of the Night, Mailer tracks his own movement from critic to supporter to war protester to prisoner of conscience, and we see that he “feels the claims of imagination as urgently as the claims of action” (Behar 262), and so he must both examine and act.

For Mailer, Armies represents a test of his moral strength, an examination of whether Mailer could stand behind his highest moral principles. The story of Armies offers a way for Mailer to put his philosophy into action and to answer the question, Are you willing to put your life on the line? David Wyatt calls Mailer “a man so obsessed by courage” which is a persistent theme in Mailer’s famous essay “The White Negro” (1957) (318). In many ways Armies is tied to all of Mailer’s preceding writing. The most obvious connection is to Why Are We in Vietnam?
(1967), but the themes and challenges of *Armies* also are also indebted to *Cannibals and Christians* (1966) and *The Presidential Papers* (1963); these books variously tested the warrior in Mailer. Even his first book, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), plays a role in the conception of *Armies*; Mary Dearborn claims that *Armies* is a recapitulation of his first novel bringing up questions of “confrontation with and the reaction to authority” (244). In *Armies* Mailer’s critique of structures of power and his own civil disobedience stood in clear defiance of authoritarian establishments, the same authoritarian establishments which thwarted characters in his previous texts. Mailer’s working out of his own demons in this journey from author to activist was also meant to engage the hearts and minds of his readers in the important business of opening their eyes to the truth about the war in Vietnam. But it is not just a story about Mailer or the many Mailer characters; rather, Mailer serves as an entry to the predicament of the war in Vietnam and a people’s various ways to protest it.

Mailer finds the need for understanding between the two halves of America pressing and hopes that his narrative would span the chasm, writing that “the two halves of America were not coming together, and when they failed to touch, all of history might be lost in the divide. Yes, there was a dark night if you had the illusion you could do something about it, and the conviction that not enough had been done” (*Armies* 177). The conviction that more could be done is the germ of the novel itself; Mailer’s own conscience was awakened amid the action and dedication of anti-war activists. As Mailer moves from observer and skeptic to supporter and activist, we see the novel grow organically out of Mailer’s transformative experience over the weekend in Washington, D.C.; essentially, the case for political action is made as Mailer becomes more and more committed to the anti-war cause throughout the story. Mailer’s personal experience is as essential to the story’s meaning as Walt Whitman’s personal observations were to his writing:
“The Armies of the Night is just as brilliant a personal testimony as Whitman’s diary of the Civil War, *Specimen Days*, and Whitman’s great essay on the crisis of the Republic during the Gilded Age, *Democratic Vistas*. I believe that it is a work of personal and political reportage that brings to the inner and developing crisis of the United States at this moment admirable sensibilities, candid intelligence, the most moving concern for America itself” (Kazin, *On Native* 26). Mailer took on personally the problems of the nation and placed his own psyche and person on the line to explore the dicey territory of American politics in the late 1960s.

Mailer asks serious questions of his readers, as Alfred Kazin points out, describing him as the first “leading American peacenik and resister addressing urgent questions to his ‘army’—Are we good enough? How can we overcome the ‘mediocrity of the middle-class middle-aged masses of the Left?’ The general shoddiness of American standards just now? The tendency of authorities to lie?” (“The Trouble” BR 1). Mailer artfully places such questions within the framework of a narrative, addressed not only to fellow peaceniks but also to a popular readership. It was important that this novel travel beyond the Left community, and it did. Indeed, *Armies* “reestablished Mailer with a wide audience” (Whalen-Bridge, “Norman” 217) and won both the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction and the National Book Award. And it was gaining a popular audience (a readership made up of more than those on the Left) for this topic that was a challenge for Mailer: “walking the parapet between the intellectual and the popular, and Mailer with his dream of making ‘a revolution in the consciousness of our time’ is too ambitious to settle for a minority ‘art’ audience” (Radford 230). Mailer was ambitious enough to take on the challenge of telling a story that those within the anti-war movement would view as valid and those outside the movement would give a fair hearing.
Mailer admits early in the story his growing belief that his own writing about the Vietnam War was not enough, that “no project had seemed to cost him enough,” for his writing was one thing, but action was another. And by simply writing about the Vietnam War “he had been suffering more and more in the past few years from the private conviction that he was getting a little soft, a hint curdled” (Mailer, Armies 58). This may have served as a barb at his audience of readers, among who surely numbered many armchair revolutionaries. To keep from getting soft and to resist being contented with a writer’s perspective he had to move into action himself. He had to actually take part in the demonstrations, to be physically, not just ideologically in opposition to the war, but we are not meant to concentrate solely on Mailer’s own struggle. Rather, from his own story of activism he may effect in his readers a new understanding that through the act of reading one becomes aware, but not yet involved in a cause. Readers might appreciate that having their consciousness raised was not the same as protesting the war in their own communities, not at all the same as stepping out into the streets to form a human protest. One had to move from words to action, from page to protest.

The novel, first in serial and then in book form, was meant to prod the reader to action. In fact, it is specifically the expansiveness of the novel genre that Mailer finds useful towards a moral end. Mailer understood the great potential of the genre: in one interview he contends that “art is to intensify, even, if necessary, to exacerbate the moral consciousness of people. In particular, I think the novel is at its best the most moral of the art forms because it’s the most immediate, the most overbearing. . . It is the most inescapable” (Mailer, Advertisements 384). Did Mailer’s readers find his story inescapable, and if so, were they catalyzed to protest the war themselves? The answer cannot be easily quantified. We can, however, study the way in which Norman Mailer tried to activate readers. In his review of Armies, Willie Morris, the editor of
Harper’s, praises the irrepressible verisimilitude of the novel: “Mailer’s account of the Washington march transcends the event itself and becomes a living and human entity” (15). Critics picked up on this hunger of Mailer’s to make change, his “extra-literary hunger for things to change and change now, in palpable ways rather than in the imaginary, alternative ways in which most artist-novelists deal” (Gilman 27). This book is not only a testimony of civil disobedience but also a story which aims to engender civil disobedience in the reader.

In a nonfiction novel such as Armies, the story can take on very real manifestations which could lead to political action on the part of the reader. After reading, a reader could take measure of their own (in)action regarding the war and choose to act out against the war. Such action is difficult to trace, but in the case of Armies, Rubin claims the novel “became the Bible of the movement” (Manso 461); Dearborn suggests that “young leftists found it an astute analysis and were impressed by the passion Mailer brought to the work” (246). However, Michael Albert and Noam Chomsky, both major figures in the anti-war movement, didn’t feel that it made much of an impact within the movement. Albert recalls “honestly, I doubt if anyone I knew or virtually anyone in the movement read it, even I didn't. My guess would be it had [a] very very modest impact on a rather narrow audience of professionals - very little among the broad populace, and virtually none inside the movement per se.” While it’s unclear whether it affected those within the movement, it’s also difficult to tell how it affected readers just becoming acquainted with the peace movement. Dearborn indicates that those outside the movement were touched by the novel: “across the political spectrum, readers who watched the student movement with varying degrees of approval or censure were made to understand that what was going on in the streets... was a real phenomenon that had to be taken extremely seriously” (246). Furthermore, the Pulitzer and National Book Award which were awarded the novel are a sort of establishment
seals of approval—proof it had reached middle America. Contemporary reviewers were generous with their praise with the *London Magazine* calling him “the best living writer of English prose” (Bergonzi 100). Others saw *Armies* as a monumental book, “a literary act whose significance is certain to grow” (Gilman 27). One way the book could live on was through the re(actions) of its readers.

Wherever the readers stood on the political continuum, *Armies* invited readers to justify events in the book with their real lives; it allowed for “reading history over the edge of the text,” which is a combination of “close reading and analysis that allow us to get ‘inside’ the narrative, while at the same time we understand that the narrators and subjects of nonfiction . . . live ‘outside’ the narrative as well” (Lehman 3). This makes for an intense reading experience, especially if the novelist like Mailer uses his skills to capture an already fascinating or contentious event. Mailer in his nonfiction novel was able to “coerce the reader into responding with heightened vision to the upheavals of the 1960s” (Vanderbilt 661). One other factor that might have turned contemporary readers into implicated readers was the timeliness of the book’s release: the march was more than mere history it was a recent event when the book was published just seven months after the event—the controversy over Vietnam still raged on. Mailer’s novel represents a catalyst for social change through its introduction of an anti-war subculture to a popular audience. Mailer speaks candidly about his intentions: “I was trying to bring a consciousness to America about the war in Vietnam. . . . I think the effect of the book was to make resistance to the war in Vietnam a little more human to people who were still supporting the war. So, yes, I think the book did have a political effect. Maybe it tended to strengthen the side opposed to the war in Vietnam” (n.d., 220). Jason Epstein recalls *Armies* as a book “meant to rally or produce a political reaction” (Manso 470); a strong argument
can be made for the fact that Mailer meant to catalyze his readers. He attested to the disorganization and dissension within the anti-war camp, but more vigorously showed the misrepresentation, defamation, and even the physical denigration of the activists. His argument for peace in Vietnam gained stature because he was a bona fide activist for the cause, facing arrest to further the significance of his protest. He was there, present at the march, and authenticated his action by telling the story of the march. *The Armies of the Night* exists as a testament to the anti-war movement and to the efficacy of civil disobedience.

Not only was *Armies* about politics, but the novel stood as a statement of the relationship between literature and politics. To ignore politics as a novelist is an error; Mailer must speak politically, for “the separation of the literary and political horizons is a mute acceptance of the structures through which power is exercised” (Schueller 127). Whether his novel convinced one single person to join the anti-war cause or not, it was a necessary testimony. Simply by representing the happenings of the anti-war movement in narrative form, Mailer made a new current in American politics. Perhaps Mailer understood the inescapability of politics, for as an activist author he could not “dissociate himself from the social contexts through which he speaks” (Schueller 125). His story would be null without its complex entanglement with real political struggle.

A contemporary review of *Armies* in *The Nation* called it “a permanent contribution to our literature—a unique testimony to literary responsiveness and responsibility” (Trachtenberg 702); certainly, Mailer was responding to important political phenomena which had not received sustained literary attention. His writing about the rifts within the tumultuous New Left, the division between Americans for and against the war, and the response of government and the press to the anti-war movement did delineate important political issues that needed to be aired.
Mailer did not shy away from critique of the government or the media or of himself in order to
tell the story of those in the anti-war movement; he seized upon the fledgling genre of New
Journalism in order to fully capture the essence as well as the journalistic facts of this story of
protest. He opened himself up as a vulnerable character inviting readers to make the journey with
him through the philosophies of social justice and the streets of Washington. He did not offer
categorical or easy answers to complex questions about the war. Instead, he introduced many
Americans who weren’t peace activists to the logic and viability of peace in Vietnam.
CHAPTER 6

WOMANISM IN PRACTICE: ALICE WALKER’S THE COLOR PURPLE

Alice Walker is the architect of the philosophy of womanism, a re-crafting of feminism, that would ripple through the Women’s Liberation movement in the early 1980s. While traditional feminism is mostly concerned with sexism, womanism seeks to take action towards equality based on issues of gender, race, economics, culture, nation, and class—these categories hold equal footing for womanists. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, a progenitor of womanism, believes that womanism is a more multifarious answer to the multiple abuses of power; womanism “is more complex than white sexual politics, for it addresses more directly the ultimate question relating to power: how do we share equitably wealth and concomitant power among the races and between the sexes?” (68). In this sense it is womanism, rather than feminism, that seeks greater equality among humanity.

After being active in the Women’s Liberation movement and writing for *Ms.* magazine, Walker produced a womanist novel in *The Color Purple* (1982). *The Color Purple*, in fact, embodies Walker’s ideas of womanism—she created a world where this philosophy comes to life. In the letters of her epistolary novel she demonstrates how women can help each other grow, and how both women and men can reject the strictures of gender roles. Among the many aspects of womanism, Walker depicts the difficulties of attaining healthy female sexual esteem. At the same time, she explores the implications of a lesbian relationship for her protagonist, Celie, who undergoes her own womanist awakening. The book offers not a feminist utopia, as some claim, but a narrative with tenacious and convincing womanist principles.

Although Walker sets forth the definition of womanism in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), which came out a year after *The Color Purple*, much of the writing in the collection was written before and during the composition of *The Color Purple*. In
fact, the majority of the “womanist prose” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* was written in
the 1970s, and much of it was reprinted from Walker’s 1970s articles in *Ms*. The entire womanist
philosophy is brief enough to record here:

1. From womanish. (Opp. Of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A
black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to
female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to
outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more in
greater depth than is considered “good” for one. . . . Responsible. In charge.
Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually.
Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values
tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes
loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and
wholeness of entire people, male and female.

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (Walker, *In Search* xi-xii)

Womanism is Walker’s term for a more evolved and multicultural feminism. Black women
understood their own oppression to be first of all race based. To some, the problems of sex
discrimination paled in comparison to race discrimination. So when it came to understanding
themselves as a disadvantaged minority, they identified with being black before they identified
with being female. Moreover, their subjugation was dual, so any path towards equality would
have to involve both race and gender.

By simply applying the name “womanism” Walker made a significant statement, for
appellations have power. In changing the term from feminism to womanism, black women were
empowered. For black women, feminism dictated, demeaned, demoralized. Womanism offered a
home for black women who were concerned with issues of gender, but not only gender. The
change of name itself was important because black women didn’t have to march under the
banner of feminism. Womanists could disassociate from feminism and all the racism and classism they felt it personified.

With the philosophy of womanism, Walker enunciated the fact that black women were often left out of the strategies of white feminism. By coining the term “womanism” Walker put a name to the anti-feminist sentiment that black women felt. In her 1970 essay Cellestine Ware spells out the reasons that the Women’s Liberation movement was not attracting black women. First of all, black women were worried about being used as a means to an end by white women (and “feminists are perceived as whites before they are seen to be oppressed”) to further their own cause. Black women feared that white women did not sincerely care about the plight of black women. Also, black women were too busy with issues of basic survival--keeping their kids in clothes, navigating the food stamps bureaucracy-- to be concerned with the sometimes distant feminist vision of equal rights (Ware 100).

The novel steps into the feminist debates of the 1970s and early 80s, and it “was written in the midst of an intense examination and critique of the precepts and assumptions of white feminism” (Bealer 23). Walker knew that multiculturalism was essential to feminism, and thus came up with womanism which “is a bulwark not only against sexism, but also against racism . . . racism exists among white women, our potential sisters” (Christian, Black 201). Walker is unafraid to address the rifts between feminists. White women were not seen as sisters but as part of the problem of black women’s oppression. Black women could not forget that they have been historically oppressed and abused by white women, and that white women have been the benefactors of their racial privilege and have advantages that black women do not have. One cannot expect black women to overlook this history and suddenly join together as sisters with white women.
Also at issue was black women’s perception of the feminist movement as “anti-male.” For black women to be anti-male would make them anti-black. So black women saw feminism as disloyal to their race. Black militant politics fostered a unification of black males and females that the Women’s Liberation movement did not. Black women were looking for a movement that would allow them to ally with black men, and the predominantly white women’s liberation was not this movement. In Frances Beal’s 1970 essay “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” she writes, “Black people are engaged in a life and death struggle and the main emphasis of black women must be to combat the capitalist, racist exploitation of black people” (160). Black women were asked to sacrifice their own bid for gender equity for the sake of their race. Womanism allowed black women to attend to issues of race and gender simultaneously. Ware also points out that in the 1970s black women were celebrating racial pride. African Americans were breaking free of the old cultural habit of idealizing white culture. So, for women of color joining a white Women’s Liberation movement was seen as something a little too close to assimilation.

Further separating white from black feminists was the problem that the Women’s Liberation movement was also viewed as being middle class, and thus preoccupied with middle class problems. Most black women’s lives were circumscribed by their poverty. Black women had unique socioeconomic burdens that white women did not address in their liberation movement, like the issue of unwed motherhood. While white women often didn’t work, black women were sometimes the sole breadwinner for her household. While white women were advocating for more independence, black women’s backs were bent from the burdens of their independence. When the white world denied black men decent jobs, black women had to take on jobs outside the home while still managing their own home. And black women had to do it all
while their black men resented them for it. Another point of contention between black and white women that was less apparent was that black women resented that successful black men seemed to favor white women over black women. White women were seen as “taking” the few decent black men in the community.

In the 1960s and 70s feminists of color were being sidelined by the women’s liberation movement. Black feminists of the time recall experiences of being rejected or ignored or objectified by white women [in the Movement]. They felt that feminism was not relevant to their lives as black and primarily working-class women and that white women were insensitive, often insulting and obtuse, about their interests. They suggest that privileged white feminists could focus only on issues of personal concern and were unable to comprehend that, for black feminists, race and class discrimination were as important as sex discrimination. (Breines 9)

Such were the black/white schisms in the feminist movement that Walker was addressing. Walker was looking for a more relevant feminism for black women, and “this novel can be read as Walker’s project for examining the ways in which womanist values both contribute to the revision of old cultural assumptions that delegitimate black women, and help provide nonexclusive ‘womanist’ alternatives to enhance social equity among genders” (Montelaro 15). Rather than bemoan the limits of feminism, she created a womanist intervention. Celie, the novel’s protagonist, takes on “patriarchal constructions of female subjectivity and sexuality and thus makes representation itself a compelling issue for all women, regardless of their ethnicity or sexual orientation” (Abbandonato 1106). Walker made racism a woman’s issue and feminism a black issue. Women, rather than being splintered by their ethnicity, needed to strategically pull together to fight the oppression of the patriarchy.

Even the simple cry of “fight the patriarchy” was lost in translation in the gulf between black and white worlds. The “patriarchy” was paradigmatically different as it was viewed from black and white perspectives. For black women didn’t necessarily see black men as part of the
patriarchy because the patriarchy was profoundly white and racist. In the 1970s, during the time of women’s liberation, there were few black men in positions of power from which they might oppress women. The black patriarchy in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements did not draw the ire of black women because they were disinclined to critique for fear of disturbing the momentum of the movements.

Womanism was not only enmeshed with concerns of race but also with issues of class. Walker writes that a womanist “loves the Folk” (Walker, *In Search* xii). This notion of loving the folk, the common people, is emblematic of the classlessness of womanism. In womanism it’s everyday people who lead the movement. Walker emphasizes the importance of people power by capitalizing the “f” in the Folk. And it’s “the Folk” that Walker uses to express her womanist philosophy: “Walker implies that *The Color Purple* is a fictional representation of what womanism would look like as a lived experience” (Bealer 25). Rather than distancing feminist theory, Walker banks on the power of people’s lives to enchant and inspire her readers. Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos claims that it’s in the novel form “where [Walker’s] ‘womanist’ theory is put into practice” (115). Through the story of Celie and the family and friends who surround her one gets a view of how womanism is meant to work. Walker, a novelist, becomes tantamount to a feminist theorist, but without the theoretical monograph. Walker’s novel, for the layperson may well be more effective than a book of feminist/womanist theory. *The Color Purple* spreads the message of womanism to readers who wouldn’t think of picking up a scholarly journal or book of theory. The reader of *The Color Purple* doesn’t simply ruminate on the theoretical formations of gender inequity but experiences it by engaging with the everyday problems and solutions of womanist philosophy. The novel, following that truism of effective writing, shows rather than tells since Walker “presents an alternative model of instruction, a model based not on direct
address, but indirect, not on the didactic lecture, but the didactic example” (Katz 69). It is much more useful to read a story than to try to digest the sometimes esoteric feminist theory. Walker demonstrates how theory that is narrativized can be as relevant as traditional theory. Rather than writing a manifesto, Walker develops her ideas about womanism novelistically. The narrative in this case is a step beyond womanist philosophy because the philosophy is set into motion.

Barbara Christian maintains that traditional literary theory is restrictive for minority voices: “people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic” (“The Race” 399). Christian says that minorities often tell stories to purvey their theory. And Walker’s political ideas are at their most powerful and most poignant in story form.

Womanism depends on the power of sisterhood. As discussed earlier, sisterhood across race boundaries is complicated. Tension between black and white women is brought to the fore in the novel in Sofia’s altercation with the mayor’s wife, Miss Millie, which lands Sofia in jail and then over a decade of domestic servitude. This demonstrates in tragic terms the oppression of black women by white women. By contrasting the lives of Sofia and Miss Millie, Walker “mak[es] the point that the black women’s destiny, in general, radically differs from her white counterpart’s” (Ogunyemi 76). This is a history of a severed sisterhood. The white woman rejects the black woman as a sister rather than both women aligning and perceiving their similar oppression under the patriarchy. These are the roots of the complex cooperation of black and white women for gender equality.

At the same time The Color Purple extols the merits of sisterhood; it’s a story “about female friendship, about the myriad unsung ways in which beaten women bear up each other’s life” (Gussow 125). Adam Gussow does not just refer to domestic violence but to women who are beaten by living in a patriarchal, classist, homophobic, and racist society. Walker’s story
encompasses the everyday ways that women help lift each other up. Barbara Smith calls *The Color Purple* a “breakthrough in Black literature” citing how “Walker so succinctly names the unnamable: that Black women have at times been brutally and matter-of-factly oppressed by Black men, that they have suffered from sexism as well as from racism, and that Black women’s love for each other has formed the bottom line of our survival” (“Sexual” 170). In the bonds between women Walker highlights workaday feminists. These are not women who are lobbying their senators or marching in the streets, but women who nonetheless take feminist action in their daily lives. By simply supporting each other, these women are womanists. Walker has said that she believes “in women’s bonding as a necessary means of liberation” (Interview 14). Women must stand together as sisters and as examples to one another that there is a way not only to survive but also to triumph over sexist oppression. In one instance of sisterhood, Shug Avery, Mr. _______'s lover, promises not to leave the house until Mr. _______ agrees to stop beating his wife Celie. Shug also supports Mary Agnes (Squeak) in her singing career and offers to give Mary Agnes a place on her stage: “If I bring you before the crowd, they better listen with respect” (Walker, *The Color* 115). In this way Shug shares her confidence and empowers Mary Agnes to have her own stage career. And Mr.________’s abuse cannot kill Celie’s love for her sister Nettie, from whom he has separated her; their sisterhood rises like a phoenix. Celie writes, “I lay there thinking bout Nettie while he on top of me, wonder if she safe” (Walker, *The Color* 12). Although Celie is trapped in an abusive marriage, she nevertheless worries about her sister’s safety with their rapist stepfather. Celie liberates herself through her many relationships with women–through the sexual relationship with Shug, through the mentoring relationship with Sofia, and through the letters to and from her sister. Sisterhood is an elemental part of Walker’s womanist philosophy. Womanism, although founded, fostered, and articulated by black women,
of necessity is a multicultural project. And though the relationship between black and white women is fraught with impediments, “womanism is a perspective open to all humanity” (Phillips xxxvi). A common sisterhood steeped in the awareness of diverse cultures ensures the vitality and relevancy of womanist philosophy.

The novel’s sisterhood is not infallible. Celie is mistreated not only by men but also by women. Fraile-Marcos declares that “oppression for Celie comes always through the actions of men. Women, on the other hand, will be the ones who contribute to her liberation” (121). But Celie is oppressed by Shug at the beginning of their relationship; Shug calls Celie ugly and disrespects her by sleeping with her husband. The women of The Color Purple are not some utopian sisterhood—far from it. For example, Shug uses her sexual potency against two exploited women in the novel when she sleeps with Albert during his first and second marriage. But Shug recognizes her mistake later. Shug recalls with regret how she treated Annie Julia, Mr. ______’s first wife: “Why I hurt her so? I used to keep Albert away from home for a week at a time. She’d come and beg him for money to buy groceries for the children” (Walker, The Color 122). This is Walker’s way of scrutinizing the patriarchal institution of marriage which can pit women against each other. There is plenty of woman-on-woman oppression in the novel, but that makes it more realistic. Because women are not always supportive of each other; sometimes women can be as malicious oppressors as men. This woman-on-woman oppression tests the strength of Walker’s womanist philosophy and illustrates the fault lines that must be addressed among the sisterhood.

Women can be powerful comforters and healers for each other, but sisterhood is good for men as well. Walker “demonstrates how sisterhood among women benefits the entire black community” (Christian, Black 199). After Celie is “mothered” by Shug, her relationship with her
husband improves, and he becomes Albert to her, not some nameless man she calls “Mr. ______.” In the novel, “womanism becomes a means of empowerment for women and contributes to the improvement of both men and women, as well as to the way they relate to one another” (Fraile-Marcos 117). After he begins treating Celie as an equal, Albert finds that he is a more content and thoughtful man. The unification of the whole community is essential to gender equity. Walker represents womanism as a communal enterprise, for it is “interpersonal connection and communal support . . . [that] makes personal freedom possible and, in so doing, [Walker] employs a womanist philosophy to offer a radical revision of the paradigmatic solitary American hero” (Bealer 38). The dual blight of racism and sexism cannot be faced alone. Walker challenges the rugged individualism of America with her more collective, all-inclusive endeavor of womanism. The “ill effects of male domination” can be remedied when men become a part of the womanist commonweal. Moreover, men are freed from an insidious form of repression that masquerades as male privilege, for “the oppression of women is a form of self-oppression” for men (Lemons 107). The fate of womanists is inextricably tied up in male collaboration.

Walker’s womanist philosophy is developed throughout the book, often through the situations and personalities of the characters. For instance, Shug embodies the type of audacious woman Walker advocates in her womanist philosophy. When Mr. ______ is unfortunate enough to suggest that Celie would be the subject of community scorn if she left for Memphis “like [she] don’t have a house to look after,” it’s Shug who speaks up, “Why any woman give a shit what people think is a mystery to me” (Walker, The Color 200). Sofia provides another example of a strong woman. In the text she is a wife who refuses to be subservient, a survivor of sexual abuse by her male family members, and a woman who draws on the strength of her sisters. Sofia fights back when her husband Harpo attempts to beat her, and “the image of female
superpotency drawn here is consistent with the womanist idea of audacious womanhood. Sofia pointedly enacts a self-enabling ethos deemed necessary to deform patriarchy” (Allan, “Womanism” 99). Walker stocks the book with characters who can mentor the most oppressed subject of all, Celie. Celie’s life includes many forms of disenfranchisement: sexual, social, political, and spiritual. She comes to represent all subjugated women: “the specific systems of oppression that operate in Celie’s life symbolize the more or less subtle operations of patriarchal power in the lives of women everywhere” (Abbandonato 1110). Thus, Walker widens the scope of the story, and appeals to readers’ experiences with different forms of oppression. From Walker’s characters the womanist philosophy flows out of the story towards the reader.

Walker matched her medium to her womanist message. The epistolary style that Walker uses is steeped in woman’s culture, for letters are historically a women’s genre. Before the mid-19th century, women didn’t have equal access to editors and publishers and had to tell their story in letters. Even the epistolary genre did not necessarily promote women: “the female voice in the epistolary tradition has been a history of restrictions or failed interactions. The one genre with which women have been persistently connected has specialized in narrowing the range of possible inflections for feminine expression” (Goldsmith xii). Walker, setting her story between 1910-1940, replicates this censored position of women of the period. Walker also exploits the powerful first-person, present-tense effect of the epistolary form, using “this technique’s ability to build suspense and to heighten the affective impact of fictional narratives” (Warhol 184). This is especially true in a Bildungsroman about an abused woman. The cruelties endured by Celie are more vivid and painful because they are recorded by her own hand at the time that they are happening.
This epistolary style becomes just another precept of Walker’s womanism. Writing her story in letters Celie demonstrates one characteristic of Walker’s womanism – “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” (Walker, *In Search* xi). From the first line of the novel--“you better not tell nobody but God”--Celia’s voice is suppressed (Walker, *The Color* 1). So Celia writes to god instead of telling it to another person. Yet we see through Celia’s letters her gradual casting off of this suppression, and “the development of Celia’s voice provides a vantage point from which the father’s censorship can be undermined, punctured, and eventually overcome” (Boesenberg 223). Celia tells her truths, capturing in letters what she dare not tell another person. At first she follows the command of her stepfather and addresses her letters to God, but she steps off that path when Shug enlightens her that she’s been praying to a racist, sexist, monotheistic god, and so later in the novel Celia begins addressing her letters to her sister. Thus, in time she challenges her stepfather’s censorship and, in a sense, tells her sister her story (although the letters are never sent because she and her sister are incommunicado); however, the message still reaches the reader. Celia is sending messages in a bottle, but the reader is privy to them all.

Though her stepfather tries to silence her, Celia does not keep it all inside. Celia is timid at first, but she is brave enough to write about her rape, which is no easy task, and by doing so she “externalizes her experiences so that they do not destroy her” (Cutter 166). Celia enjoys some of the cathartic power of writing. These letters are like a journal, and journaling can be a healing process. This process involves the reader and instructs the reader in one method of self-healing through journaling. The reader also inevitably roots for Celia on her path from dark, abusive past to fully actualized womanhood. We can see Celia gradually being restored. Through writing Celia reconceives herself: “she initially had been fragmented by an external force, by rape, but
when she takes control of that fragmentation—solidifying the rupture by displacing part of herself into her letters—she is able to reunify herself” (Wall, “Lettered” 91). As readers turn the pages and as Celie’s letters transpire, the protagonist is growing stronger. There is a redemptive quality to all of Celie’s correspondence. Celie’s letters are a way for her to reach self-realization, and readers are not only witness to this process, but also perhaps inspired by it. While viewing Celie’s epiphany, readers can experience their own epiphany. Because of Celie’s story readers grow viscerally aware of the blight of gender discrimination. Celie is learning to know herself and to assert herself. Through her letters “she becomes aware of her identity and takes possession of her life” (Fraile-Marcos 119), a moment that readers might also reflect and examine their own positionality in relation to oppression. Walker sets up a do-it-yourself guide to realizing the sustenance of womanism. For with their own story and their own pen readers can affect their personal freedom from domination. We know that Celie is processing all that is happening to her and through her own pen is finding her salvation. Walker uses these “words as symbols of self-knowledge,” and Celie becomes the wise woman (Babb, “Women” 83). It is through the power of language—language that is accentuated in this epistolary style—that Celie is redeemed.

Celie’s letters are written but never sent. First she writes her letters to god, an entity with no known address, and then to her sister, for whom there is no available mailing address. So the letters form an autobiographical journal of sorts. Celie becomes the author literally of her own story in the face of great opposition, and “although she has been forbidden to voice her experiences to the outside world, her letters are an affirmation of her being and of her refusal to have her story told by anyone other than herself” (Smith, “We Need” 8). In this, Walker reiterates the importance for women’s stories to be told by women. Walker claims in her article in Ms. magazine that “it is language more than anything else that reveals and validates one’s
existence, and if the language we actually speak is denied us then it is inevitable that the form we are permitted to assume historically will be one of caricature, reflecting someone else’s literary or social fantasy” (Walker, “Finding” 72). The Color Purple honors a black woman’s voice as authentic and authoritative. When Celie stops writing letters to god and starts writing to her sister, Walker emphasizes the importance of women talking to women. This conversation is in part hijacked by Albert, who for decades has been intercepting Nettie’s letters and hiding them from Celie. Here Walker illustrates the break-up of the sisterhood by a man who keeps Celie from drawing on the strength and love of another woman, her literal and figurative sister. But even without hearing a word from her sister, Celie keeps up the communication, presses onward. The words themselves hold authority. Walker emphasizes the use of Celie’s voice by using the epistolary style where Celie is a protagonist casting about for her own true voice.

Her prose is stilted at first, as though Celie is afraid even of the blank page. But as Celie begins to bloom into a full, confident woman, her words blossom as well. The writing becomes more vivid as the years pass and is more full of “metaphors for her feelings” (Babb, “Women” 90). Celie makes connections with the world around her and sees that she is oppressed just as the environment around her is oppressed. She creates these simple, apt images: “I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man” (Walker, The Color 22). In such metaphoric moments, we see the growth of the protagonist; her writing shows empathy. Also, it demonstrates greater understanding as Celie links her oppression to greater systems of oppression.

Like the epistolary style, Walker harkens back to another form of women’s communication: sewing. Sewing is a historic part of women’s ethos which Walker pays tribute to in her definition of womanism; she positions a womanist as someone who “appreciates and
prefers women’s culture” (Walker, *In Search* xi). Since sewing was considered women’s work and devalued by the patriarchy, men left women to their sewing. While sewing, women could explore their artistic side and build a female community of sewers. In Walker’s celebrated essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” she asks the difficult question: “How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year . . . when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write?” (Walker, *In Search* 234). Walker contends that even during the slave regime and in the lean times that followed black women found a way to bring art and beauty into their lives through domestic tasks like flower gardening and quilting. In a similar way, quilting is a creative outlet for Celie and a way that she creates fellowship with other women.

Celie sews through most of the novel, making her own clothes, curtains for Sofia, quilts, and finally goes into business making her Folkspants. Celie herself is on some level aware of the peacemaking power of sewing. She writes, “A needle not a razor in my hand, I think” (Walker, *The Color* 147)—it’s notable that both are sharp, but with her needle she can create something new or mend something old instead of simply destroying. We see this in the novel when the quilt Celie is working on is made out of Sofia’s torn curtains. These were the same curtains that Celie originally made for Sofia when Harpo and Sofia were setting up their home. But the curtains were torn when Harpo and Sofia fought as Harpo tried to physically dominate Sofia. So they became scrap for the quilt, grist for the mill. With brutality all around her, Celie finds a way forward with needle and thread: “sewing is a language that explicates an alternative to the violence of patriarchal discourse” (Cutter 173). Out of this world of domestic violence Walker allows Celie to stitch together her own story, her quilt. From these curtain remnants comes the creative base for the quilt. Symbolically, the quilt evolves out of gender discord.
The womanist communal value of women sewing together shouldn’t be overlooked. And the quilt is a ripe metaphor for a narrative. Within the quilt circle is where women ruled the discourse, so “quilting . . . functions as a way of creating female community in a world that represses female expression” (Byerman 164). Celie, Sofia, and even Shug work on the quilt and grow closer:

She pick up a random piece of cloth out the basket. Hold it up to the light. Frown. How you sew this damn thing? she say.

I hand her the square I’m working on, start another one. She sew long crooked stitches, remind me of that little crooked tune she sing.

That real good, for first try, I say. That just fine and dandy. She look at me and snort. Everything I do is fine and dandy by you Miss Celie, she say. (Walker, The Color 57).

There is a sisterhood in the quilt making; the women work on a quilt in a pattern aptly named “Sister’s Choice.” They are not only forming a sisterhood but also creating a quilt that is a comforting item that Sofia takes when she leaves her husband; in the form of a quilt the sisterhood travels with her.

Another needlework endeavor comes toward the end of the novel, Celie’s Folkspants, Unlimited. This is a company that Shug bankrolled--an example of women investing in women’s business. Shug invites Celie to Memphis where Celie starts Folkspants, and Shug declares that Celie won’t be waiting on her like she waited on Mr.________: “You not my maid. I didn’t bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet” (Walker, The Color 211). With Shug’s support, Celie’s fanciful sewing grows into a full-fledged business. Sewing is not only a medium for the protagonist’s “economic and emotional independence” which are important for any independent woman, but also “a vehicle for Celie’s self-expression and for her creation of an alternate socio-cultural context within which to exist”
Smith, “We Need” 11). Through Folkspants, Unlimited, for the first time Celie is making her own money, has a career and is in control of her own destiny.

This business comes out of Celie’s love of creating pants for her family and friends. She makes pants first for woman; for Celie to wear and encourage other women to wear pants in the 1930s was a step outside of traditional gender roles. Through her creations, Celie “narrows the gap between the sexes, making pants for both men and women” (Ross 80). Women and men are both able to access this functional item of clothing—so women like Celie need not be tripped up by their dresses when they’re trying to plow a field. These pants convey the power of womanism, for Celie’s pants are a physical, sartorial manifestation of womanly autonomy, and they “transmit to the women who wear them the womanist quality of self-determination and independence” ((Fraile-Marcos 126). Celie asserts her freedom and equality when she first puts on a pair of pants—she is re-crafting the role of woman. Woman need not always “look pretty” in a dress, need not be primarily aesthetic objects, as the patriarchy calls for. The patriarchy, especially in the 1930s, dictated the aestheticism of dresses on women, and Celie’s pants unravel this notion.

Making pants for men and women is a peaceful way to attack sexism. Celie makes the pants with love--“every stitch I sew will be a kiss”--and she extends that love to the men for whom she also sews fashionable and comfortable pants (Walker, The Color 214). It’s interesting how she engages some of the very men who have abused her: “since men have been her most cruel oppressors, it is ironically appropriate that she take something traditionally assigned to them in shaking off the power they have over her. And not only does she shake off that power; she turns it against them by getting them to like the pants she sews” (Harris, “From
Victimization” 14). In this Walker underscores womanism’s peaceful path to gender equity. Walker works hard to integrate men into the womanist tapestry.

The question is how to include black men in the feminist project of equality. Gary Lemons spells out the historical aversion black men have towards anything feminine, which would of course include the strategies of womanism. This anti-feminist perspective started, as with many cultural blights, during the slave regime. The white slaveholders constructed black males as super-sexual black bucks who wanted nothing more than to rape white women; thus, the black men were in need of beating, lynching, and castration. This history has its modern consequences because “many black men have internalized the racist sexual myths of black manhood and masculinity such that images of ‘black macho’ and the super sexual ‘buck/stud’ have prevailed in black communities as legitimate representations of black male power.” It’s clear to see how this mental framework would not allow a concept like womanism to thrive. Through the Civil Rights and Black Power movements the work for equality, was actually work towards male equality, and this “reinscribed a male-centered view of race that always already ignores issues of sexism” (Lemons 97, 103). Rather than applaud the few achievements black women had made, black men “bitterly resented” the success of black women (Ware 102). Black men saw black female achievement as something that would detract from black male accomplishments. When few opportunities were open for African Americans, black men saw black women as competition. In the poorer black populations the divisiveness between the sexes was deep. Financial difficulties exacerbated the gender inequalities: “The women belittle the men for not taking care of business. The men curse the women for not being feminine and comforting” (Ware 103). This history divides the race against each other. But womanism moves in to heal these deep wounds.
Womanism calls on men to cast off the shackles of male domination and pursue gender equity with the same tenacity and passion they have mustered for the cause of racial equity.

Nevertheless, some mistakenly believe that womanism is anti-male or is not the concern of men. But this is not the tone Walker takes in her womanist novel. Walker makes her message cross-sexually accessible; her “approach to social change is realistic... the ‘feminine’ is not silenced and it belongs entirely to neither gender. The ‘feminine’ functions as a language that both men and women can speak, a language that offers the possibility of radical social transformation” (Cutter 175). Womanism capitalizes on the idea of men and women sharing a common language. In Walker’s definition of womanism she states that a womanist “sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, In Search xi). Womanism not only includes all ethnicities but also includes men, which is not always easy when men are the oppressors. The women of the novel love men. Shug, especially, is always with a man: “clearly—the male sex can’t be dispensed with entirely. Black men are a part of Creation too” (Gussow 126). It’s apparent in this novel that men are an important ingredient in the life of a womanist.

Walker does not condemn men; rather, her novel takes on “a wholesale revision of... the dominant master narrative of patriarchal culture itself: the silencing and objectifying of women... the basis for male subjectivity” (Cutter 176). Walker certainly shows the cruelty and misogyny of men. Celie is raped by a man, robbed by a man, and beaten by a man. Sofia is beaten by a man, Nettie is assaulted and almost raped by Mr. _______, and Mary Agnes is raped by her uncle. But Walker is not only critical of men’s oppression of women but also of women’s oppression of each other: “Walker is concerned with any oppressive behavior... that stands in the way of individual and collective freedom” (Jamison-Hall 192). Plenty of women-on-women
oppression occurs in the novel. One example is when Celie betrays Sofia by telling Harpo to beat Sofia. *The Color Purple* deals with intra-female tyranny, and Walker isn’t afraid to bring to light women’s oppression of each other. In showing this woman-on-woman repression Walker demonstrates that men and woman must be partners in the quest for equality.

Some critics like Jacqueline Bobo and Trudier Harris have claimed that Walker’s novel is damaging to the black community and black men in particular. Bobo asserts that “the predominant reading, or meaning construction, of *The Color Purple* is that the works negatively depict black people, especially black men” (“Sifting” 333), and *The New York Times Book Review* stated that “Miss [Ms.] Walker’s skill as a writer was partially obscured by her one-dimensional portraits of black men” (Watkins). But Walker shows the complexities and gender confusion of Harpo, and she shows the evolution of Mr. _______. Spike Lee alleged that Walker “really has problems” with black men (Glicksman 48). In fact, Walker has problems with the abuse that is meted out by black men to black women. And by showing black men as abusers, she was supposedly maligning the whole black community. Walker recalls the critique, “It was said that I hated men, black men in particular; that my work was injurious to black male and female relationships; that my ideas of equality and tolerance were harmful, even destructive to the black community” (Walker, *The Same* 22). But sexual abuse and domestic violence continue to plague the black community. For instance, in 1979 a few years before Walker wrote her novel, the U.S. Census Bureau found that rape was 20% higher among blacks than whites (177). Walker was not going to disregard this plague of abuse in the black population. Christian sees this type of critique of black culture as a “recurrent motif in Walker’s work”; she maintains that Walker persists in “probing the relationship between struggle and change, a probing that encompasses the pain of Black people’s lives. . . .Paradoxically such pain sometimes results in
growth, precisely because of the nature of the struggle that must be borne, if there is to be change” (“Alice” 457-8). No one more than Celie personifies the pain in the struggle, but Celie is an agent for change within herself first and then her community. No positive change can be sought until the underlying problems are brought to light, and Walker’s novel shines such a light.

In her stark portrayal of the abuse of women Walker “simply tells a story that needed to be told” (Jamison-Hall 192). She had a womanist obligation to talk about the abuse of women. Unfortunately, women are vulnerable to all manner of physical and sexual assault; to be a woman is to be prey. When this story was written, domestic violence and sexual abuse were not often discussed in public. In fact, some argue that the book helped the trend of openly talking about physical and sexual abuse; the book “presaged the increased attention society began to pay in the 1980s and ‘90s to issues of domestic violence, child sexual abuse and same-sex love” (Davis, “The Color”). It is a womanist endeavor to tell the stories of oppression, to hold them up to the light of day, so that they can no longer be ignored.

When read carefully, Walker’s is a story of “female bonding, which does not, finally, exclude the males at all, but accommodates, redeems, even celebrates them” (Tucker 93). Walker certainly redeems the Mr. _______ character whom we find by the novel’s end keeping house, respecting Celie, and sewing on the porch. Walker could have wreaked vicious revenge on Mr. _______, but instead she chooses to liberate him. In combination the measure of Mr._______’s personal growth and Celie’s capacity for forgiveness allows womanist revolution to be possible: “After all the evil he done I know you wonder why I don’t hate him. . . . Look like he trying to make something out of himself. I don’t mean just that he work and clean up after himself” (Walker, The Color 260). Mr._______ is rehabilitated; he’s showing the possibility of what kinds of evolution can take place, and “once the rapist has been transformed and included in a
new social order where he can engage in ‘feminine’ activities and be part of ‘feminine’ language, society can move toward a more equitable relationship between the sexes” (Cutter 175). Walker shows other examples of equality when she focuses on each gender participating in non-traditional gender roles. Sofia talks about how Harpo “love that part of housekeeping a heap more ‘en me. . . . He love cooking and cleaning and doing little things round the house,” and Sofia in turn would rather do work usually consigned to men: “I rather be out in the fields or fooling with the animals, even chopping wood” (Walker, The Color 59). And Sofia and her sisters serve as pallbearers at her mother’s funeral, traditionally a male role. Harpo cleans his father’s house and nurtures his father when his father suffers a nervous breakdown. Also, Harpo cooks at his club, his favorite activity. Walker shows the sense of mastery and joy that people can get from activities that are not dominated by gender expectations.

While the patriarchy is concerned with exclusivity, womanism is about inclusivity. Womanism is a common human enterprise invested in remedying the extreme marginalization, victimization, and abuse of women in cultures across the globe. Although it is often men who are benefitting from and partaking in a sexist system of oppression, it must also be men who are also part of the solution. Certainly Walker is testifying to the plight of black woman, so “although the major thrust of the novel is to interrogate the double subjugation of black women, Walker’s model of human growth very much embraces men, too, and the male characters break out of their own gender prison” (Bracks 98). Mr. _______ gains a name and becomes Albert. Most significantly, Walker shows Mr. _______’s transformation, his evolution to a more fair-minded individual. Mr.______-cum-Albert is a changed man as Celie describes at the close of the novel: “I mean when you talk to him now he really listen . . . he said Celie, I’m satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man” (Walker, The Color 260). Walker shows that it
is “natural” for women and men to live harmoniously and equitably. *The Color Purple* serves as a positive direction for the feminist-womanist movement. Rather than being adamantly anti-male, Walker creates at the end of the novel, an equitable society—“You cannot mobilize a movement that is only and always against: you must have a positive alternative, a vision of a better future that can motivate people to sacrifice their time and energy toward its realization” (Alcoff 308-9). In these pages, Walker is clearly rallying womanist troops, but rather than simply condemning the inherent evil in men Walker encourages women to look at men’s useful role in a new social order.

The novel takes up the odyssey of Celie who finds her way to this just social order. One of the most salient womanist features of the novel is how Celie is able to extricate herself from systems of sexist domination. It is worth examining the details of her protagonist’s womanist pilgrimage. Celie is the engaging character that Walker uses to deal with the combined issues of gender and race. Through Celie we see the depraved nature of sexism and racism as well as a way to fight these scourges. Christian notes how Walker explores womanist evolution in her protagonist in whom one can observe both “the impact of oppression on her spirit as well as her growing internal strength and final victory” (*Black* 93). What Celie experiences on her journey from age 14 to her mid-50s is transformative—she doesn’t just grow old, she progresses. She is able to take the love of people around her and build up her own self-esteem; she moves “from a fearful self-hating victim of male domination and oppression to a self-assertive and self-loving woman” (Jamison-Hall 196). It’s notable that Celie must love herself because so much of the sexist, heterosexist, and racist world sets up conditions under which she should not love herself, but rather sublimate herself. Walker’s definition of womanism uses the word “love” eleven times. And self-love is the womanist choice to fight the patriarchy and love one’s femininity.
The story opens with Celie telling us about her rape. The abuse from the man Celie knows as her father (who it is revealed later is actually her stepfather) “disconnects her from the familial and moral dynamics on which she has previously depended and fragments her developing sense of self” (Smith, “We Need” 7). Walker creates Celie in as subaltern a position as one can be–she is raped, beaten, impoverished, emotionally abused and discriminated against. Walker seems to present the full array of oppression for a black gay woman in order to prove that no matter how dire one’s circumstances, there is a way out--there is a road to freedom and equality.

Early in the story Celie is passed from the hands of one abuser to another, and we see “how little difference there is between the circumstances of an abused daughter and an abused wife” (Smith, “Sexual” 171). Celie is given no choice her marriage. When Celie is bargained away by her stepfather and given to Mr. _______ it “seals her status as a commodity in a patriarchal system of exchange” (Eddy 48). Celie is represented as a sexual object by her stepfather to her future husband. Celie is described by her stepfather as not “fresh”; she was “spoiled” by the two children she’s borne (from her stepfather’s rape), meaning her virginity is no longer intact. Celie’s stepfather reviews Celie’s “positive” and “negative” attributes: “She ugly. He say. But she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it” (Walker, The Color 8). Unbelievably, one of her selling points is that she can no longer have children, so Mr. _______ can have all the sex he wants, he can “do everything just like you want to” without the worry of offspring. Celie’s position as provider of sexual pleasure is illuminated. Moreover, it’s god himself who apparently made her sterile so that Mr. _______ may more fully enjoy himself sexually. So according to her stepfather, it’s god’s will that Celie be a vehicle for Mr. _______’s sexual pleasure. And naturally, since she is a woman, her physical beauty must be
taken into consideration. Celie is “ugly” and this detracts from her appeal as a spouse because women are supposed to be aesthetic objects, a visual pleasure for their “man.” But her lack of beauty is balanced by her ability to work and her cleanliness, as though her stepfather is selling a slave at auction. Celie’s stepfather is anxious to marry Celie off (so he can better prey on Nettie), and “the discussion between the two men takes the form of negotiations over livestock; the deal is closed when a cow is included with the woman” (Byerman 163). The inclusion of livestock in the transaction emphasizes Celie’s position as chattel.

Notably, Celie refers to her new husband only as “Mr. ________.” He could be Mr. anybody; he is simply another man to whom Celie must be subservient. The use of “Mr. ________” by Walker “serves to make the reader aware not only of the distance that exists between Celie and her husband, but also of the position of servitude in which Celie is placed” (Johnson 103). Celie avoids naming her new master; she could not bear to name him because she was so subservient. There is also the similarity in the men Celie knows—each able to abuse her at their leisure: “Most mens look pretty much alike to me” (Walker, The Color 15). This sentiment demonstrates Celie’s fear of men because the most important men in her life have abused her.

In one of her letters we see her worldview as a victim of domestic violence: “Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr.__________ say, Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—he don’t finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa” (Walker, The Color 22). Celie closely connects one abuser with another by stating that Mr. ________ reminds her of her Pa. And we can see what kind of a monster to whom Celie is married. Beating works as a tool of physical and mental control; “beating Celie promises to secure the relationship between masculinity and femininity as one of domination and submission
through the materiality of the body itself” (Eddy 44). That domination carries over into their sex life, where Celie is essentially being raped. And Mr. _______ apparently was going to say “all women [are] good for” is fucking. We glimpse the male abhorrence of women while at the same time these men need women to gain sexual satisfaction. Celie understands that the men she knows hate women, yet still use them sexually. Walker sets up this contradiction, I believe, to echo the feminist thought of the 1970s that began to agitate for women’s sexual pleasure. In 1970, Anne Koedt wrote the groundbreaking essay “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” which Walker may have drawn upon in her characterization of Celie’s sex life. Koedt writes, “Men have chosen to define women only in terms of how they benefited men’s lives. Sexually, a woman was not seen as an individual wanting to share equally in the sexual act” (107). In her marital sex life Celie has no agency. And linking back to her childhood Celie describes her stepfather’s twisted relationship with women: “He hate children and he hate where they come from. Tho from all the children he got, you’d never know it” (Walker, The Color 41). This is misogyny--a hatred of the essence of women. Walker takes on the notion that the vagina is obscene, this essential part of a woman, yet is still good enough to have sex with in order to bring about the male’s sexual pleasure. Men like Mr._______ continue to use women’s bodies for sex and to birth their children, while all along hating those women’s bodies.

Even in the darkest days of her abuse, we see Celie begin to grow. When Nettie encourages Celie to stand up to Mr. _______’s children she tells Celie that she’s got to fight, and Celie replies, “But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (Walker, The Color 17). Staying alive is where Celie begins. The simple act of survival is a step in her growth. This is echoed when Celie talks with Mr. _______’s sister who is encouraging Celie to assert herself; Celie responds, “I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive” (Walker, The Color
21). Her straightforward assertion “I’m alive” is an incremental step in her independence. There are other small steps towards autonomy that Celie makes; “Celie’s growing sense of self enables her to take her first action against the oppression of patriarchy” when she puts spit in her father-in-law’s water (Johnson 106). She does this in defense of Shug because Mr._______’s father is impugning Shug’s character. Here we see the redeeming bonds of sisterhood beginning here.

Celia is so possessed by patriarchal abuse that she assumes the abuse as her just due. She believes like Mr. _______ that women deserve abuse. In one scene Mr. _______ gives Harpo advice on his wife Sofia: “Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let ‘em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating” (Walker, The Color 35). Celie becomes a perpetrator of abuse when she advises Harpo to follow Mr. _______’s advice and beat Sofia. One is never so enmeshed in the rule of the patriarchy as when one begins to repeat its oppressive mantras.

When Sofia finds out Celie has betrayed her it brings about a pivotal confrontation between the two. Sofia confronts Celie about advising Harpo to beat Sofia, and Celie explains:

I say it cause I’m a fool, I say. I say it cause I’m jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can’t.

What’s that? She say.

Fight. I say. (Walker, The Color 40)

Rather than this jealousy acting as a wedge between the two women, Sofia takes pity on Celie, and their friendship grows stronger. It is a major precept of liberation that oppressed subjects must strategically align and not perpetrate the evils of patriarchal domination among each other. Gayati Chakravorty Spivak calls this sort of approach strategic essentialism which she defines as "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest"(214). In the
pursuit of gender equality, women’s in-groups need to adopt a temporary essentialism in order to bring about widespread social action.

One way Celie acts out womanist principles is by participating in emotionally supportive female friendships. The relationships between Celie and the women of *The Color Purple* are therapeutic, and “her inferiority complex, due to violence, to male chauvinism, and to poverty, is being erased because of the supportive bonds between black women in the novel” (Fraile-Marcos 122). First, we see the love and support shared between the sisters. In fact, Celie sacrifices herself so that Nettie won’t be raped by their stepfather. Nettie in turn emotionally supports Celie by building up her self esteem and passing on the knowledge she is learning in the classroom from which Celie was barred. Later, Sofia offers Celie her friendship, the “healing bond of friendship as Celie tentatively emerges from her habitual numbness” (Fiske 152). Celie is reeling from the separation from her sister and her two abusive male relationships when she meets Sofia. Sofia is Celie’s first friend and offers Celie a chance to impart the harrowing stories of her life to a human being, not to the “Dear God” she addresses in her letters. Sofia takes Celie out of the insular world where men control everything sexual, social, political, spiritual. Moreover, Sofia becomes not only a friend but also a “model[] of resistance” for Celie (Bobo, *Black* 63). By Sofia’s example Celie is able to examine her own submissiveness: “I like Sofia, but she don’t act like me at all. If she talking when Harpo and Mr. _______ come in the room, she keep right on. If they ast her where something at, she say she don’t know. Keep talking” (Walker, *The Color* 36). Sofia offers Celie an example of how to avoid being subjugated by the men around her.

Celic’s most life-changing relationship is with Shug Avery. While at first Celie nurses and even worships Shug, Shug subsequently nurtures Celie, and their relationship grows into an intimate, loving partnership. Shug’s love is able to ameliorate some of the trauma in Celie’s life:
He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me, I say.

She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. (Walker, The Color 112-13)

This lesbian relationship has a positive impact on Celie because “Celie’s love for and with a Black woman is literally and conceptually capable of healing physical abuse and undoing the previous oppression” (Bealer 29). Love is a driving force of womanism, and according to Walker’s philosophy, a womanist “loves love” (Walker, In Search xi). For the first time Celie is in a healthy romantic relationship. Walker is demonstrating the wide-ranging acceptance of womanist philosophy where a woman can love whoever she wants; as she writes in her definition of her philosophy, a womanist is “a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually” (In Search xi). Walker celebrates this freedom to love, and her work is “devoted to the whole and true portrayal of black women, she feels compelled to expose black womanhood in all its facets, including that of lesbianism” (Fraile-Marcos 115). In 1982, when the novel was published, it was still an atypical idea that women had the right to engage in lesbian relationships, and Walker “portrays a black lesbian relationship as natural and freeing” (Christian, Black 94). Celie’s relationship with Shug certainly frees her from loneliness and her abusive past. This corresponds to womanist principles where being a lesbian is celebrated and also venerated as a basic human right.

Celie takes a giant step forward in her personal growth when she discovers her own sexuality. She does so in the face of great odds against her; “that Celie’s sexuality, like her humanity, can remain intact under prolonged male siege is evidence that contradicts and invalidates her dominant image as pathological victim” (Allan, Womanist 85). She moves forward from a sexual victim to an autonomous sexual agent. Celie has been sexually victimized by two men, so “the process of discovering or developing desire begins, for Celie, with the
reappropriation of her own body” (Ross 70). Shug is Celie’s guide in this reappropriation. She begins by having Celie look at her own vagina. This self-examination is a moment of identity: “In discovering and accepting with pride her own body, Celie initiates a desire for selfhood” (Ross 71). Womanist ideals must start with the self, and the self includes one’s body. Celie, at Shug’s behest, looks at her vagina in the mirror: “I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass tween my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose. It a lot prettier than you thought, ain’t it? she say from the door. It mine, I say” (Walker, The Color 78). A lot happens in this brief description of her vagina. For the first time Celie is viewing her own sexual embodiment. When she declares “it mine” she “assumes material control over her sexuality by reinscribing its discursive representation” (Eddy 57). Celie is in control of her body’s description and in doing so takes ownership of her body, including her genitalia, the epicenter of her abusive past.

Celie’s vagina has been the site of so much pain and abuse, and in this mirror scene, Celie is commanding her vagina. This leads to Celie’s self-determination; when looking at her vagina in the mirror “Celie becomes a subject to herself, and it is the first time she really looks at any part of her being as more than something offensive” (Dozier 12). She sees the beauty of her vagina where before she only found it repugnant and obscene. Seeing and accepting her own vagina was a part of Celie’s growth: “Walker emphasizes a relationship between the development of selfhood and acceptance of female biology. Repeatedly, Celie talks of making herself wood, of not responding to either abuse or sexual intercourse” (Byerman 167). When Celie turns wooden, she is going physically and emotionally numb. In discovering her sexual presence she moves from wood to flesh. In looking at her vagina she is reaffirming the right for her body to exist. As Celie becomes self-aware and confident she does so partly through the
discovery of her own sensuality and sexuality. She is encouraged to look at her vagina in the mirror and own it, love it. She grows bold after looking with love at her vagina. It’s after this scene that Celie becomes more assertive, counseling Squeak to make Harper call her by her real name, Mary Agnes (Dozier 12).

In this vaginal self-examination scene Walker is plugging in to a tradition of self-exam within the women’s movement. The women’s health movement of the 1970s sought to take back control of women’s bodies from the male-dominated medical establishment. One way they did so was through vaginal self-examination. Women would get a speculum, flashlight, and mirror and look into their vaginas, sometimes alone, or sometimes in groups. The groups of vaginal self-examiners were feminist consciousness-raising groups. The point was the “demystification of one’s own body” (Sloane 3). Whereas men’s genitalia are external and can be seen and handled easily women’s are internal and often hidden from the women themselves. Like Celie, many women were unfamiliar with their own genitalia: “a woman knows that such aspects of her body are at the very core of her sexuality, of her womanhood. Thus, such organs are there-but-not-there, like secrets that women, the owners of these things cannot understand” (Sloane 3). Women who do not look at their genitalia are hidden from themselves. But with this new knowledge of themselves comes power. Women, before the self-examinations, “were likely to share a sense of estrangement from their bodies,” but while looking at their vagina, labia, cervix women “recoded the vagina as accessible and knowable” (Murphy 129, 131). Once a woman has looked at her genitalia there’s a pride of ownership. Anachronistically, Walker recasts this 1970s feminist tool of empowerment for Celie in the 1930s—giving her heroine a moment in time when she looks in the mirror at her vagina and is awakened.
Celie makes further womanist progress in her sexual relationship with Shug. Celie and Shug fall in love and Celie has her first homosexual experience. Sexual desire of any sort is new for Celie, for she never felt any desire for her rapist or her husband or any other man. But from the moment Celie sees Shug’s photo she is moved. While she nurses Shug back to health we also see her desiring eye. When Celie is bathing Shug she surveys Shug’s “long black body with its black plum nipples,” and Celie reacts, “I thought I had turned into a man” (Walker, *The Color* 49). She, a woman of the 1930s, would not immediately recognize herself as a self-declared lesbian. And for Celie her only sexual experience has been with men who do all of the desiring: “for Celie, sexual pleasure is also reserved for a man” (Dozier 11). She must move past this strict gender designation if she is to become involved with Shug. Shug teaches Celie what it’s like to be a free sexual agent—a desiring woman. Shug models a female enjoying sexual self-determination, and her “sexuality suggests that untranslatable French word jouissance, an experience beyond pleasure, beyond orgasm, not phallocentric but concentric” (Tucker 85). Shug loves herself and enjoys the pleasures that her body can bring her. Shug uses her empowered sexuality to teach Celie; in doing so, she opens up a whole universe of sexual enjoyment for Celie—remapping Celie’s body and unearthing Celie’s pleasure center.

There is a real measure of growth for Celie in her relationship with Shug, for “Shug introduces Celie to the mysteries of the body and sexual experience, making possible both Celie’s discovery of speech and her freedom from masculine brutality” (Ross 71). Shug gets Celie to re-think sexuality. Rather than being with a man, Celie has another option she never knew she had: Celie’s lesbian relationship “presents an alternative to sexual pleasure with a man” (Dozier 11). Mr. _______ has been unwilling and unable to satisfy Celie sexually. Celie opens up to Shug about her sex life with Mr._______:
Mr.________ can tell you, I don’t like it [sex] at all.

What is it like?

He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep.

She start to laugh. Do his business, she say. Do his business. Why, Miss Celie. You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you.

That what it feel like, I say.

She stop laughing.

You never enjoy it at all? she ast, puzzle. Not even with your children daddy?

Never, I say.

Why Miss Celie, she say, you still a virgin. (Walker, The Color 77)

It’s notable that Celie feels like a toilet when Mr. _________ has sex with her. Rather than an equal enterprise where each partner feels some pleasure, it is only Mr. _________ who is orgasming. Shug boldly declares that if she’s never had an orgasm Celie is essentially still a virgin. Thus, control of her own virginity lies with Celie--“Shug’s redefinition of the word ‘virgin’ in this passage is equally threatening to patriarchal control over women’s bodies, in that it places priority not on penetration, and thus on the social mechanism for guaranteeing ownership of children, but on enjoyment, making the woman’s own response the index of her ‘experience’” (Hite 266). An orgasm is truly a feminist act. During an orgasm a woman fully inhabits her body and is able to enjoy sexual pleasure from it. Walker strips sex of its obscenity and leaves Celie shameless and able to feel pleasure. When Shug redefines Celie’s virginity in terms of an orgasm, it is Celie who decides when her sexual life begins. And since Celie’s first sexual experience was rape, it’s even more important that she be able to recast her first time.

Many women don’t even know enough about their own biology to understand how to give themselves pleasure. Shug attempts to educate Celie on how to feel sexual pleasure: “Listen, she
Education, in this case sexual education, is an important part of womanist sisterhood. It’s significant that Shug mentions a “lot of finger and tongue work,” which does not necessitate the use of a penis. Fingering and cunnilingus can bring a woman to orgasm without the need for a man. Shug invokes the power of the clitoris to provide a non-vaginal orgasm that doesn’t require male penetration. Walker again, I believe, calls upon Koedt’s feminist theory of the 1970s: “the establishment of clitoral orgasm as fact would threaten the heterosexual institution. For it would indicate that sexual pleasure was obtainable from either men or women” (109). Since the clitoris is biologically designed solely for pleasure, it would bring women’s pleasure to the forefront in any sexual relation. Also, Shug helps Celie re-map her body; Celie is discovering a new part of herself and there is great power in this. This “new bodily site” is “representative of Celie’s control over her own sexuality” (Eddy 58). Just like looking at her vagina, in discovering her clitoris Celie is empowered to determine her own sexual destiny. Walker reifies her message of a womanist as someone who “loves herself” (Walker, In Search xii). Truly, self-love is a firm foundation on which to build an autonomous life and is the bedrock of any successful relationship.

The sex scene Walker constructs between Celie and Shug begins with Celie’s confession that she was raped. Celie finally tells the story of her abuse and is comforted by Shug, and this nurturing develops into a sexual episode. Celie and Shug’s lovemaking “is the exact inverse of Alphonso’s rapes and Mr. _______’s domination”; in her lesbian relationship, Celie is taking back control of her sexual life (Bealer 33). Celie and Shug finally consummate their relationship:
“She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. Um, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say, um, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can’t hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other” (Walker, *The Color* 113). Bell hooks says that Walker’s “intent is . . . to encourage appreciation and acceptance of same-sex female sexual pleasure” (459). This is part of Walker’s womanist agenda, to support gay relationships which threaten the patriarchy. Fraile-Marcos reframes Celie’s lesbian relationship as her “way out towards fulfillment and happiness” (115). It is significant that Walker chooses to give Celie her happy ending in a lesbian relationship—an uncommon finale in the early 1980s when this book was published.

There is a pinnacle in Celie’s “journey[] from a seemingly silent object to speaking subject” (Johnson 99). A great change has come over Celie. Gloria Steinem avows that the great power of the novel is to promote change; the “pleasure [in it] is watching people redeem themselves and grow. . . . It’s an organic morality of dignity, autonomy, nurturing, and balance” (*Outrageous* 290). Celie redeems herself by finally speaking out against her oppressor to his face. Celie roars at Mr.______, “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook. . . . But I’m here” (Walker, *The Color* 207). When Celie at last speaks up to Mr. ______ towards the end of the novel it is transformative. Speaking is both non-violent and cathartic: “speaking forth carries with it its own authority; the voice exposes the suffering that has been her life and gives her an interiority and humanity that others have denied her” (Byerman 166). There is a great deal of meaning in the words Celie chooses to tell Mr.______ as she is leaving for Memphis with Shug. Celie declares her freedom from Mr._______: “You a lowdown dog is what’s wrong, I say. It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need” (Walker, *The Color* 199). Celie has been empowered by the love of the women around her and by the romantic love of her partner Shug and is finally able to stand up for herself. Celie
curses Mr. _______ further: “Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me” (Walker, *The Color* 206). Unloading years of pent up frustration, Celie howls her message of personal liberty.

When Celie gets to Memphis she begins her pants business. Through meaningful work and her relationship with Shug, Celie continues to blossom; Celie’s “pride in the accomplished product [pants], as well as Shug’s and the others’ admiration enhance Celie’s self-confidence and sustain the revision of her self-image” (Boesenberg 208). Celie makes her own money and then inherits family property. She is free and content, she writes, “I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time” (Walker, *The Color* 215). After some distance and with the means for her own independence she is even able to forgive Mr. _______ and begins to refer to him by his given name, Albert. When Celie and Albert (formerly Mr. _______) become companions at the end of the novel, Albert “engages Celie on a more evolved, human level. In renewing her association with Albert, not only does Celie affirm his newly-formed self, but she demonstrates the full extent of and affirms her own spiritual and psychological rebirth” (Smith, “We Need” 14). Albert and Celie are sojourners on the path to independence. This novel celebrates the great capacity for change in people. The lesson of the novel entails the movement from a subaltern position, that even the “life of the downtrodden, humanly almost obliterated Celie” could be redeemed and the sexist discrimination she endured could be redressed (Morgan, “The Color” 180). Celie’s passage from the condition of slave to that of a self-actualized, free woman is a message of hope for all who are similarly oppressed and abused.

Walker recasts Celie in a global context: “For if and when Celie rises to her rightful, earned place in society across the planet, the world will be a different place” (“Finding” 72). To look at this more broadly, we can conjecture that when black women ascend to their rightful
place, the world will be a more just place. For if someone as persecuted and victimized as Celie can rise, so too can black women worldwide. Celie’s story is connected to the wider world, through the channel of her readers. Celie leads the reader on a journey of self-discovery as she comes of age in this Bildungsroman: “a reader of The Color Purple, then, learns (or receives instruction) by assuming Celie’s ambivalent position within the novel, outside it” (Katz 72). Through Celie’s compelling letters the reader takes on her subaltern position, tries on Celie’s troubles, while maintaining a readerly distance. This sort of compassionate witnessing on behalf of the reader can provoke social change. From the reader out to the greater world, and by the novel’s end “Walker imagines a world where personal transformations induce social transformations” (Wall, Worrying 160). Walker gives readers every reason to become womanists. For Walker, the progressive changes for gender equity happen personally and then communally; she has said “I believe in change: change personal, and change in society” (In Search 252). So it makes sense that womanist philosophy is effected in her novel in a personal, individual, and then communal manner. In the end Celie becomes a witness of womanism, and the reader can become such a witness too.

While Walker creates a womanist tale, it’s not mere fantasy. I take exception with Keith Byerman, who calls the novel a “womanist fairy tale” (161). This suggests a fictionality, simplicity, and juvenility that does not exist in this novel. The novel shows the struggles within the Women’s Liberation movement—the racism, the jealousy, and the women-on-women abuse. Some people have suggested that the novel has a fairy tale ending, but “the transformations Walker writes about are true to life in that they are clearly not harbingers of ‘happily ever after’. . . .It is clear that these characters are headed for personal and community struggle. And these are the types of struggles that readers will continue to face throughout their lives” (Huskey 111). The
close of the novel does not neatly tie up all storylines. For example, Celie certainly has a difficult road ahead to repair the relationship between her and her sister and with her children as well. There will of course be joy at their reunification, but what to make of all the lost years? At the close of the novel Celie is running a store like her father and faces the danger of lynching in her community, as befell her father. Sofia will have to work through the complexities of her relationship with the daughter of a woman who imprisoned her. Shug and Celie still have to mend their relationship if they are going to attempt lesbian monogamy. But these difficulties and imperfections remind the reader of the ongoing struggles for gender equity in their own world. And it is this type of self-reflection that Walker asks of her readers.

With all of Walker’s effort to create a working space for womanism within her book, it’s important to see the feminist response to the text. The Color Purple garnered mainstream seals of approval as the winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1983. Winifred Morgan assessments its long history of achievement: “since its publication, buoyed up by enthusiastic support of feminists and black studies departments, the novel has enjoyed considerable success” (“The Color” 177). The enthusiastic popular reception of the book gave it a momentum which led to its quickly being made into an Oscar-nominated movie in 1985. The novel’s subject was timely; womanism as a version of feminism worked very well at the moment when Walker published her novel; “Celie’s dark skin and homosexuality position her as a heroine particularly suited to resonate within her reformulation of the radical feminist politics of the 1980s” (Bealer 23). At that time feminism was becoming more multicultural and inclusive. But not all feminists raved about the novel. Plainly, Walker’s novel wasn’t ignored; it “made a significant impact on the feminist movement, sparking scathing criticism from Trudier Harris, Camile Paglia, and bell hooks” (Huskey 96). Trudier Harris worried about the bad impression it
gave of the black community; as I have already discussed, Walker was broaching unpleasant problems of abuse that happens at elevated rates in the black community, but choosing to ignore the abuse to give a “good impression” of the black community would never do anything to resolve the problem. Camile Paglia saw the story as a “sociological soap opera,” but soap operas are given to unnecessary sentimentality and clichés, neither of which are found in the novel. Bell hooks felt the novel didn’t go far enough to effect radical change.

However, Walker obviously meant to inspire activism in her readers. She draws the reader in at the end of the novel when Celie directly addresses readers in her last letter; she writes “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples” (The Color Purple 285). Walker is writing outside the bounds of the book—communicating with her readers or all of Creation, as Celie would say. Walker’s is a message of power to the people—power to the reader! Walker “envisions the possibility of transformation in the reader. This latter transformation is dependent on the internalization of the novel’s message: neither Celie nor any other character can help anyone in the community until they first figure out how to help themselves” (Huskey 98). The individuality of Walker’s womanist message reifies that change can happen reader by reader. Readers are mean to internalize, to take personally, Celie’s journey from gender oppression to gender equality. The epigraph of Walker’s novel reads “Show me how to do like you / Show me how to do it,” a lyric by Stevie Wonder. It is indeed a novel of education. There is no doubt that Walker seeks sociopolitical enlightenment in her readers, and she “marks off The Color Purple’s territory and purpose: it is a novel that intends to teach its readers, and it is also a novel about how that instruction might take place” (Katz 67). Through her story and characters Walker doesn’t just talk feminism-womanism, she creates a living, thriving world to that end. The closing words of the novel are telling; Celie says, “I think this is the youngest us ever felt” (The
There is a sense of renewal in these words, a sense that even at the end of a novel, it is only a beginning for the type of progress the novel represents. There is a measure of success for this book’s womanist philosophy: “judging by the popular and academic response to *The Color Purple* over the years it is not very risky to claim that Walker’s novel has actually become a catalyst of social, cultural, and political change on society” (Fraile-Marcos 129). In this Walker has succeeded. Taught on college campuses and in high school classrooms, it’s been read and reread; indeed in 2004, it was found that *The Color Purple* was one of the top ten books reread in America’s libraries (“Frequently”). It’s the choice of a thousand book clubs and was produced by Oprah Winfrey as a Tony award-winning Broadway musical that still tours the country—29 years after publication and the book still has momentum. After selling approximately 15 million copies (Walker, “Loving”) and being translated into two dozen languages Walker’s message has received a global airing (Sternburg 267).

Walker uses womanist philosophy powerfully throughout her story. She essentially re-writes the story of black women:

Through the reification of her womanist doctrine, Walker challenges and subverts the predominant myths and stereotypes that perpetuate the condition and treatment of women . . . within the patriarchy. She dislocates the existing archetypal and stereotypical patterns of the black female socio-cultural experience, loosening and, in some instances, removing the constraints under which black women exist. The result is a mythic narrative that deliberately and unapologetically flies in the face of what is expected and accepted as historically and culturally plausible for poor, oppressed black women, offering an alternate path from subordination and victimization to ‘heroic female selfhood.’ (Smith, “We Need” 5)

Walker does not leave her characters trapped in patriarchal oppression, giving her readers hope. She marks a path to freedom for those enslaved in systems of oppression; womanism is her readers’ North Star. Walker’s womanism is made flesh through self-expression, found in Celie’s letters; sexual freedom, found in Celie’s discovery of her own sexual potency; sisterhood/brotherhood, found in the supportive relationships in the community; minority
business uplift, exemplified in Shug’s backing of Celie’s non-corporate pants business; improved self-esteem, displayed when Celie comes face-to-face with her own vagina; community bonding, found in the communal quilting and socializing at Harpo’s juke joint; and healthy gay and heterosexual relationships, evident throughout the novel. Walker has created a song of freedom in *The Color Purple*—it is, like all great redemption songs, powerful, emotive, and meant for everybody, regardless of gender, age, class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. This song streams from the novel each time the story is read and brings with it the power to break the bonds of racism, sexism, and heterosexism.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

The project of this dissertation was to sound the subtle and overt connections between novels and political action. In this dissertation, “Social Justice and the 20th Century American Novel,” we are interested in how novels inspire social justice. The aspiration to create a more socially just world is both a commendable and complex goal, and novels are an integral part of creating a society that is more equitable, caring, and peaceful. We saw in this dissertation how four novels attempted to achieve this end. These four novels, *The Jungle*, *Native Son*, *Armies of the Night* and *The Color Purple*, stand as a testimony to the indomitable spirit of social activism.

The novels of this study represent profound questions about the world outside the pages of the text. This study was particularly concerned with how books are linked to social movements: the Consumer Protection movement, the Black Power movement, the Anti-war movement, and the Women’s movement. Each book demonstrates a different means for linking books to social movements. Novels can serve as both tools of education and inspiration for activists in social movements. In their usefulness to social movements, novels exert some influence. For instance, John Whalen-Bridge attests to the authority of one Margaret Atwood novel: “Activists I met at Pro-Choice rallies certainly enjoyed a sense of approval from *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (13).

Novels can provide support and validation to activists within a movement. This dissertation also looked at subtler forms of novelistic influence.

Political novels are unique in that political ideas are twisted into the narrative like the double helix of a DNA strand. The politics becomes inseparable from the story. By addressing sociopolitical issues and spinning a persuasive tale, a political novelist taps into the intellect and the heart. This is a powerful combination, and it is no surprise that readers can be moved by such
stories. We sought to find out just how a reader is moved and what implications that has for the sociopolitical sphere.

Some American critics disparage overtly political novels as propaganda. American critics are far too eager to refer to political commentary as propaganda. Sections of both *The Jungle* and *Native Son*, have been labeled propaganda when the characters speak about Socialism. Certainly, Upton Sinclair and Richard Wright favor Socialism, but they see it as a tool to combat the greed and racism that play out tragically in their stories. It seems reasonable that if an author like Richard Wright depicts in heartrending terms a social ill like racism in his novel that he also be afforded the chance to offer ideas to resolve it. This contention reifies novels as agents of social justice that seek to influence the society into which they are deployed.

Rather than looking at sociopolitical novels as propaganda, this dissertation’s greater claim is that politics can raise the stakes of a story. Politics are a part of the human experience, the same experience which is fathomed by the narrative. The four novelists of this dissertation fully exploit the potential of documentary realism, lively characters, convincing points of view, panoramic settings, and plot twists to measure the breadth and depth of a sociopolitical issue.

Rather than using propaganda, these four novelists utilize literary and rhetorical elements to tell an irresistible story with sociopolitical implications. Novelists can bring to bear the entire rhetorical triangle, accessing the reader’s trust, logic, and emotions. These political stories are also powerful because novelists can tap their readers’ imaginations. People are moved by the empathy they feel for a character that is, for instance, experiencing extreme poverty. Characters serve as something larger than themselves in a political novel; they instead can take on the shape of a whole sociopolitical issue. For instance, Bigger Thomas does not just represent an isolated case of racism but rather the effects of a whole system of U.S. racism that plays out in the story,
impacting where Bigger can live, work, learn, or seek justice. So a character can be an entry into a deeper consideration of a social injustice.

Political novels can also act as a disruptive narrative to counter a prevailing hegemonic and oppressive narrative (Hanne 20). For example, *The Armies of the Night* told a counter-narrative about the anti-war protesters. The news media at the time portrayed anti-war protestors as unpatriotic and troublesome, but Mailer provided proof that the protestors were willing to risk life and liberty for the cause of peace. After constructing such a counter-narrative, the book also asks something of its readers. It relies on its readers for the story’s fulfillment, for a true-to-life happy ending. This may mean that a reader changes her mind on a topic or it may mean she becomes a part of a social movement. But the novels seek a righting of wrongs, a remedy for the injustices they depict.

Such remedies must come from the reader. Yet, reader activism is a slippery concept. How does one construct an activated reader? To be an activated reader, one does not have to march in the streets, although this may be a valid response. But more often readers are activated through the process of witnessing the narrative. A reader reads the story with empathy and testifies about it in the community (Huskey 99). Simply, the story has transformed the reader; the reader is enlightened and may share her experience. This is also a form of activism. Let’s review how each of these novels became relevant politically.

*The Jungle* is a unique example of books into action, a clear instance of a novel which effected actual legislation. This text was included in the dissertation to mark one end of the spectrum of reader activism. Few books have this type of direct political effect, but the success of *The Jungle* demonstrates that it is possible.
The Jungle represents how social protest novels would work in an ideal world: a novel would inform the reading public about an injustice, the readers would be outraged and call for amelioration of the injustice. This is one way peaceful progressive revolution happens. In 1906, readers reacted with revulsion and indignation to passages about unsanitary food processing in The Jungle, and with media attention surrounding the novel’s dramatization of injustices Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Bill. These food safety measures formed the foundation for the modern FDA, which is a lynchpin in American governmental consumer protection. Because of this, Upton Sinclair has been called the father of the U.S. Consumer Protection movement. So this novel not only effected positive political change but even began a social movement.

Another novel that became enlivened by a social movement is Richard Wright’s Native Son. When it was originally published in 1940, it initiated a discussion on the devolved state of race relations in the U.S. This made the book an important political novel as well as an innovative and vibrant piece of black literature. But, in a sense, it was ahead of its time with its condemnation of the racism that was woven into the very fabric of America. It was as though the payment of Wright’s revolutionary vision came due in the 1960s and 70s. It wasn’t until the emergence of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements that the novel became a real motivator for black empowerment. One could say that Native Son experienced a renaissance during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Wright influenced movement leaders like Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) who maintained that “Wright was one of the people who made me conscious of the need to struggle” (“WBW”). Because it was so widely read and because of its unequivocal revolutionary themes, James Smethurst claims that Native Son was enormously influential in the Black Arts Movement, the cultural arm of the Black Power movement. The
book’s rediscovery in the 1960s and 70s expresses the long-lasting power of political novels. In the instance of *Native Son*, it is evident that political novels can inspire new generation of activists. Powerful political novels can have long afterlives.

Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* represents a piece of literature that is uniquely related to a specific social movement. Mailer goes inside the Anti-war movement, utilizing the genre of New Journalism to write a nonfiction novel. Mailer attends a weekend of protests that were part of the Siege of the Pentagon in 1967. As the story transpires, Mailer goes from observer to protester, even going so far as to get arrested with his fellow protestors. This sets up the connection between the novel and sociopolitical activism, for the nonfictional protagonist becomes activated and is conceived as a moral example to readers.

The nonfiction novel genre that Mailer employs has a unique and compelling impact on readers. Readers of nonfiction novels read “over the edge” of the novel (Lehman 4), which mean they consider what’s happening in contrast to the world as it stands outside the novel. This meant that Mailer’s contemporary readers were apt to reevaluate their view of the anti-war protestors and their cause. In a contemporary context, this reevaluation of the Anti-war movement was necessary since the media of the time tended to by turns deride or ignore the Anti-war movement.

Mailer creates a vivid tale of the weekend of protests with insights into the movement. Furthermore, he explains the physical abuse and discrimination the anti-war protestors faced. Because of this he was able to gain sympathy for the movement. The novel was widely read and critically acclaimed, and all of this helped the cause of the Anti-war movement. But apparently it was inspirational within the movement as well, for Jerry Rubin called *Armies of the Night* “the Bible of the movement” (Manso 461). This illustrates that novels can serve as inspiration for
political action. Finally, *Armies of the Night*, like *Native Son*, has had an impactful afterlife. Because of its documentary style record of the workings of the Anti-war movement, activists can refer to this novel today for insight and inspiration. Mailer recorded social change in action, and this is preserved and celebrated in his Pulitzer Prize-winning story.

In the pages of *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker used the power of narrative to embody her political philosophy of womanism. Even though Walker never specifically mentions womanism, the novel has often been read as a womanist text. Womanism, a term Walker coined, reconstructs feminism to include factors like class, sexual orientation, and race. The African American characters in *The Color Purple* question, engage, and claim the tenets of this black feminism. Since Walker came up with the philosophy of womanism, she ties her novel to this womanist movement which interrupted and amended the overarching Women’s movement.

The protagonist, Celie, has a life that naturally engages with several womanist issues: domestic and sexual abuse, lookism, and sexuality. Celie uses womanist values like sisterhood-brotherhood, self-esteem, and sexual empowerment to become a self-actualized, independent woman. Abused, poor, uneducated, and timid, Celie begins in a subaltern position, but with the help of her female friends she becomes a successful and contented womanist. Walker constructs such a journey so that a any marginalized reader could follow in Celie’s footsteps. Celie’s story becomes activated in a reader who witnesses the story with intelligence and compassion. After reading *The Color Purple*, the reader may look at the sexism and racism in the world around her and feel compelled in some measure to counteract it.

All of the canonized novels of this dissertation are taught and read frequently. The stories of social injustices these books depict have lasted because they are entertaining novels. For instance, *The Jungle*, published in 1906, is still widely read and is a “syllabus all-star” because it
tells the story, not just the facts, of disadvantaged workers (Olsson), whereas a nonfiction book about workers’ rights from the same period would today seem dated. So for political novels like *The Jungle*, its political significance affects future generations of readers. We have seen in this study that novels can be a force for social justice. And there will continue to be forceful political novels that will importantly tell the stories of the disadvantaged, the wronged, the oppressed, and the subaltern.

Even if one doubts the connections these four novels have to social movements, and even if one is uncertain that reading leads to sociopolitical action, it does not change the fact that these novels have moved readers. These four novels opened up conversations on a variety of sociopolitical topics: consumer rights and workplace safety, civil rights, American military imperialism, and feminism-womanism. At the very least these novels participated in an ongoing social conversation. Kwame Anthony Appiah highly values such conversations, especially conversations that take place “across boundaries,” boundaries like race, class, nationality, sexual orientation, gender, political orientation, or faith. Appiah believes that novels are the perfect type of “imaginative engagement” to begin these important and inevitable conversations between reader and novelist, reader and reader or reader and citizen. For this concept to work, Appiah “stress[es] the role of imagination here because the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves. Conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values” (85). In the end, a political novel’s success doesn’t have to hinge on whether it solves the world’s many injustices, but rather on the relevance and openness of the conversations it stimulates. Conversations have been initiated by all of the novels we have explored, and each time the reader opens one of these novels, the discussion begins anew.
Looking towards the future, I hope to turn this novel into a book project. I will extend the scope of this study by exploring an additional novel, Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room* (1977). I will look at how this novel explored, celebrated, fostered and critiqued feminism. I will also seek out connections between French’s novel and the Women’s Liberation movement of the 1970s. Examining *The Women’s Room* will provide a contrast to the ideas of womanism as constructed in *The Color Purple*.

I also hope to further expand the scope of this project by looking at new media. I plan to do research online about each of the novels, looking at how the books are deployed in online communities. This will give me some measure of the afterlife of each of the novels. I can see whether they have spurred websites, testimonials, blogs, and book clubs. I can also seek out how the novels might be addressed on social networking sites like Facebook. I will be asking how a book brings a community of people together. And I will consider whether all of this cyberactivity has enriched the reading experience or activated readers.

I plan to turn this dissertation into a class because I believe it is up to educators to point out political themes and activist moments within the text. It is important that scholars study the political effects of novels. T. V. Reed suggests that there is rich work to do here; there is “the need for ‘articulation’ in the sense of active reading of ‘texts’ into political (con)texts of meaning-making” (20). The classroom is the perfect environment to study the political implications in these novels. I look forward to rediscovering these books and their political import with successive generations of students.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Katharine Westaway was born in Washington, D.C., in the year of the United States bicentennial. She is the oldest of four children. She attended Flagler College and finished in three years with a double major in journalism and psychology. She went on to pursue her master’s in journalism at Northeastern University in 1997. She taught college writing for several years before enrolling in the University of North Carolina, Greensboro’s women’s and gender Studies program in 2004 where she earned her graduate certificate. The following year, she attended the University of Miami where she received her master’s degree in English in 2007. Later that year, Katharine began the University of Florida’s Ph.D. program in English where she studied American literature with a particular interest in how literature intersects with the achievement of social justice. She graduates from the program with her Ph.D. in English in August of 2011.