

BEN-GURION UNIVERSITY OF THE NEGEV
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN LITERATURES AND LINGUISTICS

WHAT MAKES THE MAN: CHARACTER VERSUS LITERACY IN *THE VIRGINIAN*
AND *MARTIN EDEN*

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

MARYA LEVIN

UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF PROFESSOR BARBARA HOCHMAN

APRIL 2006

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Signature of student: _____

Date: _____

Signature of supervisor: _____

Date: _____

Signature of chairperson

Of the committee for graduate studies: _____

Date: _____

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Abstract

This thesis examines two novels published in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, *The Virginian* by Owen Wister and *Martin Eden* by Jack London. Up to a point the protagonists of both novels seem to follow the traditional pattern of "rags to riches." Literacy is usually represented as an important element in this pattern. Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens have studied social, economic and other dimensions of literacy in America up to the end of the nineteenth century. They suggest that literacy is often used "to communicate to children and adults a code for success" (59-60). I believe, however, that the two novels challenge the value of literacy. I show that the driving factor for success is first and foremost the protagonist's essential character.

Robert Darnton and Roger Chartier use the term "protocols of reading" to mean guidelines for how a particular text should be read. Following their lead I examine scenes of reading in *The Virginian* and *Martin Eden* in order to shed light on the role of literacy in both texts. By analyzing scenes of reading I explore the idea of gender and class as factors in literary preferences and in assumptions about novel-reading in the late nineteenth century. I also map the implied audience of the two novels. Finally, reading scenes help me to trace changes in the status of the novel in American literary culture of the early twentieth century.

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In my thesis I focus on two novels published in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, *The Virginian* by Owen Wister and *Martin Eden* by Jack London. Up to a point the protagonists of both novels seem to follow the traditional pattern of "rags to riches," well-known in American literature from the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin through the fiction of Horatio Alger. Literacy is usually represented as an important element in this pattern. I suggest, however, that the two novels challenge the value of literacy. I will show that the fundamental and driving factor for success is first and foremost the protagonist's essential character. In each case it is formed before the rise is attempted. I am going to support my claim by analyzing scenes of reading in both novels.

Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens have studied social, economic and other dimensions of literacy in America up to the end of the nineteenth century. They explore the concept of the "ideology of literacy" in the period. Soltow and Stevens suggest that literacy is often used "to impose the values of one social group upon another" (11) as well as "to communicate to children and adults a code for success" (59-60). There existed a "worldly view that literacy enhanced one's economic opportunity" (72). The ideology of literacy represents the idea that with the help of literacy one can improve his or her life. Literacy was seen as a key to one's moral redemption as well as "worldly success" (Soltow and Stevens 86). According to the ideology of literacy, a person who acquires literacy will be able to socialize more effectively, better his material state and become more civilized. The protagonists of both *Martin Eden* and *The Virginian* seem to undergo a transformation in this direction at the time they acquire literacy. Both the *Virginian* and *Martin Eden* improve their material state and rise in social status in the course of the novel. Literacy is more significant in *Martin Eden* than in *The Virginian* yet only as a tool. It is indispensable in Martin's leaving behind the life of a sailor and engaging in the career of a writer. It also seems to have a redeeming role for the protagonist in making him give up some bad habits that were part of his way of

life before. Nevertheless, as I will show, neither *The Virginian* nor *Martin Eden* can be taken to epitomize the ideology of literacy. I will look at the meaning of literacy in the lives of the protagonists by analyzing reading scenes and drawing conclusions about what the two novels imply about reading practices of the time.

Amy L. Blair writes about "reading up," a phrase by which she refers to a certain practice which is "part of the process at the turn of the century by which class identity was decoupled from solely financial considerations so that a remaking of the self through cultural acquisition (both material and intellectual) became the imperative means of upward mobility" (150). It is clear that "reading up" relates to the ideology of literacy. It is part of a larger concept of literary culture having multiple aspects and variations. It is particularly interesting for the sake of my argument that Blair uses "reading up" as "a way into [...] an elucidation of the [...] peculiarly American [phenomenon]: the dream of class mobility" (150-1). My thesis probes the connection between literacy and the "rags to riches" story.

Robert Darnton and Roger Chartier use the term "protocols of reading" to mean guidelines for how a particular text should be read. Darnton suggests that if we "study contemporary depictions of reading in fiction," we may gain an insight into a history of reading (171). I am adopting Darnton's method, but using it for the exploration of a more particular and specific question--to show how the representation of reading can shed light on the role of literacy in two texts. Then, I am going to suggest some larger implications of literacy and fiction, in particular, paying special attention to the gendered aspect of a genre.

The first chapter is centered on *The Virginian*. The protagonist, a Southerner and a cowboy living and working in the West wins an educated Eastern girl, Miss Wood, and, through marriage and professional development, he crosses class boundaries. In the course of the novel the Virginian develops a growing familiarity with literature, but he achieves a social rise mainly owing to his character while his relation to literacy only plays a minor role. Its major significance is in unfolding the protagonist's character both to Miss Wood and the reader.

Though literacy proves to be quite useful to the Virginian by allowing him self-expression, its significance is diminished when compared to other elements. The protagonist is not basically changed by his reading experiences. My major claim in this chapter is that it is the Virginian's character, formed before he starts to acquire literacy, which makes Miss Wood look up to him and wins her over as well as leads to his worldly success. I am going to prove my claim about the Virginian by analyzing his character in detail.

The second chapter explores the place of literacy in *Martin Eden*. Like *The Virginian*, the novel is centered on one character rising across class lines. Martin who is a sailor falls in love with Ruth from the bourgeois family of the Morses. Like the Virginian, Martin succeeds professionally and socially. In *Martin Eden*, as in *The Virginian*, the protagonist's character is already mostly formed at the beginning. But in the former reading, writing and acquisition of knowledge in general reshape the behavior and the way of life of the hero. For example, when he gives up drinking the narrator says: "He was drunken in new and more profound ways—with Ruth, who had fired him with love and with a glimpse of higher and eternal life; with books" (London 54). Thus, literacy and middle-class culture, in general, play a redeeming role in Martin's transformation.

Paradoxically, however, what allows him to cope with all the difficulties of his rise is the character of a sailor, a working class man. The major characteristic of this character is vigor. This aspect of Martin attracts Ruth Morse from their first meeting on. It is reflected in the protagonist's writing as well as in his account of some episodes from his past. However, unlike the Virginian, Martin undergoes a radical transformation by growing totally estranged from his former working-class environment. At the end of the novel he says that "Mart Eden the hoodlum, and Mart Eden the sailor, had been real, had been he; but Martin Eden ! the famous writer, did not exist" (London 361). Renny Christopher notes that "[o]nce Martin has succeeded, it's too late for him to go back to the working-class world" (84). His tragedy is that he "takes himself out of his original community and joins no other" (85). The protagonist is incapable of overcoming his disappointment and commits suicide.

Both novels embrace a vigorous type of protagonist. This may have important implications for understanding early twentieth century literary culture. By the end of the nineteenth century America had undergone changes in such basic life spheres as technology, economics, and psychology. T. J. Jackson Lears analyzes these changes in much detail and concludes that "[o]rdinary people's livelihood depended increasingly on decisions made in distant cities, on circumstances largely beyond the individual's control" (34). This diminished feeling of autonomy created anxiety.

Writing about neurasthenia, Lears notes that "[i]n literature [...] the vigorous outdoor romance gave way to the modern mode of domestic realism" (49). In their novels, Wister and London restore and celebrate this outdoor vigor, which, according to Lears, many Americans believed had been lost (48). Such vigor, reinforced by the Western setting in *The Virginian* and the sea in *Martin Eden*, also provides a contrast with the feminine images of Miss Wood and Ruth who are both closely identified with literary activities. The protagonists of both novels read well-known literary works by Browning, Swinburne, George Eliot, Scott and others, usually because encouraged by a woman. Both the

Virginian and Martin are attracted to literate women who try to educate them, but that education, as I will show, is of secondary importance to their success and happiness. Although literacy is a necessary stage in the Virginian and Martin's progress, it bears little, if any, emphasis at the end. Thus Wister and, even more so, London undermine the "ideology of literacy." In *The Virginian* literacy is portrayed just as a secondary tool in the protagonist's rise. The cowboy is already mature and competent enough for success before he begins reading the texts recommended by Molly. In *Martin Eden* literacy is overidealized by the hero. Martin is younger than the Virginian and, perhaps therefore, more impressionable than he. Martin's idealization of literary culture inevitably leads to disappointment. Both books clearly show that literacy cannot lead to a happy realization of the "rags to riches" myth unless a person already has some indispensable character traits.

Literacy was an important part of people's life in nineteenth-century America. People understood literacy as a marker of social position as well as of personal achievement. Young Americans aspired to attend school and universities. Education was considered normative for the aristocracy and desirable for the middle class. However, there have always been exclusions, people from the lower strata of society who sincerely aspired to gain knowledge, including literacy. Some of them were self-educated, others attended universities. Owen Wister, for example, belonged to the leisure-class family and "grew into manhood amidst fellow aristocrats devoted to academic education" (Max Westbrook 318-9). Among the self-educated was Jack London who started working in various lower-class jobs at an early age in order to help his family, was an over-aged student at school, attended university, left it and continued education on his own (Irving Stone, *Sailor on Horseback*). Other significant examples of the aspiration to literacy can be found among African Americans, especially from the period of slavery, when black literacy was feared and considered undesirable by most white slaveholders. It was seen as a tool to fight slavery by the enslaved population. One of the most prominent examples of this is

Frederick Douglass who explicitly talks about literacy as about a tool to become a freeman in his *Narrative*.

Exploration of the role literacy plays in the lives of people from the lower class allows for studying the human character and the boundaries of its possibilities. Moreover, since literacy is aspired to till today, it is worthwhile to understand it better as a phenomenon by looking at it from a historical and cultural perspective. Literature, especially fiction, frequently reflects the development of literacy and its various implications.

* * *

This thesis not only explores the class implications of the aspiration to literacy, but also addresses the gendered facet of reading. I contextualize gender assumptions about novel reading in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The eighteenth century was characterized by a view of novels as an unworthy or unserious literature, especially for United States women whose major role was domestic. Women were to bring up the children, teach them, and inculcate values in them. Linda Kerber talks about "[t]he vision of the Republican Mother": "To the mother's traditional responsibility for maintenance of the household economy, and to the expectation that she be a person of religious faith, were added the obligation that she also be an informed and virtuous citizen. She was to be a teacher as well as a mother" (235). Kerber notes that "[n]ovels seemed to offer approbation for precisely the sort of behavior that political and didactic literature had labeled a danger to the Republic" (245). Kerber observes that in the eighteenth century "[a] vigorous proscriptive literature warned of dangers women risked if they persisted in what was said to be their taste for frivolous and romantic fiction" (235). In critiques of novel-reading, frivolity and sentimentality were counterpoised to "rationality and self-control" (Kerber 245). According to Cathy N. Davidson, "[t]he censure of the novel in the late eighteenth century has been amply documented, " and "the main object of censure is

the woman who, not coincidentally, is also the implied reader of most of the fiction of the era" (45). It was supposed at the time that "those who read warnings about the disastrous consequences of reading novels and assurances about the benefits of other types of literature would certainly eschew the former in favor of the latter" (Nichols 2). Yet Nichols points out that diaries and letters cited in her article indicate the opposite: "Female readers read dire warnings about novels and [nonetheless] female readers read novels" (2). As Kerber observes, "[i]n the eighteenth century the novel first came into its own as a genre" (236). As Sicherman notes, in the nineteenth century "[t]he American publishing industry took off, as new genres, including essays, history, travel, biography, and especially fiction, flourished" (*Reading and Middle-Class Identity* 141). In the nineteenth century "[w]omen were [still] the principal readers of domestic fiction" (Sicherman, *Reading and Middle-Class Identity* 150). Ann Douglas writes: "numerous observers remarked on the fact that countless young Victorian women spent much of their middle-class girlhoods prostrate on chaise longue with their heads buried in 'worthless' novels. Their grandmothers, the critics insinuated, had spent their time studying the Bible and performing useful household chores" (10). Sicherman also observes that "[c]onflicts over reading were particularly acute during early adolescence, especially for girls who often read with great intensity" (145). She notes: "Not all parents would have banned *Jane Eyre* [...], but most would have excluded works they considered sexually suggestive or emotionally overwrought: that went without saying" (146). It is especially interesting that "[d]ime novels were a [...] frequent target [of criticism]. Here the issue may have been less overt sexuality than the freewheeling depictions of smoking, drinking, gambling, and the use of vulgar language—habits the middle class wanted their sons to avoid and to which they considered them susceptible" (146). Thus, the skeptical eighteenth century view about novels continued into the nineteenth century, as Sicherman shows: "The growing respectability of fiction did not eliminate fears about its impact on youthful minds. Precisely because novels exercised such a powerful hold on people's imagination, they

must be monitored, a task required as well by the profusion of books 'flooding' the market" (*Reading and Middle-Class Identity* 43).

Sicherman notes that "[a]lthough many of the pejorative connotations of the old association of women and fiction had disappeared by the late nineteenth century, when 'good' fiction had attained the status of a cultural icon, reading was still a gender-marked activity, no doubt because it seemed a relatively passive form of intellectual exercise and one that had no practical outcome" (*Sense and Sensibility* 215). In 1887 Hjalmar Hjørth Boyeson observes:

The average American has no time to read anything but newspapers, while his daughters have an abundance of time at their disposal, and a general disposition to employ it in anything that is amusing. The novelist who has begun to realize that these young persons constitute his public, naturally endeavors to amuse them. He knows, in a general way what ladies like, and as the success of his work depends on their taste, he makes a series of small concessions to it, which, in the end determine the character of his book. He feels that he is conversing with ladies and not with men...

The silence concerning all the vital things of life and the elaborate attention paid to things of small consequence I believe to be the most serious defect in the present American fiction. (616-7)

It is clear from both Sicherman and Boyeson's arguments that late in the nineteenth century, fiction as a genre was considered "feminine" in a pejorative sense, lacking seriousness, either intellectual or practical. George Clark, writing at the very end of the nineteenth century also speaks unflatteringly about fiction: "[t]he preponderance of fiction in literature of the closing decades of this century is the most salient feature in the literary history of our times which will strike the future historian" (670). Novel-reading, according to Clarke, lacks the imaginative "effort and exercise" necessary for cultivation of "a mental faculty" (673). In that he confirms Sicherman's argument, quoted above. Clarke continues:

"[t]he constructive and creative imagination of the reader [of fiction] is allowed to lie torpid. Fiction has therefore especial attraction for persons who are deficient in mental energy and creative powers" (673). The last sentence echoes eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth statements about women indulging in reading novels. Elizabeth Long, writing about paintings and illustrations that represent reading, especially a solitary female reader, observes:

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many images of women reading alone complement those of the serious male reader/writer. Domesticity continues to frame these readers, but now it is less serene than sensuous, frilled, frivolous. The pictures celebrate the sheen and softness of the feminine sphere; they are as decorative as the women, and the books—grown tiny now—serve as the cultural decorations of literacy at once leisurely and trivialized. (182)

The adjectives like "sensuous, frilled, frivolous, leisurely and trivialized" strongly recall characteristic eighteenth and even late nineteenth century descriptions of fiction. Long further writes: "The women themselves are less contemplative than langorous, narcissistically absorbed in imaginative literature that helps them while away the hours. [...] Such women do not read to write, but passively consume...what? Perhaps the novels whose moral effects were so debated one hundred and fifty years ago" (182). The way Long talks about female readers echoes and extends the comments of nineteenth-century critics such as Boyesen and Clarke as well as more recent historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century such as Kerber, Sicherman and Douglas. Thus, it becomes clear that the pejorative association of women and novels was part of eighteenth as well as nineteenth-century assumptions about literacy and literary culture.

Despite the pejorative critique of fiction as frivolous, reading had other dimensions and was much revered by nineteenth-century Americans. The positive perspective on reading found expression in "the ideology of literacy," the term extensively used by Soltow and Stevens. They discuss the moral dimension of the ideology of literacy: "The elevation of

behavior to an acceptable moral level was clearly a commitment of editors, printers and authors. In their efforts to increase awareness of the moral value of literacy, these entrepreneurs and self-proclaimed promoters of public enlightenment attempted to define the functions of literacy in American society" (85). The editors and others, referred to above, "helped to interpret for consumers both the reasons for becoming literate and the proper use of literacy, [... and] focused their arguments on the morally redeeming value of literacy for the individual" (85-6).

Secondly, Soltow and Stevens emphasize that the moral value of literacy was not "presumed to negate [... its] more secular function [...] for individual worldly success" (86). They suggest that "[i]n fact, the moral function of literacy and its value for worldly success were mutually reinforcing" (86). They add that "[i]n the moral consensus assumed by early nineteenth-century promoters of print, the moral and worldly uses of literacy were compatible" (87). Finally, as Barbara Sicherman notes, "proponents of reading could not deny that books could benefit anyone who took them seriously" and this, she remarks, "was a central component of 'the ideology of reading'" (*Reading and Middle-Class Identity* 148).

If there was so much discussion of literacy in nineteenth-century America, then we can expect literacy to play a significant role in the general evaluation of a person's intellect. Looking at this issue is helpful for evaluating *The Virginian* in my first chapter and *Martin Eden* in my second. One example from Soltow and Stevens will suffice. They sum up a few cases implying the widespread assumption "that illiteracy is an obstacle to the development of higher cognitive powers" (6-8). However, they side with Berger who considers such hierarchical view a mistake (qtd. in Soltow and Stevens 8). Soltow and Stevens's "interviews with contemporary illiterates [... suggest] that it is a mistake to attribute greater intellectual capacity to literates by virtue of their being literate" (8). If literacy is not important for the development of one's intellect, can it also be insignificant for moral redemption and secular success? What place does it occupy in one's life as a

whole? An analysis of *The Virginian* and *Martin Eden* as well as comparison between them will clarify at least some of the issues raised above.

Chapter One: "Character versus Literacy in *The Virginian*"

Literacy is marginalized in the representation of the Virginian. It is used just as a device to unfold his natural character to Miss Wood and the reader. It does not play a decisive part in his socioeconomic advancement and/or personal development. Although it is necessary for the protagonist to achieve his ultimate success, eventually the novel clarifies that without the Virginian's strong and noble character, literacy or, in Blair's terms, "reading up" would have been to no avail. Thus, Wister questions the ideology of literacy. Education assumes a secondary role. What is celebrated is not literacy but the Virginian's character. The novel creates "an ideology of character" in a way, whereas literacy takes on a rather "technical" role. The novel gives little respect to the conventional belief that it can surely lead to one's social rise. Would the Virginian be as successful without his innate character which is represented in the novel as truly remarkable and manly? Raising such a question, Wister undermines or weakens the ideology of literacy which, as we have seen, had considerable influence in the nineteenth-century United States. His novel does not present literacy as ideology. Rather, its role in the Virginian's rise is blurred, shifting the focus to personal qualities formed in his character before his acquisition of scholarly knowledge.

Barbara Hochman speaks with a slight irony about the place of the ideology of literacy in the story: "the novel devotes considerable attention to the education of the 'cowboy.' It was partly this emphasis that allowed Wister's novel to be read [...] as a paean to the possibilities for social and economic opportunity in America" (53). However, she says that although "[w]ith Molly's help, and winning Molly as a central goal, he learns to spell, to express himself in writing, and to read—primarily Shakespeare and a great many novels [, ...] the Virginian's desire to learn, like his ability and even his opportunity, only becomes additional proof of his 'natural' superiority" (53). Thus, the significance of literacy in the story is diminished. Though it proves to be quite useful to the protagonist by allowing him

self-expression, it becomes neither his major achievement, nor the major thing in his character that makes Molly sympathize with him. At the beginning of the novel, the Virginian's character has already been formed. My central claim in this chapter is that it is the Virginian's character, formed before he starts to acquire literacy, which finally makes Miss Wood look up to him and wins her over. "Reading up," as interpreted by Blair, is not what mostly helps him to rise. I am going to prove my claim about the Virginian by analyzing his character in detail in order to show that the same qualities that are reflected in his reading were possessed by him before that.

The Virginian's character is wholesome and stable from the beginning, even before he meets Molly and reads literature recommended by her. His literary judgment is frequently different from hers and sometimes surprising and revealing to the girl. Wister seems to imply that men like the Virginian read in order to find in books the reflection of their own manliness, especially the description of such qualities as self-control, competence and others, whereas women read to get a picture of society and to find the echo of their thoughts about love and romance. Wister puts both male and female subject-matter in his own novel. This is significant because thus Wister implies that novels should include both sexes in their audience. Wister's attempt to attract both men and women to his novel questions the surviving nineteenth-century conventional assumption that novels are mainly written for women. In the rest of this chapter I explore, first, the Virginian's character and its reflection in reading scenes. I then devote a section to his and Molly's gender-biased preferences in literature. I will conclude by speculating about Wister's own aesthetic values as far as gender and the genre of the novel are concerned. Thus, I follow Darnton's method of looking at reading scenes for the sake of exploring historical implications. Examining reading episodes in the novel allows me to draw some conclusions about Wister's role in development of the novel at the time.

The Virginian's Character

Character is one's perception of one's self and the world, based on such factors as upbringing and life experience. Although the reader is not told much about the protagonist's past, his self is stable, with a few essential principles deeply installed there. In the next three sections I am going to talk about some of the protagonist's qualities that are especially emphasized in the story. Those qualities are mature manhood, self-control, honor and imaginative creativity. Each of these traits deserves a separate analysis. Above all, I would like to emphasize that these traits are represented as central aspects of the Virginian's character from the very beginning of the novel, even before he meets Miss Wood who helps him to become literate. Scenes of reading serve only to elaborate on qualities that the protagonist exhibits from the start.

The Virginian's Character: Mature Manhood

From the beginning of the novel the Virginian is presented as a man who has chosen his way in life and never betrays his principles. His maturity is often emphasized. Toward the end of the novel the protagonist talks about his growing up in his letter to Molly's mother. This letter makes clear that he has gone through many things and gained much life experience. As he says, his health has "stood the sundries," he has heard many promises along the way, has "seen plenty rough things" and earned a reputation that he is not ashamed to make known to others (Wister 233-4). This letter shows that he has had a hard and not a simple life and acquired a lot of experience; he has remained an honest person and has nothing to be ashamed of. Such a rich experience, as appears from his letter, and such a stable reputation is not likely to have been earned only during the time he knew Molly. My analysis of his character will show that indeed his maturity pre-dates his acquaintance with Molly, and her influence. Literacy brought to the protagonist by Molly

seems to have little to do with his maturity as it is represented in his letter to her mother and his service on Judge Henry's ranch.

Moreover, the protagonist's character is represented as truly remarkable. In the beginning of the novel, he plays a trick with his friend Steve in which they switch their neighbor's sleeping babies at a party. This depicts the Virginian as somewhat childish, playful like a child. As the narrative proceeds, the Virginian does not play such tricks anymore. However, this does not mean that he gets more mature. The protagonist is already mature at the start; he retains child-like qualities at the end. In the final chapter of the book, when the Virginian and Molly are together on his island, there is an episode in which the Virginian tells Molly about things that he keeps in his heart: "the bridegroom husband opened his shy heart deep down" (Wister 310). In this episode, Molly sees the child in her husband: "When he had finished talking, still he lay extended and serene; and she looked down at him and the wonderful change that had come over him, like a sunrise. Was **this dreamy boy** the man of two days ago? It seemed a distance immeasurable; yet it was two days only since that wedding eve when she had shrunk from him as he stood fierce and implacable" (310, my emphasis). The Virginian does not lose the childish part of himself. He just knows when to release it, which makes him even more wise and mature. His character has a remarkable integrity, since no trait that is there from the beginning of the novel disappears.

From the start the Virginian is depicted as a grown-up man despite his chronologically young age. The protagonist's maturity is best seen when he is counterpoised to other characters, especially Steve and Shorty. The former is the friend of his early youth, the one with whom the Virginian plays tricks on the community. At a certain stage of the narrative, Steve leaves the Virginian and becomes a thief, whom the Virginian later catches and is forced to execute. The fact that the Virginian leaves Steve despite their long friendship demonstrates that his principles are very stable and fit for a mature person. The reader knows that the Virginian breaks off his relationship with Steve from his letter to the

nameless narrator, the Easterner, and from the Easterner's response to this letter. After the Easterner finishes reading the Virginian's letter, he reflects: "Concerning Steve he [the Virginian] would say no more than he had written. But it was plain that for some reason this friendship had ceased" (Wister 54). The Virginian's laconic way of relating to Steve in the letter is another proof of his maturity. In the same chapter, the reason is provided by the narrative voice: "the Virginian was supposed to have discovered in some way that Steve had fallen from the grace of that particular honesty which respects another man's cattle" (55). Steve is suspected of becoming a cattle thief and the Virginian parts from him on that ground. This takes place before the Virginian meets Molly, when the girl is only on her way to the West to teach there. This chronology is significant since it clearly shows that the Virginian's character was firmly formed before he met the girl; he was already mature, self-confident and honest.

The juxtaposition of the Virginian with characters who go astray implies that unlike the novel's hero, the problematic characters have not matured enough. A mature person is not as easily tempted as an immature one. The issue of temptation is best illustrated in the novel through the juxtaposition of the Virginian and a young man named Shorty. The latter arrives from the East and is obsessed with making money. Shorty is a kind person, which is mainly demonstrated by his treatment of horses. Nevertheless, he sells his own horse, which is also his friend, and, thus, betrays it. The Virginian understands that Shorty is going astray and tries to dissuade him. Both Shorty and the Virginian are young, but the latter attempts to teach the former how to live, just like a father would try to teach a son who has gone astray. In a chapter called "Various Points" the Virginian tries to convince Shorty to gain money in a fair and respectable way by taking care of the horses on Judge Henry's farm instead of meddling with a character called Trampas who is the main representative of evil in the novel. Trampas heads a gang of men stealing cattle. In his admonition to Shorty, the Virginian sounds like a father speaking to his son:

"[...] I wish I knew somebody that had a lot of stable work to be attended to. I

certainly do for our sake."

"Why?" said Shorty.

"Because it's the right kind of a job for you."

"I can make more—" began Shorty and stopped.

"There is a time coming," said the Virginian, "when I'll want somebody that knows how to get the friendship of hawsses. I'll want him to handle some special hawsses the Judge has plans about. Judge Henry would pay fifty a month for that."

"I can make more," said Shorty, this time with stubbornness.

"Well, yes. Sometimes a man can—when he's not worth it, I mean. But it don't generally last." (Wister 170)

In contrast to Shorty, who is stubborn like a teenager, living in the present moment, the Virginian weighs future consequences. Moreover, the Virginian speaks wisely by not confronting the "hot youth" directly. This scene depicts the protagonist as wise and judicial, in other words, a competent and mature man. In the middle of the narrative the Virginian tries to lead Shorty in the right direction. At this stage, the Virginian has already begun to acquire literacy with Molly's help. She has already provided him with some books. Yet, it is not literacy that makes him behave the way he does with Shorty. The episode with Shorty touches on the same issues as the episode with Steve that occurs earlier in the narrative. The Virginian's valuable qualities, as demonstrated in both episodes, testify to the firmness and maturity of his character. The same qualities of the Virginian's character are reflected in the reading scenes that I will discuss below. However, those scenes do not form his character anew. Rather, they confirm all the qualities that were already present in his character. A detailed look at the reading scenes will clarify this.

The issue of being a mature and competent man as opposed to a careless youth, figures clearly in scenes of reading throughout the novel. The following example is from the

Virginian's letter to Molly: "I have read Romeo and Juliet. [...] Romeo is no man. I like his friend Mercutio that gets killed. He is a man" (174). The Virginian explicitly sides with Mercutio, who is both more witty and more decisive than Romeo. Whereas Romeo is a lover, a maturing adolescent, Mercutio is a competent man who knows what he is doing. As the Virginian says: "If he [Mercutio] had got Juliet there would have been no foolishness and trouble" (174).

Another reading scene that is worth attention in this context shows not only the Virginian's maturity and competence but also his leadership capacity. Sir Walter Scott's *Kenilworth* figures when the Virginian performs Judge Henry's task of conveying two loads of cattle East while commanding a big group of cowboys: "two ten-car trains with their double crew of cow-boys had been given to the Virginian's charge" (95). This task demands much competence, since he commands a group of men. A passage in which the Virginian bids farewell to Miss Wood contains a reference to *Kenilworth* which is relevant to the task before him since it depicts Queen Elizabeth who is famous for her leadership: "Molly and her Virginian sat at a certain spring where he had often ridden with her. On this day he was bidding her farewell before undertaking the most important trust which Judge Henry had as yet given him. For this journey she had provided him with Sit Walter Scott's *Kenilworth*" (Wister 88). This book is mentioned by the protagonist several times further on. On occasion, the Virginian's attention is focused on Scott's representation of Queen Elizabeth. The reader is not told what in particular impresses him in the Queen, but I suggest it is her good leadership. The Easterner addresses the Virginian: "[...] Miss Molly Wood might have some book about French dishes" (94). The cowboy's reaction is the following: "She was raised in Vermont. Hyeh's what Miss Wood recommended the las' time I was seein' her," the cow-puncher added, bringing *Kenilworth* from his pocket. "Right fine story. That Queen Elizabeth must have cert'nly been a competent woman" (94). The Virginian prefers to read books that treat such issues as leadership and competence rather than books about cooking. The Virginian's preferences unfold his

character to a great extent. The protagonist possesses many of the same qualities he likes to read about.

Finally, the scene where Molly and the Virginian read a poem by Browning explicitly relates to the issue of being a mature and a competent man and confirms the Virginian's status as such. Browning's poem describes a heroic soldier. The Virginian appreciates the soldier's brave deed: "If the soldier could ride out of the battle all shot up, and tell his general about their takin' the town—that was being gritty" (218). However, despite his heroic behavior in the battle, the soldier openly tells his chief that he is dying. Such behavior contradicts the Virginian's "notions of masculine courage and modesty" (Wister 219). Therefore, the protagonist does not like Browning. As the narrator tells us, "[t]o Browning they did come back, but the Virginian, though interested, conceived a dislike for him" (219). As he tells Molly, "a man who was man enough to act like he did, yu' see, would fall dead without mentioning it" (218). In the beginning of the poem, the soldier is represented as an ideal hero. The Virginian implies that a mature and competent man must be consistent and never violate his principles. The soldier is not consistent because, acting like a hero in the beginning, he "cries" like a baby in the end.

There is one more poem by Browning that the protagonists discuss and that is worth mentioning since it is designated "a bed-rock piece" by the Virginian (219). In this poem there is a man who needs to settle things "'in the world of men'" before uniting with his beloved. It is noteworthy because of the Virginian's reaction to the poem. The Virginian tells Molly that this poem is a true one, "dropping his eyes from the girl's intent ones" (219). It seems to have reminded the Virginian of his own case. Trampas has spread a rumor that the Virginian "was a thief and a murderer," and the community "also knew that he knew [the rumour]" (291-2). The Virginian faces a dilemma--whether to get on the train with Molly and, thus, not to face Trampas, or to risk his life and Molly's happiness by having a duel with the libeler. As the outcome of the novel suggests, the Virginian would not have been a self-respecting and courageous man if he had not chosen the latter course.

A man must defend his good name, if he has any self-respect. This is what the Virginian explains to Molly:

'Can't yu' see how it must be about a man? It's not for their benefit, friends or enemies, that I have got this thing to do [to fight Trampas]. If any man happened to say I was a thief and I heard about it, would I let him go on spreadin' such a thing of me? Don't I owe my own honesty something better than that? Would I sit down in a corner rubbin' my honesty and whisperin' to it, 'There! there! I know you ain't a thief? No, seh; not a little bit! What men say about my nature is not just merely an outside thing. For the fact that I let 'em keep on sayin' it is a proof I don't value my nature enough to shield it from their slander and give them their punishment. And that's being a poor sort of a jay.'

(298-9)

This passage shows that a man must be able to defend his reputation. Otherwise, he is a man of poor competence and little self-respect. Since these qualities are important for the Virginian, he chooses to fight with Trampas against Molly's wish that he ignore the insult. At the end, Trampas is defeated by the Virginian. The happy conclusion of this episode implies that competence and self-respect are qualities that the author uses to promote the Virginian's character and encourage readers' sympathy and respect for him.

The reading scenes analyzed above elaborate on the same qualities that constitute Wister's notion of manhood, especially maturity, competence, leadership and self-respect. Yet the Virginian possessed these qualities even before these reading scenes figure in the narrative and before he meets Miss Wood and studies with her help. I turn now to some additional traits possessed by the Virginian. These traits, too, are present in the protagonist's character independent of his literacy.

The Virginian's Character: Self-control and Honor

Self-control is an important quality, especially because it relates to manhood. Self-control is acquired through experience and a mature person must certainly possess it. The

Virginian has remarkable self-control. This quality can be best exemplified through the analysis of a few scenes in which he confronts Trampas. In the first of these scenes Trampas is introduced as a character. At this time the Virginian accompanies the Easterner to Judge Henry's ranch. They pass through Medicine Bow and stop at one of the eating houses. In the house the Virginian, his friend Steve, and Trampas play cards. As someone at the inn remarks, the Virginian has recently been in Arizona. Trampas hints that the Virginian has left Arizona because he is an amateur. The atmosphere becomes tenser and at last it reaches its peak when Trampas calls the Virginian names: "Your bet, you son-of-a---" (18). By his reaction to this insult, the Virginian demonstrates the utmost self-control which is especially remarkable because of his youth:

The Virginian's pistol came out, and his hand lay on the table, holding it unaimed. And with a voice as gentle as ever, the voice that sounded almost like a caress, but drawling a little more than usual, so that there was almost a space between each word, he issued orders to the man Trampas:--'When you call me that, smile!' (18)

The fact that the Virginian speaks in a gentle voice means that he is in control of himself and, hence, of the situation. His not aiming his pistol at Trampas immediately testifies to his being confident that he can handle the case. The Virginian acts very soberly in this scene by not rushing to fight with Trampas: "He has handed Trampas the choice to back down or draw his steel" (19). Trampas chooses not to fight. By demonstrating his self-control, the Virginian earns respect from other characters in this scene.

There is an evident dislike between the Virginian and Trampas throughout the story, but every time the former encounters the latter, he demonstrates his capacity to control his passions. When the Easterner meets the Virginian in Omaha, there is a casual encounter between the Virginian and Trampas. At that time the Virginian performs the difficult task of commanding a big group of men and conveying the cattle which I have mentioned earlier. This task demands a lot of responsibility and consideration. Therefore, it is important that the Virginian control his passions. The Virginian is also forced to control his

feelings because, as he tells the Easterner, Trampas works for Judge Henry now. The protagonist's self-control is demonstrated by his appearance, as it is described by the Easterner: "His appearance was changed. Aged I would scarcely say, for this would seem as if he did not look young. But I think that the boy was altogether gone from his face—[...] the boy who had loved to jingle his spurs. But manhood had only trained, not broken, his youth. It was all there only obedient to the rein and curb" (94). The trait of self-control, "the rein and curb," in the Easterner's words, distinguishes the Virginian from a reckless youth. Just before the appearance of Trampas in this scene, the Virginian tells the Easterner his opinion about *Kenilworth*, focusing on the competence of Queen Elizabeth in this story. ["Right fine story. That Queen Elizabeth must have cert'nly been a competent woman" (94)]. The Virginian recognizes that the Queen's competent leadership clearly demands good self-control. The order of the scenes is significant. Just after the protagonist comments on the Queen, the Virginian exemplifies his own capacity for self-control. The discussion of *Kenilworth* not only reflects his qualities of character but also demonstrates that the Virginian is used to reading books in the light of his own standards. The protagonist has very stable principles and uses them to make judgments about what he reads. Scenes of reading merely confirm qualities of character that are already in place, including critical judgment. As my analysis of additional traits (decency and honor) will show, Wister consistently emphasizes that not only the Virginian's character but also his literary taste exist prior to his reading.

Self-control is necessary in order for one to behave in a decent and honorable way. Decency includes knowing how to behave with a lady without showing off. The cases when the Virginian behaves with decency and honor are numerous. Behaving in such a way makes one "a gentleman." According to the OED, one of the meanings of "gentleman" is "[a] man in whom gentle birth is accompanied by appropriate qualities and behavior; hence, in general, a man of chivalrous instincts and fine feelings" (Weiner and Simpson). The OED also says that "gentleman" "[i]n recent use [is] often employed (*esp.* in 'this

gentleman') as a more courteous synonym for 'man', without regard to the social rank of the person referred to" (Weiner and Simpson). In this paper when I use the word "gentleman" with regard to the Virginian, I mean not his class status, but his natural, inherent qualities of character.

When the Easterner first meets the Virginian, he is amazed by the latter's conduct:

Having been sent to look after me, he would do so, would even carry my valise; but I could not be jocular with him. This handsome, ungrammatical son of the soil had set between us the bar of his cold and perfect civility. No polished person could have done it better. What was the matter? I looked at him, and suddenly it came to me. If he had tried familiarity with me the first two minutes of our acquaintance, I should have resented it; by what right then had I tried it with him? It smacked of patronizing: on this occasion he had come off the better gentleman of the two. Here in flesh and blood was a truth which I had long believed in words, but never met before. The creature we call a *gentleman* lies deep in the hearts of thousands that are born without chance to master the outward graces of the type. (7-8, author's italics)

The Virginian is "a gentleman," although he has not been brought up as such. "Being a gentleman" in the cited passage is exemplified by the Virginian's formal and polite treatment of a stranger. The Easterner certifies this as decent conduct. The narrator implies that the protagonist has gentlemanly qualities in his "flesh and blood," i.e. he has it in his character from nature. This passage suggests that one's identity can exist independently of education or conventions. Consequently, the Virginian's "gentlemanliness" or decency is not conditioned by whether he is literate or not, well-read or not. He is a gentleman from the beginning, even before he meets Molly and starts his education under her guidance.

Other examples of the protagonist's decent and honorable behavior include two cases that involve Molly. In each of them, the Virginian is counterpoised to his fellow Southerners and teaches them such notions as honor and decency. In the first case, the Virginian saves Miss Wood while she is crossing the river in the carriage. In this passage,

the protagonist is pictured as a chivalrous man, while Miss Wood's driver is depicted as a rough cowboy: "The ripple came sucking through the upper spokes, and as she felt the seat careen, she put out her head and tremulously asked if anything was wrong. But the driver was addressing his team with much language, and also with the lash" (Wister 63). The Virginian is depicted as a romantic rescuer who uses neither "much language" nor violence in contrast to the driver. At the end of the scene, the former teaches the latter the honorable and decent way to behave with a lady: "She saw the tall one [the Virginian] delaying beside the driver, and speaking. He spoke so quietly that not a word reached her, until of a sudden the driver protested loudly. The man had thrown something, which turned out to be a bottle" (63). Although the driver protests, he understands that the Virginian is right: "The driver drove up now, a chastened creature. He helped Miss Wood in, and inquired after her welfare with a hanging head; then meek as his own drenched horses, he climbed back to his reins, and nursed the stage on toward the Bow Leg Mountains much as if it had been a perambulator" (Wister 63). It is important for my argument that the episode of rescue takes place before the Virginian gets acquainted with Molly. There is no substantial communication between Molly and the Virginian in this episode. Like the episode with the Easterner, mentioned above, the Virginian proves to be an honorable and decent man before his connection with literacy. He is not literate at this stage in his life and in the narrative. The reading that he does under Molly's guidance has not yet begun.

Another passage that pictures the Virginian as an honorable and decent man prior to his literary education occurs when Trampas and others discuss Miss Wood in a disrespectful way:

"Riding and shooting and kissing the kids, sneered Trampas. "That's a heap too pussy-kitten for me.

They laughed. The sage-brush audience is readily cynical.

"Look for the man, I say," Trampas pursued. "And ain't he there? She leaves Baldy sit on the fence while she and Lin McLean—"

They laughed loudly at the blackguard picture which he drew; and the laugh stopped short, for the Virginian stood over Trampas.

"You can rise up now, and tell them you lie," he said. (Wister 68-9)

Trampas and his listeners are represented as "rude" indecent men as opposed to the Virginian who is authoritative and sincere, yet modest, when he teaches them how to be decent gentlemen: "He [the Virginian] stopped and surveyed Public Opinion, seated around in carefully inexpressive attention. 'We ain't a Christian outfit a little bit, and maybe we have most forgotten what decency feels like. But I reckon we haven't forgotten what it means'" (69). This episode takes place at the beginning of the book, before the Virginian starts his course of education with Molly. There is quite a distance between them at this point. When they meet at a barbecue, the Virginian calls her "mam" and her language is also very formal:

'Will you try a turn, ma'am?'

'I beg your pardon?' It was a remote, well-schooled eye that she lifted now upon him.'

(71)

The episodes analyzed above show that even before acquiring literacy the Virginian is an honorable and decent man; these qualities are shown to be part of his innate, natural self. The protagonist has not got Eastern breeding and is surrounded by cowboys who do not necessarily value decency. Yet, decency clearly characterizes the Virginian, and elicits the respect of others. Talking about the Virginian Max Westbrook describes him as "fundamentally decent" (329). The Virginian was not taught the notions of decency, but he nonetheless abides by them. This is so because these notions are naturally part of his character.

As I have shown through the example of scenes with Molly, the Virginian behaves with honor towards a woman. Moreover, he behaves with honor not only towards a woman, but also towards a horse. There is a similarity here because both the woman and the horse are weaker than a man in the West and need the latter's protection. There is an episode in

which a character named Balaam abuses his horse and, after some consideration, the Virginian interferes and puts an end to it. Although another's horse is not one's business, the issues of honor and kindness to the weak are more important to the Virginian than the convention of minding one's own business. The narrator makes the point about this kind of honor quite explicitly. He quotes from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: "He prayeth well who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast," noting that "[t]hese lines are the pure gold" (Wister 179). Further on the narrator makes an observation about the Virginian: "They [the lines] are good to teach children; because after the children come to be men, they may believe at least some part of them still. The Virginian did not know them,—but his heart had taught him many things. I doubt if Balaam knew them either. But on him they would have been as pearls to swine" (179). This passage shows again that some values found in books, such as honor, are inherent in the protagonist's self; they are in his heart. Other characters who do not possess these values will not acquire them by reading.

The Virginian's Character: Imaginative Creativity and Language

Another trait that the Virginian possesses even before he starts to acquire literacy is his imaginative creativity. This quality is present in the scenes showing the protagonist's wit and in some other scenes as well. His imaginative creativity sometimes helps the Virginian to find a solution to problems that involve communication with others. In addition, it enables Wister to more fully unfold the Virginian's character. As Westbrook observes, "the Virginian's verbal ability—a characteristic of the natural hero—is essential to his success" (329). There are several examples of the effect this ability produces on other characters. Westbrook analyzes the scene in which the Virginian "puts down the 'mutiny' and avoids violence by a verbal trick, the famous tall tale of frog ranching" (329). Westbrook implies that in this episode Trampas "is blind to the joke because of greed, and the Virginian's real worth—merely reflected by wit—is his good character and his resultant

insight into the strengths and weaknesses of others" (Westbrook 329). Thus, Wister shows that the Virginian's wit and imaginative creativity enable him to cope with a difficult situation such as mutiny.

Imaginative creativity is also manifested in other scenes in the novel. One such episode concerns Emily, the hen which seems obsessed with hatching. In this episode, the Virginian talks to the Easterner thus: "I'm regular getting stuck on Em'ly,' [...] Yu' needn't to laugh. Don't yu' see she's got sort o' human feelin's and desires. I always knowed hawses was like people, and my collie, of course. It is kind of foolish, I expect, but that hen's goin' to have a real aigg di-rectly, right now to set on'" (Wister 50). The Virginian personifies the hen, endowing her with the human feeling of motherhood. When the hen dies, he treats her as a human being: "I have buried some citizens here and there,' said he, 'that I have respected less'" (52). The Virginian's ability to be compassionate and witty is combined with his imaginative creativity in the personification of the hen.

Another scene that depicts the imaginative creativity of the protagonist in a more serious way occurs toward the end of the novel when he presents his island to his beloved, Miss Wood. The Virginian creates his own world, his utopia: "So many visits to this island had he made, and counted so many hours of revery spent in its haunting sweetness, that the spot had come to seem his own. It belonged to no man, for it was deep in the unsurveyed and virgin wilderness; neither had he ever made his camp here with any man, shared with any the intimate delight which the place gave him" (305). The fact that he creates his own paradise and is able to take delight in nature signifies that he has a "rich" imagination and a sensitive soul: "for many weeks he had planned to bring her [Molly] here after their wedding, upon the day itself, and show her and share with her his pines and his fishing rock. He would bid her smell the first true breath of the mountains, would watch with her the sinking camp-fire, and with her listen to the water as it flowed round the island" (305). This passage is focalized through the Virginian. It conveys his inner feelings, his most intimate dream, to share this place with his beloved. Only a person who

possesses a sensitive imagination can talk about nature the way the Virginian does.

Moreover, his description of the island is not drawn from any of the books that Molly has previously given him to read, which means that he has this imaginative creativity in his nature; it is inherent in his character.

The protagonist's imagination is also shown through his reading. The Virginian reads thematically, for content, which he imaginatively applies to his own life. He judges texts on the basis of the values and behavior they depict. For instance, when the Virginian responds to *Romeo and Juliet* in the letter to Molly, previously cited, he praises the language of the play but immediately goes on to the question of character and manhood: "That is a beautiful language but Romeo is no man. I like his friend Mercutio, who gets killed. He is a man" (174). The Virginian appreciates the language of Romeo, that of courtly love, but it is not primarily the play's poetry that interests him. His imagination is engaged by the central characters and his sympathy is with Mercutio who is more decisive than Romeo (as well as more witty). Still, it is important here that the Virginian is smart enough to differentiate between Romeo's flattering language, and the witty talk of Mercutio. The protagonist is able both to appreciate the beauty and discern the wit. Although he may not be good at spelling, the Virginian does not lack other intellectual or linguistic skills.

The protagonist is aware of various types of linguistic expression. For example, he knows what register is appropriate to use with ladies. As we have seen, the Virginian is counterpoised to his fellow Southerners and teaches them such notions as honor and decency. When he saves Miss Wood while she is crossing the river in the carriage, the protagonist is pictured as a chivalrous man, while Miss Wood's driver is depicted as a rough cowboy through his use of "much language [... as well as] the lash" (Wister 63). The Virginian is depicted as a romantic rescuer who uses neither "much language" within the hearing of a lady nor violence (unlike the driver). The Virginian thus proves to be

not only an honorable and decent man but also one who is competent in changing verbal registers despite his lack of education.

The Virginian is sensitive to such basic linguistic aspects as high poetic language (in the passage about Romeo), or formal versus informal language and verbal propriety (in the case of Molly and the driver). Finally, he knows how to use language to his advantage as in the frog tale. This trait attests to his being in no way inferior and possibly even superior to Molly in respect of linguistic competence. Literacy, then, becomes of secondary importance, constituting a tool rather than a fundamental factor in the protagonist's progress.

The Issue of Gender in *The Virginian*

Besides elaborating on the Virginian's character and emphasizing its major traits, scenes of reading in the novel have additional functions, especially an exploration of novel-reading as a social practice, and an exploration of the relevance of gender to an understanding of both genre and reading conventions. On the one hand, through the Virginian, Wister attempts to challenge some persistent late nineteenth century assumptions about novels and novel-reading, especially the notion that fiction was mainly written for and read by women. On the other hand, the juxtaposition of the Virginian and Molly, with regard to their taste in reading, especially fiction, can shed light on Wister's own literary values and aims. We have seen that the Virginian's character was formed and possessed stable principles and traits before he became a literate person. The Virginian's principles, including his manliness, are reflected in his reading; thus it can be said that his way of interpreting literature is male-biased. Wister's novel reveals significant differences in the Virginian's and Molly's reading habits. The representation of these differences draws attention to the role of gender in readership and literary preferences. Wister seems to promote the Virginian's literary judgment in the same way he celebrates his character.

First, I will look at a few passages which show how the reading taste of the two central characters differs. I end this chapter with some speculations about Wister's attempt to intervene in conventional assumptions about novel-reading.

Molly reads a variety of books, but is especially fond of Jane Austen, George Eliot and Browning. The first two are novelists. When her mother sends her books, she writes to Molly thus: "everybody has contributed from their store,--Shakespeare, Tennyson, Browning, Longfellow; and a number of novels by Scott, Thackeray, George Eliot, Hawthorne, and lesser writers; some volumes of Emerson; and Jane Austen complete, because you admire her so particularly" (Wister 86). Wister is consistent in emphasizing a special fondness for Jane Austen on Molly's part. At the same time, however, he presents a scene in which the Virginian shows indifference to *Emma*, written also by Austen. The Virginian also dislikes George Eliot, as we shall see below.

The Virginian shows an obvious dislike for the kind of novels Molly is most fond of. Yet, as noted, the Virginian finds certain novels valuable. This suggests that although fiction is sometimes judged as a "feminine" form, it is not always so in practice. I suggest that *The Virginian* itself was designed to appeal to both women and men.

Molly is presented as a novel reader, whereas the Virginian forms a contrast to her by not having a special liking for novels. He does not like George Eliot's book because it "talks too much" (86). The Virginian and Molly discuss a novel by Eliot in which the heroes die at the end. The Virginian is sorry for the heroes, but this does not leave as strong an impression on him as it does on Molly:

"Didn't you feel sorry for poor Maggie Tulliver?"

"Hmp. Yes. Sorry for her, and for Tawmmy, too. But the man did right to drown 'em both."

"It wasn't a man. A woman wrote that."

"A woman did! Well, then, o' course she talks too much."

"I'll not go riding with you!" shrieked Molly. (87)

As the Virginian's final remark about the writer's sex implies, the Virginian thinks it appropriate that this novel, with its emphasis on compassion, is written by a woman. The Virginian's remark offends Molly because it changes their conversation from one about the book into an attack on her sex. What does Wister imply by this conversation? Through the Virginian, he indirectly presents the view that, as Kerber puts it, while "[m]en were said to read newspapers and history; women were thought to exercise their weaker intellects on the less demanding fare of fiction and devotional literature" (235). Kerber writes about the Early Republic. However, the conception of fiction-reading as a feminine activity persisted at the end of the nineteenth century. As I have noted in the Introduction, Sicherman observes that "reading was still a gender-marked activity" lacking active "intellectual exercise" (*Sense and Sensibility* 215). William Dean Howells emphasizes that the novel in America was not written just "for men and married women," but is also "for young girls to read" (quoted in Joseph Katz 35). However, in the course of the nineteenth century the novel received more and more serious attention among both critics and readers. Daniel H. Borus mentions "the growing equation of the novel with literature and the new respect for the form" in the same period that Sicherman talks about (111-2). Any comparison of the Virginian and Molly's reading preferences must take the tendencies stated above into the account.

By criticizing George Eliot, the Virginian criticizes Molly as well. Yet, one might argue with my point regarding the Virginian because he himself does like a few novels—*Kenilworth* by Scott and one Russian novel. However, those novels might be the exceptions that prove the rule. Scott's novel is history-related since Queen Elizabeth figures there. As Kerber suggests, history was conceived as male literature. The Russian novella may be an exception because it reminds the Virginian so much of himself; it makes him identify with the protagonist, a "young come-outer" who is different from his family in that he has bigger aspirations in life (87). Like this hero, the Virginian is on his own, taking chances in the West. Thus he reads certain novels—the ones he likes—as if they directly

reflect reality and address his own experience. The Virginian's response to the Russian novel is different from his reaction to *Emma*. He tells Molly: "'As regards that Emma book, [...] the doin's and sayin's of folks like them are above me'" (217). *Emma* seems to him detached from his own "world." The Virginian prefers *Henry the Fourth*. Both *Kenilworth* and *Henry the Fourth* depict history and center on male heroes. It is consistent that the Virginian should prefer reading such works.

When Molly suggests that the Virginian read *Emma*, the protagonist takes the book but soon returns it to her together with *Pride and Prejudice*, both unread: "'How do you like them?' she had then inquired; and he had smiled slowly at her. 'You haven't read them!' she exclaimed.'" (Wister 200). She reacts with excess of indignation because Jane Austen is much admired by her. When she reads *Emma* to the Virginian herself, he falls asleep because it does not appeal to him: "[...] Molly proceeded with *Emma*; slackly at first, but soon with the enthusiasm that Miss Austen invariably gave her. She held the volume and read away at it, commenting briefly, and then, finishing a chapter of the sprightly classic, found her pupil slumbering peacefully" (216). Molly's adoration of the novel is counterpoised to the absence of any interest in it on the part of the Virginian, even though Austen has become a classic. These literary exchanges between Molly and the protagonist clearly demonstrate Wister's awareness of the persistent view that novels are "feminine" reading.

We have noted that Molly resists the Virginian's reading of George Eliot; at the end of the narrative, however, she admires his reading of Browning, which signifies that he is no less proficient a reader than herself, even a better one. As we have seen, the Virginian is represented as an indisputably positive character and a good person. He is made into a foreman, inviting other characters as well as the reader to look up to him. Moreover, he is looked up to by Molly at the end of the novel: "Her better birth and schooling that had once been weapons to keep him at his distance, or bring her off victorious in their encounters, had given way before the onset of the natural man himself. She knew her

cowboy lover, with all that he lacked, to be more than ever she could be, with all that she had" (281). The Virginian is represented as superior to Molly in all respects, including aesthetic judgment and interpretation.

In talking about the Virginian's character, I have shown that he possesses a lot of manly traits and that they are inherent in his nature and repeatedly demonstrated in his reading practices. Wister is consistent in celebrating the protagonist's character both as reflected in his actions, for example, as a foreman, and as reflected in his literary judgment. My conclusion is that the Virginian reads in a conventionally typical "manly" way, paying special attention to such issues as leadership, honor and some others, whereas Molly's taste in literature is characteristic of late nineteenth century women's reading; she looks, for example, for social life and romance. *The Virginian* represents both ways as acceptable ones. Other aspects of *The Virginian* show that Wister assumes novels can appeal to both sexes.

Wister says in "To the Reader" which prefaces *The Virginian* that "[a]ny narrative which presents faithfully a day and a generation is of necessity historical; and this one [*The Virginian*] presents Wyoming between 1874 and 1890" (ix). The Virginian's special interest in some historical novels might reflect Wister's own literary values. *The Virginian*—like its hero's favorite text—not only touches on manly issues like self-respect and honor, mainly in episodes with the Virginian, but also portrays a historical moment. Yet Wister also gives the reader a glimpse of the protagonist's love. Thus, *The Virginian* is aimed at both male and female readers.

Conclusion

Wister dedicates his novel to Theodore Roosevelt. In the dedication he refers to Roosevelt as his critic and confesses to having "changeless admiration" (v) for him. The fact that the novel is dedicated to Roosevelt, especially designating him the novel's critic,

encourages the reader to keep Roosevelt's image in mind. Roosevelt's idea of the "strenuous life" is clearly reflected in *The Virginian*. This fact suggests a conclusion about the role Wister attributes to literacy in the novel. Jacob A. Riis provides the following passage from one of Roosevelt's speeches: "I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife; to preach that highest form of success which comes [...] to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardships, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph" (420). *The Virginian* is a literary elaboration of Roosevelt's statement. This is best illustrated when the Virginian "preaches" to Shorty about the honest way of earning money. This young man chooses what both Roosevelt and the protagonist despise; the life "of ignoble ease" in Roosevelt's terms. In contrast to Shorty and other cattle thieves, the Virginian is neither afraid of danger (the episode when he prevents the mutiny, the episode when he survives after Indians' attack), nor of toil and work as he rises from a mere cowboy to a foreman. The Virginian's image as created by Wister with echoes of Roosevelt stands in opposition to neurasthenia of the American Eastern middle-class, as surveyed by Lears.

Furthermore, as I have shown, the Virginian's character is in the forefront of the novel, and "reading up," as conceived of by Blair, is secondary to it. In other words, the Virginian achieves whatever he achieves, including his becoming literate, owing to his character. He wins Molly and her love, which enables him to enter her elite social circle as well as make a fortune which makes him even more suitable for the Eastern society. Yet, there is no implication in the novel that the Virginian achieves all this with the help of literacy. Rather, Wister places a very strong accent on the Virginian's character and does so throughout the novel, thus, questioning the ideology of literacy. The novel clearly suggests that literacy can help one rise in social status only if one possesses a naturally strong and noble character. Literacy appears to be just a necessary tool in one's progress in life as is evident in the case of the Virginian. I have used the word "tool" on purpose. The

role of literacy is "technical" rather than ideological, as represented in the novel. The ideology of literacy is undermined since the role of education and reading in the success of the Virginian is significantly diminished, moved to the back stage, whereas his manly character always remains in the forefront.

Wister shows that the Virginian and Molly read differently, as we have seen above. He explores these differences and, at the same time, puts multiple elements (for example, both adventure and romance) in his own novel, implying that it is not restricted to either men or women. Both sexes are invited to read it. Since many people still considered novel-reading a feminine activity, Wister's combination of adventure and romance engages and perhaps attempts to revise conventional assumptions about novel reading and gender. Thus, having started my discussion with the role of literacy, I have ended this chapter with speculation about the role of the novel as a genre.

In *Martin Eden*, as in *The Virginian*, the theme of literacy in general, and scenes of reading in particular, occupy considerable narrative space and figure repeatedly in the course of the novel. In *Martin Eden* the protagonist not only acquires literacy but also becomes a successful writer. Martin Eden's character, like the Virginian's, is reflected in his reading and his literary values. It is also reflected in his own writing. Thus, the role of literacy in both novels is two-fold. It elaborates the protagonist's character and opens a discussion about reading. Like the Virginian and Molly, Martin Eden and Ruth seem to display gender differences in their literary judgment. In the following chapter, I start by looking at Martin Eden's character and at the function of literacy in emphasizing the protagonist's major traits. I also pay attention to gender variations in the literary preferences of Martin Eden and Ruth. Scenes of reading assist me in analyzing the protagonist's character as well as exploring gender issues. Finally, attention to Jack London's representation of reading will help me arrive at some conclusions about London's own aesthetic ambitions. These, as we shall see, were different from Wister's.

Chapter Two: "Character versus Literacy in *Martin Eden*"

Martin Eden can be seen as a milestone in the study of literacy in fin-de-siecle and early twentieth century American fiction. The novel abounds with reading scenes. The protagonist undergoes a radical transformation in the course of the book and reading episodes play a crucial role in the process. Reading scenes in fiction are significant, as Robert Darnton has suggested. In *Martin Eden* literacy and education enable the social rise of the hero. This rise, however, does not bring him happiness. On the contrary, it leads Martin Eden to the realization of his spiritual misery. Therefore, literacy indirectly destroys the inner peace of the protagonist and, eventually, his life itself.

I argue in this chapter that Martin is portrayed as a victim of literacy. More strongly than Wister's depiction of literacy in *The Virginian*, London's representation of Martin's experience undermines the ideology of literacy, or the idea of "reading up," as represented by Blair. Literacy changes Martin's mode of life, his habits, his leisure and social environment. Yet, the transformation is incomplete because his character or personal "nature" remains untouched. This produces a conflict without leaving space for reconciliation or a way out. Toward the end of the novel, the hero neither wants to change his thinking nor to return his former way of life. The effect of this impasse is suicide.

Unlike the Virginian who remains true to his initial principles as he acquires literacy, Martin indirectly "betrays" himself. Paradoxically, it is Martin's strong and determined nature that helps him to acquire literacy and even erudition. The crux is that his nature or character was formed in the working-class environment, from which he becomes utterly estranged. Unlike the Virginian who attracts Molly to his world, the world of the West, Martin craves to be immersed in Ruth's bourgeois milieu. In this chapter, I analyze Martin's acquisition of literacy and its effects on his life. I will explain why Martin's quest makes him a victim while the Virginian's experience makes him a "winner." This

difference between the two novels has implications for the role of literacy in the early twentieth century United States.

The difference between the outcomes of the two novels also raises questions about genre. The ending of *Martin Eden* as well as London's choice of subject-matter characterize the novel as a realist one. The conventional romance plot of the nineteenth century novel is violated by the ending of *Martin Eden*. Borus notes: "In place of the traditional love story realists wrote inverted or transformed romances. [...] they almost always included love stories in their novels, but they portrayed the romance in such a way as to debunk the accepted conventions and prevent the lovers from living happily ever after" (113). Martin and Ruth's unhappy love is one element of the story that makes the novel a realist one.

Another issue that places *Martin Eden* in the genre of realism is the focus on class. The protagonist comes from the working-class. According to George J. Becker, "there was [...] a tendency to go downward in the social scale [...] Realism seems to contain a kind of implicit [...] assumption that the life lived by the greatest number is somehow the most real" (25). Class is discussed throughout the novel. Martin comes from the working-class, aspires to fit into the middle-class, succeeds, is disappointed in his success, but cannot return to his former social environment. The scope that the issue of class occupies in the novel suggests realism as its genre: "of course realism should cover the whole range of human experience, should reach to the drawing room as well as the stable, but at the same time most human behavior takes place at a level rather lower than that admitted by sterile principles of decorum" (Becker 25). *Martin Eden* abounds in characters from both the middle class (the Morses' circle) and the lower class (Martin and his sisters).

Another aspect that makes *Martin Eden* a realist novel is that it might be said to be "true to life" for London. Truth in literature was important for London: "only those artists will go down who have spoken true of us. Their truth must be the deepest and most significant, their voices clear and strong [...]. Half-truths and partial truths will not do [...]" (London,

No Mentor but Myself 67). Such affirmations of "truth" in art were made by many writers of realism. William Dean Howells observes: the "highest aim of the greatest novelists has always been to move the reader by what he must feel to be the truth. For the civilized man no representation of events can give pleasure, or fail to give pain, if it is false to his knowledge of himself and others" (quoted in Borus 61). London celebrates not only his hero, Martin Eden, in general, but also Martin's way of writing, in particular. I will show in this chapter that like London, and other realist writers, Martin aspires to showing the truth of life in his writing. Therefore, the protagonist's perspective on genre may lead to speculation about that of London.

Issues of gender, class and genre are intrinsically connected. The issue of "truth" in the realist genre is connected to the issue of gender. Two female characters to whom Martin reads his stories, Ruth and his sister Gertrude, seem to prefer reading something happier and more beautiful than Martin's realist fiction. For Martin it is most important to depict life, as he sees it. This, however, is little appreciated by Ruth. By promoting the protagonist's character and writing as well as by investing his own novel with conventional realist traits, London implies that unlike Wister he particularly addresses the male reader. Borus notes that "realists had in mind [...] to extend full readership to men" (113). According to Borus, "[m]any realists agreed with H. H. Boyesen that the female audience was the bastion of sickly sentimentality, and their complaints about the use of ideal models and their strictures on typicality were directed against sentimental fiction" (111). *Martin Eden* is London's implicit complaint against such feminized fiction as Borus refers to. Therefore, the novel "courts" the male audience.

Martin Eden's Character

Although Martin Eden's way of life and his relation to his social circle is affected by the process of literacy acquisition, his character remains fundamentally unchanged.

Furthermore, it is his character that enables the protagonist to become educated and rise in social status through literacy. First and foremost Martin Eden is a fighter. Moreover, he is capable of coping with difficulties for the course he believes in because of his determination. These two qualities constitute the protagonist's manhood and help him evolve into an educated person. It must be noted, however, that he does not lack creativity in the beginning of the novel. From the first moments of Martin's appearance at Ruth's house, he uses his creative imagination. Martin's manly traits and his imaginative capacity enable him to ascend the social scale. It is most significant for the sake of my argument, however, that all the aforementioned characteristics are possessed by Martin before he gets educated with Ruth's help. Some essential traits such as manhood are demonstrated in the very beginning of the novel, when he first appears at the Morse's place. Although Martin's best qualities are present in his character from the start, they are elaborated through reading scenes in the novel. I analyze the most important traits in detail below.

Martin Eden's Character: Mature Manhood

The first impression the reader gets of Martin Eden is of a rough sailor who cannot accommodate himself to the sophisticated interior of the Morses' house. Yet, despite his awkwardness, the protagonist immediately exhibits some remarkable qualities of his manly, strong character. First of all, Martin is mature enough to grasp the situation: "He was keenly sensitive, hopelessly self-conscious, and the amused glance that the other [Ruth's brother] stole privily at him over the top of the letter burned him like a dagger-thrust. He saw the glance, but he gave no sign for among the things he had learned was discipline" (London, *Martin Eden* 14). One needs experience in order to have such a developed sensitivity and self-consciousness. These traits and his self-discipline will later be indispensable in Martin's quest for knowledge. His capacity for discipline will help him to undergo a lot of privation in the process. He will have "to fight" hunger and other

physical hardships. The nature of a "fighter" can be glimpsed in Martin from the first chapter. When he feels unfit in the Morses' house, he does not give up: "He cursed himself for having come, and at the same time resolved that, happen what would, having come, he would carry it through. The lines of his face hardened, and into his eyes came a fighting light" (14). From the beginning Martin is determined to win this "battle" which is virtually a "class" battle. Eventually, he will become desirable to the middle class environment. But Martin possesses his most important traits when he is first introduced to the reader. At this stage he has not even met Ruth and has not begun to acquire literacy.

In the first chapter, the protagonist encounters culture, in particular, books. He soon arrives at the conclusion that reading literature characterizes Ruth's social class and he becomes determined to fight for the "entrance" into it in order to be closer to beauty which he associates both with the girl and with books. Shortly after Martin finds himself in Ruth's house, his attention is attracted by books: "He glanced around at his friend reading the letter and saw the books on the table. Into his eyes leaped a wistfulness and a yearning as promptly as the yearning leaps into the eyes of a starving man at the sight of food" (15). The protagonist is open and responsive to culture. When he takes a book by Swinburne, Martin is immediately immersed in the text: "He went back to the text and lost himself. He did not notice that a young woman [Ruth] had entered the room" (15). The protagonist immediately associates the girl with high literature: "She might well be sung by that chap Swinburne" (16). Ruth is repeatedly likened by him to books. For instance, when Martin tells Ruth about a stabbing episode from his past and feels embarrassed, the narrator focalizes a passage through him: "Such sordid things as stabbing affrays were evidently not fit subjects for conversation with a lady. People in the books, in her walk of life, did not talk about such things—perhaps they did not know about them either" (18). When Martin shifts to Ruth's kind of talk, as he perceives it, listening to her, he becomes convinced that high culture is something worth fighting for: "Here was intellectual life, he thought, and here was beauty, warm and wonderful as he had never dreamed it could be. He forgot

himself and stared at her [Ruth] with hungry eyes. Here was something to live for, to win, to fight for—ay, and die for. The books were true. There were such women in the world. She was one of them" (19). The protagonist gives up such bad habits as drinking: "With Martin the need for strong drink has vanished. He was drunken in new and more profound ways—with Ruth, who had fired him with love and with a glimpse of higher and eternal life; with books, that had set a myriad maggots of desire gnawing in his brain" (54). Inspired by the vision of the new world, Martin Eden begins to idealize middle-class life and aspire to the beauty and refinement he associates with it.

Finally, Martin becomes determined to study Ruth's cultural world: "Well, he decided, it was up to him to get acquainted in this new world. He had never seen anything that he couldn't get the hang of when he wanted to and it was about time for him to want to learn to talk the things that were inside of him so that she could understand" (21). Martin is decisive. Moreover, the things he wants to speak of are already inside him, he just needs literacy as a tool to unfold them. He sounds most determined when he and Ruth talk about poetry: "Excuse me, miss, for buttin' in that way. I guess the real facts is that I don't know nothin' much about such things. It ain't in my class. But I'm goin' to make it in my class" (21). What allows Martin to feel himself capable of achieving anything he wants is his virile character.

Martin Eden's Character: Virility

Virility, both physical and spiritual, is repeatedly emphasized in *Martin Eden*. It is the foundation of all the protagonist's other qualities. It surfaces in its physical form through his roughness when he first enters the Morse's place with Ruth's brother: "He walked at the other's heels with a swing to his shoulders, and his legs spread unwittingly, as if the level floors were tilting up and sinking down to the heave and lunge of the sea. The wide rooms seemed too narrow for his rolling gate, and to himself he was in terror lest his broad

shoulders should collide with the doorways" (13). Like Molly, who is attracted by the Virginian's virility from the beginning, Ruth is touched by Martin's. The protagonist responds to beauty and literature with all vigorousness of his character: "he stared at the real woman [Ruth], sitting there and talking of literature and art. He listened as well, but he stared, unconscious of the fixity of his gaze or of the fact that all that was essentially masculine in his nature was shining in his eyes. But she, who knew little of the world of men, being a woman, was keenly aware of his burning eyes" (20). Eventually, when Martin shows Ruth his determination to fight for the entrance into her world, she feels the same virility. Martin's determination of character is reflected in his voice and face: "It sounded like a threat. His voice was determined, his eyes were flashing, the lines of his face had grown harsh. And to her it seemed that the angle of his jaw has changed; its pitch had become unpleasantly aggressive. At the same time a wave of intense virility seemed to surge out from him and impinge upon her" (21). Despite Martin's illiteracy, he manages to impress an educated lady: "She knew only that no man had ever affected her before as this one had, who shocked her from moment to moment with his awful grammar" (22). Later in the novel, Martin again expresses to Ruth his desire to study and asks her to guide him: "I want to make my way to the kind of life you have in this house. There's more in life than booze, an' hard work, an' knockin' about. Now, how am I goin' to get it?" (66). He is as determined as before: "Once I get started, I'll work night an' day" (66). The girl is impressed by the Martin's vigor: "Ruth did not speak immediately. She was too absorbed in striving to reconcile the stumbling, uncouth speech and its simplicity of thought with what she saw in his face. She had never looked in eyes that expressed greater power. Here was a man who could do anything, was the message she read there" (66-7). Ruth recommends that he begin studying and corrects some aspects of his grammar. In my opinion, it is nothing but Martin's vigor subsuming his determination that inspires her to participate in his fate.

The protagonist's virility is the most important part of his manhood. It repeatedly figures in reading scenes. For example, when he discusses Swinburne with Ruth, he says: "What I read was the real goods. It was all lighted up an' shining, an' it shun right into me an' lighted me up inside, like the sun or a searchlight" (21). The protagonist is touched by "the bigness and glow of life" (21) in the poet's lines. The imagery of passion or strong emotional upheaval is closely connected to Martin's virility and vigor, the central traits of his character.

Martin Eden's Character: Honor and Persistence

The protagonist's strength of character, not only his vigor, but also his sense of honor surfaces in episodes from his past. As a child Martin often fights with someone called Cheese-Face. The latter was a good fighter and overcame Martin many times. It was a question of honor to win in this fight because other boys watched them: "Cheese-Face had been a little fiend at fighting, and had never once shown mercy to him. But he had stayed! He had stayed with it!" (129). Martin persisted in the name of honor, "learning the long patience, to confront his eternal enemy, Cheese-Face, who was just as sick as he, and just a bit willing to quit if it were not for the gang of newsboys that looked on and made pride painful and necessary" (130). When Martin remembers this episode much later, he reminisces: "I licked you, Cheese-Face! It took me eleven years, but I licked you!" (135).

It is significant that Martin remembers that fight at the period of his life when he tries to get into print but receives only rejection slips. Editors are like his enemy Cheese-Face. When Martin submits his writing to the magazines, he compares the editors to a machine: "He was a good fighter, whole-souled and stubborn, and he would have been content to continue feeding the machine for years" (117). The protagonist's writing career evolves into a fight with the publishing market: "weeks would determine the fight" (117).

Martin is at odds with the prevailing taste in writing. He feels that what is published is devoid of the vigor of life: "He was amazed at the immense amount of printed stuff that was dead. No light, no life, no color, was shot through it. There was no breath of life in it" (116). Martin thinks that writing must be totally different: "He felt the stress and strain of life, its fevers and sweats and wild insurgences—surely this was the stuff to write about! He wanted to glorify the leaders of forlorn hopes, the mad lovers, the giants that fought under stress and strain, amid terror and tragedy, making life crackle with the strength of their endeavour" (116). The episode with Cheese-Face is also full of "stress and strain" (116). Therefore, Martin is motivated to imagine what writing should be by his own past experience.

The protagonist's strength or virility surfaces in his writing, especially his earlier works: "his earliest efforts were not marked with the clumsiness of mediocrity. What characterized them was the clumsiness of too great strength—the clumsiness which the tyro betrays when he crushes butterflies with battering rams and hammers out vignettes with a war-club" (218). The source of Martin's strength is his sailor's "rough" character. This is the same manly aura which deeply touches Ruth.

Martin's story "Adventure" that is both rejected by the publishing system and criticized by Ruth tells about struggle, endurance and ultimate victory: "it was the apotheosis of adventure—not of the adventure of the story-books, but of real adventure, [...] through blood and sweat and stinging insects, leading up by a long chain of petty and ignoble contacts to royal culminations and lordly achievements" (124). Martin puts the vigor of his character as a working-class man, a sailor, Cheese-Face's enemy, into his writing. It is not literacy that creates the vigor in him or his stories. Ruth is touched by the protagonist's "intensity of power, the old excess of strength that seemed to pour from his body and over her" when he reads "Adventure" to her. The narrator makes it explicit that this power comes from the story, although the girl does not realize this: "The paradox of it was that it was the story itself that was freighted with his power which was the channel, for the time

being, through which his strength poured out to her. She was aware only of the strength, and not of the medium" (124). The narrator emphasizes that Martin's vigorous nature is reflected in his story. This nature was formed by his past experience well before his acquaintance with Ruth and acquisition of literacy.

Martin's reading aloud of another story that he has written—"The Pot"—illustrates a conflict of literary taste while leading to differences which we can relate to issues of class and gender. Ruth does not like the story because it dwells on the nasty side of life. Yet, Martin's past is nasty: "in a flashing light of multitudinous detail, he sighted the whole sea of life's nastiness that he had known and voyaged over and through, and he forgave her for not understanding the story" (123). Martin seems to have a broader vision of things than Ruth owing to his past experience: "he knew life, its foulness as well as its fairness, its greatness in spite of the slime that infested it, and by God he was going to have his say on it to the world" (123). This quote is focalized through the protagonist. Its last words sound like Martin's vow that he is going to write about and get his past heritage into print. Ironically, although he admires Ruth, she is not the subject to be written about. Martin and Ruth differ in the subject-matter each prefers to see in literature. This difference supports my emphasis on realism as "truth" earlier in this chapter. For Martin real vigor of character in writing appears when tested by the "dirt" of life, in contrast to it or in spite of it, as it is clear from the following passage which the narrator focalizes through the protagonist:

Saints in heaven—how could they be anything but fair and pure? No praise to them.
But saints in slime—ah, that was the everlasting wonder! That was what made life worth while. To see moral grandeur rising out of cesspools of iniquity; to rise himself and first glimpse beauty, faint and far, through mud-dripping eyes; to see out of weakness, and frailty, and viciousness, and all abysmal brutishness, arising strength, and truth, and high spiritual endowment—" (123)

Like the Virginian's reading, Martin's judgment of literature is informed by his knowledge of life, especially his own past experience. When Ruth brings "In Memoriam" as high

literature in contrast to the low tone of his own writing, Martin counters her with

"Locksley Hall." Finally, he envisions himself a literary hero:

Martin Eden, [...] too, had come up in some amazing fashion from out of the
ruck and the mire and the countless mistakes and abortions of unending creation.

There was the romance, and the wonder, and the glory. There was the stuff to write,
if he could only find speech. Saints in heaven!—They were only saints and could
not help themselves. But he was a man. (123)

As we have seen, *The Virginian* too employs a vigorous hero and a genteel upper-class woman to explore a conflict of literary values. When the Virginian reads a Russian novel, he identifies himself with the hero of the book who possesses potential but does not find understanding in his family: "That young come-outer, and his fam'ly that can't understand him—for he is a broad gauge [...] and they are narro' gauge" (Wister 87). This is what the Virginian explains to Molly and continues to say, blushing: "I pretty near cried when that young come-outer was dyin', and said about himself, 'I was a giant.' Life made him broad gauge, yu' see, and then took his chance away" (87). Like Martin Eden, the Virginian reads through the lens of his past and his own life conception. However, neither Molly, nor Ruth understands the protagonist. Both women are affected by the physical aspect of each of the protagonists rather than by the latter's thoughts. After Martin reads "Adventure," Ruth "was warmed; but she was warmed, not by the story, but by him" (London 124). Likewise, seeing the Virginian blush, Molly "thought that it came from his confession about 'pretty near crying'" (Wister 87). The girl does not really understand the protagonist: "The deeper cause she failed to divine,—that he, like the dying hero in the novel, felt himself to be a giant whom life had made 'broad gauge,' and denied opportunity. Fecund nature begets and squanders thousands of these rich seeds in the wilderness of life" (87).

Martin and the Virginian are alike in that they both have the potential to rise out of nothing, on account of their sheer character. Yet, Molly and Ruth cannot understand them since both women come from a higher social strata which is like another "world" and, thus,

makes understanding others utterly difficult. The girls are like "saints" untouched by the slime of life as opposed to the protagonists who are men with worldly experience. Martin implies in the passage above that literature must be about a man, someone who knows low reality as well as beauty. For Martin it is a matter of honor to include the whole truth of his experience in his writing.

Martin Eden's Character: Imaginative Creativity

When Martin first appears at Ruth's home in the first chapter, he draws the sympathy and respect of the reader by exhibiting a remarkable sensitivity to art and beauty. The latter inspires Martin's imagination to go beyond what he sees. One of the first things which arrests Martin's attention is a work of art:

An oil painting caught and held him. A heavy surf thundered and burst over an outjutting rock; lowering storm-clouds covered the sky; and, outside the line of surf, a pilot-schooner, close-hauled, heeled over till every detail of her deck was visible, was surging along against a stormy sunset sky. There was beauty and it drew him irresistibly. He forgot his awkward walk and came closer to the painting, very close.

(London 14)

This passage is focalized through the protagonist and it is clear that he is sensitive to what he observes. Martin is also highly imaginative. For example, being impressed by Ruth's delicate appearance, he builds in his mind something like a picture based on his former memories: "For an eternal second he stood in the midst of a portrait gallery, wherein she [Ruth] occupied the central place, while about her were limned many women, all to be weighed and measured by a fleeting glance, herself the unit of weight and measure" (16). Martin resembles an artist drawing a panoramic picture in which Ruth is in the foreground. A little detail is enough to set the protagonist's imagination afloat. For instance, Ruth's laughter which Martin compares to silver makes his memory wander to some exotic land:

"Like silver, he thought to himself, like tinkling silver bells; and on the instant, and for an instant, he was transported to a far land, where under pink cherry blossoms, he smoked a cigarette and listened to the bells of the peaked pagoda calling straw-sandalled devotees to worship" (20). Martin exhibits imaginative creativity very early in the novel, long before he begins his self-education with Ruth's help. He has probably been to the distant land he imagines or another one of the kind--so vivid is its description. It is as vivid as a real story about himself which he subsequently tells the Morses: "He brought the pulsing sea before them, and the men and the ships upon the sea. He communicated his power of vision, till they saw with his eyes what he had seen" (29). Martin tells his story as skillfully as a professional artist or writer: "He selected from the vast mass of detail with an artist's touch, drawing pictures of life that glowed and burned with light and colour, injecting movement so that his listeners surged along with him on the flood of rough eloquence, enthusiasm and power" (29-30). Although his speech is rough, it is eloquent and does not prevent his listeners, the Morses, from discerning beauty in the story: "At times he shocked them with the vividness of his narrative and his terms of speech, but beauty always followed fast upon the heels of violence, and tragedy was relieved by humour, by interpretations of the strange twists and quirks of sailors' minds" (30). It is obvious that Martin's imagination is already developed and he needs literacy only to polish his language. Thus, literacy becomes a secondary tool on his way to becoming a successful writer.

Martin is sensitive both to visual and auditory effects, to fine art as well as female beauty. Knowledge and beauty touch him powerfully. When Ruth's brothers, Arthur and Norman talk about subjects of study at the university, Martin hears them mentioning trigonometry, asks questions and is strongly drawn to knowledge. It is significant, however, that his imagination transforms what he hears into something creative:

He had caught a glimpse of the apparently illimitable vistas of knowledge. What he saw took on tangibility. His abnormal power of vision made abstractions take on concrete

form. In the alchemy of his brain, trigonometry and mathematics and the whole field of knowledge which they betokened were transmuted into so much landscape. The vistas

he saw were vistas of green foliage and forest glades, all softly luminous or shot through with flashing lights. In the distance, detail was veiled and blurred by a purple haze, but behind this purple haze, he knew, was the glamour of the unknown, the lure of romance. It was like wine to him. Here was adventure [...] (29)

His imagination takes the protagonist as far as comparing an abstract discipline such as mathematics to a visual landscape and a scene of adventure. Yet, what has a still more powerful impact on Martin is music, as when Ruth plays the piano: "He was remarkably susceptible to music. It was like strong drink, firing him to audacities of feeling—a drug that lay hold of his imagination and went cloud-soaring through the sky. It banished sordid fact, flooded his mind with beauty, loosed romance and to its heels added wings" (31).

Moreover, Martin is able to grasp the charm of something he does not understand: "He did not understand the music she played. It was different from the dance-hall piano-banging and blatant brass bands he had heard" (31). His imagination, however, enables Martin to finally float with the music. He is naturally sensitive to beauty: "he yielded [...] freely to the music. The old delightful condition began to be induced. His feet were no longer clay, and his flesh became spirit; before his eyes and behind his eyes shone glory; and then the scene before him had vanished and he was away, rocking over the world that was to him a very dear world" (31). The protagonist uses his imagination to connect his familiar sailor's world to the world of culture. Martin's mind is highly creative: "The known and the unknown were commingled in the dream-pageant that thronged his vision. He entered strange ports of sun-washed lands, and trod market-places among barbaric peoples that no man had ever seen" (31). Music is like an inspiration for him: "He was harp; all life that he had known and that was his consciousness was the strings; and the flood of music was a wind that poured against those strings and set them vibrating with memories and dreams. He did not merely feel. Sensation invested itself in form and color [...], and what his

imagination dared, it objectified in some sublimated and magic way" (32). Martin is capable of high sensitivity to beauty because of the vigor in his character. When he first reads Swinburne in the Morses' house, the vigor of life is precisely the thing that affects him.

Martin's imagination enables the protagonist to express the intensity of his vision of the world in his writing. After he finishes reading "The Pot" to Ruth and observes her affected state, Martin knows: "He had communicated the stuff of fancy and feeling from out of his brain. It had struck home. No matter whether she liked it or not, it had gripped her and mastered her, made her sit there and listen and forget details" (122). A similar strength penetrates Martin's reading of "Adventure." It produces the same affect on Ruth: "She sat without movement, her eyes steadfast upon him" (124). Martin writes these stories some time after he begins to embark on reading and study. The gift of imaginative creativity was already inside him. The protagonist needed literacy as a tool to learn to express what he kept inside his mind. Martin is observant, sensitive and creative from the very beginning. Therefore, he reacts imaginatively to painting and music at the Morses' house.

The protagonist also has a gift of association, namely the ability of recalling related images in his mind: "His [the protagonist's] brain was a most accessible storehouse of remembered fact and fancy [...] Whatever occurred in the instant present, Martin's mind immediately presented associated antithesis or similitude which ordinarily expressed themselves in vision" (224). Martin's creative mind also leads him to draw inspiration from the work of others. For example, Henley's *Hospital Sketches* serve as a model for his *Sea Lyrics*: "They were simple poems, of light and colour, and romance and adventure" (98). In *Sea Lyrics*, "[h]e was finding speech, and all the beauty and wonder that had been pent for years behind his inarticulate lips was now pouring forth in a wild and virile flood" (98). Both Martin's poetry and prose show virility and color. His acquisition of literacy enables him to express his innate gifts.

When the protagonist reads his story "The Wine of Life" to Ruth he experiences the same emotion which he felt while writing it: "the wine of it [the story], that had stolen into his brain when he wrote it, stole into his brain [...] as he read it. There was a certain magic in the original conception, and he had adorned it with more magic of phrase and touch. All the old fire and passion with which he had written it were reborn in him" (121). When Martin reads "The Wine of Life" to Ruth he "wanted her to feel with him this big thing that was his, that he had seen with his own eyes, grappled with his own brain, and placed there on the page with his own hands in printed words" (122). However, Ruth's reaction to Martin's writing is not what he expects. She focuses on details of style overlooking its content. The difference in the protagonists' literary preferences is related to gender.

The Issue of Gender in *Martin Eden*

The issue of gender in the novel is connected to the issue of Martin's "love of reality" (218) and choice of genre: "His work was realism, though he had endeavored to fuse it with the fancies and beauties of imagination" (218). Reality is not always beautiful and aesthetic. It can be nasty and rough. Ruth and Martin differ in that the former expects literature to depict only positive reality, while the latter conceives of good literature as requiring an inclusive fidelity to all of life: "What he [Martin] sought was an impassioned realism, shot with human aspiration and faith. What he wanted was life as it was, with all its spirit-groping and soul-reaching left in it" (219). The word "human" is the key word in this quote. Martin "denied the worthwhileness of artistry when divorced from humanness" (219). "Humanness" is an intrinsic part of describing reality. To write realistically in Martin's mind means to show humanness or, in other words, life as it is, in all its aspects.

As I have shown, this very aspect of the protagonist's conception of literature is misunderstood or disapproved of by Ruth. For example, before reading "Adventure," Martin says to Ruth: "Don't bother about the little features of it. Just see if you catch the

feel of the big thing in it. It is big, and it is true, though the chance is large that I have failed to make it intelligible" (124). After he finishes reading the story, Ruth comments that the motif "was confused," that "the story [...] is too wordy;" with "much extraneous material" (125). Ruth did exactly what Martin asked her not to do. She looked at the small things—especially style—and was, thus, prevented from grasping what Martin calls "the major *motif*," [...] 'the big under-running *motif*, the cosmic and universal thing'"(125, author's emphasis). Martin thinks that he failed to convey this because Ruth is educated, as opposed to him: "I did not succeed in suggesting what I was driving at. But I'll learn in time" (125). When the protagonist explains that the motif is universal Ruth does not understand his explanation. However, the misunderstanding occurs not because of Martin's inarticulateness, but because of Ruth's limitations, as is clear from the narrative voice: "She did not follow him. She was a bachelor of arts, but he had gone beyond her limitations. This she did not comprehend, attributing her incomprehension to his incoherence" (126). It is clear that Ruth neither grasps the universal and true thing in Martin's story while he reads it to her, nor sees it even when Martin especially draws her attention to it during the discussion that follows. The question is whether Ruth's perspective is related to gender, whether the depiction and understanding of truth in literature, especially fiction, is gendered "male," according to this novel. Analysis of a few other reading scenes will help clarify the issue.

When Martin reads his story "The Wine of Life" to Ruth, the latter pays special attention to such technical aspects as sentence-rhythm, whereas for the former the small things are not important: "The details did not matter. They could take care of themselves. He could mend them, he could learn to mend them. Out of life he had captured something big [...] It was the big thing out of life he had read to her, not sentence-structure and semi-colons" (121-2). However, Ruth does not relate to the main message of the story. Does this happen because as a woman she does not think it is crucial to show life vividly in literature? Another scene, when Martin reads "The Pot" can shed some light on this. Ruth

is deeply touched by the story: "How dreadful! [...] It is horrible, unutterably horrible!" (122). Martin is satisfied by Ruth's reaction because the story "gripped her and mastered her, made her sit there and listen and forget details" (122). He explains why the story is so horrible: "It is life [...] and life is not always beautiful. And yet, perhaps because I am strangely mad, I find something beautiful there. It seems to me that beauty is ten-fold enhanced because it [beauty] is there—" (122). In Martin's opinion, beauty is more vivid through the prism of negative reality. However, the story's closeness to reality makes Ruth object: "Oh! It is degrading! It is not nice! It is nasty!" (122). Martin feels that it is unfair to say the work is nasty just because it depicts the "dark" side of life: "Nasty! He had never dreamed it. He had not meant it. The whole sketch stood before him in letters of fire, and in such a blaze of illumination he sought vainly for nastiness" (122). Ruth says she does not like the story because it is against her perspective on literature: "Why didn't you select a nice subject? [...] We know there are nasty things in the world, but that is no reason—" (122). Martin disagrees with her. He wants "to see out of weakness [...] arising strength, and truth" (123). Ruth further objects: "The tone of it all [the story] is low. And there is so much that is high. Take *In Memoriam*" (123). The difference between Ruth and Martin's literary judgment is clear. The question is what London tries to imply by this difference and whether this implication is connected to gender. A look at one reading scene which includes the participation of another female character, Martin's sister, Gertrude, will finally clarify the issue.

Martin writes a bunch of short stories. A passage focalized through the protagonist informs the reader that "[t]he real world was in his mind, and that the stories he wrote were so many pieces of reality out of his mind" (95). Martin reads his stories to Gertrude and she likes them and is "all worked up" in her own words (96). It is unquestionable that Gertrude is affected by Martin's writing. However, she is disturbed by the fact that one of the stories does not have a happy ending. Gertrude tells Martin: "That story [...] makes me sad. I want to cry. There is too many sad things in the world anyway. It makes me happy to

think about happy things" (96). Gertrude as a reader has certain expectations: "One thing he [Martin] learned, after he had read her a number of stories, namely, that she liked happy endings" (96). Gertrude's reaction is very similar to Ruth's. When Martin reads "The Pot" to Ruth, she is affected by it. Yet, the girl prefers Martin to choose a nicer subject because life is nasty by itself. Although Gertrude is from Martin's class, the working class, and Ruth is from the middle class, their response to Martin's writing is very much alike. This can be explained by the fact that they are women; it is not class but rather gender that can account for the women's shared literary expectations. Another question arises from this point: whose preferences does London promote? This, in turn implies for which audience, male or female, he intends his novel.

Ruth does not accept Martin's realist writing. Gertrude also desires to hear a happy ending as is typical of a romance story but not of a realist fiction. Whom does London side with? The protagonist is much more talented than Ruth: "he had discovered that his brain went beyond Ruth's, just as it went beyond the brains of her brothers, or the brain of her father" (183). When Martin explains to Ruth what the message of "Adventure" is, and she fails to understand him despite her education, the narrator makes Martin's superiority clear: "In spite of every advantage of university training, and in the face of her [Ruth's] bachelorship of arts, his power of intellect overshadowed hers, and his year or so of self-study and equipment gave him a mastery of the affairs of the world and art and life that she could never hope to possess" (183). To conclude, by invalidating Ruth and celebrating the male protagonist, London may be implying that his novel, like Martin's work, will be better appreciated by male rather than female readers.

Furthermore, London's promoting Martin Eden may imply London's own literary preferences, namely his adherence to the genre of realism. *Martin Eden* shares a few basic aspects with the protagonist's writing. The novel discusses class issues and abounds in characters not only from the middle-class, but also from the working-class. Martin has a story "Wiki-Wiki" in which one of the characters has a rough way of speaking. Such

speech is usually attributed to lower-class characters. This is what Ruth dislikes in this story: "that character, that Wiki-Wiki, why do you make him talk so roughly? Surely it will offend your readers, and surely that is why the editors are justified in refusing your work" (279). Martin replies as a realist writer: "the real Wiki-Wiki would have talked that way" (279). Ruth says, "it is not good taste" (280). Martin explains to her: "[i]t is life [...] [i]t is real. It is true. And I must write life as it is" (280). As I noted above, London himself favored truth in writing. Therefore, perhaps, he makes the protagonist of the novel come from the working-class and does his best to depict him faithfully: before his education starts, Martin fights with Cheese-Face, drinks, smokes and speaks ungrammatically. Finally, the unhappy ending of the novel may be another proof of London's endeavor to "write life as it is," in Martin's terms. Jack London is an important persona in the history of American literature. In *Martin Eden* he offers his own way of writing in the genre of realism.

Conclusion

Martin Eden is a realist novel. Its protagonist commits suicide. Martin and Ruth's love story is gradually deemphasized and overshadowed by the struggle and eventual conflict of the protagonist. London first invested Martin Eden with illusions about beauty, knowledge and bourgeois society. According to Renny Christopher, the protagonist "uncritically accepts the idea that everything in Ruth's world is better, more desirable, than anything in his" (83). Martin's illusion is destroyed as the protagonist progresses in the novel. Martin's tragedy is that he was delusional towards the Morses and the bourgeois society they represent. After he learns their negative side, the protagonist undergoes a bitter disappointment, a loss of illusion, and has nothing else to compensate him for his loss. Christopher observes: "Martin Eden [...] is so disillusioned by his entry into the world of the middle class, which he finds hollow, empty, and devoid of meaning [...] that he

commits suicide at the end of the novel" (82). Martin starts out as a working-class sailor and becomes a refined writer leaving his past behind. However, when the protagonist loses all interest in his new image, "[h]e cannot rejoin his working-class world, nor find a place for himself in the middle-class world" (82). The paradox is that the protagonist does not realize "how much his experiences of class—both within the working class and through his move out of it—have shaped and molded him" (85).

As I have shown in this chapter, Martin's major qualities of character such as virility, persistence and others were mostly formed before his close contact with the middle class represented by the Morses. Christopher, referring to the episode with Cheese-Face, keenly observes about Martin's path: "It is his working-class willingness to fight that brings him, ultimately, into the middle-class world" (84). Working-class culture is more substantial and real for Martin than the middle-class world. The former shaped his character which is reflected in his writing, as I have shown in this chapter, whereas the latter as it is interpreted by Martin proves to be the protagonist's illusion. According to Loren Glass, "the material that made him famous was written by the hoodlum and the sailor" (537). Martin himself comes to the gradual realization of this at the end of the novel. Martin tells Ruth at the end of the novel: "I am the same. I have not developed any new strength nor virtue. My brain is the same old brain. I haven't made even one new generalisation on literature or philosophy. I am personally of the same value that I was when nobody wanted me" (London 366). Martin knows that the public wants him "for the recognition" and "for the money" (366). He is also convinced that Ruth, who left him when he was striving to become a writer, returns to him when he is famous for the same reason he is invited to dinners. The protagonist tells the girl: "'Martin Eden, with his work all performed, you would not marry. Your love for him was not strong enough to enable you to marry him. But your love is now strong enough, and I cannot avoid the conclusion that its strength arises from the publication and the public notice" (367). Ruth eventually comes to represent the whole middle-class for Martin: "It was an idealized Ruth that he had loved,

an ethereal creature of his own creating, the bright and luminous spirit of his love-poems. The real bourgeois Ruth, with all the bourgeois failings and with the hopeless cramp of the bourgeois psychology in her mind, he had never loved" (369). The Ruth he loved had been an illusion, what remains is the class she belongs to—the bourgeoisie.

The protagonist's conflict determines the plot of the novel. In *Martin Eden* the love plot gives way to a class plot. This change positions London's novel in the genre of realism. Martin tells Ruth at the end of the narrative: "You would have destroyed my writing and my career. Realism is imperative to my nature, and the bourgeois spirit hates realism. The bourgeoisie is cowardly. It is afraid of life. And all your effort was to make me afraid of life" (368). The novel conveys the message that with its entire education the bourgeoisie has a weak spirit of life. This recalls the problem of neurasthenia in Eastern upper-class society, as summarized by Lears, and noted in my Introduction. At the same time, Martin's position recalls Roosevelt's idea of the strenuous life. Thus, like *The Virginian*, *Martin Eden* reflects a conflict in late nineteenth-century United States' culture.

Although both Wister and London emphasize the vigor and principles of the protagonist, they do it with different purposes. Wister places an accent on the importance of catching the historical moment in fiction but still keeps the love story central, while London celebrates realism in fiction and subordinates his love plot to class issues. Finally, even though both Wister and London imply that literacy is less significant than the protagonist's character which is in both cases the fundamentally moving force, London goes further by denying Martin Eden happiness and even life. Eventually, literacy proves to be of absolutely no avail to the protagonist as his quest for it ends in suicide.

In the late nineteenth-century there was a lot of discussion in literary critical circles about the genre of realism and its "twin brother" naturalism. Writers and critics tried to differentiate between the two. More recently, many critics "find the notion of a normative mode undescriptive of the rich variety of expression occurring within the period" (Ammons, cited in Pizer 14-5). Those critics "believe that all writing between the Civil War and World War I constitutes, in [Elizabeth] Ammons's phrase, various 'realisms'" (Pizer 15). Following this approach, in this paper I do not differentiate between realism and naturalism. Instead,

I draw a line between two unique modes of realistic writing—that of Wister and London. I speak of Wister and London's "'realisms,'" in Ammons's terms.

Although Wister's and London's novels both have some realistic elements, they differ radically. For London it was important in *Martin Eden* to show "truth" which meant to write about the working-class, poverty, violence, injustice and other manifestations of the "dark" side of life including the unhappy end of a love-relationship. *The Virginian* has realistic elements which can also be generalized by the word "truth." However, this "truth" differs from London's and can be more accurately described by two words—authenticity and historicity. London seems to aim at a vivid depiction of particular incidents in the life of the working-class, such as fighting. Wister, in contrast, focuses on a larger context and emphasized the historical particularity of a place and an epoch: "Any narrative which presents faithfully a day and a generation is of necessity historical; and this one presents Wyoming between 1874 and 1890" (Wister, "To the Reader" ix). Wister provides his definition of historical fiction basing it on "the common understanding of the term 'historical novel'" (ix). He says: "*High Wynne* exactly fits it. But *Silas Lapham* is a novel as perfectly historical as is *Hugh Wynne*, for it pictures an era and **personifies a type**" (ix, my

emphasis). Wister attempts to present a type of character and/or personality that can be found in one's contemporary society: "Mr. Howells saw many Silas Laphams with his own eyes" (ix). Wister had spent time in the West and he too attempted to capture what he saw in a specific region. This is realism on both personal and social levels.

London's work can be called social realism; he writes about the working-class and its conflict with the bourgeoisie. He represents this conflict through the progress of his protagonist, Martin Eden. Wister's novel is also focused on his protagonist, the Virginian. However, whereas Wister's emphasis on the protagonist is closely linked to picturing Wyoming, London's accent serves a different aim, namely exposing the middle-class and the idea of class-crossing. What is common to both—Howells, Wister and London—is their endeavor to portray reality as they see it. In Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, when a few characters discuss a sentimental novel called *Tears, Idle Tears*, they end up discussing novels in a broader sense. One of the characters, Sewell, says: "The novelists might be the greatest possible help to us if they painted life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation, but for the most part they have been and are altogether noxious" (Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* 185). Both Wister and London seem to adhere to this idea of proportion.

At the end of the nineteenth century "the writer was to reject the romantic material and formulas of earlier fiction [...] in favor of a realistic aesthetic which demanded that the subject matter of contemporary life be objectively depicted" (Pizer 6). Both *The Virginian* and *Martin Eden* have a love-plot, as we have seen. Yet, although Wister provides a happy ending and London does not, neither love-plot is over-romanticized. The Virginian first hears about Molly, when he reads Molly's message to Mrs. Taylor in the West. The Virginian does not react to this message with an overflow of immediate passion as may be expected in an unrealistic pompous love-story. On the contrary, the protagonist comments on Molly's writing "not knowing at all that the seed had floated across the wide spaces, and was bidding its time in his heart" (Wister, *The Virginian* 39). The Virginian and Molly's

love-story develops gradually throughout the narrative. The social gap between them is acknowledged. Moreover, it is never totally crossed, although it is bridged by the protagonists' love. This gap is emphasized during the meeting of the Virginian's meeting with Molly's family. The Virginian does not answer Molly's family's expectations to see a rough cowboy, but dresses in homespun. As he tells Molly, he adopted this style from one of the Eastern travelers who came to Judge Henry. Nothing extraordinary happens on the Virginian's first visit to the family. It looks like a usual social visit: "Bennington was probably disappointed. To see get out of the train merely a tall man with a usual straw hat, and Scotch homespun suit of a rather better cut than most in Bennington—this was dull. And his conversation—when he indulged in any—seemed fit to come inside the house" (313). Wister is realistic, abiding by the idea of proportion. A fairy-tale about a cowboy and a lady is absent in the episode. He is also realistic implying that notwithstanding the appearance, the social difference between the Virginian and Bennington remains. The narrator addresses the reader thus: "Everybody did their best; and, dear reader, if ever it has been your earthly portion to live with a number of people who were all doing their best, you do not need me to tell you what a heavenly atmosphere this creates" (314). There is irony in the tone of the narrator which makes clear that what happens in Bennington may symbolize a civil meeting between East and West while each keeps its own identity, and some tensions persist.

Finally, the social gap remains in the protagonists' relationship as well. What provides the happy ending of the love-story is not the closing of the gap, but compensating for it by the protagonists' mutual affection. When Molly and the Virginian spend time alone on the island and the latter tends the horses or goes fishing, Molly "would watch him with eyes that were fuller of love than of understanding" (312). The protagonists' worlds stay different, but connected through the love that they feel towards each other. The difference that persists adds a flavor of realism to the novel. Moreover, realism does not deny love. It criticizes exaggerated passion and the dominance of a love-plot.

Martin Eden falls in love with Ruth passionately. Moreover, he idealizes the woman. When Martin first meets Ruth, he associates her with a goddess: "She was a pale, ethereal creature [...] He likened her to a pale gold flower upon a slender stem. No, she was a spirit, a divinity, a goddess; such sublimated beauty was not of the earth" (London, 16). In the beginning, their love-story suggests courtly love. Martin "was oppressed by her [Ruth's] remoteness. She was so far for him, and he did not know how to approach her" (99). Ruth seems inaccessible: "Love itself denied him [Martin] the one thing that it desired" (99). At a certain stage, this "courtly love" is exposed as illusion. Martin's unrealistic feeling for Ruth is transformed. There is an episode in which Martin and Ruth eat cherries and the fruit stains the woman's lips: "For the moment her divinity was shattered. She was clay, after all, mere clay [...] And if so with her lips, then was it with all of her. She was woman, all woman, just like any woman. It came upon him abruptly. It was a revelation that stunned him. It was as if he had seen the sun fall out of the sky, or had seen worshipped purity polluted" (99). This passage, with its exposure of the ideal, is representative of realism. Moreover, it foreshadows Martin's final disillusionment with Ruth, as I have shown in the second chapter. Thus, the novel with its unhappy love-story "parodies" conventional romance and exposes it in favor of the genre of realism.

One important difference between Wister and London's novels is that the latter is more "sarcastic" in his implicit criticism of such disproportioned fiction as *Tears, Idle Tears*. Both writers, however, step away from writing solely in the genre of romance. Wister attempts an authentic representation of his recent historical past. London aims at dismantling the myth of the bourgeoisie and explores class issues. The writers share certain literary values. Their novels imply that American literature may be entering a new era with regard to genre, leaving behind the romance, looking for such broader horizons as sociology or history in the case of Wister and class politics in the case of London.

Both Wister and London write about American life. For Wister, Wyoming at the end of the nineteenth century represents the West, which is uniquely American. In "To the

Reader," Wister writes about the West: "It is a vanished world" (ix). Although it is indeed vanished, it has helped to make America, its history, culture and literature. The Virginian is an **American** hero: "he will be here among us always, invisible, waiting his chance to live and play as he would like. His wild kind has been among us always, since the beginning: a young man with his temptations, a hero without wings" (Wister, "To the Reader" x).

Wister's novel reflects Roosevelt's conception of American literature: "the greatest work must bear the stamp of nationalism. American work must smack of our own soil, mental and moral, no less than physical, or it will have little of permanent value" (cited in Lawrence J. Oliver 93). As Wister notes in "To Theodore Roosevelt," a dedication which prefaces the novel, Roosevelt indeed liked *The Virginian*: "Some of these pages you have seen, some you have praised" (v). The Virginian is the hero who works on American soil, representing the West. He is a type of protagonist with strong manly appearance, noble character and unbreakable principles.

Martin Eden is a similar type of protagonist. However, the novel's implications are in a totally different direction. London seems to expose the "rags to riches" myth, which is typically American. According to Christopher, "Jack London is the anti-Horatio Alger, and the unhappy upward mobility genre might well be named 'Martin Eden stories'" (82). London depicts working-class strife in the experience of his hero. On the contrary, Wister's novel is a story of success. American "'novelists [...] concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American,'" Howells wrote in 1881 (*Criticism and Fiction* 62). Although there are more smiling pictures in *The Virginian* than in *Martin Eden*, both works attempt to depict a specifically American reality.

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מאת : מריה לוי
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ניסן תשס"ו

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בהנחיית פרופסור ברברה חוכמן

תאריך : _____

חתימת הסטודנט : _____

תאריך : _____

חתימת המנחה : _____

תאריך : _____

חתימת יו"ר הועדה המחלקתית : _____

ניסן תשס"ו

תקציר

עבודת מחקר זו בוחנת שני רומנים שיצאו לאור בארצות הברית בתחילת המאה העשרים: איש וירג'ינה מאת אוון ויסטר ומרטין עדן מאת ג'ק לונדון. נראה שעד לנקודה מסוימת הדמויות הראשיות בשני רומנים אלה עולות לגדולה בהתאם לתבנית העלילתית המקובלת של עליית הגיבור "מאשפתות לעושר" ("rags to riches"), תבנית שבה נתפסת האוריינות בדרך כלל כבעלת תפקיד מכריע. לי סולטו ואדוארד סטיבנס, שחקרו היבטים חברתיים, כלכליים ואחרים של האוריינות בארצות הברית במהלך המאה התשע-עשרה, גורסים שלעתים קרובות שימשה האוריינות כאמצעי "להנחיל לילדים ולמבוגרים את המפתח להצלחה" (59-60). אולם אני מאמינה, שבניגוד לתפיסה המקובלת, מטילים שני הרומנים האלה ספק בערך האוריינות. אני מראה כיצד הגורם העיקרי להצלחת הדמויות הראשיות ברומנים אלה אינו האוריינות אלא בראש ובראשונה האופי המהותי של הגיבור. אני עושה זאת באמצעות ניתוח סצנות קריאה בשני הרומנים תוך שימוש במושג "פרוטוקולים של קריאה" כפי שטבעו אותו החוקרים רוברט דרנטון ורוג'ר שרטיה: קווים מנחים לקריאת טקסט בנסיבות היסטוריות ותרבותיות ספציפיות. בהתאם לכך, אני בוחנת את תפקיד האוריינות בשני הטקסטים תוך שימת לב מיוחדת לחשיבות של גורמים כמו מגדר ומעמד חברתי בביסוס העדפות ספרותיות ובעיצוב הנחות מקדימות על תפקידה, אופייה וחשיבותה של קריאת רומנים בארצות הברית של שלהי המאה התשע עשרה. כחלק מתהליך זה אני ממפה את קהל הקוראים המרומז של שני רומנים אלה. לבסוף, אני עוקבת באמצעות בחינת סצנות הקריאה ברומנים אלה אחר השינויים שחלו במעמד הרומן בתרבות הספרותית האמריקאית בראשית המאה העשרים.

