

“The Pernicious Effects of Novel Reading”

The Methodist Episcopal Campaign against American Fiction, 1865-1914¹

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Abstract

From 1865-1920, Methodists took aim at the “danger” of fiction in American society, believing it to be at the root of social problems affecting American society like urban crime, rising divorce rates, mental illness, and the corruption of the American character. Methodists strove to help readers realize the danger that literature posed and to turn readers’ attention to pious literature. Some ministers argued that it was more useful to serve as literary guides, steering readers toward the virtuous. At the same time, Methodism itself emerged in American fiction with such authors as Edward Eggleston, Harold Frederic, and Stephen Crane. Finally, the “threat” of fiction seemed to pass when the Church’s attention was drawn to the new “threats” of cinema and radio in the course of the early twentieth-century.

Introduction

The deterioration of the moral nature is one of the pernicious effects of novel reading.

James H. Potts, Editor, *Michigan Christian Advocate* (1908: 1)

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.

W.D. Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1965: 181)²

[1] Before the arrival of the cultural juggernauts of cinema and radio, the novel stood among the forefront of entertainment options luring Americans during their personal time. Alarmed

¹ The ideas in this article have been developed from my 2006 study.

² Originally published in 1885, the quote is by the character of a Christian minister, Reverend Sewell.

by the novel's influence, Methodists, the most numerous Protestant group in the United States at that time, stirred to action.³ This article will examine how the Methodist Episcopal Church, the largest and most influential of the Methodist communities, focused its attention on the novel and initiated a veritable campaign against it, believing the novel to be a fundamental threat to American society and particularly, to the authority of the Church within it.⁴ The Methodist Church, of course, was not the first Christian community to concern itself with the impact of fiction, but it was, however, in a good position – given both the rising numbers of Methodists and of literate Americans turning to fiction – to attempt to combat the “problem.” This was, in its perspective, a struggle for the very soul of America.

The Pervasiveness and Influence of the Novel

[2] Methodist leaders realized that the pervasiveness of the novel was a testament to the effective development of the American educational system in the second half of the nineteenth century. Theirs was an age “of books and of labor; we live in a generation of readers and workers” (Price). They were concerned, however, that the reading public preferred to indulge in the entertainment of the novel rather than apply its energy to the edifying and instructive reading of the Bible or other accepted Christian works. Methodists were troubled that this choice for gratuitous *leisure* over enriching activity was morally dangerous, leaving readers susceptible to the pitfalls of messages imbedded in the fiction by numbing their intellectual faculties and their motivation for social action (Crane). One Methodist writer succinctly summarized this view: “Today the reading public, vastly widened in the last half century by our school system, demands chiefly the novel, which gives them something for nothing, that is to say, *furnishes entertainment without requiring thought . . .*” (Baker: 538, emphasis added).

[3] An increasingly literate American public bought its fiction in a variety of options ranging from relatively expensive hard cover editions to popular, easily accessible dime-novels, literary periodicals, and pulp fiction magazines. Concerned onlookers carefully noted the enormous volume of this literature, citing 1,400 new works of fiction available in the United States in 1895 and watching this number more than double in less than a decade (Potts 1891, 1903; Townsend; Gilbert). Booksellers eagerly competed for their share of this lucrative market. When a potential best-selling work was released, general stores might sell it at a discounted price in order to draw customers – much to the frustration of bookstores unable to offer such discounts (Frederic: 51-52). As an alternative to purchasing novels, many Americans turned to public libraries where works of fiction accounted for 75% of books in

³ Methodists were divided into a number of ecclesiastical communities. In 1900, the Methodist Episcopal Church had 2,754,000 members. There were 1,469,000 in the Methodist Episcopal, South and another 209,000 in the Methodist Protestant Church. These three branches merged back together in 1939 to form the Methodist Church. Other Methodist communities included African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Wesleyan, Evangelical Association, and United Brethren, among others (see Norwood).

⁴ For an overview of Methodist political and social action, see Bucke et al.; Norwood; note also the interesting comments and suggestions in Hatch. There were voices of moderation on this issue, though they clearly expressed the minority opinion. The best source for the alternative view is the Methodist journal *The Ladies' Repository: a Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Arts, and Religion*; see, for example, Vol. 6/4 (Oct. 1870): 305-06; 6/5 (Nov. 1870): (382-86); 13/1 (January 1874): 27-31; 13/2 (Feb. 1874): 120-23; 13/6 (June, 1874): 454-56.

circulation (Blakeman; Lawrence: 120). Beyond the general public, the novel's looming presence also held sway over the highly educated and the politically powerful, from academics to politicians. Reading Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle* (1906), President Theodore Roosevelt was appalled by the horrid, though profitable, business practices of the Chicago meatpacking industry that routinely transformed the seemingly inedible and unhealthy into food for American consumption. Roosevelt responded by signing the Pure Food and Drugs Act and the Meat Inspection Act, providing Federal oversight to protect American consumers and, in turn, giving birth to the US Food and Drug Administration (for a full account of this drama, see Young).

The Methodist Episcopal Church Takes Aim

[4] The novel's literary hold on the American mind was a source of grave concern to the Methodist Episcopal Church that viewed it as a threat to the American character. Future Methodist Bishop Joseph Flintoft Berry explained: "The influence of reading in the formation of character is so generally admitted . . . that it requires neither elaborate proof nor extended illustration. Next to the society in which we mingle, the books and periodicals we read form the cast of our minds . . . and in fact make us what we are" (Potts 1885: 1).⁵ The novelist's influence rivaled that of the preacher's in shaping American lives: "The reading mind controls the world. . . Writers of fiction have largest access to that reading, ruling mind" (Crook: 438). This influence, then, resulted in a decline in Bible reading as novels competed for an individual's free time. This, Methodists argued, led to a general waning of virtue as the Church's grasp loosened on the lives of Americans, opening the door to a series of ailments from crime to the deterioration of the family (Knowles; Crane).

[5] In the face of this cultural change, an idealistic view of the past emerged in which the Church once had undisputed sway in contrast to the present where "its authority and domination are challenged now by . . . the modern printing-press" (Herben: 897). In his *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Howells expressed it through the voice of the Boston aristocrat Bromfield Corey: "All civilization comes through literature now, especially in our country. . . Once we were softened, if not polished, by religion; but I suspect that the pulpit counts for much less now in civilizing" (108). Methodists refused to accept this cultural shift without a fight, hoping to protect American society and return to the purity of the imagined past. At stake, they believed, was the salvation of the nation and the Church's role in ensuring it.

The Impact on Society: Corruption, Crime, Family, and Faith Problems

[6] This was not seen as some esoteric theological conflict, but a most practical and urgent concern, for novels morally corrupted readers and caused crime and disorder in American communities (Van Dyke). This was a most prevalent and pervasive threat for, throughout the nation, "[i]n every city and town may be found cheap news stands . . . where sensational fiction is freely dispensed to boys and youth, always to their hurt and frequently to their

⁵ For a literary account of the influence of novels, see Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as well as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* where the character Tom Sawyer models his own activities on those he had read in novels. For a more macabre portrayal of such influence in this period see, Stephen Crane's short story, "The Blue Hotel," where a character ("the Swede") was so influenced by reading Westerns that he believed murder and conspiracy lurked behind every face. This belief motivated his action and precipitated his own murder.

ruin.” The flames of moral decay were fanned by the greed of booksellers described as “. . . gray-haired, withered old men, who smoke their pipes at ease on the profits from nickels which innocent boys pay them for printed poison” (Potts 1894a: 1). Here the novel’s depravity was fully exposed by its connection to greed, the corruption of youth, and substance abuse. Furthermore, Methodists equated the effect of the novel on the reader to that of alcohol or opium, causing similar addiction and related problems (Crane: 127-32, 143-44).

[7] The advocacy of Editor James H. Potts of the *Michigan Christian Advocate* serves as an excellent case study of this cause. He broadcast, through this publication, the sentiments of his Detroit Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church as well as those of many other Methodist leaders who viewed contemporary fiction as woefully lacking in moral merit, calling Methodists to “shun every book that is morally tainted” (1891: 1). He championed this cause during his editorial career from the 1870s to the second decade of the twentieth century, regularly publishing front-page editorials that proclaimed the dangers of novel reading and warned Methodists to turn away. The negative sway of the novel, it was feared, might even be greater than the positive influence of Christian community (Hawley: 52).

[8] To persuade readers, the *Michigan Christian Advocate* relentlessly cited the “facts” to make the incontrovertible point that novel reading was socially and morally destructive, for “dime novels ruin boys. Fetid fiction ruins girls. No person can pour over prurient reading matter without hurt” (Potts 1907: 1). The young, not yet fully trained in the discipline of Christian living, were particularly susceptible to the influence of novels. The consequences for youth who read them were “petty crimes and annoying mischief” and the formation of criminal gangs. Potts cited, as an example, the case of a “gang” of eleven, aged 10-16, arrested for theft. What led these boys to vice? The answer was obvious: “They were all novel readers, and were wildly anxious to distinguish themselves as cowboys, pirates, and other famed nuisances.” Novels and youth were a volatile mix with crime being “the inevitable result of permitting the young mind to feed on such unwholesome food. . . We wish the venders of such literature could be reached and punished” (1894a: 1). The damage inflicted on American youth by the printing and distribution of this literature was a “crime worse than the opium-trade forced upon China, or the liquor traffic in Africa” (Whitlock: 834). Parents were warned to monitor carefully the books their children were obtaining from corner drug stores and public libraries lest their own be led astray (Potts 1901d; cf. Tyler).

[9] The *Michigan Christian Advocate* presented the startling “evidence” that “[a]lmost all the boys brought before criminal courts ascribe their downfall to impure reading” and throughout the United States “. . . gangs of thieves organized under rules and compacts worthy only of western bandits, to pilfer stores, woodsheds, and even to waylay other boys. . . The criminality of all such is in every case traceable to dime novels and nickel murder stories” (Potts 1907: 1).⁶ The Methodist Episcopal Church fully assessed the grim nature of this problem even as it seemed to escape the majority of novel readers and advocates. Understanding the “true” impact of this “threat,” the Church trumpeted a warning and proclaimed its intervention

⁶ Cf., Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* where the protagonist’s actions were so frequently (and comically) modeled on those he read in novels.

efforts on behalf of the American people. In 1885, for example, the Detroit Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church warned that this literature's:

pernicious character and tendency . . . is to the mind and morals of the innocent and unsuspecting what slow poison is to the body. It makes a pretense of love for truth, purity and honor, but aims a deathblow at them all and carries with it a suppressed contempt for the proprieties and purities of behavior prescribed by good society. Like an infection in the air, the unthinking are poisoned before they are aware of its presence (Minutes, 64-66).

Fiction was insidious, deceiving the reader under the guise of leisure and inspiration, while supplying instead moral decadence and personal devastation.

[10] This view of the novel and its influence seemed to explain the prevalence of criminal activity in American cities during the late nineteenth century. The more Americans turned from Bible to the novel, the more the dam was breaking as cities were submerged in a flood of sin, now unrestrained (Crane: 145-48). Such belief led many Methodists away from focusing attention and effort on complicated systemic social and economic injustices and related urban challenges. For them, it was a matter of *moral* corruption stemming from reading novels as well as newspapers with their sordid accounts of crime and urban violence (Potts 1888a, 1889, 1894b, 1895, 1905b, 1905c).

[11] The "evidence" against the novel was not limited to the charge that it corrupted youth and created criminals out of impressionable young minds. This was supplemented by the indictment that the novel damaged the mind itself, for it was believed that novel reading caused mental illness. (Crane: 133-35, 142-43; the charge that reading has a negative impact on health has a long history, see Porter). In 1905, *The Michigan Christian Advocate* reported: "The son of a distinguished statesman, given to novel reading, was expelled from college 'as a dolt and a nuisance.' A Massachusetts physician had a patient who became insane, incurably insane, from reading novels" (Potts 1905a: 1). The novel intoxicated readers' minds, deprived them of rest, shattered their health, and made "their prospect of usefulness blighted" (Potts 1905a: 1). The novel did not offer the intellectual stimulus necessary to keep the mind strong and so "[h]aving no vigorous exercise, it grows puny, soft, milky, watery, and tends to decay . . . much of the insanity of the age is attributable to such pernicious reading habits" (Potts 1886: 1). Moreover, the novel was also charged with being a cause of suicide (Crane: 149-50). Since the novel "furnishes entertainment without requiring thought," it could not offer the mental health benefit of the Bible that was at the foundation of Methodist theology and community. The choice was clear: Bible and sound mental health or novel and insanity.

[12] The novel's popularity also presented an obstacle to the Methodist effort to realize its vision of a moral society, for it prevented readers from engaging in the struggle (Crane: 133-35). Novels transformed readers from active participants in society to passive recipients of tall tales. The end result was that readers were turned away from serving as useful and industrious agents of Methodist moral power:

Their habits of seclusion while pouring over fiction tend to permanent retirement from every exalting activity. They live within themselves, and are mere observers of what is going on in the great big world around them. They become so dreamy-like in their waking moments that they can scarcely discern a real live noble man from some imaginary character. . . The wrongs of society, the distresses of the poor and afflicted, pass recognized, because so many of such scenes have been made to pass, phantom like, before the mind of the unreal world of fiction (Potts 1886: 1).

Novel reading, in fact, “weakens the whole intellectual function and contributes to silliness. . . The novel-reader becomes a kind of slave of his habit, crowding his mind with exciting tales one after the other . . . and he lives and dies in a pitiable state of novel-drunkenness” (Potts 1886: 1). If the Methodist vision for a righteous America under its moral direction was to be realized, it required vigorous hands and spirits willing to adhere to the guidance of Christian leadership. The novel competed with this vision, turning readers away from Methodist guidance and call to action by the enticing fancy of fiction (see Potts 1908).

[13] Another accusation leveled was that the novel threatened the faith of Christians. Potts, echoing the sentiments of many Methodist leaders, believed that contemporary American fiction was blatantly anti-Christian. He declared that nearly every recent novel has “either contained a studied sentiment hostile to evangelical religion or a studied silence upon the subject when a positive world needed to be spoken.” Potts rejected the value of the many novels from the category of Christian fiction, since they “for the most part contained either diluted Christian doctrine or such a mixture of error with truth as to render the effect anything but wholesome.” He fumed that novelists only introduced Christianity in order to disparage it or to portray Christians in the worst light through characters “whose every word and deed are a travesty on true piety or an impressive suggestion that all religious profession is the baldest hypocrisy.” Why, he wondered, could they never “make a hero of a robust, square, uncompromising, intelligent, and triumphant Christian” (1901b: 1; see also Heath).

[14] A final indictment against the novel was that it threatened the stability of American society by undermining the family. *Post-bellum* America witnessed a dramatic increase in the divorce rate. By 1880, this rate had risen to one divorce for every twenty-one marriages, by 1900 this was one per twelve, by 1909 one per ten, and by 1916 one per nine (O’Neil). This was a matter of gravest concern to the Methodist Episcopal Church that identified the novel as one factor at the source of the problem. The reading public found in this literature that “[n]ot infrequently the sanctities and obligations of marriage are lightly esteemed, Christian restraints are ridiculed, and the bonds of virtuous society are loosely held or are utterly disrupted” (Hawley: 54). The campaign against the novel was a struggle to save the family.

[15] The novel turned young women away from their responsibilities within the family structure by denigrating the traditional role of women in the family and society (Crane: 136-39). As an example, *The Michigan Christian Advocate* cited the case of one young woman who, while reading a novel in public, attracted the attention of several men. When their conversation turned to matters of homemaking, she replied: “Well, I don’t know much about house keepin’ and such like, but when it *comes to anything litter’y, I’m there.*” Since the social, moral, and mental health danger was so great, Potts believed it was his duty to

castigate a young boy on a train whom he witnessed reading a dime-novel, fearing for the damage inflicted not only to his personal and spiritual health, but also to the well-being of the nation (1894c).

The Minister as Literary Guide

[16] While many Methodist leaders condemned the current literary age, arguing that the great writers like Irving and Cooper had long since past from the American cultural stage (Potts 1884a; see also 1884b), there were others who expressed a more optimistic view. Dr. J. W. Mendenhall, editor of the *Methodist Review*, argued that a more refined approach was needed. An unconditional condemnation of literature, he argued, was not an appropriate or effective strategy since:

The novel is a powerful factor in society, and must be recognized. It would better be employed as an instrument of righteousness than as an instrument of evil. It has promoted reforms, stimulated philanthropies, encouraged moralities. With a broadened mission, it may become the ally of the pulpit, home, and country.

Nevertheless, it must be treated carefully: “Discrimination in reading novels is a necessity.” Thus, the novel was for adult consumption only and not for the young at all. Youth must build up a foundation of knowledge by reading history, poetry, biography, and by travels, rather than expose themselves to the risk of novels. Fiction must wait until the mind is suitably matured and the soul spiritually prepared. Simply put: “The novel may be taken up later in life” (disseminated to the general public in Potts 1888b).

[17] Given the scope of the evidence against the novel, let us consider the Methodist strategies for a solution. Ministers believed that it was their duty to turn reading eyes to more edifying literature (Potts 1894c). The most convenient alternative was the supply of books published by the Methodist press, the Book Concern. Professor W. F. Whitlock explained: “Methodist literature has been a great antidote to pernicious literature. The former has kept the latter out of many homes; often has displaced it where found, and restrained the injurious tendencies of what was allowed to remain” (921). Founded in 1789, the Book Concern’s purpose was to publish theological literature at a reasonable cost for the enrichment of Church and society (Detroit Annual Conference Minutes 1865: 24; see also Potts 1901c; Hawley; Hunt; for an overview on Methodist publishing, see Bucke: III, 129-200; Norwood: 210-22). Methodists viewed this ministry as “one of the most important of the church,” since “the demand for reading matter of some kind is universal,” but “. . . a large percent of the literature of our time is of pernicious character. Novel reading is the rule. The ban which society once put upon the objectionable of this class of literature is quite removed, and much of it is found even in Christian homes” (Detroit Annual Conference Minutes 1885: 64-66).⁷ Some even advocated that it might be best for Methodists to read

⁷ The Book Concern followed John Wesley’s injunction to “[f]eed our people with helpful reading.” See Potts 1901c; see also Berry; Thompson.

only “Methodist books. Every volume that issues from the presses of our Book Concern” (Potts 1901a: 1).⁸ This view did not prevail.

[18] Even with ministers serving as book agents, encouraging the reading and sale of Methodist literature, this supply did not satisfy the American literary appetite as readily as the novel. An alternative approach was for ministers to read fiction themselves (Gilbert). Considering the voracious habit of the American reader, Mendenhall called ministers to serve as literary guides for the public. This would be a more useful and effective way of maintaining influence and steering society in the “right” direction. To help pastors in their effort, the *Methodist Review* regularly published articles on American (as well as international) fiction and authors. Mendenhall rated novels into seven moral categories, ranging from those that denigrated morality to those that encouraged high morality. Many best-selling contemporary American authors were placed in the banned category:

Mary J. Holmes (see *Tempest and Sunshine*), Celia E. Gardner (see *Stolen Waters*), Augusta J. Evans (see *St. Elmo*), Mrs. E. D. Southworth (see *A Beautiful Fiend* and *Spectre Lover*), all American writers, are unwholesome in moral teaching, and to be banished from our tables and libraries . . . [and] avoided as most damaging to moral aspirations, and destructive of moral sensibility (574-75).

Novels whose ethical teaching were nearly absent included those by Henry James, while “novels inclined toward the moral,” depicting acceptable conceptions of right and wrong, were those by T. W. Higginson (*The Monarch of Dreams*, 1886), O. W. Holmes (*The Guardian Angel*, 1867), and W. D. Howells, who were rated as “wholesome teachers of social purity and moral decorum (though all of the “liberal” cast or who are avowed Unitarians). While they may not satisfy the rigid doctrinaire, and may sometimes offend a chaste orthodoxy in religion, they stand as exponents of safe moral views and must be approved” (Mendenhall: 580; see also Townsend). American novelists whose novels “harmonized with the highest ideals of life and the most advanced code of religious morality,” included H. B. Stowe (*Old Town Folks*, 1869), Edward Eggleston (*The Circuit Rider*, 1874), E. P. Roe (*Barriers Burned Away*, 1872), George W. Cable (*The Grandissimes*, 1880), General Lew Wallace (*Ben-Hur*, 1880), Harriet B. Spofford (*New England Legends*, 1871), Frank Stockton (“The Lady or the Tiger?” 1882), and M. N. Murfree (C. E. Craddock, *In the Tennessee Mountains*, 1884). These authors “have exalted the novelist’s profession and illustrated the relations of the novel to moral reforms and philanthropic activity” (Mendenhall: 581). Methodists were realizing that denunciation of the novel was an errant strategy, not only because Americans were avid readers, but also because the work of many contemporary novelists could be used to support the ministry, despite Potts’ protest. Furthermore, Mendenhall recognized, as did many of his colleagues, that theirs was a great day for American fiction and this could be used to benefit the Methodist Episcopal Church, if pastors would only do their part.

⁸ The spiritual value of the Book Concern’s products was well established. In 1856, Peter Cartwright, the famous circuit writer pronounced that the “religious press is destined, in the order of Providence, to give moral freedom to the perishing millions of earth” (187).

Methodism in American Fiction

[19] It was also in this period that Methodism itself emerged in American fiction. Novelist Edward Eggleston (later historian and founding member of the American Historical Association for which he served as President) found inspiration in his Methodist upbringing in Indiana and time in Methodist ministry to depict stories of romance and religious awakening set in the opening years of nineteenth-century Ohio in *The Circuit Rider* (1874) and four decades later in Southern Indiana in his more complex novel, *Roxy* (1878).⁹ Fellow Hoosier E. W. Howe also drew on his Methodist experience and personal life, disheartening as it was, for raw material to shatter the idyllic image of American small town life, including a depiction of a stern Methodist minister who abandoned his family for an extra-marital relationship (mirroring the experience of Howe's own father), in *The Story of a Country Town* (1883).¹⁰ In *Ramona* (1884), a hard-working and devout Methodist family appears in Southern California in Helen Hunt Jackson's novel of injustice toward the Mission Indians, though not completely to the credit of Christian compassion. This did not, however, prevent Methodist approval of this important work (Armstrong).

[20] Harold Frederic put a Methodist minister on center stage in his brilliant novel, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), which portrays the moral descent of a young Methodist minister. Rev. Ware, a talented and ambitious preacher, had his hopes of obtaining his New York Conference's foremost pulpit dashed when the Bishop (thanks to the Presiding Elder) appointed him to a small town church where he was forced to struggle with an undersized salary, a provincial congregation, and tyrannical trustees. Rev. Ware's own narrow outlook was soon broadened by chance encounters with Irish Catholics that led him to re-consider his received Protestant antagonism to Catholicism. Through his interaction with the town's urbane priest, a bohemian young Catholic woman, and a Darwinian scientist, Theron's horizons became radically expanded. This expansion was noticeable, among other ways, in a dramatic change in reading habits as he became a fawning admirer of his new acquaintances' relaxed ability to navigate intellectual and cultural currents that he had never known even existed. In the end, Theron's incredible *naiveté* and *ego* subsumed this awakening and, in the process, destroyed his superficial faith, his career, and nearly his life (on Frederic, see Myers). Other notable writers with Methodist backgrounds were Stephen Crane (*The Red Badge of Courage*, 1895), whose father was a Methodist pastor (and a writer who wrote on issues of Christian living as well as pious short pieces of fiction for children), and Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*, 1906), whose troubled father had been a deacon (on Crane and his father, see Berryman; Wertheim; Gullason; on Sinclair, see Arthur). None of the authors listed, however, were able to remain within the Methodist Episcopal Church.¹¹

⁹ On Edward Eggleston, see Randel. Eggleston's *The End of the World* (1872) moves Methodism near to center stage, though the novel revolves around the impact of the Millerite movement on an Indiana community.

¹⁰ Howe's own childhood reflected traditional Methodist sensibilities about reading. In his autobiography, he reflected that ". . . I recall no other publication [than the *Christian Advocate*] we received; *our* literature was made up of *The Christian Advocate*, religious books and McGuffey's readers" (20; on Howe, see Pickett; Sackett).

¹¹ Sinclair Lewis opens his *Elmer Gantry* within this period of study, but the novel of hypocrisy and gross religious and political manipulation under the guise of Methodist religious piety was published in 1927, beyond the period analyzed here.

Fiction, Pastoral Education, and New Directions

[21] With each passing decade it appeared, to many observers, that American fiction was becoming more and more distinguished. At the same time, some Methodists argued that novel-reading actually assisted the pastor in his duties by improving the minister's mastery of the English language in his spoken and written word (Jackson; Potts 1884c; see also Mudge). By the early twentieth century, Rev. Thomas J. Gregg could declare that the novel was so important that "the preacher must study literature." In addition to the benefit to his pastoral duties, it also "broadened and deepened the sympathies of all men . . . and helps us to acquaint ourselves with men and women" (2). Hence, novel reading inspired readers to fulfill their duty as Christians and as Americans.

[22] By 1904, Methodist Professor Henry Van Dyke of Princeton University argued that the novel was *necessary* to faith: "Christianity needs not only a Sacred Scripture for guidance, warning, instruction, inspiration, but also a continuous literature to express its life from age to age . . ." This included the work of secular novelists whose books revealed "the ethical, the spiritual, the immortal, as the chief factor in the divine drama of sublime, patient faith . . ." Even though the majority of novels, he admitted, were of little value, which he called "works of affliction," Prof. Van Dyke believed that they were no "great or pressing danger," because they would quickly pass away. In a sort of literary natural selection, only the highest quality and most vital literature would survive, outlasting lesser works of literature.

[23] This favorable approach to the novel was embodied in the life and ministry of the Reverend Dr. Lynn Harold Hough (1877-1971) (Beauregard). Hough studied at Scio College in Ohio and then Drew Theological Seminary where he earned his Bachelor of Divinity in 1905 and his Doctorate in 1919. He served as a pastor for several churches in the New York and Baltimore areas, before joining the faculty of Chicago's Garrett Biblical Institute in 1914. In 1919 he was appointed President of Northwestern University and the following year returned to full-time ministry at Central Methodist Church in Detroit, where he remained until taking a position in Montreal in 1928. In 1930, Rev. Hough returned to Drew Theological Seminary for the rest of his career, as Professor of Homiletics and Christian Criticism of Life and then Dean, until his retirement in 1947. Throughout this journey, Dr. Hough was a prolific author (of over forty books) and a champion of the value of literature for Christians. He was recognized as a "masterly teacher of English and American literature" who ". . . discerned their implication for that which he fervently expounded, Christian Humanism" or as he also labeled it, "Evangelical Humanism" (Hough 1925, 1945). He believed that literature was a necessary educational and theological component for the Christian student, since it broadened one's outlook and offered the reader a deeper understanding of the world. With this in mind, he helped to found Drew's first graduate program in the study of religion and literature. Hough exemplified this Christian Humanism in his social concerns and his notable tolerance. He attributed his openness to his love of literature, writing in 1911:

When by some strange magic a book is transformed and becomes a portal, a door to whose lock one possesses the key, and whose knob one may turn – a door through which one may enter into new knowledge, new feeling, new

appreciation of the meaning of men and things – then he begins to feel the lure of books. *The first thing about books is that they take us out of ourselves* (384).

Moreover, the study of literature, he explained, prepares the Christian for engagement of the world's needs: "A man goes out from his library to serve the world as effectively as he may. Armed with the best thoughts from his books, his mind disciplined by long study, he goes forth to work for the men of his own day, giving toil and the full measure of devotion to the tasks of his own time" (392). At the close of our period of study, a Methodist minister could pronounce the novel a stimulant for the social good.

Conclusion

[24] Rev. Hough's career charted a new course for Methodism and literature. His period also witnessed another cultural shift that diminished the overall influence of the novel in the pantheon of American entertainment. Its high profile in the Methodist dialogue declined during the second decade of the twentieth century when its relative sway in American popular culture gave way to new forms of media, namely the cinema and radio, which now began to draw Methodist attention. By 1912, when there were nearly 13,000 movie houses in the country, *The Michigan Christian Advocate* recognized that "moving picture shows have a strong hold on popular attention" (Potts 1912: 1). In the next decade, daily sales of movie tickets reached ten million. This decade also witnessed the birth of commercial radio broadcasting and by the 1930s nearly every American family owned a radio. As the attention of the Methodist Episcopal Church became drawn to new – far more popular – challenges, it appeared that the threat of the novel had largely passed.

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