

Introduction

Poor White Southerners in the American Imaginary

In its February 1891 issue, the *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* laid before its readers “a race problem.” Or, at least, so declared the caption for a pen-and-ink drawing of a man by E. W. Kemble, one of the magazine’s staff illustrators. Reflecting on his career decades later, Kemble observed, “I was established as a delineator of the South, the Negro being my specialty,” by working at the *Century* and illustrating stories by Mark Twain, George Washington Cable, Thomas Nelson Page, and other southern writers.¹ Racism and racial injustice were on the minds of many Americans at the end of the Gilded Age. The year before Kemble’s “race problem” appeared in the *Century*, Frederick Douglass delivered a speech about southern efforts to curtail the civil rights of African Americans that he titled, simply, “The Race Problem.” In 1892, the year after Kemble’s illustration was published, activist and educator Anna Julia Cooper included a chapter called “Has America a Race Problem? If So, How Can it Best Be Solved?” in her book *A Voice from the South*. That same year, Marietta Holley – an American humorist sometimes referred to as the female Mark Twain – added to her popular book series featuring the wit and wisdom of an upstate New Yorker named Samantha by releasing a volume in which her eponymous heroine weighs in on race relations in the postbellum South. Its title? *Samantha on the Race Problem*.

Yet E. W. Kemble was not thinking about Jim Crow segregation, or disenfranchisement, or even lynching when he put pen to paper in 1890. Instead of addressing what W. E. B. Du Bois famously termed “the problem of the color-line,” the artist took on an intraracial issue.² Kemble’s “race problem” takes shape on the page as a poor white southerner (Figure 0.1). *Century* subscribers were primed to recognize the shabby, slouching figure before them as a familiar – and deeply problematic – poor white type. The magazine’s readers had been looking at Kemble’s pictures of poor whites in the South for six years – ever since his renderings of another fictional poor white southerner, Huckleberry Finn, captured the fancy of



A RACE PROBLEM.

Figure 0.1 A drawing by E. W. Kemble illustrating, according to the caption, “a race problem.” Published in the February 1891 issue of the *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* as part of Clare de Graffenried’s essay “The Georgia Cracker in the Cotton Mills.”

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editors at the *Century* and earned him a spot in the magazine's art department.³ In illustrations from his early days as a staff illustrator at the *Century*, Kemble's poor white southerners are Huck Finn's kissing cousins. For instance, a picture of a poor white Alabamian for "Hodson's Hide-Out," a local color story published in March 1885, closely resembles Kemble's frontispiece illustration of Huck Finn. Each figure stands at a forty-five-degree angle to the viewer with a rifle held vertically in his left hand and sports a battered hat, homespun shirt, and ragged pants.

As his work continued in this vein, Kemble developed a repertoire of visual signifiers of poor white identity that foregrounded characteristics regarded by some middle- and upper-class observers as markers of laziness, genetic inferiority, and ignorance. In his drawings, poor white men regularly have unkempt hair, scraggly beards, and worse-for-wear hats – attributes suggesting not only impoverishment but also slovenliness. Poor white southerners in the American imaginary routinely embrace anti-intellectualism, and Kemble's illustrations portray this by way of facial expressions that are sometimes perplexed, other times blank. The artist's poor white southern women are unfashionable from the tops of their slat bonnets to the bottoms of their ill-fitting brogans – or their bare feet. Their bodies are often distressingly gaunt, and occasionally impossibly fleshy, but rarely just like the physiques of more prosperous women in drawings by Kemble and other artists. In illustration after illustration, both sexes have their vice of choice – whiskey for men, tobacco for women – ready at hand.

Kemble's drawings jibe with local color writers' depictions of poor white southerners. In his stories about the denizens of Georgia's piney woods, Joel Chandler Harris portrays poor white people who are "steeped in poverty of the most desolate description."⁴ Again and again, local colorists attribute this destitution to individual rather than institutional factors, chalking up characters' privation to laziness. In one of Harry Stillwell Edwards's stories, an "air of listlessness" hangs around poor white people.⁵ In a tale by Mary Noailles Murfree, a poor white pair consists of a "slovenly, indolent woman" married to a "listless" man with "slow brains" and "dull," "listless" eyes.⁶ Third-person narrators and better-off characters frequently point to the sorry state of poor white southerners' homes and habiliments as evidence of their lassitude. As one middle-class white girl rather superciliously observes after successfully "mastering a natural repugnance to so much uncleanness" in order to take on the task of reforming one of her poor white neighbors, "evidently cleanliness is not looked upon as next to godliness among the crackers."⁷

Local color stories are not the only late nineteenth-century literary works that treat poor white southern identity as a problem in need of a solution. Scholars have long recognized how *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* speaks to its post-Reconstruction publication context by addressing racism and black disenfranchisement under the burgeoning Jim Crow system.⁸ But the novel also engages with its era's classism by taking on the emerging American eugenics movement.⁹ Eugenics offered "a way of reading the structure of social classes onto nature" by attributing differences in economic status to heredity rather than environment.¹⁰ American eugenicists believed that poor white people living in rural areas represented a grave internal threat to the white race. As criminologist Nicole Hahn Rafter has observed, the social menace conjured by the bulk of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century eugenic analyses is "the degenerate hillbilly family, dwelling in filthy shacks and spawning endless generations of paupers, criminals, and imbeciles."¹¹ Pap Finn's defining characteristics – intemperance, pauperism, vagabondage, and criminality ("take a chicken when you get a chance" is one of the few lessons Huck learns from his father) – represent the attributes that most fret eugenicists.¹² Yet Twain's novel defies eugenics, staging nurture's triumph over nature in Huck's maturation by making him more like Jim, his adoptive father, than Pap, his biological dad.

Even writers chiefly interested in African American life call attention to poor white southerners. In his 1890 speech to the Bethel Literary and Historical Association in Washington, DC, titled "The Race Problem," Frederick Douglass challenged the arguments against black citizenship and voting rights that some southern politicians and journalists were trumpeting. The southerners fulminating against less educated people's participation in the democratic process, Douglass observed, were the same ones who denied schooling to large swaths of the region's populace, because "it has been the policy of the ruling class there to oppose education not only for the blacks, but for the poor whites as well."¹³ Humorist Marietta Holley also took up the issue of poor white southerners' voting rights in *Samantha on the Race Problem* (1892). Advocating for middle-class female suffrage, Holley's eponymous heroine argues that voting rights should be granted on the basis of education, not race or sex. Denying the vote to the "low, ignorant ones of the white people" would, Samantha explains, both protect society from that group's political will and inspire some poor white people to better themselves as a way to earn the right to vote.¹⁴ The accompanying illustration, produced by Kemble, shows a poor white man who looks nearly identical to the fellow who incarnated the "race problem" in the *Century* the year before (Figure 0.2).



POOR WHITE.

Figure 0.2 E. W. Kemble's illustration of a "poor white." Published in *Samantha on the Race Problem* (1892), by Marietta Holley.

Foils and Forms

As the foregoing examples suggest, poor white southerners figure prominently in Gilded Age American literature. Yet literary criticism offers few ideas about how to make sense of late nineteenth-century writers' interest in poor white southerners. Historians have long studied the South's poor whites.¹⁵ Social scientists frequently analyze poor white people.¹⁶ The election of Donald Trump in 2016 prompted a flurry of interest in poor (and working-class) white Americans, including much-discussed books purporting to lay bare the mind of the poor white southerner.¹⁷ These efforts to grasp poor white southerners' role in the American electorate have not been matched by attempts to understand their role in the American imaginary.

More often than not, literary scholars erase poor white literary characters and misread fictional treatments of cross-class conflicts among white people. In his field-defining work on American literary regionalism, Richard Brodhead accounts for the hordes of poor white southerners in local color stories by reading them as stand-ins for northern cities' new immigrant communities. In local color tales, Brodhead asserts, "Appalachian hillbillies [substitute] for Russian Jews and Chinese" people who had recently left their

countries of origin and settled in the United States.¹⁸ In a much-discussed book, Shelley Fisher Fishkin takes up Huckleberry Finn, arguably the most famous poor white southerner in American letters, and asks, *Was Huck Black?*¹⁹ For his part, Twain suggested that he was not. In his autobiography, Twain wrote that “Huckleberry Finn” was Tom Blankenship,” an “ignorant, unwashed, insufficiently fed” poor white boy he knew as a child in Hannibal, Missouri.²⁰

Reading poor white characters out of the works in which they appear is not confined to studies of late nineteenth-century literature. Nor is it unique to analyses of southern fiction. In 2000, a literary critic made a splash by arguing that Jazz Age literature’s most celebrated social climber, who is born into a poor white family and raises himself up by his own bootlegging bootstraps, is black. Carlyle V. Thompson’s take on Jay Gatsby stimulated a level of popular interest rare for literary scholars’ arguments, garnering coverage by *The Guardian*, *Salon*, *Times Higher Education*, and other media outlets. But because the South is a hotbed for anxieties about impoverished white people, the region’s literature teems with poor white characters.²¹

Although poverty is not unique to the South, poverty has long been viewed as a key part of what makes the South distinctive. In the middle of the twentieth century, C. Vann Woodward identified the South’s “long and quite un-American experience with poverty” as a defining aspect of southern distinctiveness.²² A half-century later, Jennifer Rae Greeson observed that “underdevelopment, poverty, [and] backwardness” are among the “enduring associations” that allow the region to serve as “an *internal other* for the nation.”²³ Poverty in the South is often treated differently from poverty in other parts of the United States. At the end of the nineteenth century, works including Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) shined a light on poor people in New York City. Local reformers embraced environmental strategies for alleviating poverty and its attendant ills during this era, advocating for boys’ clubs offering “quiet and innocent amusement,” city parks affording tenement residents an escape from their close living quarters, and homestays in the country for children from poor families.²⁴ Willard Parsons, whose Fresh-Air Fund sponsored two-week trips to the countryside for economically disadvantaged children, observed in an 1891 article for *Scribner’s Monthly* that a fortnight on a farm could bring about a “complete transformation” in impoverished city kids, because countless recipients of his organization’s aid returned to the Big Apple “with head and heart full of . . . new ideas of decent living.”²⁵

By contrast, the very year that Parsons celebrated poor New Yorkers' transformative potential, an investigator with the US Bureau of Labor lamented that poor white Georgians were "less plastic to civilization than any other race in America."²⁶ In response to such ideas about their adamant natures, some Americans endorsed sterilizing poor white southerners. When Indiana adopted the nation's first compulsory eugenic sterilization law in 1907, for instance, it did so in response to migrants from Kentucky and Tennessee. As historian Alexandra Minna Stern explains, "Hoosier eugenicists branded destitute white southerners as the state's most serious biological hazard."²⁷ Viewing poor white southerners' status as more or less immutable made poor white identity something one was unlikely to shed. Or to assume. In Charles Chesnut's novel *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), young southerners who find themselves in reduced circumstances take comfort by insisting that being poor and white is different from being poor white: "We might be poor, but not poor-white! Our blood will still be of the best."²⁸ Regarded as unlikely to improve their situation by getting more fresh air or frequenting boys' clubs, poor white southerners have often been looked at differently from impecunious Americans in other parts of the country.

Some scholars view southern literature's poor white characters as proxies for other members of the social order. Others ignore them altogether. As a result, we have little sense of the cultural anxieties they embody or the textual effects they produce. Yet poor whites are important – and omnipresent – players in the southern literary landscape. They are southwestern humor's *raison d'être*. They populate the bayous, piney woods, and mountain hollers of late nineteenth-century local color fiction. They figure crucially in modernist literature, appearing as the protagonists of proletarian novels (*To Make My Bread*), experimental nonfiction (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*), novels admired in the modern era (*The Time of Man*), and novels well known today (*As I Lay Dying*). In postwar novels including *The Dollmaker* and *Seraph on the Suwanee*, poor white women seek out their places in the world. In works like *Deliverance* and *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, poor white southerners' experiences reveal the impact of ecological changes. Poor white southerners even have their own contemporary genre: grit lit.

This book analyzes the changes and constants in representations of poor white southerners across the long twentieth century to advance two major arguments. The first is that poor white literary characters are barometers of the cultural anxieties gripping middle-class white people in the periods in which they are produced. Throughout this study, I work to show how literary representations of poor white southerners divulge the aspirations and fears of

the middle-class (and occasionally upper-class) writers and readers who create and consume them. Poor white southerners appear throughout US literature as embodiments of whatever wealthier white people are most eager to distance themselves from. My examples show the utility and malleability of southern poor white stereotypes during four different periods of social and economic upheaval: the late nineteenth-century Gilded Age, the Great Depression of the 1930s, the mid-twentieth-century civil rights era, and the economic boom of the 1990s.

This book's second major argument concerns the dynamic relationship between social structures and literary structures. I contend that writers' engagements with and investments in class distinctions manifest not only at the level of character and theme but also in the conventions that define major American literary movements and genres. Chapters focus on authors who push back on prevailing representations of poor white southerners, tracing out how social disruptions – depictions of poor white experience that challenge the status quo – take shape textually through formal disruptions. The middle class reproduces itself, I argue, through literary forms that have classist ideology baked into them. This makes it possible to represent poor white people as a problem, in terms that shift to fit each cultural moment under discussion. But this baked-in ideology also encumbers authors who wish to veer away from their periods' predominant portrayals of poor white identity. Thus, the five writers I concentrate on invent and adapt techniques in search of ways to contest negative representations of poor white southerners that buttress the major literary genres and movements of their eras. In highlighting these authors' counterdiscursive structural and stylistic innovations, I illuminate the ideological cast of not only dominant discourse but also, and more importantly, dominant literary forms.

Class, Whiteness, and Southern Literature is a study of traditions defined in the breach. Centering on writers who contest their eras' prevailing representations of poor white southerners, chapters examine the formal mechanisms for refiguring poverty these authors employ to write against the grain of their predecessors' and contemporaries' constructions of poor white identity. Because my foremost interest is in a two-way traffic in ideas – a classist tradition and a formally innovative countertradition – rather than in representations of poor white southerners per se, some genres that attend to poor white life in the South are peripheral to or even absent from this study. For instance, southwestern humor is an important part of the story this book tells insofar as the genre writes into literary history the contours of the poor white type. Southwestern humor stories' poor white raconteur, whose

“barbarously authentic dialect” gave rise to a “linguistic revolution” in American literature, influenced almost all of the literary works addressed in this study.²⁹ Likewise, the “gaunt-looking specimen of freakish humanity” – Hardin E. Taliaferro’s evocative description of southwestern humor’s archetypal antihero – who speaks in dialect and dresses shabbily begets generations of imaginary poor white southerners.³⁰ But no southwestern humorist significantly reworked the form in order to rebut the stereotypes disseminated by his fellow humorists. Although southwestern humor’s frame narrative structure evolved across the genre’s three-decade run, sidelining the outer frame’s gentlemanly speaker in order to cede more and more space to the vernacular-speaking frontiersman at the heart of the tale, this change happened progressively across numerous works in the tradition rather than solely in the writings of an iconoclast who sought to swim against the tide of his fellow southwestern humorists’ depictions of poor white life. On the whole, George Washington Harris, Johnson Jones Hooper, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, and other southwestern humorists seem pretty well aligned in terms of not only the forms they use but also the yarns they spin about rough-and-tumble dialect-speaking poor white southerners.

From the postbellum era to the present, “poor white” functions in some ways less as an economic designation than as an inflexible identity, because social status can prove surprisingly unresponsive to monetary ebbs and flows. In the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction periods, southerners who had been affluent in the antebellum era forged new social categories that not only afforded them status despite their reduced circumstances but also undercut the prestige of arrivistes. Margaret Mitchell explored how antebellum elites denied prestige to postbellum upstarts in *Gone with the Wind* (1936). In Mitchell’s work, the Civil War threatens to turn the social hierarchy of Clayton County, Georgia, on its head, because it leaves planters’ daughters like Scarlett O’Hara penniless and allows poor white girls like Emmie Slattery to marry men flush with new money. But Mitchell’s narrator makes clear that Emmie remains a “common, nasty piece of poor white trash” even after she is wealthy.³¹ For one thing, the war revealed that social status amounted to more than one’s clothes and cadences, because Scarlett and her sisters discovered while nursing wounded soldiers that they could discern the men’s social stations “instinctively, as they knew thoroughbred horses from scrubs.”³² For another thing, Emmie’s newfound prosperity demonstrates that money cannot buy taste. Emmie’s pricey getup is so gauche – a dress “bright in color to the point of vulgarity,” an “absurd” hat, and boots with red tops and

tassels – that Scarlett simply scoffs at it.³³ Finally, even Emmie’s whiteness is faulty. Taking her cues from myriad nineteenth-century forerunners, Mitchell gave poor white characters sickly yellow complexions.³⁴ Emmie’s face, “caked with white powder,” is a tragic burlesque of Scarlett’s “magnolia-white skin.”³⁵

This book delves into literature’s role in class formation and cohesion by looking at literature as a domain of cultural capital in which middle-class producers use representations of poor white southerners in order to establish – by contrast – certain ideas about what middle-class white people are like. In identifying engagements with social class through textual elements fostering identifications and disavowals among readers, writers, narrators, and characters, I adapt historian E. P. Thompson’s definition of class not as a structure or a category but as a “historical phenomenon” that *happens*: “Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.”³⁶ In turning from English history to American literature, my analysis takes up real and fictional experiences of affinity and discord that play powerful roles in the national imaginary. Some works establish a class-based us/them dichotomy, with both the syntax and the substance of the prose inscribing intraracial dividing lines. Lillian Smith’s *Killers of the Dream* (1949), for example, forges a first-person plural collectivity out of common experiences imaginatively produced by depicting Smith and her readers as feeding on reading: “How can we who were fed so bountifully feel what it means to live with a mind emptied of words, bereft of ideas and facts, unknowing of books and man-made beauty?”³⁷ This rhetorical question aims to expose how far removed “we” are from the tripartite ignorance of poor white southerners.

Other works concentrate on the poor white southerner and depict him as aberrant, which encourages readers to conceive of themselves as his antithesis. Eudora Welty’s short story “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” (1963) presents a first-person monologue by a poor white narrator whose racism, hostility, laziness, and vitiated language are calculated to repel and alienate readers. Class *happens* in response to such a text when middle-class readers become conscious of their superior social status by mentally cataloging the characteristics that differentiate them from poor white people. According to Pierre Bourdieu, “difference . . . only becomes a visible, perceptible, non-indifferent, socially *pertinent* difference if it is perceived by someone who is capable of *making the distinction*.”³⁸ Fiction affords a space for staging economic differences in ways that emphasize their social