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## “Of Nobler Song Than Mine”: Social Justice in the Life, Times, and Writings of Fitz-James O'Brien

John P. Irish

*Southern Methodist University*, johnpirish@gmail.com

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“OF NOBLER SONG THAN MINE”: SOCIAL JUSTICE  
IN THE LIFE, TIMES, AND WRITINGS OF FITZ-JAMES O’BRIEN

Approved by:

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Dr. Bruce Levy  
Professor of English

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Dr. Leroy Howe  
Emeriti Professor of Theology

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Third Reader

“OF NOBLER SONG THAN MINE”: SOCIAL JUSTICE  
IN THE LIFE, TIMES, AND WRITINGS OF FITZ-JAMES O’BRIEN

A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of  
Simmons School of Education and Human Development  
Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Liberal Studies

by

John P. Irish

B.A., Political Science & Philosophy, Southern Methodist University

M.A., Philosophy, University of Arkansas

M.L.S., Humanities, Southern Methodist University

May 6, 2019

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John P. Irish

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John P. Irish B.A., Political Science & Philosophy, Southern Methodist University, 1992

M.A., Philosophy, University of Arkansas, 1994

M.L.S., Southern Methodist University, 2015

“OF NOBLER SONG THAN MINE”: SOCIAL JUSTICE  
IN THE LIFE, TIMES, AND WRITINGS OF FITZ-JAMES O’BRIEN

Advisor: Dr. Bruce Levy

Doctor of Liberal Studies conferred May 17, 2019

Dissertation completed May 5, 2019

This dissertation will be a detailed study of the life, times, and writings of a mid-nineteenth century Irish-American writer, Fitz-James O’Brien. This will be the first full length study of O’Brien’s thought and writings. O’Brien was known, during his day, for two different types of writing: fiction of the supernatural and his writings on social justice, written in the emerging style of literary realism. It is his writings on social justice which this dissertation will explore. O’Brien’s writings on social justice covered three main topics: children, women, and animals. I look at how the historical context, O’Brien’s life, and his writings intersected with each other. The goal of the dissertation is to make an argument that O’Brien’s writings, largely forgotten today, constitute a place in the history of American literature.

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## DEDICATION

First, to the first cohort in the D.L.S. program, you all challenged me and inspired me, thank you for your encouragement and support.

Second, to my father; who always welcomed me over to his house, when things got stressful, so I could laugh, cry, and share and vent anything I felt. I am looking forward to our trip to Ireland in August of this year so that I can experience, first hand, the place that O'Brien came from and to get to hang out with my favorite person.

Third, to my wife Elizabeth and our extended family, our pets: Tom, Nellie, Annie, and Teddy. I would not have been able to do any of this without them. I love them with all my heart and soul.



## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation constitutes, to date, the first and only full-length study of the life, times, and writings of Fitz-James O'Brien and contends that O'Brien is unnecessarily ignored in the scholarship of nineteenth century America. With the emphasis on the issue of immigration in the current political and economic climate, it seems helpful to be reminded from time to time about the contributions that immigrants have actually made to the history of this country. O'Brien lived a short life; most estimates put his age between thirty-four and thirty-six. Unfortunately there is little known about his early life; in fact, there is little known about him before his arrival in America in 1852.<sup>1</sup>

Almost everything that we know about O'Brien today centers on his writings dealing with supernatural and gothic themes; he admired Edgar Allan Poe, and it was his goal to emulate him. Like Poe, his first publications were poems. None of these were supernatural in theme, but rather constituted some scathing attacks on the political and economic struggles that the Irish people were suffering during the middle part of the nineteenth century. It was really in London, however, in the late 1840s, in which O'Brien began experimenting with various types and different styles of writing. He began experimenting with short story fragments, novellas, poetry, and essays. But it was in America, as he continued to experiment, where he began to exhibit a real talent for writing. London was the first place in which O'Brien became a paid writer, but it was in America in which he became an artist – it was in America where O'Brien found his calling in the emerging literary marketplace.

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<sup>1</sup> His first biographer, Francis Wolle, placed the year of his birth in 1828. However, an argument has been made for a date which is two years earlier in 1826.

Before I began writing the dissertation, I engaged in a Herculean task. There have been some collections dedicated to the writings of O'Brien, beginning in 1881 up through the twenty-first century. However, most of these collections contain two flaws. First, most used the 1881 edition of his writings, collected and edited by his good friend William Winter. This collection, provided for the first time, a nice sampling of O'Brien's stories and poetry; however, this edition suffered from a major editing flaw. The original texts were edited and modified, and as a result, Winter changed O'Brien's original texts. Every edition of O'Brien's works, following the Winter edition, replicated the Winter texts. Thus, these editions were not the original texts from O'Brien's writings. One exception to this was the edition by Jessica Amanda Salmonson. Her collection of O'Brien's writings was the first and only edition to draw directly from O'Brien's original texts. The second flaw of O'Brien editions, after the Winter edition, focused exclusively on O'Brien's supernatural and fantasy writings – and none of them included any of his poetry. To address these two oversights, I began a mammoth project of collecting and editing what I hoped would become the first multi-volume edition of O'Brien's collected writings. This began in 2015 when I graduated from the Masters of Liberal Studies program at Southern Methodist University. The first two volumes of the edition were dedicated to his short stories. Every story identified by Francis Wolle was included in this collection, as well as other stories which I believe were written by O'Brien. Then in 2018, I published the third volume of this collection, which would constitute the first ever edition of O'Brien's works dedicated exclusively to his poetry. At the time of that publication I was able to procure almost all his poems in their original texts. I have now obtained all his known and published poetry, and I am in the process of collecting and editing these which will be included in the fourth volume of this collection. This

fourth volume will include the rest of his known and published writings, except his journalism, which will be included in a fifth volume.

This endeavor was important for several reasons. First, it provided me a single source to draw on for quotations and references to O'Brien's writings. Second, part of the expectation of the Masters and Doctoral programs in Liberal Studies at Southern Methodist University are that our research results in action. While we engage in the same intellectual pursuits as a traditional Ph.D. program, ours takes on a more pragmatic purpose. For my particular research, the action constitutes collecting and editing the first-ever complete collection of O'Brien's writings. Hopefully, this edition will lead to further research by scholars to explore other topics within O'Brien's writings. It was a tremendous amount of work, considering I was doing this on my own, without the help of a publisher.

The poetry volume was necessary considering the topic of this dissertation. In an attempt to provide original scholarship on nineteenth century America, the central focus of this dissertation is on the development of O'Brien's ideas on social justice, especially how they manifested themselves in his writings about children, women, and animals. O'Brien spent much of his mental and physical energy with his writings on social justice in his poetry. Having all these – his short stories, as well as his poetry – the collection gave me a unified and single source to draw upon, and since all of these were collected from O'Brien's original publications, it makes the collection much more authentic than the Winter edition or the subsequent collections published thus far.

A quick word about the construction and organization of the dissertation; the topic of the study is the life, times, and writings of O'Brien in general and on his writings on social justice in particular. As a historian by trade, I have spent time looking at the historical context that would

have, either directly or indirectly, informed O'Brien's thinking. As a result, part of the study is to look at the historical context of the subject of each chapter. Each chapter focuses on a particular aspect of O'Brien's life or thought. As such, the first two chapters and the seventh chapter look at the events of his life as a young man in Ireland then in London (Chapters One and Two), then in the last few years of his life in America (Chapter Seven). The middle chapters, which focus on his writings in America, were organized thematically – each chapter is dedicated to an important aspect of his evolving idea of social justice.

Chapter One will explore the historical context of O'Brien's youth. The chapter will focus on two formative events in Irish history and as such formative moments in O'Brien's development: the unification of Ireland under British rule and the Great Famine. O'Brien's earliest poetry was concerned with these two events. O'Brien came from a prominent family in the southern part of Ireland in Cork County. This part of the country was hit the hardest during the famine, but since O'Brien came from wealth, he was not directly effected by these hardships. He did, however, experience them, as suffering was all around him. This chapter will delve into O'Brien's early history, at least up till his move to London in his early 20s. There is very little that we know about O'Brien before his coming to America, so the biographical information in this chapter draws heavily from his first and only biography, published in 1944 by Francis Wolle, titled *Fitz-James O'Brien: A Literary Bohemian of the Eighteen-Fifties*.

Chapter Two looks at O'Brien's life while in London. He migrated to London once he inherited his wealth and he spent just under three years in this city – spending his entire inheritance while there. It is not clear that he traveled much; there are some gaps in the chronology of his life during this period. His activities during this time are murky; O'Brien claimed to have served in the British army. However, considering O'Brien liked to embellish the

truth especially when it came to his biography, there is probably no truth to this claim.<sup>2</sup> This chapter will focus on his publications during this time and especially his time editing the British magazine *The Parlour Magazine*, which was one of the unofficial publications of the International World's Fair hosted by London in 1851 – it was his work for this magazine which constituted the first instances of O'Brien as a formal writer and editor. For the first time in his life, O'Brien became a paid author.

Chapter Three explores the literary atmosphere of antebellum America. This was the environment to which a young O'Brien stepped into and one which he was challenged to navigate. One of the biggest challenges he faced, echoed by many literary artists during this period, was finding a balance between publishing what he wanted and what the public (and publishers) wanted. This conflict often created tensions between the artist and the publisher. Many artist felt alienated from their work, as they were forced to prostrate themselves at the hands of the masses. O'Brien confronted this problem head on in much of his early writings in America. In this chapter I explore O'Brien's role within the emerging democratic literary marketplace in the antebellum period and his associations with some of its major actors. O'Brien's proper place in the history of American literature is missing; he serves as an important literary "missing link" between the Romanticism of the first half of the nineteenth century and the Realism of the second half of the century. When O'Brien stepped foot in America in 1852, Edgar Allan Poe had been dead for several years and both Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne were at the end of their publishing careers. Ambrose Bierce and Henry James were

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<sup>2</sup> His skills with a pistol, of which others believed supported this assertion, could have easily been obtained as a young man, raised in affluence, in Ireland. Other speculations are that he traveled to France, which is quite likely, as O'Brien was fluent in French and considered it one of his greatest enjoyments to read French plays. Another speculation is that he attended Trinity University; there is also no evidence for this claim as well. Wolle claims that there are no records of his ever graduating from Trinity, although, in O'Brien's defense, he never claims to have graduated from the university simply that he attended.

just children, and Edith Wharton had not even been born yet. As such, O'Brien's writings constitute an important place in the history of American literature. His writings signal a transition between these two important literary movements.

Chapter Four begins the exploration of O'Brien's American writings.<sup>3</sup> O'Brien's London connections allowed him to immediately begin publishing in America. Chapters Four, Five and Six are arranged topically and constitute what I argue are the main threads of his writing on social justice. Chapter Four looks at his writings on children. I place his work in conversation with recent studies of childhood in America during the antebellum period. Special focus will be on the different roles of the child and the expectations that children were forced to conform to, especially in some of the literature of the day. O'Brien responded to these issues by challenging traditional gender expectations and viewed children as possible role models for older Americans. Children constitute the first attack on some of the institutions which O'Brien viewed as perpetuating social injustice on some of the most vulnerable within our society.

Chapter Five continues the dialogue of Chapter Four but changes the central focus from children to women. The plight of women constitutes the main focus of O'Brien's writing on social justice. Virtually all of his short stories and poetry on social justice contain women as important protagonists. For this chapter I focus on the following concerns: the changing role of women during the antebellum period, expectations about marriage and family, and the notion of the independent woman. The chapter is informed by my sense that O'Brien drew upon his experiences at Pfaff's Beer Hall (a popular hang-out for O'Brien while in New York) and some

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<sup>3</sup> He first stepped foot in this country in 1852, after more rumors about his life – this time it involved an affair with a married woman who was married to a British officer who was on his way home from India. The rumor is that O'Brien purchased a ticket and hopped on the first boat with its destination to America as fast as he could. The usually aggressive O'Brien was not interested in this fight. This story is confirmed by some different sources, and O'Brien even alludes to it; he believed that he was deeply in love and because of this he never pursued another romantic relationship.

of the women he met there, who may have served as possible examples of some of his characters. O'Brien's work challenged gender stereotypes and a large part of this chapter will be spent exploring the ways his writing did so.

Chapter Six builds upon the previous two chapters, but now shifts the focus from children and women to a topic that O'Brien felt particularly strong about; the inhumane treatment of animals. Some of his best poems and short stories have animals as the main protagonists. A quick survey of the history of animal welfare will inform and contextualize the focus of O'Brien's poetry and stories. O'Brien focused on two animals in particular: the street monkeys and birds. Birds play an important role in several of his writings, including some of his non-fiction. In his essay, "Bird Gossip," O'Brien reflects fondly upon his days in Ireland lying in the large open fields just watching the different birds fly by. Like Walt Whitman, he even believes that he has a special connection to birds; in several of his stories about birds the human character interacts with the birds and exhibits a kind of intimate and personal control over them – O'Brien claims in his essay that he possesses the same abilities over birds. But it would be the street monkey which O'Brien showed he had a soft heart for, as this animal would be the central focus of some of his most important stories and poems on social justice. O'Brien occasionally would invoke religious sentiments and imagery in his writings (usually as a rhetorical device), but he almost always does this when he is writing about animals. He believed that humans and animals maintained a very special relationship.

Chapter Seven concludes the story of O'Brien's life; the central focus of this chapter is on the last few years of his life and in particular his role in the Civil War. O'Brien's life and the tensions that lead up to the Civil War intersect in some interesting ways. It is the war which ultimately takes his life. Curiously, for someone who took up the Union cause with such passion,

O'Brien never wrote much about slavery. In fact, his writings on the "peculiar institution," with one exception, are absent. Making some important connections to the institution of slavery and the city of New York will constitute a part of this chapter. O'Brien and the individuals that he ran with, especially with those that frequented Pfaff's Beer Hall, were active in the political and economic conversations of the day; the coming war and its potential consequences would have been on the minds of everyone in the political and economic crucible that was New York City. However, the patrons of Pfaff's, with a few exceptions, were eerily quiet on the issue of slavery. O'Brien only mentioned it once in all of his published writings, and it was in a Swiftian-type satire that was composed the first year of his life in America. In this chapter, I will explore some of the reasons why O'Brien might have fought. Eventually O'Brien demonstrated a strong sense of historical and political awareness and it was this sense which ultimately drove him into the arms of the Union Army and gave him the courage to face his death.

Throughout this study, I make a case for O'Brien's inclusion into the American literary canon. However small that place may be, O'Brien's work bears reading. Hopefully, this dissertation and the volumes in the edition being edited by myself will spur on more interest and research on Fitz-James O'Brien. The quote from the title of the dissertation, "Of Nobler Song than Mine," comes from one of his earliest poems, "Say sacred Clarseac." The poem has never been published before (outside of the original publication during the 1840s). The quote, I believe, captures the spirit of the end of O'Brien's life. In the poem, the unnamed narrator begs the muse to compose a song, which contains a universal message, one that is detached from the provincial concerns of its listeners. O'Brien's death constituted a noble sacrifice, one that he believed was much greater than his own existence. His writings on social justice and his service (and sacrifice) to his adopted country reflected a cosmopolitan decision. O'Brien summed it up



best when he said: "I do not know whether I am a part of the universe, or whether the universe is a part of me." It was this existential questioning and the philosophical angst that came with it, along with his demands for social justice, upon which O'Brien's reputation ought eventually to rest.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “Uttering the Cries of Freedom” — Two Crisis in Ireland

My soul is longing to be free,  
Without the weight of chains it bore —  
But when again  
Old Erin's chain,  
Is cleft by freemen's swords in two,  
The sea I'll brave,  
And o'er the wave,  
I'll come again, dear land, to you.

“Oh! Give a Desert Life to Me” (1845)

There are some writers for whom we know a great deal: who they were, where they lived, how they died, and all the details in between. For others, we know very little outside their published works – their lives are hidden in obscurity. The life of Fitz-James O'Brien falls into both of these camps. We know very little of his life before he emigrated to America around the turn of the year 1852. Once in America, however, his life can be traced through the various pieces that he published, the periodicals that he chose to use as avenues to explore and express his ideas, and the people that he befriended. In spite of the obscurity of his life before he came to America, this chapter will focus on the young O'Brien in Ireland, and on his relationship with the newspaper in which he first began to publish – *The Nation*. His publications in this magazine centered around two major events occurring in his early life and showed his emerging interests in the social, political, economic and historical events affecting Ireland – the political conflict with Britain and the Great Famine, which ravished the population of Southern Ireland, where O'Brien grew up. These two events occupied much of O'Brien's early writings, especially his poetry.

The date of Michael Fitz-James O'Brien's birth is unclear. His first and only biographer, Francis Wolle, placed his birth in 1828; however, there is an argument to be made for his birth two years earlier in 1826.<sup>1</sup> His friend, William Winter, who compiled the very first collection of his poetry and short stories in 1881, also has his year of birth as 1828. Winter also claims, incorrectly, that he was born in the city of Limerick. Wolle's biography, published in 1944, argues that he was born in 1828 in the city of Cork. Wolle's research was based on extensive traveling and the studying of biographical records in Ireland in 1929.<sup>2</sup>

His father, James O'Brien (1780 – 1839/40), was a local attorney with some influence in the community. James's father – Fitz-James's fraternal grandfather – was Michael O'Brien and his fraternal grandmother was Catherine Deasy. The O'Brien's owned the Brownstone House located in southern Ireland in Cork County. Not much is known about his father's side of the family. We do know that his father must have been a successful lawyer, as he was very active in local politics. As Wolle observes, “[t]o obtain the office of coroner he must have had an established position as an attorney and have been an owner of property with means sufficient to carry out the duties of the office with dignity. He lived at 58 South Mall, the most respectable street in the city, and seems to have had his attorney's office in the same building.”<sup>3</sup> For as little as we know about his father's family, we know quite a bit about his mother's side – which was one of the oldest and most prestigious families in Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia has his birth listed as October 25, 1826. This is probably from a paper written by Randal A. Everts that makes an argument that his date of birth attributed in 1828 is a mistake. He provides substantial documentation for the 1826 date as accurate. Randal A. Everts, “Michael Fitz-James O'Brien (1826 – 1862)”: accessed 09/03/18, [http://thestrangecompany.us/index.php/michael\\_fitz-james\\_o\\_brien/](http://thestrangecompany.us/index.php/michael_fitz-james_o_brien/).

<sup>2</sup> For purposes of this dissertation, I will assume that the year 1826 is accurate and that his place of birth, in Cork, is also accurate.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien: A Literary Bohemian of the Eighteen-Fifties* (Boulder, Colorado: University of Colorado, 1944), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 4.

Estimates are that Fitz-James's mother, Eliza O'Driscoll was probably no older than twenty when she married. Fitz-James's maternal grandfather was Michael O'Driscoll, and his maternal grandmother was Helen O'Driscoll.<sup>5</sup> The O'Driscoll's owned the Baltimore House located in southern Ireland in Limerick County<sup>6</sup> – according to Wolle, “Baltimore is a small fishing village almost on the southeastern point of Ireland, and was before the time of Queen Elizabeth a flourishing port ruled over by the chief of the clan O'Driscoll, whose castle stronghold, Toberanargid, commanded the town and the harbor.”<sup>7</sup> Fitz-James' father died around 1839 when young Fitz-James was about thirteen years old, and his mother remarried. She married DeCourcy O'Grady; both the O'Driscoll and the O'Grady families were old traditional Irish families. The O'Driscoll family can trace their family name back to 1276 and traditionally to 366 with the Kings of Munster.<sup>8</sup> Both the O'Grady and the O'Driscoll names are some of the most ancient families of Limerick. One of Fitz-James's distant grandfathers, Frances O'Driscoll (d. 1629), also known as “Black Florence” or “Fineen Dhuv,” was a notorious Irish pirate, who was knighted by Elizabeth I.<sup>9</sup>

O'Brien spent his childhood in great affluence, which shows in the activities he mastered: hunting, fishing, riding, boating, and shooting. He was also an avid bird watcher, and some of his semi-autobiographical pieces involve birds. One of his most popular essays, published in *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, once he arrived in the United States, is an interesting little piece called “Bird Gossip.” He speaks very fondly of his childhood days while birdwatching:

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<sup>5</sup> Helen's maiden name was also O'Driscoll, so she did not need to change it when she married.

<sup>6</sup> Part of the confusion as to where Fitz-James was from is because he was born in Cork, but then his father died when he was around the age of thirteen, his mother remarried and the family moved to Limerick, where he spent the next ten years, till the time when he left for London around 1849 at the age of twenty-three.

<sup>7</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> O'Brien would include a short snippet about his distant grandfather, Florence O'Driscoll, in his excellent short story, “The Lost Room.” This story was published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in September 1858.

To study the habits of birds in an unscientific way, I hold to be the most delightful of pastimes. I can conceive no higher pleasure than to have time and money enough to enable one to go wandering through the woods of the world watching birds. I confess I have little sympathy with those men who hunt after a bird for the purpose of giving it a long name, describing its structure in so learned a manner as to be wholly unintelligible to ordinary readers, and gratifying us with but a meagre account of its ways of life.<sup>10</sup>

This passage shows the type of childhood he must have lived and how he spent most of his days. One can imagine young O'Brien, a precocious child, running through what must have been large open fields, as southern Ireland is full of almost infinite rolling hills and open fields, lying around all day watching the different kinds of birds fly by.<sup>11</sup> His early life was one dedicated to freedom, leisure, and pleasure.

Young O'Brien shows a genuine fascination with the land and geography of Ireland. One of the earliest poems with *The Nation*, was titled "Loch Ina"<sup>12</sup> and subtitled "A Beautiful Salt-Water Lake, in the County of Cork, Near Baltimore." This poem eulogizes the beauty of the country and the location of the lake, lamenting with sadness the fate of this once great castle.

I know a lake where the cool waves break,  
And softly fall on the silver sand —  
And no steps intrude on that solitude,  
And no voice, save mine, disturbs the strand.

And a mountain bold, like a giant of old  
Turned to stone by some magic spell,  
Uprears in might his misty height,  
And his craggy sides are wooded well.

In the midst doth smile a little Isle,  
And its verdure shames the emerald's green —  
On its grassy side, in ruined pride,  
A castle of old is darkling seen.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *The Best of Fitz-James O'Brien* (Texas: A Bit O'Irish Press, 2018), 39.

<sup>11</sup> A number of items written by O'Brien involve birds. Some of his most popular stories involve birds as main characters: "How a Prima Donna was Fledged," "Bob o' Link," and "The Bullfinch."

<sup>12</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music* (Texas: A Bit O'Irish Press, 2018), 5 – 6.

<sup>13</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 5. "Loch Ina" is the third known published poem by O'Brien. This was such a popular poem that local school children were required to memorize the poem as part of their education. It also has the privilege of being included in a two-volume publication dedicated to Irish literature, *The Ballads of Ireland*, edited by Edward Hayes and published in 1855. This would be the first time that any of O'Brien's writings

O'Brien's early poetry reflects a deep appreciation for his country, but more specifically, it is clear he cherished the geography of southern Ireland. The southern and northern geography of Ireland was very different; there were major cities and certain aspects of urbanization in both, but the south was much more agricultural and the north more industrialized. In "Loch Ina" O'Brien is inspired by the natural landscapes of the coast and its connection to his family. These are two themes which will dominate his early writings – geography and history. But O'Brien shows a deep appreciation for both family and the geography and history of Ireland his entire life. Many of the pieces he publishes once he arrives in America explore these two themes.

O'Brien's first six poems were published in *The Nation*, a weekly newspaper dedicated to the cause of Irish nationalism and founded on October 15, 1842. It says a lot about his early politics that he viewed this publication as a potential source for expressing his ideas. The magazine published all his submitted poetry, except one poem, which was deemed too unpatriotic. Wolfe recalls the event, "[o]n October 4 they declined Heremon's<sup>14</sup> 'Irish Hurra for Past Heroism'; but the irrepressible author continued to submit it until, more than a month later, they were driven by his effrontery to remark, 'whatever Heremon may think to the contrary, we actually do read contributions before we reject them . . .'"<sup>15</sup> The magazine, *The Nation*, was established primarily as a vehicle for Irish nationalism. It was founded by three individuals: Charles Gavan Duffy (the first editor), Thomas Davis, and John Blake Dillon. All three were members of the Repeal Association, which was a movement, founded by Daniel O'Connell in 1830, whose primary purpose was Irish independence through the repeal of the 1800 Acts of

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would appear in book form. In the 1840s there was a push on the part of Irish nationalists to establish an Irish literature, many of the magazines established during this time had that as their goal, the volumes edited by Hayes makes O'Brien's contribution especially interesting.

<sup>14</sup> Heremon was a legendary king of Ireland in the twelfth century B.C., the founder of the Milesian dynasty. It was a pen name O'Brien would use from time to time in his poetry.

<sup>15</sup> Wolfe, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 13.

Union which officially united the Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland. *The Nation* was not the only paper dedicated to Irish politics (and specifically advocating for Irish nationalism and independence), but it quickly became a popular paper, especially with a group that came to be known as Young Ireland. The paper had a circulation of over ten thousand subscribers. The paper's goals were to: promote Irish autonomy, direct the popular will, and unshackle old habits, old prejudices, and old divisions. Perhaps most significantly, in a society riddled by sectarian turmoil, the paper was established to be devoid of religious divisions, Duffy was a Catholic, and the other two founders were Protestant; hence, avoiding the internal tensions that had plagued Ireland for years between Catholics and Protestants. While it was probably the politics which first attracted the young O'Brien to this paper, he might have also been enticed by the paper's cosmopolitan social vision. Unfortunately, there is virtually no information about O'Brien's personal religious views, although given his family history it is probably safe to assume he was Catholic. Wolle does recount a story which might shed some light on O'Brien's religious affiliations. A number of his uncles served as justices of the peace, one in particular (on his mother's side), Alexander O'Driscoll, was swept out of office (along with other Roman Catholics) when the staunchly Protestant chancellor, Lord Manners, was appointed to the office in 1807.<sup>16</sup>

In 1843 the paper threw down the gauntlet, showing its true colors, by publishing a politically radical poem. The poem recalled the Irish Rebellion of 1798 which was part of the general world uprisings against British rule at the end of the eighteenth century, especially prominent in North America and also drew support from the French Revolution. The poem was written by John Kells Ingram and titled "The Memory of the Dead:"

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<sup>16</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 5.

Who fears to speak of the Ninety-Eight?  
Who blushes at the name?  
When cowards mock the patriots fate  
Who hangs his head in shame?

He's all a knave, or half a slave,  
Who slights his country thus;  
But a true man, like you, man,  
Will fill your glass with us.<sup>17</sup>

A quick glance at most of the articles and other entries in the newspaper shows similar themes throughout the weekly publication. The newspaper served as a popular mouthpiece for radical ideas, reminding the readers of their deep historical roots, through a variety of different pieces: poetry, essays, editorials, and short fiction. Two events drove many of the pieces in the magazine, while O'Brien lived in Ireland: opposition to the 1800 Acts of Union, thus fueling the Repeal Association movement in the 1840s, and the Great Famine beginning in 1845. It was these two events which first moved the young O'Brien to put pen to paper.

The Acts of Union were a direct response from William Pitt, following the Irish Rebellion of 1798. Thomas Bartlett, in his *Ireland: A History*, notes that the "Union would have been inconceivable without the 1798 rebellion. The violence of that year had delivered a profound shock to the political structure and to the self-confidence of the ascendancy."<sup>18</sup> Even though the act itself brought the two countries together, Bartlett continues, they "were in fact moving further and further apart – industrially, agriculturally, demographically and, not least, religiously."<sup>19</sup> O'Brien grew up in this environment. Because of the wealth of his family, he was probably more than familiar with these events, and no doubt was exposed to the debates that were raging in Ireland during this time.

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<sup>17</sup> P.A. Sillard, *Life of John Mitchell* (James Duffy & Sons, Ltd., 1908), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 228.

<sup>19</sup> Bartlett, *Ireland: A History*, 236.



The problems in Ireland in 1800, when the Acts of Union were passed and continued into the middle of the nineteenth century, were multifold: scarcity of land, poor farming techniques, an increasing population, competition between the industrialized north and the agricultural south, competition of industry with British imports, and Catholic demands for full emancipation.<sup>20</sup> *The Nation* was capitalizing on what was becoming a grassroots movement in support of the repeal of the Acts of Union. The magazine went through some personnel changes as they began to disagree about the use of violence in support of the Repeal Association. In 1848 a failed nationalist uprising contributed to the tensions as a result of a push for unification. On July 29, 1848 rebels besieged a police unit, but were forced to retreat after police reinforcements arrived – this uprising was known as the Young Irelander Rebellion. This failure loomed large in 1848, certainly hurting the unity movement, but even as early as 1840, O’Connell’s Repeal Association was considered a miserable failure. One bright spot from the failure of the Repeal Association, however, was the development of the Young Ireland movement, which used the establishment of *The Nation* as its mouthpiece.

O’Brien’s first publication directly responded to these political issues and showed great concern over the relationship between Britain and Ireland; the poem was called “Oh! Give a Desert Life to Me.”<sup>21</sup> It was published on March 15, 1845, when O’Brien was only about nineteen years old. The poem was published despite the editor Charles Gavan Duffy’s misgivings that the poem was unpatriotic.<sup>22</sup> And although he published it, Duffy used the opportunity to take a shot at the young O’Brien: “This,” Duffy wrote, “might be called ‘The

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<sup>20</sup> J. H. Whyte, “The Age of Daniel O’Connell: 1800 – 47” in T. W. Moody, et al (editors), *The Course of Irish History* (New York: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 2012), 216.

<sup>21</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Duffy viewed O’Brien’s perspective of leaving when things are going bad, then returning once things get better, as an act of cowardice and unpatriotic. Real patriots stay and fight, even if it is difficult to do so. The young O’Brien is still thinking about things and is a little unsure about his relationship to his country. His life and his connections to patriotism will be an evolutionary process and in the end, his actions will match his words. I will explore this connection in Chapter Seven of this dissertation.

Coward's Resource' . . . We recommend our friend not to come again when the work is over. He will get a cold welcome from the men he left to bear the heat of the harvest."<sup>23</sup> O'Brien was not discouraged, but he did exercise more caution when submitting any more publications to *The Nation*. The next poem he had published comes two weeks later, but is not signed with his name, instead this poem is signed "T.J. O'B."<sup>24</sup> All the other poems he published in *The Nation*, following the poem "Loch Ina," were either published using the pen-name Heremon or anonymously.<sup>25</sup>

"Oh! Give a Desert Life to Me" brings to light the issues surrounding the Acts of Unification and its controversy in Ireland. O'Brien recognizes the debilitating effect that the unification has had on his homeland, equating it to slavery.

Oh! give a desert life to me,  
Where I no tyrant's law need fear;  
For there, indeed, I may be free,  
Nor live a slave as I do here —  
For here we're born,  
For England's scorn.  
We weep o'er our degraded land —  
Or ban the head such curses planned.  
Oh! on the pampas wild I'll dwell,  
Amongst Columbia's free born race,  
With dog and steed that love me well,  
My flying herds I'll swiftly chase.  
Oh! then a desert life for me,  
Dependent I will live no more;  
My soul is longing to be free,  
Without the weight of chains it bore —  
But when again

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<sup>23</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> O'Brien's initial poem was signed with his full name, but not hyphenated, "Fitzjames O'Brien." The traditional usage of hyphenating his name has become the standard. His middle name occurs in four different forms – Fitzjames, FitzJames, Fitz-James, and Fitz James. During his lifetime, the most common printing was the hyphenated and this is the style employed by William Winter, the editor of his first collected writings. "T.J. O'B" was probably a misprint on the part of the magazine, O'Brien would often sign his publications "F.J. O'B."

<sup>25</sup> Of the six poems published in *The Nation*; the first contained his full name, the second contained the incorrect initials "T.J. O'B," the third was anonymous, and the next three were signed by Heremon. The next ten poems he had published in *The Cork Magazine*, only two of them contain his initials "F.J. O'B," one contains the signature of Fineen Dhuv, all the rest were published anonymously.

Old Erin's chain,  
Is cleft by freemen's swords in two,  
The sea I'll brave,  
And o'er the wave,  
I'll come again, dear land, to you.<sup>26</sup>

The poem focuses on the contempt that many British had for the Irish, thinking of them as inferior, leading to the debilitating policies enforced from London. The poem then shifts from Ireland and Britain, to America. There had been Irish immigration to America almost from the start of the New World experiment, but it would peak in the 1840s and 50s, mostly due to the Great Famine, but also because New World opportunities provided a major pull factor for Irish immigrants. Immigration to America served as a vehicle of hope and potentially a life of freedom and opportunity that was not available to many people living in Europe. The reference to the “free born race” is another shot at the *de facto* relationship that Ireland had to Britain. The final lines remain hopeful, as the narrator looks forward to returning to their homeland. The “sea I’ll brave” is a reference to the danger that many immigrants faced while traveling by ocean voyage. It was extremely risky, and while travel had improved, significantly, from the seventeenth century, individuals still risked their lives in making those trips. Irish immigration, like much of Western Europe, was made up of young, single, males. Those that traveled were not at the bottom of the social ladder though; they were usually males with some resources. Because of the Laws of Primogeniture and Entail, only allowing the eldest son to inherit property and not allowing that son to sell the family land, younger sons were encouraged to travel abroad in search of their wealth. But the final line of the poem, with its hopeful ending, was inconsistent with the reality of Irish immigration in the nineteenth century – Ireland was one of the few countries in which immigrants left home with no intentions of returning.

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<sup>26</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 3.

O'Brien's first poem shows an understanding of and sympathy with the plight of the Irish population and Irish history. The fact that he chose to publish it in an Irish nationalist newspaper also sheds light on his early politics. *The Nation* was a relatively new paper but had been around for several years with a growing subscription. The shot that Duffy takes at the young man would turn out to be very important for O'Brien. It would set the tone for the type of relationship that he would continue to have with many of the editors he worked with his entire life. The difference between these early works and his later works, especially once he comes to America, is that these early pieces were written and published without pay and without much experience in the world. Because O'Brien came from wealth and privilege, these early poems are less driven by the literary marketplace than his later work. He does focus on issues, it is true, that are close to the heart of the Irish people, especially those topics of importance to *The Nation*. He is not, however, relying on an artist salary for financial support with any of his writings from Ireland. When O'Brien decides to turn to publishing for a living, he, like most writers, rely on the temperament of the reading world to guide and direct their published works.<sup>27</sup> But his first poem shows a kind of unmediated raw energy and excitement because it is something he feels passionate about. It is untouched by the pain and necessity that O'Brien will feel many times, once he leaves Ireland and is forced to publish for money. Several of O'Brien's American writings show this, with titles like "He Writes for Bread" and "From Hand to Mouth."<sup>28</sup>

O'Brien did not leave the problem of unification once he left Ireland. He revisited the idea in one of his earliest American publications once he arrived in New York. One of his

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<sup>27</sup> This issue will be explored in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

<sup>28</sup> The other important issue to keep in mind with regard to O'Brien's experience of the rebuff from Duffy is that a young O'Brien may not understand exactly what Duffy is accusing him of. Experience gives us a perspective that the young cannot understand or appreciate. O'Brien's youthful naiveté will turn into experienced resolve and determination as O'Brien enthusiastically embraces the Civil War. Instead of running away from the fight, as Duffy accused him, in 1860 O'Brien runs headfirst into the middle of the fighting. The older O'Brien believes that he is part of something greater than himself and it is this realization which moves him to act in a way that he would not have done as a young man.

earliest works in America was a series of publications, published under the title “Fragments from an Unpublished Magazine”<sup>29</sup> – an interesting collection of poetry, essays, and short fiction. The series was published in three installments, the first beginning in September of 1852 and was published in *The American Whig Review*. In this first installment, there was a story called “Carrying Weight – A Reminiscence of the Turf” written by an unknown author calling himself “The Irishman.” One of the few humorous pieces that O’Brien published, it was an interesting mix of political satire and humor. It also took up the theme of the relationship between Ireland and Britain. The story tells of an Irish jockey, Bob Blake, otherwise known as “Little Ginger” who is about to start a big race but is stopped by a bill collector before he can weigh in. The collector has a warrant for his arrest and is not allowed to let Blake start the race. Blake is decked out in his traditional colors of green and gold, reminiscent of the official colors of Ireland. The bill collector is wearing a faded red waistcoat, reminiscent of the colors of the British army – the “Redcoats.” The bill collector says he must not let go of Blake. Blake comes to an ingenious idea – since the bill collector can not let go, he can join him on the back of the horse, called “Let-me-alone-before-the-people,” as he runs the race. The judges allow him to enter the race even though the horse will have two riders, despite the objection of Blake’s biggest rival in the race. As the race was nearing the end, there was one jump left between Blake’s arch enemy and first place. “My grandfather settled in his saddle and prepared himself to lift her well over, while the little

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<sup>29</sup> The “Fragments from an Unpublished Magazine” is a curious little project that O’Brien first engaged in when he arrived in America. It contains a running narrative, with various pieces holding the narrative together. It tells of an unnamed editor, who is reading through an old dusty unpublished magazine collection. The narrator randomly thumbs through a volume and shares what he finds with the reader. The original editor was named, Adam Eagle, who was a New Englander, who lives a contemplative life of ease. The collection begins with an unusual poem, “Madness” which tells of a man who eventually goes mad. The pieces shared with the reader from the unnamed narrator vary in types and quality, there are short stories, there are poems, there are ramblings. All the entries are held together though around the mysterious Adam Eagle. Unfortunately O’Brien did not continue this publishing exercise. There were three installments, all of which were published in *The American Whig Review*. The entire collection of these “fragments” can be found in the following publication: John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I (Texas: A Bit O’Irish Press, 2017), 39 – 137.

bailiff stuck on like a limpet to a rock . . . [the horse] then with one tremendous effort shot over.”<sup>30</sup> The implication here, with a little cooperation between the two countries, the apparent hardships can be overcome. Together the two countries can overcome any perceived issues, and while working together with the public support, like that support by the people in the race, all issues will disappear.

The unification question was not the only issue in the news in most of the Irish papers during the 1840s and 50s. The Irish potato famine, known as the Great Famine, decimated the Irish population and while O’Brien was not directly affected by the famine, he would have still experienced death first hand by even the most cursory observations of the Irish countryside that he so loved. The famine, *Phytophthora Infestans*, caused the potatoes to blacken and rot, giving off an awful smell. It has been described as the smell of death, with scenes resembling and rivaling anything found in horror fiction. On a visit to a neighborhood of Skibbereen, in West Cork, a visiting magistrate left the following account:

I entered some of the hovels . . . and the scenes that presented themselves were such as no tongue or pen can convey the slightest idea. In the first six famished and ghastly skeletons, so all appearance dead, were huddled in a corner on some filthy straw, their sole covering what seemed a ragged horse-cloth, and their wretched legs hanging about, naked above the knees. I approached in horror, and found by a low moaning they were alive, they were in fever – four children, a woman and what has once been a man.<sup>31</sup>

Another scene described by a physician visiting the village of Schull, in southwest County Cork, almost as grizzly: “a father tottering along the road – a rope was over his shoulder, and at the other end of the rope, streeling along the ground were two dead children whom he was with difficulty dragging to the grave.”<sup>32</sup> The potato famine would also be the subject of one of

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<sup>30</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 69.

<sup>32</sup> Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History*, 70.

O'Brien's major poems that was also published in *The Nation*. The poem, "The Famine,"<sup>33</sup> was published almost one year after "Oh! Give a Desert Life to Me" on March 7, 1846. It would serve as a second poem in which the young O'Brien explores an important topic relevant to Ireland and critical to the relationship between Ireland and Britain.

John Mitchell, a Young Irelander, who was radical and quick to support violence in support of Irish independence, became a primary contributor to *The Nation* in 1845.<sup>34</sup> His concern was over Irish independence and repeal of the Acts of Union, like others who published in this magazine, but he echoed a more pragmatic concern over something that he considered much more pressing: the land problem. The issues concerning land in Ireland were magnified by the dire conditions brought about by the Great Famine, which lasted from 1845 to 1851. There had been famines before 1845, but because of the population density, the conditions of land ownership, and the "internal" colonial policy Ireland was ripe for a disaster in the middle of the nineteenth century. Entries from *The Nation*, during the time of the Great Famine, are obsessed with the plight and desperate condition of the country – and they had a reason to be. It could be argued that this was the most important and catastrophic event in Irish history. The number of individuals who died and those that immigrated out of Ireland during this time period certainly bears this assessment.

The census in 1841 reported that almost eight million people lived in Ireland, compared to over two hundred million in all of Europe. But just ten years later, by 1851, over one million had died in Ireland, and over one million had immigrated out of the country. Ireland lost almost twenty-five percent of its total population. There are some different theories as to what caused the potato famine beginning in 1845: air born from the Americas, imports from North America,

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<sup>33</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 7 – 9.

<sup>34</sup> S. J. Connolly, *Oxford Companion to Irish History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 379.

or imports from Peru. Potatoes originated in Peru, and they were introduced to Ireland in the sixteenth century, and by the eighteenth century, they had become a staple crop of over half the population. According to Jay Dolan:

The average adult male consumed twelve to fifteen pounds of potatoes each day, with women and older children consuming as much as eleven pounds . . . Even though they had a rather monotonous diet, the potato-fed Irish were better nourished than the poor in other European countries, enjoying a respectable life expectancy at that time of thirty-eight years.<sup>35</sup>

The Irish dependence on the potato was partly responsible for the population boom that existed on the island before 1845. Four of the eight million, who lived in Ireland in 1841, were dependent on the potato for their main staple. The potato was a useful source of food for the population, especially considering the scarcity of land in the country. One acre of land could feed an entire family, and it also provided the population with nutritional vitamins that no other single crop could provide; thus resulting in a longer life expectancy than many other Europeans.

The potato famine, which began in 1845, decimated the Irish population. It first appeared in June 1845 in Belgium,<sup>36</sup> but then quickly spread across the continent and hit Ireland the worse in 1846 in which over 90% of the potato crop failed for that year.<sup>37</sup> This devastation of the population resulted in massive immigration from Ireland. Initially many of the immigrants landed in Liverpool, but overcrowding there forced many to continue their journey to North America. The area hit the hardest was in the southern agricultural parts of Ireland. In March of 1848, 9,414 Irish immigrants landed in New York. In April of 1850, 3,613 sailed from Cork County alone, O'Brien's boyhood hometown. During the years of the Great Famine, from 1846

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<sup>35</sup> Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History*, 69.

<sup>36</sup> Connolly, *Oxford Companion to Irish History*, 239.

<sup>37</sup> Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History*, 67.



through 1851, over one million Irish immigrated to North America and 926,306 settled in the United States.<sup>38</sup>

Again, the Great Famine was blamed on a variety of causes. Some argued it was a natural disaster, but there were others who wanted to place the blame squarely at the feet of the British, whose response (or lack thereof) caused the epidemic to be much more disastrous than it could and possibly should have been. *The Nation* published some articles blaming the British government for their failure to respond correctly in helping the Irish population as early as 1846, the year that the famine did its worse damage. Several of these attributed the lack of response to the religious tension that had existed between the two countries. Since most of Ireland was Catholic, Protestant Britain blamed the plight on a divine punishment – God was punishing Ireland for its religious beliefs. Britain also considered Ireland as an inferior country, filled mostly with rabble, so it was also, in their view, a source of divine population control. Robert Peel, the Prime Minister, did act in two important ways: first, by establishing public works projects, and second, purchasing grain which would be imported to Ireland to keep food prices down. John Russell, however, who became Prime Minister in 1846, did much less. A strong proponent of *laissez-faire* policies, he nevertheless introduced soup kitchens which were designed to be a short-term solution, and in 1847 he established workhouses, which were very unpopular in Ireland.<sup>39</sup>

Some other theories were available and were put forward to the public, which were articulated in *The Nation*, as the focus went to the Poor Laws, which were implemented in Ireland in 1838. The young O'Brien saw these as more fundamental to the problems caused by the famine than the lack of reactions on the part of the British government. First, they required

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<sup>38</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History*, 72.

all landlords to pay rent of tenants holding property in rent for four pounds or less. This policy resulted in landlords getting rid of tenants who could not afford to pay their rent, thus displacing a large number of the population off their land. This scenario fits with many of the descriptions we read of the famine, lots of anecdotal stories of poor people lining the roads because they have no place to go. This first-hand observation would have a lasting effect on O'Brien and would serve as fodder for much of his later writing.

Second, anyone who held a quarter-acre of land was ineligible for help from the Poor Law. This part of the law resulted in tenants reducing their holdings, thus turning over the remainder of the land to their landlord. Landlords then converted land to more commercially viable holdings, using the land for cattle and sheep grazing.<sup>40</sup> This example also seems to confirm what we know about the times; throughout Britain an "Enclosure Movement" was gaining ground. This movement was used as a way of displacing the poor off the commons areas which allowed the owners of the land to use the land for better profit-making enterprises. These concerns were less about the British and more about the wealthy landlords who lived in Ireland. As the young O'Brien was one of these, he knew all too well what resources they had to help the poor and potentially alleviate the suffering. He also used this critique as the foil for his next big publication.

Published on March 7, 1846, O'Brien's fourth poem to be published in *The Nation* was called "The Famine."<sup>41</sup> Even though this poem did not blame the British, as did many other articles published in *The Nation*, its appearance in an Irish nationalistic newspaper suggest British culpability. It was also the first poem in which the young O'Brien used the pen-name of Heremon, a *nom de plume* which he would employ from time to time, even in his later American

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<sup>40</sup> Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History*, 70 – 71.

<sup>41</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 7 – 9.

publications. His second poem was a humorous piece, called “Epigram on Hearing a Young Lady Regret Her Eyes Being Bloodshot” and the third poem, “Loch Ina,” was a reflection on the Irish geography and the landscape to which he was quite familiar from his family holdings.

“The Famine”<sup>42</sup> shows a tremendous sense of economic awareness and empathy with the plight of the poor. By objectifying the disaster, placing it within the natural setting, the young O’Brien allows the discourse of the famine to move away from ethical concerns over the nature of the event and allows individuals to search for rational ways to deal with it. It also anticipates his concern for social justice that will be displayed in many of his writings once he comes to America. Often O’Brien looks at economic hardships from a social perspective; the themes of many of his later poems, and other writings, deal with the issue of social justice, with special focus on children, women, and animals.<sup>43</sup> All three were viewed as victims who have suffered unreasonably at the hands of those who are in power or authority. The difference between the later and earlier pieces is the young O’Brien sees writing as an avocation, while the older O’Brien, after blowing his inheritance, works for money and will experience hardship first hand.

In “The Famine” he calls out the wealthy Irish aristocracy, of which he was one, chastising them for not doing enough to help the suffering. The young O’Brien warns the wealthy that withholding needed aid will result in two things. First, the poor will rise up against them. They will attack the granaries, of which Ireland is full of – with violence if necessary, if it relieves the suffering of the poor. The wealthy also had laws which prohibited people from hunting and fishing on others property. The coasts were full of fish, but many of the poor sold their property as to reduce their holdings. The young O’Brien also warns them against potential punishments they might avoid in the afterlife, by aiding the poor.

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<sup>42</sup> The full text of this poem can be found in the Appendix, Entry #1.

<sup>43</sup> Each of these topics will be dealt with in a separate chapter of this dissertation. Chapter Four will focus on children, Chapter Five will focus on women, and Chapter Six will focus on animals.

“Oh! Give a Desert Life to Me” and “The Famine,” show great concern and awareness, from the young poet, for freedom and liberty, both regarding politics and economics. The young O’Brien uses the resources at his disposal, as part of the wealthy class in Ireland, to help “utter the cries of freedom and liberty” on behalf of the poor and oppressed in the country. O’Brien’s first and only biographer, Francis Wolle, argues that once he arrived in America, he gave little concern for his home country of Ireland. This interpretation might be true up to a point. However, once he immigrates to America, he adopts the social and cultural values of his new home. Wolle also claims that since O’Brien came from an aristocratic background, he probably was “ashamed” of the types of folks that would have been migrating from Ireland in the middle of the nineteenth century. This also may be true; however, O’Brien continued to make Ireland and Irish themes a central focus of many of his publications. His most popular play, “A Gentleman from Ireland” is a farce of mistaken identity in which confusion abides between a family and a visitor from Ireland. One of his best poems, written in 1861, a year before his death, called “The Ballad of the Shamrock,” tells the heart-wrenching story of an Irish mother who waits patiently to emigrate from Ireland to America, to reunite with the son she loves so much, only to find the son dead when she steps on the shore in New York. This story becomes very prophetic in a way, as O’Brien was to die only a few months later from wounds incurred during the American Civil War.

His other major writing activity, while living in Ireland, was with the Irish periodical, *The Cork Magazine*. Very little is known about this publication, from the introduction to the first edition, it claims to be a magazine dedicated to the goal of establishing Irish literature. It is for this reason that the young O’Brien did not focus on political and economic topics in this periodical as much as he did with *The Nation*. Instead, O’Brien used this magazine to work out

what would become an important source of material for many of his publications, romantic tragedy. None of the poems published in this magazine show much promise, but they do show him working and trying to perfect his craft. As Wolle notes:

These early writings of Fitz-James O'Brien show that he knows the poetry of his time and that in spirit and technique he apes the late romantics – he is enthusiastic about natural scenery which he sentimentalizes, he tells love tales and supernatural stories of the long ago in ballad form, and he utters his cry for individual freedom. At the same time the subject matter is born of his own experience and his Irish environment, and frequently he uses his verse scathingly to attack the political and social evils that come under his ken.<sup>44</sup>

There is an almost two-year gap between his last poem published in *The Cork Magazine* and his first publication when he arrived in London with *The Family Friend*. There are some theories as to what must have occupied his time during this two-year hiatus from publishing: he moved to Dublin and attended Trinity College, he left Ireland and traveled touring France, or he joined the British army. Wolle believes whatever occupied his time during these two years; he certainly was out of Ireland.<sup>45</sup>

After dabbling in Romantic themes with *The Cork Magazine*, he returns to political poetry with his last Irish poem, titled “Say scared Clarseac”<sup>46</sup> in *The Irishman* of Dublin on February 3, 1849. This piece was the only known poem O'Brien published for this newspaper. The editor of this publication also commented on the poem, similar to his first poem with *The Nation*, however, instead of ridiculing him, this editor pays him a compliment. “‘Heremon’ – Though young in years is not weak in rhythmic power. We like his movement; it is bold and free.”<sup>47</sup> In this poem, the young O'Brien deplors the sad state of Ireland and the fate of her patriotic poets, who are either in prison or driven into exile. “And Freedom bids the few who

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<sup>44</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 16.

<sup>46</sup> The full text of this poem can be found in the Appendix, Entry #2.

<sup>47</sup> *The Irishman* (Dublin), Feb. 3, 1849.

linger here – / Our prostrate Isle to fly, / And Hope’s glad light, that shone for many a year, /  
Seems just about to die.”<sup>48</sup> Wolle observes, “[o]n this despondent note the writing of Fitz-James  
O’Brien for the journals of his native island ceased; for in the year 1849 he came of age and  
inherited whatever fortune was left him by his father, James O’Brien, and by his grandfather,  
Michael O’Driscoll.”<sup>49</sup> From here O’Brien left for London, never to return to his native country  
and never to see his family again. Like many other Irish immigrants, once he left, he never  
returned. He may never have returned to his native home physically, but he returned to it time  
and time again emotionally and spiritually through his published writings.

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<sup>48</sup> *The Irishman* (Dublin), Feb. 3, 1849.

<sup>49</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 17.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “Wakened from thy Slumbers” — London Calling

Thou has wakened from thy slumbers,  
Which no earthly care encumbers;  
All is fresh and fair to thee,  
Pilgrim of Eternity!

“To an Infant” (1851)

The middle of the nineteenth century marked a turning point for both Britain and Fitz-James O’Brien. Both turning points were connected to and centered on what was known as the Great Exhibition, the first international world fair, which was to take place in London in 1851. For Britain, as the host country of the Great Exhibition, it was its chance to profile to the world its advanced industrial and technological superiority to the world. But this opportunity was much broader and more universal than British national interests; it gave countries around the world a venue to showcase everything they were doing to promote, support, and encourage the rising middle classes.

For O’Brien, as an editor for one of the unofficial magazines of the Great Exhibition, it was his chance to profile his editing and writing abilities to a new audience. Also, for O’Brien, this opportunity was much broader than this – he could now be “wakened from his slumbers” and take his place among the profession of writers – a calling which had beckoned him since his youth. It would serve as a chance for him to mature, both regarding his writing technique and the themes he explored. It would be this time in London which would set the stage for all his later writings; he would continue the themes of his writings in Ireland, but would take them to a new

level and depth of understanding. The Great Exhibition allowed O'Brien to mature and develop into the literary figure that he would not have otherwise been able to become. This transition was an important part of O'Brien's literary education. While in London he was still a man of means, he had not yet felt the sting of what it means to go without. In time, he will have traversed all of these different experiences, but the O'Brien of London was still young, wealthy, and inexperienced. His London publications, like his Ireland writings, have a kind of personal authenticity to them. Although, his work for the Great Exhibition signals his entry into the literary marketplace, it is not economic necessity that drives his decisions. Rather O'Brien is at this point pursuing his desire to expand his readership.

In 1849 O'Brien would depart Ireland, never to return. He had his inheritance in hand and the world at his fingertips. He gained some valuable writing experience while as a young man in Ireland, but now he was ready to begin a new journey, and it is not clear from what little we know of his life if he had ever visited Britain (particularly London) before. Certainly the surname of his stepfather, O'Grady, was a well-established name and would have gained him entrance into some of the most exclusive circles in London.<sup>1</sup> London would also serve as the first place in which O'Brien took on, formally at least, what would become his lifetime profession – editor and writer. It would be the place to which he would become a professional writer. And while his time in London would be brief, just two and a half years, it would serve as a valuable training ground for what would become his future home in America. O'Brien never lost track of his roots and continued to emphasize in his London writings what emerged as major themes in his Irish writings: patriotic nationalism and concern for the oppressed. A number of his London pieces

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<sup>1</sup> There is anecdotal evidence that he actually used the O'Grady name in social settings, no doubt, to help him acclimate to the exclusive London society which he sought the approval of. The O'Grady name carried a tremendous amount of weight across Europe, as it was one of the oldest and most established Irish surnames.



would continue to dwell on Ireland and his choice of publications reflected his social, political, economic, and historical concerns.

The first set of publications to which we find O'Brien submitting pieces was the London based magazine *The Family Friend*. Edited by R. Kemp Philp, the magazine offers a rare glimpse into British social history. The magazine reflected the social attitudes of the rising middle class and spanned a wide range of topics: household tips, parenting advice, spiritual reflections, and dramatic fiction.<sup>2</sup> *The Family Friend* was published on a monthly basis, but was later, because of its popularity, extended into a weekly. According to Wolle, the magazine "won such great popularity . . . its original monthly numbers [were changed] to a fortnightly issue, and finally to a weekly one."<sup>3</sup> It was in *The Family Friend* and his association with that magazine (as well as with its editor), in which Fitz-James O'Brien was to take his first step to becoming a professional writer. His first publications in that magazine were in the form of definition competitions. The magazine would announce terms to which readers were asked to submit their witty definitions (*a la* Ambrose Bierce's *The Devils Dictionary*, but not as witty). Some of O'Brien's contributions included: "Debt: A pound that human donkeys sometimes get into, and from which it takes many pounds to release them."<sup>4</sup> "Freedom: The summer shower that, descending on a nation, causes the flowers of Peace, Art, and Plenty, to spring upon her soil."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Family Friend*: accessed 09/22/18,

<http://cdm15935.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15935coll13>

<sup>3</sup> Francis Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien: A Literary Bohemian of the Eighteen-Fifties* (Boulder, Colorado: University of Colorado, 1944), 19. But this was not the first British publication with O'Brien's name on it. Instead that would go to *The Metropolitan Magazine*. It is not entirely clear how this magazine came to publish O'Brien's poem "Forrest Thoughts," because this poem had been originally published earlier in December 1848 in *The Cork Magazine*. It is likely that O'Brien, upon arriving in London, decided to submit some of his better poetry selections from his days in Ireland. Regardless of how this poem came to be republished, it constitutes O'Brien's first official publication in London. The poem would reflect many of O'Brien's later themes: dark places, Gothic settings, philosophical reflections, existential crisis, and cosmic tensions.

<sup>4</sup> Fitz-James O'Brien, "Debt." (*The Family Friend*, I, July, 1851), 207.

<sup>5</sup> O'Brien, "Freedom." (*The Family Friend*, I, July, 1851), 207.

“Hunger: The weapon whose edge the pauper strives to blunt; the epicure to sharpen.”<sup>6</sup> O’Brien submitted a total of twelve of these definitions: Debt, Freedom, Gambling, Hunger, Nobody, Bachelor, Jealousy, Economy, Envy, Money, Newspaper, and Peace.<sup>7</sup> He does not show too much originality or creativity with these, but his steady and regular contributions caused the editor to reach out to him and solicit more substantial offerings.

As a result of this, O’Brien’s first paid publication comes in the form of a short story allegory, “Philosophy in Disguise,”<sup>8</sup> in November 1849. An interesting early story from O’Brien, Platonic in its approach and tone, it emphasizes the importance of morals not being “ugly” or “threatening” to the youth who seek knowledge and wisdom from their elders. In the story, the main character, Philosophy, who is old and ugly, but yet wise and educated, seeks to pass on his knowledge to the younger generation. But instead of listening to him, they shun him because of his “weirdness.” When Philosophy seeks advice from a witch, she transforms him into a young and beautiful person, still wise and now much more attractive to the young, who are now willing to listen to him and heed his valuable wisdom. The important moral within this story is to the youth: don’t be too judgmental and base everything on outward appearance – the path to wisdom can come in many different shapes and forms.<sup>9</sup>

O’Brien only had two poems published in *The Family Friend*. The first was published in July 1850, “Lines Addressed to a Young Lady About to Depart for India.” The second was published in August 1850, “A Lyric of Life.” Both of these pieces show maturity and preciseness of his craft that O’Brien had been working on since his early publications, which came to fruition

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<sup>6</sup> O’Brien, “Hunger.” (*The Family Friend*, I, July, 1851), 207.

<sup>7</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O’Brien: Miscellaneous Writings* (Texas: A Bit O’Irish Press, forthcoming). All twelve of O’Brien’s contributions to this magazine will be published in this collection.

<sup>8</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Miscellaneous Writings*, forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> The content from this early story reflects one of O’Brien’s life-long interests in how the relationship between education and how knowledge is disseminated and acquired.

with the publication of “Forest Thoughts.”<sup>10</sup> The first poem “Lines Addressed to a Young Lady” is about the distressing state of Ireland and the second poem “A Lyric” is about the lessons one can learn from an old oak tree. Both poems focus on the moral importance of steadfastness of character and show his continued interests in the same themes he began exploring in his writings from Ireland.

Two other significant contributions to *The Family Friend* came in February, “Babies!,” and in March, “Children. A Vindication,” of 1851.<sup>11</sup> These two essays show a side of O’Brien which we have not seen before, with maybe the exception of his republication of “Young Lady Regret her Eyes being Bloodshot,” in which O’Brien employs humor and satire. The poem “Young Lady” was published in *The Nation* in 1845, it was reworked then republished in *The Cork Magazine* in 1848, then reworked again and republished in *The Parlour Magazine* in 1851.<sup>12</sup> In the essays “Babies!” and “Children” O’Brien shows his wit and humor by lampooning youngsters and the parents who have them. Intended by O’Brien to be taken “tongue and cheek,” it was, however, not taken that way by the readers of the magazine. O’Brien was forced, along with the editor, to publish a follow-up and a sort of apology for the previous pieces. The second piece, “Children,” contained a side story similar to that of his earlier piece “Philosophy in Disguise.” In this side story, “A Story of a Child,”<sup>13</sup> O’Brien would set the stage and develop a philosophy about human nature and society that would stay with him and be included in many of his publications from this point forward in his writings. The main targets in this short moral tale: Faith, Hope, and Charity.

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<sup>10</sup> In my estimation, “Forest Thoughts” is one of his best pre-American poems. Wolle also says, “[in Forest Thoughts] the reader feels for the first time that perhaps Fitz-James did have in him the true poetic spark.” (Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Miscellaneous Writings*, 16). The full text of this poem can be found in the Appendix, Entry #3.

<sup>11</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Miscellaneous Writings*, forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 4, 20, and 36.

<sup>13</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Miscellaneous Writings*, forthcoming.

O'Brien exposes the hypocrisy he believes exist not only in human nature, but the institutions that cultivate and corrupt that nature. The story tells of a natural child, who lives in the forest, untouched by civilization, hence a kind of Rousseau pre-civilized human being.<sup>14</sup> As he journeys into the world of civilization to observe human society, the goal is to learn what he can about the secrets of this different world. He is given a warning though about the corrupt nature of humanity but feels a yearning to venture on. His first encounter is with a religious figure, who extols the virtues of the wealthy and implores the poor in his church to see them as models to imitate – even though the rich are cruel and uncaring individuals. The child becomes disgusted with the sermonizing and decides to move on. Next, the child encounters a writer, who encourages humans to achieve the highest level of morality through his poetry and essays, only to discover that the writer is willing to sell his own integrity for wealth and riches. Similarly, the child leaves this second encounter disappointed with humanity. Lastly, the child meets a wealthy man who is known for his charity and hospitality toward the poor, but the child witnesses first hand his terrible treatment of a poor woman. The woman, out of desperation and sheer helplessness, asks him for a penny to save her life so she can buy food for the day, but because the act will go unnoticed, the wealthy man brushes her aside. This man reveals his true nature, with his only concern being the appearance of charity, instead of genuine moral behavior. All of these examples harken back to O'Brien's early days during the Great Famine. In his poem, "The Famine," he chastised the wealthy for not doing enough to help the poor. Here O'Brien continues

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<sup>14</sup> This seems to be a clear reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "Discourse on the Sciences and Arts" published in 1750. Roger Masters and Christopher Kelly, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Discourse on the Sciences and Arts and Polemics* (Hanover: Dartmouth College, 1992). Given O'Brien's fluency in French, it would not be surprising that O'Brien would draw inspiration from many of the French masters.

to place a large part of societal injustice at the feet of the wealthy and privileged classes – of which he was one.<sup>15</sup>

The last piece that O'Brien published with *The Family Friend* was another short story, "The Simple History of a Family Friend," in July of 1851. This story, similar to several later stories, is about the birth, life, and death of a bullfinch by the name of "Bully."<sup>16</sup> This story shows, as we have already seen, O'Brien's enduring interest in birds. O'Brien grew up in the country, in Cork County Ireland, located in the southwestern part of the country, where there would have been lots of opportunities for the young boy to engage in different bird watching experiences.<sup>17</sup>

These early London pieces demonstrate O'Brien's continued interests in themes that he began while in Ireland. These stories and poems represent the first instances of O'Brien as a professional writer; these would be the first time that he would receive pay for publication. O'Brien was moved early on to write out of a sense of concern for the poor and downtrodden, as well as a sense of patriotism and national pride. His historical and geographical awareness continues to evolve in his London writings in the magazine *The Family Friend*. It is with this magazine which would facilitate O'Brien to solidify his life-long interests in literature and writing. These pieces show a kind of "awakening" for O'Brien alluded to the title of this chapter and his poem "To an Infant." Each of these represents an awakening regarding expanding interests in the human condition and a broadening of his professional resume. But for O'Brien, and his publications for this magazine represent this, his talents are still directed to a limited and

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<sup>15</sup> Chapters Four through Six of this dissertation will explore in depth these themes of O'Brien's vision of social justice.

<sup>16</sup> O'Brien utilized the same name for a bullfinch character in his story "The Bullfinch" published in *The Knickerbocker* in July 1861.

<sup>17</sup> This was the first instance of O'Brien making birds and bird behavior a part of his fiction. Chapter Six of this dissertation will explore O'Brien's relationship to animals as part of his social justice philosophy.

provincial audience. Despite the wide circulation of this magazine, the sensibility primarily reflects the taste of the London middle class readership. But it is with his connections to R. Kemp Philp, as editor for *The Family Friend*, which will lead to a much broader and in many ways, a more universal and cosmopolitan audience. It is with this connection which will allow O'Brien to continue to grow as a man of letters.

In 1851 London hosted the first international world fair, known around the world as the Great Exhibition. It was the French, though, who were the first to recognize the importance of an exhibition for promoting national pride. Historian Michael Leapman, who wrote a detailed study of the Great Exhibition, commented, "Europe's first major exhibition of manufactures was held in the Temple of Industry in Paris in 1789, followed by others every four years."<sup>18</sup> The Exhibition of Products of French Industry was a public event organized in Paris from 1789 to 1849. The purpose of the event was to "offer a panorama of the productions of the various branches of industry with a view to emulation."<sup>19</sup> The Paris industrial expositions can trace their origins to the fairs held in several cities in Europe during the Middle Ages. After the start of the French Revolution authorities staged several festivals in Paris, beginning with the Festival of the Federation on July 14, 1790. This festival was followed by others: Festival of Law (1792), Festival of Reason (1793), Festival of the Supreme Being (1794), and finally the Festival of the Foundation of the Republic (1796). These celebrations of the new republic were designed to help unite the people and accept the new order.<sup>20</sup> The Directory launched the first exposition at a time when France was engaged in external wars and was still in upheaval from the revolution. The

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Leapman, *The World for a Shilling: How the Great Exhibition of 1851 Shaped a Nation* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2001), 28.

<sup>19</sup> *L'ancêtre des Expositions universelles*: accessed 09/23/18, <https://www.histoire-image.org/fr/etudes/ancetre-expositions-universelles?i=232>

<sup>20</sup> *Exposition des produits de l'industrie française*: accessed 09/23/18, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exposition\\_des\\_produits\\_de\\_l%27industrie\\_fran%C3%A7aise#CITEREFColmont1855](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exposition_des_produits_de_l%27industrie_fran%C3%A7aise#CITEREFColmont1855)

goal was to promote patriotism, in the form of nationalism, and to showcase French culture and society. These events were precursors to the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. The major difference between London's exhibition and those in France was that the London exhibit was to be an international affair.

There was some internal debate with the organizers as to whether the exhibit ought to include other countries, or just include British accomplishments. Ultimately the Commission who was tasked with organizing the event decided to make it the first truly international exhibition. This also had a nationalistic purpose, for Leapman claims, "[it] would symbolize Britain's self-confidence and ensure that the world's eyes turned towards London."<sup>21</sup> But Jonathon Shears, who edited an important contemporary collection of primary sources from the 1851 exhibition, argues that the Great Exhibition was something much more important than just Britain flexing its muscles. "[The] Exhibition," he wrote, "is significant primarily because it represented something new – and it undoubtedly inaugurated a new era of international expositions."<sup>22</sup> But even further it was a cosmopolitan universal attempt to profile the greatness of humanity and extol the virtues of progress. The exhibit was organized around four principle categories: Raw Materials, Machinery, Manufactures, and Plastic Arts. According to Shears, the exhibit would "demonstrate the view that man was gradually harnessing each 'wondrous element' of the natural world, modifying and improving them."<sup>23</sup>

The origins of the Great Exhibition can be traced to several different causes. First, it signified the liberal shift in politics in Britain during the 1830s which saw the popularization of the *laissez-faire* attitudes to manufacturing and enterprise. Second, it attempted to promote

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<sup>21</sup> Leapman, *The World for a Shilling*, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Shears, ed., *The Great Exhibition, 1851: A Sourcebook* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Shears, *The Great Exhibition*, 4.

Britain's position as an economic and moral power. Third, it announced the arrival of a new class of civic minded Londoners who were in the 1840s publicizing Britain's growing dominance in the global economy.<sup>24</sup> Another important factor was the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, which removed restrictions on imports and exports, putting British goods in a new competitive market. Finally, the exhibit was viewed by many as an example of promoting the middle classes and the contributions they were making toward the greatness of Britain through industry and technology. This particular relationship would be an important connection for O'Brien to the Great Exhibition. As Shears explained, "objects on display at the Great Exhibition focalized the material aspirations of the middle classes."<sup>25</sup> But more to the point, the goals were to emphasize the "welfare, social improvement, the cultivation of good taste and a reconsideration of the cultural contributions of the working men."<sup>26</sup> According to Jeffrey A. Auerbach, in another study of the history of the Great Exhibition, "what is so remarkable about the Great Exhibition is that it included something for almost everyone."<sup>27</sup> This democratic emphasis would have held great appeal to O'Brien and it would be this event which would, for the first time, profile his literary abilities on the world stage.

The Great Exhibition offered publishers many different opportunities. There were several presses that operated inside the exhibition halls, and some publishers rushed at the opportunity to display the latest publishing and printing techniques to the public. Publications included things like suggestions of what to do while at the exhibit, local sites and scenes, directions of how to enjoy the exhibit, detailed layouts of the massive collection of exhibits, and food lists for places to snack on while visiting the exhibit, among others. But one magazine, *The Parlour Magazine*

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<sup>24</sup> Shears, *The Great Exhibition*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Shears, *The Great Exhibition*, 56.

<sup>26</sup> Shears, *The Great Exhibition*, 145-6.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 2.



*of the Literature of all Nations*, wanted to do something different. This magazine wanted to showcase literature from around the world in the same fashion that the exhibit was showcasing different items of manufacturing and industry from around the world.<sup>28</sup> The magazine offered the opportunity for individuals to showcase their talent for writing, which would also reflect the local flavor of different international writers.

The individuals that printed this magazine within the walls of the Great Exhibition were the same publishers who turned out the pages of the magazine *The Family Friend*. It was this connection which gave O'Brien his first and best opportunity to showcase his talents as the editor of this magazine – this would constitute for O'Brien his first full-time job as an editor and writer. According to Francis Wolle, even though “its weekly numbers were small, the supplying of material and the preparation of copy must have kept Fitz-James pretty constantly occupied, and he helped fill its columns with a number of his own contributions.”<sup>29</sup> Finally, this was the opportunity that had been awaiting O'Brien – the chance to edit a major publication which was targeted to an international audience. His publications in Ireland, while published with a major newspaper, would not have enjoyed a worldwide audience. Now, with him editing this magazine, he now had the opportunity to showcase his talents. One important question lingers here: did O'Brien share the visions and the goals of the exhibition?

In reviewing O'Brien's writing from this period, we see him being pulled in two directions. On the one hand, as an unofficial publicist for the exhibition he embraces the central value of progress that the exhibition promotes. However, on the other hand, he seems critical of

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<sup>28</sup> This must have been a really small publication and there was, no doubt, tons of competition for publishers to capitalize on this opportunity. A quick survey of some of the major histories of this event and none of them mention the magazine. Which is rather strange considering the press did operate inside the confines of the building of the exhibit; granted, there were a number of presses that operated inside and some of the publications became the “official” publication of the Great Exhibition, leaving these other publications to be “unofficial” publications of the event. Despite the size of the publication, this would provide O'Brien a great opportunity to hone his talents as an editor and writer.

<sup>29</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 21.

the idea that progress is always a positive good. Indeed, some of his publications for *The Family Friend* seem to challenge the positive aspects of progress. In his story, “A Story of a Child,” O’Brien shows the purity of the natural child, who lives in “the quiet heart of a vast untraversed forest”<sup>30</sup> as opposed to the “great world, which he had never seen, throbbed with fevered pulse outside the girdle of these calm green woods. How myriads of human beings, with busy hands and restless hearts, thronged its paths, raising mighty cities, leveling ancient thrones, balancing in their little hands the destiny of empires.”<sup>31</sup> Here the innocence and secluded nature of the natural world is juxtaposed with the hustle and bustle of the city and civilized society. This emphasis clearly shows the Romantic influence upon O’Brien’s thought at this early stage in his philosophical and mental development.<sup>32</sup> O’Brien goes even further in his criticism of the “progress” of civilization, as the Wind warns the child of the hypocritical nature of humans and warns him that they “pride themselves on what they have not, and the gifts they really possess they look on with contempt. Three great virtues in particular do most of these men pretend to – Faith, Hope, and Charity; but if you follow me, sweet child, you will see how they are practiced.”<sup>33</sup> Not only is O’Brien condemning the nature of civilized society, but he seems also to be casting a rather large net over all of humanity – at least the ones that have been gifted with the progress of civilization, as the child from the story is the only one who is untainted with this corrupt nature. The story ends with the child shunning civilization and returning to the seclusion and the moral safety of the woods:

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<sup>30</sup> O’Brien, “Children. A Vindication.” (*The Family Friend*, IV, March 15, 1851), 171.

<sup>31</sup> O’Brien, “Children. A Vindication,” 172.

<sup>32</sup> O’Brien will maintain this Romantic world view for the rest of his life, but will drift toward the Dark Romantics, *a la* Hawthorne, Irving, and Poe, as he matures into his American writings. While O’Brien shows a proclivity to viewing human nature in this Rousseau like state of innocence, he will go on to develop a much more complex view of humans. For O’Brien, the human condition is capable of both good and evil and this seems to be the overall message with this story.

<sup>33</sup> O’Brien, “Children. A Vindication,” 172.

The child was not sorry to leave behind him the profaned temple, the corrupt cities, and the prostituted intellects, and betake himself to the woods, where none of these could come; and it was a pure and grateful joy that he welcomed the sight of those waving coverts, whose quiet pleasures he would never more forsake. So he entered the forest, and saluted his old friends the trees, and was welcomed by all the woodland flowers; and he and the Wind went straight to the warm mossy cave, and dwelt there happily for evermore.<sup>34</sup>

Alienation and corruption lie at the feet of these three: the church, the cities, and the intellectuals. The child's inquisitive nature and natural curiosity got the best of him, but once he realized that progress and civilization offered him nothing but frustration, fear, and unhappiness, he easily quit that state and returned to the comfort of the woods. Is the story here simply a form of entertainment, or does O'Brien offer the reader something of a more serious condemnation? All of O'Brien's early writings, which will be replicated in his later writings, show a tendency toward criticizing the human condition; he sees the potential within the human, but time and time again we are reminded that any hope we might have is the exception and not the rule. The Dark Romantics warn us that human nature is just as capable of evil as it is of good.

One of the first poems published by O'Brien for *The Parlour Magazine* was included in the July 12 issue, called "The Lonely Oak."<sup>35</sup> In this poem, O'Brien touches on many of the themes already published in his earlier poetry.<sup>36</sup> "The Lonely Oak" is a cautionary tale, which echoes many of the same themes that O'Brien will continue to draw on till his death in 1862. According to Wolle, "[in this poem], there is a touch of patriotism, a regret that the steadfast oak must stand and see such deplorable changes as were taking place in the land of Erin."<sup>37</sup> In the opening we are told that, despite changes that have come over the years, the oak stands firm in its place. Unyielding to time and situation, the oak has weathered the dangerous storm of life to live

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<sup>34</sup> O'Brien, "Children. A Vindication," 174.

<sup>35</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 39 – 40.

<sup>36</sup> The full text of this poem can be found in the Appendix, Entry #4.

<sup>37</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 22.

for another day. The next part reflects on the relationship the narrator and the oak have had with each other. But not content to leave it there, O'Brien universalizes his sentiment by connecting the life of the oak with that of his native country of Ireland. Finally, the narrator tells of how in manhood, while he was off gathering "knowledge" he would return to the oak and turn his "mind to a deeper thought" – another subtle, or maybe not so subtle, hint by O'Brien about the juxtaposition of civilization versus nature.<sup>38</sup> The narrator, like the child in "A Story of a Child," realizes that life truly dedicated to good and virtuous living can only be achieved within the confines of the natural state. O'Brien here is not criticizing the pursuit of knowledge, but like a theme he will develop in his American writings, the pursuit of knowledge without ethical and moral constraints, or considerations, can be very dangerous.<sup>39</sup> The end of the poem finishes on a melancholy note, as the narrator wishes, once his life is over, to spend his eternal slumber under the guidance and protection of the lonely oak.

O'Brien continues to reflect with wonder and reverence for the past and on his native land. Ireland always remains in his heart and mind. He is drawn to nature, as he continued to return to the memories of his childhood living in Cork County. The lessons learned from nature's advice are much more valuable and stronger than those offered by humanity, or superficial learning from traditional educational pursuits.<sup>40</sup> This poem shares many themes with his earlier poems published in *The Family Friend*, "Lines Addressed to a Young Lady About to Depart for India" and "A Lyric of Life." These also continue the same somber reflections that O'Brien began back in Ireland: an evolving historical awareness and subtle patriotism couched within a

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<sup>38</sup> O'Brien was a child of Romanticism, which held nature in reverence. However, overall I would categorize him as a Dark Romantic, especially with his American writings, most notably with his short stories. His poetry will continue to echo the ideas of Romanticism.

<sup>39</sup> This theme is best developed in his American short stories: "The Diamond Lens" and "Seeing the World." Both of these stories are reminiscent of Poe's stories about individuals plagued with monomania, but in the two O'Brien stories the subject of their obsession is knowledge.

<sup>40</sup> O'Brien would become very critical of the traditional educational institutions, especially those for women.

tempered nationalism. There is a reverence for the past, especially the historical connections to family and geography. O'Brien may never have returned to Ireland, but these publications from London clearly show it is still in his heart and mind.

In 1851 O'Brien returned to Ireland – sort of. He had another poem published in a popular Irish magazine, *The Dublin University Magazine*. This poem, titled “The Wish; or, the Fall of the Star,”<sup>41</sup> had as its setting Ireland and told of a poor Irish couple who came together when Dermot saves Norah after nearly drowning in a nearby river. The editor of this newspaper, Jonathan Freke Slingsby, comments on the poem, “Bravo; a very pretty piece of versification; it illustrates one of our native superstitions.”<sup>42</sup> Wolle notes, a “sequel to these verses, continuing the story of Dermot and Norah, appeared about a month and a half later (September 20) in *The Parlour Magazine* . . . The two young peasants sat before their turf fire dreaming of wealth and ease.”<sup>43</sup> The story had the honor of being republished, with an additional stanza and retitled,<sup>44</sup> showing how Dermot’s industry succeeded in earning them a snug mansion, in Edward Hayes *The Ballads of Ireland*, published in 1855. There were attempts throughout the 1840s and 50s to pull together exemplary examples of Irish literature, showcase the best of Irish writing by Irish editors and writers. The purpose of these collected anthologies, like Hayes’s collection, was to demonstrate the existence of a unique Irish literature and written tradition. O'Brien would have three poems included in this highly important cultural and literary anthology.<sup>45</sup>

O'Brien continued to provide material for *The Parlour Magazine*. In addition to original writings, like those already noted, he was also responsible for translating material from the

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<sup>41</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 33 – 35.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Freke Slingsby, *The Dublin University Magazine* (XXXVIII, August 1851), 141.

<sup>43</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 23.

<sup>44</sup> The original title of the sequel, “Fortune in the Fire,” was changed in Hayes collection to, “Irish Castles.” Both poems can be found in Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 46 – 47.

<sup>45</sup> This clearly shows the importance and talent of O'Brien as this was a highly acclaimed collection. One would not get this impression by the most recent surveys of the history of the Irish short story, none of which even mention Fitz-James O'Brien.

French for the press which operated in full sight of the crowds that visited the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. With the publication of the second volume, the magazine changed its policy and only published material that was translated from the original (in other words, only translated material was to be included in the second volume of this magazine). Considering O'Brien's follow-up Nora-Dermot's poem, titled "Fortune in the Fire," was published in this second volume, O'Brien used his position to include it regardless of this new policy change, claiming that it was "Translated from the original Irish of a Peasant Bard at Ballingarry."<sup>46</sup> What is particularly important to note here is O'Brien's continued reflection and writing about his native land of Ireland and the concerns about the lives of the poor and working classes.<sup>47</sup>

The Great Exhibition ran from approximately May to October of 1851, with all exhibits removed by December, and according to Wolle, when

the exhibition ended, the life of the popular little magazine ceased also, and its buyers and subscribers were recommended to patronize a new magazine, *The Home Companion*, as its successor. *The Home Companion* was another of the many ventures of R. Kemp Philp . . . [and in] anticipation of its early appearance Philp had evidently commissioned O'Brien to write him a story, for beginning in the first number and continuing serially through nine of its weekly issues appeared "The Phantom Light: A Christmas Story."<sup>48</sup> By Fitz-James O'Brien.<sup>49</sup>

This story was O'Brien's earliest attempt at a full-length story, it is true he had published short story fragments prior; but it would be this publication that would constitute his first full-length story (the story is really more of a novella, rather than a short story, as it runs to over seventy pages in length). Interestingly enough, O'Brien continues the same themes here as he had

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<sup>46</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 46.

<sup>47</sup> Wolle contends that once O'Brien left Ireland he wrote very little about Ireland. It is my contention that this is absolutely false and that he published a number of Irish writings while in London, but also continued that activity well into his American writings.

<sup>48</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Miscellaneous Writings*, forthcoming.

<sup>49</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 23.

pursued within his earlier story fragments and his poetry: concern for his native land of Ireland, empathy with the plight of the peasants and those in need, historical and geographic awareness of Irish folk-lore, myths, and legends, and the important juxtaposition of nature and society.

“The Phantom Light” is subtitled “A Christmas Story” and while the story itself will not go down within the O’Brien canon as one of his best publications, it is important in the fact that it does constitute his longest and most sustained effort at a full-length story. It is also important for another reason. With the exhibitions emphasis on progress, this story (along with other examples we have seen) does show a side of O’Brien at odds with the spirit of that event. Here O’Brien chooses to focus his attention on the importance of the past and lost traditions with focus on local Irish myths and legends. It shows O’Brien engaging in an important literary activity which was gaining popularity in the nineteenth century. As has already been noted, the collecting and organizing of culture was being systematically prepared in geographic anthologies across the world. The Grimm brothers, while not being the first to engage in this exercise, with the publication of the first edition of their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in 1812, became important literary and cultural historians by setting a standard for others to emulate. With the publication of “The Phantom Light” O’Brien is contributing his part to this cultural activity. This, again, shows O’Brien’s continued interest in his Irish homeland.

Jessica Amanda Salmonson, an O’Brien scholar and first anthologist to draw exclusively upon O’Brien’s original manuscripts for inclusion in her collections, comments about the importance of this first short story by O’Brien:

The larger text of ‘The Phantom Light’ merits passing discussion, although the supernatural element was deemed too insignificant to justify inclusion of it here. In the first half of the story there are various references to Irish folklore, but the only occurrence within the story *per se* is the sighting of a will o’ the wisp as an evil omen. The phantom light is thereafter dispensed with, rendering the choice of title somewhat suspect.

The story develops as a sentimental love story such as Fitz was to write now and then with some success. The real sparks of life enter during scenes with Uncle Tot, an eccentric old inventor who sets off various malfunctioning devices. These moments of highly effective comedy<sup>50</sup> are all the story has to commend it, besides, of course, the legend encountered midway in the narrative. . . . the novella must be counted Fitz's first substantial story, already revealing his fascination for the supernatural. It's also one of his few tales to make use of his Irish homeland as a setting. . . . [and] reveals the cultural origins of his love for an uncanny tale.<sup>51</sup>

Wolle also commented on the importance of the novella "The Phantom Light" when he said, the "plot is bad; it rises to no climax, the hints and suggestions it makes as to supernatural interference come to nothing, and it is frequently ridiculously melodramatic or irritatingly homiletic. The style is bad too, being so stilted and unnatural in the dialogue of the principal characters that it entirely prevents them from seeming real." However, he goes on, "even in its title, suggests the supernatural, and that throughout these chapters it contains incidents based on peasant superstitions and reports of miraculous occurrences, show that the young O'Brien, brought up in the southwest corner of Ireland, had a mind well saturated with the myth-making habits of the Irish peasantry."<sup>52</sup> This story constituted O'Brien's last literary efforts before he left for America and therefore is an important document as it was a tribute to his native land of Ireland and a sympathetic description of the customs and scenes of his southwestern corner of

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<sup>50</sup> O'Brien had a great sense of humor, both in terms of his publications and his personality. There are great anecdotal stories about his practical joking.

<sup>51</sup> Jessica Amanda Salmonson, ed., *The Wondersmith and Others* (British Columbia: Ash-Tree Press, 2008), 259. Salmonson is the first editor to draw exclusively from O'Brien's original texts for her anthologies, making her collections very important in O'Brien scholarship. All others, as far as I can tell, drew exclusively from the William Winter collection, which had major editing flaws. Winter changed the texts, omitted paragraphs, and updated grammar as he saw fit as O'Brien's editor, making his texts and those that use his anthology for their collections suspect. She is wrong in her assessment of this story constituting his first short story publication, which should go to his "An Arabian Night-Mare" which was published on November 8, 1851. "The Phantom Light" was published from January through February of 1852, after O'Brien had already left for America. I would also argue that many of his story fragments were also substantial in nature, all of which were also published prior to "The Phantom Light." I do agree with the assessment that it was his first full-length and sustained efforts at telling a story.

<sup>52</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 24.



it.<sup>53</sup> This story reaffirms my argument that while O’Brien leaves Ireland in 1849, never to return, he returns to it time and time again in his thought and writings.

There are three other pieces, published without author attribution, that have been credited to O’Brien in London; all three pieces were published in Charles Dickens’s *Household Words*.<sup>54</sup> This two-penny weekly magazine of original short fiction and crusading social journalism “was launched to widespread publicity on 30 March 1850. . . . [its] handsome bi-annual volumes, aimed at affluent middle-class families and people of influence, no less than at working-class readers interested in ‘trading up.’”<sup>55</sup> The magazine contained over 380 contributors, some 90 were women, many have been identified, but there remain a few pieces which have not been identified still today. Three pieces, “An Arabian Night-Mare,”<sup>56</sup> “An Abiding Dream,”<sup>57</sup> and “A Child’s Prayer”<sup>58</sup> all follow O’Brien’s style and formula and have been attributed to O’Brien by Frances Wolle. It is also not surprising that O’Brien would have submitted pieces to this magazine, as it fits with his early sense of social justice and concern for the poor and working classes. “An Arabian Night-Mare” is another satirical piece which tells of the frozen spirits of Eblis<sup>59</sup>, with its oriental setting (which he would replicate a few more times in his American writings) and its supernatural elements, it is one of O’Brien’s early successful pieces. “An Abiding Dream” is a sentimental ballad and “A Child’s Prayer” is the same in subject matter to his earlier piece “My Childhood Prayer” published in *The Cork Magazine* in 1848. These

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<sup>53</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 24 – 25.

<sup>54</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 254 and 261. Wolle argues, I believe correctly, that these three anonymous pieces have many similarities with O’Brien’s other works that they are definitely publications by his hand. They do not necessarily fit the overall purpose of the magazine, but in fact, show O’Brien at his best and carry on the same concerns since his Irish days several years earlier.

<sup>55</sup> *Dickens Journals Online: Household Words*: accessed 09/23/18, <http://www.djo.org.uk/indexes/journals/household-words.html>

<sup>56</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I (Texas: A Bit O’Irish Press, 2017), 1 – 6.

<sup>57</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 48 – 50.

<sup>58</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 51.

<sup>59</sup> The Islamic equivalent to the Christian Satan, who was cast out of Heaven by God because he refused to bow down before Adam.

publications were to constitute his final publications in London, as the waning days of 1851 came to an end O'Brien boarded a ship bound for America – much like his leave from Ireland, O'Brien would never return to London.

What caused O'Brien to abruptly pick up and set sail on a ship bound for New York? He had made good connections with publishers and seemed to have an up-and-coming career as an editor and writer in London. The matter is a source of some conjecture. There were rumors that he had been involved with a married woman, whose husband was in the English army stationed in India. O'Brien had commented on this affair to his friend, Stephen Fiske.

He spoke guardedly to me of an attachment in the old country, that had marred his life. "Passion I can feel," he said; "but never again shall I know what it is to love. A man who once really loves can love but once. I have loved one woman; for all other women my heart is dead; but my passions, which have no heart in them, are as strong as lions, and they tear me like lions" It was the old story, – trite enough to be almost ludicrous.<sup>60</sup>

As the British officer was making his way back to Britain, the couple discovered this and O'Brien skipped out of town as soon as he could buy a ticket. With only \$60 in his pocket, he boarded a ship bound for America and landed in New York, where he would make his new home. O'Brien dreamed of coming to America as early as 1845 with the publication of his first poem "Oh! Give a Desert Life to Me." Ironically though, it was neither the Great Famine nor the British tyranny of Ireland which drove him to the shores of New York near the end of 1851, but instead, it was an affair with a married woman. And with that, thus ends O'Brien's sojourn in London.

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<sup>60</sup> Stephen Fiske, "O'Brien's Bohemian Days," in William Winter, ed., *The Poems and Stories of Fitz-James O'Brien* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881), lvii. Winter's edition was the very first collection of O'Brien's collected works. It contains 43 of approximately 140 of O'Brien's poems and 13 of approximately 75 of O'Brien's short stories, along with biographical material. As has been noted, unfortunately, Winter took too many liberties with O'Brien's texts, heavily editing them. There were plans for a second volume, but that never came to fruition. Winter published a second collection, four years later, which was the same short stories and biographical material as the previous collection, minus the poems.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “He Writes for Bread” — Democratic Artist in the Literary Marketplace

He writes to make the reader laugh,  
When his heart's full with tears;  
And all the Town seem happy when  
His prose or verse appears.  
They little know the loving heart  
That beats in garret dim —  
Or, while they daily go to 'Change,  
What change would be to him!  
The Printer's paid — the Paper's paid —  
The Pressman's pressing, too;  
And while the Author's left to starve,  
The “Devil” gets his due.  
The Publisher in carriage rolls,  
And sleeps on feather bed;  
While He that gives  
Them all life, lives  
In a prison of thought and sorrow,  
Never daring to think on the morrow.  
For the Bookseller's note, which put off the pay,  
Will not lighten a creditor's tread:  
Nor save from the landlord the few darling books  
Of the Bondman, who writes for his bread.

“He Writes for Bread” (1852)<sup>1</sup>

To say that Fitz-James O'Brien is an obscure figure in the history of American literature is an understatement; a quick perusal through any historical survey of this literature and one would be hard pressed to find even a footnote about this idiosyncratic Irish-American writer of fantasy, science fiction, and horror stories. But during the 1850s O'Brien ran with some of the most famous and important figures of the antebellum period, dined at some of the most exclusive restaurants, and was known as somewhat of a Renaissance man. He hung out with the likes of Walt Whitman, threw dinner parties at Delmonico's, and published in some of the most

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<sup>1</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music* (Texas: A Bit O'Irish Press, 2018), 81.

important periodicals during the time – he even wrote and produced a Broadway play. However, even during O’Brien’s day, with some of his own acquaintances, there were conflicting accounts about the writer and his character. George Arnold, the poet, claims that he lived in apartments which contained “a large and valuable library, piles of manuscripts, dressing-cases, decanters, pipes, pictures, a wardrobe of much splendor, and all sorts of knicknackery such as young bachelors love to collect.”<sup>2</sup> But his other close friend, Richard Henry Stoddard, describes O’Brien’s living situation in almost the opposite way: “[the] rooms of which he wrote were in no sense elegant, nor did they contain books enough to be called a library, valuable or otherwise. . . . nor the splendid wardrobe. . . . At one time he occupied good apartments; at another, and not very remote time, he occupied indifferent lodgings.”<sup>3</sup> That he was a man of inconsistent means, these two pictures from his good friends bear out. However, O’Brien’s inconsistencies do not end here; more anecdotal stories indicate that even his character was somewhat suspect.

His friends also indicate that he was inconsistent with regard to his character. Thomas Bailey Aldrich, one of O’Brien’s best friends, claimed that at one time O’Brien borrowed \$35 from him to pay a pressing bill, “instead of paying the bill, he gave a little dinner at Delmonico’s to which he did *not* invite *me!* Arnold and Clapp were there . . . . *I gave that dinner!*”<sup>4</sup> O’Brien lived the ultimate “Bohemian” lifestyle, the first and only biography of him, published in 1944, was written by Francis Wolle and he titled it, *Fitz-James O’Brien: A Literary Bohemian of the Eighteen-Fifties*. He, like most other figures during this time, who wanted to make their living by literary pursuits, lived a hand to mouth existence. But O’Brien knew what he wanted to do; he had been writing and publishing poems and story fragments since his younger days back in

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<sup>2</sup> *The New York Citizen*, September 30, 1865.

<sup>3</sup> *New York Tribune*, March 6, 1881.

<sup>4</sup> William Winter, *Old Friends Being Literary Recollections of Other Days* (New York: Moffat, Yard & Co., 1909), 101.

Ireland. Now America gave O'Brien the opportunities that he desperately sought after, however, the literary environment of which he stepped into, in 1852, was one of cutthroat competition and was thoroughly democratic in every respect. O'Brien did not always like this atmosphere and he rebelled many times against this environment, but ultimately he reveled in it. Eventually, O'Brien would succumb to it, but it is not clear that O'Brien would have done anything different had he been given the opportunity. Like O'Brien's life and character, the antebellum period was rife with contradictions and conflicts. Exploring the contours and crevices of this literary marketplace will give insight into the kinds of challenges that O'Brien and other writers must have faced.

Ronald J. Zboray, in his classic study, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public*, observes, "if the democratization of literature means the equal participation of all in a unified print culture, the antebellum years witnessed a distinctly undemocratic trend."<sup>5</sup> Zboray is arguing here, incorrectly I believe, an all or nothing definition of democracy. To narrow the definition of democracy, like all things, to a black and white dichotomy is limiting and inaccurate. The actualization of democracy is a process, which can expand and narrow as the historical conditions evolve – capable of exhibiting many shades of gray. In America, the first half of the nineteenth century witnessed a tremendous amount of change – politically, economically, and socially. In 1820 only about 25% of the eligible voters cast votes in that presidential election, but by the presidential election in 1844, just twenty years later, almost 80% of the eligible voters cast votes in that election. Not only did the electorate become more active, but the number of individuals participating in the electorate also grew. In 1800 only a handful of states had eliminated the prohibitive property qualifications for voting;

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.

four had eliminated property qualifications, replacing those with taxpayer qualifications. Two states (Kentucky and New Hampshire) had no property qualifications at all and included universal white male suffrage. By 1830, however, after vigorous calls to update the state constitutions, most states had done away with property qualifications altogether, only three states kept those requirements (i.e., Tennessee, North Carolina, and Rhode Island). Politically speaking, democracy was spreading and widening to more and more individuals. While we might be hard pressed to call what was happening, full on democracy, there were democratic seeds that were being planted.

What has become known as the Market Revolution was also transforming the country in remarkable ways. Impressive changes, regarding communication, transportation, and industrialization were taking place throughout the young nation – these changes, in turn, created fundamental shifts in societal demographics. Access to land, which was one of the cornerstones of success and economic independence in America, was also expanding rapidly. According to historian Charles Sellers, the author of *The Market Revolution*, considered by many to be the most important history and survey of this period, “cheap land, virtually free at first, not only elevated the mass but imposed a limit on wealth.”<sup>6</sup> Gaps between the rich and poor did continue, but the emergence of a new middle class contributed to a growing economy and that growing economy, in turn, continued to feed a growing middle class. Radical and rapid social changes were also taking place. Changes in gender roles and expectations and vast opportunities were available to more people in the first half of the nineteenth century than in the first two hundred years of the country’s existence. Despite the limited definition of democracy that Zboray chose

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815 – 1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 4.

to adopt, it is hard to argue that there was not a “democratic sentiment” washing over the country during the antebellum period.

It was also this “democratic sentiment” which led to the emergence of an unusual group of individuals onto the American scene. Centered on a small Beer Hall in New York City, which was visited by some of the most important literary and artistic figures of the antebellum period, this group became leaders in promoting a democratic movement. The imbibers at “Pfaff’s of the ’Fifties”<sup>7</sup> became the first organized Bohemia of America. This group, according to Joanna Levin, in her important study, *Bohemia in America, 1858 – 1920*, “reasserted their Bohemian commitments through their continued quest for a new literary aesthetic, one that might represent a more broadly democratic America.”<sup>8</sup> Pfaff’s opened in 1855 by Charles Ignatious Pfaff; it was modeled after the German Ratskellers (restaurants or bars located in a basement or cellar) that were popular in Europe at the time. The bar was located on Broadway near Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village, and from the mid-1850s to the late 1860s, it became the center of New York’s revolutionary culture.<sup>9</sup> Many of its regulars included: Henry Clapp, Jr., Walt Whitman, Ada Clare, Adah Isaacs Menken, John Brougham, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Fitz-Hugh Ludlow, R. H. Stoddard, and Fitz-James O’Brien.

This group was openly ridiculed and criticized by many of the mainstream papers, including the *New York Times*, a paper which O’Brien would later work for as one of its cultural editors and critics. On January 6, 1858 the paper claimed that a Bohemian patron of Pfaff’s “cannot be called a useful member of society.” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, another

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<sup>7</sup> A term coined by one of the first and earliest historians of this period, Albert Parry, in his groundbreaking survey of this movement, first published in 1933, and later revised and updated, *Garrets and Pretenders: Bohemian Life in America from Poe to Kerouac*.

<sup>8</sup> Joanna Levin, *Bohemia in America, 1858 – 1920* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010), 69.

<sup>9</sup> Modelled after the European Bohemians and despite the claim from Henri Murger, in his eclectic collection of Bohemian musings, *Latin Quarter: Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, Bohemia could exist in other places other than France.

periodical which O'Brien contributed more stories and poems to than any other publication, goes even further: "Bohemia is a fairy land upon the hard earth. . . . Respectability is the converse of the Bohemian idea."<sup>10</sup> This establishes and puts the movement squarely at odds with much of the popular media of the day, so much so that the group, under the direction of Henry Clapp, Jr., established their own paper in 1858, *The Saturday Press*, which often served as a mouthpiece for the movement and their ideas. O'Brien contributed one poem, one short story and a collection of journalistic essays to this paper. The conflict between the group at Pfaff's and the popular media emphasis on middle class values, according to Levin, "reveal the extent to which Bohemianism self-consciously defined itself against the opposition of a bourgeois press dedicated to cataloguing urban types and assessing their relation to desirable social norms."<sup>11</sup> Part of the issue was just how the Bohemian's defined themselves and how their opposition defined them. Because in America, this movement was somewhat new and unusual, it was up to the participants, like O'Brien and others, to define what issues they supported and who they were.

Many of the Bohemian's at Pfaff's, including Henry Clapp, Jr., were aware of the intellectual movement that was being defined by works like Henri Murger's *Latin Quarter: Scènes de la vie de Bohème*. This book was considered by the Bohemian's of the antebellum period as the "Bible" of Bohemianism. Most read it and it was even included in one of O'Brien's most important American short stories, "The Bohemian." In O'Brien's short story, "The Bohemian," published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in July 1855, the self-proclaimed Bohemian defined the movement and its individuals in the following dialogue:

"Well, then, you can comprehend my life. I am clever, learned, witty, and tolerably good looking. I can write brilliant magazine articles" — here his eye rested contemptuously on my historical tale — "I can paint pictures, and, what is more, sell the pictures I paint. I can compose songs, make comedies, and captivate women."

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<sup>10</sup> Levin, *Bohemia in America*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Levin, *Bohemia in America*, 30.



“On my word, Sir, you have a choice of professions,” I said, sarcastically; for the scorn with which the Bohemian had eyed my story humiliated me.

“That’s it,” he answered; “I don’t want a profession. I could make plenty of money if I chose to work, but I don’t choose to work. I will never work. I have a contempt for labor.”

“Probably you despise money equally,” I replied, with a sneer.

“No, I don’t. To acquire money without trouble is the great object of my life, as to acquire it in any way, or by any means, is the great object of yours.”<sup>12</sup>

This dialogue and the idea that emerges from it, according to what we know about O’Brien, is the way that he also tried to live his life. He sought after wealth and the finer things that wealth could buy, but doing so with as little effort as possible – at least that was the perception that O’Brien wanted to portray to the outside world. According to Levin, “O’Brien was the Bohemian most likely to inspire comparisons to both the working-class loafer and the aristocratic dandy.”<sup>13</sup> O’Brien’s story, “The Bohemian,” tells of a lawyer, Henry Cranstoun, interested in following the Bohemian lifestyle. Cranstoun yearns for the life of luxury, with the least amount of effort; he is tempted by the self-proclaimed and self-serving Bohemian, Philip Brann. Brann possesses some magical powers; one of which allows him to read the minds of certain individuals. It just so happens that Cranstoun’s fiancé, Annie Deane, possesses those powers and Brann uses her to find the location of a lost treasure, which he and Cranstoun will share. The plan works perfectly, however, at the cost of the life of Cranstoun’s fiancé. The main moral of the story is to question the value of wealth, especially if that wealth is acquired at the expense of other valuable things. The life of Cranstoun and Brann exemplify the typical view of what Bohemia represented, at least according to the mainstream media – and possibly even the Bohemians themselves. O’Brien’s life, in many ways, also represented and reinforced this conflicted lifestyle. The Bohemian’s, including O’Brien, were a complicated group. Despite their outward lifestyles, according to Levin, “Bohemians sought to defend their country [and their actions] from the

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<sup>12</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I (Texas: A Bit O’Irish Press, 2017), 271.

<sup>13</sup> Levin, *Bohemia in America*, 33.

socioeconomic dominance of its haute bourgeoisie.”<sup>14</sup> We see this with the life of O’Brien. Indeed, he came from a wealthy family back in Ireland, but even as a young man, he was willing to recognize injustice and call out those individuals he believed responsible for those injustices. O’Brien had an overwhelming desire to uplift those who were oppressed; he did so through his writings. Others of this group also contributed to a culture which advocated for the oppressed and helpless, it was no coincidence that many of the Bohemians, especially those at Pfaff’s, would lead many of the reform movements popular at the time. There are strong links between antebellum reform and this American Bohemian movement. Antebellum reform enjoyed widespread popularity and represented a growing uneasiness about recent social, political, and economic changes.<sup>15</sup> Many of these changes were being challenged by these emerging groups, these self-styled Bohemians, and a democratic movement.

A figure central to this democratic movement was William Ellery Channing, a Unitarian philosopher, who, in 1841 at a meeting of the Mercantile Library of Philadelphia gave a lecture called “The Present Age.” This organization was founded in 1821; it was started as a private lending library, designed to promote self-improvement, general culture, and recreational learning. But by 1826 the membership had grown significantly, and three years later, in 1829, they added guest speakers who presented lectures as part of their service to the community. These lecture services, sometimes known as the Lyceum movement, were quite common for these types of organizations. Channing argued that there was a general trend of intellectualism moving across the country, which was pushing the country toward, what he called, “expansion, diffusion, and universality.” He emphasized that the gradual democratization of politics, and society in general, witnessed since 1800, was leading to and promoting the democratization of

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<sup>14</sup> Levin, *Bohemia in America*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> The specific connection between O’Brien’s thought and these reform movements will be the focus of Chapters Four, Five, and Six of this dissertation.

information and culture. In other words, there was developing in antebellum America, a democratic literary culture. According to Channing, this was fundamentally different from previous movements, “[this] tendency is directly opposed to the spirit of exclusiveness, restriction, narrowness, monopoly, which has prevailed in past ages. Human action is now freer, more unconfined.”<sup>16</sup> Channing goes on to explain how this movement and tendency, this “freer momentum” in his words, had resulted in the dissemination of the best form of cultural diffusion. “Books are now placed within reach of all. Works once too costly except for the opulent are now to be found on the laborer’s shelf. Genius sends its light into cottages.”<sup>17</sup> What was happening was that a literary public was being developed and cultivated, for the first time in American history. This new literary culture would have significant ramifications on society writ large. It would be this new literary culture that many of the Bohemians’ contributed to, including the different works of O’Brien.

Fourteen years after Channing’s lecture, on September 27, 1855, in New York City, the Association of New York Publishers convened for its yearly conference. One attendant made a toast: “To American Literature!” – this toast contributed to the recognition and confirmation of a uniquely American literature.<sup>18</sup> American’s were responding to Scottish minister, Sydney Smith, who in 1820 published an article raising the following questions: “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book or goes to an American play? or looks at an American

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<sup>16</sup> William Ellery Channing, “The Present Age,” *The Works of William E. Channing*, 3 vols. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1901), 1:159. William Ellery Channing (1780 – 1842) was the foremost Unitarian preacher in the United States in the early nineteenth century and was known for his influence that he had on Transcendentalism.

<sup>17</sup> Channing, “The Present Age,” 161.

<sup>18</sup> It was in 1782 in his *Letters from an American Farmer*, in which J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur asked what exactly was this new experiment – what is this new American? Crevecoeur argued that the American’s were a kind of blending of all the different types of Europeans. The term melting pot is not used till the later part of the nineteenth century. Crevecoeur’s theory was criticized because of its Eurocentric perspective.

picture or statue?”<sup>19</sup> Clapp’s paper, *The Saturday Press*, of which O’Brien would contribute a few items, in addition to advancing the philosophy of Bohemia, also advocated what they viewed as an American agenda and promoted an American Identity – of course, their identity was grounded in the Bohemian philosophy and their own worldview. An important question on the mind of Americans during the antebellum period, especially following the War of 1812, with the increase of nationalism and American pride – was there a uniquely American literature? Maybe not in 1812, although a number of writers tried to present their writings as such, it really was not till the works of Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, and others, that Americans could really boast, for the first time, the existence of a uniquely American literature. It was Edgar Allan Poe’s dream to publish a magazine that was dedicated to the promotion and publication of a uniquely American literature. The first two successful publishing ventures by Americans, according to the great literary historian William Charvat, in his book, *Literary Publishing in America: 1790 – 1850*, were Washington Irving’s *The Sketch Book* which began publication in 1819 and James Fenimore Cooper’s novel *The Spy* in 1821.<sup>20</sup>

What these events show us (i.e., Channing’s lecture, the toast of the Association of New York Publishers, and the rise of unique American papers, journals, and magazines), is that there was, at least in the hearts and minds of some Americans during the antebellum period, the existence of a uniquely American literature and that literature was being disseminated throughout the country regardless of social standing. In other words, the democratization of literature was spreading across the country, and it was having a significant effect. In 1850 over 90% of the

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<sup>19</sup> American History: From Revolution to Reconstruction and Beyond, accessed 02/15/19, <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/essays/1801-1900/the-role-of-philosophy-and-literature/history-and-literature.php>

<sup>20</sup> William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America: 1790 – 1850* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 38.

American population, over the age of twenty, could read and write, compared to 60% in Great Britain the same year.<sup>21</sup> And according to Daniel Walker Howe, the eminent historian of the antebellum period, in his massive volume, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815 – 1848*, by the 1840s the United States population “possessed the largest literate public of any nation in world history.”<sup>22</sup> This literature was not only being consumed by but was being written for the mass audience of the American public. This phenomenon would have significant ramifications for the reading public – for the first time in American history, there now existed a genuine literary marketplace. Americans became consumers and producers of literature, and like any marketplace, literature would be subjected to the same economic forces as any other commodity. Whether these were positive or negative, that depended on one’s perspective – but it does raise an interesting question. How did America develop into this literary marketplace? In other words, what were the forces that brought this phenomenon into existence?

Following the American Revolution, another development which contributed to the rise of the literary marketplace was the ideology known as “Republican Motherhood,” which emphasized the importance of women in the educating and rearing of children in the young republic. Because of their sentimental tendencies, as argued by those supporting this idea, women took on the role of primary educator within the family. Proper morality, which would be necessary for the republic to survive and thrive, now moved from the men’s to the women’s sphere. Reading and writing became an important characteristic within the home, and since women were the primary facilitators of that education, they also needed to be able to read and

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<sup>21</sup> Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 83.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815 – 1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 627.

write.<sup>23</sup> This change in gender dynamics stimulated and caused the literacy rates between women and men to come closer together following the revolution. The Market Revolution also played an important role here, as economic activities moved out of the household, children had more time to read, and parents (especially women) had more time to devote to education. Of course, much of this schooling was predicated on the idea that the family had resources, which during this time would be based on economic standing. According to Zboray, “the number of children able to cross that threshold from basic literacy to fluent comprehension was limited by the amount of parental attention afforded by social and economic circumstances.”<sup>24</sup> This new emerging middle class experienced this phenomenon more than any of the other economic classes. The upper classes continued as they had always done – the hiring of servants and private tutors for their children. The lower classes also continued as they had always done – children at an early age entering the workforce with limited opportunities for education.

In addition to the household, which played an enormous role in education, there were some other “institutions” which shaped the new literary marketplace. Probably the most important, next to the home, was that of formal education provided by the common schools.<sup>25</sup> Schools had always played an important role in American society, one of the first buildings that Puritans erected when they established a community was the school-house. An important observation by John Adams, as early as 1765, in his *Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law*,

They were convinced by their knowledge of human nature derived from history and their own experience, that nothing could preserve their posterity from the encroachments . . . of tyranny, . . . [but to] take every precaution in their power, to propagate and perpetuate knowledge. For this purpose they laid, very early the foundations of college, . . . They

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<sup>23</sup> Literacy rates between men and women prior to the American Revolution were heavily in favor of men, but after the revolution, the literacy rates merged much closer together.

<sup>24</sup> Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 87.

<sup>25</sup> Sunday schools, which were originally established to help the poor, also contributed to literacy rates.

made it a crime for such a town to be destitute of a grammar school master, . . . So that the education of all ranks of people was made the care and expence [sic] of the public in a manner, that I believe has been unknown to any other people ancient or modern. . . . [the] consequences of these establishments we see and feel every day. A native of America who cannot read and write is as rare an appearance . . . as a Comet or an Earthquake.<sup>26</sup>

Adams exaggerates the effects of education, especially by the end of the eighteenth century, and while this may be true for the states in New England, individuals and communities outside that cultural bubble were far from the way Adams described them. For Adams and the Puritan founding fathers, however, education would serve as the tool by which tyranny could and would be countered, but it also had a very important by-product, one that was unexpected by Adams and probably others – the cultivation of a “democratic culture.”<sup>27</sup> Cathy N. Davidson, in her *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, observes: “Inspired by this naturalistic educational philosophy, most of the new states mandated in their constitutions support for publically funded education.”<sup>28</sup> These laws in Massachusetts, known collectively as the Massachusetts School Laws (established in 1642, 1647, and 1648 respectively), were followed by other New England and Mid-Atlantic States; however, it would take about a century later for southern states to establish similar laws. Population growth would also play a role in the increase in literacy, as Howe states, “the audience for reading matter grew as population increased and popular education promoted literacy.”<sup>29</sup> As the population grew, more schools were being built, more books were being published, and these books were being consumed by the reading public. It is a little misleading though to assume that everyone was attending public

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<sup>26</sup> Gordon Wood, ed., *John Adams: Revolutionary Writings, 1755 – 1775* (New York: The Library of America, 2011), 121-2.

<sup>27</sup> Adams should not be construed here as an advocate of democracy. He does believe, quite strongly, in the benefits of education to help curb back the dangers of tyranny – particularly religious and political tyranny. He does not believe that all individuals are capable of achieving the same level, whether it be politically, economically, or socially.

<sup>28</sup> Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 131.

<sup>29</sup> Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 627.

schools during this time. Records show that in 1850 less than 50% of individuals between the ages of five to twenty attended public schools.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, there must be other factors and “institutions” contributing to the growing literacy of the American public during the antebellum period.<sup>31</sup>

The American church also played a fundamental role in the rise of the literary marketplace, with religious journals, magazines, and newspapers proliferating during the antebellum period. Indeed, this connection can be traced back to the historical origins of the Protestant churches, of which the Puritans were historically connected. For Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation during the early part of the sixteenth century, reading was a fundamental component of one’s faith. To counter the tyranny of priests’ and the corruption of the church, individuals must be able and allowed to read the Bible for themselves. Simply put, to read the Bible one had to be literate. This idea went to Adams point about the establishment of public schools. Religious tyranny was one of the two tyrannies, in addition to political tyranny, which posed the greatest threat to society, according to the young Adams. To achieve a high level of competency and security against tyranny, churches urged and encouraged children to achieve comprehensive literacy.<sup>32</sup>

Bookstores and public libraries also played important roles in increasing literacy. Interestingly though, these two “institutions” also added social elements to the interactions of individuals. Hence, they created a public space for literacy and thus contributed to the socialization and democratization of literature. According to their classic study of literacy and social interactions, *Literary Dollars and Social Sense: A People’s History of the Mass Market*

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<sup>30</sup> Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 96.

<sup>31</sup> Reading in the home continued to play an important role in literacy. But there were other factors that helped contribute to the high literacy rate in the antebellum period in America.

<sup>32</sup> Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 89.



*Book*, Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray concluded, “bookstores clearly were more than establishments of selling. Although customers might rate each shop’s range, scope, or unusual holding, they emphasized social aspects over purchases.”<sup>33</sup> The bookstore would serve as meeting places where social interaction would take place. Literacy and the literary marketplace would now take on a social aspect. Books could be purchased, or packages might be picked up, and these interactions might lead to conversations about what someone was reading, or even conversations not related to the books, like politics, religion, or other topics. The bookstore created a social and public place for interaction – what was once private and personal, now became public. Similarly, libraries could also serve as social spheres. Libraries often attracted visitors to cities; sometimes the attractions were not even related to the books in the holding, like the art prominently displayed in the Boston Public Library. But more than not, visitors wanted to see the vast holdings of these institutions; they were often overwhelmed and awed with their plentitude. These communal experiences brought individuals from different parts to central places – all centered on the concept of literacy and books. The Zboray’s concluded, “tourists gravitated to great libraries just to be near the vast and precious collections, and even sometimes to peruse their volumes.”<sup>34</sup> Bookstores and libraries added a very important aspect to public literacy; they attached a social element to the experience.<sup>35</sup>

Other social elements which led to the creation of a literate public were bars like Pfaff’s. These establishments provided open access to democratic dialogue. Often at these places, the customers would be exposed to the current political and economic news, offering them a place for rational dialogue and discourse – sometimes it was not so rational, especially when O’Brien

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<sup>33</sup> Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Literary Dollars and Social Sense: A People’s History of the Mass Market Book* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 143.

<sup>34</sup> Zboray and Zboray, *Literary Dollars and Social Sense*, 149.

<sup>35</sup> We see this continued today, with the alignment of prominent coffee shops and bookstores.

was involved, who was notorious for fisticuffs on just about any occasion. Customers would also read from newspapers, and public reading of poetry was also popular and commonplace – especially at Pfaff’s. Pfaff’s provided an opportunity to engage in and experience a generative, performative, and collaborative process of literary democratic socialization. There was no more popular customer, and performer, than O’Brien on this front. Ingrid Satelmajer, in her article “Publishing Pfaff’s: Henry Clapp and Poetry in the *Saturday Press*,” notes, “bohemian Fitz-James O’Brien, we are told, once followed a Broadway sidewalk brawl by entering Pfaff’s and performing ‘a poem that he said he had that evening written.’ O’Brien reportedly delivered the poem with a black eye on which he ‘applied’ ‘a leech.’”<sup>36</sup> Another anecdote relays a story which tells of a time in which O’Brien was reading poetry from Emerson and managed to squeeze in one of his poems – without anyone even noticing. This collaborative and collective experience aided the expansion of democracy through a reading public and social literacy. These outlets allowed O’Brien and others the opportunity to engage in the democratic literary marketplace. It was at Pfaff’s where O’Brien would often trial run some of his poetry and other writings. These places were important, but other places, more public also were contributing to the literary environment.

Within the schools themselves, teachers often played the most important role in increasing social literacy. In 1850 there were over 100,000 teachers in the United States, and with the limited availability of books and funds, teachers often would read texts to students during the school day. Some students could not afford to purchase books, so these teachers served as a kind of middle ground surrogate between publishers and consumers. In addition to individuals not being able to purchase books, many of the schools did not have textbooks for

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<sup>36</sup> Ingrid Satelmajer, “Publishing Pfaff’s: Henry Clapp and Poetry in the *Saturday Press*,” in Joanna Levin & Edward Whitley, eds., *Whitman among the Bohemians* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 39.

students, so reading out loud helped solve that problem – it also created active listeners. Reading out loud, according to the Zboray's, also served a social function, “at an early age links were forged between social communication and the printed word that would characterize adult literacy social abilities.”<sup>37</sup> Close connections were being formed between socialization and literacy and these “institutions” continued to promote this socialization and literacy across a wide audience. Whether it was attending a public lecture, checking out a book at the local public library, or grabbing a beer with friends at Pfaff's, the process was democratic at its core.

Since only about half of the school-age individuals attended school, it was incumbent upon other “institutions” to disseminate knowledge in an expanding literate community. One very popular “institution” was the formal presentation of literature in a public setting. Many individuals attended these public readings and performances; these served as educational opportunities for many individuals. These “textual performers” contributed to a public audience, similar to the public lecture.<sup>38</sup> Public and private performers, as well as lecturers, contributed to the social aspect of literacy, as noted by the Zboray's, “high literary culture then blended with popular culture.”<sup>39</sup> Because these activities, as well as the participation in informal settings like Pfaff's, were public and social, they helped to create a popular culture that was centered on literature and democratic in nature.<sup>40</sup> What made these performers and lectures so important was that literature could reach consumers outside the avenues of print distribution. An individual could become quite literate without much reading – or any reading at all. Through the traveling of performers and lecturers, they contributed to the dissemination of knowledge and literature.

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<sup>37</sup> Zboray and Zboray, *Literary Dollars and Social Sense*, 159.

<sup>38</sup> Donald M. Scott, “The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 66, no. 4 (March, 1980), 791 – 809.

<sup>39</sup> Zboray and Zboray, *Literary Dollars and Social Sense*, 160.

<sup>40</sup> Popular books and novels, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, written in 1852, were adapted for public performances. This allowed the public to become informed and knowledgeable about important literary works, but not having to read the novels themselves.

According to the Zboray's the major advantage of these two "institutions" was that they "insured that literature did not stay confined to major cities or towns or main transport routes, and so moderated the strong dichotomy between literacy metropolis and lagging provinces."<sup>41</sup> These "institutions" (i.e., lectures, textual performers, and informal meetings like congregating at Pfaff's) became as important for the dissemination of literature as anything during the period.

Other factors which also contributed to the dissemination of social literacy and helped create this literary marketplace were the industrial and transportation revolutions – both these helped to create a reading revolution which contributed to the literacy of antebellum America. Before 1820 literary publishing was local and decentralized. River transportation was the most common form of dissemination. This dependency on water caused the creation of what William Charvat called a literary axis of power. This axis was a combination of the top three major literary cities for publishing: New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, with Cincinnati serving as a major publishing center for the West, but not part of the axis. It was no coincidence that O'Brien settled in New York City. This was a major port city for immigration, but for O'Brien, it provided the closest and most accessible port for immediate opportunities in the publishing industry. O'Brien spent most of his American literary career in New York City. He did travel once to Boston, and once the Civil War broke out, he joined the war and was sent down to defend Washington, D.C. According to Charvat, because of the existence of this axis, "publishing interests were deeply involved in the cities' struggle for control of rivers and canals."<sup>42</sup> But it was the widespread evolution and development of the railroads, after the 1820s, which fundamentally shifted the literary environment within America. The railroads were

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<sup>41</sup> Zboray and Zboray, *Literary Dollars and Social Sense*, 168.

<sup>42</sup> Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America*, 19.

responsible for shifting literature from a local to a national print culture. These cities also attracted immigrants, like O'Brien, for the economic opportunities they provided.

Railroads provided a faster and more efficient distribution of literature across the country, but because there were limited rail lines going into the South, the lag with literacy rates in the South would continue. By 1830 individuals could travel anywhere in the North within a week's worth of time, however, travel within the South still took weeks. According to Zboray: "Not only did rail improve the dissemination of literature, but it also provided, in the form of the passenger car, new appetites for reading it."<sup>43</sup> The increase and evolution of the railroad shaped the avenue of distribution of literature, but it also provided new opportunities for reading. Publishers provided reading material in smaller formats, so it was easy for individuals to carry onto the trains. Publishers also began publishing literary material in larger print, thus, making the reading on the train easier on the eyes. But the most important function of railroads was the role it played in creating a national culture. Zboray notes: "The massive expansion of the printing industry made it certain that information would indeed flood down the rail lines, with little regard for the needs, hopes, or the very ways of life in the local communities."<sup>44</sup> The railroad helped to link the country physically, but also intellectually and culturally – in the process, destroying the local culture at the expense of a national culture. In the same way that radio and television would do in the twentieth century, the homogeneity of America, especially in the nineteenth century, owed a lot to the development and expansion of railroads.

In addition to the transportation revolution, the reading revolution was also aided by the industrialization of printing in the antebellum period. Before the advent of stereotype, printing was a long and labor-intensive process – the technological advancements of stereotyping,

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<sup>43</sup> Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 72.

<sup>44</sup> Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 79.

electrotyping, the steam press, and paper making all contributed to the ease of massive distribution of literature. However, despite all these time saving and cost effective techniques and technologies, the price of books remained very high. A hardcover book would average in cost of 75 cents to \$1.25. Even paperback books were expensive, relative to the average worker (who earned about \$1/day), averaging anywhere from 38 to 63 cents. Therefore, according to Zboray, despite the “increased productive power of American publishing [these technological developments] did not make original books more available to the masses.”<sup>45</sup> The prohibitive cost of books is what made the oral reading of literature by teachers, as well as the public performance and lectures, such a powerful tool in increasing the social literacy in antebellum America. O’Brien had the opportunity to learn all about the new publishing trade when he spent three years in London. In 1851 London hosted the first international world fair and O’Brien would serve as the editor of one of the unofficial journals of this exhibit. O’Brien’s publisher produced the journal inside the building where the exhibit was being housed. It gave Londoners the opportunity to witness, first hand, the actual printing process and showcase some of the new technology of printing. It also gave O’Brien the opportunity to learn the ins and outs of the publishing industry and the editing profession.<sup>46</sup>

There were a few other pieces of the technological revolution which contributed more to the increased literacy of the American public than modern lighting and the development of mass-produced eye-ware. The use of whale oil contributed to the length of the day indoors as it provided a more consistent and steady source of illumination in the evening. However, it was very expensive, so this was limited to a small portion of the population. Many families still read from the fireside, also contributing to the social aspect of the sharing of literature. These

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<sup>45</sup> Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 12.

<sup>46</sup> Chapter Two of this dissertation explored O’Brien’s time and experiences in London.

advances in illumination, like the teacher and the public performances and lectures, allowed individuals the opportunity to share literature. The large-scale manufacture of spectacles in 1833 also helped the reading public for those with bad eyesight. Hence, Zboray concludes, “industrialization dramatically increased the number of books and periodicals American publishers could produce, and the transportation revolution ensured them that they could send these imprints anywhere in the United States.”<sup>47</sup>

Lots of factors contributed to the high literacy rates in antebellum America. It was these high literacy rates which also contributed to some interesting and sometimes controversial, conversations within the public sphere. Questions were raised about the purpose and nature of literature itself – as well as the consequences that came with increased literacy. In most cases, these questions were new to the conversation. Americans had a literary marketplace, now what were they going to do with it and in what ways was it going to fundamentally shape the nature of publishing and society writ large?

America’s religious heritage guided much of the conversation about literacy in the antebellum period – literacy was an important part of our founding. The Protestant Reformation was a part of our ancestral heritage, and the need to be literate was considered a fundamental part of one’s religious duty. But the Pilgrims and Puritans that established permanent communities in this country in New England were also strict as to what should and could be read. Reading the Bible was required, but what, outside of that, was permissible for a good Christian to be reading? Reading novels and any type of fiction was generally frowned upon by the Puritans. Following the American Revolution, however, much of the American Puritan heritage had been replaced with more Enlightenment thought and ideas. The reading of fiction, which had been shunned by the Puritans, was becoming more and more fashionable. Howe notes that one such perspective

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<sup>47</sup> Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 83.

endorsed the idea that art, including all cultural expressions like fiction, could and should be used to elevate a person's moral nature; "art could stimulate sentiments that could then be applied to real life, making the reader or viewer of sentimental art into a more morally sensitive person."<sup>48</sup> This was a fundamental shift in focus from the Puritans, who viewed fiction as nothing other than what would debase the human soul. Now fiction, under the auspices of the Enlightenment, could serve as a source of elevation and uplifting.

Much of the new literature, however, reflected the middle class values, as more and more individuals became readers, the market, and publishers specifically, looked to capitalize on this new consumer. In 1838 a new publication type became popular and coincided with the rise of an urban population, the chap-books. These cheap serialized paperbacks sought to provide the reading public with more cost-effective materials to consume, and they also created a strong culture of "sub" literature. However, not all of the writers during this time sought to elevate the human, many simply wrote for pure entertainment. As Howe concludes: "Not all authors aimed at the market for uplift . . . writers such as George Lippard achieved commercial success by targeting an audience of young working-class males with sensationalism, violence, . . . social criticism, and escapism."<sup>49</sup> These "dime novels," as they were sometimes called, like the domestic fiction targeting women of the day, focused on characters and situations of which their readers could identify. These "dime novels" as Michael Denning notes, in his excellent survey of this literature, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*, confirmed the fears of Calvinists and gave cause for the concern of anxious reviewers who wanted literature to promote personal improvement.<sup>50</sup> David S. Reynolds, in his important

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<sup>48</sup> Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 630.

<sup>49</sup> Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 631-2.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1998).



history of this subversive literature, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, went even further in his explanation of the importance of Lippard, as he states, “his perception of the distance between democratic ideals and the horrors of industrialized America impelled him to write lurid exposes of upper-class corruption in a style perhaps unparalleled in its irrationalism.”<sup>51</sup> Reynolds concludes that Lippard “waged holy war against all kinds of social oppressors.”<sup>52</sup> Writers like Lippard engaged in and facilitated a working class consciousness during the rise of urbanization and industrialization during the antebellum period – this “irrational style had a compelling attraction for the American public.”<sup>53</sup> For individual writers like Lippard, literature’s function was that of social commentary; it served to ignite the consciousness of the working class, to provide an outlet for political and religious criticism, and more importantly, to engage the reader in a way that was very different from other sentimental novels of the period. Lippard’s goal was not to improve – instead, his goal was to move the individual and this new urban working class community to action.

There is no evidence which shows that O’Brien knew Lippard. Lippard died in 1854, and O’Brien first entered the country in 1852, so that gives the two of them only a two-year overlap of potential interaction. Lippard was a friend of Edgar Allan Poe’s and was from Pennsylvania. O’Brien never visited Pennsylvania, so it is unlikely the two ever met. It is probable; however, that O’Brien would have been knowledgeable about Lippard’s works and it is difficult to imagine that he would not have read Lippard’s masterpiece of urban gothic horror, *The Monks of Monk Hall* (1844), reprinted as *The Quaker City*. O’Brien shared many common interests and concerns with Lippard. O’Brien’s goal was to become the next Poe; he dabbled in many genera.

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<sup>51</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 205.

<sup>52</sup> Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 205.

<sup>53</sup> Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 207.

However, he was best known during his day and today as a writer of gothic horror and science fiction. Poe, Lippard, and O'Brien were some of the earliest examples and exemplars of American writers developing an urban gothic literature. This is an overlooked and underrepresented literary movement, and many of the Bohemians at Pfaff's contributed to the expression of this literary genera. Albert Parry, in his 1933 classic study of American Bohemian's, *Garrets and Pretenders: Bohemian Life in America from Poe to Kerouac*, argues that the group that formed at Pfaff's was heavily influenced by and indebted to Poe. Parry argues, "American Bohemianism, so gay and mellow and, in its later stages, respectable, began with a tragedy. It began with Edgar Allan Poe."<sup>54</sup> O'Brien's gothic horror stories were excellent replicas of both Poe and Lippard, as they explored some of the important philosophical questions and existential concerns of urban living. The three stories that O'Brien was most known for during his day and today are: "The Diamond Lens," "What Was It? A Mystery," and "The Wondersmith."

"The Diamond Lens,"<sup>55</sup> published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in January 1858, considered by some to be one of the earliest science fiction stories, tells the tale of obsession and monomania, a theme common to Poe's writings, and the steps that one will go to obtain that which one is obsessed about – even murder. O'Brien explored that similar message in his earlier story "The Bohemian." In "The Diamond Lens," Mr. Linley, an obsessed microscopist who is obsessed with creating the perfect microscope, in the process kills his neighbor in the name of science (because his neighbor possessed a very rare lens which he refused to give to Linley, which was required to build the perfect microscope) and discovers a new universe in a drop of

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<sup>54</sup> Albert Parry, *Garrets and Pretenders: Bohemian Life in America from Poe to Kerouac* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2012), 3.

<sup>55</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II (Texas: A Bit O'Irish Press, 2017), 221 – 242.

water. In “What Was It?,”<sup>56</sup> considered by some to be the first science fiction story to utilize invisibility, published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in March 1859, tells of an invisible creature who preys on the victims staying in a haunted house. “The Wondersmith,”<sup>57</sup> also published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in October 1859, considered by some to be the first science fiction story using robots, tells of the revenge plot by old world gypsy Herr Hippe to murder all the Christian children of New York City. These stories explore important themes of obsession, the nature of reality, and revenge. They probe the underbelly of urban living. O’Brien believed that literature could both entertain and educate – but more importantly, with his gothic horror, O’Brien wanted the reader to reflect.

The debate, whether literature was to elevate or entertain, was replicated and debated by two important figures in the history of American literature – Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Hawthorne, who often embraced his Puritan background, despite his attempts to distance himself from it, believed that all literature was to serve a more “noble purpose.” In other words, literature was always to have a didactic purpose. As Neal Frank Doubleday notes, in Hawthorne’s tales, “he lets us know that he is in quest of a moral.”<sup>58</sup> Nancy Bunge goes even further than this in her analysis of Hawthorne’s intents, “Hawthorne’s morals make careful readers uneasy, forcing them to repeatedly rethink and reanalyze both his fiction and the issues it raises.”<sup>59</sup> Hawthorne, who also wrote within the “dark gothic” realm, produced short stories that were designed to entertain, all of his works contained important messages designed to make the reader reflect, like O’Brien.

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<sup>56</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 343 – 355.

<sup>57</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 357 – 388.

<sup>58</sup> Neal Frank Doubleday, *Hawthorne’s Early Tales, A Critical Study* (Duke University Press, 1972), 65.

<sup>59</sup> Nancy Bunge, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 6.

On the other hand, Poe who promoted urban gothic literature similar to that of Lippard believed that literature was there to entertain. As Poe scholar, Kent Ljungquist, noted, “his opposition to the ‘heresy of the didactic’” was evident in all his literary criticism and works of fiction.<sup>60</sup> Poe often wrote short fiction that shocked many folks out of their sensibilities. When confronted by an editor once about the inappropriateness of one of his stories, the “Pit and the Pendulum,” Poe responded that “for one to be judged, one must be read.” The implication here is that despite some of the objectionable nature of some of his stories, at least he is being read.

Regardless of where one stood on this issue, reading for improvement or reading for entertainment, there was no debating that the reading public would influence what was being published. Because of the consumer nature of literature during the antebellum period, as Zboray notes, “the reading public would have . . . [a] direct . . . impact upon the literature produced.”<sup>61</sup> Part of the significance of this dissemination of literature, with the advent of railroads, was the move from a local to a national culture. As Charvat notes, “access to literature created a cosmopolitanism across the country.”<sup>62</sup> With this cosmopolitanism also came a questioning of authority. Part of what made Thomas Paine’s publication of *Common Sense* so popular, during the Revolutionary War, was the subversive message it brought against tradition and authority. Again, the Protestant Reformation, part of the Puritan heritage, was a rebellion against institutional authority. Lippard’s novels and other writings served to promote working class consciousness, and many other similar works did create an environment which called into question authority and delegitimized existing institutions. O’Brien’s story “What Was It?” worked on two levels, first, it was a gripping, scary yarn, and second, it was a story about the

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<sup>60</sup> Kent Ljungquist, “The poet as critic,” in Kevin J. Hayes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 19.

<sup>61</sup> Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 80.

<sup>62</sup> Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America*, 17.

nature of reality. At what point is one justified in questioning one's senses? This has important implications for the nature of authority. As Davidson notes, rising literacy "encouraged self-reliance, free-thinking, inductive reasoning, and questioning of principles and authority . . . True literateness entails increased autonomy" and further, "with access to the world of books, the reader can choose among different authorities and take them according to the reader's evaluation of their worth."<sup>63</sup> This subversive aspect of literature was becoming more and more a national and cultural phenomenon. O'Brien took advantage of this movement and tailored many of his stories to this popular movement. Approximately half his published writings, that have been identified, are within the horror "dark gothic" genera – all of them require the reader to operate on these two levels, entertainment and reflective.

This democratization of literature and book printing not only loosened the bonds of authority, it often dictated what would be written by the writers. The literary marketplace dictated to the writer, or more accurately, the economic principles of supply and demand determined what would and would not be published. So at the same time loosening authority externally, internally it imposed its authority over the publishers, who in turn transferred those expectations to the writers (some of which were not happy with this relationship). This reversal of power structures concerned writers and led to another debate within the publishing world as to the positive or negative consequences of this literary democratic environment. Thomas Bender notes, in his survey of intellectual thought in New York, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time*, "Cooper . . . regretted that in America the writer was expected to be one of the democratic multitude."<sup>64</sup> The writer, Cooper, believed, "must be free of public opinion and free to express inner artistic

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<sup>63</sup> Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, 137-8.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1987), 129.

genius.”<sup>65</sup> Melville felt the same way, according to Michael T. Gilmore, in his classic study, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, Melville “regards the writer as a kind of alienated worker, turning out texts from which his individuality has been erased.”<sup>66</sup> Gilmore argues that Hawthorne felt the same way, but he was better at his craft. He was able to hide his true intents behind the façade of a democratic construct. “Hawthorne is an outwardly conventional author who smuggled into his stories dark, unpopular truths.”<sup>67</sup>

This commodification of democratic literature was heavily debated during the period. In an anonymous article “Liberty vs. Literature and the Fine Arts” published in *The Knickerbocker*, dated January 1837, the author argues that the democratization of literature during the period serves a positive function. The author traces the history of literature and the arts to its foundations, where originally it was wedded to the European crown, where it was not free to act on its own, from fear of the “hand that feeds it.” It was impossible to create something that would not have been accepted by the crown, for fear of reprisal. Instead, literature was liberated once it was divorced from politics, “It was in this free city [i.e., Florence], that literature and the fine arts first arose from out of the obscurity of the dark ages. It is from a democratic community, shining like a solitary star in the dark regions of feudal despotism, that we can distinctly trace the progress of literature and the arts in modern times.”<sup>68</sup> The democratic marketplace provides the artist the freedom from the caprice of the patron, who often, at least historically speaking, was closely associated with the crown and did not provide the artist with independence and freedom. In “Liberty vs. Literature” the author argues that because the artist is free from the constraints of

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<sup>65</sup> Bender, *New York Intellect*, 130.

<sup>66</sup> Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 52.

<sup>67</sup> Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, 59.

<sup>68</sup> “Liberty vs Literature and the Fine Arts,” *The Knickerbocker: or, New-York Monthly Magazine*, vol. ix (January, 1837): 3-4, accessed 11/23/18, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081684767;view=1up;seq=7>

the patron, they can pursue their artistic freedom without fear or limitations. The artist is free, yet they are subject to the literary market. In a democratic literary market, the artist is subjected to the same laws as any other producer – supply and demand are now the new judges and jurors of taste. Gilmore notes, “since a free people show regard for a literary man by buying his publications, the writer in a democracy has good reason to view his activity as a form of trade.”<sup>69</sup> Writers, essentially, like all other producers, ought to be judged by the same standards as others who have goods to sell in other markets. So while they are technically free to produce what they want, to survive, at least economically speaking, they are subject to the tastes of the public.

This view is countered, by another piece of the time. Another anonymous article titled “Amateur Authors and Small Critics,” published in July 1845 of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, essentially argues the position that many of the writers (e.g., Hawthorne, Melville, Cooper, Poe, O’Brien, etc.) argued during the time:

Now we all know very well how absurd a thing it would be for a client to ask the services of an amateur lawyer, with an air of confidence in the request, and in the expectation of his faithful attention to business; so too, with regard to the advice of an amateur physician; and, indeed, the analogy holds in every walk of life. Few do that well ‘for love’ which can be better done for money.<sup>70</sup>

The fundamental fallacy of the argument for a democratic literary marketplace, according to this author, assumes that all things are equal; the blacksmith is equal to the artist. The blacksmith is just as capable as the artist to determine what is culturally significant. In most instances, this is not the case (according to the author of the article), and the artist is forced, in the words of Gilmore, “in order to earn a sufficient livelihood he may be obliged to court the common reader to the detriment of his art.”<sup>71</sup> Many of the writers during the period felt the tensions between

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<sup>69</sup> Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, 55.

<sup>70</sup> “Amateur Authors and Small Critics,” *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, vol. xvii (July, 1845): 62, accessed 11/23/18, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31175012196468;view=1up;seq=11>

<sup>71</sup> Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, 56.

these two choices (i.e., create for the market or create for art sake) and some chose not to prostitute themselves by engaging in this literary leveling. Some chose the position, in the words of Melville's *Bartleby*, with a resounding rejection – "I prefer not to."

Zboray argues that the democratic marketplace during the antebellum period reveals something much more serious about the nature of American society. In a close study of the inventory of one small New York City establishment, that of Homer Franklin, Zboray argues that we can gain a glimpse into the nature of literary consumption. Franklin's inventory of September 1840 reveals a total of 8,751 books. 2,526 were Bibles or religious books. 3,008 were educational or children's books. Both of these categories reflect the importance of "self-improvement" as a source of reading. The rest of his inventory was as follows: 867 were professional or scientific books, 287 were reference books, and 2,063 were novels, poetry, or books on music. But what was more revealing for Zboray was the placement of these titles throughout the store. "The inventories show surprising juxtapositions of titles: Bibles next to novels, law books near poetry, plays alongside dictionaries. . . . the permeability between boundaries of different genres reflects the general fragmentation of antebellum culture."<sup>72</sup> The proximity of different types of books points to "the way the retailer perceived the world of knowledge."<sup>73</sup> It represented the retailer's epistemological interpretation and the general disorder of knowledge systems. In other words, while the democratic marketplace represented literary accomplishments, it also created disarray within the ways of knowing and organizing knowledge. This disarray was a source of concern for many writers in antebellum America. It created an existential crisis; on the one hand, access to literature was widening and expanding to most of America, but on the other hand, the overwhelming nature of this literary dissemination created an

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<sup>72</sup> Zboray, *A Fictive People*, xxi.

<sup>73</sup> Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 146-7.



intellectual and epistemological gap in the way that society seeks to understand and organize this knowledge. Knowledge was overwhelming the intellect.<sup>74</sup>

Another potential problem with publications was that many magazines were tightly aligned with political affiliations and hence often reflected strong partisanship. This alignment created fractionalization, similar to today's political environment where a quick survey of where an individual gets their news from will clearly show the individual's political party affiliation. Those that watch CNN are liberal Democrats, and those that watch FOX are conservative Republicans. Often it's not quite that simple or easy, but sometimes it is. The Democratic Party, in the antebellum period had as its main voice, the *Democratic Review*, published in New York. The Whig party also had some popular magazines, the *American Whig Review* and the *North American Review*, the former being published in New York and the latter being published in Boston. From time to time, there might be overlap, and each magazine would publish an article that was not partisan, but this was the exception and not the rule. This political alignment of magazines would often create conflicts between writers and publishers. It also contributed to the fractionalization of society along political ideology.

O'Brien tended toward the more Whiggish magazines in his publication preferences. Even though New York City, in the 1850s, was controlled by the Democratic Party, there were more magazines and newspapers that were aligned with the Whig Party than those of the Democratic Party.<sup>75</sup> O'Brien would, however, send in publications where he thought he had the best chance of publication. Many of his publication choices were products of his relationships with publishers. When he developed a positive relationship with a publisher, he would often

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<sup>74</sup> Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), German philosopher, uses a similar argument against the empiricists. In his philosophical and epistemological classic, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that in order for the mind to make sense of the empirical impressions imposed upon it from the outside world, the mind must have essential organizing categories helping the person to make sense of all of these.

<sup>75</sup> This will be explored in some detail in Chapter Seven of this dissertation.

submit many pieces with that publication. He also served as an editor and correspondent with the *New York Times*, despite their open hostility toward the Bohemian movement. His work with them served as steady employment and income.

Another issue which created clearly defined divisions between publishers and writers was over the lack of international copyright laws. In Meredith L. McGill's careful study of the culture of reprinting during the antebellum period, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834 – 1853*, argues that the “debate over international copyright in the context of partisan struggles did influence the development of a market culture.”<sup>76</sup> Part of the difficulty of writers struggling to become professional and experience a modicum of success was due to the lack of international copyright laws. Howe notes, “[t]he first half of the nineteenth century witnessed publishing flourish as an industry while creative writers struggled to establish an economically viable profession in the U.S.”<sup>77</sup> This issue took on partisan flavors, as the Jacksonian Democrats sided with the publishers, who argued that it was counter-intuitive to force them to pay royalties to foreign authors, “the publishers declared it contrary to American national interest to pay royalties to foreign authors. They also cleverly aligned their interest with that of the reading public, arguing that free reprints kept down the price of books.”<sup>78</sup> While American publishers put out cheap editions of European writers, they refused to invest in an American product that was untested on the free market, one which they would also have to pay royalties. Why not publish works of Dickens and the like, that cost them nothing and was a tested, tried, and a successful product? This divide between publishers and writers caused many American artists, those that had the means, to self-publish their works and use publishers simply as distributors of their

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<sup>76</sup> Meredith L. McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834 – 1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 79.

<sup>77</sup> Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 635.

<sup>78</sup> Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 635.

goods.<sup>79</sup> According to Charvat, however, this tension between publishers and writers did lead to one positive consequence – reprinting British literature and other “early reprint competitors who [engaged in the reprinting business] developed into the most able publishers of American literary works.”<sup>80</sup> Through their experience, they developed their craft and were able to fine-tune the skills that eventually made them some of the top publishers of American literature. It was not, however, till 1891 when Congress finally passed the first international copyright law.<sup>81</sup>

O’Brien was also caught up in the debate over copyright law. One of his claim-to-fame acts was in the production of a very popular Broadway play, *A Gentleman from Ireland*. The cover page of the *Picayune* for September 20, 1856, consists of a cartoon by Frank Bellew (a personal friend of O’Brien’s and someone who illustrated many of his short stories and poems in various magazines), entitled “Effect of the Dramatic Copyright Law.” It shows a “Rush of dramatists to the office of the clerk of the District Court of the United States for the Southern District of New York.” Each playwright has in his hands his most popular play, except John Brougham and Dion Boucicault, whose plays are so many that they bring them in baskets. O’Brien advances in the center foreground, grasping in both hands a copy of “A Gentleman from Ireland,” and is pictured with the prominent nose, heavy mustaches, and small chin that his friends have described. Of course, the cartoonist who so prominently pictures O’Brien as one of the seven outstanding playwrights of America was showing his prejudice in favor of his friend.<sup>82</sup>

It should be clear, at this point, that there existed a democratic literary marketplace during the antebellum period. The country had a huge literacy rate by mid-century. The different

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<sup>79</sup> Cooper did this very successfully, by self-publishing he was able to control the price and percentage paid to the publishers. Writers that had name recognition, like Cooper, this was the best way to control their product. It also gave them intellectual freedom and independence from the democratic market, but at a cost. If the product was not successful, they bore the entire brunt of the production costs of that work.

<sup>80</sup> Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America*, 18.

<sup>81</sup> Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 635.

<sup>82</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 113 – 114.

“institutions” which promoted and generated that literacy rate were wide and varied and the technology helped produce and disseminate, like other commodities of the period, that to the reading public. But there were conversations and consequences, and important questions, which came with this literary marketplace. What was the purpose of literature? Was literature to be treated like any other commodity – subjected to the same economic laws and principles as everything else? These questions and concerns also drove wedges between publishers, who approached this literary marketplace from one perspective, and the writers, who approached this literary marketplace from a different perspective.

This atmosphere was the literary environment to which Fitz-James O’Brien stepped into in 1852 when he immigrated to the United States from Ireland, from London. Indeed, he was engaged with many of the same difficulties and challenges faced by most of the other authors during this period. He would subject his works to the supply and demand of the market, he took on the publishers, and he addressed many of the societal concerns of the country during the period. As Francis Wolle, O’Brien’s first and only biographer, noted, “a number of them [i.e., writers] like Fitz-James had to make their livings by their pens; they followed the demands of the market.”<sup>83</sup> Similar to Hawthorne and Cooper, O’Brien was subject to the same literary forces of supply and demand. The conflicts they felt also resonated with him. O’Brien was deeply aware of the tensions between publishers and writers, the low pay by publishers often forced him to work at rates that were counter to the creative process. He often found himself without money to even pay for food. Wolle relays an interesting story about O’Brien when he was doing a lot of work with Harpers.

At another time, when he was not strictly sober, O’Brien found himself out of funds. He wandered into a publisher’s office and asked for \$25. This was refused him. Angrily seizing a placard, O’Brien reversed it and made in big letters on the blank side: ONE OF

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<sup>83</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 35.

HARPER'S AUTHORS. I AM STARVING. Tying a string to the card, O'Brien placed it around his neck and paraded up and down the street, to the great amusement of a large crowd. He was of course requested to desist, but nothing stopped his mad course until a \$5 bill was presented to him as a compromise, whereupon he divested himself of his unique sign and went on his devious way rejoicing.<sup>84</sup>

This episode demonstrates that O'Brien faced many of the same issues that writers faced during the antebellum period; it was very difficult for a writer to earn a living exclusively from that profession. O'Brien lived in a tough existence during this time, often unable to even buy food for himself. But once he was paid, he would lavishly throw dinner parties for all his friends. It was in this respect which places O'Brien squarely within the Bohemian movement and tradition.

One of his earliest poems published in the United States, "He Writes for Bread,"<sup>85</sup> published in *The Lantern* in July 1852; O'Brien explored the relationship between the writer and the publisher in this new literary marketplace. O'Brien sees the writer as the victim in the publishing process, the most important actor, yet the one who always was last to reap the reward of a successful product. This semi-autobiographical poem was a cry for help and demonstrates many of the hardships that writers were subjected to during this period. O'Brien is expressing a collective concern about the publishing world. Wolle comments on the poem: "The young man in his garret at midnight must sit up and write clever bits, cudgeling his brains and forcing himself to keep at it as he looks at the table empty of food. Although everyone else in the publishing business is amply paid, the writer gets not enough to meet his bills. It is a hard lot!"<sup>86</sup> This poem and the message intended by O'Brien, reflect an important concern for the literary marketplace and the nature of writing during the antebellum period.

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<sup>84</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 55.

<sup>85</sup> The full text of this poem can be found in the Appendix, Entry #5.

<sup>86</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 39.

Another one of O'Brien's writings, one that was written later in his American career, published in 1858, was a story, titled "From Hand to Mouth."<sup>87</sup> "From Hand to Mouth" was published in *The New York Picayune*, it was serialized from March to May. This story combines two elements important to O'Brien: the presence of the supernatural and the personal issues of publishing. In this story, O'Brien tells of a writer who is captured and held a prisoner in a hotel, the Hotel de Coup d'Oeil, which has very strange properties. The hotel is surrounded by thousands of disembodied eyes, ears, hands, and mouths, which allow the hotel owner, Count Goloptious, to spy on its guests. When the guest falls in love with another resident who is unable to leave the hotel, the captured writer decides to extend his stay in the hotel, to which he comes to realize that the hotel does not accept cash for payment, but instead, requires individuals to write stories for them – the better the room the more pages are required. This story is an analogy of the writer within the literary marketplace. The eyes, ears, nose, and hands serve as the democratic audience, which allows the publisher to feel out the temperature of the crowd, which in turn is imposed upon the writer in payment of written work. O'Brien here is addressing these serious issues in tongue-in-cheek fashion; satire was one of the genres he dabbled in and was quite effective.

It was in America where O'Brien came into his own as a writer. It was the first time that he fully developed the themes that will come to dominate all of his writings. These ideas were not born in America for O'Brien; he tinkered with them in various places in his early writings. His first significant foray into exploring the themes of political and historical awareness was with his first poem published in Ireland, "Oh! Give a Desert Life to Me." This poem dealt with the complicated relationship between Britain and Ireland. His first significant foray into exploring the themes of economic and social awareness was with his second poem ever published in

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<sup>87</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 243 – 280.

Ireland, “The Famine.” This poem dealt with the difficulties of the Great Potato Famine of the 1840s. He dabbled with some of these themes in his London writings, but it was in America where he began developing a consistent and thorough social and moral philosophy centered in social justice. Wolle notes, about O’Brien’s evolution, that it was his particular economic circumstance in America which helped to solidify his philosophical thoughts. “Perhaps the change in his circumstances from a position of affluence to one in which he ate only as his pen produced had thus quickly after his arrival in New York forced upon him a sympathetic consciousness of the hard conditions of the poor.”<sup>88</sup> We know that these ideas were not born in the mind of O’Brien for the first time in America, therefore Wolle’s analysis is not correct here, as he was thinking of these issues way before he enters New York – his first two poems published in Ireland prove this. But once in America, as Wolle implies, the concerns take on a personal flavor as he is now an active participant in the economic and political environment of the literary marketplace. O’Brien is now subject to the economic hardships that he was exempt from back in Ireland, which makes his writings in America especially interesting and relevant.

O’Brien’s goal, like that of Poe, was to become a successful poet and like Poe, he would come to be known more for his short stories than his poetry. America, as it was for many other individuals, gave O’Brien opportunities that he would not have had had he stayed in Ireland. His family was wealthy, so there were no economic hardships pressing on his life, making his immigration more about professional opportunity, rather than one of fundamental survival. He began his writing talents in Ireland as a young man, and then honed these skills the two and a half years he spent in London. But it was in America where he made a name for himself. He loved this country, so much so that he joined the New York 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment upon the opening shots of the Civil War in 1861. He died for this country, like many young men during this war. The

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<sup>88</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 38.

development of his visions on social justice will be explored in depth in Chapters Four through Seven of this dissertation. His writings and publications in Ireland show depth and promise as a young writer, then his time in London allows him to fine tune those skills and prepare the way for his American literary journey.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### “Methinks the poor do feign!” — O’Brien on Children

I reasoned with a friend one day,  
A wealthy man, and proud;  
Who rode in a lordly chariot,  
And cared not for the crowd.  
I told him that the poor were crushed  
To earth, and sore opprest;  
And that they looked upon the grave  
As their only place of rest.

There was cold scorn within his eye,  
When I pleaded for the slave —  
But his glances rolled uneasily,  
When I talked about the grave.  
Said he “I tire of this discourse,  
Methinks the poor do feign!”  
“Come forth with me, and let us see,  
(Quoth I) why they complain?”

“Street Lyrics: The Beggar Child” (1852)<sup>1</sup>

In 1852 Fitz-James O’Brien penned a series of three poems, “Street Lyrics,” which would constitute the cornerstone pieces of his vision of social justice. Each poem focused on a particular aspect of American society that O’Brien wanted to isolate and magnify for the reading public. These topics were not a new direction for O’Brien; he simply picked up where he left off from his days back in Ireland. He was quick to call out the injustices of the way the poor were being treated during the 1840s, during the Great Potato Famine, at the hands of the wealthy elite. Instead of calling out Britain, as many writers did, the young O’Brien focused his attention on those that had plenty of resources within their own country. Why look outward for relief, when everything they needed was within their own borders? In this sense, the “Street Lyrics” poems

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<sup>1</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music* (Texas: A Bit O’Irish Press, 2018), 70.

echo the same points and themes that he elaborated on in 1846 with his publication of “The Famine,” O’Brien’s fourth published poem.

Francis Wolle, notes, with only \$60 in hand, “to supply the fashionable wardrobe, or what was even more exigently pressing, to keep himself fed and housed, O’Brien must very soon after landing have sought literary employment.”<sup>2</sup> This he obtained very soon, under a fellow Irish countryman of his, the well-known actor, John Brougham. Right away we begin to see the transformation of O’Brien from a man of letters to a man forced to acquiesce to the supply and demand of the literary marketplace. On January 10, 1852, Brougham began the publication of a comic magazine called *The Lantern*.<sup>3</sup> O’Brien contributed a number of pieces to this magazine, of varying quality. In the early 1850s, he was still in the process of honing his craft. On March 31 *The Lantern* began a serial story, written by O’Brien, called “The Wonderful Adventures of Mr. Papplewick.”<sup>4</sup> According to Wolle, “this ridiculous yarn contains examples of the technique upon which O’Brien’s fame as a writer of weird tales was to rest – the localization of fantastically unbelievable events in well-known, even prosaic surroundings.”<sup>5</sup> The story tells of a man, Mr. Papplewick, who accidentally swallows a magnet, turning himself into a human magnet. He goes on a number of adventures, including being a side show exhibit at Barnum’s Museum, but ultimately (and unfortunately) the story is unfinished. This showed some promise in O’Brien, with his ability to write some early fantasy and surrealist literature.

It was O’Brien’s work with *The Lantern*, in which he began to formulate and work through his ideas of social justice. It would be his ideas on social justice, along with his

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien: A Literary Bohemian of the Eighteen-Fifties* (Boulder, Colorado: University of Colorado, 1944), 31.

<sup>3</sup> In the issue of February 21, there appeared what is the first identified writing of Fitz-James O’Brien in America, a terrible poem titled “A Legend of the Olden Time.” Wolle also describes this poem, rightly so, as a poorly written poem.

<sup>4</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I (Texas: A Bit O’Irish Press, 2017), 7 – 25.

<sup>5</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 33.

supernatural writings, which would earn him an audience and respect during this time period. *The Lantern* provided him the opportunity to publish many poems of social protest. The most important set and best poems that O'Brien published for *The Lantern*, (maybe of all his American writings) related to his views of social justice, were the set of poems collectively known as the "Street Lyrics." Three poems published within a few weeks of each other, which addressed the three major sources of concern for O'Brien: children, women, and animals.<sup>6</sup>

The first poem of the set, "The Beggar Child,"<sup>7</sup> was published in *The Lantern* on May 1, 1852. "The Beggar Child"<sup>8</sup> tells of an incident of a wealthy and proud man who has been completely incredulous about the stories of dire poverty in the city and refuses to believe the reality that the poor do struggle, as the man retorts – "Methinks the poor do feign!" In this early American poem, the objective of O'Brien is to raise awareness of the plight of the urban poor, especially children. The story tells of a wealthy gentleman who is completely out of touch with the destitution of the urban poor. He believes the poor complain too much and regardless, he believes the number of poor is way overestimated, as he never sees them: "'Tis very strange (sneered he) / That I have lived so long, nor seen, / This vaunted misery!" The unnamed narrator decides to take the wealthy man on a trip around the city. This is an important note because it illustrates an important component of O'Brien's social justice; empathy must begin and be rooted in experience. The two experience poverty first hand in the form of a young child. When the wealthy gentleman queries the young child as to why she is outside, she claims she is on the street to beg for food. Then the wealthy gentleman, who is somewhat surprised, asks where her parents are? The child explains that her father was killed in the Mexican-American War and her mother worked till she became ill and is now unable to go into work. The child is the eldest of

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<sup>6</sup> The topics of women and animals will be the subject of Chapters Five and Six of this dissertation.

<sup>7</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 70 – 71.

<sup>8</sup> The full text of this poem can be found in the Appendix, Entry #6.

five, so she feels she must provide for the others. Note how the father was killed fighting for his country, during a controversial war; many folks benefited from the war with Mexico, this child's father sacrificed his life so that others could continue to live in luxury. The child led the party to her house, where the wealthy gentleman finally succumbed when he witnessed, first-hand, the level of poverty in which the family reside. This first hand and direct experience transforms the wealthy gentleman in a fundamental way. "The man became a child — / Embraced his brother man again, / And rose up reconciled."

Several ideas emerge from this poem. First, empathy must begin in experience. No matter how much the narrator tried to convince the wealthy gentleman about the plight of the poor, it did not resonate until he experienced it for himself. The pangs of poverty can best be felt with the experience of its hardship. This is a point that would have hit home for O'Brien. Second, the culpability of the wealthy for the poverty in the urban setting is clear. The wealthy gentleman lives in the lap of luxury, contrasted with that of the child, who is barely able to maintain basic living standards. The situation for the child has become so bad; she wishes she were dead. Like his earlier poem "The Famine" O'Brien is calling the upper classes to action. They can help solve the poverty issue of these poor families, especially the innocent children, from the destitute life they live. Third, attention is drawn to veterans. They sacrifice for others; those who benefit from their sacrifice owe an obligation to the community.<sup>9</sup> Fourth, once empathy is moved to action, the wealthy gentleman returns to a condition to which all humanity belongs. The wealthy, as long as they refuse to help, stand outside the human community. "Now dowered with a gentler soul, / He feels he is a part / Of that most glorious work of God, / The mighty human heart!" O'Brien occasionally invoked divine allusions in his poetry and prose, but when he does, it

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<sup>9</sup> This is an idea similar to Andrew Carnegie's view of the "Gospel of Wealth." The belief that the wealthy have a moral responsibility to give back to the community.

becomes a powerful tool in pulling at the heartstrings of the reader. The crime here is not being wealthy, O'Brien comes from wealth, he never argues against the existence of wealth. Instead it is not acting, and more importantly, it is the man's distance which has caused him to be lost from the circle of humanity. It is this disconnection which constitutes the crime, and it is the reconnection which constitutes the reconciliation – and ultimately his moral redemption.

It was this poem, along with others of the same theme, according to Wolle, which “initiate a type of writing in which Fitz-James later became especially proficient, stirring his reform-loving contemporaries with rhymed attacks . . . perhaps the change in his own circumstances from a position of affluence to one in which he ate only as his pen produced has thus quickly after his arrival in New York forced upon him a sympathetic consciousness of the hard conditions of the poor.”<sup>10</sup> O'Brien's work with *The Lantern* would be short-lived, his publications with this magazine would only last about a year and a half, but his work on behalf of the poor children in America would continue for the rest of his life.

By 1850, urbanization and industrialization had taken hold in America and nowhere were the direct consequences of these two conditions felt stronger than in the lives of children, especially with children living in urban America – in cities like New York. It was in 1920, in which the census showed, for the first time, that more people living in the United States live in urban places than in rural places. This change in population constituted a significant paradigm shift. For the first three hundred years of America's existence, it consisted of a country of farmers. It was Jefferson's vision, one of an agrarian empire that was going to transform America into a world power. Opposed to this view, was Hamilton's vision of a commercial and

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<sup>10</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 38. This dissertation does take issue with this analysis of Wolle here. It has been my contention that O'Brien has been consistent from early on in the subject matter of his writings. He begins his career focusing on what would be developed in his vision of social justice and would continue that theme throughout his entire writing career.

manufacturing power – by 1920 Hamilton was finally winning. This shift did not just happen overnight, and by the middle of the nineteenth century, it was clear to many Americans that the shifting demographics of our country were going through some radical changes – America was becoming more urbanized and industrialized, and this transformation would have some significant consequences.

Children were some of the most visible beneficiaries and benefactors of these urban and industrial changes. Children also occupy a prominent place in much of the cultural and literary expression in nineteenth century America. Important works of fiction, music, plays, essays, and art included children as their central topic. In 1906 George Bellows, an influential American Realist artist most known for his images of the city and one of the leaders of the “Ashcan” school of art (an important art movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), painted a relatively unknown painting titled “Kids” (pictured below).<sup>11</sup>



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<sup>11</sup> Virginia Museum of Fine Arts: accessed 12/09/18, <https://www.vmfa.museum/piction/6027262-55295555/>

Bellows first moved to New York City in 1905 to pursue a career as an illustrator. However, under the influence of Robert Henri, he was inspired to paint the realities of urban living. “Kids” is one of Bellows’s first major works, which depicts the tenements and slums of urban living in New York City. What makes this painting so important and interesting is the fact that Bellows chose to use children as his first set of characters. In the painting, young children, mostly from urban working class and lower class poor families, are standing around what seems to be the outside of a tenement house. It is clear to the viewer that these children have a hard life. It demonstrates the boredom and isolation that children in urban settings must have been confronted with in their day to day living. Contrast most of the children portrayed in the image with the one child who looks somewhat out of place in the painting. A young girl, with a dog, located to the far bottom right of the canvass, looks as if she made a wrong turn in a bad neighborhood – it always reminds me of the scene from the Wizard of Oz: “Toto – I don’t think we are in Kansas anymore!” Bellows intended to juxtapose, to borrow a phrase from another Progressive reformer of the early twentieth century, Jacob Riis’ “How the Other Half Lives,” the lives of the urban middle class children with that of the working class and lower class children.<sup>12</sup>

While this painting was produced about fifty years after O’Brien walked the streets of New York City, the scenes, or those similar to it, were one that would have been observable to individuals like O’Brien and other urban dwellers in the 1850s. It would have been a reality that they experienced firsthand every day. Like Bellows’s painting, O’Brien consciously incorporated the plight of children as major themes in much of his American poetry and prose. Charles Dickens, the great English writer and colleague of O’Brien’s, in his 1842 publication, *American*

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<sup>12</sup> The dichotomy between the experiences of the urban working class versus the urban middle class is not the only way to establish the parameters for this chapter, frontier children as well as the upper class children were also subject to countless studies. However, O’Brien was an urban dweller, and most of his stories focused on the urban working class child, so that will be the major focus of this dissertation.

*Notes*, comments on the condition he observed in New York City, “Poverty, wretchedness, and vice, are rife enough where we are going now.”<sup>13</sup> The city was dangerous, dirty, and full of children. As historian Steven Mintz notes, in his excellent study of the history of American childhood, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood*, many urban teens were “caught in the tide of a modern market economy, they became delinquents, joined gangs, or drifted into a life of poverty and unskilled labor, joining America’s growing underclass of the chronically unemployed or underemployed.”<sup>14</sup>

O’Brien often wrote on the topic of education, especially when it came to child-rearing or institutions which affected children. It was in London, when he first explored the topic in two pieces published in *The Family Friend*.<sup>15</sup> In the first piece, “Babies!,” O’Brien was being satirical in nature, ridiculing parents who use their children as sort of “trophies” for others to admire. Like most satire, it fell on deaf ears and the readers completely misinterpreted his intentions; O’Brien’s intent was mostly playful in nature and because of the controversy he was forced to recant his earlier piece, in “Children. A Vindication.” In “Children,” O’Brien made a distinction between babies and children, as he praised the later for their infinite variety.<sup>16</sup> The editor of the magazine, R. Kemp Philp, had to offer his own apology and argued that O’Brien was, in fact, a great lover of children and had attended dinner at his house on many occasions entertaining his own children. The conclusion of “Children” contained the strange short story fragment, “A Story of a Child,” which, deals with the theme of education and the relationship between nature versus nurture – an important concept when discussing the rearing of children.

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 99.

<sup>14</sup> Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 140 – 141.

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter Three of this dissertation.

<sup>16</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 21.



As more and more economic housework moved outside the home, due to the growth and emergence of the Market Revolution, urban middle class women concentrated their daily routine on child care. This new sense of mothering became an important part of their self-image. The idea of “Republican Motherhood” trickled down from the upper classes to this new middle class. Books and reading became important to the education of these children and often these books depicted clearly defined gender roles. Boys were often portrayed as aggressive and daring, whereas girls were often portrayed as more self-sacrificing and dependent. School also played an important role in childhood for these urban working class families – these institutions also reinforced typical gender stereotypes. These schools also kept children of middle class families out of the workplace. As David B. Tyack notes, in his *Turning Points in American Educational History*, “schools tended to prolong middle-class children’s dependency by forestalling youth’s entry into the world of work.”<sup>17</sup> According to Elizabeth Pleck, the most important characteristics of childrearing for this new urban middle class family was: shaping character, implanting habits of self-control, shelter children from corruption, keeping them home longer, enrolling them in school which would emphasize industry, regularity, and restraint.<sup>18</sup>

O’Brien did, from time to time, publish stories that reinforced the traditional conceptions of childhood, but usually in his prose and poetry, he would challenge these gender stereotypes. Two important stories, which challenged these traditions were: “Milly Dove”<sup>19</sup> which was published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in September 1855, and “Sister Anne”<sup>20</sup> which was published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in December 1855. O’Brien sometimes

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<sup>17</sup> David B. Tyack, ed., *Turning Points in American Educational History* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Blaisdell, 1967), 330.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of Social Policy against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I, 301 – 318.

<sup>20</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I, 343 – 352.

followed Dickens in his characterization of childhood, as Mintz notes, which “depicted both boys and girls as fragile, vulnerable creatures in need of adult protection.”<sup>21</sup> The standard gender stereotypes in literature often depicted boys as aggressive and daring and girls as self-sacrificing and weak. In “Milly Dove” and “Sister Anne” O’Brien chooses to defy social convention and present the two girl characters with strength and independence.

“Milly Dove” is the story of young Milly Dove, a sixteen-year-old girl, who operates and manages a general store by herself – the store once belonged to her parents, both have died and now she is the sole heir to the family business. Josiah Compton, an older family friend of her mothers, helps out when he can and in exchange, he rents a room behind the store. Compton has also taken on a parental role, ensuring that Milly is getting her education and other normal child needs. The two spend time enjoying music, telling stories, and a panorama that was created by Compton, which tells the story of the history of the world. Milly very much enjoys Compton’s company and appreciates what Compton does for her.

One day Milly notices a handsome man walk by, she had never seen the gentleman before, and this piques her curiosity. One day the man enters Milly’s general store, inquiring about the owners of the store. Alexander Winthrop assumes that she lives with relatives, because “you are young to be at the head of an establishment.”<sup>22</sup> Winthrop begins to annoy Milly, as he asks more and more questions; he even challenges the value of the panorama that she and Compton enjoy so much. Winthrop tries to convince Milly that the panorama is not historically accurate; he even chastises Compton for not giving Milly books to read. Gradually Milly, Compton, and Winthrop develop a close relationship, and Milly and Winthrop are going to be married. They come to discover that Winthrop is a famous philosopher/writer, whose pen name

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<sup>21</sup> Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 83.

<sup>22</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I, 310.

is Ivan Thore, who has published many important books on philosophy. Compton figures this out pretty quickly. However, Winthrop asks him to keep it a secret from Milly; by the end of the story both Milly and Winthrop have fallen in love and all three go on to live wonderful lives together. This sentimental story is typical fodder for O'Brien when he takes up the pen on behalf of social justice. This type of writing is very different from his forays into supernatural and fantasy, of which his most lasting reputation has been built. This illustrates the tension that emerged within the literary marketplace in antebellum America – “publish or perish.” Over half of O'Brien's published writings contain many of these themes, and O'Brien does not give us any sense whether he enjoys writing these sentimental pieces or not, but he does use most of them as avenues for exploring social injustice.

“Sister Anne” is the story of young Anne Plymott, a dreamer and writer of poetry. She lives in a household that does not appreciate either her or her craft. She is constantly verbally abused by her mother who considers her worthless compared to her other sisters because they work and contribute to the family, whereas Anne simply mulls around all day writing poetry. Anne has a friend, Steven Basque, who takes walks with her in the forest and gives her inspiration for her poetry. Basque also encourages her and gives her confidence, despite the opposite she receives from her family. One day Basque informs Anne that he must leave for New York City, he has a great job opportunity and cannot pass it up. This means that he will be leaving Anne and probably will never see her again. Anne becomes very sad about this as she desperately enjoys the company of her friend. The harassment from her mother becomes too much for her to tolerate and Anne decides one day that she will run away, to New York City, where she can write and be reunited with her friend Steven Basque. She has never been to New

York, but wonders, how large can it be? Little does she know, she is in for a challenge, but the reader gets the sense that Anne is capable of overcoming any obstacle.

Once Anne arrives in New York City, she experiences two traumatic events. First, the periodical that she has published much of her poetry in refuses to believe who she is because she is a girl (and is also a child) – Anne had been using a male pen name to submit her poetry. They do not believe her, and the editor also tells her that he would never pay for poetry because it is not in demand by his readers. The editor dismisses her from the office, and Anne leaves very upset. Second, while wandering the streets aimlessly, she is sexually accosted by a stranger, who tries to take her back to his apartment. Fortunately, and coincidentally, Anne runs into Steven Basque, and by the time he figures out what is going on, the man who tried to attack her has run away. After the two reunite, Basque talks to the editor of the newspaper and convinces him to agree to publish some of her writings. Basque also convinces Anne that poetry is not the best way to go to support herself financially and encourages her to write some short sketches based on her childhood walks in nature. She does, they become very popular, the newspaper is happy to pay her, and of course, she and Steven Basque fall deeply in love and live happily ever after.

There are some interesting connections between this story and O'Brien's earlier London story "A Story of a Child." The role that nature plays in both stories is similar. For the child in "A Story of a Child," nature serves as a source of comfort and home. Similarly for Anne, her walks in nature serve as inspiration for her poetry and eventually the sketches which would begin to earn her some financial success. Anne was able to navigate the literary marketplace by adapting her skills, that of writing poetry, to a different genre, that of writing sketches. However, the topics of both of these involve her reflections on nature. The city, at first, for Anne, served as a place of alienation and hostility, like the child in "A Story of a Child." But for Anne, she was

able to make adjustments and eventually thrive in the urban setting, unlike the child, who is forced to return back to nature in order to be happy. Anne is able to bring the comforts of nature to the city, in the form of her writings and thoughts, whereas the child is not.

What “Milly Dove” and “Sister Anne” have in common is the rejection of the traditional gender stereotypes of female children as weak and dependent. Milly runs and manages a general store all by herself, with occasional help from Compton. Anne is a successful writer, who is publishing poetry in her teens. Both Milly and Anne do face challenges, and O’Brien is careful to make the story believable. O’Brien’s readers probably would not have believed that Milly lived alone and ran the general store completely by herself – at the age of sixteen. Likewise, O’Brien’s readers probably would not have believed that Anne published poetry without using the pen name of a male. Both female protagonist exhibit strong and independent characteristics, however, O’Brien is quick to add a touch of reality within both of these stories. O’Brien’s challenge of the traditional gender stereotypes of female children, at least in these two stories, was progressive for his day. O’Brien chose to project characters that stood in the face of tradition, defied the norms, and ultimately were successful. Despite the independence of these two children, they do require the aid of an older male figure to completely accomplish their goals. O’Brien’s progressive thinking here is tempered with a dose of reality.

Many of O’Brien’s writings in 1852, and subsequently his writings over the next ten years, have children as the main themes. It would have been difficult to walk the streets of New York City in the middle of the nineteenth century and not be surrounded by children. O’Brien often uses images closest to him for inspiration in both his prose and poetry. Mintz goes so far as to conclude that the very notion of the modern child was invented by mid-century. “Idyllic images of childhood past,” he says, “in which young people moved seamlessly toward

adulthood, are invariably misleading, but for no period is this more mistaken than the early nineteenth century.”<sup>23</sup> The types of experiences that children had, as well as the way that children were viewed by their parents, depended on the social and economic status of their family. Whether they were viewed from the perspective of “protection” or “usefulness,” the family status directed how the experience of childhood would be lived. The urban upper and middle class child grew up in an atmosphere of that of a “protected child” – they were sheltered from stress and the dangers of adulthood. Opposite of that, the urban working and lower class child grew up in an atmosphere of that of a “useful child” – they contributed to the family income, as their earnings were seen as critical in keeping the family out of poverty.<sup>24</sup> O’Brien writes about all of these experiences of childhood. Children, of all classes, were common protagonist in O’Brien’s poetry and prose; although he concentrates mostly on the urban working class and poor.

The notion of a “protected” childhood is rooted in three sources: the Enlightenment idea of the child as a blank slate, the Protestant idea of the child as an innocent soul, and the Evangelical stress of childhood as developing through different stages.<sup>25</sup> Many of O’Brien’s children exhibit qualities of the first two of these sources. Urban middle class families did not view children as sources of labor. This was seen from the fact that more and more of these families were having fewer and fewer children. In 1800 the average American family had from seven to ten children, by 1850 that number was cut in half, with the average family having five children, but by 1900 the average family only had two to three children. Urban middle class children, according to Mintz, were “no longer economic assets who could be put productively to

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<sup>23</sup> Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 75-6.

<sup>24</sup> Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

<sup>25</sup> Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 76.

work, children required expensive investments in the form of education.”<sup>26</sup> This also contributed to the growing sense of nationalism. Following the War of 1812, as more and more American families felt like they needed advice on childhood, much of it reflected distinctly American problems and issues.

There were stark childhood differences between the urban middle class “protected” child and that of the urban working class “useful” child. Mintz notes, “the growth of industry, the commercialization of agriculture, and the expansion of a market economy widened the gulf between middle-class and laboring children.”<sup>27</sup> The expansion of capitalism had far-reaching consequences for children’s lives, especially for those who were not part of the urban middle class. The urban middle class family experienced increasing affluence within the expanding economy under the Market Revolution, whereas the urban working class family experienced more hardships and often more poverty. Because of these changes in society and the economy, radical differences emerged with children within different economic classes – there was more diversity in 1850 than ever had existed in American history prior to that period.<sup>28</sup> The vast majority of children in the nineteenth century went into the labor force. Mintz notes, in most urban areas, “working-class children ran errands, scavenged, participated in street trades, or took part in outwork, forms of manufacturing that took place in the home.”<sup>29</sup> The working class family was so dependent upon their child’s labor for wages that approximately 20% of the average family’s earnings in 1850 came from the children.<sup>30</sup> Decisions about school versus work were often based on family needs and circumstances rather than individual choice. The decision

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<sup>26</sup> Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 78.

<sup>27</sup> Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 92 – 93.

<sup>28</sup> Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 134.

<sup>29</sup> Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 135.

<sup>30</sup> Priscilla Ferguson Clement, *Growing Pains: Children in the Industrial Age, 1850 – 1890* (New York: Twayne, 1997), 7.

to place a child in the labor force was the norm, rather than the exception in the middle part of the nineteenth century. Anthony F.C. Wallace notes, in “many mechanized industries, from a quarter to half the workforce was under the age of twenty.”<sup>31</sup> Howard P. Chudacoff, in his excellent study, *How Old Are You?* also notes that “more and more teens were being used for unskilled labor.”<sup>32</sup>

Following the Panic of 1837 urban families had two options for their children: enter a factory (which would have doomed them to a life of unskilled or semiskilled labor) or remain in school where they would remain till a clerkship or another salaried position opened up.<sup>33</sup> The urban working class family often opted for the first choice and the urban middle class family often opted for the second choice. For poorer families, however, there were no options, as children were often forced into the workforce at even younger ages. Poor children participated in the “informal” economy, as noted by Jacqueline S. Reinier, selling fruit, matches on street corners, often peddling loose cotton, old rope, bits of hardware, and bottles or broken glass.<sup>34</sup> Christine Stansell, in her important study of women and children in antebellum New York, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789 – 1860*, also notes that most of these children scavengers came from single-parent homes.<sup>35</sup> High death rates, especially among Irish immigrants, who were swelling the harbors of New York City in the middle part of the nineteenth century, were the main culprits for family instability among the urban poor. Mintz

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<sup>31</sup> Anthony F.C. Wallace, “The World of Work in a Nineteenth-Century Mill Town,” in *Family Life in America, 1620 – 2000*, ed. Mel Albin and Dominick Cavallo (St. James, New York: Revisionary, 1981), 174 – 175.

<sup>32</sup> Howard P. Chudacoff, *How Old Are You?: Age Consciousness in American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 19.

<sup>33</sup> W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice: From Franklin to the Machine Age in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 130.

<sup>34</sup> Jacqueline S. Reinier, *From Virtue to Character: American Childhood, 1775 – 1850* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 126.

<sup>35</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789 – 1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 158.



notes, “single-parent families were more common among Irish than any nineteenth-century ethnic group except African-Americans.”<sup>36</sup>

O’Brien writes a number of stories that involve children from single-parent households. In the story, “The Golden Ingot,”<sup>37</sup> O’Brien chooses to focus on a strong and independent female child, who comes from a single-parent household. The “The Golden Ingot,” was published in *The Knickerbocker, or New-York Monthly Magazine*, August 1858. This story is about a child, Marian Blakelock, and her father, William Blakelock, who is an alchemist and believes that he has discovered the formula which can convert ordinary metal into gold. The truth, however, is that he has not discovered the formula, but believes he has because Marian is tricking him into believing it by putting a bar of gold into the crucible after he performs his ritual. The reason Marian is doing this is that her father’s obsessive quest is killing him. Marian convinces her father that he has accomplished his goal, thus relieving some of the stress on the old man. Blakelock, however, becomes suspicious when Marian appears to be hoarding the gold nuggets, so a conflict develops between Marian and her father. One day while performing another experiment Blakelock’s lab blows up seriously injuring him. Marian runs out of the house in search of medical help. She wakes a doctor in the middle of the night, she tells her story, and the doctor goes to the lab to help the old man. After performing some helpful medical aid, Blakelock tells the doctor the story about how he has come up with the formula to convert metal into gold and that his daughter is not helping him and is hoarding all the gold. The doctor at first believes him, although he does not believe that the old man has come up with the formula, ultimately when Blakelock tries to convince the doctor with another experiment and fails; only then the doctor realizes that Marian is helping the old man. There is only one bar of gold; the old man is

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<sup>36</sup> Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 144 – 145.

<sup>37</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II (Texas: A Bit O’Irish Press, 2017), 301 – 314.

delusional and abusive toward Marian. In the end, the old man dies when he realizes that his experiments were, in fact, a failure.

Here O'Brien provides another example of a strong and independent female child, standing up to the adult world. Marian exemplifies a strong and independent character, as she takes abuse from the one person in her life that she loves, to protect him from his obsession. Marian sacrifices in the only way that she knows how for the benefit of the family. She lies to the father that is true. However, the lie is for the greater good and the health and safety of her father. In these stories, "Milly Dove," "Sister Anne," and "The Golden Ingot" children serve as the protagonist which challenge the idea of traditional gender stereotypes. But O'Brien does much more than this; he provides positive role models in the form of children. Marian is the ultimate Platonic tragic figure.<sup>38</sup> She not only understands the truth, something which her father does not understand, but she suffers for this knowledge. When she tries to reveal the truth, she is condemned and proclaimed a liar from her own father and others around her.

In the late eighteenth century a group of reformers known as "child savers" emerged, as their name implies, their goals were to protect children from the dangers of urban society. But they also had another purpose, to protect society from the dangers of children. Children, especially poor children, participated in all kinds of criminal activities, causing havoc on the city streets of urban populations. Nowhere was this more evident than during the middle of the nineteenth century of New York City. Mintz notes, "child-saving was driven by a mixture of hope and fear – by a utopian faith that crime, pauperism, and class division could be solved by redeeming poor children; and a mounting concern over growing cities, burgeoning gangs of idle

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<sup>38</sup> Plato's dialogue *The Republic* describes, in the "Allegory of the Cave," a place where philosophers, the holders of truth, are required to free themselves from a cave, but then return to share that knowledge with others in the cave. However, despite the truth, the cave dwellers refuse to believe the truth and end up killing the philosophers for the truth that they know. Plato's message and moral was clear: those that contain the truth have a moral responsibility to share that knowledge, despite the fact that sharing could result in negative consequences.

and unsupervised youths, and swelling immigrant populations.”<sup>39</sup> Orphans, which made up a bulk of this problem, became a national epidemic. There were lots of reformers who had ideas on how to solve this urban problem. In 1800 only six orphanages existed in the entire United States, but by 1850 there were over one hundred just in New York City alone. Orphanages were just one solution to this problem; the reform school movement also emerged by the 1840s as a viable solution. However, these did little to remedy the problem. Adoption became a popular solution, this, according to historian Michael Grossberg, in his classic study of the intersection of law and the family, *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century America*, “provided an alternative to placement of children in institutions and a way to assist abused and neglected children.”<sup>40</sup> Sometimes the poor even sold their children, if they thought they were buying a better life for them.

Prostitution, especially in urban settings, became a real problem for reformers. In 1850 approximately ten percent of young women, among teens to early twenties, engaged in prostitution. To try and counter this problem, one that was endemic among the urban poor, the city of New York raised the age of consent to sex from ten in 1865 to eighteen in 1895. The problem with this was that prostitution was a lucrative option for many children of the urban poor; it paid more than double of what a young girl would earn in a factory.<sup>41</sup> In an era where the urban working class struggled for survival, death and disease hovered over their heads on a constant basis; the reality was that all of these options for children, whether it be working in a factory, peddling things on the street, or prostitution, were often encouraged by families. Urban working class and poor families relied heavily on the labor of children and within many of these

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<sup>39</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 157.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Grossberg, *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 195.

<sup>41</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 170.

families, who often suffered the death of at least one parent, a child's labor could mean the difference between survival and death. Any option was difficult and essentially condemned them to a perpetual life of poverty. While the Market Revolution created a new urban working class demographic, who reaped many political and economic benefits from its existence, this new system continued to drive wedges between the upper and lower classes, and was especially difficult on the lives of children.

Following his work in *The Lantern*, O'Brien's next big publication on behalf of urban working class and poor children would come in September 1852. This time O'Brien would turn his attention to an interesting collection of short works for *The American Whig Review*. *The American Whig Review* was a monthly partisan magazine based in New York City and was published from 1844 to 1852. It was published by Wiley and Putnam; it was owned and operated by George H. Colton. The origin of the magazine was purposeful so that it could promote the Whig presidential candidate Henry Clay against the Democratic candidate James K. Polk in the election of 1844. Polk was supported by the *Democratic Review*. *The American Whig Review* had the distinction of being the first authorized periodical to print Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" in February of 1845. The magazine had to cease publication in 1852 because it was unable to continue paying its contributors.<sup>42</sup> This collection by O'Brien, collectively titled, "Fragments from an Unpublished Magazine,"<sup>43</sup> was an interesting mix of essays, poems, and short stories, all of which were held together in a framework indicated by the title. Wolle comments:

authors of the 'Fragments' O'Brien invents the 'tender, melancholy, and impassioned pet Heremon,' whose name it will be recalled was signed to some of the Dublin Nation pieces; the 'quizzical Pro;' the 'wild, half-mad, extravagant, imaginative metaphysician

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<sup>42</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1930).

<sup>43</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I, 39 – 137.

Origen Od;’ and ‘the Irishman, profound, humorous, and pathetic by turns, and terminating every article with an entreaty to advance him five dollars.’<sup>44</sup>

Wolle argues that these pieces demonstrate, at the same time, the strength and weaknesses of O’Brien’s literary talent. “His talent or such genius as he possessed could best express itself only in short spurts;<sup>45</sup> he was incapable of sustained effort. . . . Not infrequently, therefore, O’Brien is found giving play to his fancy in articles of a mixed nature.”<sup>46</sup> O’Brien explored a number of different themes in these short pieces; it was the first entry in the second volume of this collection, in which O’Brien picked up the theme of the “protected child” and “child saver” – the story was titled “One Event.”<sup>47</sup>

Wolle described “One Event” as German in inspiration, an atmosphere of brooding romance and melancholy, “and the conception of the solitary recluse, of his adoption of a ward, and of the gradual change of his character through his growing love for her, though not original, is interestingly handled.”<sup>48</sup> John Vespar, an intellectual recluse, with a somewhat philosophical inclination has gotten disillusioned because of his negative view of humanity. He lives with an old German housekeeper, named Meta, where the two of them live by themselves out in the country. Vespar is well respected within the tiny community, and Meta thinks he has the potential to make any young woman a great husband. Vespar has given up on humanity though, and believed that it is his lot to remain alone in the world. On one cold and stormy night, Meta hears Vespar come home, but to her surprise, he has a visitor with him – a young girl. “The face, which was all that could be seen, was that of a child of about thirteen years old, very pale, very thin, with large, wild, fierce eyes, and a splendidly developed forehead . . . she had tolerably

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<sup>44</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 44.

<sup>45</sup> There were rumors about O’Brien working on the great American novel or a great American project. He talked about it to several of his friends and he was expecting to work on it after his service in the Civil War. Unfortunately he was shot and killed at the start of the war, so we have little information on exactly what he was planning.

<sup>46</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 45.

<sup>47</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I, 67 – 91.

<sup>48</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 47.

good features, and, on the while, gave one the impression of a child that would be pretty if she was well fed.”<sup>49</sup> Meta questions Vespar about the nature of the child and where she came from, but Vespar responds with silence. Meta leaves the room and begins setting up an empty room for the new guest. The child, not giving an impression of acceptance, “how she stared at Master John, as he stood with his back to the fire! Not a stare of childish curiosity, not a stare of fear or wonder, but a wild, untamable, savage glance, such as the snared panther casts upon its enemy.”<sup>50</sup> The child’s defiance was strong, and through conversations in the story, the reader comes to discover that she was the third child; she has two older brothers, Johnny and Willie. We also get a clue as to where she came from, as John Vespar explains to Meta that he bought her, indicating that some poor family sold her to the wealthy patron in hopes of a better life for her and them. As the child grows up, the relationship between the three becomes much more cordial and familial.

Annie Vespar, as she was renamed, becomes a good member of the family, accepts her place and has long forgotten her previous life. She develops a close relationship with a young man, Bolton Waller, a wealthy member of the community from a highly thought of family. It is clear to Meta that the two of them are developing a close relationship, despite Vespar’s naive observations. He believes the two are simply friends and that Waller is doing his due diligence as a young man. Annie and Bolton’s relationship continue to develop, however, Annie one day receives a letter in which Bolton indicates that he must leave and he departs without much explanation, letting Annie know he will never return. Annie, so distraught, leaves the house, out in the freezing snow with her heart crushed. Sobbing and in despair, she loses her way and collapses from the harsh temperature. Annie is now lost and freezing out in the middle of the

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<sup>49</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I, 69.

<sup>50</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I, 69.

country. When Vespar finds out what had happened, he organizes a search party to look for her, only to discover her too late – Annie has died.

A similar story, with some common themes, written by O'Brien, but with a happier ending, was published four years later. This story, "How Nellie Lee Was Pawned,"<sup>51</sup> was published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, September 1856. The year 1853 marked the beginning of an association which was to prove the most permanent and most important of all those which, during his inconsistent career, O'Brien formed with various publishers.<sup>52</sup> "How Nellie Lee Was Pawned" has many similarities to the previous story, "One Event." The story opens with the main character, Mister Papillote, attempting to pawn a chess board to a local Jewish pawnbroker, Lazarus Levi. Levi goes in the back to check on some things, after refusing to accept the chess board, leaving Papillote alone in the store – or at least he thought he was alone! Suddenly a voice out of the dark tells him, "I know how to play chess." The voice in the dark is that of a young girl named Nellie Lee. Nellie Lee is a young girl who offers to play the gentleman in chess. As the two engage in chess, they begin to talk, and Papillote comes to find out quite a bit of information about the young girl – including the fact that she is merchandise in the store, as her father, who is an artist, has pawned her! The relationship is not as bad as it sounds, the girl's father is a starving artist, who pawns the girl from time to time for a loan so he can buy art supplies and the girl helps out the store and its owner doing odds and ends. Nellie Lee and Lazarus explain that the girl's father is abusive and also has problems with alcohol, so the girl does not mind getting out of the house from time to time. Nellie Lee feels a sense of

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<sup>51</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 97 – 105.

<sup>52</sup> O'Brien became familiar with the magazine through his work with the *New York Times* and was probably introduced to the editor, Fletcher Harper, by individuals associated with the newspaper. The magazine was started in 1850 and ran up to 1900. The Harper brothers also started a weekly magazine, *Harpers Weekly*, which is now the second longest running magazine in American history. O'Brien's contributions to these two magazines would constitute his most contributions to any other publication. For the *Monthly* he wrote thirty-two poems, thirty-one short stories, and five articles of a miscellaneous character; while for the *Weekly* he contributed seven poems and one short story, he also contributed to a series of journalism pieces known as "The Man about Town" columns.

comfort with Papillote, to which he offers to adopt the young girl. Lazarus says that her father would never accept such an exchange. Lazarus comes back from visiting Nellie's father and finds out that he has died from alcohol overdose and now the arrangement would now not be challenged by anyone. Papillote adopts the girl, unofficially, takes care of her and as she grows up, the two of them fall in love and get married.

“One Event” and “How Nellie Lee Was Pawned” share some common themes – both stories are about the “child saver” as well as the adult male as “child protector.” Both stories promote the idea of children as a Lockean experiment. The enlightenment idea of children as blank slates, subject to shaping by the parent and the environment; this was John Locke's view of the nature of childhood as developed in his treaty on education, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*.<sup>53</sup> The emphasis here is on nurture instead of nature (although not ignoring the importance of nature). Mintz had argued that this was one of the driving forces underlying the philosophy of the view of the “sheltered or protected childhood” – a strong principle and idea within the newly emerging urban middle class family.<sup>54</sup> Both Vespar and Papillote adhere to this Lockean idea of childhood. Both stories confirm this idea as well, as both Annie and Nellie Lee develop into, arguably, successful young ladies. They certainly have avoided what would ultimately have been their fate, had they stayed in their original condition. Annie would have been subjected to a life of abuse and poverty, and Nellie Lee would have most likely ended up either as a prostitute on the street or in an orphanage. Both Vespar and Papillote are characters that represent the “child-savers” of the antebellum child reform movement. O'Brien seems to have a positive view of both of these individuals, as what they do produce is good in the lives of these young children. While Annie ends up dying, it is likely she would have died much younger

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<sup>53</sup> John W. and Jean S. Yolton, eds., *John Locke: Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>54</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 76.



had Vespar not adopted her. Nellie Lee ends up living out every poor girl's dream – being rescued from the handsome young hero, marries her, and the two ends up living happily ever after. Adoption is presented as the best option of how to deal with the poverty of the urban poor. Both girls come from the ranks of the urban lower and working class poor, the two gentlemen who adopt them come from the upper classes of society. Vespar and Papillote do ultimately break up the family, which was controversial at the time; however, ultimately it ends up well for all concerned.

All these children are faced with the same hardships that many children faced in the antebellum period: abusive parents, abandonment, and early death. Yet these individuals not only survive but thrive despite the harsh urban environment in which they exist. These horror stories were especially frequent in the cities and New York City, being one of the largest cities in America, was replete with instances of these injustices. O'Brien is making a larger point with these stories though, children face tremendous challenges, but they are capable of doing much more than society gives them credit for – they are capable of overcoming them if given a chance. O'Brien is creating an idea of the child as the excellent role model.

O'Brien provides us with two more stories in which children provide excellent role models for his readers. "Baby Bertie's Christmas"<sup>55</sup> and "The Child that loved a Grave."<sup>56</sup> Both stories were published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, "Baby Bertie's Christmas" was published in January 1856, and "The Child that loved a Grave" was published in April 1861. In "Baby Bertie's Christmas" the main character, Charles Forrest, encounters a young girl, Baby Bertie, who is the granddaughter of one of his helpers, Old Obadiah. Forrest accidentally runs into the girl one day while visiting the home of his helper. Baby Bertie is sick and dying, but as

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<sup>55</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 1 – 17.

<sup>56</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 411 – 414.

Forrest gets to know the child better, he witnesses a strength of character that he has never seen before. The child has strength, conviction, and faith. O'Brien often used religious themes, especially in his writings on social justice, and since this story was published right after Christmas, it is full of the Christian theme of love.<sup>57</sup> His interaction with the child gives him the courage to face some of the challenges that he faces in his own life, but once he gets to know Baby Bertie, he realizes that his own problems pale in comparison to hers, and he is not facing them with nearly the amount of courage and fortitude that she does. In the end, Baby Bertie dies, but the message is clear to the reader – even innocent children have lots to offer adults if they are willing to listen.

“The Child that loved a Grave” is another sad and sentimental story; it is about loyalty and abuse. It tells the story of a young boy, who is very sensitive and odd. His parents are alcoholics and abuse him, physically and mentally, on a daily basis. His only solace from this horrible family life is that he spends hours and hours tending the grave of an unnamed and unknown child. He spends his day lying next to the grave, tending to its upkeep, talking to the child (as if he were alive), despite the jeers and insults thrown at him by other children and his parents. Then one day, while conversing with his “friend” a group of men come into the graveyard. The boy is frightened and hides. The men begin digging up the grave of the child, and when the young boy confronts them and begs them to leave the grave alone, he is told that the child comes from a wealthy family and belongs in a better grave than the one he is currently in. The child begs the men to leave the grave undisturbed, to no avail. This saddens the child, and when he returns home, his parents make fun of him and tell him to go to bed, to which the child tells them that he will be dead in the morning and asks that he be buried in the grave of his friend. Of course, the next day comes, and the child is dead, and the parents do as he wished.

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<sup>57</sup> This theme harkens back to the first story ever published by O'Brien, “The Phantom Light.”

Both of these stories, “Baby Bertie’s Christmas” and “The Child that loved a Grave,” focus on the innocence of childhood, a theme that was emphasized by Mintz in his historical survey. The children that die in these two O’Brien’s stories do not deserve to die; they have much to offer the world. Baby Bertie shows the strength of character that most adults would probably not show under the same circumstances. She shows Charles Forrest what is truly important in life and helps him to see that many things that we consider important pale in comparison to the challenges that others face. The unnamed boy in “The Child that loved a Grave” unfortunately does not relay the same message to the characters in the story, but does provide a moral and message to the reader. It shows the powerful effect that physical and mental abuse can have on children – children who do not deserve it. In these two stories, O’Brien focuses on the innocence and vulnerability of children.

O’Brien took on social injustice full steam in his prose and poetry, evolving a humanitarian vision, grounded in the idea of social justice, which was developing by the time he began writing in America. This was not something that was new to him once he arrived in America or something that began as part of his American experience; we saw aspects of his social justice in his early writings while in Ireland and London. They were, however, not as frequent nor as developed as his later writings in America. There might be several reasons for this. As Wolfe noted, it is likely that because of his condition, that of a starving writer made him more aware of the suffering of others around him. There might be some truth to this, but it is not the only explanation, or even the best. O’Brien witnessed first-hand the suffering of the poor at the hands of environmental catastrophe during the Great Potato Famine back in his home of Ireland. Instead of calling out Britain and blaming the devastation on the failure of their policies toward Ireland, he calls out the wealthy of Ireland. He touched on several of these themes while

in London, but it was in America, especially in the urban setting of New York City, where O'Brien would be given lots of material to focus on his view of social justice. The conditions created by the urban plight of the poor in New York City, as witnessed by O'Brien, were not inevitable; instead, the harsh conditions faced by the urban working class were often artificial constructs of which the evils could be remedied through human action. O'Brien looked to the wealthy of New York society, as he previously did back in Ireland, to help relieve the suffering of the poor.

Children played a prominent role within many of O'Brien's stories. Some overall ideas emerge from these writings in America and O'Brien does make some definitive claims about the nature of childhood. First, and foremost, injustice must be experienced to move one to action. This is going to be true of all aspects of his view of social justice. In some of his stories he does call into question the nature of experience about epistemological questions of truth, but when it comes to the question of justice, O'Brien is emphatic about this – experience is the prime motivator in moving one to do justice. Second, O'Brien is quite comfortable in challenging the gender stereotypes of children. The gender fluidity that he presents in some of his stories challenges much of the literature that was popular during the day, especially that of one of the most popular writers and colleague of O'Brien – Charles Dickens. Third, children are capable of exercising independence and strength, despite some challenging situations they are often placed in. Fourth, children can serve as role models for adults. Despite their innocence and frailty, we could learn volumes about the big rocks of life. If we choose to listen, they can teach us morals and ethics that could help us in the struggles and challenges that we all face.

Children served as the first avenue of O'Brien's analysis and exploration of societal injustice. This was not a passing fancy, nor was it the flavor of the day for O'Brien. The nature

of childhood was something that he was concerned with for his entire writing career. His stories in 1852, when he entered the American writing scene, through 1861, just a year before his ultimate death, included ideas of exploring the nature and struggle of childhood. O'Brien made children the protagonists of much of his prose and poetry. O'Brien was also greatly concerned about the nature of womanhood. O'Brien would use female characters as protagonist in more of his stories than men; he was conscious of the challenges that women faced, especially in the urban setting. In many ways, the challenges that children faced mirrored the challenges that women faced.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### “Full of Hopeless Want” — O’Brien on Children

Silent she sat within a naked room,  
Wearily working at a tedious web,  
Wet with the moisture of her eager hands.

So wan her cheeks; so full of hopeless want  
Her worn and withered form: she seemed to be  
The child of Famine, born of gaunt Despair.

Her starveling children crouched around her foot,  
And gazed into her face with hungry eyes.  
While their hands clutched imaginary food.

The needle flew — at last the shirt was done:  
Then donning with weak hands her ragged cloak,  
She left the house, and hurried through the street.

“The Spectral Shirt” (1852)<sup>1</sup>

In the second of Fitz-James O’Brien’s “Street Lyrics” poems, titled “The Crossing Sweeper,”<sup>2</sup> published in *The Lantern* on May 15, 1852, he continued the line of attack from the first poem in that series, but gave the reader a different perspective. O’Brien focused his attention, this time, on the plight of a young woman. The humanitarian theme of this poem essentially retells the story of the Good Samaritan, but the victim, in this case, is a starving girl, while the only one who comes to her aid is a poor old woman who gives her half of what she has.

A child, scarce thirteen summers old,  
    Stood sadly in the crowded street;  
While by her swept the hurrying throng  
    Of callous hearts and busy feet.  
She had been there since earliest dawn,  
    Working her slender arms a weary —  
And half the city passed her by

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<sup>1</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music* (Texas: A Bit O’Irish Press, 2018), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 74 – 75.

All heedless of a fate so dreary.

There came a merchant, rich and sleek,  
His purse was warm, his heart was cold;  
The wrinkles on his narrow brow  
Seemed furrowed there by weight of gold.  
“One penny, Sir,” the poor girl cried,  
“A penny, Sir, to get my dinner!”  
But onwards strode, with careless car,  
The wealthy and respected sinner.

A parson next, with face of woe,  
That masked a ribald sensual soul,  
Thin lips, that seemed worn out with lies,  
An eye that sneered behind control.  
“Here!” thought the child, “comes one whose breast,  
Religion must have taught to pity” —  
But no! the hypocrite went by,  
The coldest heart in all the city.

And as the poor child sadly leaned  
Upon her broom, and sorely sighed —  
A ragged woman, weak and poor,  
Came tottering midst the scornful tide.  
And as her wandering glances fell  
Upon that shape, so full of sorrow,  
She dropped a coin into her hand,  
Though half her pittance for the morrow.

Oh! Poverty, 'twas sweet to see  
Thee help a sister on the way,  
While icy wealth strode by, nor dreamed  
Of such a thing as want that day.  
And if the weak would help the weak,  
Uniting in the dangerous hour —  
They'd crush the cruel kings of gold,  
And burst the chains of monied power.

The final warning is reminiscent of “The Famine” in which O’Brien warns the wealthy upper classes of two things: the danger of religious hypocrisy and the threat of potential unity among the poor as a source of economic and political power – “They’d crush the cruel kings of gold, / And burst the chains of monied power.” From the start in his first year in America, O’Brien takes

on one of the most pressing forms of injustice in the nineteenth century – the condition of women. Women, along with children, were the constant victims of social, political, and economic injustice in the antebellum period. Women would provide O’Brien a second, and be his most frequent, avenue to explore on the topic of social injustice.

It was commonly believed that women had been benefited as a result of the economic changes which were taking place as a result of the development of manufacturing in the country. In 1791 Alexander Hamilton noted, in his important *Report on Manufacture*, “It is worthy of particular remark, that, in general, women . . . are rendered more useful . . . by manufacturing establishments, than they would otherwise be.”<sup>3</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century in America, women would be given more opportunities to be useful than they previously had and many took advantage of this opportunity. But opportunities come with costs and while Hamilton’s claim may very well be true, the ideology behind the claim also caused widespread havoc within the lives of women throughout the period. Manufacturing would provide opportunities for women, but it would also take many lives and condemn many of them to lives of poverty and utter hopelessness.

For example, Lucy Larcom, one of the young girls who took advantage of the new opportunities provided her as a result of the emerging Market Revolution, spent her teenage years as a mill girl in the new factory town of Lowell, Massachusetts. In 1835 Lucy’s mother, a recent widow, moved there out of necessity and took a job as a manager of one of the company-owned boardinghouses to support herself and her children. For Lucy, working in the textile factory, was the formative experience of her life. She initially loved doing work that was significant to the larger society and wrote of “the pleasure we found in making new acquaintances among our workmates.” But in later years, she became uneasy with the

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<sup>3</sup> Joanne B. Freeman, ed., *Alexander Hamilton: Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 2001), 661.



condescension toward her humble past as a factory girl. “It is the first duty,” Larcom wrote, “of every woman to recognize the mutual bond of universal womanhood.”<sup>4</sup> Larcom felt the tug of what would become known as the Cult of True Womanhood (sometimes referred to as the Cult of Domesticity); even more so, she participated in and promoted that ideology with her notes from her diary. Women sometimes were the largest promoters, sometimes unintentionally, of that ideology which caused class division and gender stereotypes.

This Cult of True Womanhood reinforced much of the literature targeted toward women of the time. Barbara Welter, in her classic study, *Dimity Convictions: The American Women in the Nineteenth Century*, defines what exactly were the characteristics of this ideology: “The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.”<sup>5</sup> It was this ideology which dominated middle class social, political, economic, cultural, and gender relations in nineteenth century antebellum America. O’Brien would challenge many of these notions in his poetry and prose. Many of the patrons of Pfaff’s and those conversations that took place inside that democratic setting, encouraged writers like O’Brien to speak out against these and many other injustices.

In 1852, the *New York Times* (the paper was founded in 1851), which would employ O’Brien as a cultural editor for the next eight years, published an expose, dated April 14 and 15, on the terrible conditions under which the sewing women of New York City must work. The story reinforced earlier criticisms in prose and poetry like Thomas Hood’s poem “The Song of the Shirt” (1843), and such novels as Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke* (1850). O’Brien responded to the *New York Times* expose with a poem,

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<sup>4</sup> Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood: Outlined from Memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1889), 222.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 21.

“The Shirt Fiend, A Christian Carol,”<sup>6</sup> which appeared in *The Lantern* on April 24. O’Brien’s poem was published just ten days following the expose in the *New York Times*. O’Brien’s poem was quick and to the point and directly responded to the current events and conditions of the lives of women in America. O’Brien immediately inserted himself in the conversations and debates about the proper role of women. His writings on social justice, many of which dealt with the plight of women in the nineteenth century, would make up a considerable part of his overall publishing production. Some of his best and most important poems and prose deal with concerns about women and their place within society. “The Shirt Fiend” constitutes the first poem concerned with social justice published by O’Brien in America. As such, it marked an important point in O’Brien’s thinking.

The poem was a scathing attack on the exploitative nature of wealth toward women’s labor.

’Twas the purple dawn of a golden day,  
On the floor the haggard children lay;  
They had soothed and kissed themselves to sleep,  
For they loved each other too dearly to weep.

The mother worked on, for her children dear,  
And her burning eyes could shed no tear:  
On she toiled, for her darling’s sake,  
Anguish keeping her brain awake.

At rise of sun, her work was done,  
’Twas a weary week since it had begun!  
She kissed the children — shared the bread —  
And, when she had seen her little one’s fed,  
Fasting herself, on her errand she sped.

She reached the store with a weary heart,  
And gave in her work to the great Shirt Fiend:  
The mother beheld with a sickening start,  
That he gazed upon it Demon-miened!

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<sup>6</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 69.

Ripping it up with a ribald oath,  
He tost to her the mangled cloth —  
“Take it back — ’tis all awry,” I say,  
“And bring it done properly, *next* Saturday!”

“Oh, Heaven! My children” — was all she said,  
As she fell at the Shirt Fiend’s threshold dead!<sup>7</sup>

Here O’Brien uses the middle class tropes of sentimentality to make political arguments. This poem tells the story of a mother who wears herself out sewing shirts to earn food for her children. O’Brien uses emotional appeal, from the first lines, to draw the reader in. It is clear that the woman is living within a single parent household; there is no mention of the husband, only the children. Many women had families without husbands during this time period, sometimes the men left, many died (especially in urban settings like New York City), some Irish women migrated over to America as single parents or had to leave their families behind. In the middle of the nineteenth century America, this scene was commonplace. The Shirt Fiend tears the shirt to shreds and orders that it be redone and brought back next week properly done. It is hard not to identify with the woman who toils all day and night over her work, for her children, to simply be dismissed on an impetuous whim by the man who she relies on for her economic sustenance. Such was the life for women who worked in the garment industry; however, it was the universality of the situation which made the poem so powerful. The nature of the work, along with the alienated product being produced by the woman in the poem, would have a powerful appeal to many workers during the period. But perhaps more urgently it would expose middle class readers to the growing problem of labor and exploitation within the market economy.

About a month later, O’Brien published another poem, in *The Lantern* on June 5, 1852, similar in theme to the previous poem, titled “A Spectral Shirt.”<sup>8</sup> In this updated version of the

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<sup>7</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 69.

“The Shirt Fiend,” the sewing woman, before she falls over dead, following a similar episode puts a curse upon the task-master. The man becomes haunted by a spectral shirt, it follows him everywhere he goes, tormenting him and causing him to go insane. The spectral shirt eventually blinds him one evening forcing him to fall into a river from which he drowns. Frances Wolle, notes, these types of poems “initiate a type of writing in which Fitz-James later became especially proficient, stirring his reform-loving contemporaries with rhymed attacks on the finishing school, the prize fight, and the tenement house.”<sup>9</sup> O’Brien’s second avenue of attack on the social injustices within the city of New York (and American society) was that of the conditions of women. Like the plight of children in the city, O’Brien’s focus on social injustice gravitated to some of the weakest and most vulnerable within American society. In revealing the condition of working women within the market economy, O’Brien was possibly influenced by some of the female patrons of Pfaff’s, particularly Ada Clare (known as the Queen of Bohemia) and Adah Isaacs Menken. Both women were aware of the plight of women like Larcom, but instead of promoting the Cult of True Womanhood, they lampooned it and openly flaunted what it stood for. They defied the social conventions that were designed to keep them and all women in a position of subservience. They said “no” and writers like O’Brien, as well as others, gave them literary role models to emulate.

Lucy Larcom’s diary entries demonstrate, according to Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, in their classic survey, *Through Women’s Eyes*, two important concepts about women during the antebellum period. First, they reinforce the influential ideology of womanhood, home life, and gender relations as fundamentally different for men and women. Despite the fact that

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<sup>8</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 76 – 78. The full text of this poem can be found in the Appendix, Entry #7.

<sup>9</sup> Frances Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien: A Literary Bohemian of the Eighteen-Fifties* (Boulder, Colorado: University of Colorado, 1944), 38.

there were women like Clare and Menken, theirs was a minority existence. Second, it reinforces the idea of women as participants in the first wave of American industrialization, which dramatically redirected the young nation's economy and created new dimensions of wealth and poverty, new levels of production and consumption, and new ways of life.<sup>10</sup> The first, that of domestic ideology (through the concept of the Cult of True Womanhood), had been identified with middle class women and the second, industrialization, had been identified with working class women. O'Brien would, in his prose and poetry, directly challenge the implications of both of these assumptions. First, O'Brien directly rejects the assumptions implicit in the middle class ideology, predicated on the belief that women are fundamentally different and should maintain separate spheres. Second, O'Brien directly challenges the assumption (a la Hamilton, and others) that women have become only beneficial as a result of new opportunities which have come about due to industrialization. Some of O'Brien's best work as a writer would come at the hands of championing women. Like he did with children, he was no stranger to challenging the prevailing assumptions of gender stereotype.

The ideology of "True Womanhood" was rooted in the psyche of Americans, going back to the days of their founding with the Puritan roots, but the ideology solidified as America moved toward an industrialized society with the advent of the Market Revolution. This ideology was connected to the idea of "Republican Motherhood," the belief, according to noted historian, Susan Ware, that "women were tasked with instilling in their sons the qualities of virtue, piety, and patriotism necessary to the young country's future."<sup>11</sup> To do this, however, they needed access to knowledge. By the 1850s, according to Ware, women made up 4/5 of the reading

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<sup>10</sup> Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 155.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Ware, *American Women's History: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 28.

public. O'Brien knew this and used it to his advantage; approximately half of his published writings were sentimental poems and prose possibly targeting a female audience. Sometimes this was out of economic necessity, but the two goals do not have to be mutually exclusive. This idea of separate spheres was reinforced on a daily basis, not only through the literature of the day but more directly reinforced through constant relations between men and women – women's lives were supposed to revolve around the family. But as the American economy began to change, new societal dynamics also began to emerge. For the first time, in the first few decades of the 1800s, a middle class emerged. But what lingered was the belief that women and men were fundamentally different. O'Brien directly challenged these assumptions, with regard to societal perceptions of both children and women. As Carol Hymowitz and Michaela Weissman note, in their classic study, *A History of Women in America*, theories about personality continued to evolve, "based on the belief that men and women were polar opposites, two separate branches of humankind with opposing characteristics."<sup>12</sup> Women were viewed as dependent and soft, and men were viewed as independent and tough. "Men," according to Welter, "were the movers, the doers, the actors . . . [women] were the passive, submissive responders."<sup>13</sup> This was reinforced through several outlets, including the belief that these differences were built into the sexes DNA – that is, there were distinct biological differences between the two sexes.

One of O'Brien's first tasks was to present images of women which would challenge these societal and gender assumptions. Two stories quite successful during their day, where O'Brien takes up the cause of independent and strong women, were: "My Wife's Tempter"<sup>14</sup> and "Number 101."<sup>15</sup> Both stories are centered on young women who were mentally and physically

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<sup>12</sup> Carol Hymowitz and Michaela Weissman, *A History of Women in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1978), 66.

<sup>13</sup> Welter, *Dimity Convictions*, 27 – 28.

<sup>14</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II (Texas: A Bit O'Irish Press, 2017), 211 – 220.

<sup>15</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 281 – 300.

abused by their husbands. Each story turns on different dynamics on how O'Brien wanted to challenge these gender stereotypes, but both challenge the standard view of women. Both stories are also critical of male behavior that was typical of the day.

"My Wife's Tempter" was published in *Harper's Weekly* on December 12, 1857. This story tells of the courting of Elsie Burns by Mark Dayton. Dayton pursues Burns as he believes he is in love with her. She initially spurns his advances but eventually capitulates to the incessant requests. The story is told from the perspective of Mark, who claims to be very happy; however, there was a different sentiment from the young bride, "[as] the day approached for our wedding Elsie did not appear at all stricken with woe. . . . Even in her most loving moments, when resting in my arms, she would shrink away from me, and shudder as if some cold wind had suddenly struck upon her. . . . I dismissed it as one of those mysteries of maidenhood which it is not given to man to fathom."<sup>16</sup> Elsie quickly develops an intellectual (as described by her husband) relationship with another man, Hammond Brake. Mark and Hammond develop a tense relationship with each other, marred by jealousy, and eventually, Mark lays down the law and forbids Hammond from ever visiting Elsie again. It turns out that Hammond is a Mormon and has recruited Elsie into the religious fold; they are planning on running away together. However, Mark finds out and threatens Hammond with his life, to which he agrees to leave. Mark confronts Elsie and she admits to the scheme.

Wolle (as well as others) interpret this story as an example of prejudice on the part of O'Brien, he and others choose to focus their interpretation of the story on the fear that Mark exhibits toward the Mormon Hammond and the role that these forces can exert on innocent individuals. However, there is another way to interpret this story. A young girl who is pressured into marriage, the unhappiness of Elsie is evident from the start when she develops a Platonic

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<sup>16</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 212 – 213.

relationship with Hammond. Hammond, who is not devoid of culpability either, looks at Elsie as another pawn in his religious chest. The next objectionable part of the story comes when Mark exhibits complete control over Elsie, she is his wife, and hence, according to the times, part of his property. Elsie has become a threat to Mark and his family; as Welter notes, “[women] were warned that if they tampered with this quality they tampered with the order of the Universe.”<sup>17</sup> But O’Brien makes the reader feel sympathy for Elsie, not Mark. The story closes with poor Elsie being imprisoned in her home and shamed for the rest of her life. This story explores the debilitating mental and physical aspects of marriages on women in the nineteenth century. Both male characters in this story try and exhibit dominance over Elsie. She is the victim. Unfortunately, women were often forced into marriages, from economic necessity. Women had new economic opportunities, thanks to the changing economic structures from the Market Revolution and the early stages of industrialization; however, tremendous social and economic pressure was placed on women to marry. Women who did not marry were often ostracized, for not marrying possibly meant condemning themselves to a life of toil, poverty, and perpetual struggle. But more importantly, not marrying meant that the woman was resisting societal norms; she was placing herself outside the expectations of American society – she was becoming an outcast.

Published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in April 1858, “Number 101”<sup>18</sup> was written during O’Brien’s most productive period. It was this year in which O’Brien saw the publication of some of his best short stories: “The Diamond Lens,” “From Hand to Mouth,” “The

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<sup>17</sup> Welter, *Dimity Convictions*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> This story was not identified by Francis Wolle as part of the O’Brien canon. Since a number of O’Brien pieces were published anonymously it is quite likely there are still a number of items that have not been identified could be O’Brien’s. This story was initially identified by Wayne R. Kime, a retired English professor from the University of Delaware. There is much to be suspicious about Prof. Kime, he edited two volumes of O’Brien’s stories; however, like William Winter, he heavily edited and changed the original texts. He also has incorrectly identified a number of O’Brien stories. I have come to believe that “Number 101” is an O’Brien story. It follows his writing style, it contains important themes that O’Brien continued to write on, and has an O’Brien feel to it.



Golden Ingot,” “The Lost Room,” “Jubal, the Ringer,” and finally “Three of a Trade; or, Red Litte Kriss Kringle.” He was only a year away, however, from two of his most famous short stories: “What Was It? A Mystery” and “The Wondersmith.” It would be these two stories, along with “The Diamond Lens” that constitutes the basis of his reputation today. “Number 101,” tells the story of two older individuals, Margaret Welch, and Robert Payson. The two meet during the showing of an art exhibit, at the Art Union in New York City, Payson is enamored with one particular piece that is hung in an out-of-the-way corner in the exhibit. “I had been there several times without noticing it, but that day my eyes chanced to rest on it, and I could not withdraw them.”<sup>19</sup> It turns out that Welch is the painter of the artwork and she happens to be standing next to the painting while he is admiring it and the two of them strike up a conversation. Of course, once it is revealed that she is the artist, Payson becomes very interested in the piece – as well as the artist. The two engage in a conversation about the painting and explore some philosophical questions about the nature of art and creativity.<sup>20</sup>

The two develop an informal relationship. However, Welch refuses to allow herself to get involved with Payson at the level of formality that he is pursuing. About halfway through the story, the reader comes to discover, along with Payson, that Welch had been married previously, but this was a failed marriage. Welch was mentally and physically abused by her previous husband, thus forcing her to be very cautious going forward with romantic relationships. She leaves a note for Payson explaining her situation and asks that he respect her decision. Of course, he does not and attempts to locate her. He visits the places that he would usually run into her, unfortunately this is not successful. The way that he finds her is that he posts one of her sketches,

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<sup>19</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 281.

<sup>20</sup> Another reason to identify this story with O’Brien was the nature of the conversations between the two main characters and the overall themes which the story explored. O’Brien, as the cultural editor for *The New York Times*, reviewed books on art and literature. He was very interested in these types of philosophical questions.

of herself, at a local bookstore and coffee shop on the outside window and asks if anyone knows of her location. Of course, one day sitting in the coffee shop, Payson is about to lose all hope, but then Welch happens to walk by and stops to take notice of the sketch. Payson notices this and runs after her and eventually catches up to her. He professes his love for her and lets her know how much he sympathizes with her past but begs her to reconsider and give mankind a second chance. She agrees, and the two of them live out the rest of their lives together. The story ends on a sad, but satisfying note. “At length old age stole upon us, and turned our hair white; our eyes lost their power; our hands forgot their cunning. But he could not chill or make old our hearts. Then Death surprised us. He stilled my wife’s pulses, and hushed the voice I loved to hear. He led her before me into the country of shadows; but our love triumphed over even him.”<sup>21</sup>

What makes the story interesting is the letter which Welch writes to Payson, in the middle of the story, recounting the nature of her previous relationship. Like Elsie in “My Wife’s Tempter” Welch makes a decision about marriage, out of economic necessity and is forced to sustain a physically and mentally abusive marriage. Welch however gets up enough energy to leave her husband when she discovers that he is plotting to divorce her and leave her and their newborn baby for a younger and prettier woman. Welch flees with their baby and with nowhere else to go returns to her family who she discovers have died from a broken heart from Welch’s original marriage. Welch realizes what a negative impact her decision has had on many others surrounding her. She decides to leave for New York and attempts to make her way in the world anew in this urban environment as an artist. She is moderately successful; her art is good enough which allows her to live a life of moderate means. She does exert caution however when Payson enters into her life many years later. This story is about hope and true love; it shows women that they do have options and they can exercise independence despite the societal pressures that are

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<sup>21</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 299.

on young women. It is also a story about redemption and second chances. However, both stories show the inherent destructive nature of power, exhibited by men toward women, during the antebellum period.

The emphasis on the differences between man's sphere and woman's sphere critiqued in many of O'Brien's writings permeated American culture throughout the antebellum period. However, these stereotypes were strongly reinforced throughout society writ large and particularly in the literary marketplace. For example, we see through the writings of the well-known Southern intellectual Thomas Roderick Dew (1802 – 1846).<sup>22</sup> He described the hardships faced by men in the marketplace and the almost brutal strength needed to survive in such a competitive atmosphere:

He leaves the domestic scenes; he plunges into the turmoil and bustle of an active, selfish world; in his journey through life, he has to encounter innumerable difficulties, hardships and labors which constantly beset him. His mind must be nerved against them. Hence courage and boldness are his attributes. It is his province, undismayed, to stand against the rude shocks of the world; to meet with a lion's heart, the dangers which threaten him.<sup>23</sup>

Dew described woman's characteristics extremely different from those he used for that of men: "Her inferior strength, and sedentary habits confine her within the domestic circle; she is kept aloof from the bustle and storm of active life; . . . Her attributes are rather of a passive than active character. Her power is more emblematic of divinity. . . . Woman we behold dependent and weak . . . but out of that very weakness and dependence springs an irresistible power."<sup>24</sup>

Even noted French observer of American culture, Alexis de Tocqueville, commented on this as a unique phenomenon within antebellum America in his classic study, *Democracy in America*:

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<sup>22</sup> Dew is best known today as an American apologist for slavery through his work as an educator and writer. He was the thirteenth president of The College of William & Mary from 1836 until his death in 1846.

<sup>23</sup> Aileen S. Kraditor, ed., *Up from the Pedestal* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), 45.

<sup>24</sup> Kraditor, *Up from the Pedestal*, 45 – 46.

In no country has such constant care been taken as in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes . . . American women never manage the outward concerns of the family, or conduct a business, or take a part in political life; nor are they, on the other hand, ever compelled to perform the rough labor of the fields, or to make any of those laborious exertions, which demand the exertion of physical strength. No families are so poor, as to form an exception to this rule.<sup>25</sup>

Although in this context de Tocqueville was not referring to religion, the ideology of separate spheres involved the idea of women having Christian piety (as noted by Dew) – in fact, this was one of the characteristics of the Cult of True Womanhood identified by Barbara Welter. During the 1810s and 1820s, there emerged a second wave of religious revivalism, known as the Second Great Awakening. DuBois and Dumenil noted, “the Second Great Awakening was a reaction both to the political preoccupations of the revolutionary period and to swift changes in the American economic system.”<sup>26</sup> The First Great Awakening was a consequence of the secularization of American society from Enlightenment ideas that filtered over from Europe in the first half of the eighteenth century. The Second Great Awakening was a consequence of the materialization and industrialization of the Market Revolution in the first half of the nineteenth century. Women participated in the revivals of the Second Great Awakening; this movement provided them an arena for individual expression and social recognition that they were denied in secular politics. One notable and significant expression of this religious movement was an increase in reform movements. Susan Ware notes, “white women played a key role in this reform impulse, despite the prevailing ideology that relegated them to the private sphere of their homes and families. . . . the line between public and private was quite porous indeed.”<sup>27</sup> Women began to move in and out of acceptable roles, thanks to the opportunities brought about from the reform movement, women could exercise a modicum of independence.

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<sup>25</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 6.

<sup>26</sup> DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes*, 157.

<sup>27</sup> Ware, *American Women's History*, 26.

Two of O'Brien's longest and most sustained poems dealing with reform movements and the issues of women were: "The Finishing School"<sup>28</sup> and "The Sewing Bird."<sup>29</sup> These poems were published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, "The Finishing School" was published in September, 1858 and "The Sewing Bird" was published two years later in September 1860. "Scattered among a number of his stories and articles," says Francis Wolle, "O'Brien in speaking of New York society and the education of its young ladies, had referred slightly or satirically to Madame Cancan's fashionable boarding school."<sup>30</sup> The poem is divided into three parts, the first two tell most of the story, while the third describes the horrible degradation to which such an education as that dispensed by Madame Cancan must lead, and from this O'Brien draws a very long and elaborate moral. In the first part Miss Mary Degai, the heiress, is introduced as ready to make her debut from Madame Cancan's finishing school. O'Brien uses this opportunity to satirize the finishing schools and their training. The second part, The Ball, O'Brien uses the opportunity for many shots at the idle and superficial life of the upper class in New York. Miss Degai flirts violently with the fake Count Cherami, and while poor Madison Mowbray, a rising young lawyer, is looking for her to claim the next dance, she elopes with the count. The poem then flashes to seven years into the future, where in a den of vice and corruption, starving and shivering in a filthy attic, the disillusioned wife is beaten and abused by her drunken husband. In seven short years he has squandered her fortune and now neither work. This poem appealed to a large number of Harper's readers; it was a call to everyone to exhibit the higher moral virtues, to promote advocacy of a common-sense and pragmatic education for women. "In addition," says

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<sup>28</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 190 – 198.

<sup>29</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 257 – 263.

<sup>30</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 163.

Wolle, “it tells the old but ever interesting story of how pride will have its fall, and it berates the idle rich.”<sup>31</sup>

O’Brien’s other major poem, dealing with reforms and women, “The Sewing Bird,” he also utilized multiple categories, that he was becoming good at: fantasy, social satire, romanticism, and realism. This poem focuses on descriptions as it tells the story. The poor seamstress is seen in her desolate attic; then, led by the silver sewing bird, she passes before a series of pictures: the young clerks demonstrating Cantator’s Sewing Machines, the exquisite dummies murmuring over a dry-goods counter, and by contrast, the manly labor of the California goldminer, of the Main lumberman, and the Ohio farmer.<sup>32</sup> Despite these and many other popular literary works displaying the excesses of the idle rich, much was not changing in America. Women still felt the pinch and pressures placed on them, deviation was not encouraged and was often viewed as harmful.

According to Hymowitz and Weissman, because of the differences viewed between women and men, along with the emergence of the new middle class, “the new middle class, home and family came to be seen as separate from the world of work and money.”<sup>33</sup> More and more men worked outside the house, and most women worked within the house. Men earned income and women did not, and because women earned no income for household work, a change in mindset occurred; women were now viewed as dependent and were no longer viewed as partners in the marriage. Alice Kessler-Harris argues, in her classic work, *Out to Work*, “women knew they were essential workers, yet wage work was not to be essential in their lives.”<sup>34</sup> This shift in ideology was class specific. Working class women continued to view wage work as

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<sup>31</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 165.

<sup>32</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 198.

<sup>33</sup> Hymowitz and Weissman, *A History of Women in America*, 65.

<sup>34</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 22.

essential to their and their family's survival. It would be the differentiation between wages as a necessary function of economic survival that would often separate the different classes of women. As Glenda Riley notes, in her important survey, *Inventing the American Woman*, "throughout the nation, middle- and upper-class ladies were the only women with the resources necessary to pursue seriously such idealized notions as true womanhood."<sup>35</sup>

The notion of "True Womanhood" was not an ideology simply foisted upon women during the nineteenth century through males and masculine outlets. These ideas were not imposed, exclusively, upon women from men. Women writers and publishers also contributed to the dissemination of the idea of a separate sphere.<sup>36</sup> Two noted examples were with a popular magazine of the day and a popular bestseller self-help book. Sarah Joseph Buell Hale edited an influential women's magazine, *Godey's Lady Book*; in 1860 this magazine had a subscription of over 150,000 subscribers. Catharine Beecher published her *Treatise on Domestic Economy* in 1841, and it argued that women's different sphere was a noble profession. "While proponents of true womanhood [like that of Hale and Beecher] insisted that women's sphere differed from man's," according to DuBois and Dumenil, "they regarded it as of equal importance to society and worthy of respect."<sup>37</sup>

In 1855 O'Brien wrote two important stories, dealing with the psychology of class and gender economics, published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. These two stories appeared as companion pieces. The first story, titled "My Son, Sir!"<sup>38</sup> was published in January and the

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<sup>35</sup> Glenda Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: An Inclusive History* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2007), 122.

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Welter, in her book *Dimity Convictions*, surveys extensive literature from the period that reinforced the ideology of the Cult of True Womanhood.

<sup>37</sup> DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes*, 162.

<sup>38</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I (Texas: A Bit O' Irish Press, 2017), 237 – 246.

second story, “The Beauty”<sup>39</sup> was published in July. According to Wolle, with these two companion pieces:

[O’Brien] develops his satire not in a spirit of playful thrusting but with a cutting edge which seeks to accomplish the reform of dangerous customs sanctioned by the artificial conventions of the wealthy class. Such satirical attacks at false standards, at superficial codes of conduct, at the brutal selfishness of moneyed interests, and at effeminacy in the wrong places continued for the rest of O’Brien’s life to be part of his product in both prose and verse.<sup>40</sup>

Both stories are narrated by Mr. Troy, an old bachelor, who wishes to warn parents as to what will be the sad fate of their children if brought up in the midst of luxurious indulgence and educated in the most fashionable (and yet wasteful) schools. In both cases, the father fails in business, and the child comes to a tragic end. The son of the first story becomes a drunkard and a gambler and is finally stabbed to death in a drunken brawl on the East Side. The daughter of the second story, having received the “proper” education at Madame Cancan’s, she has learned to do nothing useful. So when her father’s swindling schemes fail, she becomes a beggar, and a dies of delirium tremens. “Both stories,” notes Wolle, “are interesting in their Thackeraylike pictures of the hollow mockery behind Fifth Avenue society, and in their tragic climaxes; but both are spoiled by the obvious moralizing of Mr. Troy in the final paragraphs.”<sup>41</sup> In these stories, O’Brien chooses to focus on the hypocrisy and dangers inherent for both sexes within upper class society. In both cases, the two individuals were raised the proper way. However, both ended up in the same situation. These two characters come from similar backgrounds, similar socio-economic positions within New York’s upper society, they also experience similar fates when society fails to provide them with a safety net. O’Brien is implying that women and men

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<sup>39</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I, 259 – 266.

<sup>40</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 103.

<sup>41</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 103.



are not that different after all. Both protagonists in “My Son, Sir!” and “The Beauty” suffer identical fates, regardless of sex.

The idea that women participated in the first wave of American industrialization and dramatically redirected the young nation’s economy and created new dimensions of wealth and poverty, new levels of production and consumption, and new ways of life, was the second important aspect of Larcom’s observations in her diary about women in antebellum America. There is no doubt, the changes that were brought about as a result of the Market Revolution were cataclysmic. In many ways, these changes represented a radical paradigm shift regarding social, political, and economic relations among all members of American society. Probably no group was more impacted by these changes than American women. Changes in the economy brought a more stratified class structure, especially in urban areas. It was the early years of the nineteenth century which brought about the emergence of a new middle class. Working class and lower class women entered into the workforce, they moved out of the house. For middle class and upper class women, however, they experienced more leisure time, and this allowed them to experience the changes brought about as a result of the Market Revolution very differently. In the first half of the eighteenth century women primarily worked as: teachers, seamstresses, domestics, and factory workers. The types of work engaged in depended, largely, on whether a woman was married or not. Married women often worked in the home; this allowed them, especially if they were from a middle class home, the opportunity to perform many of the tasks associated with the idea of “True Womanhood.” Single women and women from working class homes often worked in factories.

Before the War of 1812 American’s bought wool, linen, and cotton textile cloth manufactured in Great Britain; the war stopped that influx of imports. This forced American’s to

turn to other sources and in 1814 the first factory to house all aspects of textile production under one roof was opened in Waltham, Massachusetts. In the early 1820s factories began to pop up all over New England and not just any kind of factory, specifically, mill factories surrounded by mill towns, like the one described by Lucy Larcom in her diary. The mills offered a sense of independence that these young girls had never known before. There was no disputing that these changes taking place were fundamentally changing the face of work in America. In 1816 Congress counted about 100,000 industrial workers in America – over 2/3 of these were women. As Riley notes, “The War of 1812 resulted in an upsurge in industrialization that created an expanding demand for workers and offered women not only wages for their toil but an escape from the drudgery of farm life.”<sup>42</sup> It was this early stage of industrialization, which fundamentally transformed the demographics of the country, and began moving many families from the farm to the cities.

In the northern urban areas, middle class and upper class women enjoyed the benefits of living in homes on the outskirts of the city, however, working class and lower class women lived in shantytowns, tenements, and slum districts – where they would face all kinds of dangers: disease, fire, high crime rates, domestic violence, and abuse from men. O’Brien addressed these dangers faced by women (and the working class and lower class families in general) very specifically in his poetry and short stories. Late in 1861, he published a powerful poem in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, November 1861, titled “The Tenement House.”<sup>43</sup> “The Tenement House” brings to a climax the long series of O’Brien’s poems about social injustice. It criticizes, in scathing satire, the selfishness and greed of the rich and their callous indifference to the loss of life for which they are directly responsible. It juxtaposes the comfort of the wealthy in

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<sup>42</sup> Riley, *Inventing the American Woman*, 117.

<sup>43</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 304 – 308.

their opulent homes with the utter filth and degradation of the poverty they have caused among the urban working and lower classes. Christine Stansell notes, in her classic study, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789 – 1860*, “for all laboring women . . . working-class life meant, first and foremost, the experience of living in the tenements.” Then later, “Tenements were a response to the acute housing shortage that begun in N.Y. with the surge in immigration in the 1820s and lasted unabated through the mid-1850s.”<sup>44</sup> O’Brien’s poem was a clarion call to action on behalf of those living in these sub-par housing conditions; previously he had chastised the wealthy of his native Ireland for not lending enough support to help those in need during the Great Famine, here he turned his pen on the urban upper classes.

O’Brien’s poem, “The Tenement House,”<sup>45</sup> opens with a description of dinner at one of New York’s finest and most expensive restaurants, Ormolu’s Restaurant. “A nice little dinner at Ormolu’s; / A chosen few, and no ladies there: / Every man is a millionaire, / With ample waistcoat and creaking shoes. / The dinner, of course, is a great success — / Dinners at Ormolu’s always are — / From the delicate bisque to the caviar, / And the wild boar’s head in its gaudy dress.”<sup>46</sup> Following a few more lines describing the posh nature of the restaurant, O’Brien shifts gears, contrasting this night out of the upper classes with the daily lives of the working and lower classes. The owner of the restaurant is also the owner of a set of tenement houses. “He sees them squalid and black and tall, / With rotten rafters and touch-wood stair, / The scant rooms fetid with stagnant air, / And the plaster membrane that’s called a wall.”<sup>47</sup> The second part of the poem quickly shifts as Ormolu and the others watch as some of the tenement houses go up in flames – and in the district where Ormolu owns these tenement houses. None of them at dinner

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<sup>44</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789 – 1860* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 46.

<sup>45</sup> The full text of this poem can be found in the Appendix, Entry #8.

<sup>46</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 304.

<sup>47</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 305.

even stir, because they know they have insurance, which will take care of any of their losses. The poem ends in similar fashion to O'Brien's "The Famine." "Crushed and mangled with beam and girder, / Five corpses lie in those tenement houses; / And Ormolu with his guests carouses, / Guilty, by Heaven, of all that murder!"<sup>48</sup>

O'Brien is clear in his indictment with this poem as he uses a careful word to end the poem – murder. Once again, O'Brien evokes religious connotations; those wealthy patrons of Ormolu's are not guilty according to human law (maybe they are, maybe they are not, there were very little regulations on building codes during this time), but they were guilty according to a more important judge – Heaven. God condemns them and their actions against the poor. They may have their insurance, but it is a more potent judge they ought to fear. The patrons of Ormolu's are guilty; however, they did not feel the pangs of the poor. They sat in the tower of that restaurant, passively observing the city and all its vastness. For O'Brien, action must come as a result from experience. These guests feel no experience of the poor. They understand what they are doing intellectually, as the poem clearly shows they understand what kind of conditions their tenement houses are in; however, they do not feel the conditions. That is, they do not experience them first hand, which is necessary for moral movement and moral improvement.

A few years earlier, in 1858, O'Brien published a poem titled, "Homeless." As a professional writer in New York, he is taking up a theme popular among his female audience, suggesting the ways in which the literary marketplace determined the expectations of his female readership. "Homeless" was a short and simple poem, but the message was powerful as it champions the plight of the urban poor. It was published in *The Knickerbocker* and published in December of 1858, during the Christmas season.

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<sup>48</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 308.

I

I sit in the Park alone,  
The dead leaves are round me blown:  
    The skies are dim,  
    And the white clouds swim,  
As I sit in the Park alone.

II

I once had houses and lands,  
And friends with generous hands,  
    And a Love who sung  
    With a honeyed tongue  
When I had houses and lands.

III

Now I have not even a hut,  
And the generous hands are shut  
    And my Love's proud eyes  
    Cannot recognize  
Him who has not even a hut.

IV

So I sit in the Park alone  
And shiver and mutter and moan,  
    For friends are scarce,  
    And Love is a farce,  
And Death is true alone.<sup>49</sup>

This short poem was influential in O'Brien's critique of society and the way it treats those down and out on their luck; Wolle also notes "what an appeal to the charitable feelings which lie close to the surface near Christmas time!"<sup>50</sup> O'Brien knew when to pull out those emotional poems with religious references, his use of these as a rhetorical device was quite sophisticated; he often published these during Christmas. Very little is known about O'Brien's religious beliefs, there is no published statement by him indicating his personal views of religion, but he would invoke

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<sup>49</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 199.

<sup>50</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 167.

religious sentiment and imagery from time to time when he felt like it was needed; often he did so quite effectively.

“Duke Humphrey’s Dinner,” was one of the most important of O’Brien’s short stories concerning the social injustice of urban living conditions. Much like his poem, “The Tenement House,” in this story O’Brien juxtaposes two ways of living: one in affluence and one on the edge of starvation.<sup>51</sup> The story tells of the challenges of a young urban couple who are struggling financially and live in utter poverty in a tenement house. The opening sets the scene for the reader:

Have we no more coal, Agnes?  
No more.  
What the deuce are we going to do for fire?  
I haven’t the slightest idea, Dick. You’re clever; why don’t you invent some way of warming one’s self without the aid of fire?<sup>52</sup>

The highlight of the story comes in the middle as the impoverished couple pretends to be eating a fancy meal. In order for the couple to survive they pawn all their belongings, even a book which has tremendous and personal value to them – a copy of Erasmus. The book yields \$2, the couple estimate that the book is worth ten times that amount, however, dire poverty renders them at the mercy of the book-buyer. The couple then decides to go out and buy a real meal, which might be their last one. However, the action quickly turns when a stranger enters their home claiming to know them. As soon as they realize who he is, he is an old friend who is the one that gave them the book they cherished; he invites the couple back to his house for a real meal and a new start in life. Within the dialogue, the plot reveals that the couple was brought to this dire state from their own families because they objected to the marriage. The couple distanced themselves from their

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<sup>51</sup> It was published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, August 1855. This story was so popular that O’Brien turned it into a one-act play. Rehearsal for the play was being conducted in December at Wallack’s Theater. However, the production was postponed many times, and the play was presented in front of an audience for the first time on February 4, 1856.

<sup>52</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I, 285.

families for love, but this decision brought them to a desperate condition. This story carries a powerful message about the nature of marriage, in a time where many women were forced into marriages in which they did not love the man; O'Brien offers a compelling narrative supporting the idea of marital independence. Even though the couple live in poverty, at least they are happy.

O'Brien was also concerned about economic independence. Women found ways to respond to the changes that were taking place in the new market economy. Many women found ways to make money inside the household; others worked in the looms at the mills outside the home. The clothing industry was the most common way that working class women participated in these changes. We have seen a number of O'Brien's poems and stories that have focused on seamstresses and the clothing industry. The seamstresses of New York were a common theme of many of O'Brien's poems and short stories. Women working at home produced most of the clothing manufactured for sale in the antebellum period. By 1860 there were 16,000 seamstresses in New York City alone. The manufacture of cloth did not shift into factories until after the Civil War. According to Hymowitz and Weissman, "the most common home-manufacturing trade for women was sewing for the emerging ready-made clothing industry."<sup>53</sup> Sewing was a very well respected profession for all women.

By the mid-1800s the nature of the home sewing industry had changed drastically, the work was done only by the poorest of native-born and immigrant women. In large cities such as New York and Chicago clothing manufacturers bought whole blocks of tenements and leased them to workers, within these tenements and leased them to workers. Within these tenements and sweatshops women and children labored for starvation wages.<sup>54</sup>

Mill jobs were similar to those of work done at home making cloth. The Lowell Mills were the factories that operated inside the town of Lowell, Massachusetts and became one of the most popular of the mill towns. However, many other New England towns emerged following the War

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<sup>53</sup> Hymowitz and Weissman, *A History of Women in America*, 122.

<sup>54</sup> Hymowitz and Weissman, *A History of Women in America*, 123.

of 1812: Lowell, Fall River, Dover, and Waltham. In the Lowell Mills, women were paid 1/3 to 1/2 the wages that men were paid for doing the same job. There were drawbacks, however, for the jobs that were created in the mills, noted by Kessler-Harris, “the potential for independence threatened the traditional roles of women.”<sup>55</sup>

The Panic of 1837 hit New York City particularly hard. About 1/3 of the working population in the city was thrown out of work during this economic crisis. By 1840 the total number of workers in New York was women, and over 1/4 of these worked in factories. Kessler-Harris notes: “Nearly all of the nation’s men’s clothing was made by women who sewed at home for contractors.”<sup>56</sup> Seamstresses did not earn enough to make a living on their own, much less earning enough to sustain a family. In 1855 the *New York Tribune* reported that there were twice as many seamstresses as were needed for the demand. Native women also faced challenges from immigrant women. As more and more Irish immigrants poured into the city of New York, this created a surplus of workers. Conditions were extreme, and many hit the bottom of poverty. The introduction of the sewing machine, during the mid-1850s, did not improve things for women either. In many cases it made things much worse, as noted by Kessler-Harris, it “increased pressure to produce more. The machine encouraged centralization into small shops where work could be routinized and efficiently distributed.”<sup>57</sup> Between 1820 and 1860 the working class became largely immigrant – English, German, and most of all Irish. By 1855 the Irish made up over 25% of New York City’s population; furthermore, by 1855 over 3/4 of the workforce in New York were immigrants. As women faced challenges from the immigrant workforce, the largest challenge for women was the fear and threat of survival, with a family, on their own. Death was a constant threat. As Stansell notes, “any woman, whether the wife of a prosperous

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<sup>55</sup> Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 37.

<sup>56</sup> Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 48.

<sup>57</sup> Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 65 – 66.



artisan or a day laborers daughter, was vulnerable to extreme poverty of, for some reason, she lost the support of a man.”<sup>58</sup> It was this struggle that most women face on a daily basis, which led to and helped solidify what Stansell calls a bourgeois self-consciousness.<sup>59</sup> It was this societal phenomenon that engaged O’Brien and forced him to attack these head on with his pen.

It was these social, political, and economic injustices which forced writers, like O’Brien, to recognize the struggles that these women faced. About half of O’Brien’s short stories involved aspects of social justice, he took on social injustice head on and most of these stories involved as central figures either children or women. O’Brien did draw on all aspects of the different classes within his fiction. He employed the lower, middle, and upper class women as his central figures. Some of his best poems, those that he was most known for during his day, challenged the prevailing ideas of gender and equality in his newly adopted American society. O’Brien was equally condemning of the upper classes for what they do to themselves, as well as how they treat those that are economically underneath them. O’Brien came from this class as a young man in Ireland. However, as he entered the shore of New York, he would experience life from a different perspective, one of which would often serve as the basis for his poetry and prose.

O’Brien’s poetry and short stories involving women and children make up most of his publications on social injustice. The other half of his work involves works of supernatural elements which explore various philosophical themes. Although most of his writings on social justice involved women and children, he was aware of another issue that was pressing on his moral conscience. A few of his other social justice pieces develop a third avenue of attack – the plight of animals. Continuing with his focus on those individuals who are the most vulnerable in the urban setting, the poor, children and women, his next topic dealt with the abuse and

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<sup>58</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, 45.

<sup>59</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, xii.

inhumanity that humans exhibit toward their furry friends; animals were, in many ways, more vulnerable than humans. Everywhere one turned in the city, there were examples of and one would have experienced abused animals. Their lot in life was hard and few, during this time, gave much thought to them and their suffering. O'Brien did not write much about them, but when he did they were the subject and focus of some of his best and most important works.

## CHAPTER SIX

### “How have I sinned?” — O’Brien on Animals

They flung it coins — and when it failed  
To catch the pittance, rolling by;  
Oh! how its slender figure quailed,  
Beneath the master’s savage eye!

Straight from the South the soft wind crept,  
From silent glades, where ripe fruit fell:  
Where shadows on the herbage slept,  
Like spirits compassed by a spell.

Its soft brown eyes were dull with grief,  
Its silken hair disease had thinned —  
With gentle glance it asked relief  
And seemed to say, “How have I sinned?”

“Street Lyrics: The Street Monkey” (1852)<sup>1</sup>

In 1852 Fitz-James O’Brien’s third and final poem in the “Street Lyrics” series took as its main protagonist a poor street monkey. This would constitute the first published work, but not the last, by O’Brien on a theme that he seemed to be passionate about – animal welfare.<sup>2</sup> The poem is a passionate plea for kindness and caring toward a creature that would have been quite visible in the New York urban setting. Street monkeys were often employed by organ grinders on local street corners. These animals were often abused, and because of the nature of their work, they would also create havoc amongst the innocent people walking by, as they would often harass and accost them as they begged for food and money. O’Brien’s poem focuses on the abuse from the perspective of the animal. The poem was published in *The Lantern*, July 10,

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<sup>1</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music* (Texas: A Bit O’Irish Press, 2018), 79.

<sup>2</sup> I have used the word welfare instead of rights, because I don’t think O’Brien went that far. As a young man it is almost certain that he would have engaged with the traditional activities of his wealthy class: hunting, shooting, fishing, etc. There is no mention of O’Brien being a vegetarian, most of the characters in his stories engage in the eating of animals. Several poems and short stories, however, do take up the cause of animal welfare.

1852, and like the previous two, “The Beggar Child” and “The Crossing Sweeper,” shows early signs of what will constitute O’Brien’s third avenue of attack on social injustice in America.

In scarlet coat and tarnished lace  
It trod the scorching, dusty street;  
And peered into each human face  
For Pity, that it did not meet.

Straight from the South, the dull wind blew  
Through silent ranks of sleepy palms:  
While flaccid leaves, athirst for dew,  
Hung down, like sails in Tropic calms.

All day upon the burning flags  
Its tender forest feet had trod —  
With chain round neck, and tinsel rags,  
That mocked the ordinance of God.

Straight from the South the hot wind came,  
From wood-paths filled with Orchid’s bloom:  
Where even noon’s relentless flame  
Assumed a mild mysterious gloom.

They flung it coins — and when it failed  
To catch the pittance, rolling by;  
Oh! how its slender figure quailed,  
Beneath the master’s savage eye!

Straight from the South the soft wind crept,  
From silent glades, where ripe fruit fell:  
Where shadows on the herbage slept,  
Like spirits compassed by a spell.

Its soft brown eyes were dull with grief,  
Its silken hair disease had thinned —  
With gentle glance it asked relief  
And seemed to say, “How have I sinned?”

Straight from the South the fierce winds boom,  
Oh! would they had a blazing breath  
To blast the wretches, who can doom  
God’s creatures to a living death!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 79.

The critical part of the poem is the line: “How have I sinned?” Couching the animal’s condition within a religious question would be a powerful point in the poem, one that would touch the emotional nerve of the readers. O’Brien will, from time to time, situate his poetical language within a religious connotation. This approach worked well and it is an effective strategy here as well. The poem opens by focusing on the alienation of the poor animal. The reference to “chain round neck” and “mocked the ordinance of God” are subtle references to the institution to slavery. It was no coincidence that the animal welfare movement arose out of the abolitionist movement; many of the same reformers that were heavily involved with that also extended their compassion to our furry friends. The reference to its physical condition emphasizes the cruelty and disregard by their owners in providing it the most basic essentials for survival. Then the final line, “who can doom / God’s creatures to a living death!,” highlights the ultimate cruelty and the day to day torture of the poor animal.

Organ grinders were common street performers in cities, usually immigrants, who played musical instruments on street corners. Organ grinders provided entertainment to people who were too poor to afford to go to music halls or the theater or other forms of entertainment, but more than not, they were viewed as a public nuisance. They were often accompanied with small monkeys; the monkey usually held out baskets in hopes of gaining tips from the passengers as they walked by – these monkeys were often employed in hopes of generating sympathy in the viewers. These monkeys were often abused and ran away, or were abandoned, causing other problems in the cities. O’Brien published a few poems and short stories where street monkeys were the main protagonists. Francis Wolle, comments on the poem: “The third of the series, ‘The Street Monkey,’ pleads in an oversentimental way for more kindly treatment of animals.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Francis Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien: A Literary Bohemian of the Eighteen-Fifties* (Boulder, Colorado: University of Colorado, 1944), 39.

O'Brien published a second important poem, about eight years later, on the same topic, titled "A Sermon to Organ Grinders." This poem was published in *Vanity Fair*, July 28, 1860. His earlier poem "The Street Monkey" was published at the beginning of his American writing career and "A Sermon to Organ Grinders" was published toward the end of his American writing career. "A Sermon to Organ Grinders" was part of his publications that he contributed to *Vanity Fair*. All of these were published between 1860 and 1861; O'Brien contributed a total of four essays, including ten installments of a series called "Here and There," along with sixteen poems to this magazine. A fair amount of work, especially to one magazine, in such a short amount of time – this was not unusual for O'Brien though, as he seemed to publish in bulk with certain magazines.

"A Sermon to Organ Grinders" is not a long poem, but it does contain the essence of many of his poems on topics that he felt passionate about. Wolle says of it, "a poem on one of his favorite subjects – humane treatment for the monkey."<sup>5</sup>

Come, ye grinders grim and weary.  
Cease awhile your windy groans!  
Cease your wailings sharp and dreary,  
Listen to my dulcet tones!  
Duo from La Favorita,  
Waltz profane call'd Prima Donna,  
Pray suspend, while I repeat a  
Few remarks in Virtue's honor.

Wearers of the velvet breeches!  
St. Cecilia's humblest flunkeys!  
Don't you know the Scripture teaches  
That you should not wallop monkeys?  
Those who bring the pennies votive —  
Those who jump and frisk so sadly —  
Friends! pray what can be your motive  
When you treat the wretches badly?

Exiled monkey! ah! once floated

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<sup>5</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 190.

All his days serene and silky;  
Once to forest love devoted,  
He asked why cocoa-nuts are milky?  
Then his heavier labors ending,  
Hope less that great truth to know,  
By his tail his form suspending,  
Swung he swiftly to and fro.

Ended soon that season shiny —  
That investigation juicy;  
He must cross the billowy briny;  
He must dance the Long Miss Lucy;  
In his eyes the tears must glisten —  
Milk of life grown sour and curdy;  
And O, harder fate! must listen  
To the strains composed by Verdi.

Now my Topic Two producing;  
Very much I think you'd show  
Christian virtue by vamosing,  
When you're asked, my friends, to go.  
Though with rapture Bidy swelling,  
Drinks in Operatic joys,  
Those who own the cook and dwelling,  
May grow frantic at your noise.

Move like gentle grinders *presto!*  
Cut your stick *rapidamente!*  
Number Sixteen leave to rest! O  
Leave to rest, too, Number Twenty!  
Hearts will bless the good musician —  
Gratitude your art inspire,  
When they mark your transposition  
Up the street, two octaves higher.

Tuscans! if so dear your art is,  
You must either grind or die,  
Seek some lonesome vale, my hearties!  
There your cranks incessant ply!  
Shun the city's strong temptations!  
To some desert make your way!  
'Midst congenial desolations;  
Grind the death of Old Dog Tray.

One more word and I have done now;  
You may then resume your tunes:

Really, breth' ren, there's no fun now  
In the way you freeze to spoons.  
O take heed if you love ranging;  
Lest you meet a lowlier lot,  
Sing-song into Sing-Sing changing,  
And your organ gone to pot!<sup>6</sup>

O'Brien calls into question the motive behind the cruelty toward these poor animals. He makes another reference to religion, "the scripture teaches not to wallop monkeys." O'Brien also alludes to the unnatural state of these poor creatures, as they are not living in their natural environment. Then he ends the poem commenting on how there is no lowlier creature in all of existence. O'Brien is issuing a moral warning and condemnation to his readers, it is not human law you need to fear by being cruel to animals, but you corrupt your own soul by engaging in this type of cruelty. The path to cruelty begins with animals, but can evolve and end with being cruel to one's own neighbors.

In 1751 William Hogarth, the great English satirist published a series of four printed engravings titled, "The Four Stages of Cruelty."<sup>7</sup> Each print depicts a different stage in the life of the fictional character Tom Nero. The first print, "First Stage of Cruelty," Nero, whose name is a play on words and inspired by the Roman Emperor of the same name meaning "no hero," is shown being assisted by other boys who are inflicting various tortures on innocent animals. The setting is Hogarth's notorious slum areas, which he used in many of his works. His target audience is the working and lower classes of English society. The second print, "Second Stage of Cruelty" is set at the Thieves Inn Gate which was notorious for housing lawyers in London. Nero has grown up now and worked as a coachman. The scene in the second plate continues the same cruelty to animals which he began as a young child. At the center of the engraving is Nero's

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<sup>6</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 251 – 252.

<sup>7</sup> Tate Museum of Fine Arts: accessed 01/01/19, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/hogarth/hogarth-hogarth-modern-moral-series/hogarth-hogarth-4>



horse, from years of mistreatment the poor animal has now collapsed. Nero has beaten the horse so savagely that he has put out the poor animal's eye in the process. Other acts of cruelty are depicted in the engraving by others around Nero. In this engraving, the cruelty has moved onto the abuse of people, and a poster in the background advertises a cockfight and a boxing match, further evidence of the brutal entertainments favored by the subjects of the engraving. The scene advances in the third plate, "Cruelty in Perfection," Nero has now progressed from the mistreatment of animals to theft and murder. The murder is shown to be a particularly horrific one, with the victim's neck, wrist, and fingers are all almost completely severed. Finally, the fourth plate, "The Reward of Cruelty," having been tried and convicted of murder, Nero has now been hanged, and his body is now being subject to a public dissection. Hogarth's moral is clear, cruelty toward animals as a child can and will lead to further acts of cruelty as an adult. Hogarth was dismayed by the routine acts of cruelty witnessed on the streets of London, and while there were minor moves to counter inhumane treatment of animals throughout history, it was not till the nineteenth century in which organizations and legislation were beginning to make some headway. O'Brien was aware of this lesson and made it part of several of his publications on social justice.

The evolution of animal rights and welfare in America was a slow and complicated history, one of which was heavily indebted to Britain. O'Brien would have been familiar with the movement, as one of the first state legislatures to address cruelty issues of animals was the New York State Legislature. They passed the first law in America which dealt with cruelty issues toward animals. This, however, was not the first attempt to address animal welfare in America – that honor would go to the Puritans in the initial migration. "Massachusetts Bay Colony," says Diane L. Beers, in her sweeping history, *For the Prevention of Cruelty: The History and Legacy*

of *Animal Rights Activism in the United States*, “enacted the earliest known law in this part of the world to afford some sort of legal protection to animals.”<sup>8</sup> She does caution, however, that Liberties 92 and 93, the ones that dealt directly with animal welfare, unquestionably established a significant legal precedent for animals, “but motivating principles behind them, property and religion, underscored decidedly human interests.”<sup>9</sup> These statutes mirrored Puritan concerns with charity, virtue, discipline, and predestined salvation. The Puritans, like most individuals during this time, viewed animals as property and it would make sense they would have laws preventing cruelty because that meant protecting individuals property. For two decades after this enactment, humane attitudes changed very little, and Americans lagged behind changes which were first occurring in Britain.

Interestingly, one of the first public protests against animal cruelty occurred in 55 BCE during the reign of Pompey the Great in Rome. Animal cruelty as a spectator sport was commonplace in Rome, as Romans enjoyed the Chariot races and large-scale animal fighting in the Coliseum. During one of the arranged spectacles, a group of elephants was scheduled to be slaughtered, but the Roman crowd became so moved by the anguished cries of the animals, they began shouting insults at Pompey for his cruelty.<sup>10</sup> This form of protest was unusual, especially for the time, according to Norm Phelps, and it was not till the “beginning of the nineteenth century in which we saw the development of the world’s first broad popular movements for animal protection.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Diane L. Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty: The History and Legacy of Animal Rights Activism in the United States* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 2006), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Norm Phelps, *The Longest Struggle: Animal Advocacy from Pythagoras to PETA* (New York: Lantern Books, 2007), 31 – 33.

<sup>11</sup> Phelps, *The Longest Struggle*, 95.

The first bill debated by any modern legislature, on banning animal cruelty, occurred on April 18, 1800, in the House of Commons. The law proposed a ban on bull-baiting. It was proposed by a Scottish Member of Parliament by the name of William Johnstone Pulteney. There was strong opposition to the bill, and it was ultimately defeated by two votes. The bill was put forward again in 1802, and again it was defeated. Despite the ultimate failure of these two bills, the times were beginning to change. One of those that strongly opposed the bill was George Canning – who hoped that as long as the lower classes would vent their frustrations out on animals, they would not vent them on the upper classes. In 1809 a second attempt to pass an animal cruelty act was proposed by Lord Thomas Erskine; his proposed bill would make it illegal to beat cattle, but the language intentionally left off bears and bulls. This bill also failed in Parliament. These early attempts to outlaw cruelty were viewed by many as class warfare, attempts to ban entertainment from the lower and working classes, but allowing the same kinds of cruelty by the upper classes. James Turner notes, in his classic, *Reckoning with the Beast: Animals, Pain, and Humanity in the Victorian Mind*, that the hypocrisy of these early attempts were met with much hostility, “the cruelty of bull baiting was not really what irritated its opponents. These sham humanitarians ignored a host of genteel and aristocratic cruelties: shooting, fishing, hunting, and more.”<sup>12</sup> O’Brien seems to be consistent with his message, however, he would have engaged with these types of sports as a young man back in Ireland. It is probably safe to assume though, that he abandoned these once arriving in New York. He never would have had the amount of money necessary to engage in these types of activities once in America.

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<sup>12</sup> James Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast: Animals, Pain, and Humanity in the Victorian Mind* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 27.

The first successful law protecting animals came in 1822, it was proposed by Richard Martin, and the bill became known as Martin's Act.<sup>13</sup> The law specifically protected cattle, horses, sheep, and mules from excessive cruelty. While this was viewed as a success within the movement, very few rushed to the farms and the fields to enforce the provisions. In 1824 Martin assembled and organized a group that would be responsible for investigating and prosecuting animal abuse under the Martin Act. This group included the noted abolitionist, the one responsible for helping abolish slavery in Britain, William Wilberforce, along with Arthur Broome. On June 16, 1824, the group formed the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (now known as SPCA). This was an important group because it was made up of both upper and middle class individuals, thus taking the class element and biased out of the movement. The group was able to successfully add amendments to the Martin Act in 1833, 1835, 1849, and then in 1854. "The new amendments," says Beer, "covered all domesticated animals, including dogs, chickens, pigs, and cats, and outlawed a variety of activities, including the baiting and fighting of animals, cropping dog's ears, and dehorning cattle."<sup>14</sup> The first decades of the SPCA experienced quite a bit of success, including securing hundreds of cruelty convictions, distributing thousands of humane publications, established veterinary hospitals, and founded shelters for stray dogs and cats. "Martin's Act," according to Phelps, "provided that any citizen could bring charges before a local magistrate, a fact which essentially places cruelty prosecutions in the hands of the public and eventually led to the peculiar circumstance of private human societies being chartered by legislatures to make arrests and bring criminal charges in cases of

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<sup>13</sup> The act was also known as the Cruel Treatment of Cattle Act of 1822 and is generally considered to be the first piece of animal welfare legislation. The act was repealed by the Cruelty to Animals Act of 1849.

<sup>14</sup> Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, 22.

animal cruelty, a practice that still endures in much of the world.”<sup>15</sup> The SPCA was strongly supported by Queen Victoria, and in 1840 it was re-chartered as the Royal SPCA.

America lagged behind the progress being experienced in Britain. Part of this lag was due to the slow growth of industrialization and urbanization that occurred in America compared to that of Britain. The first state law covering animal cruelty issues was in 1828 in New York, and by 1860, the start of the Civil War, fourteen states and six territories had established legal punishment for abuse of domestic animals. But like the Martin Act, most of these went unenforced. During the 1830s, and for the next twenty years, many newspapers carried articles reporting acts of cruelty and editorials denouncing them. O’Brien contributed many poems and short stories in these periodicals. It was during this reform period in America in which animal welfare melted with others emerging from the Second Great Awakening. According to Beer, “one of the nation’s earliest reform initiatives, abolitionism bequeathed many legacies to subsequent social justice movements. It served as a wellspring for both the leaders and the followers of efforts to secure women’s rights, prison reform, sanitation, civil rights, and, animal protection.”<sup>16</sup> These reform movements were instrumental in achieving breathtaking reforms and changes within American society. Women made up many of the converts during the Second Great Awakening, and as a result of this, they took the lead with many of these reform movements.

In 1890, George T. Angell, an American educator, and publisher, published a copy of Anna Sewell’s 1877 novel, *Black Beauty*, which was considered the animal welfare equivalent of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The novel teaches about animal welfare, but more general, about treating others with kindness, sympathy, and respect. Before this, there were some children’s books

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<sup>15</sup> Phelps, *The Longest Struggle*, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, 24 – 25.

promoting animal welfare: 1765 the publication of *Goody Two-Shoes* and in 1786 the publication of *Fabulous Histories*. Both books attempted to do what Hogarth did with his engravings, promote kindness toward animals. Children's literature took the lead with these types of stories. This belief can be traced back to early ideas on child psychology in the belief that one's moral character was formed and developed in these formative years of their lives.

Two other important eighteenth century publications which served as founding documents for helping the animal welfare movement gain momentum were: Dr. Humphrey Primatt's publication "Dissertation on the Duty of Mercy and Sin of Cruelty to Brute Animals" and Jeremy Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Primatt's "Dissertation," which was published in 1776, was one of the most important intellectual documents promoting animal welfare during the time. It combined a traditional view of animal subservience and a strong and formidable theological defense of kindness toward animals. But it was the English utilitarian Jeremy Bentham who established the philosophical foundations on which animal welfare would be built for years to come. In 1780 Bentham published his most famous work, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. "Bentham rejected," argues Beers, "traditional notions of animals as unthinking and undeserving automatons . . . he argued that the criteria for the legal consideration and protection of nonhumans should be derived from the answer to the following query: 'The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?'"<sup>17</sup> This was a stark difference from the Cartesian philosophical tradition, which viewed animals as automatons, tantamount to machines completely devoid of feeling or reasoning abilities. These philosophical and literary foundations all helped promote the animal welfare movement, but according to James Turner, the anti-cruelty movement made its most important gains during the time of industrialization and urbanization. The movement itself

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<sup>17</sup> Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, 21.

was dependent upon the social and economic changes that were taking place during the nineteenth century. Because of this, it made O'Brien's message even more powerful and opened his argument up to a much broader audience. It is also consistent with O'Brien's larger message about the links (both positive and negative) of social justice to urbanization and industrialization in antebellum America.

Turner says that industrialization and urbanization had important effects upon the animal welfare movement. "Urbanization and industrialization . . . marched hand in hand with intense concern for public morality and work discipline – both flouted by brutality to animals."<sup>18</sup> Turner argues that as the country moved toward urbanization and industrialization individuals felt displaced from their natural agrarian societies. They began to associate that longing for their previous environment with their connection to animals. "The entire developing ethos of kindness to animals reflected the worries and psychological stresses of a once agrarian society suffering the trauma of modernization."<sup>19</sup> Turner believes this is why the animal welfare movement never really took off in the rural environments, all of these movements, in both Britain and America, were centered in the urban settings, "the rising concern for animals was largely a phenomenon of cities and factory districts, seldom shared by farmers and other rural folk. By standing up for the animals that they or their ancestors had left behind, city dwellers could ease the need to feel a sense of kinship with their rural past."<sup>20</sup> These feelings, not surprisingly, were also directed toward child labor and protecting women – two other components of O'Brien's social justice. Turner concludes, "concern for the sufferings of animals must be understood in this wider context. Far from an aberration, animal protection embodied the temper of the age."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast*, 30.

<sup>20</sup> Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast*, 33.

<sup>21</sup> Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast*, 35.

The philosophical movement of Romanticism also helped pave the way for sympathies with the animal welfare movement. In Jean-Jacques Rousseau's classic on Romantic education, *Emile*, the main character echoes an education devoid of cruelty. "Emile . . . will never set two dogs to fight. He will never set a dog to chase a cat . . . The sight of suffering makes him suffer, too; this is a natural feeling. It is one of the after effects of vanity that hardens a young man and makes him take a delight in seeing the torments of a living and feeling creature."<sup>22</sup> Beers concludes, "the gaining popularity of the philosophy of natural rights for humans, successful British efforts to abolish slavery, anxieties about the more destructive effects of industrialization and romanticism's appreciation of nature opened the door in eighteenth-century Britain for the ethical consideration of nonhumans."<sup>23</sup> These movements converged and created a sweeping move toward a philosophy that would seek to protect animal welfare.

O'Brien's direct contact with animals, once in New York, would most likely have come in three types of experiences. One experience would have been with circuses. The first modern circus has been attributed to Philip Astley, it opened in London, on April 4, 1768. This contained mostly riding horses doing various tricks – Astley was a Calvary officer. The first circus in America was established in Philadelphia and opened on April 3, 1793, and was created by John Bill Ricketts. Traveling circuses were established in the 1820s and 1830s. O'Brien has no known writings or reviews of circuses, but it is plausible to believe that O'Brien would have attended circuses from time to time in his reviews for the *New York Times* as one of its social and cultural writers.

A second significant experience with animals would have been by visiting Barnum's American Museum, which opened in 1842 (originally it was Scudder's American Museum) and

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<sup>22</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (London: Everyman, 1993), 28 – 29, 140 – 141.

<sup>23</sup> Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty*, 21.



closed in 1865. Between these years the museum was visited by over 38 million customers – the American total population in 1860 was under 32 million. The museum offered both strange and educational attractions. Its attractions consisted of a zoo, museum, lecture hall, wax museum, theater, and freak show. O’Brien mentioned Barnum’s Museum two times in his published writings. First, in the story “The Wonderful Adventures of Mr. Papplewick,”<sup>24</sup> in which the main character having turned himself into a human magnet took a job working at Barnum’s as the museum’s newest freak show exhibit. A second reference to Barnum’s Museum was in a publication in *The Lantern* on June 19, 1852 under the title, “The Doctor, the Lawyer, and the Lady,”<sup>25</sup> where a young gentleman, describes how he is willing to meet a lady first at Barnum’s Museum and then in Washington Square. In 1865 the museum burned to the ground in one of the most spectacular fires in New York City.

A third significant experience with animals, and his most extensive, would have been with organ grinders and street monkeys, which would have been very common in New York City. O’Brien published two short stories in which a street monkey makes its appearance: “Three of a Trade”<sup>26</sup> and “The Wondersmith.”<sup>27</sup> The first of his street monkey stories, “Three of a Trade,” was published in *The Saturday Press*, on December 25, 1858.<sup>28</sup> The story tells of two homeless brothers, both young children, who are living out on the streets. The setting is Christmas Eve, and the story itself was published on Christmas Day. The story opens in typical O’Brien fashion, with a vivid description of the surrounding. “The city was muffled in snow, and looked as calm and pale and stately as a queen in her ermine robes. It was night, and the tinkling

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<sup>24</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I (Texas: A Bit O’Irish Press, 2017), 7 – 25.

<sup>25</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O’Brien: Miscellaneous Writings* (Texas: A Bit O’Irish Press, forthcoming).

<sup>26</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II (Texas: A Bit O’Irish Press, 2017), 337 – 341.

<sup>27</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 357 – 388.

<sup>28</sup> This story is one of his absolute best on the topic of social justice.

of innumerable sleigh-bells made the frosty air musical.”<sup>29</sup> Next comes the description of the two brothers and O’Brien is at his best here in evoking pathos and empathy with his readers: “two little figures were visible in the dim glimmer of the night. Two little children, they were, sitting with their cold arms embracing each other, their chill cheeks pressed together, and their large, weary eyes looking out hungrily into the blank street.”<sup>30</sup>

O’Brien reminds the readers how safe and comfy they are while reading, and reminding them about the thousands of homeless people living in the city at the same time, many of which are innocent children. O’Brien also evokes a religious note, “Presently a mystic music seemed to fall from the arched skies upon the city. It was the chimes from old Trinity ringing the Old Year out and the New Year in. . . . They jubilantly seemed to scale the slope of heaven.”<sup>31</sup> O’Brien, from time to time, would appeal to religion or religious sentiments and on Christmas, it seems an even more appropriate time to do so – if the story itself does not move individuals, then perhaps a little reminder of their religious duties during this seasonal time of the year. It is at this point that we meet the two brothers: Tip and Binnie, two brothers who are living on the street. We get a short glimpse into their lives before their arrival in the city. They lived with their mother in the country; perhaps they moved to the city in search of job opportunities. Now they are alone, only their dreams of their previous lives to warm them on the cold streets. The two reminisced about their mother and the days when they celebrated Christmas and the coming of Kriss Kringle. The two fall asleep, huddled together, behind a trash can, in hopes of deflecting the wind and the cold. But as the image of the two brothers is an important and powerful one, O’Brien is now ready to introduce the real protagonist of the story.

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<sup>29</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 337.

<sup>30</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 337.

<sup>31</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 337.

As the two begin to doze off, they encounter a strange visitor. “It seemed to be a little man about two feet high, clad in a red coat, covered with gold lace, and wearing a little cap, in which was stuck a long feather, that was bent nearly horizontal by the wind. A tiny sword, about the length of a lead-pencil, dangled at his side.”<sup>32</sup> The two debate who or what the visitor could be – is he even real? The two children believe it is Kriss Kringle; he has come to rescue them. They beg the man to come closer to them, but then they realize what the figure is – “it’s only a monkey!”<sup>33</sup> It was an organ grinder monkey, possibly who ran away from his owner. “Sure enough it was a monkey: a poor shivering little Brazilian, with pleading eyes and soft, silky hands, and a countenance that seemed to tell of a life of sorrow. A bit of broken chain dangling from a belt round his waist told his story.”<sup>34</sup>

The two brothers convince the little fellow to huddle with them and use their body heat for warmth. “Meanwhile the snow drifted and drifted right under the shed where the vagrants lay. It began to pile itself up about them on all sides, and it clung to every projection of their persons. The air grew colder and colder.”<sup>35</sup> They managed to drift off to sleep, “closer the three houseless creatures drew together, until a great drowsiness fell upon them.”<sup>36</sup> The two brothers dreamed that the monkey they befriended was Kriss Kringle and he came to save them. But in typical O’Brien fashion, the dream was broken, and the reader is brought back to a grim reality. “When the first day of the New Year dawned, and the grocer’s boy came from his bed behind the flour-barrels to take down the shutters, he saw a mound of snow close by the side of the coal-bin.

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<sup>32</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 339.

<sup>33</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 340.

<sup>34</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 340.

<sup>35</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 340.

<sup>36</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 341.

He brought the shovel to take it away, and the first stroke disclosed the three little vagrants lying stark and stiff, enfolded in each other's arms."<sup>37</sup>

This story comprises O'Brien at his best in pointing out the hypocrisy that exists in New Yorkers, who live oblivious to the pain and suffering all around them. O'Brien forced the image on the hearts and minds of his readers. Another story, written by O'Brien, with a similar theme and more popular than "Three of a Trade," and became one of the stories that O'Brien is most known for today, was "The Wondersmith." "The Wondersmith" followed on the heels of his highly popular supernatural horror short story, "What Was It? A Mystery," and was one of two stories that O'Brien had published in the relatively new magazine *The Atlantic*. "The Wondersmith" was another highly successful supernatural thriller, like many of his stories at this point in his career, and like "Three of a Trade" it involved a street monkey with the setting being another Christmas tale. The difference between "The Wondersmith" and "Three of a Trade" was that the street monkey was a side story within the larger story, whereas the street monkey in "Three of a Trade" was the central figure of the tale.

"The Wondersmith" was published in October 1859. O'Brien would only have two identified short stories published this year, he would have six identified poems, following the highly successful year of 1858 (this was probably O'Brien's most successful year for publishing), in which he published seven stories and seven poems. "The Wondersmith" opens up with what is arguably one of the best opening paragraphs in all of O'Brien's works. It tells of the ghetto on Golosh Street, a small local neighborhood, where a few merchants own their shops. The main character and protagonist is that of Herr Hippe, a gypsy, who is known in the neighborhood as the Wondersmith. The narrator says that he is not exactly sure what a Wondersmith is and the shop is essentially empty, "Beyond a few packing-cases, a turner's lathe,

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<sup>37</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 341.

and a shelf laden with dissected maps of Europe, the interior of the shop is entirely unfurnished. The window, which is lofty and wide, but much begrimed with dirt, contains the only pleasant object in the place. This is a beautiful little miniature theatre.”<sup>38</sup>

It turns out that Herr Hippe is a gypsy who is planning on implementing a diabolical scheme. To exact revenge on the death of his son at the hands of, at least what he believes were Christians, he is planning a massive murder spree against the Christian children of the neighborhood. He has teamed up with a few other unsavory characters, and the plan is to craft puppets, magically enchant them with evil souls and then unleash them upon the neighborhood children on Christmas Eve. The plan backfires though as the four evil gypsies get drunk and accidentally set them upon themselves, in which the puppets stab them to death with their poisoned spears, but before they all die, the four gypsies toss the puppets into the fire, in which everyone (puppets and all) dies horrible deaths.

The street monkey comes in within a side story of the larger story. Before the mishap, we are introduced to a local child whose parents have died and left him their local bookstore. He is the sole proprietor of the used bookstore. Solon has befriended Herr Hippe’s adopted daughter, Zonéla. It is revealed to the reader that Zonéla was captured by Herr Hippe back in the old country and has been his slave since. Solon and Zonéla develop a close friendship, which Herr Hippe forbids, forcing the two of them to interact with each other out of the ever watchful eyes of Herr Hippe. Zonéla is forced, by Herr Hippe, to work the streets as an organ grinder, during the day earning her keep with an injured street monkey, Furbelow. The three of them act as a sort of side story within the larger story, although the three of them are instrumental in helping overthrow Herr Hippe’s diabolical plan of murder.

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<sup>38</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 359.

O'Brien is, once again, clear on his intent with the three characters: Solon, Zonéla, and Furbelow – tugging at the heartstrings of his readers. The descriptions of the three of them throughout the story are deliberate and intentional, “she went to a dusk corner of the cheerless attic-room, and returned with a little Brazilian monkey in her arms, – a poor, mild, drowsy thing, that looked as if it had cried itself to sleep. She sat down on her little stool, with Furbelow in her lap.”<sup>39</sup> All of O'Brien's texts achieve this highly emotional appeal; this was intentional and was well within the tradition of animal welfare activists. As James Turner notes, “animal lovers were not ashamed to admit that their campaign to protect brutes from abuse was more the result of sentiment than of reason.”<sup>40</sup> O'Brien's coupling empathy with the animal, in many of these stories and poems, with that of children and women, was part and parcel of a consistent message that O'Brien was trying to relay to his readers. His attempt to get the reader to connect with the main characters was not rational; instead, it was an emotional appeal. O'Brien, however, did not limit his stories to street monkeys; he also published some stories in which birds were main characters.

In 1855 O'Brien published a strange little essay, in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in November 1855, called “Bird Gossip.” Wolle notes that it is a “wandering, gossipy essay written in the easiest of manners, it relates amusing and interesting anecdotes connected with birds of unusual species and refers to various items of bird literature.”<sup>41</sup> The essay reveals some semi-autobiographical information about what his childhood must have been like, he fondly reflects on days in which he would lay in the Irish fields watching the different birds flying by. The essay also discloses the affinity that O'Brien must have had for birds and birdwatching. Two of his short stores, “Bob o' Link” and “The Bullfinch” were interesting stories in which, in addition to

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<sup>39</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 369 – 370.

<sup>40</sup> Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 108.

the revealing titles, the protagonists of the stories were also birds. These stories have a different feel from his other animal stories, but the purpose is clearly the same – emotional appeal to the reader on behalf of animals. Interestingly, both stories were written at the end of O’Brien’s career, which makes for a nice bookmark on his life. One of the things he reflects fondly upon as a young child was his bird watching days in Ireland, toward the end of his life he published two stories which focused on the lives of two birds.

The first story, “Bob o’ Link”<sup>42</sup> was published in *The Knickerbocker* in March 1861. The story is told from an unnamed narrator who happens to come upon a bird one day, the bird he takes special notice of. “His frequent journeys to the same spot led me to suspect that he had some private interest in that quarter – a nest, or a young bride perhaps, and that he was in fact passing his honeymoon, so I walked toward the place in which I saw him disappear last, determined to be a witness of his domestic bliss.”<sup>43</sup> As the narrator follows the bird, he discovers that the bird was following a child. “It seemed to be that a human head was lying alone and bodiless in the deep green sea of grass that surrounded me. A beautiful youth’s head, blonde and spiritual, looking up at me with a calm, unfrightened look, while nestling close to its pale, rounded cheek, hushed and rather astonished by my appearance, sat Master Bob o’ Link.”<sup>44</sup> It turns out that the young child suffers from an affliction which does not allow him to walk. He lies in the field, training his little friend – another semi-autobiographical story for O’Brien, as this is probably reminiscent of his boyhood. The boy and the narrator talk and the boy, named Harry, reveals to the narrator that his father had died when he was an infant, leaving him alone with his mother and his cousin Alice – for whom Harry has a major crush. Unfortunately, Alice is engaged to marry Ralph, a boy from the village. Harry finds out and throws himself in the

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<sup>42</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 405 – 410.

<sup>43</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 405.

<sup>44</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 405.

ocean, killing himself. The story ends by relaying how the bird reacts to the young child's death. "For days after his master's death he used to fly down to the old place in the meadow and hover around there, waiting for him who never more would come. This lasted for about a fortnight, when one day Ralph in passing by found the poor bird dead in the grass, which still bore the impress of his master's form."<sup>45</sup> Once again, O'Brien evokes an emotional reaction of the reader by associating the animal with a sympathetic human character – similar to "Three of a Trade" and "The Wondersmith."

The second story, "The Bullfinch"<sup>46</sup> also published in *The Knickerbocker*, but three months later than "Bob o' Link" in July 1861. This story is similar to "The Wondersmith" in that the bullfinch, Bully, is part of a larger story. Overall "The Bullfinch" is another typical O'Brien sentimental story about a couple falling in love, complete with all the challenges that accompany that type of plot. Kamm is a neighborhood bootmaker and provides some props for the local theater. Kamm is deeply in love with one of the young and up-and-coming stars of the theater, Grace Sculpin. But standing in the way of their true happiness is the evil and manipulative Mr. Belvidere, who also has his eye on Grace. Of course, Grace is not interested in him, but the two of them spend a lot of time together as they are both stars of the local theater. Kamm asks for her hand in marriage from her mother, who is a widow and her husband was a famous war hero, so she views the status of their family in somewhat of a heightened status. She refuses Kamm, tells him that her daughter is much higher than him and it would be below her to marry such a low fellow – even though she respects him as he owns his own successful shoe business. One evening during a rehearsal, Belvidere attacks Grace, Kamm hears them scuffling and comes to

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<sup>45</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 410.

<sup>46</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 423 – 435.



her rescue. He pummels Belvidere within an inch of his life, and Mrs. Sculpin is so happy to hear that her daughter was rescued that she agrees to the marriage.

Kamm has a trained bird, a bullfinch, which he trains to sing different songs while he is working in his shop. Kamm “was busy at work on a pair of young Marlowe boots for Mr. Belvidere, with the bullfinch perched on his shoulder, croaking like a diminutive raven, or arranging his feathers with great care, or occasionally climbing down on Kamm’s coat-collar, until he got within reach of his mouth, where he would peck a kiss to him and gravely reascend to his former position.”<sup>47</sup> This is how we first meet Bully. We also learn that Kamm is trying to teach Bully to sing ‘Roslyn Castle,’ which he, for some reason, refuses to learn, much to Kamm’s anger and frustration. “‘Confound you for an obstinate little pig!’ cried Kamm, enraged; ‘will you never learn that tune, you red-breasted idiot? I’ll flog it into you, by all that’s great I will?’”<sup>48</sup> Grace enters the shop and comes to the poor birds defense, “‘O Mr. Kamm! Please don’t beat the little bird,’ cried a voice at this juncture. ‘I’m sure he sings very sweetly. I’ve been listening to him outside the door these two minutes.’”<sup>49</sup>

Once Grace and Kamm get married, Kamm forgets about Bully and leaves him in his shop, locked up without food or water. “‘O my God! what a wretch I am! The bird! Bully! I shut up my shop, and have not been there for four days, and he is starving; oh-h-h!’ and the poor fellow groaned as if he had been stricken with some agonizing disease.”<sup>50</sup> Kamm rushes to his shop hoping that he finds the little bird still alive. “He put his ear close to the door, and listened. I will not tell how his heart smote him as he heard from within, whistled in faint but clear notes the long-disputed air of ‘Roslyn Castle.’ Poor bird! Deserted by his master for another love, he

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<sup>47</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 427.

<sup>48</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 427.

<sup>49</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 428.

<sup>50</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 435

called up from the depths of his memory, the strain he would not remember when he was present; and in the dreary work-shop, lonely and without food, he bethought himself of the strain that his master loved!”<sup>51</sup> O’Brien has chosen to shift the focus on the couple and their happy ending of a marriage, to the focus on Bully and the struggle for life that he was engaged in while trapped in the boot store. “Need I say with what acclamations Bully was received at Mrs. Sculpins when Kamm brought him thither? What pastures of groundsel were thrust into his cage of mornings? What dainties in the way of seeds and fruits were his portion evermore? He was in all respects, slangular and otherwise, Bully.”<sup>52</sup>

O’Brien, time and time again, can capture the heart of his readers with the emotion and descriptive language that he employs on behalf of children, women, and animals in his poetry and prose. It was these three sources of focus which informed the bulk of his writings on social justice. When O’Brien wants to capture and move his readers, he often invokes religious language. This served his purpose well. But O’Brien also used the opportunity to point out the hypocrisy with individuals that claimed to be religious but never headed its messages of love, kindness, and charity. O’Brien’s paths to a consistent message of social justice and humanitarian awareness involved children, women, and animals. Each set of individuals offered O’Brien the opportunity to engage and challenge the reader. It made the reader uncomfortable, because he knew that was what it took to move the individual to moral action. Social justice was best distributed through the emotions, not reason.

O’Brien’s humanitarianism, however, was not complete here; exposing the inconsistencies of one’s existence was only part of the battle. To achieve this complete reality, that is to achieve full awareness, O’Brien would need to experience something that was beyond

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<sup>51</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 435.

<sup>52</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. II, 435

himself – something larger. The outbreak of the American Civil War would provide him the opportunity to grow and experience oneness that he had never achieved before. Unfortunately, it would also end his life. O'Brien was not afraid to die, nor was he afraid to sacrifice his individuality for the universal greater good. In 1861 he embraced his destiny and enthusiastically signed up for the American Civil War.



Swift, . . . The setting is a mythical island far away in the Pacific Ocean; but the description of Nodland under the reign of King Slumberous and the premiership of Lord Incubus carries satirical thrusts at England, while the state of slavery in which the Cock-Crows are held refers to conditions in the United States.”<sup>6</sup> This would be the only known reference in any of O’Brien’s published writings with specific references to the institution of slavery. In this story, the Nodlanders every year invade the surrounding land and take the inhabitants for slaves. The Nodlanders sleep all the time, hence the name of the country, so the Cock-Crows are used for labor.<sup>7</sup> The moral of the story is a little unclear, at least with regard to the nature and institution of slavery. The reader feels sorry for the Cock-Crows, Zoy and Lereena, the two main characters, who also happen to be slaves of the Nodlanders. Both are sympathetic characters, but they end up with a fairy-tale “happily-ever-after-ending” by the end of the story. The slavery of the Nodlanders is condemned, maybe not directly or as explicitly as the reader might hope, but the downfall of the country is internal and not related to the fact that its citizens engaged in slavery. Nodland falls not because of their participation in slavery, but instead, because of their selection of tyrannical leaders and their superficiality.

O’Brien’s position on slavery presents a puzzle. He enlists in the Union Army, but like many of the American Bohemians of the 1850s he demonstrates a lack of literary attention to the peculiar institution. To connect his relationship to this issue, it is helpful to discuss the political culture of New York City, which was rapidly becoming the center of the coming “political storm.” Indeed, Joanna Levin, in her outstanding survey of the Bohemian movement, *Bohemia in*

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<sup>6</sup> Francis Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien: A Literary Bohemian of The Eighteen-Fifties*, (Boulder, Colorado: University of Colorado Studies, 1944), 47 – 48.

<sup>7</sup> This is a little unusual that O’Brien would not have taken on the issue of slavery, considering much of his writing, as evidence from this dissertation, focused on social justice. O’Brien did spend most of his entire American life in New York, where slavery had been abolished in 1827. However, O’Brien would have been surrounded by racial discrimination by Northern whites, freed blacks, as well as enslaved blacks from Southern visitors to New York, on a daily basis.

*America, 1858 – 1920*, says, “it is true that at least on paper, the Bohemians virtually ignored slavery, the most pressing issue of the day, and, taking antipolitics to the extreme, even went so far as to repudiate existing forms of antislavery agitation.”<sup>8</sup> It was Henry Clapp, Jr., considered by many as the leader of this American Bohemia in the 1850s, who claimed slaveholding to be a sin, was even willing to allow the existence of the institution believing that it would eventually wither away – like so many since America’s revolutionary days. In *The Saturday Press*, the mouthpiece of this movement, an article was published, which stated, “we are opposed to slavery of every kind, but we are even more opposed to what is stupidly called anti-slavery, for the simple reason that it has no distinct aim or purpose, and consists of nothing but a series of noisy an unmeaning howls.”<sup>9</sup> So while slavery cannot be blamed on the downfall of the country of Nodland in O’Brien’s little fantasy, in the middle of the nineteenth century in America some were questioning whether the country was going to survive and some believed that the institution would be the significant cause of the country’s demise. There were some, however, who were willing to take on the institution, regardless of the risks or consequences it posed.

On February 27, 1860, a relatively obscure man accepted an offer to present a lecture from some prominent citizens in New York City. Most of the individuals attending the lecture had never heard of the speaker, and none of them had ever seen what he looked like. The person introducing the speaker was much more well-known than the actual speaker himself. Both of those things would change following the speech that evening. The person introducing the speaker was none other than William Cullen Bryant; New York published poet and editor.

It is a grateful office that I perform in introducing to you an eminent citizen of the West, hitherto known to you only by reputation, who has consented to address a New York assembly this evening. A powerful auxiliary, my friends, is the great West in that battle which we are fighting in behalf of freedom against slavery and in behalf of civilization

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<sup>8</sup> Joanna Levin, *Bohemia in America, 1858 – 1920* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010), 28.

<sup>9</sup> Levin, *Bohemia in America*, 28.

against barbarism, for the occupation of some of the fairest regions of our continent now first opened to colonization. . . . These children of the West form a living bulwark against the advance of slavery, and from them is recruited the vanguard of the mighty armies of liberty. One of them I present to you this evening, a gallant soldier.<sup>10</sup>

The excitement surrounding the speech was so high that the organizers had to move the venue because they sold more tickets than the original venue could hold, the new location was to be the Cooper Union Building (The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art), which was just newly established in 1859. Harold Holzer, in his important study, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, argues: “it is entirely possible that had he not triumphed before the sophisticated and demanding audience he faced . . . Lincoln would never have been nominated, much less elected, to the presidency that November.” He goes even further, “had Lincoln not won the White House in 1860, the United States – or the fractured country or countries it might otherwise have become without his determined leadership – might today be entirely different.”<sup>11</sup>

The topic of the speech was on the institution of slavery, according to Holzer, “the issue that had been roiling the country with a growing ferocity since 1854.”<sup>12</sup> The first impression that Abraham Lincoln made with that New York audience was hardly impressive at all:

Standing before them was an ungainly, oddly dressed giant, dwarfing the other dignitaries on the stage even though he stooped forward as he walked. His wrinkled black suit ballooned out in the back. His withered, long, dark neck jutted upward from a comically loose collar that looked several sizes too big. Wiry black hair flew out in all directions, unable to hide enormous ears jutting akimbo from his leathery face. Massive hands clutched his manuscript.<sup>13</sup>

However, despite this unimpressive initial impression, his power of persuasion eventually won them over. All the New York newspapers carried the text of the speech the next day. In one fell

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<sup>10</sup> Harold Holzer, ed., *The Lincoln Anthology: Great Writers on His Life and Legacy from 1860 to Now* (New York: The Library of America, 2009), 1 – 2.

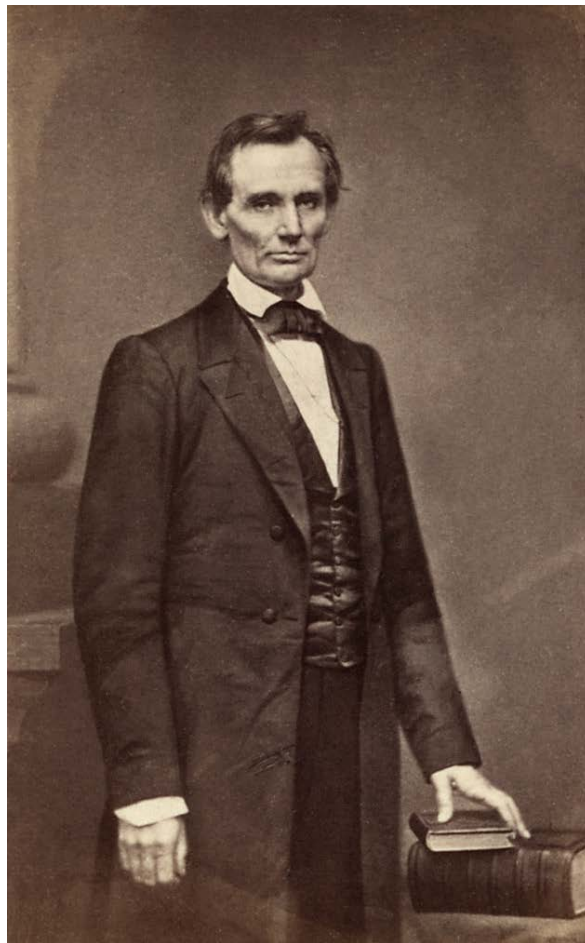
<sup>11</sup> Harold Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 108.

swoop, the East was introduced to Abraham Lincoln and the speech was well received. Holzer does not overestimate the importance of the speech; Lincoln knew he needed to do well in New York if he was going to have any shot at the presidency and in order to do that he had to take on slavery.

Following the speech, Lincoln was photographed, in what would become one of the most iconic photos of Lincoln, by Mathew Brady.<sup>14</sup>



Interestingly enough, Brady's studio, located near Bleecker Street, at 643 Broadway, was next door to Pfaff's Beer Hall.<sup>15</sup> A frequent stop of Fitz-James O'Brien and many of the other

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<sup>14</sup> Cooper Union Speech: accessed 03/09/19, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooper\\_Union\\_speech](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooper_Union_speech)

<sup>15</sup> Mark A. Lause, *The Antebellum Crisis & America's First Bohemians* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2009), 105.



Bohemian's of the antebellum New York scene. Pfaff's Beer Hall was frequented by some of the most important literary, philosophical, and artistic figures of the day – Walt Whitman was a regular visitor of this particular establishment. The conversations at Pfaff's were no stranger to politics, many of its regulars, most notably Henry Clapp, Jr., a good friend of O'Brien and founder and editor of *The Saturday Press*, had openly and aggressively situated himself in the politics of the day.

Although New York had been a free state since 1827, when the state freed all of its black population, New York's complicity with the institution and the country as a whole was much more complicated than what it shows on the surface. Lincoln knew this, and that was the reason why he focused his topic for the Cooper Union address on the institution of slavery.<sup>16</sup> As Holzer noted, if Lincoln were to hope to win the presidency, he would need the support of the largest state in the country, and in 1860 the state of New York and the institution of slavery had a precarious relationship. New York was not full of "fire eaters,"<sup>17</sup> however, there were enough connections to the institution and the politics, and especially the economics of the city, to cause even the most sympathetic observer some causes for concern, if one was hoping (indeed, needing) to win the state in order to win the election of 1860.

Historian Jennifer A. Lemak, in her article, "Antebellum New York," notes, "the slave trade quickly became one of New York's most prosperous businesses."<sup>18</sup> Historically speaking, the colonies economy was grounded in the institution of slavery. In 1609, the English explorer Henry Hudson landed in the New York Harbor while searching for the Northwest Passage to the Orient for the Dutch East India Company. He proceeded to sail up the Hudson River, roughly

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<sup>16</sup> Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859 – 1865* (New York: The Library of America, 1989), 111 – 130.

<sup>17</sup> Eric H. Walther, *The Fire-Eaters* (New Orleans: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer A. Lemak, "Antebellum New York," in *An Irrepressible Conflict: The Empire State in the Civil War*, ed. Robert Weible, Jennifer A. Lemak, and Aaron Noble (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 5.

150 miles; he made a ten-day exploration of the area and claimed the region for the Dutch East India Company. In 1614, the area was claimed by the Netherlands and called New Netherland. The Dutch West India Company imported eleven African slaves to New Amsterdam in 1626, with the first slave auction being held in New Amsterdam in 1655. The British expanded the use of slavery. By 1703, more than 42% of New York City households held slaves, often as domestic servants and laborers. This was the second highest proportion of any city in the North American colonies after Charleston, South Carolina. In 1750 the slave population was over 9,000, in 1800 82% of the city's 25,875 black New Yorkers were held in bondage, and finally, in 1817 a new state law abolished slavery for all blacks on July 4, 1827<sup>19</sup> – a day known as “Manumission Day.”<sup>20</sup> However, despite this success, the state of New York would continue to be involved with the institution of slavery up to the time of the Civil War.

In many ways, the division between the North and the South was replicated in the state of New York. Historian Harold Holzer, in his article, “Housekeeping on Its Own Terms: Abraham Lincoln in New York,” notes, “[l]ike the nation itself, pre-war New York State was separated along rigid north-south borders that divided politics as well as geography.”<sup>21</sup> The city itself was split on the nature of slavery, the city, like most large urban metropolises, was divided along racial lines. In 1860 the 12,574 blacks had no territorial base; the Irish had pushed them out of the Five Points and jobs were hard to come by. For example, in 1852 the newly formed Longshoreman's United Benevolent Society announced its intention to reserve water-front jobs to its own, overwhelmingly Irish, membership. Thus, for many blacks, working on the docs, which constituted a large number of jobs in the city for the lower class, was off limits. For black

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<sup>19</sup> Lemak, “Antebellum New York,” 5.

<sup>20</sup> John Strausbaugh, *City of Sedition: The History of New York City During the Civil War* (New York: Hachette Book Group, Inc., 2016), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Harold Holzer, “Housekeeping on Its Own Terms: Abraham Lincoln in New York,” in *State of the Union: New York & the Civil War*, ed., Harold Holzer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 4.

women, however, domestic service remained an option and in 1855, around 3% of the cities servants were African-American. Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, in their mammoth, Pulitzer Prize-winning history of New York City, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*, states, “Black men did hold on to jobs as waiters in the dining rooms and kitchens of the great hotels and restaurants and, indeed, organized a union that won higher wages.”<sup>22</sup> Blacks during the period, much like their organizational efforts during the modern Civil Rights Movement, organized around black churches – but everywhere they turned they were discriminated against.

Rosa Parks contributed to the launch of the modern Civil Rights Movement with her protesting through civil disobedience of the public transportation system, which led to the Bus Boycott Movement in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955. Approximately one hundred years earlier, though, a similar situation was playing out by a young African-American woman by the name of Elizabeth Jennings. In the 1850s the public transportation system was segregated in New York City. On a Sunday afternoon in July of 1854, Elizabeth Jennings, on her way to play the organ at services of the First Colored Congregation Church attempted to board a railroad car. The conductor told her to wait for the colored car, but after an altercation, he grudgingly allowed her entrance, though telling her that if anyone were to complain, he would kick her off. She responded by claiming that she had never been insulted like that before and he responded by saying he was an Irishman and she had to leave his car. She refused, he tried dragging her out, she clung to the window. He called on the driver to help, and together they pried her loose and threw her to the street. Though badly hurt, Jennings climbed back on. Finally, the driver galloped his horses down the street until he found a policeman, who ejected her. The Jennings family decided to sue the Third Avenue line, and they were represented by the future president of the

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<sup>22</sup> Edwin G. Burrows & Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 854.

United States and recent law school graduate, Chester A. Arthur. The Jennings won the case, and the jury awarded her \$225. After this, most Manhattan railroads ceased discrimination. This victory was short-lived, as the African-American community's most ardent struggle, however, was against slavery itself.<sup>23</sup>

One large challenge for African-American's living in New York City came in the form of being a major component of the Underground Railroad. Lemak notes, "the Underground Railroad routes through New York State were crucial because of the state's lengthy border with Canada and its well-developed system of canals, rivers, roads, and railroads. While thousands of escaped slaves passed through the state in route to freedom in Canada, many chose to stay in New York."<sup>24</sup> After 1850, when President Fillmore signed the Fugitive Slave Law, their work became considerably more dangerous. The number of blacks in New York City in 1850 was 13,815, but just five years later, in 1855 the number had dropped to 11,840.<sup>25</sup> The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was a beefed up provision which had been a federal law since the ratification of the U.S. Constitution beginning in 1787. The Compromise of 1850 was part of a series of political compromises between the North and the South. The first significant compromise came in 1820 with the passage of the Missouri Compromise. This federal law protected slavery below the 36°30' within the Louisiana Territory area, which was the southern boundary of the state of Missouri. It also allowed Missouri to enter into the union as a slave state and Maine to enter the union as a free state, which maintained the sectional balance in Congress between free and slave states. This was accepted federal law for thirty years, before the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

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<sup>23</sup> Burrows & Wallace, *Gotham*, 856 – 857.

<sup>24</sup> Lemak, "Antebellum New York," 35.

<sup>25</sup> Burrows & Wallace, *Gotham*, 857.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act opened up the possibility of expanding the institution of slavery, above the 36°30', which flew in the face of established and accepted federal law. The idea was that Kansas would most likely be admitted as a slave state and Nebraska would most likely be admitted as a free state, to maintain the sectional balance. But the new law would lead to widespread violence, leading to what has become known as "Bleeding Kansas." To opponents, according to Holzer, it "was part of an insidious plot to spread slavery nationwide by encouraging slaveholders to migrate north and west and vote to import slaves. Within two years Kansas territory erupted in bloody violence between pro- and antislavery settlers."<sup>26</sup> Historian John Strausbaugh argues, "The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 turned the Kansas Territory into an actual battleground between free-state and slave forces."<sup>27</sup> This violence was coupled with two other major events: Charles Sumner's 1856 beating at the hands of Democrat Preston Brooks in the Senate and the Supreme Court ruling in 1857 of the Dred Scott decision. New Yorkers denounced the violence that erupted in Kansas; however, they also opposed the radical abolitionists which seemed to be controlling the new Republican Party.

The regulars at Pfaff's had mixed feelings about the political situation. Henry Clapp, Jr., one of the most vocal and outspoken of the Pfaff's regulars, was skeptical about making the war over the issue of slavery, according to historian Mark A. Lause, "the veteran abolitionist simply could not reduce the fact of war as to something like slavery, particularly given what seemed to him to be the rank hypocrisy of the Republican and Unionist coalitions on race."<sup>28</sup> O'Brien never visited the South; he spent most of his life in America in the city of New York. There were a few visits to Washington, especially once the war began, and one trip to Boston. O'Brien would never have experienced slavery first hand. However, he would have been exposed to African-

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<sup>26</sup> Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Strausbaugh, *City of Sediton*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Lause, *The Antebellum Crisis*, 104.

Americans visiting the city from the South (no doubt accompanied by their white masters), and there were plenty of free blacks walking the streets of New York in the 1850s. Considering this, it is unusual that O'Brien's comments on the institution of slavery or the plight of African-Americans were essentially non-existent, except as mentioned in his one story, "The King of Nodland and His Dwarf" published in 1852. In general, O'Brien was quite on political matters – he may have learned his lesson well as a young man when his early poems, which were rebutted by newspaper editors, were comments on the politics and economics of Ireland. O'Brien's early American writings do show interest in politics, several of his published pieces during his first year in New York were satires; however, he seems to have quickly abandoned that particular style of writing, as nothing outside of those initial attempts have surfaced.<sup>29</sup>

The majority of the population in New York was made up of whites – many of whom were supportive of the Republican Party. Some of these individuals spoke up and out against discrimination in the city and the country as a whole. The Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was published the same year that O'Brien stepped foot in America, called on New Yorkers to extend the rights of citizenship to their own black citizens and refused to ride any streetcar line in Brooklyn that segregated its passengers. Republicans made inroads into the business community as well; many financiers promoting a transcontinental railroad and merchants whose trade dealings were not southern oriented – joined Beecher in attacking attempts to introduce slavery into Kansas. In addition to offering a moral and cultural critique of the South, they stressed the practical business advantages of a Republican victory might bring. They argued that a Democratic victory would hurt trade with Cuba, as a pro-South Democratic party would try and annex the country to

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<sup>29</sup> O'Brien wrote extensively about economic and social matters, Chapters Four, Five, and Six of this dissertation explore in some detail his writings on social justice and their historical context.

expand slavery. In fact, there was a deal to annex Cuba, the Ostend Manifesto, which was ultimately never approved. The Democrats would attempt to try and block the construction of a northern transcontinental railroad and if successful would diminish New York's chances of capturing the China trade. Historically, as opponents of internal improvements, the Democratic Party would try and slow up the river and harbor improvements.<sup>30</sup> Although the city was a cosmopolitan community, the city itself was overwhelmingly made up of whites that were sympathetic to the Democratic agenda – the group that Burrows and Wallace call “Metropolitan Dixiecrats.” It was this group which posed the closest connections to slavery and the politics and economics of the city.

These “Metropolitan Dixiecrats” were key actors that played a significant role in shaping the political and economic decisions within New York City. Edward K. Spann, in his interesting study, *Gotham at War*, claims, “one basic fact of New York politics was the dominance of the Democratic Party over the city and the entire metropolitan region.”<sup>31</sup> Burrows and Wallace go even further in their analysis of the connection:

Whatever their private views about the southern social order, the city's key economic actors – the shipowners who hauled cotton, the bankers who accepted slave property as collateral for loans, the brokers of southern railroad and state bonds, the wholesalers who sent goods south, the editors with large southern subscription bases, the dealers in tobacco, rice, and cotton – all had come to profitable terms with its slave economy. Their attitude had been reinforced by the aftermath of the Panic of 1857, when the South rebounded far more quickly than did the West – clear evidence that European demand for cotton was higher than that for foodstuffs.<sup>32</sup>

This economic connection of New York City with the institution of slavery was undeniable, and those that were reaping the benefits of those connections were unlikely or unwilling to let go of

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<sup>30</sup> Burrows & Wallace, *Gotham*, 859 – 860.

<sup>31</sup> Edward K. Spann, *Gotham at War: New York City, 1860 – 1865* (Wilmington, Delaware: A Scholarly Resources Inc., 2002), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Burrows & Wallace, *Gotham*, 860.

those connections.<sup>33</sup> One merchant summed up the position of some New York City interests, “a great portion of the property of the Southerners is invested under its sanction; and the business of the North, as well as of the South, has become adjusted to it. . . . We cannot afford, sir, to let you and your associates endeavor to overthrow slavery. It is not a matter of principles with us. It is a matter of business.”<sup>34</sup> From January 1859 through August 1860, nearly 100 vessels left New York harbor on the slave trade business. Many of these vessels had been built in New York City as shipbuilders hurt by the Panic of 1857 turned to the production of slavers. The profits could be enormous – up to \$175,000 on a single voyage – as steamers could carry many more slaves than had the old sailing vessels.<sup>35</sup> Burrows and Wallace conclude, “Given this matrix of interest and ideology, most New York City merchants worked through the decade to banish the slavery issue from politics.”<sup>36</sup> Despite the city’s connection to Democratic ideology, the upstate population was overwhelmingly Republican. According to Spann, “The conflict between upstate and downstate interests dominated politics for decades.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, the divisions in the state of New York replicated the political and economic dynamics of the country; however, the city continued to remain sympathetic to the South.

O’Brien’s absence within this political and economic discourse, however, should not be construed as assent to the current institutions. There is no evidence that O’Brien supported the institution of slavery. Considering his strong stand in favor of economic social justice for the

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<sup>33</sup> An outstanding book showing the connection of the Northern economy with that of the Southern institution of slavery is *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery*, by Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jenifer Frank. A few other publications explore the historical connection of New York with the institution of slavery: Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626 – 1863*; Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American? Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784 – 1861*; Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770 – 1810*; and Edgar J. McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York*.

<sup>34</sup> Burrows & Wallace, *Gotham*, 860.

<sup>35</sup> Burrows & Wallace, *Gotham*, 860.

<sup>36</sup> Burrows & Wallace, *Gotham*, 861.

<sup>37</sup> Spann, *Gotham at War*, 3.



downtrodden (i.e., children, women, and animals as argued in this dissertation), it is hard to imagine that someone with his social inclinations that he would not have been an opponent of the institution of slavery. O'Brien does show, in a couple of instances, some strands of racial prejudice. It is hard to tell though if O'Brien is sincere in his "nativist" beliefs, or is using common stereotypes to advance the realism of his stories. The conversations at Pfaff's would often center on the political and economic issues of the day, but more than not, these guests were more interested in artistic and literary conversations. There is no doubting the significance of the coming war, the city of New York was economically and politically dependent on the "peculiar institution" and was in a precarious position about what sides it was going to take.

While Democratic merchants pressed hard for conciliation with the South, Republicans found few adherents among the workers. By the 1850s few laboring groups strongly opposed slavery. Like the New York businessmen, they believed New York's economy and their jobs depended on a southern connection that Republicans endangered. They provided many reasons for workers to support the Democrats over the Republicans. Many Republicans were anti-immigrant bigots, who were supportive of the nativist movements which were prolific during nineteenth century America. They were skeptical of the nationwide "free labor" campaign. They resisted the beliefs of many Republicans who believed that unions were despotic. Many employers used African-Americans as strikebreakers. Democrats controlled New York City's politicians, and the two largest political machines were associated with the Democratic Party: Tammany Hall and Mozart Hall. Burrows and Wallace conclude, "all things considered, it was not altogether inappropriate that what would become the South's national anthem had its

premiere in New York City . . . Dan Emmett’s ‘I Wish I Was in Dixie’s Land’ was first aired at the April 4, 1859, performance of Bryant’s Minstrels in Mechanics Hall.”<sup>38</sup>

While O’Brien was interestingly silent with regard to the institution of slavery, he does take on the popular characterization of “blackface” in minstrel shows, so popular during the nineteenth century. Blackface was a form of theatrical make-up used by white performers to represent and caricature blacks. The practice was popular during the nineteenth century and contributed to the spread of racial stereotypes. By the middle of the century, blackface minstrel shows had become a distinctive American art form. In 1853 O’Brien tackled the institution of blackface in a story titled, “Elegant Tom Dillar.”<sup>39</sup> The story was published in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* in May, 1853. The story tells of Tom Dillar who is wealthy and considered by many as an up-and-coming young man. He is very popular with the ladies and is sought after by many of the prestigious families of New York. He gets swindled out of his money, because he rejects the wrong family’s offer of marriage to their daughter. As Tom Dillar makes his way back into high society, questions abound, as no one knows exactly how he is making his money. There are speculations, but none can discover his hidden secret. Until one day, the father of a young lady that Tom is now engaged with discovers that Tom is performing as a blackface minstrel performer. New Yorkers love the character he plays (including the father of his fiancé), but when they find out that Tom Diller is the one playing the part, he is shunned again from high society. The message is clear, the hypocrisy of the wealthy are called out and exposed for all they are: “when it was found that my money was honestly obtained – that I wronged no one, nor owed any one – society rejects me again, and the girl who was willing to marry me as a swindler, turns her

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<sup>38</sup> Burrows & Wallace, *Gotham*, 862 – 863.

<sup>39</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I, 139 – 149.

back upon me as an honest man.”<sup>40</sup> The blackface is used as a foil to juxtapose the falseness within American society writ large. Interestingly enough, the blackface character is also false, as Tom Dillar is presenting himself in a false light.

No one in the country feared a war between the states more than New York’s business community. They did a tremendous amount of trade with the South. The coming war meant the end of a highly profitable trade and possibly the loss of \$150 million (\$4.5 billion in today’s dollars) in Southern debt. The apathy exhibited by Northerners was also replicated in New York City, as Strausbaugh notes, “the truth was that to the majority of Northern whites, Southern slavery was not a pressing issue,” this was true of New Yorkers as well, “only a minority of New Yorkers expressed much interest in freeing slaves hundreds of miles away, and many, from those fretful businessmen to immigrant laborers, felt they had a personal stake in preserving Southern slavery.”<sup>41</sup> Republicans faced an uphill battle in New York, but some did not give up on the city.

Some Republican politicians did try to make headway in the metropolis itself. They argued that the West had firmly recovered from the Panic of 1857 and it might be a better market and political partner than the South. They emphasized Republican support for internal improvements and tariffs, positions that won over some of the business interests. Historian Marc Egnal argues in his persuasive and scholarly survey, *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War* that this dynamic, the East and West connection, was the true root cause of the Civil War.<sup>42</sup> However persuasive this argument might have been, it fell on deaf ears to voting citizens living in New York City. Lincoln knew New York was critical and that is what made the Cooper Union speech so important. According to Aaron Noble, in his article, “The Civil War, 1861 – 1865,” “New York was the largest state in the union. With a population of 3.8 million

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<sup>40</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Short Stories*, Vol. I, 149.

<sup>41</sup> Strausbaugh, *City of Sedition*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Marc Egnal, *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009).

people, this was approximately 17% of the total U.S. population in 1860.”<sup>43</sup> In the 1860 election, New York City cast 62% of their votes for candidates other than Lincoln. However, this was negated by Republican landslides upstate, which put Lincoln on top statewide.<sup>44</sup> The split of the Democratic Party nationwide resulted in a victory for Lincoln and the Republicans.

Approximately a year earlier the mayor of New York City, Fernando Wood, a pro-Southern Democrat, campaigned for re-election on the slogan: “The South is our best customer.”

Following the election of Lincoln, panic ensued among the city’s business community.

For many of the regulars at Pfaff’s the coming war simply meant who was going to be in power to exploit the common man. For many of them, neither party, whether it was Democrat or Republican, represented the true interests of the nation. In this sense, the election of 1860 specifically and the sectional crisis in general, represented a fight to determine which party shall have the right of plundering the country for the next four years. Henry Clapp, Jr., opined, “if any one is inclined to join in a political struggle, the chief object of which is to feed these cormorants, we, of course, have no objection. Every one to his taste. For our part, we heartily despise the whole concern.”<sup>45</sup> O’Brien, most likely, would have disagreed with this sentiment, as well as some of the other regulars at Pfaff’s Beer Hall, as several were involved with the sectional conflict in different capacities. But many of the citizens of New York City continued to exercise caution and concern about the growing political and economic divisions which had the country on the road to war.

On December 15, 1860, just a few weeks after the election of Lincoln, over two thousand unnerved city merchants crowded into a Pine Street establishment to draft a resolution of

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<sup>43</sup> Aaron Noble, “The Civil War, 1861 – 1865,” in *An Irrepressible Conflict: The Empire State in the Civil War*, ed. Robert Weible, Jennifer A. Lemak, and Aaron Noble (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>44</sup> Burrows & Wallace, *Gotham*, 865.

<sup>45</sup> Lause, *The Antebellum Crisis*, 108 – 109.

conciliation and reassurance to southern leaders. Before this meeting, Prominent Democratic politicians, Samuel J. Tilden (future presidential candidate) and William B. Astor met privately, the result was a resolution, which Spann claimed, urged “added protection for slavery to mollify secessionists and appointed a committee headed by former President Millard Fillmore to go to the South with assurances of support for the Southern cause.”<sup>46</sup> However, these efforts were overshadowed by a more radical response to secession proposed by New York City’s mayor, Fernando Wood.

According to Spann, “[s]trongly sympathetic to the South and equally hostile to Republican reformers, Wood was one of a number of Democrats prepared to accede to secession.”<sup>47</sup> There were rumors that Wood was proposing the creation of a new state, which would be called “The New State or Kingdom of Manhattan.” The plan that he proposed was less radical, but troublesome and ridiculed by many in the city, “the secession of the metropolis from the state of New York, declaring that the city had closer ties with the South. Wood proposed that New York become a ‘free city’ that would continue to trade with the seceded states.”<sup>48</sup> The idea was not a new one. According to Strausbaugh, the “idea of New York becoming a free and open port city was not new.”<sup>49</sup> In 1857 Wood fought to keep Republicans in Albany from stripping him of power, he proposed that the city cut its ties with Albany to become an independent state. Although Wood expected the economy to be so shaken that he would be taken seriously, his plan was rejected, and he was ridiculed in the local press.

Despite Wood’s plans, there were real concerns for the business leaders in New York City. Once southern states began seceding, they took steps to close off all political and economic

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<sup>46</sup> Spann, *Gotham at War*, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Spann, *Gotham at War*, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Spann, *Gotham at War*, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Strausbaugh, *City of Sediton*, 138.

connections to the Union. They immediately repudiated all debts owed to the North. This was damaging to the Northern, especially New York, economy. The South cut off all economic ties to the North. Forty cents of every dollar New Yorkers took from Europeans paid for cotton exports. Panic erupted in New York City in 1861; some argued that the panic was worse than the economic panic a few years earlier of 1857. Southern debt went unpaid, merchandise went unordered, prices dropped, and money dried up. Some argued that the city itself, like the southern states, should be let free. Some were beginning to echo Wood's plan, according to Burrows and Wallace, a "declaration of independence by Manhattanites would liberate them from the meddling and plundering of upstate Puritans and free them as well from federal-dictated tariffs."<sup>50</sup> Despite immediate concerns, shortly following the secession crisis, New York was beginning to rebound from the economic crisis.

There was a significant shortage of foodstuffs in Europe, which the northern and western states would gladly provide. New York shipping benefited for breadstuffs which were in demand in England and Europe. According to Spann, "Expanded exports and the arrival of large shipments of gold from California enabled financial New York not only to support a faltering economy but also to provide much needed loans for the beleaguered national government."<sup>51</sup> The economy was not great, but things were not as bad as many expected; it certainly was not bad enough to force New Yorkers to run to the South. New Yorkers were beginning to recognize that cotton was not their king, that they were not as dependent on the South's trade as they had thought. "The manufacturing, mining, and craft work of the industrial North was the real source of wealth and power on which the metropolis could expect to draw in the future. The work of manufactures, mechanics, minors, merchants, and bankers would prevail over the boasts and

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<sup>50</sup> Burrows & Wallace, *Gotham*, 867.

<sup>51</sup> Spann, *Gotham at War*, 7.

delusions of the agrarian South.”<sup>52</sup> Burrows and Wallace concluded, “New York’s bourgeoisie, virtually overnight, opted for war.”<sup>53</sup>

The firing on Fort Sumter galvanized the Union cause, including within the state of New York. The news of the April 12 Confederate attack on the Union fort resulted in an unprecedented outburst of patriotism in New York and around the Union. Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to quell the Southern rebellion. Lincoln requested New York to supply 13,280 men. According to Strausbaugh, “for all their pro-South and anti-Lincoln inclinations, New York and Brooklyn reacted to the news with an explosion of patriotic outrage. The bluster would fade as they tasted the actual horrors of war, but for a brief time men of the metropolis were as gung-ho as anyone in the North.”<sup>54</sup> New York responded with enthusiastic passion and elation as the largest assemblage ever seen on the continent, between 100,000 and 250,000 people, flooded to Union Square to see the first New York regiment called up to fight in the war. According to Strausbaugh, “Late on the afternoon of Friday, April 19, . . . massive crowds lined Broadway to cheer the first New York City regiment to head to Washington, the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Volunteer Infantry, as they marched to the Courtlandt Street ferry terminal.”<sup>55</sup> The 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment, composed of young merchants, bankers, professional men, and clerks, were off to defend the city of Washington, at that point virtually cut off and wide open to Confederate attack. The 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment was the second group called up to defend the nation; the first group was the Massachusetts 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment. “The 7<sup>th</sup>, also known as the Darling Seventh, the Silk Stocking Regiment, and the Kid Glove Regiment, represented the cream of New York City society.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Spann, *Gotham at War*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Burrows & Wallace, *Gotham*, 868.

<sup>54</sup> Strausbaugh, *City of Sedition*, 157.

<sup>55</sup> Strausbaugh, *City of Sedition*, 169.

<sup>56</sup> Strausbaugh, *City of Sedition*, 169.

The war became popular with many groups, for the Irish it had some significant political overtones. It silenced the nativist who viewed them unworthy of citizenship. It could serve as a blow against Britain, the natural ally of the Confederate “cotton lords.” The training might serve them in Ireland’s coming war of liberation. It also gave them the economic opportunity to escape from economic hard times. Irish immigrants, however, were recruited to serve in both the Union and the Confederate armies. Overall the popularity of the cause moved many different groups within New York society. According to Noble, as “New Yorkers from all political parties and economic classes rallied to the federal cause, they looked to the natural flag as a symbol of unity. Any debate over leniency toward the South disappeared in a wave of patriotic fervor. With flags waving, New Yorkers marched to war at Union Square in Manhattan and in every corner of the state.”<sup>57</sup> One of the New York residents that responded with fervent enthusiasm was Fitz-James O’Brien. The young Irishman who had lived for ten years in America was now a member of the Union army.

The excitement and disturbances which culminated in the firing on Fort Sumter and the outbreak of the Civil War had been gradually accumulating and O’Brien, sharing in the excitement and desirous of action should it come, joined Company “G” of the New York 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment. He was part of the parade that came out historically at Union Square in Manhattan. He described the excitement in a letter published by the *New York Times*:<sup>58</sup>

The scene at the armory on Friday was one to be commemorated. For the first time since its formation, the Seventh Regiment left its native City on active service. All day long, from an early hour in the morning, young men in uniforms or civilian’s dress, might have been seen hurrying up and down Broadway, with anomalous looking bundles under their arms. . . . Hardware stores were ransacked of revolvers. A feverish excitement throbbed through the City – the beating of that big Northern pulse, so slow, so sure, and so steady.

At 3 o’clock, P. M., we mustered at the Armory, against which there beat a surge of human beings like waves against a rock. Within, all was commotion. Fitting of belts,

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<sup>57</sup> Noble, “The Civil War, 1861 – 1865,” 60.

<sup>58</sup> A fuller text of this letter can be found in the Appendix, Entry #9.



wild lamentations over uniforms expected but not arrived. Hearty exchanges of comradeship between members of different companies, who felt that they were about to depart on a mission which might end in death. . . . At last the Regiment was formed in companies, and we marched. Was there ever such an ovation? . . . The marble walls of Broadway were never before rent with such cheers as greeted us when we passed. . . . An avenue of brave, honest faces smiled upon us . . . and sent a sunshine into our hearts that lives there still.<sup>59</sup>

On April 19, they began their march to Washington. The 7<sup>th</sup> encamped at Washington for five weeks. Strausbaugh described Lincoln's reaction as they entered Washington for the first time:

After repairing sabotaged rail lines outside Annapolis, the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment, dusty and unshaven, finally marched down Pennsylvania Avenue on Tuesday, April 25 . . . The 7<sup>th</sup> turned smartly off Pennsylvania Avenue, onto the White House grounds, and past the front portico, where a relieved Lincoln, who just that morning had gloomily said he didn't believe the 7<sup>th</sup> would ever arrive, smiled and awkwardly doffed his hat as they passed.<sup>60</sup>

As more and more regiments arrived, the city of Washington scrambled to house and feed them. The 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment bedded, at first, in the House of Representative's galleries. Following this, the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment spent most of their time at Camp Cameron, located north of the capital. The 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment encamped for five weeks, they were called into service for only thirty days, and on June 1, 1861 they returned to New York to a hero's welcome. There was debate amongst its members, whether they should be decommissioned or not. O'Brien argued vehemently that the regiment ought to remain in commission and stay in Washington. Despite his appeals, the regiment returned home to New York, leaving O'Brien looking for other ways of serving.

These initial military experiences gave O'Brien the opportunity to reflect and publish two poems: "The Midnight March"<sup>61</sup> and "The Seventh."<sup>62</sup> O'Brien's poem "The Seventh"<sup>63</sup> was written as a song, to the tune of "Gilla Machree." The poem was published with the letter

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<sup>59</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 210.

<sup>60</sup> Strausbaugh, *City of Sedition*, 170.

<sup>61</sup> Irish, John P., ed., *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music* (Texas: A Bit O' Irish Press, 2018), 271 – 272.

<sup>62</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 290 – 292.

<sup>63</sup> The full text of this poem can be found in the Appendix, Entry #10.

republished above, in *The New York Times*, May 2, 1861. Wolle describes it as, “a rollicking lilt in Irish brogue.”<sup>64</sup> It is a fun song, which recounts the exploits of the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment on their initial journey to Washington. The second poem, “The Midnight March,”<sup>65</sup> was never published in O’Brien’s lifetime, but was printed in Colonel Clark’s *History of the Seventh Regiment*. This poem, which replicated the experiences described in O’Brien’s letter to *The New York Times*, was another example of artistic expression created in the experiential space of his most immediate experiences, but unlike some of his poetry, all his Civil War poetry took on personal and immediate importance. O’Brien described their initial experience before they arrived in Washington, D.C., cutting through rough brush, constant fear of ambush by the enemy, sharing supplies with fellow soldiers, and the general comradeship which was developing among the troops. This experience had a powerful influence on O’Brien and reminded him why he had enlisted in the first place. It gave meaning to his decision and brought the evolution of his political and historical awareness to a conclusion.

Once the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment returned to New York, O’Brien immediately began looking for other opportunities to enlist. Wolle notes, O’Brien “who had had merely a taste of war, now cast about for the best opportunity to see active service. With some of his comrades, he became interested in forming a volunteer regiment, with himself included in its list of officers as a captain.”<sup>66</sup> The Clinton Rifles as they were called developed trouble soon after its formation. The Colonel was forced to dismiss three of its officers, O’Brien was one of them, and as such O’Brien began organizing another regiment, called The McClellan Rifles. The regiment mustered and elected O’Brien, a Captain. The recruiting continued and went very slowly, as

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<sup>64</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 214.

<sup>65</sup> The full text of this poem can be found in the Appendix, Entry #11.

<sup>66</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 215.

enthusiasm for the war began to die down. However, an incident resulted in O'Brien's court-martial, but eventual exoneration. Wolle recounts the incident:

One night about eight o'clock as Captain O'Brien was returning from the boat to the camp . . . he saw Sergeant Davenport standing talking with two other men. Captain O'Brien asked the Sergeant why he didn't go into camp, and then if he had a pass. . . . Davenport called O'Brien a liar and other abusive epithets. O'Brien again commenced retreating followed by Davenport, and then, with his pistol pointed at the Sergeant, O'Brien said, 'Stand back or I will shoot you.' . . . The Sergeant then laid hands on the Captain, and threw him into the ditch; but, when he raised a hand to strike him, O'Brien fired.<sup>67</sup>

O'Brien was exonerated as firing in self-defense. Nevertheless, considerable bad blood was stirred up by such a serious encounter between members of a volunteer regiment; and the article in the *Evening Post* of November 7 under the title "Fitz-James O'Brien under Arrest" was published and was an embarrassment for O'Brien. The article ran the story and argued that O'Brien had fired on the sergeant because of jealousy and slander of stealing story ideas – all of which were false. This, along with the slow recruiting, forced O'Brien to give up the idea of going into action with a voluntary regiment; in December of 1861 he withdrew from the McClellan Rifles.

O'Brien composed three more Civil War poems between this episode and the appointment that he so desperately sought. The first poem, "The Countersign"<sup>68</sup> was published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in August 1861.<sup>69</sup> This poem was printed in 1863 in J. Henry Hayward's collection, *Poetical Pen-Pictures of the War*, making it the first of O'Brien's American writings to make its way into book form. This poem described the young soldier's experience of having to say goodbye to his sweetheart as he goes off to war. The "Prisoner of

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<sup>67</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 226 – 227.

<sup>68</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 294 – 295.

<sup>69</sup> The full text of this poem can be found in the Appendix, Entry #12.

War”<sup>70</sup> was also published in August 1861 in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*.<sup>71</sup> This was a popular poem, making its appeal through its exaltation of comradeship. Wolle sums up the poem, “Two staunch friends, both in the army, are now separated, and the soldier in the northern camp expresses his longing for the friend held in a southern prison, and tells of his affection, his vicarious suffering, and his determination to share his comrade’s fate or get him free.”<sup>72</sup> The third poem published during this time, “A Soldier’s Letter”<sup>73</sup> was published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, March 1862.<sup>74</sup> This poem tells the story of a young soldier, who is writing updates to his sweetheart, finally has to have his letter finished by a friend, because the unnamed author has lost his arm in battle.

It would not take long for O’Brien to secure the position he wanted in the Union Army, one which would put him squarely in the middle of fighting of the Civil War. On December 31, 1861 he was able to secure an appointment with General Lander as an Aid-de-Camp. Upon receipt of Lander’s letter, he set out from New York, leaving on the morning of January 9, 1862. After a few days delay, he finally reached Camp Kelley, General Lander’s Divisional Headquarters, on Patterson’s Creek, Virginia. Soon after this, O’Brien began experiencing premonitions of his death. In a letter from A.R. Waud to William Winter, O’Brien’s long-time friend, Waud divulged the following:

After he became Aid on Lander’s staff a feeling took possession of him that he should not long survive the commission: under its influence he became, at times, strangely softened. His buoyant epicureanism partly deserted him. He showed greater consideration for others and was less convivial than was his wont. . . . as he had a presentiment that he should himself be shot before long.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 309 – 310.

<sup>71</sup> The full text of this poem can be found in the Appendix, Entry #13.

<sup>72</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 234.

<sup>73</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music*, 320 – 321.

<sup>74</sup> The full text of this poem can be found in the Appendix, Entry #14.

<sup>75</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O’Brien*, 236.

Others would report that O'Brien confided in them with similar experiences. His friend Stephen Fiske shared an observation that O'Brien suffered from depression. He relates a conversation, one night at Pfaff's, between O'Brien and Henry Clapp, Jr. According to Fiske, Clapp was

always cynical, declared that his feeling in regard to death was one of "consuming, intolerable curiosity." "That," said O'Brien, "is my feeling exactly, and I intend to satisfy my curiosity without waiting for the slow decay of nature. Doubtless the "consuming" may come afterwards; but of that we must take the chances. Without such a fascinating problem as that of death before us, I cannot imagine how anybody can be satisfied to go on with the monotonous stupidity of living."<sup>76</sup>

Many of O'Brien's published writings deal with dark and gothic themes and imagery. Fiske claimed that O'Brien constantly thought about the idea of suicide, and it was his intellectual and literary hero, Edgar Allan Poe, who also suffered from depression. Poe also served successfully in the U.S. Army, as well as spent some time at the U.S. Military Academy.

In early February General Lander and his command had moved south and reoccupied Romney, West Virginia. From there they pushed on about fourteen miles further to Bloomery Gap. Here O'Brien would soon get his first taste of fighting. General Lander and his army arrived at Bloomery Gap after a forced march, which included some significant bridge building, about five o'clock in the morning. For some hours there was no sign of any opposing force, and then they encountered the enemy at the head of the pass, about two miles from their present location. They were met with sharp fire and then halted their march. Lander jumped on his horse and followed by O'Brien, dashed away toward the scene of the firing. In the general engagement that followed, lasting nearly an hour, thirteen of the enemy was killed and seventy-five taken prisoners, while the victory cost the Union forces two killed. Captain Baird, with the Confederate

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<sup>76</sup> Stephen Fiske, "O'Brien's Bohemian Days," in *The Poems and Stories of Fitz-James O'Brien*, ed. William Winter (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881.), lv – lvi.

Army, surrendered to O'Brien. O'Brien kept, as was military custom, Baird's sword and accouterments as trophies.<sup>77</sup>

Two days later, about four o'clock in the morning of Sunday, February 16, O'Brien was sent out on a scouting expedition with a company of thirty-five cavalymen. Their objective was to capture a hundred head of cattle belonging to the secessionists. A skirmish resulted. The enemy, consisting of sixty of "Stonewall" Jackson's regular cavalry and one hundred and fifty infantry, opened fire on O'Brien's advance point from behind a bluff. The advance fired a few random shots and retreated upon the main body. A crossfire opened upon them from the hillside, and O'Brien charged down the road leading his men against the enemy cavalry. The Confederate officer raised his hand and ordered them to stop. O'Brien shouted back, and the two officers fired at each other almost simultaneously. This was the signal for a general engagement, in the midst of which the duel between Lieutenant O'Brien and Colonel Ashley continued. At the second shot, O'Brien was hit, the ball passing through his breast near the left shoulder and splintering his scapular bone. The two armies continued to exchange shots.<sup>78</sup> O'Brien fired a third shot which presumably killed Ashley, knocking him off his horse.

O'Brien's onslaught against such odds had been so audacious that the enemy thought he must have reserves somewhere; and even after he was wounded, he continued to rally his men, until a subordinate officer, seeing him reeling in his saddle from loss of blood, got him to the rear. No one except O'Brien was hurt, while the enemy suffered two killed and four wounded. Weak and in pain, O'Brien now had to ride back twenty-four miles to base, where he was placed in the hands of a surgeon, who in his ignorance did not consider the wound a dangerous one and gave it insufficient care and treatment. O'Brien at first had hoped to be well of his wound in

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<sup>77</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 235 – 237.

<sup>78</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 238.

about twenty days, but by March 8 he was no better. The surgeon seems to have mistaken the nature of the injury, and on March 20 a new surgeon of ability was sent by General McClellan to take the case in hand. He discovered the serious extent of the injury and said that the shoulder blade rattled like a bag of marbles. The new surgeon decided that resection of the joint was the only recourse, and though this is one of the most difficult and dangerous operations in surgery, he advised O'Brien to submit to it. On the morning of Sunday, April 6, O'Brien felt a little better than usual, and, being helped up by the attending surgeons, sat for a time on the side of his bed; but while sipping a glass of sherry, he turned pale and fell back dead.<sup>79</sup> On April 6, 1862 Fitz-James O'Brien "cashed in his chips." "So ended the life of Fitz-James O'Brien," says Francis Wolle, "the vitality, the manliness, the intense verve and joy of living, together with the flashes of true poetic feeling and the touches of vivid, weird imagination."<sup>80</sup>

Soldiers often explain reasons why they fight in wars. The Civil War was no different. Some fought for their country out of a strong sense of patriotism, others got caught up in the passion of the moment, while others fought out of economic necessity and the feeling of the inability to look to other means for survival, some soldiers fought from strong feelings against the institution of slavery, whereas others fought simply from manly bravado. Some personal reports from O'Brien's friends claim that he joined the Union Army out of a strong sense of patriotism. There does seem to exist, outside of anecdotal stories from friends, a strong sentiment about the love he felt for his newly adopted home. In 1857 he wrote a rousing and patriotic poem titled "How the Bell Rang."<sup>81</sup> This poem was first published in *Harper's Weekly*; it was republished, revised, and retitled "Independence Bell"<sup>82</sup> in Henry Clapp's newspaper *The*

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<sup>79</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 236 – 246.

<sup>80</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 246.

<sup>81</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 158 – 160.

<sup>82</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 246 – 248.

*Saturday Press*, on July 7, 1860, just a few months before the November presidential election. This poem retells the day the Declaration of Independence was adopted and read from the top of Independence Hall in Philadelphia.<sup>83</sup> His Civil War poetry clearly shows there is an aspect to O'Brien that endears him to America. But it was not just America that had captured his heart; his native land was never far from his thoughts.

O'Brien never left his native land, at least psychologically or emotionally. He continued to write about Ireland while in America. Two important publications that show his unending reflections on Ireland were published in 1854 and 1861.<sup>84</sup> In 1854 O'Brien produced a play that was performed at Wallack's Theatre on the night of Monday, December 11. The play, "A Gentleman from Ireland,"<sup>85</sup> was a comedy of mistaken identity. It was considered his most successful play; it was positively reviewed in both *The New York Daily Times* and *The New York Herald*. In 1861 O'Brien published, in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, an autobiographical poem, titled "A Ballad of the Shamrock."<sup>86</sup> This poem tells the story of Donal, who makes his way to the New World, leaving his family behind. One day his mother saves up enough money to join him, she carries a shamrock from her native land, which she will present to him when she meets him, but discovers that he has died:

We landed at the Battery in New York's big bay,  
The sun was shining grandly and the wharves looked gay.  
But I could see no sunshine nor beauty in the place,  
What I only cared to look on was Donal's sweet face;

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<sup>83</sup> The full text of both these poems can be found in the Appendix, Entry #15 and Entry #16.

<sup>84</sup> O'Brien used his native land as the source of many short stories, poems, plays, and essays. His American writings span the time period of 1852 to 1862 and with a quick survey of all his published writings, one can find Ireland as the topic from that first year to the last and all in between. Wolfe believes that O'Brien, when he left Ireland, never looked back, but his continual publications with Ireland as topics I believe shows he continued to think about the country he left behind.

<sup>85</sup> John P. Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Miscellaneous Writings* (Texas: A Bit O' Irish Press, forthcoming.) The fourth volume of *The Collected Writings of Fitz-James O'Brien* will contain this play, along with other miscellaneous writings not included in the previous three volumes. A fifth volume is also in the works, which will contain his journalistic writings.

<sup>86</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 280 – 282.



But in all the great crowd, and I turned every where,  
I could not see a sign of him — my darling was not there;  
I asked the men around me to go and find my son,  
But they only stared or laughed, and left me one by one,  
'Till at last an old countryman came up to me and said —  
How could I live to hear it? — that Donal was dead!

The shamrock sod is growing on Greenwood's hill-side.  
It grows above the heart of my darling and my pride;  
And on summer days I sit by the head-stone all day,  
With my heart growing old and my head growing gray,  
And I watch the dead leaves whirl from the sycamore-trees,  
And wonder why it is that I can't die like these;  
But I think that this same winter, and from my heart I hope,  
I'll be lying nice and quiet upon Greenwood's slope,  
With my darling close beside me underneath the trickling dew,  
And the shamrocks creeping pleasantly above us two.<sup>87</sup>

The story of the poem is eerily similar to the way that O'Brien's mother finds out about his death. She was having dinner with her husband in London, the two noticed a young couple sitting next to them in a restaurant, they looked like Americans, so the two inquired if they had ever heard of Fitz-James O'Brien, to which the American gentleman responded, "Oh yes, I knew him very well. He was killed in our war."<sup>88</sup> Upon hearing this, his mother burst into tears. "O'Brien's body was for a long time held in the receiving vault at Greenwood, but on November 27, 1874, it was removed, to be buried in a grave near the southwest corner of the Cemetery."<sup>89</sup>

Mark A. Lause, in his important survey of the history of America's first Bohemians, claims, "O'Brien and the circle at Pfaff's generally left an ample record of a deep dedication to the cause for which he gave his life."<sup>90</sup> The "cause" which Lause is referring to was that of radical abolitionism and the open hostility to the institution of slavery. His primary argument in his book is that the Bohemian's had developed a radical set of beliefs that were in sympathy with

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<sup>87</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 282.

<sup>88</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 250.

<sup>89</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 250 – 251.

<sup>90</sup> Lause, *The Antebellum Crisis*, 126.

Fourier Socialism and Radical Abolitionism, among other things.<sup>91</sup> The group at Pfaff's should be viewed, in Lause's opinion, on similar terms to those of the radical left of the counter-culture movement of the mid to late twentieth century. There seems to be no evidence, with regard to O'Brien, to support this claim (as has already been noted, O'Brien wrote virtually nothing on the institution of slavery). In Lause's defense, his book is primarily about interpreting the life and thought of Henry Clapp, Jr., but Lause does extrapolate from Clapp's ideas to make some sweeping generalizations about the group as a whole. Simply put, there is no evidence to support the argument that O'Brien fought in the American Civil War out of a sense of political sentiment in support of abolitionism, certainly not radical abolitionism (it is probably safe to assume that he did not support the institution, but Lause is making a greater leap than the evidence provides).

Following the First World War, the early historian of Bohemianism, Albert Parry, argued that O'Brien's service to his country is rooted in his manly bravado that he exhibited many times while at Pfaff's. "At least one garreteer in a group must die as a soldier of fortune, away from friends and loves. This tradition was inaugurated in America by Fitz-James O'Brien. At Pfaff's, fistic combats over literary issues took place often enough, and the chief fighter was Fitz-James O'Brien. . . ." Parry continues, "He quarreled not only over literature, but over the right of way on the streets of New York, receiving most of his bruises from strangers. . . . [as the war came closer] talk at Pfaff's grew more warlike. . . . O'Brien was carried away by the wave of excitement and heroics. He cared little for the issue of the conflict, but he, the pugilist of Bohemia, was among the first to leave it for the incivilities of the Civil War."<sup>92</sup> O'Brien, as Parry notes, was no stranger to fights. He even had an iconic broken nose from a brawl and many of

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<sup>91</sup> Lause is wrong on both counts with regard to O'Brien.

<sup>92</sup> Albert Parry, *Garrets and Pretenders: Bohemian Life in America from Poe to Kerouac* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2012), 50 – 54.

O'Brien's friends comment on his athletic and rugged nature, when describing his appearance.<sup>93</sup>

O'Brien's manly brawling bravado attitude was confirmed by an acquaintance of his, who related an anecdote, in the *New York Times*, July 2, 1898, about why she believed he signed up for the Union Army:

He had all the enthusiasm of an Irishman about being killed. I think he enjoyed the idea. I am afraid, this love of adventure and this heroic intoxication has sent many a man to the war. It is a greater draught than patriotism. It is an amusement, and this arousing a man out of what may be torpor and a habit of ennui is immense. It is more powerful as a factor in the young man's nature than we are apt to imagine.<sup>94</sup>

This seems to confirm what Parry argues; maybe it was O'Brien's manly bravado and his rugged personality going back to his days in Ireland, which led him to join in the Civil War. While there may very well be something to this, however, I think it does not go far enough. O'Brien felt a part of something, something that he was able to articulate in the following way: "I do not know whether I am a part of the universe, or whether the universe is a part of me."<sup>95</sup> It is this existential sentiment which is the clearest articulation of O'Brien's notion of being part of something larger than life – it was this actualization of his evolving political and historical awareness.

O'Brien's actions to join the Union Army and ultimately to give his life for his adopted country, what Lincoln so eloquently describes of these fallen heroes, "that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion,"<sup>96</sup> was much more than patriotism and bravado, although it does include both of those things. It was the realization that he was a part of something larger and more important than his individual life. It is this connection to the universe and the

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<sup>93</sup> William Winter, ed., *The Poems and Stories of Fitz-James O'Brien* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881).

<sup>94</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 220.

<sup>95</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 220.

<sup>96</sup> Fehrenbacher, *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings*, 536.

universe's connection to him, which compelled him to fight for his country and ultimately sacrifice his life.

O'Brien comes full circle from his younger days as a young lad in Ireland. O'Brien's joining the Union Army in the Civil War was the actualization and fulfillment of something that he had shunned in his first published poem "Oh! Give a Desert Life to Me." O'Brien has grown, finally, to understand the kind of interaction that is required of him. That was something that he could not understand as a young man, something for which the editor of *The Nation*, called him out on. His evolving political and historical awareness requires action (like all moral and ethical behavior), but not just any action, it requires action which ennobles the individual and connects the individual to his country and his country to him. It was in this sense to which O'Brien "cashed in his chips" and gave "his last full measure" to his adopted country – O'Brien gave the ultimate sacrifice that an individual can give for one's country.

For a time his friends paid him tributes and then Harpers printed a story and one of the poems that were written during his illness (both of which O'Brien never saw in publication). O'Brien's good friend and editor of the first collection of his writings, William Winter, wrote an eulogy while the loss of his friend was still fresh on his mind and heart. It was printed in *The Alibion* of April 12 over the signature 'Mercurio.'

It would be easy to recite his triumphs; to tell the brief and brilliant story of ten years of literary labour; to say that, in the professions of literature and journalism, he was ever active and successful; to recall his poems, his stories, his dramas – weird, imaginative, original, and full of fiery life; to name him a man of real genius, powerful intellect, rich culture, and varied experience; to remember the large scope of thought and observation, the endless variety of character, the sparkling wit, the quick tenderness of feeling that made him, as a companion, so genial and so charming. But all this would avail little to mark their sense of sad bereavement who knew and loved him. With all his frailties of nature and all his faults of life, he was a man to be as deeply loved as now he is deeply mourned. Genuine, fearless, independent, gifted with great powers, true ideals, and vast energy, he aimed to achieve the highest triumph of his art, to interpret the passing age, to

beat out the music of human activity, 'To shed a something of celestial light / Round the familiar face of every day.'<sup>97</sup>

O'Brien died as he lived – his championing of the cause of humanity was what ennobled his character and elevated his spirit. His writings and the sacrifice he gave are what ought to define his literary legacy.

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<sup>97</sup> Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 248.

## CONCLUSION

Whatever one wants to make of Fitz-James O'Brien's literary talents or even the significance of his contributions to the history of American literature, the purpose of this dissertation was to make a case for his importance within social history. To be sure, O'Brien was not the first American writer to contribute to the concept of a social justice philosophy. However, O'Brien helped to target and brought to light a number of important issues with regard to the plight of children, women, and animals during the antebellum period. These were the avenues that he explored and highlighted through his writings. The books surveying the history of Bohemianism in America have plenty of references to O'Brien, but only consider him a minor player. Rarely do they consider his role within the larger context of the emerging literary marketplace. Nor do they chronicle his role in developing a social justice agenda that anticipated a new social consciousness among the middle class which emerges during the century.

O'Brien's thinking on social justice issues was well grounded early on in his thoughts as a young man in Ireland. His first few poems exhibit some talent as a writer, but more importantly, they exhibit a restless soul – an individual yearning for justice and freedom born from his observations of Ireland's condition as an "internal" colony within the British Empire. These yearnings continued through his days in London, where he began to hone his craft and explore his ideas on a much broader and deeper level. His years in London gave him the experience he needed for understanding the technical side of writing and publishing. It was in this city, with its cosmopolitan atmosphere of the Great Exhibit where O'Brien was first exposed to the world's stage. The magazine he edited was not the largest or the most known, but the

exposure and experience he learned during these three years in London were incalculable. But it was in America in which O'Brien emerged as an experienced professional writer. It was also in America where O'Brien would systematically explore all facets of his vision of social justice.

The young O'Brien developed an acute sense of awareness of others in his two earliest poems: "Oh! Give a Desert Life to Me" and "The Famine." These poems were published when O'Brien was nineteen and twenty years old, they were published in an important newspaper dedicated to expressing Irish identity and nationality. O'Brien's poem "Loch Ina" also shows a deep love and respect for the Irish geography of his homeland in Cork County. As I have noted several times in different places, Wolfe is wrong about his assessment of O'Brien and Ireland. O'Brien left his native land, but he returned to it (emotionally and spiritually) time and time again in his writings from London and in America – including the final years of his life.

O'Brien's social justice philosophy evolved, developed, and deepened once he arrived in New York City. This is where he was confronted with poverty and desperation on a level that he had never experienced firsthand. It was his experience of these hardships which transformed him from a man of letters to a professional writer who wrote out of economic necessity. It would be incorrect to say that he had never experienced hardship, because the Great Famine was devastation on a level that few nations have ever known. O'Brien experienced this, but did so from the comfort of wealth. He did not know the desperation that many of his fellow countrymen felt during that overwhelming time. It was this event, however, that stirred his soul to its core and forced him to take action as he first put pen to paper in taking up the cause of the oppressed.

Action is what moves the human soul and this action must be grounded in empathy. Empathy, not reason or rationality, was what changed characters. It is what moved the rich man, in his first set of "Street Lyrics" poems, outside the circle of humanity to an acting member.

Moral action is what directs the soul; it is what defines us as members of the human race. For O'Brien, however, this is not confined simply to humans though; some of our most important actions involve consideration of the other creatures which also inhabit this globe. For O'Brien, it is our treatment of animals, which is the strongest test of our moral compass. They are the weakest and most vulnerable among us and therefore, according to O'Brien, it is our moral imperative to reach out and act with kindness and justice toward them.

The strongest statement that O'Brien makes, in anything that he wrote or said to friends, was the existential reflection he made in pondering his role in the universe. In language reminiscent of Walt Whitman, his fellow patron at Pfaff's, O'Brien reflects: "I do not know whether I am a part of the universe, or whether the universe is a part of me." This, almost pantheistic, view of the reciprocal relationship between the universe and us was important for O'Brien's evolution and final growth. It was this sentiment which made the "older" O'Brien to reverse his course, from the judgment of the editor from *The Nation*, upon reading his first poem. The "young" O'Brien dreams of fleeing the troubles faced by Ireland, to return in the future once things are figured out and are now safe. The "older" O'Brien now, instead of fleeing, faces the harsh reality of life and embraces this existential moment.

O'Brien, despite his Irish birth, was an American. Not only because he sacrificed his life for this country, but because he participated and celebrated that democratic American literature while he was here. This is best summed up by an editor for *The New York Leader*, who summarized O'Brien's contributions to this country, following his death:

It is some ten years since he came here, an unknown and unheralded stranger, and, in the hurry-scurry of our rapid ways, he soon made himself a recognized position in our literature and affairs, and became so much an American that his foreign birth and education would never be recognized in his writings. The amalgam of his genius moulded



itself at once to the temper of the people among whom he had come to dwell. There was nothing more remarkable than this in his singular career.<sup>1</sup>

O'Brien was an American, but his writings on social justice show that he was much more than just that; he expressed a genuine humanitarian point of view – the belief that the strong have a moral responsibility to help the weak. This was thoroughly explored in his American writings on social justice. It was this contribution from O'Brien which constituted the central focus of this dissertation. Today O'Brien is largely known, for those that have heard of him, within the genera of horror and science fiction short stories. But O'Brien is much larger than this; it is his writings on social justice which should advance his reputation within the larger world of American History and Literature.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New York Leader*, April 12, 1862.

## APPENDIX

#1: “The Famine”, *The Nation* (Dublin), March 7, 1846.<sup>1</sup>

Striding nearer every day,  
Like a wolf in search of prey,  
Comes the Famine on his way —

Through the dark hill, through the glen,  
Over lawn, and moor, and fen,  
Questing out the homes of men.

And a Voice cries overhead —  
“Rend your hair — the hot tears shed —  
Ye shall starve for want of bread.

“Though your wail be long and loud,  
Hope for nothing from the Proud;  
Dig the grave, and weave the shroud;

“Seek a place where ye may die —  
Clench the teeth, and check the sigh —  
Hope, but only hope on High.

“When the last hope fades in air,  
To your hearts of grief and care,  
Thus shall speak the fiend Despair:

“Cord and knife, and river deep,  
“Open paths for those who weep,  
“To a sweet and dreamless sleep.

“Though ye shun such thoughts at first,  
“When each hope you long have nurs’d,  
“Like a bubble shall have burst,

“Ye shall run to death, though He  
“Armed with double-terrors be;  
“Better death than misery.”

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<sup>1</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O’Brien: Poetry & Music* (Texas: A Bit O’Irish Press, 2018), 7 – 9.

'Tis a fearful sight to see,  
Man, the equal and the free,  
Kneeling at a Brother's knee;

When he knows a People's might,  
Trained, directed, made unite,  
Can do all things for their right.

Why then does he wail and weep?  
Why does he supinely sleep,  
And nor food nor vengeance reap?

'Tis not base and slavish fear  
Makes him shun the sword and spear —  
'Tis the Faith he holds so dear;

Faith, that turns a trustful eye  
To the God that dwells on high,  
In the bright and blessed sky.

But when thousands, day by day,  
With the Famine pine away,  
Will they own religion's sway?

Ah! ye mighty, ponder well;  
If wild riot burst its shell,  
Who its fearful flight can tell?

Men of wealth, in time be wise,  
Lest they gather, with loud cries,  
Round your well-fill'd granaries,

As the ravens, hunger hoarse,  
Troop around the lifeless corse  
Of a fever-stricken horse.

Give the wretched who complain,  
And their rage you will restrain  
With your love, as with a chain.

Brother, life is but a span —  
See thou dost what one man can —  
Help a fainting fellow-man;

While the magnates of the land

On their gilded titles stand,  
Be thou called the "Open Hand."

And, when life is ended here,  
In another, higher sphere,  
Voices thus shall greet your ear:

"Without fear to judgment wend —  
Here, the wretched toiler's friend,  
Tastes the joy that has no end."

#2: "Say sacred Clarseac," *The Irishman* (Dublin), February 3, 1849: 72.<sup>2</sup>

Say sacred Clarseac – hallowed harp of old,  
    Shall hands like these essay  
To wake thy strings to numbers yet untold,  
    Of war, or battle lay?  
Surely there will remain from that proud host,  
    Of those that late were thine,  
Some that will tend thee – some to bid thee boast –  
    Of nobler song than mine.

The heart, beneath whose sway thou didst arise  
    To Glory, from the Tomb,  
Mouldering amid Mount Jerome's gravestones lies,  
    Waiting his final doom.  
His brother bard, whose high and holy strains  
    Shall live till time is 'oer,  
Lies in the prison, 'neath the despot's chains,  
    Bound for the felon shore.

Thy veteran Minstrels sleep in death – save one –  
    Who does not live for thee!  
Thy youthful votaries, alas! are gone –  
    Scattered by tyranny!  
And Freedom bids the few who linger here –  
    Our prostrate Isle to fly,  
And Hope's glad light, that shone for many a year,  
    Seems just about to die.

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<sup>2</sup> John P. Irish, ed., *Fitz-James O'Brien: Miscellaneous Writings* (Texas: A Bit O' Irish Press, forthcoming).

#3: "Forrest Thoughts," *The Cork Magazine*, December 1848 (II): 99 – 100.<sup>3</sup>

Above me rise the dark o'er-hanging woods,  
Whose pillared vistas like cathedral aisle,  
Sink dimly into distance; nor intrudes  
The thought-dispelling sunlight that beguiles  
The soul from deep reflection; as the smiles  
Of bright-eyed beauty dazzle with their ray  
The student mind, and with alluring wiles  
Beckon it from its lore-strewn path away,  
And beam with joy, to lend that sober soul astray.

Though all is dim, all is not dark; around  
The soft light struggles through the clust'ring leaves,  
And many a wild shape on the mossy ground,  
In shadowed tracery it deftly weaves;  
It is a haunt for him who best believes —  
That silent solitude engenders thought;  
A sanctuary too for him who grieves  
O'er fallen hopes, or happiness long sought,  
Which, when possession came, then vanished into nought.

It is a solemn place, that forest shade:  
A temple vast, where reverie sits enshrined  
The silent Priestess: yet no vows are made,  
Before her altar green, no heads inclined  
In worship low: no chants, save when the wind  
Sweeps the tall arches of the trees among,  
No choral music swells in hymns refined,  
None, save the lonely robin's liquid song,  
That in eve's dreamy hour melts in joy along.

There is a music in a wild bird's song,  
That wreathes the soul with strange impassioned spells,  
Making old blood rush youthfully along,  
Of boyhood's heedless happiness it tells,  
Of sunbright morning, ere the flower-bells  
Had yet from out their dew-crowned slumbers stirred;  
Of long days spent in moss-embroidered dells —  
Not all the orchestral strains that ear hath heard,  
Could move the heart to tears like one free singing bird!

Soft! soft! it steals upon the listening ear,  
And memory's spell-bound portals ope once more

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<sup>3</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 28 – 29.

To its harmonious notes: and then the clear,  
Bright stream of age-remembered youth steals o'er  
The soul, like a forgotten dream, wafting a store  
Of beauteous thoughts along with it, that make  
Us innocent again: the weed-strewn shore  
Of our life's ocean, is washed clear; we take  
A journey o'er the past with that bright bird that singeth in the  
brake.

Yet there are those, who tell us to believe —  
That beings such as these will pass away,  
And live no more; and who, when we would grieve  
For some dumb friend, will, with proud conscience, say —  
It is not good to love these things of clay! —  
Oh! why not love them? what dark, guilty deed,  
Doth stain their race, like what each passing day,  
Brands with disgrace, proud man's *immortal* breed,  
Away! away! thou stern votary of a selfish creed!

More beautiful is that old love-born faith,  
That dwells with the rude sons of India's land,  
And prompts them, when their chief lies low in death,  
To lay in hill green grave, his dog, his brand,  
And that proud steed that loved his master hand;  
And thus, when his strong grasp hath felt the spell,  
That all must feel: when the fierce heart hath spanned  
Its hour of rude enjoyment, he will dwell  
In happier plains, with all, on earth, he loved so well.

Sing on, then minstrel of the wilderness! sing on,  
Thy voice hath not leas joy, thy shape less grace,  
Because thou'rt blotted from the scroll, where one  
Less innocent than thee, his name may trace —  
As man, immortal. Hast thou then no place  
Beyond this earth? Is there no hope for thee,  
Of stormless woods, and summer skies, whose face  
May smile eternal? Yes! thy warblings free,  
Are breathing of God, Love, and Immortality.

#4: "The Lonely Oak," *The Parlour Magazine*, July 12, 1851: 287.<sup>4</sup>

I

Widely and high thy branches spread;  
The winter of age is on thy head,  
Thy sturdy comrades all have died,  
For time hath swept them from thy side;  
Yet, though howling storms have o'er thee broke,  
Thou hast braved them all, old lonely oak!

II

The time has been, when young and fair,  
Thy branches waved to the summer air,  
And the red deer slept beneath thy shade,  
And the birds in thy boughs sweet music made;  
And the wind, through thy green leaves, softly spoke,  
With a happy voice — Thou lonely oak!

III

Yes; thou hast seen, when our native land  
Was fettered not by a stranger's hand —  
When our youths were brave, and our chiefs were free,  
And our maidens were bright as the sunlit sea;  
When the gray bard, stretched by thy mossy side,  
Chanted his tales of Erin's pride.

IV

Dost thou not sigh for the wild bird's wing,  
When by thee he cleaves in the budding spring?  
Dost thou not sigh with him to stray  
To some giant forest far away?  
Here thou hast no companion near thee —  
Not even one is left to cheer thee!

V

Yet I would grieve to part with thee —  
I would miss thy form, old, friendly tree;  
For on many a sultry summer's day,  
In childhood's time, when faint with play,  
I sought thy kindly sheltering shade,  
And my weary form beneath thee laid!

VI

And, in manhood's time, when I strove to store  
My seeking mind with ancient lore,

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<sup>4</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 39-40.



Thy lone and silent foot I sought,  
And turned my mind to a deeper thought;  
While the light through thy thick leaves faintly broke,  
And shone on my page, old kindly oak!

VII

And when I have grown old, like thee,  
And age has come on me silently,  
Like a shadow upon the sea:  
And when with a tottering foot I stand,  
On the viewless bank of the unknown land,  
I will wait for death's resistless stroke,  
And sleep beneath thee, old lonely oak!

#5: "He Writes for Bread," *The Lantern*, July 31, 1852 (II): 47.<sup>5</sup>

## I

Time — 'tis midnight; Scene — a Garret;  
Dramatis Personæ — two:  
One, with wintry locks of silver —  
One with locks of dark brown hue.  
And the old man sits him calmly,  
Speaking nothing, while his face,  
With its quiet depth of meekness,  
Sheds a radiance on the place,  
But God! Could we unfold his soul,  
And rend the epic there,  
We would not wonder at his thought,  
Nor whiteness of his hair.  
Anon, he strangles to a sigh  
Some heart-ach upward led;  
Lest, by a word,  
He'd break the chord  
Of song, that's wildly flitting,  
Through the brain of him that's sitting,  
Gushing out his very heart's blood  
On the page before him spread —  
For through the night the young man kneads  
His brains for their daily bread.

## II

See — his pen toils slower — slower —  
Then — he talks his dreams aloud —  
Now — he hastes to wrap his fancy  
In the pale expectant shroud.  
For every sheet his brain thoughts fill,  
Each line his keen wants crave;  
But wrap and bind by piecemeal down  
The youth to an early grave.  
Those little characters he inks,  
Are all grim Death's abettors;  
*He* does not nobly die at once,  
But sinks to his grave by letters.  
And now, his jaded thought would lag,  
To soothe his aching head —  
But he cannot wait,

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<sup>5</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 80 – 82.

For his empty plate  
Reflects on his want  
Of the loaf that's *not* on't:  
And the old man there? Oh! God, must *he* starve,  
While a legion of other men's fathers are fed?  
The pang's inspiration! The madhouse and love,  
Are gambling for him who is writing for bread.

### III

He writes to make the reader laugh,  
When his heart's full with tears;  
And all the Town seem happy when  
His prose or verse appears.  
They little know the loving heart  
That beats in garret dim —  
Or, while they daily go to 'Change,  
What change would be to him!  
The Printer's paid — the Paper's paid —  
The Pressman's pressing, too;  
And while the Author's left to starve,  
The "Devil" gets his due.  
The Publisher in carriage rolls,  
And sleeps on feather bed;  
While He that gives  
Them all life, lives  
In a prison of thought and sorrow,  
Never daring to think on the morrow.  
For the Bookseller's note, which put off the pay,  
Will not lighten a creditor's tread:  
Nor save from the landlord the few darling books  
Of the Bondman, who writes for his bread.

### IV

All the world is crying "progress!"  
Every head is for re-form:  
E'en women, manlike mounts the breach,  
To take the age by storm.  
The Tailor strikes — the Bricklayer strikes —  
The Printer strikes for "pie;"  
And several Senators have struck  
To raise — each other's eye.  
And while Societies are made  
To give each man's bread butter,  
Shall he who moulds Society,

Be trod down in the gutter?  
Shall he, with Heaven's noblest gift,  
Have Earthly Hell instead?  
While Brawler's rant,  
And Preacher's cant,  
About tracts and shirts for Niggers!  
Shall they leave numbers naked figures?  
Shall these men die, because they cannot coin  
Dollars and Dimes from out each senseful head?  
Nor win the loaf which Loafers hourly win,  
Though grinding nightly Fancies Flower for bread!

#6: "The Beggar Child," *The Lantern*, May 1, 1852 (I): 166.<sup>6</sup>

I reasoned with a friend one day,  
A wealthy man, and proud;  
Who rode in a lordly chariot,  
And cared not for the crowd.  
I told him that the poor were crushed  
To earth, and sore opprest;  
And that they looked upon the grave  
As their only place of rest.

There was cold scorn within his eye,  
When I pleaded for the slave —  
But his glances rolled uneasily,  
When I talked about the grave.  
Said he "I tire of this discourse,  
Methinks the poor do feign!"  
"Come forth with me, and let us see,  
(Quoth I) why they complain?"

He bade his servant bring his cloak,  
He wrapped it round him warm:  
Put on fur gloves, and carefully  
Encased his portly form.  
Then forth into the streets we strode;  
"Tis very strange (sneered he)  
That I have lived so long, nor seen,  
This vaunted misery!"

We met a poor girl in our path,  
Her face was pinched with cold;  
Half clad was she, with naked feet,  
She might be ten years old.  
And looking closer in her face,  
Sure hunger made her pale —  
I never read in any book,  
So piteous a tale.

"Why do you idle here your time?"  
With pompous air he said;  
She, trembling 'neath his glance, replied,  
"I've come to beg for bread!"  
"Where is your father?" quoth my friend,  
Her tears began to flow,  
"He went to fight his country's fights,

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<sup>6</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 70 – 71.

And fell in Mexico!”  
“My mother since he went has worked,  
And kept us just alive;  
But now she’s sick, and what can I,  
The eldest of the five!  
And one is dead — that’s little Jane,  
Spots came upon her brow:  
And mother tells us, that she is  
A happy Angel now!

But as for us, indeed, we’ve had  
Since yesterday, no bread  
And tho’ I know ’tis wicked, Sir,  
I wish that I were dead.”  
She led us to her wretched home,  
A cellar damp and cold,  
But words are feeble — what we saw  
By words can scarce be told!

As springs from rocky Horeb gushed,  
To quench the wanderer’s thirst:  
So from his gold encrusted heart,  
The human fountain burst.  
And seated on a broken chair,  
The man became a child —  
Embraced his brother man again,  
And rose up reconciled.

Now dowered with a gentler soul,  
He feels he is a part  
Of that most glorious work of God,  
The mighty human heart!

#7: "The Spectral Shirt," *The Lantern*, June 5, 1852 (I): 219.<sup>7</sup>

Silent she sat within a naked room,  
Wearily working at a tedious web,  
Wet with the moisture of her eager hands.

So wan her cheeks; so full of hopeless want  
Her worn and withered form: she seemed to be  
The child of Famine, born of gaunt Despair.

Her starveling children crouched around her foot,  
And gazed into her face with hungry eyes.  
While their hands clutched imaginary food.

The needle flew — at last the shirt was done:  
Then donning with weak hands her ragged cloak,  
She left the house, and hurried through the street.

On, on she flew, amid the roar of wealth —  
The way was teeming with cold-hearted life,  
And merchants clanked their dollars as they passed.

She trod, perhaps, within the warm foot prints  
Of men, whose lightest word was worth a million —  
While for two days she had not tasted food!

She reached the store, where stood the soul-less wretch,  
Upon whose breath her very life depended:  
He was the incarnation of a fiend.

She handed him the shirt, and trembling stood  
With her eyes riveted upon his face.  
He was her God — she had no lord but him.

With devilish sneer he scanned the toilsome seams,  
"Too hasty work," he said; "it will not do:"  
Then ripped it up, and bade her take it back.

Oh! how her poor heart sickened, as she thought  
Of the wan faces, watching till she came:  
How would she meet them with an empty hand?

Was there no hope? No! not a single grain.  
She begged her task-master to give her food —  
A single crust. He cursed, and bade her leave him.

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<sup>7</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 76 – 78.

Then rose her nature up against all earth.  
The sky grew black and damp — the fiery sun  
Looked down as if in mockery of her woe.

And raising up to Heaven her thin right hand,  
Through which the sunlight shone as through dull glass,  
She spent her life in one tremendous curse.

She cursed the man with sharp and scathing words,  
That hissed between her lips like poisoned adders:  
Then tottering to the door, she fell and died!

What cared the fiend for curses; he was rich.  
His skin was oiled with gold, and bitter words  
Fell from him easily as beads of rain.

He bade the neighbors take the corpse away.  
He did not fear the dying: but the dead  
Was not the pleasantest of company.

The day wore on. The man still bought and sold,  
And robbed and lied — that every day routine,  
Which is the holiest duty of the tribe.

But ever and anon something would flit  
Between him and the wall — or interpose  
Betwixt him and the paper when he wrote.

'Twas strange! He tried to brush the thing away  
As airy cobweb, but like curling smoke  
It rose again, and floated straight before him.

On every side, and every where he went,  
It followed him — each moment more distinct:  
And then it took the semblance of a shirt.

The man grew terror-sick — his craven eyes  
Glared on the spectre, and his icy heart  
Would have grown colder, if such thing could be.

He hurried home. His wife and children came  
To greet him as of old; when lo! between  
Their outstretched arms the horrid shape arose.

It floated everywhere. The radiant sky



Seemed blotted with its shadow; like a cloud  
It spread between his vision and the sun.

Then madness came. Out rushed he in the day,  
Down through the crowded streets he raved, and ran;  
But every with him ran that spectral thing!

The trees were glowing with the hues of spring —  
The robin sang 'mid greenness — but for him  
There never will again be bird or spring.

The river slept — the yellow sunbeams played  
Like smiles that light up dreamers — but he saw  
Nor sun, nor river; all was blind despair!

On, on he rushed. He never saw the brink:  
The shape obscured his vision like a mist —  
A plunge — a shriek! The river slept again.

#8: "The Tenement House," *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, Nov. 1861 (XXIII): 732 – 4.<sup>8</sup>

I

A nice little dinner at Ormolu's;  
A chosen few, and no ladies there:  
Every man is a millionaire,  
With ample waistcoat and creaking shoes.

The dinner, of course, is a great success —  
Dinners at Ormolu's always are —  
From the delicate bisque to the caviar,  
And the wild boar's head in its gaudy dress.

But better than all is the rich dessert,  
The season of large, well-fed repose,  
When calm delight through the system flows,  
And the brain deliciously lies inert.

Then the rich man sits in his easy chair,  
And dreamily sees his houses and gold  
In long processions of wealth unrolled,  
Like caravans crossing the fields of air.

Wine and walnuts,  
Walnuts and wine;  
Big grapes frosted with purple bloom;  
Odors floating all over the room  
From ruby claret and leathery Rhine;  
Frozen flasks of the dry Champagne,  
Crystal goblets of flint-like grain  
Flashing the light through a thousand prisms,  
And full of the tawny unctuous chrims  
That ooze from the oily vines of Spain.

Fleshy clusters of rich bananas,  
Citrons drowning in sirops of amber;  
And, curling cloudily through the chamber,  
Faint blue smoke from the fresh Havanas.

Over the wine the chat goes round —  
English consols and Erie stock;  
The newest invention, a patent lock,  
And how the Paragon Bank's unsound.

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<sup>8</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 304 – 308.

Money, money on every tongue;  
How to make it and how to lose it,  
How to keep it and how to use it —  
All the changes are duly rung.

Every guest round that shining board  
Only dreams of dollars and cents,  
Only dreams of the rise in rents,  
Only thinks of his gathering hoard.

And Ormolu at the table sits,  
Sipping with gusto that rich Latour;  
While a vague thanksgiving that he's not poor  
Over his gratified senses flits.

And somehow he sees, in a dreamy way,  
His tenement houses: — He owns a few,  
And capital profits they bring him too;  
For he knows how to make the tenants pay: —

He sees them squalid and black and tall,  
With rotten rafters and touch-wood stair,  
The scant rooms fetid with stagnant air,  
And the plaster membrane that's called a wall.

And he sees the swarms of life that huddle  
In and out and over and thorough,  
Till the buildings look like a human burrow  
Moated about with a loathsome puddle.

Crazy, filthy, and insecure,  
Hastily builded, and cheap and nasty,  
About as strong as fresh-baked pasty,  
But almost too good for vagrant poor.

The neighbors say that they must come down;  
From top to bottom each chamber rocks,  
As the roaring wind of the Equinox  
Blusters fiercely over the town.

And sometimes it seems that the neighbors think  
That if a fire should come that way,  
What splendid field it would have to play  
Through tottering chamber and gaping chink.

And how its serpentine tongue would curl

With fierce, insatiate appetite,  
Down the staircase's rotten flight,  
And over the roofs in a crimson whirl.

And how the fiery fiend would rifle  
Each crackling room of its human treasure;  
Drinking blood with a savage pleasure,  
And vomiting vapor to blind and stifle.

But what if it did? the tenement houses  
Are all insured to their fullest figure —  
Appraised and valued with utmost rigor —  
And so our friend Ormolu carouses.

Come, just one glass of this Clos Vougeot!  
An olive, though, first to give it a savor;  
That's a wine of the true grape flavor,  
Bottled exactly ten years ago!

See how it shines in amethyst splendor,  
Just where the lamp-light strikes it and shivers:  
This is the food for our sanguine rivers —  
Strong as Milo, as Venus tender!

The wine is praised and the bottle passes,  
And Ormolu looks all ripe and glowing;  
No black remorse to his heart is flowing  
As he gayly drinks from his aerial glasses.

## II

One, Two, Three, Four!  
The fire alarm comes loudly tolling,  
Over the roofs of the city rolling,  
And dying away on the island-shore.

One, two, three, four!  
Engines over the pavements leaping;  
While lusty tides of the firemen sweeping  
Down through the channeled avenues pour.

One, two, three, four!  
The panting foreman's trumpet bellows,  
"Pull her along and jump her fellows!  
All your muscle and something more!"

One, two, three, four!

The shrieking crowds of the boys that follow,  
The cries of the firemen hoarse and hollow,  
Startle the night with a fitful roar.

One, two, three, four!

The red shirts down to their labor settle;  
Every fellow is full of mettle,  
Muscle, and courage, and something more.

One, two, three, four!

Ormolu hears the fire-bell toll;  
It is his district — but, bless your soul!  
All is insured, and fires are a bore!

One, two, three, four!

These Burgundy wines make one feel misty,  
So here's a bottle of Lagrima Christi,  
Fresh from the indolent Naples shore.

The wine is praised, and the bottle passes —

Smoky Vesuvius is its sire —  
But Ormolu thinks never of fire,  
As he gayly drinks from his aerial glasses.

III

The tenement buildings are red and flaring,  
The narrow street with the crowd is choking,  
The opposite houses are hot and smoking,  
The windows like blood-shot eyes are glaring.

Golden jets, like fiery fountains,  
Over the tall roofs leap and spatter;  
Till, struck by the wind, they break and scatter,  
While ever the smoke piles up like mountains.

Fire, fire, fire, fire!

Hark to the roar of its hollow laughter,  
As it swirls all over each rotten rafter,  
Drunk with the heat of its own desire!

See how the jets from the hose-pipes battle

All in vain with the floods so furious;  
Hark to those sounds so hollow and curious,  
Like mournful lowing of distant cattle!

See how the blinded firemen clamber,  
Step by step, up the smoking ladder;  
And how the fire grows madder, madder,  
As it thrusts them off from that stifling chamber!

See how the crowds that are watching shiver,  
As they see in the midst of that tide abhorrent  
A black shape flash through the golden torrent,  
Like one that drowns in a fiery river!

See that woman at the window flicker,  
Holding a child in her hands and shrieking.  
Ah! she's gone, even while we're speaking,  
And every heart in the crowd grows sicker.

List to that sound that so hollowly rumbles!  
The firemen pause, for they know what's brewing;  
Then down with a roar, in a crimson ruin,  
Ormolu's tenement building tumbles.

Crushed and mangled with beam and girder,  
Five corpses lie in those tenement houses;  
And Ormolu with his guests carouses,  
Guilty, by Heaven, of all that murder!

#9: O'Brien's Letter to the *New York Times*, May 2, 1861.<sup>9</sup>

The scene at the armory on Friday was one to be commemorated. For the first time since its formation, the Seventh Regiment left its native City on active service. All day long, from an early hour in the morning, young men in uniforms or civilian's dress, might have been seen hurrying up and down Broadway, with anomalous looking bundles under their arms. . . . Hardware stores were ransacked of revolvers. A feverish excitement throbbled through the City – the beating of that big Northern pulse, so slow, so sure, and so steady.

At 3 o'clock, P. M., we mustered at the Armory, against which there beat a surge of human beings like waves against a rock. Within, all was commotion. Fitting of belts, wild lamentations over uniforms expected but not arrived. Hearty exchanges of comradeships between members of different companies, who felt that they were about to depart on a mission which might end in death. . . . At last the Regiment was formed in companies, and we marched. Was there ever such an ovation? . . . The marble walls of Broadway were never before rent with such cheers as greeted us when we passed. . . . An avenue of brave, honest faces smiled upon us . . . and sent a sunshine into our hearts that lives there still. . . .

The first evening, April 20, on board the *Boston*, passed delightfully. We were all in first-rate spirits, and the calm, sweet evenings that stole on us as we approached the South, diffused a soft and gentle influence over us. The scene on board the ship was exceedingly picturesque. Fellows fumbling in haversacks for rations, or extracting sandwiches from reluctant canteens; guards pacing up and down, with drawn bayonets; knapsacks piled in corners, bristling heaps of muskets, with sharp, shining teeth, crowded into every available nook; picturesque groups of men lolling on deck, pipe or cigar in mouth, indulged in the *dolce far niente*, as if they were on the blue shores of Capri rather than on their way to battle; unbuttoned jackets, crossed legs, heads leaning on knapsacks, blue uniforms everywhere, with here and there a glint of officers' red lighting up the foreground – all formed a scene that such painters as the English WARREN would have reveled in. . . .

Notwithstanding that we found very soon that the commissariat was in a bad way, the men were as jolly as sandboys. I never saw a more good-humored set of men in my life. Fellows who would at DELMONICO'S have sent back a turban *de volaille aux truffes* because the truffles were tough, here cheerfully took their places in file between decks, tin plates and tin cups in hand, in order to get an insufficient piece of beef and a vision of coffee. But it was all merrily done. The scant fare was seasoned with hilarity; and I here say to those people in New-York who have sneered at the Seventh Regiment as being dandies and guilty of the unpardonable crimes of cleanliness and kid gloves, that they would cease to scoff and remain to bless, had they beheld the square, honest, genial way in which these military Brummells rough it. . . .

Some men in the regiment who have fine voices – and their name is legion – had been singing, with all that delicious effect that music at sea produces, several of the finest psalms in our liturgy. . . . While we were singing, the moon swung clear into air, and round her white disc was seen three circles, clear and distinct – *red, white and blue!* The omen was caught by common instinct, and a thousand cheers went up to that Heaven that seemed in its visible signs to manifest its approval of the cause in which we were about to fight. . . .

On the afternoon of the 22d we landed at the Annapolis dock, after having spent hours in trying to relieve the Maryland. For the first time in his life your correspondent was put to work to

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<sup>9</sup> Francis Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien: A Literary Bohemian of the Eighteen-Fifties* (Boulder, Colorado: University of Colorado, 1944), 210 – 213.

roll flour barrels. He was entrusted with the honorable and onerous duty of transporting stores from the steamer to the dock. Later still he descended to the position of mess-servant, when, in company with gentlemen well known in Broadway for immaculate kids, he had the honor of attending on his company with buckets of cooked meat and crackers. The only difference between him and Oc. And the ordinary waiter being, that the former were civil.

After this I had the pleasing duty of performing three house of guard duty on the dock, with a view to protect the baggage and stores. It was monotonous – being my first guard – but not unpleasant. . . .

All surmises were put an end to by our receiving orders, the evening of the 23d, to assemble in marching order next morning. The dawn saw us up. Knapsacks, with our blankets and overcoats strapped on them, were piled on the green. A brief and insufficient breakfast was taken, our canteens filled with vinegar and water, cartridges distributed to each man, and after mustering and loading, we started on our first march through a hostile country. . . .

We marched the first eight miles under a burning sun, in heavy marching order, in less than three hours; and it is well known that, placing all elementary considerations out of the way, marching on a railroad track is the most harassing. . . .

The tracks had been torn up between Annapolis and the Junction, and here it was that we wonderful qualities of the Massachusetts Eighth Regiment came out. The locomotives had been taken to pieces by the inhabitants, in order to prevent our travel. In steps a Massachusetts volunteer, looks at the piece-meal engine, takes up a flange, and says coolly, “I made this engine, and I can put it together again.” Engineers were wanted when the engine was ready. Nineteen stepped out of the ranks. The rails were torn up. Practical railroad-makers out of the Regiment laid them again, and all this, mind you without care or food. These brave boys, I say, were starving while they were doing all this good work. What their Colonel was doing I can’t say. As we marched along the track that they had laid, they greeted us with ranks of smiling but hungry faces. One boy told me, with a laugh on his young lips, that he had not ate anything for thirty hours. There was not, thank God, a haversack in our Regiment that was not emptied into the hands of these ill-treated heroes, nor a flask that was not at their disposal. . . .

After a brief rest of about an hour, we again commenced our march; a march which lasted until the next morning – a march than which in history nothing but those marches in which defeated troops have fled from the enemy can equal. . . . As we went along the railroad we threw out skirmishing parties from the Second and Sixth Companies, to keep the road clear. I know not if I can describe the night’s march. I have dim recollections of deep cuts through which we passed, gloomy and treacherous-looking, with the moon shining full on our muskets, while the banks were wrapped in shade, and each moment expecting to see the flash and hear the crack of the rifle of the Southern guerrilla. The tree frogs and lizards made a mournful music as we passed. The soil on which we traveled was soft and heavy. The sleepers lying at intervals across the track made the marching terribly fatiguing. On all sides dark, lonely pine woods stretched away, and high over the hooting of owls or the plaintive petition of the whip-poor-will rose the bass commands of Halt! Forward, march! – and when we came to any ticklish spot the word would run from the head of the column along the line, “Holes,” “Bridge, pass it along,” &c.

As the night wore on the monotony of the march became oppressive. Owing to our having to explore every inch of the way, we did not make more than a mile and a half an hour. We ran out of stimulants, and almost out of water. Most of us had not slept for four nights, and as the night advanced our march was almost a stagger. This was not so much fatigue as want to excitement. . . .



The fact that since then all the Northern troops have passed through the line that we thus opened, is a sufficient comment on the admirable judgment that decided on the movement.

#10: "The Seventh," *The New York Daily Times*, May 2, 1861.<sup>10</sup>

I

Och! we're the boys  
That hearts desthroys  
Wid making love and fighting;  
We take a fort,  
The girls we court,  
But most the last delight in.  
To fire a gun,  
Or raise some fun,  
To us is no endeavor;  
So let us hear  
One hearty cheer,  
The Seventh's lads forever!  
*Chorus.* — For we're the boys  
That hearts desthroys,  
Wid making love and fighting;  
We take a fort,  
The girls we court,  
But most the last delight in.

II

There's handsome Joe,  
Whose constant flow  
Of merriment unfailing,  
Upon the tramp,  
Or in the camp,  
Will keep our hearts from ailing.  
And B — and Chat,  
Who might have sat  
For Pythias and Damon,  
Och! whin they get  
Their heavy wet,  
They get as high as Haman.  
*Chorus.* — For we're the boys  
That hearts desthroys, &c.

III

Like Jove above,  
We're fond of love,  
But fonder still of victuals;

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<sup>10</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 290 – 292.

Wid turtle steaks,  
An' codfish cakes,  
We always fills our kittles.  
To dhrown aich dish,  
We dhrinks like fish,  
And Mumm's the word we utter;  
An' thin we swill  
Our Léoville,  
That oils our throats like butther.  
*Chorus.* — For we're the boys  
That hearts desthroys, &c.

#### IV

We make from hay  
A splindid tay,  
From beans a gorgeous coffee;  
Our crame is prime,  
With chalk and lime —  
In fact, 'tis quite a throphy.  
Our chickens roast.  
Wid butthered toast,  
I'm sure would timpt St. Pether.  
Now, you'll declare  
Our bill of fare  
It couldn't be complether.  
*Chorus.* — For we're the boys  
That hearts desthroys, &c.

#### V

Now, silence all,  
While I recall  
A memory sweet and tender;  
The maids and wives  
That light our lives  
With deep, enduring splendor.  
We'll give no cheer  
For those so dear,  
But in our hearts we'll bless them,  
And pray to-night  
That angels bright  
May watch them and caress them.  
*Chorus.* — For we're the boys  
That hearts desthroys,  
Wid making love and fighting;

We take a fort,  
The girls we court,  
But most the last delight in.

#11: "The Midnight March," unpublished poem,<sup>11</sup>

All along the weary miles,  
Down through the dark defiles,  
Through the woods of pine and larch,  
Under midnight's solemn arch,  
Came the heavy sounding march  
    Of the Seventh!

Scouts out on either flank,  
Searching close through dike and bank,  
Sweeping with their restless eyes  
Every hollow, cut and rise,  
Guarding from the foe's surprise,  
    All the Seventh!

Every pine-tree's jagged limb  
In the black night looked grim;  
And each dense thicket's shade  
Seemed to hold an ambuscade;  
Yet no soldier was afraid  
    In the Seventh!

Plod! plod! plod! plod!  
Over gravel, over sod,  
Over uptorn railroad-tracks,  
With their bending belted backs,  
Waiting — hoping vain attacks,  
    Marched the Seventh!

"Halt! Rest!" along the line;  
Down every man supine  
In the wet gravel lay,  
Hugging with delight the clay,  
Longing for the light of day  
    On the Seventh!

Though the dark night was serene,  
Never foeman's form was seen;  
Though like flies they buzzed around,  
Haunting every shady ground,  
Fleeing at the slightest sound  
    From the Seventh!

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<sup>11</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 271 – 272. Wolfe estimates that the poem was written in 1861. It was printed in *The History of the Seventh Regiment*, edited by Colonel Emmons Clark, Vol. II, New York, 1890.

So we marched till night was gone,  
And the heavens were blessed with dawn;  
But, History, with immortal hand,  
Must yet record how firm and grand  
Was that march through Maryland  
Of the Seventh!

#12: "The Countersign," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Aug. 1861 (XXIII): 396.<sup>12</sup>

Alas! the weary hours pass slow,  
The night is very dark and still,  
And in the marshes far below  
I hear the bearded whip-poor-will.  
I scarce can see a yard ahead,  
My ears are strained to catch each sound;  
I hear the leaves about me shed,  
And the springs bubbling through the ground.

Along the beaten path I pace,  
Where white rags mark my sentry's track,  
In formless shrubs I seem to trace  
The foeman's form with bending back.  
I think I see him crouching low,  
I stop and list — I stoop and peer —  
Until the neighboring hillocks grow  
To groups of soldiers far and near.

With ready piece I wait and watch,  
Until mine eyes, familiar grown,  
Detect each harmless earthen notch,  
And turn guerrillas into stone.  
And then amid the lonely gloom,  
Beneath the weird old tulip trees,  
My silent marches I resume,  
And think on other times than these.

Sweet visions through the silent night!  
The deep bay-windows fringed with vine;  
The room within, in softened light,  
The tender, milk-white hand in mine,  
The timid pressure, and the pause  
That oftentimes overcame our speech —  
That time when by mysterious laws  
We each felt all in all to each.

And then, that bitter, bitter day,  
When came the final hour to part,  
When clad in soldier's honest gray,  
I pressed her weeping to my heart.  
Too proud of me to bid me stay,  
Too fond of me to let me go,

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<sup>12</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 294 – 295.

I had to tear myself away,  
And left her stolid in her woe.

So rose the dream — so passed the night —  
When distant in the darksome glen,  
Approaching up the sombre height,  
I heard the solid march of men;  
Till over stubble, over sward,  
And fields where lay the golden sheaf,  
I saw the lantern of the guard  
Advancing with the night relief.

“Halt! who goes there?” my challenge cry:  
It rings along the watchful line.  
“Relief!” I hear a voice reply.  
“Advance, and give the countersign!”  
With bayonet at the charge, I wait,  
The corporal gives the mystic spell;  
With arms at port I charge my mate,  
And onward pass, and all is well.

But in the tent that night awake,  
I think, if in the fray I fall,  
Can I the mystic answer make  
Whene'er the angelic sentries call?  
And pray that Heaven may so ordain,  
That when I near the camp divine,  
Whether in travail or in pain,  
I too may have the countersign.

CAMP CAMERON, *July*, 1861.



#13: "The Prisoner of War," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Feb. 1862 (XXIV): 348.<sup>13</sup>

As I lie in my cot at night, and look through the open door,  
And watch the silken sky that is woven with threads of stars,  
While the white tents sleep on the field like sheep on a tawny moor,  
And the hushed streets traverse the camp like dusky bars,  
I think of my comrade afar, lying down in a Southern cell,  
With his life on a paper lot and a loving heart on his life,  
And my blood boils up in my veins, and I feel like a fiend of hell,  
And I long to vent my hate and my rage in strife.

I loved him with all my love; loved him even as well as she  
Whose hair he carried away in a locket close to his heart;  
I remember how jealous I felt when under the sycamore-tree,  
The night ere the regiment started, I saw them part.  
We had been chums together; had studied and drank in tune;  
The joy or the grief that struck him rebounded also on me —  
As his joy arose mine followed, as waters follow the moon,  
And his tears found their way to my heart as a stream to the sea.

I sing the irregular song of a soul that is bursting with pain!  
There is no metre for sorrow, no rhythm for real despair —  
Go count the feet of the wind as it tramples the naked plain,  
Or mimic the silent sadness of snow in the air!  
I can not control my heart, nor my innate desire of song,  
I only know that a wild and impetuous grief,  
A fierce, athletic, vengeful feeling of wrong  
Beats at my brain to-night and must have relief!

Spite of all I do to crush it, his sorrowful face will come,  
Come with its awful frame-work of interlaced bars and stone,  
And out of his patient visage, and lips that are terribly dumb,  
I hear the imprisoned whisper, "I am alone!"  
Solitude thus for him, the life and soul of his throng!  
Whose wit electric wakened the sluggish board;  
Whose voice, though sweet in converse, was sweeter still in song;  
Whose heart like a cornucopia always poured!

I mind me when by the Charles River we twain have walked,  
Close to the elms so hallowed in unwritten song,  
And over the College topics gravely pondered and talked,  
With devious student ideas of Right and Wrong.  
Ah! The river flows there in its usual placid way;  
The wherries are moored at the boat-house, the elm-trees leaf

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<sup>13</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 309 – 310.

and fall,  
But there is not a voice that now could make the old College gay,  
His dusty cap and his gown are worth them all.

How can he be a prisoner there when I have him here in my heart?  
Closer I hold his image than they in the South hold him;  
It is wrapped and corded with fibres that never, never will part,  
And shrined in Love and Friendship instead of a dungeon grim.  
Up on the fatal bluff where the gallant Baker fell,  
And the foe, insidious, fired from thicket and copse and tree —  
There, after fighting long and bravely and well,  
The friend of my heart was cut off as a stream by the sea!

Lying here in my tent at night, and looking out at the door,  
It is I who am the prisoner, not you, O! beloved friend;  
It is I who feel the shackles, and the prick of the healing sore,  
And all the prison sufferings without end.  
I see the mocking faces all day through the windows stare —  
I know they are staring at you, but they sneeringly lower on  
me —  
And I swear an oath as sacred as a soldier ever can swear  
That I will be with you there, or you will be free!

*In Camp, December, 1861.*

#14: "A Soldier's Letter," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Mar. 1862 (XXIV): 508.<sup>14</sup>

January 20, 1862

With the head of a drum for my desk, I sit on a Southern slope,  
While the sunlight streaks the apples that hang in the orchard hard by,  
And puzzle my brains over verses and many a marvelous trope,  
And vainly seek inspiration from out the sky.  
What can I tell you now that you have not known before?  
How dearly I love you, Mary, and how hard the parting was;  
And how bravely you kissed my lips when we stood at the open door,  
And blessed me for going with heart and hand in the Cause.  
Oh! sweet as a lily flushed with the red of the roses near  
When beat by the hot, implacable sun above,  
Was the hue of your angel face as tear after tear  
Rose to your ivory eyelids and welled with love!

War is not quite so hard as you poor townspeople think;  
We have plenty of food to eat, and a good warm blanket at night,  
And now and then, you know, a quiet, moderate drink:  
Which doesn't hurt us, dearest, and makes things right.  
But the greatest blessing of all is the total want of care;  
The happy, complete reliance of the carefully-guardianed child  
Who has no thought for his dinner, and is given good clothes to wear,  
And whose leisure moments are with innocent sports beguiled.  
The drill of the soldier is pleasant if one works with a willing heart,  
It is only the worthless fellow that grumbles at double-quick;  
I like the ingenious manœuvres that constitute war an art,  
And not even the cleaning of arms can make me sick.

One of the comrades five that sleep in the tent with me  
Is a handsome, fair-faced boy, with curling sun-burned hair;  
Like me, he has left a sweet-heart on the shore of the Northern sea,  
And, like her I love, he says she also is good and fair.  
So we talk of our girls at night when the other chaps are asleep —  
Talk in the sacred whispers that are low with the choke of love —  
And often when we are silent I think I can hear him weep,  
And murmur her name in accents that croon like the nesting dove.  
Then when we are out on picket, and the nights are calm and still,  
When our beats lie close together, we pause and chatter the same;  
And the weary hours pass swiftly, till over the distant hill  
The sun comes up unclouded and fierce with flame.

The scene that I look on is lovely! The cotton-fields smooth and white,

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<sup>14</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 320 – 321.

With the bending negroes shelling the flocculent bursting pods,  
And the quiet sentinels slowly pacing the neighboring height,  
And now and then hidden by groups of the golden-rods.  
Beautiful are the isles that mottle the slumberous bay;  
Beautiful are the azure veins of the creeks;  
Beautiful is the crimson that, far away,  
Burns on the woods like the paint on an Indian's cheeks!  
Beautiful are the thoughts of the time when — Hist!  
What sound is that I hear? 'Tis the rifle's continuous crack!  
The long roll beats to arms! I must not — can not be missed —  
Dear love, I'll finish this letter when I come back.

*January 30*

Don't be startled, my darling, at this handwriting not being mine:  
I have been a little ill, and the comrade I spoke of before  
Has kindly offered to take from my loving lips this line;  
So he holds, as you see, the pen I can hold no more.  
That was a skirmish that came as I wrote to you out on the hill;  
We had sharp fighting a while, and I lost my arm —  
There! Don't cry, my darling! — it will not kill,  
And other poor fellows there met greater harm.  
I have my left arm still to fold you close to my heart,  
All the strength of my lost one will pass into that, I know;  
We will be soon together, never, never to part,  
And to suffer thus for your country is bliss, not woe!

#15: "How the Bell Rang (July 4, 1776)," *Harper's Weekly*, Jul. 4, 1857 (I): 418.<sup>15</sup>

There was tumult in the city,  
    In the quaint old Quaker town,  
And the streets were black with people  
    Pacing restless up and down;  
People gathering in corners,  
    Where they whispered each to each,  
And the sweat stood on their temples  
    With the earnestness of speech.

As the black Atlantic currents  
    Lash the wild Newfoundland shore,  
So they beat against the State House,  
    So they surged against its door;  
And the mingling of their voices  
    Made a harmony profound,  
Till the quiet street of Chestnuts  
    Was all turbulent with sound.

"Will they do it?" "Dare they do it?"  
    "Who is speaking?" "What's the news?"  
"What of Adams?" "What of Carroll?"  
    "Oh, God grant they won't refuse!"  
"Make some way there!" "Let me nearer!"  
    "I am stifling!" "Stifle, then! —  
When a nation's life's at hazard,  
    We've no time to think of men!"

So they beat against the portal,  
    Man and woman, maid and child;  
And the July sun in Heaven,  
    On the crowd looked down and smiled.  
The same sun that saw the Spartan  
    Shed his patriot-blood in vain,  
Now beheld the Soul of Freedom,  
    All unconquered, rise again!

So they beat against the portal,  
    While all solemnly inside,  
The delegates to Congress,  
    With but reason for their guide;  
O'er a simple scroll debated,  
    Which, though simple it might be,

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<sup>15</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 158 – 160.

Could shake the cliffs of England  
With the thunders of the Free!

At the portal of the State House,  
Like some beacon in a storm  
Round which waves are wildly beating,  
Stood a slender, boyish form,  
With his eyes fixed on the steeple  
And his ears agape with greed,  
To catch the first announcement  
Of the signing of the deed.

Aloft in that high steeple  
Sat the bellman old and gray,  
He was sick of British power,  
He was sick of British pay;  
So he sat with lean hand ready  
On the clapper of the bell,  
When signaled from the portal,  
The happy news to tell.

See! See! the black crowd shivers  
Through all its lengthy line,  
As the boy upon the portal  
Looks up and gives the sign;  
And straightway at the signal  
The old Bellman lifts his hand,  
And sends the good news waking  
Iron music through the land!

How they shouted! what rejoicing!  
How the old bell shook the air,  
'Till the clang of Freedom ruffled  
The calm-gliding Delaware!  
How the bonfires and the torches  
Illumed the night's repose,  
And from the flames, like Phoenix,  
Slaughtered Liberty arose!

The old bell now is silent,  
And hushed its iron tongue,  
But the spirit it awakened  
Still lives forever young.  
And while we breathe the sunlight,  
On the Fourth of this July,  
Let us not forget the Bellman,

Who, 'twixt the earth and sky,  
Rang out our Independence,  
Which, please God, shall never die!

#16: "Independence Bell," *The New York Saturday Press*, July 7, 1860.<sup>16</sup>

There was a tumult in the city,  
    In the quaint old Quaker's town,  
And the streets were rife with people  
    Pacing restless up and down;  
People gathering at corners,  
    Where they whispered each to each,  
And the sweat stood on their temples,  
    With the earnestness of speech.

As the bleak Atlantic currents  
    Lash the wild Newfoundland shore,  
So they beat against the State-House,  
    So they surged against the door;  
And the mingling of their voices  
    Made a harmony profound,  
'Till the quiet street of chestnuts  
    Was all turbulent with sound.

"Will they do it?" "Dare they do it?" —  
    "Who is speaking?" — "What's the news?" —  
"What of Adams?" — "What of Sherman?"  
    "O! God grant they won't refuse!"  
"Make some way there!" — "Let me nearer!" —  
    "I am stifling!" — "Stifle, then!"  
When a nation's life's at hazard,  
    We've no time to think of men!"

So they beat against the portal,  
    Man and woman, maid and child;  
And the July sun in heaven  
    On the scene looked down and smiled;  
The same sun that saw the Spartan  
    Shed his patriot-blood in vain,  
Now beheld the soul of freedom  
    All unconquered rise again.

So they surged against the State-House,  
    While all solemnly inside,  
Sat the "Continental Congress,"  
    Truth and reason for their guide.  
O'er a simple scroll debating, —  
    Which, though simple it might be, —

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<sup>16</sup> Irish, *Fitz-James O'Brien: Poetry & Music*, 246 – 248.



Yet should shake the cliffs of England  
With the thunders of the free.

At the portal of the State-House,  
Like some beacon in a storm,  
Round which waves are wildly beating,  
Stood a slender boyish-form;  
With his eyes fixed on the steeple,  
And his ears agape with greed  
To catch the first announcement  
Of the “signing” of the deed.

Aloft, in that high steeple  
Sat the bellman, old and grey; —  
He was weary of the tyrant  
And his iron-sceptred sway,  
So he sat, with one hand ready  
On the clapper of the bell  
When his eye could catch the signal,  
The happy news to tell.

See! See! The dense crowd quivers  
Through all its lengthy line,  
As the boy beside the portal  
Looks forth to give the sign!  
With his small hands upward lifted,  
Breezes dallying with his hair,  
Hark! with deep, clear intonation,  
Breaks his young voice on the air.

Hushed the people’s swelling murmur,  
List the boy’s strong joyous cry!  
“*Ring!*” he shouts, “*Ring! Grandpa!*  
*Ring! O! Ring for Liberty!*”  
And straightway, at the signal,  
The old bellman lifts his hand,  
And sends the good news, making  
Iron-music through the land.

How they shouted! What rejoicing!  
How the old bell shook the air,  
Till the clang of freedom ruffled  
The calm gliding Delaware!  
How the bonfires and the torches  
Illumed the night’s repose,  
And from the flames, like Phœnix,

Fair liberty arose!

That old bell now is silent,  
And hushed its iron tongue,  
But the spirit it awakened  
Still lives, — forever young.  
And while we greet the sunlight,  
On the fourth of each July,  
We'll ne'er forget the bellman,  
Who, twixt the earth and sky,  
Rung out Our Independence;  
Which, please God, *shall never die!*

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