"THE MORAL HURT OF NOVEL READING": METHODISM AND AMERICAN FICTION, 1865-1914

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"The deterioration of the moral nature is one of the pernicious effects of novel reading."
—James H. Potts, Editor, Michigan Christian Advocate (1908)

"The novelists might be the greatest possible help to us if they painted life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation, but for the most part they have been and are altogether noxious."

In 1867, American novelist T. W. Higginson published, "A Plea for Culture" in The Atlantic Monthly in which he asserted that "we [the United States] are hardly yet to be ranked among the productive nations in literature." The development of American literature was slow in coming and the full harvest would be "postponed for another hundred years." While the United States was on its way to becoming the economic super power of the world, entering a period of significant growth and prosperity, its cultural output seemed to lag far behind its industrial production. With a defensive spirit, Methodist Professor W. F. Whitlock of Ohio University explained that "[a] great literature is the product of time and leisure; England has had at least five centuries of effort, America but one, and in that short time our people have had enough to do aside from the development of literature." Yet, the writers that emerged in the years between the Civil War and World War I (1865-1914), writers in the new literary modes of realism and then naturalism, are among the most celebrated in American literature: Mark Twain and Bret Harte in the 1860s, Ambrose Bierce, William Dean Howells, Henry James and Sarah Orne Jewett in the 1870s, Harold Frederic and Helen Hunt Jackson in the 1880s, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Stephen Crane, Kate Chopin, and Frank Norris in the 1890s, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, and Edith Wharton in the first decade of the 20th century.

1 "The Moral Hurt of Novel Reading," Michigan Christian Advocate (henceforth MCA), July 11, 1908, 1. (All MCA articles cited were written by Editor James Henry Potts unless otherwise stated).
and Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Sinclair Lewis in the second. The period also produced some of America's fondest children's tales in The Wizard of Oz (L. Frank Baum, 1900), Little Lord Fauntleroy (Frances Hodgson Burnett, 1886), and Little Women (Louisa May Alcott, 1869), the premier western in The Virginian (Owen Wister, 1902), the rags to riches tales of Horatio Alger, the development of African-American fiction in the works of Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins and Charles Waddell Chestnutt, and such well-known religious novels as Ben-Hur (Lew Wallace, 1880) and In His Steps (Charles Sheldon, 1897). Before the arrival of the popular cultural juggernauts of the cinema and radio, the novel stood among the forefront of entertainment options luring Americans during their personal time. The Methodist Episcopal Church, alarmed by its rising influence, initiated a campaign against the novel, believing it to be a veritable struggle for the soul of America. 5

Fiction, in all its forms, was sold in a variety of options ranging from attractive (and more expensive) hard cover editions to inexpensive and easily accessible dime novels as well as in literary periodicals and pulp fiction magazines to feed an eager public. The volume of this literature was simply enormous. 6 In 1895, for example, 1,400 new novels were printed in the United States and by 1903 there were over 3,000 books printed. 7 Not surprisingly, booksellers vied with one another for their share of this lucrative market. When best-selling books were released, general stores often sold them at greatly discounted prices in order to draw customers—much to the frustration of bookstores unable to offer such discounts. 8 Instead of buying, many Americans turned to their public libraries where, by 1900, works of fiction accounted for 75% of books circulated. The novel's looming presence had, by then, made it a worthy subject of academic study at institutions of higher education. 9 Its persuasive power even affected American governmental action. Reading The Jungle (Upton Sinclair, 1906), President Theodore Roosevelt was appalled by the Chicago meat packing industry's horrid behavior of routinely and profitably packaging rotten meat, rats, and other inedible animal parts for American consumption. His response led to the creation of the US Food and Drug Administration.

5 The majority of novels printed.
6 "Interesting Books," MCA, July 11, 1891, 1.
The novel’s literary hold on the American mind became a source of concern to the Methodist Episcopal Church which viewed it as a threat to American character for, as future Bishop J. F. Berry explained, “[t]he influence of reading in the formation of character is so generally admitted ... that it requires neither elaborate proof nor extended illustration. Next to the society in which we mingle, the books and periodicals we read form the cast of our minds ... and in fact make us what we are.”10 The novelist’s influence, it was argued, weakened that of the preacher’s in shaping American lives, “The reading mind controls the world....Writers of fiction have largest access to that reading, ruling mind.”11 This influence, Methodists believed, resulted in a decline in Bible reading and a waning of Christian virtue as the grasp of the church loosened on the lives of Americans.12 In the face of this cultural change, an idealistic view of the past emerged in which the church once had “undisputed sway,” while at present “its authority and domination are challenged now by ... the modern printing press.”13 W. D. Howells, in _The Rise of Silas Lapham_ (1885), expressed it through the voice of the aristocratic Bromfield Corey, “All civilization comes through literature now, especially in our country. ... Once we were softened, if not polished, by religion; but I suspect that the pulpit counts for much less now in civilizing.”14 Methodists viewed this cultural shift with hostility and hoped to protect American society by returning to the purity of the imagined past. Thus began a competition for prominence in influencing the public and preserving, as Methodists viewed it, righteousness in America.

This was not an esoteric theological conflict, but one of the most practical and urgent concerns. Novels, they argued, morally corrupted readers, resulting in crime and disorder in American communities.15 This was a prevalent and pervasive threat, “In every city and town may be found cheap news stands, generally indoors, where sensational fiction is freely dispensed to boys and youth, always to their hurt and frequently to their ruin.” The flames of moral decay were fanned by the greed of booksellers (and publishers), described as “...gray-haired, withered old men, who smoke their pipes at ease on the profits from nickels which innocent boys pay them for printed poison.”16 _Michigan Christian Advocate_ Editor James H. Potts, echo-

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10 “Our Church Literature,” _MCA_, June 6, 1885, 1. For a literary account of the influence of novels, see note 23.
14 Howells, 108.
ing the sentiments of the Detroit Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, called for Methodists to "shun every book that is morally tainted." He championed this cause during his editorial career from the 1870s to the second decade of the 20th century, regularly publishing front-page editorials that proclaimed the dangers of novel reading and warned Methodists to turn away. The negative influence of the novel, it was feared, might even be greater than the positive influence of other Christians.

To persuade readers, The Michigan Christian Advocate simply reported the "facts" which "proved" that novel reading was destructive for "dime novels ruin boys. Fetid fiction ruins girls. No person can pour over prurient reading matter without hurt." It reported that the consequences for youth who read these novels were "petty crimes and annoying mischief" and the formation of criminal gangs. One such example was a "gang" of eleven boys, aged 10-16, two of whom were arrested for theft. What led such boys from virtue to vice? The answer was clear. "They were all novel readers, and were wildly anxious to distinguish themselves as cowboys, pirates, and other famed nuisances." Novels and youth were a volatile mix with crime being "the inevitable result of permitting the young mind to feed on such unwholesome food.... We wish the venders of such literature could be reached and punished." The printing and sale of this literature was perceived by Methodists as a "crime worse than the opium-trade forced upon China, or the liquor traffic in Africa." Parents were warned to monitor carefully the books their children were obtaining from corner drug stores and public libraries lest their own children be led astray.

The Michigan Christian Advocate presented the startling "evidence" that "[a]lmost all the boys brought before criminal courts ascribe their downfall to impure reading" and throughout the United States "...gangs of thieves organized under rules and compacts worthy only of western bandits, to pilfer stores, woodsheds, and even to waylay other boys.... The criminality of all such is in every case traceable to dime novels and nickel murder stories." In 1885 the Detroit Conference declared that this literature's "pernicious character and tendency...is to the mind and morals of the innocent and unsuspecting what slow poison is to the body. It makes a pretense of love for truth, purity and honor, but aims a deathblow at them all and carries

17 "Interesting Books," MCA July 11, 1891, 1.
19 "Filthy Fiction Will Wreck Any Life," MCA, April 13, 1907, 1.
22 "Beware of Corrupting Fiction," MCA, December 3, 1901, 1.
23 "Filthy Fiction Will Wreck Any Life," MCA, April 13, 1907, 1. Cf., Tom Sawyer in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn where Tom's actions were so frequently (and comically) modeled on those he read in novels.
with it a suppressed contempt for the proprieties and purities of behavior prescribed by good society. Like an infection in the air, the unthinking are poisoned before they are aware of its presence.”24 The modern novel, as a perceived root cause of crime, was therefore a fundamental threat to American society.

The presence and influence of the novel in society seemed to explain, according to this perspective, the rise in criminal activity during the late 19th century. As Americans turned from church and Bible to the novel, the results were witnessed in the challenges experienced by America’s burgeoning urban centers. The complicated issues of social and economic injustice could thus be reduced to the problem of morality. The cause of moral corruption stemmed from reading novels (as well as newspapers with their sordid accounts of crime and violence).25 Whereas the church benefitted the nation by building a moral foundation, the novel only chipped away at it.

The “evidence” against the novel was not limited to the charge that it corrupted youth, creating criminals out of young minds. The charge was supplemented by testimony that the novel damaged the mind itself, for it was believed that novel reading also caused mental illness. “The son of a distinguished statesman, given to novel reading, was expelled from college ‘as a dolt and a nuisance.’ A Massachusetts physician had a patient who became insane, incurably insane, from reading novels.”26 The novel “intoxicated” the minds of its readers, deprived them of rest, and “shattered” their health, making “their prospect of usefulness blighted.”27 The novel did not offer the intellectual challenge necessary to keep the mind strong and so “[h]aving no vigorous exercise, it grows puny, soft, Milky, watery, and tends to decay ... much of the insanity of the age is attributable to such pernicious reading habits.”28 Editor Potts continued to publish this “evidence” into the second decade of the 20th century.

The novel also presented an obstacle to building a just and moral American society for it prevented readers from engaging in the struggle. Novels transformed readers from active participants in society to passive recipients of stories. The end result was that readers were turned away from “moral effectiveness” since:

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

Novel reading, in fact, "weakens the whole intellectual function and contributes to silliness. ... The novels are crowded with exciting tales one after the other ... and he lives and dies in a pitiable state of novel-drunkenness." If the Methodist vision for America was to be accomplished, it required vigorous hands, willing and able to adhere to the guidance and the regulation of the church, not those whose minds were directed toward the fancy of fiction.

Yet another charge against the novel was that it threatened the faith of Christians. Many believed, Editor Potts concluded, that contemporary American fiction was blatantly anti-Christian. He declared that nearly every recent novel has "either contained a studied sentiment hostile to evangelical religion or a studied silence upon the subject when a positive word needed to be spoken." Potts rejected the value of the plethora of novels that fit into the category of Christian fiction, since they "for the most part contained either diluted Christian doctrine or such a mixture of error with truth as to render the effect anything but wholesome." He fumed that novelists only introduced Christianity in order to disparage it or to portray Christians "whose every word and deed are a travesty on true piety or an impressive suggestion that all religious profession is the baldest hypocrisy." Why, he wondered, could they never "make a hero of a robust, square, uncompromising, intelligent, and triumphant Christian."

A final charge was that the novel threatened the stability of society by undermining the American family. The rising divorce rate in American society was a great concern to the Methodist Episcopal Church. It appeared that the modern novel was a cause of the problem for in them the public found that "[n]ot infrequently the sanctities and obligations of marriage are lightly esteemed, Christian restraints are ridiculed, and the bonds of virtuous society are loosely held or are utterly disrupted." The campaign against the novel was a fight to save the family. The novel even turned young women away from their responsibilities and roles within the family structure. The Michigan Christian Advocate reported on a young woman who, while read-

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29 "Novel-Reading," *MCA*, February 13, 1886, 1. See also, "The Moral Hurt of Novel Reading," *MCA*, July 11, 1908, 1. For another view: Rev. William Thomas McElroy of Kentucky explained that one who has had a "...trying day at the office, who has worried over financial affairs, who has been cheated or made unhappy by misfortune or false friends, may come home to his cheerful library and...may lose his cares and his heartaches..." in Rev. William Thomas McElroy of Kentucky, "The Pleasure of Good Books," *MCA*, December 6, 1913, 1.


ing a novel, attracted the attention of several gentlemen. When their conversation turned to matters of homemaking, she replied, “Well, I don’t know much about house keepin’ and such like, but when it comes to anything litter’y, I’m there.” Since the social, moral, and mental health danger was so great, Editor Potts believed it was his duty to castigate a young boy on a train whom he witnessed reading a dime-novel, fearing for the damage he was doing not only to his personal and spiritual health, but also to the well-being of the nation.

Many Methodist leaders, like Editor Potts, condemned the current literary age, arguing that America’s great writers (like Irving and Cooper) were all dead and gone. Others, however, expressed a more balanced and optimistic view. Dr. J. W. Mendenhall, editor of the Methodist Review, argued that a more refined approach was needed for “wholesale denunciation of novel literature is unwise and useless” since the “[t]he novel is a powerful factor in society, and must be recognized. It would better be employed as an instrument of righteousness than as an instrument of evil. It has promoted reforms, stimulated philanthropies, encouraged moralities. With a broadened mission, it may become the ally of the pulpit, home, and country.” Having said that, he added, it must be treated carefully, “Discrimination in reading novels is a necessity.” Therefore, it was not for the young at all. Youth must build up a foundation of knowledge by reading history, poetry, biography, and by travels, rather than expose themselves to the challenge of novels. Fiction must wait until the mind is suitably matured and the soul spiritually prepared. Simply put, “The novel may be taken up later in life.”

Given the scope of the charges against the novel, what was the Methodist strategy for a solution?

Ministers believed that it was their duty to turn the minds of Christians to other, more edifying, literature. The most convenient means to provide an alternative was to rely on the books published by the Methodist press, the Book Concern. Professor W. F. Whitlock explained that “Methodist literature has been a great antidote to pernicious literature. The former has kept the latter out of many homes; often has displaced it where found, and restrained the injurious tendencies of what was allowed to remain.”

Founded in 1789, the Book Concern’s purpose was to publish pious reading

32 “Public Library Books,” MCA, March 17, 1894, 1.
34 J. W. Mendenhall, “Novel Literature: its history and Ethics,” Methodist Review (July-August, 1888), 558-582. Editor Potts disseminated this information to the general public in “The Ethics of Novels,” MCA July 21, 1888, 1.
35 “Public Library Books,” MCA, March 17, 1894, 1.
for the enrichment of church and society.\textsuperscript{37} The Methodist Episcopal Church viewed this ministry as “one of the most important of the church,” since “the demand for reading matter of some kind is universal” but “...a large percent of the literature of our time is of pernicious character. Novel reading is the rule. The ban which society once put upon the objectionable of this class of literature is quite removed, and much of it is found even in Christian homes.”\textsuperscript{38} Some even advocated that it might be best for Methodists to read only Methodist books.\textsuperscript{39} This view, fortunately, did not prevail.

Even with ministers serving as book agents and encouraging the reading of Methodist works, Methodist literature did not satisfy the American literary appetite as readily as the novel. An alternative approach was for ministers to read fiction themselves.\textsuperscript{40} Considering the voracious habit of the American reader, Methodist Review Editor Dr. Mendenhall called ministers to serve as literary guides for the public. This would be a more useful and effective way of obtaining influence and steering society in the “right” direction. To help pastors in their effort, the Methodist Review regularly published articles on American (as well as non-American) fiction and authors. Mendenhall also rated novels into seven moral categories, ranging from those books that denigrated morality (Category #1) to those which bolstered high morality (Category #7).\textsuperscript{41} Many best-selling contemporary American authors made the banned list: Celia E. Gardner (\textit{Tested}, 1874), Augusta J. Evans (\textit{St. Elmo}, 1867), E. D. Southworth (\textit{The Fatal Marriage}, 1869 and \textit{Self-Raised}, 1876). These authors were deemed “unwholesome in moral teaching, and to be banished from our tables and libraries...[and] avoided as most damaging to moral aspirations, and destructive of moral sensibility.” Novels whose ethical teaching were nearly absent included those by Henry James, while those whose “novels inclined toward the moral,” depicting acceptable conceptions of right and wrong, were T. W. Higginson (\textit{The Monarch of Dreams}, 1886), O. W. Holmes (\textit{The Guardian Angel}, 1867), and


\textsuperscript{39} “Books and their Readers,” \textit{MCA}, March 16, 1901, 1. The spiritual value of the Book Concern’s products was well established. In 1856, Peter Cartwright, the famous circuit writer pronounced that the “religious press is destined, in the order of Providence, to give moral freedom to the perishing millions of earth.” Peter Cartwright, \textit{The Autobiography of Peter Cartwright} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 187.

\textsuperscript{40} Levi Gilbert (Editor, Western Christian Advocate), “The Minister and Fiction Reading,” \textit{Methodist Review} (September-October, 1900), 715-724.

\textsuperscript{41} J. W. Mendenhall, “Novel Literature: Its History and Ethics,” \textit{Methodist Review} (July-August, 1888), 558-582.
W. D. Howells. This trio was rated as “wholesome teachers of social purity and moral decorum (though all of the “liberal” cast or who are avowed Unitarians). While they may not satisfy the rigid doctrinaire, and may sometimes offend a chaste orthodoxy in religion, they stand as exponents of safe moral views and must be approved.”

Post-bellum American novelists whose novels “harmonized with the highest ideals of life and the most advanced code of religious morality,” included H. B. Stowe (*Old Town Folks*, 1869), Edward Eggleston (*The Circuit Rider*, 1874), E. P. Roe (*Barriers Burned Away*, 1872), George W. Cable (*The Grandissimes*, 1880), General Lew Wallace (*Ben-Hur*, 1880), Harriet B. Spofford (*New England Legends*, 1871), Frank Stockton (“The Lady or the Tiger?” 1882), and M. N. Murfree aka C. E. Craddock, (*In the Tennessee Mountains*, 1884). These authors “have exalted the novelist’s profession and illustrated the relations of the novel to moral reforms and philanthropic activity.” Methodists realized that denunciation of the novel was an errant strategy, not only because Americans were avid readers, but also because the work of many contemporary novelists supported the ministry. Furthermore, Mendenhall recognized, as did other, though not all, of his colleagues that theirs was a great day for American fiction which could be used to benefit the Methodist Episcopal Church, if pastors did their part.

It was also in this period that Methodism emerged in American fiction. Edward Eggleston, for example, drew on his own Methodist upbringing and his experiences in Methodist ministry to portray the reality of frontier life in *The Circuit Rider* (1874), while E. W. Howe depicted the constriction of small town life through the family of a hard-working but humorless minister, farmer, and printer who abandons his wife and son in *The Story of a Country Town* (1883). A Methodist family appears in southern California in Helen Hunt Jackson’s moving novel of injustice toward the Mission Indians in *Ramona* (1884), though not to the credit of Methodist compassion. This did not, however, prevent Methodist approval of the book. A Methodist minister takes center stage in Harold Frederic’s *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), one of the great 19th-century American novels. Rev. Ware, a talented young preacher, has his hopes of obtaining the Conference’s premier pulpit dashed by his Presiding Elder (via the Bishop) who appoints him to a small town church where he and his wife struggle with an undersized salary, a provincial congregation, and tyrannical and hypocritical trustees. Rev. Ware’s outlook becomes broadened by encounters with Irish Catholics that cause him to re-consider his antagonistic Protestant view. Through his interaction with the town’s urbane priest, a bohemian young woman, and a Darwinian scientist, Theron was transformed into a fawning admirer of their

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ability to navigate social, intellectual, and cultural currents that he had never known existed. Unfortunately, Theron’s *ego* and his *naïveté* subsumed his awakening and, in the process, destroyed his (equally naive) faith, his professional career, and nearly his life. Another author also writing in the 1890s was Stephen Crane, the son of a Methodist minister, whose brief but dazzling career left us a small, though remarkable, corpus, including *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895).

It appeared to more than a few that American fiction was getting better with each passing decade and so, was useful for pastoral education which was not considered complete without a knowledge and awareness of the great masters of fiction. Moreover, it was acknowledged that reading novels actually helped the pastor in his duties by improving the minister’s mastery of the English language in his spoken and written word.44 By the early 20th century, Rev. Thomas J. Gregg could declare that the novel was so important that “the preacher must study literature.” In addition to the benefit to his pastoral duties, it also “broadened and deepened the sympathies of all men...and helps us to acquaint ourselves with men and women.” 45 Novel reading, then, helped readers in their duty as Christians and as Americans.

By 1904, Methodist Professor Henry Van Dyke of Princeton University argued that the novel was necessary to faith, “Christianity needs not only a Sacred Scripture for guidance, warning, instruction, inspiration, but also a continuous literature to express its life from age to age....” This literature included the work of secular novelists whose work reveals “the ethical, the spiritual, the immortal, as the chief factor in the divine drama of sublime, patient faith....” Even though the great bulk of novels produced, he admitted, was of little value, which he referred to as “works of affliction,” Prof. Van Dyke believed that there was no “great or pressing danger,” since they would quickly pass away with time.46 In a sort of literary natural selection, only the highest quality and most vital literature would outlast the rest and survive.

This progressive and open-minded spirit was embodied in the impressive life and ministry of Dr. Lynn Harold Hough (1877-1971). Having graduated from Scio College in Ohio in 1898, Hough enrolled in Drew Theological Seminary where he earned his undergraduate divinity degree in 1905 and his doctoral degree in 1919. He served as pastor for several churches in the New York and Baltimore areas, before joining the faculty of Garrett Biblical Institute in 1914. In 1919, he was appointed President of Northwestern University and the following year returned to full-time min-

44 “Minister’s Libraries,” *MCA*, July 26, 1884, 1. See also, Rev. Dr. James Mudge, “The Art of Reading,” *MCA*, November 3, 1906, 2.
45 Thomas J. Gregg, “The Uses of Literature, Especially Fiction to a Preacher,” *MCA*, July 24, 1909, 2.
istry as Pastor of Central Methodist Church in Detroit where he remained until taking a position in Montreal in 1928. In 1930, Rev. Hough returned to Drew Theological Seminary, where he spent the rest of his career, as a professor and, after 1934, as Dean until his retirement in 1947. Throughout this journey, Dr. Hough was a prolific author and a champion of the value of literature for Christians. He was recognized as a “masterly teacher of English and American literature” who “...discerned their implication for that which he fervently expounded, Christian Humanism.” Literature was a necessary educational and theological component for the Christian student for it broadened one’s outlook and offered the reader a deeper understanding of the world. Hough himself exemplified this Christian Humanism in his social concerns and his notable tolerance. He attributed this openness to his love of literature, writing in 1911:

> When by some strange magic a book is transformed and becomes a portal, a door to whose lock one possesses the key, and whose knob one may turn—a door through which one may enter into new knowledge, new feeling, new appreciation of the meaning of men and things—then he begins to feel the lure of books. The first thing about books is that they take us out of ourselves. ⁴⁸

Moreover, the study of literature, he explained, prepares the Christian for engagement of the world’s needs, “A man goes out from his library to serve the world as effectively as he may. Armed with the best thoughts from his books, his mind disciplined by long study, he goes forth to work for the men of his own day, giving toil and the full measure of devotion to the tasks of his own time.”⁴⁹ Here the novel was recognized not as an escapist drug, but as a stimulant of the social good.

Hough marked a new age for Methodism and literature. It was also a period that witnessed another cultural shift that diminished the overall place of the novel in the pantheon of American entertainment. Its high profile in the Methodist dialogue declined by World War I when its relative influence in American popular culture gave way to new forms of media, namely the cinema and later radio, which now began to draw Methodist attention. By the beginning of the second decade of the 20th century, when there were nearly 13,000 movie houses in the country, The Michigan Christian Advocate recognized that “moving picture shows have a strong hold on popular attention” and “have gained a superlative advantage over any other class of instructors or entertainers in influencing the young mind...”⁵⁰ Daily movie

ticket sales soon reached ten million. Fittingly, then, the movie now became perceived as a cause of crime, disorder, "moral hurt and mental perversion." The 1920s witnessed the birth of commercial radio broadcasting and in the next decade nearly every American family owned a radio. As the attention of the Methodist Episcopal Church was directed to new—far more popular—challenges, it appeared that the day of the "threat" of the novel had passed.