

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE AMERICAN WORKER:
CHARACTERIZATIONS BY LONDON, SINCLAIR, STEINBECK AND RAND

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE HUMANITIES PROGRAM
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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APRIL 2011

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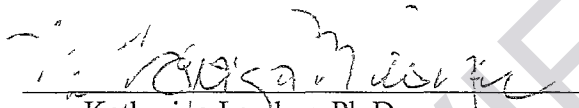
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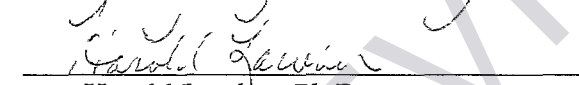
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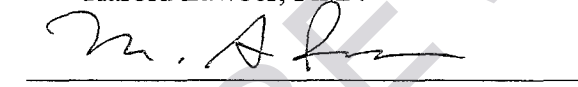
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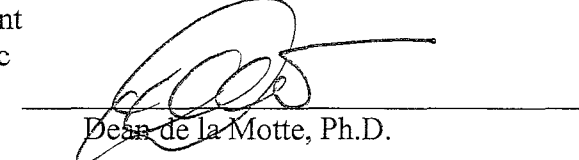
This dissertation of Nelson Guertin entitled "A Literary Analysis of the American Worker: Characterizations by London, Sinclair, Steinbeck and Rand" submitted to the Ph.D. Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Salve Regina University has been read and approved by the following individuals:

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Abstract

A Literary Analysis Of The American Worker:

Characterizations By London, Sinclair, Steinbeck And Rand

This dissertation will examine the portrayal of the early twentieth century worker through the literature of Jack London, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck and Ayn Rand. Special attention is given to the role of technology as it is brought to bear on the worker within the prevailing economic system of laissez-faire Capitalism.

While London, Sinclair and Steinbeck reflect on the travails of the pre-industrial and industrial worker, Rand extols the virtues of the industrialist only. Her body of work suggests that the working life of the mid-century worker has been standardized along with the rest of the manufacturing world. This homogenization extends to the worker's home life and neighborhood. The literature of Richard Yates and Ken Kesey help to reflect the resulting alienation of the worker, and the individual, to his/her world.

PREVIEW

To Gretchen, wife, life partner and soul mate
Your love and devotion made this work possible

For there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in Work. Were he never so benighted, forgetful of his high calling, there is always hope in a man that actually and earnestly works: in Idleness alone is there perpetual despair. Work, never so Mammonish, mean, is in communication with Nature; the real desire to get Work done will itself lead one more and more to truth, to Nature's appointments and regulations, which are truth.

- Thomas Carlyle

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Preface

It is with profound thanks that I acknowledge my dissertation committee:

Dr. Michael Budd
Dr. Katherine Lawber
Dr. Harold Lawber

Thank you all for your hard work and patience.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation will examine portrayals of workers by four twentieth century American Writers from the turn of the century to the nineteen-fifties. How did the authors construct these fictional workers? What kinds of ideological perspectives on class, labor and technology are evident in the works considered? Can the novels chosen be seen to represent the time periods in which they were written? If so, in what ways?

It is in the first half of the twentieth century that the discourse concerning the impact of industry and corporate capitalism on workers' lives grew exponentially. As technology advanced at a faster and faster pace, the battles between labor and capital raged across many fronts both domestically and internationally. In America, despite the growth in factory production and manufacturing, the period was marked by a gradual shift from an agriculturally dominated economy in 1890 to a predominantly white collar and service economy by the 1950s. Included in this fluctuation was the introduction of technology to the work setting. It is important to introduce and explain historically the seemingly innate enmity between worker and overseer.

Both historians and novelists became social commentators; historians wrote on technology's influence on labor and writers used literature as a barometer and a site for contesting and articulating theories of the worker's proper place in this fast changing, technological world. The development of social realism in the nineteenth century set the stage for the use of novels to not only portray the material conditions of the worker but also to meditate on the symbolic value and practical meaning of labor within modernity. Using historical commentary as a jumping off point, the novels chosen for this dissertation will use the literary and historical analysis and the imposition of technological thought to first compare the old work

world with the new, and then to highlight the selected literature along with the political perspectives of each author to explore how s/he uses imaginative devices and literary techniques to deal with the circumstances of the common worker.

Selected Literature

An examination of the following eight works, and to a lesser extent the authors themselves, form the focus of this dissertation. The authors and central works that will be investigated and compared are Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*, 1906, *King Coal*, 1917); Jack London (*The Sea Wolf*, 1904, *Martin Eden*, 1913); John Steinbeck (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939, *Cannery Row*, 1945); and Ayn Rand (*Anthem*, 1938, *Atlas Shrugged*, 1957). These writers are chosen because of their different approaches.

The abundance of historical evidence that will be represented evokes an important response from early American novelists. Jack London writes of the pre-industrial worker, and examines social Darwinism, one of the most important intellectual movements of the time. Upton Sinclair and John Steinbeck are moved to research and then write accounts that featured real social and economic handicaps of American workers. What was it about these particular populations that moved these writers? Why were the novels received with such acclaim? Both Sinclair's *The Jungle* and *King Coal* were modeled after actual occurrences. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* also publicized the life of real workers. All of the novels established early fame for their respective authors. Was the public's response justified? Ayn Rand writes of the work world from the opposite direction; she glorifies the inventor and industrialist and virtually ignores the worker. Her primary work, *Atlas Shrugged*, is published in 1957. Has her casual treatment of the worker indicated a change in his/her work environment?

The writing citing the predicament of the industrial worker spans several areas. This dissertation will first look at the historians who document the conflict experienced by the industrial worker. They include E.P. (Edward Palmer) Thompson, Karl Marx, and Charles Dickens.

In addition to the historians who critique the industrial work world, there are those who censure the mechanical sophistication itself and the ill will it promotes. Several writers express their opinion regarding technology and its role in the worker's world from early to mid twentieth century. The criticism of these writers accompanies that of the cited historians and serves to buttress the previous observations. These writers include Neil Postman, Ian Barbour, Arnold Pacey, and Jacques Ellul.

Expected (and Unexpected) Contribution of This Dissertation to the Existing Literature

To the writer's knowledge no one has chronicled the late nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth century world of work using these selections. Therefore, the literary selections are unique. Jack London's *The Sea Wolf* and *Martin Eden* will be used as examples of the worker in a pre- industrial setting. Humphrey and Martin are living and working outside the technological environment that is being introduced to the world of work. As such, they have more freedom to develop. This dissertation will show how social Darwinism influences both protagonists in London's stories. It should be pointed out that these options are only available to Humphrey and Martin; they would not be available to the technological worker because of the constraints placed on the industrial worker by technology.

The history of the period will be covered as the world of work is investigated. Moreover, the application of existentialism and socialism will enhance this contribution. The technological world of manufacturing and the technology of production have made the work world more

difficult. Sinclair and Steinbeck write about individuals who seem to be victims of their surroundings; despite seemingly valiant efforts, they do not progress.

Ayn Rand writes about the industrialists themselves; she makes it a point not to include the worker. Is this an intentional sleight of the worker? Could she be “damning by faint praise”? Perhaps by the 1950s workers are past suffering the poverty of their ancestors and now their working and living conditions are scarcely worth noting. While this dissertation was supposed to end with Ayn Rand, further investigation into the literature written during the 1960s confirms that her casual treatment of the worker could be warranted. One unexpected yield of this query is the discovery of the continued growth of technology with the standardization of both working and living conditions for individuals in the last half of the twentieth century. *Revolutionary Road*, (1961), by Richard Yates, is the story of a couple entangled in a cultural trap from which there is no escape. It symbolizes the dreary world of the middle class. Workers are still fighting the system, but now the system has changed. Work here is far from the extreme situation of the early twentieth century worker. It has, in fact, become boring. Ken Kesey’s contribution to our study is *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest*. Does his depiction of a psychiatric ward serve as a microcosm for mid twentieth century society?

Roughly at the same time, the systemized manufacture of housing, best exemplified by William Levitt and his various Levittowns, is occurring. So the two situations that were hardest to bear, working at a dangerous job and finding a place to live, are now being standardized and have become part of the technological world of the worker.

With the standardization of work and shelter, are individuals supposed to act in a predetermined way? Has the world of technology, an “ordered system of thought” evolved from a way of manufacturing to a way of living? What of capitalism? It is supposed to benefit the

consumer. Historians of technology associate technology with capitalism. Are we really better off than those who lived before technology? Who are these authors? What moves them to write? What causes them to write about a particular work community? Does the American worker remain virtually helpless throughout the twentieth century, or does her/his circumstances change?

In the last part of the twentieth century, therefore, a cursory look at the literature seems to indicate a working life which now includes technology in all its aspects. What does this say for the living conditions for workers and their families?

Methodology

History, literary analysis and the philosophy of existentialism will be used to explain the choice of stories and how each author fits into the canon of this dissertation. The stories chosen for this study elucidate the worker at crucial times in history and stand as outstanding examples of the technological world of work. First the pre - industrial worker is examined, using Jack London's *The Sea Wolf* and *Martin Eden*. These two stories tell compelling tales of individuals who must work to establish themselves in a world that brooks no compromise. Both individuals are held to almost impossibly high standards, but both manage to triumph in the end. The fact that they do triumph is due to their living and working in a pre-industrial society. They are the only workers who do excel. The particular time of these stories is less important than the philosophical moods that are developing in early twentieth century America. London uses Social Darwinism to illustrate the forces driving both Humphrey and Martin. In fact, it is the coalescing of these forces with the pre-industrial environment of each protagonist that allows each to excel. Literary analysis will define the way London works to weave this philosophy into his story.

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* is chosen because it is a moving story about individuals living in early twentieth century Chicago and working in a slaughter house. By this time the

worker is solidly ensconced in a technological environment. The very hours of his day are dictated by the work he must do and the pace he must keep. The beef industry is using up workers as fast as possible, paying them as little as possible. Based on actual conditions of the time, Sinclair's story is heartbreaking and illustrates the courage of the worker against impossible odds. Sinclair's *King Coal* illustrates actual conditions faced by coal miners in the early part of the century. The only common element slaughterhouse workers and miners have with London's characters is the sense of alienation each feels as they struggle with their predicament. Unlike Humphrey and Martin, however, not much can be done.

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* shows another time in US history when the worker is almost helpless against the prevailing conditions. Forced off their land by economic conditions, and encouraged by advertisements from California farms, families pack their meager belongings into old cars and struggle to get to California, expecting to work as crop pickers. But when they arrive, they are faced with almost no work and the prospects of starvation. Once again, these families, characterized by the Joads, must struggle; there is no choice. They are trapped.

These are extraordinary stories told with skill and passion. They illustrate the conditions that workers endured and illustrate their courage and relentless bravery.

Ayn Rand is writing in the fifties and conditions for the worker have improved. She glorifies the industrialist; she has almost nothing to say about the worker. Is the worker all set? Have conditions improved to the point where the worker is just part of the team? Historical analysis shows the fifties to be a time of great industrial gain for America. What of the worker? Literary analysis of *Atlas Shrugged* will answer these questions.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This dissertation combines historical and literary analysis with a focus on technology and the worker. Accordingly this review of the literature will include discussion of relevant works from scholars of history, literature and philosophy.

Adams, Henry. *The Education of Henry Adams* (1946).

The Education of Henry Adams is pivotal in this study for two reasons. First, Adams bridges the gap between the old world of his ancestors and the new world represented by technology. His attraction to technology is demonstrated in the chapter “The Dynamo and the Virgin,” in which he compares the respect held for the new electric dynamo to the adoration people feel for the Virgin Mary. He encounters the dynamo as a result of his visit to the Great Exposition in Paris. The dynamo is the symbol of the new technology that aggravates the labor difficulties of the worker at the turn of the century. Adams writes of the power, both actual and symbolic, that the dynamo represents:

To him, [Samuel P. Langley, his guide], the dynamo itself was but an ingenious channel for conveying somewhere the heat latent in a few tons of poor coal hidden in a dirty engine house carefully kept out of sight; but to Adams the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. As he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines, he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross.

The planet itself seemed less impressive, in its old-fashioned, deliberate annual or daily revolution, than this huge wheel, revolving within arm’s-length at some vertiginous speed, and barely murmuring. (380)

This power will serve to power all things industrial and stand in for muscle power as the twentieth century continues.

Adams is also important because, according to James Burrill Angell, it is Adams who first perceives the existential condition of the worker at the time. In Angell’s book *Martin Eden*

and The Education of Henry Adams: The Advent Of Existentialism In American Literature

(2006), Angell calls Jack London's Martin Eden the first existentialist character in American literature. He follows this by writing of Henry Adams and his regard for the modern world. He amplifies the significance of the virgin and the dynamo:

What scares Henry Adams in this portion of the work is probably what scared him when the book was written in 1907: how is civilization going to make the transition from the security of the Virgin to a precarious existence defined by the Dynamo of science? He reinforces his early doubts with science and the future: "All the steam in the world could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres" (388), that is, create something philosophically reassuring. (53)

Paul Johnson's *A History of the American People* (1997), is one of the better American History volumes. His coverage of F. D. R. 's New Deal is objective, giving balance to both the conservative and liberal points of view. This is especially important when Ayn Rand is considered, since although her extreme bias comes through, her attitude toward the businessman deserves some consideration.

Nevens, Allan and Henry S. Commager. *A Pocket History of the United States* (1964).

Allan Nevins and Henry S. Commager write a succinct history of American history, from the first English colonies of the early 1600s to the Eisenhower administration. Since this dissertation deals with American history from the turn of the century until the 1950s, this book is an ideal reference for the background in American history that the treatment of these four authors requires. The chapters on the rise of big business and the mining and transportation of iron ore are especially interesting. It is obvious that the common worker stands no chance against the natural resources that these companies can uncover or the economic policies they can bring to bear on the worker. More impressive was the amount of government support given to

industrialists despite “laissez faire” capitalism. For example, the use of tariffs went against any competitive environment:

The system of protective tariffs, established during the war as an emergency measure, was continued, and the iron, steel, copper, marble, woolgrowing, textile, and chinaware industries were particularly favored beneficiaries. ... Congress showed little inclination to regulate private enterprise, and the courts gave substantial immunity to restrictive legislation coming from the states. (268)

Blewett, Mary H. *The Last Generation: Work and Life in the Textile Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1910 – 1960*. (1990).

Blewett chronicles the travails of the textile worker in Lowell, Massachusetts. She gives eloquent testimony to the difficulties faced by these workers as well as the triumphs attained. In these mills along with the usual physical dangers, women, especially young women, were frequently victimized: “Any presentable young woman who walked into a mill looking for work became an easy target. Taking their cues from the petty tyrannies practiced by the bosses, some male workers felt free to annoy and molest women in the mill. Most bosses remained indifferent to such sexual harassment” (38-9). Despite these problems, women, especially, took great pride in their work accomplishments: “Under pressure to make money on piecework, women workers responded to the challenges of starting up a spinning frame faultlessly and of learning the intricacies of the weaving process. They worked together helping each other to maximize their weekly earnings by intensifying the pace of work, ... providing essential coordination for production” (43). Her work is also important, of course, because Lowell, Massachusetts, was central to the burgeoning industrial revolution as it first progressed in America.

Egan, Timothy. *The Worst Hard Time* (2006).

Egan writes about the dust bowl that developed in Oklahoma in the 1930s. In this volume Egan tells the almost innumerable stories of individuals and families who somehow stayed

through the unrelenting dust storms brought on by farming the grasslands of the great plains. This book is important because it tells the background of families like the fictional Joads, the family John Steinbeck writes about in *The Grapes of Wrath* and the conditions that drove them to California. It emphasizes the courage required to endure the horrors of the climate; it also brings out the greed of the business community which will be a major theme in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Carl Gersuny, a local writer, is important to this study because of his book, *Work Hazards and Industrial Conflict* (1981). Using local mills as examples, Gersuny documents the dangerous and sickening work conditions to which early twentieth century laborers were exposed. A typical ruse by the company was to shift responsibility for a worker's injuries from the company to another worker:

... in 1836 a butcher's boy ... won a judgment against his employer ... for a broken thigh bone suffered in the collapse of a wagon overloaded with mutton and beef. On appeal, the judges ... invented the fellow-servant rule when they reversed this decision on the grounds that it was " 'inconvenient' and 'absurd' for masters to be responsible for the negligence of their servants," the wagon having been overloaded not by the defendant ... but by another of his employees. (49)

Such thinking on the part of a company toward its employees was symptomatic of the attitude and conditions under which the common worker labored. Of course, Gersuny's book is grist for a critical look at management overall and lends credence to the believability of characters peopling the stories of Sinclair, Steinbeck and London.

Goodwin, Doris Kearns. *No Ordinary Time* (1994).

This book is a well written narration of F.D.R. and the New Deal. Goodwin's book chronicles the long career of F.D.R., his professional triumphs and his personal foibles. Her most import focus, however, for the purpose of this dissertation is F.D.R.'s New Deal:

To be sure, the New Deal, particularly in its exhilarating early days, had profoundly altered the relationship between the government and the people, giving the state final responsibility for the well-being of its citizens. Rejecting the traditional notion that government was the handmaiden of business, the New Deal Congress had enacted an unprecedented series of laws which regulated the securities market, established a minimum wage, originated a new system of social security, guaranteed labor's right to collective bargaining, and established control over the nation's money supply. (43)

What is curious about the New Deal is that for the circumstances of Sinclair's workers, Steinbeck's immigrants, and London's work beasts, it was either not enough or irrelevant. For Ayn Rand, it was entirely too much. Nevertheless, Goodwin's writing about the man and his program is timely and important.

Halberstam, David. *The Fifties* (1993)

David Halberstam's book is noteworthy for the simple reason that it provides a logical outcome to Ayn Rand's view of laissez faire capitalism. Halberstam uses General Motors to illustrate the relative security of the worker in mid twentieth century America. Bolstered by a post war economic boom, General Motors workers and managers were riding high. Halberstam illustrates. "... 49.3 million motor vehicles were registered when the decade began, 73.8 when it ended; ... an average of 4.5 million cars were scrapped annually. That means as many as 68 to 79 million cars, ever larger, ever heavier, ever more expensive were sold, and General Motors sold virtually half of them" (487). Is this the worker benefiting from the worker abuse exposed by Sinclair and Steinbeck?

Nelson, Scott Reynolds. *Steel Drivin' Man—John Henry—The Untold Story of an American Legend* (2006).

Nelson's book is perhaps the most poignant tale of the worker against the machine. John Henry is an African American convict working in the railroad industry. As railroads must pass through mountains, blasting must be done, and the holes for the gunpowder, (later dynamite), are

made by two men; one holds a long drill bit and the other uses a sledge hammer to smash the bit into the rock. The man holding the bit “rocks and rolls” the bit after each hit to shape the hole and clear it of debris. John Henry is the man swinging the sledge hammer. This book, in addition to relating the history of this industry, more importantly tells the story of the famous contest where John Henry races a new machine on the market, the steam drill.

Of course one of the conflicts central to the Industrial Revolution was the replacement of workers by machines and the work hazards that workers faced. In addition to telling the story of John Henry, who ultimately beats the steam drill in a contest, drilling fourteen feet to the machine’s nine, and then dies, the book relates how the steam drill is probably indirectly responsible for more miners’ deaths. The steam drill generated lots of dust when it drilled, much more than two men with a drill and sledge hammer. Nelson quotes P. Dee, P. Surratt, and W. Winn, scientists whose article appeared in *Radiology* in 1978: ¹

What was in those clouds of sand, generated by drill and dynamite? Freshly ground silica between five and ten microns wide, silica that floated through men’s nostrils and directly into their lungs. ... Even a single day’s exposure to freshly ground silica can cause acute silicosis and early death. ... In 1969, nearly one hundred years after John Henry and his fellow workers died, the Coal Act mandated that powered drills have collars to prevent silica from shooting out, that workers wear masks near them, and that drills be wet. (91)

So John Henry is symbolic of the worker against the machine and the worker against environmental pollution caused by technology.

¹ Scott Reynolds Nelson: *Steel Drivin’ Man – John Henry - : The Untold Story of an American Hero* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006, 91, quoting P. Dee, P. Surratt, and W. Winn, “The Radiographic findings in Acute Silocosis” *Radiology* 126 (Feb. 1978): 359-63.

Rifkin, Jeremy. *The End of Work* (1995).

Rifkin's work relates how the work world is changing and how the worker is dealing with it. One sobering point mentioned is how computer technology is changing the work world. Mimicking the early Industrial Revolution, technology, advancing evermore through computers, is seizing more control from the worker: "The new information technologies are designed to remove whatever vestigial control workers still exercise over the production process by programming detailed instructions directly into the machine, which then carries them out verbatim. The worker is rendered powerless to exercise independent judgment either on the factory floor or ... office" (182). Here is the future according to Ayn Rand as the worker becomes evermore the victim of the manager and his/her technology.

There are a number of works that relate the history of the common worker. Two of the most important are written by E. P. (Edward Palmer) Thompson. They are *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (1993). In the first, Thompson writes of the often contentious relationship between the workers and their overseers as the Industrial Revolution slowly advances in England. He points out that the "Industrial Revolution was not a settled social context but a phase of transition between two ways of life" (418).

One of Thompson's most valuable insights is his acknowledged difference between the old way of working and the work customs that industrialism brings. Here, he is writing about weavers in England being affected by work shortages:

The degradation of the weavers is very similar to that of the workers in the dishonourable artisan trades. Each time their wages were beaten down, their position became more defenseless. The weaver had now to work longer into the night to earn less; in working longer he increased another's chances of unemployment. Even adherents of the new "political economy" were appalled. "Did Dr. A. Smith ever

contemplate such a state of things?” exclaimed one humane employer, whose honourable practices were the cause of his own ruin. (*The Making of ...*280)

Thompson’s *Customs in Common* shows how work practices existed before the era of machines and factories. He explains that: “Even in larger workshops men sometimes continued to work at distinct tasks at their own benches or looms, and ... could show some flexibility in coming and going. Hence we get the characteristic irregularity of labour patterns before the coming of large-scale machine powered industry (*Common* 370).

Perhaps Thompson’s greatest contribution to this dissertation was his succinct expression “intrinsic antagonism,” which so well described the inherent animosity that the American industrial worker encountered simply by virtue of entering the workplace. Blewett and Gersuny write of this tension.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels give us the perspective of society from the abused worker’s point of view. Their *The Communist Manifesto* (first published in 1888), was written to refute the actual results of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*. Although Smith never intended laissez-faire capitalism to influence society as it did, when Marx and Engels first write in 1848, they feel that it has. They are reacting against a society that has victimized the worker. They are quite aware of the trials industry has brought to the worker: “Modern industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist. ... Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, ... the overlooker, and, ... by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself” (227). Marx and Engels are opposite in their thinking from Adam Smith.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (first published in 1759), Smith expresses an overall beneficence for mankind: “The wise and virtuous man is at all times willing that his own private

interest should be sacrificed to the public interest of his own particular order or society” (277).

Moreover, he states: “Though our effectual good offices can very seldom be extended to any wider society than that of our own country; our good will is circumscribed by no boundary, but may embrace the immensity of the universe” (276).

Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (first published in 1776), is important because it is the justification for Ayn Rand’s political outlook. From Smith we get the quote, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest” (119). Rand, as well as many historians, interpret Smith’s pro business attitude as ground for allowing business to grow without regard for the worker or for that matter, anyone else who cannot keep up with the business world’s relentless drive for profits. But a close inspection of Smith’s overall attitude reveals almost the opposite.

Long thought of as the bible of the businessman, and the disseminator of laissez-faire capitalism, a closer reading reveals that Smith extended the benevolence he first expressed in his earlier book to the worker; in fact he sees the worker as a necessary part of the overall business environment. For example, Smith encourages the master to pay his workers well so that they will be “encouraged” to work hard. “The liberal reward of labour, as it encourages the propagation, so it increases the industry of the common people. The wages of labour are the encouragement of industry, which, like every other human quality, improves in proportion to the encouragement it receives” (184). This attitude is a far cry from the fate of the worker witnessed by Marx and Engels in the nineteenth century as the worker labored long hours for very little pay. Smith’s entreaties to the manager to consider the worker’s needs are also ignored by Ayn Rand, whose primary work, *Atlas Shrugged*, essentially deals with the industrialist and curiously leaves the worker out of the mix.