

The Tramp in American Literature, 1873–1939

By Christine Photinos

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, railroad expansion and a series of economic crises gave rise in the U.S. to a population of transient, marginally employed workers known as “tramps” (and later as “hoboes”). The word “tramp,” which previously had signified a journey taken on foot, now named a distinct social type and an object of public concern and debate. In the late nineteenth century, tramps were understood by middle- and upper-class Americans in terms of deviancy and criminality; but by World War II the tramp had entered the realm of nostalgia. The primary reasons for tramping did not change; what changed was the social meaning assigned to the tramp.

The figure of the tramp emerged in the wake of the Panic of 1873, when millions of displaced workers hit the road. Although there had been depressions and worker displacement before, by 1870 wage-dependent laborers made up over half of the work force, and the depression “created for the first time a national specter of huge groups of workers deprived of their means of livelihood” (Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 53). The *scale* of unemployment in the 1870s led to the perception that it was a new phenomenon (Ringebach xiv).

This phenomenon was viewed by middle- and upper-class Americans as something of a mystery, and novelists were among those who sought to explore it. George M. Baker begins his 1879 novel *A Tight Squeeze* with the question “What is a tramp?” This question sets the stage for the “adventures” of the novel’s “gentleman” protagonist. On a bet, he empties his pockets and (temporarily) joins the ranks of the transient unemployed. In detailing his protagonist’s travels and observations, Baker provides a survey of common late-nineteenth-century understandings of the tramp. While Baker does note that “work is at present a very scarce article in the United States,” he does not portray tramps as displaced workers. Rather than focusing on socioeconomic conditions, he points to individual character traits in explaining the existence of tramps (54). This sometimes takes the form of romanticization, as when Baker has his protagonist meet up with a Thoreauvian tramp who states, “I could tramp forever and forever, with Nature for a companion” (137). More often, however, tramps appear as “professional parasites,” making up maudlin stories of distraught wives and starving children in order to cadge money off of naïve but well-meaning marks (47). Tramps are also defined as drunkards: “underlying the rambling propensities,—nay, the very instigator of those propensities—was the vice of drunkenness” (73). Last but not least, tramps appear as recent immigrants with “weak” work habits, “tramping without an object in view or an ambition to prompt them.” Describing a crowd of tramps, Baker notes: “There were some Americans . . . but the majority were foreigners” (94).

Other writers of the time took this further. Drawing upon late-nineteenth-century social Darwinist theory, they depicted the tramp as a hereditary social deviant. Rudolph, the “dark-complexioned” tramp villain of Horatio Alger’s 1876 *Tony, the Tramp*, states unequivocally: “I’m a vagrant by nature . . . I come of roving stock. My mother and father before me were rovers, and I follow in their steps” (9). His “gipsy blood” (7) marks him as part of the “new” immigration from southern and eastern Europe which, according to nativist writers and politicians of the time, threatened to dilute the Anglo Saxon strength of the nation. Thus, even though the novel’s boy hero, Tony, like Rudolph, is raised as a wanderer (“He had never—at least not for long at a time—known what it was to have a settled home or a permanent shelter” [35]), he does not “follow in [the] steps” of his guardian. The difference is explained in terms of race: “You’re dark and I am light,” Tony

tells Rudolph just before expressing his desire to “have a home, and a business, and to live like other people” (10). Alger thus aligns Tony’s ‘lightness’ with his desire to achieve economic independence and to serve as a domestic breadwinner—the key components of middle-class manhood (Rotundo 168). Taken together, these traits signal to readers that, in spite of the novel’s title, Tony is no tramp. A *real* tramp, for Alger, is a dangerous immigrant. Rudolph’s defining traits are that he is “sinister” (2) and that his country of origin is unknown: “where he was born no one seemed to know” (7). Lest this crucial distinction be lost on the reader, Alger includes in the first thirty pages of the story at least five reminders that Tony is “light” and Rudolph is “dark.”

Concern over foreign-born tramps was heightened during periods of labor unrest, which middle- and upper-class Americans viewed as “an un-American product of foreign agitators” (Higham 30). During the labor uprising of 1877, tramps, who were alleged to be congenitally lazy, were nevertheless credited with leading vast organizations of dangerous anarchists. “Black Flynn,” the villain of Lee Harris’s 1878 *The Man Who Tramps*, presides over large tramp gatherings in the woods and provides instructions on how to “stir up this strife between capital and labor” (251). Harris’s tramps are physiognomically coded as outsiders, distinguishing them from the story’s boy hero, with his “pale” face and “regular and handsome features” (9). For example, Harris endows one of his tramps with “small and piggish” eyes and a “large and sensual” mouth (27). Another is described as having a “low, receding forehead” (93). And of course there is Black Flynn, who is described as having “a very dark complexion . . . with long, straight black hair, and small, restless black eyes, sparkling beneath his projecting brows” (25). Significantly, a member of the core tramp group is a Frenchman, whose presence seems intended to suggest ominous comparisons between the brewing tramp plot and the 1871 Paris Commune. Harris thus depicts the tramp as an “outsider” and draws a sharp distinction between “the floating populace” and “the laboring men of this country—the true workingmen” (46).

This unwillingness among social elites to understand the tramp as a displaced worker continued even during the depression years following the panic of 1893 (Ringensbach 37). Elbert Hubbard’s 1894 novel entitled *No Enemy (But Himself)* opens with a meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems during which the evening’s guest speaker, a clergyman, argues that because of the depression “thousands of honest men are driven into absolute beggarmdom.” They are “wandering from house to house—village to village seeking work—but there is no work, so they must beg” (2). But a member of the Society disputes this thesis: “They tramp because they like it. . . . they do not want work” (6). The man who expresses this dissenting opinion is soon revealed to be the more knowledgeable of the two: he has studied tramps first-hand.

A necessary context for understanding Hubbard’s novel is the professionalization of the social sciences at the end of the nineteenth century and the rise of new methods of social investigation, among them “participant observation” (Higbie 562). One of the most widely read studies of tramps by an author posing as a tramp was Josiah Flynt’s 1899 *Tramping With Tramps* (the contents of which appeared as separate articles in *Harper’s Weekly*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Century* during the 1890s). Flynt used experiential evidence to argue that tramps, “enamoured of camp life” and scornful of “quiet living,” *chose* to live as they did (302). *Tramping With Tramps* became a foundational text of “realistic sociology” (Bremner 142), and Hubbard seems clearly to have modeled his protagonist after a figure such as Flynt.

Thus, even during depression periods, unemployment was viewed by the middle and upper classes in terms of individual choice. When Coxey’s army marched toward Washington in the Spring of 1894 to appeal to Congress to support an ambitious jobs

program, the mainstream press labeled the marchers “tramps,” and characterized Coxey’s army as a mob of willfully unemployed troublemakers on a cross-country begging spree. The *Pittsburgh Press* printed a parody of an old English verse on beggars that captures this view:

Hark, Hark! Hear the dogs bark!
Coxey is coming to town.
In his ranks are scamps
And growler fed tramps
On all of whom working men frown. (qtd. in McMurtry, 49)

Here, the tramp-marchers are not in pursuit of relief from poverty; rather, they are unscrupulous mischief-makers (“scamps”) and drunkards (i.e., “growler fed”), and they are sharply distinguished from “working men.”

By the turn of the century, however, the image of the tramp was undergoing an elevation in status. This status change coincided with a changing standard of masculinity in the United States. Whereas middle-class manhood had previously been defined in terms of “honesty” and “industry,” there was now a greater emphasis on physical strength and competitiveness. The growing power of middle-class women, working-class males, and wealthy capitalists seemed to call for a reassertion of manhood among bourgeois white males, who were believed to have been weakened as a result of sheltered, overly-domestic upbringings in which they were coddled by overbearing Victorian mothers.¹ The new icons of American manhood were figures associated with the “closed” frontier: e.g., the cowboy, the gunfighter, the buffalo hunter.

Jack London’s success during this period cannot be separated from aspects of his personal biography that linked him to rugged male adventure in the “untamed” spaces of the Yukon and the sea; and in a series of articles he wrote in 1906-7, London sought to cast his tramping experiences in similar terms of masculine adventure. London had tramped during the economic depression of the 1890s, and in one of his earliest writings based on this experience, a 1903 essay titled “The Tramp,” London counters characterological condemnations of tramps with economic analysis, ultimately replacing individual blame with an indictment of industrial capitalism. It was not long, however, before London would draw upon his tramping experiences to produce literary fare emphasizing adventure over economics.

For example, in an essay titled “Holding Her Down,” London portrays the extensive railroad system of the industrialized U.S. as itself a space for pre-industrial adventure and physical testing—and for reasserting what was understood as a kind of pre-industrial manhood. He recounts a night-time chase along the exterior of a moving freight train. Pursued by railroad personnel seeking to remove him from the train, London succeeds in “holding her down”—i.e., escaping his would-be captors and riding the train through to his destination—by drawing upon his experience, physical strength, and “nerve” (37). “Gripping the edge” of the train, he scales his way to the top—a process, London explains to his readers, that “is called ‘decking her’” (37). Just as the cowboy was frequently depicted demonstrating mastery over his horse, London here exhibits expert knowledge of how to “hold down” a train. The gendering of the train as female serves to emphasize the “manliness” of his feat.

Another sign of change in the cultural status of the tramp was the entry into common usage of the term “hobo.” There is no agreement regarding the origin of the word “hobo,”² but it achieved popular currency around the turn of the century and helped create a

conceptual space for a heroic figuration of the homeless transient. In a 1907 essay published by the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “The Call of the Shirt,” the narrator longs to “throw off the restraining chains” of his boring middle-class existence and live a life more like that of “Hobo Jack,” a “big and burly” wanderer whom he meets one day in the woods (725-726). The story begins with the narrator’s trip to his local laundry, and ends with a description of Hobo Jack’s own laundry ritual, which involves washing his shirt in a creek and hanging it from a tree to dry. For the narrator, the shirt becomes “a flag, the banner of liberty, of equality, and true happiness” (727). Thus, the very figure that had been understood as an inscrutable “other,” dangerously immune to dominant ideologies of success and domesticity, is here described as a quintessential freedom-loving American man.³

After 1910, this heroic figuration of the tramp also appeared in the works of literary radicals, who portrayed the tramp as a kind of industrial hero for whom wandering represented a successful escape from the indignities of the industrial factory (Gilbert 9), as well as from the strictures of domesticity. An illustrative case is Floyd Dell’s 1926 short story “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum,” in which the main character, Jasper Weed, achieves happiness and a sense of purpose by becoming a migrant worker and a Wobbly. Life as a tramp affords him a freedom he had not known in his hometown factory job: “When I was cooped up in that factory as a kid, I hated and loathed work . . . But when I hit the road I found that I didn’t have to work unless I wanted to. I could live without working, and just about as well as I had lived before. Yes, I went hungry sometimes, and I took my life in my hands every time I hopped a freight; but I didn’t mind that. I was free” (159). Here, the figure of the tramp represents an escape from modern socioeconomic strictures. Once “on the road,” Jasper achieves a life of rugged freedom. This freedom, though, has to be vigilantly defended against female domesticators. When Jasper falls in love with a young woman he meets in California, he panics: “I saw myself settling down in that little town and buying a house for that girl to live in, and spending the rest of my life paying off the mortgage . . . I walked up and down thinking about it, and then just before daybreak I lit out and took to the road again” (161). By avoiding commitments to women, Jasper can devote his energy to I.W.W. struggles, and, more generally, to a life of travel and adventure.

A similar figuration of the hobo appears in John Dos Passos’s 1923 novel *Streets of Night*, in which one of the story’s central characters, a Harvard student, meets a young hobo in the park and comes to envy his mobility, vigor, and breadth of experience. The hobo, “Whitey,” embodies Whitmanian ideals of American working-class manhood⁴:

What I like is goin’ round to new towns, hoppin’ freights an’ all that. Jeez, I been some places in the last year. I’ve worked in Akron an’ Cleveland, an’ Chicago, an’ Atlanta, Georgia. If I’d had the sense to stay down south I wouldn’t be freezin’ to death at this minute. An’ Tallahassee an’ Key West. I passed up a chance to go to Havana. . . . An’ Galveston an’ South Bend an’ Topeka an’ Pittsburgh. That’s where they pick you up an’ put you on the stone crushers. An’ Duluth an’ Cairo an’ Albany an’ New Orleans. (132)

The Harvard student listens to this speech and wishes he could “be like Whitey, going round to new towns, walking down roads, hopping freights” (137).

Around this same time, middle-class outdoor enthusiasts began to liken themselves to tramps—an identification that would have been almost unheard of at the end of the previous century. Calling themselves “autotramps” and “motorhoboes,” automobile campers embraced the ethos (if not the reality) of “roughing it.” In their motoring memoirs they

portrayed themselves as proud participants in the “See America First” movement, which, grounded partly in anti-European nationalism, encouraged American tourists to experience “American uniqueness” before visiting the chateaux and canals of Europe (Belasco 25). So mainstream had the idea of vagabondage become that it even made its way into Emily Post’s *Etiquette*. In the 1923 edition, Post includes a full chapter on “Camp Manners,” and in one comical passage describes a representative camper’s enthusiastic search through his attic, in preparation for his trip, for “disreputable looking articles of wearing apparel” (441). The upper-class motoring heroine of Sinclair Lewis’s 1919 novel *Free Air* delights in the company of cheerful “hoboes” and “tramping harvesters” whom she and her father meet on the road, offering them “lifts” and enjoying “the sight of their duffle bags stuck up between the sleek fenders and the hood” of her deluxe roadster (103). In the motor camp itself, however, her companions are a literature professor and a young mechanic who aspires to become a civil engineer (140). When transients began to make use of low-cost camp accommodations, private camps were developed, providing tourists with insulation from the truly downtrodden (Belasco 13). The tramp’s function as a democratic signifier was thus more comfortably maintained.

This purposeful ignorance of real-life tramps became harder to sustain with the onset of depression in 1929. A 1931 essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “The New Pilgrim’s Progress” notes that “tourists and sight-seers” attending the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans found themselves thrown together with “a ragged army of hoboes.” And these hoboes are not romanticized adventurers; they are “jobless outcasts” who “shuffled through the streets” (Whitcomb 546). Depression-era accounts of tramping emphasize not romantic adventure, but bleak reality. Tom Kromer’s *Waiting for Nothing* begins with a grim dedication, “To Jolene, who turned off the gas,” and ends on an equally gloomy note: “What is a man to do? . . . All he can do is try to keep his belly full of enough slop so that he won’t rattle when he breathes” (187). In a 1933 essay for *Forum* entitled “I’ve Got to Take a Chance,” Frank Bunce describes the two years he lived as a tramp after losing his job as a mechanical draftsman in 1931. Bunce warns his readers that the unrelenting hardship of homelessness turns honest men into criminals, willing “to take a chance”: “get me cold enough and hungry enough and bored and sick with futility, and I’ll probably decide to take a chance. I don’t know the technique of robbing banks, but I could swing a length of gas pipe on a fat fellow stepping out of a Packard” (112). Frank Conroy’s 1933 novel *The Disinherited* is similar in its brutal depiction of the transient’s day-to-day struggle, but differs in that Conroy ultimately promotes collective action. The story ends with the main protagonist heading West with a socialist friend to become a labor organizer.

But the thirties also saw the rise of nostalgia for pre-depression-era tramps (or “hoboes,” as they were more often referred to in celebratory contexts). Nostalgic representations of the “American hobo” in mainstream publications dismissed contemporary tramps as inauthentic “newcomers,” and celebrated hoboes of the past for their love of freedom and adventure. Included in a 1936 issue of *Reader’s Digest* devoted to “Vanishing Americans” is a personal narrative by adventure writer James Norman Hall in which he fondly remembers his boyhood encounters with the hoboes that passed through his hometown and carved their names into the town’s wooden water tank.⁵ “A No. 1,” “Frisco Jack,” and “Chicago Slim” are not “jobless outcasts,” but freedom-and-adventure loving men of an earlier era. Hall recounts how he and his boyhood friends solemnly looked up to the wanderers as great teachers— “Tank Town Professors.” Similarly, a 1940 article that appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled “That Vanishing American, The Hobo,” nostalgically remembers the hobo as a kind of frontier type: “While the modern

hobo is an urban fellow, the old-timer rarely lived in the city. Instead, he confined his wandering to the wide open spaces” (Stessin 13). Thirties nostalgia thus set up a distinction between depression transients and “old-timer[s],” working the latter into a national narrative of (vanishing) frontier freedom.

By mid-century, this distinction would fade. Depression-era hoboes themselves became “old timers,” joining their earlier counterparts in the realm of American cultural nostalgia. In Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*—a novel still widely read and celebrated (especially now, during its semi-centennial year)—the character Dean Moriarty derives his romantic, quasi-mythical status in large part from his boyhood depression-era wanderings with his hobo father, “Old Dean Moriarty.” Kerouac describes Dean’s father as an authentic, kinetic, American adventurer: “old bum Dean Moriarty the Tinsmith, riding freights, working as a scullion in the railroad cookshacks, stumbling, down-crashing in wino alley nights, expiring on coal piles, dropping his yellowed teeth one by one in the gutters of the West” (123). Like Dos Passos’s “Whitey,” Dean’s father appears to have done everything, been everywhere; in Kerouac’s portrayal, he is literally part of the Old American West. There is a somberness to this portrayal, but also a reverent, vibrant lyricism. He is invoked again in the final line of the novel’s elegiacal conclusion as “Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found” (293).

The 50th anniversary of *On the Road* coincides with the 20th anniversary of participatory journalist Ted Conover’s *Coyotes*, in which Conover identifies Mexican migrant workers in the western United States as “the true modern-day incarnation of the classic American hobo” (xvii). Such an understanding of these workers has almost no currency in the popular media, where they are portrayed as undesirable outsiders—and often in terms very similar to those that characterized late-nineteenth-century accounts of tramping. It remains to be seen how, or if, present-day migrant laborers will be incorporated into the more celebratory narrative of mobility represented by “the classic American hobo.”

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¹ Michael Kimmel, and E. Anthony Rotundo are among the many historians who have examined this transformation.

² Stuart Berg Flexner's *Listening to America* lists three possibilities: "(1) from the vagabonds' old sarcastic greeting to each other 'Ho! Beau'; (2) from the Civil War's wandering veteran's pretense of being 'homeward bound'; (3) from the young wanderers who were runaway 'hoe boys' from the farm" (312-313).

³ "The Call of the Shirt" also points to problems with some of the taxonomies of transients that emerged in the twentieth century. The most famous is that of Chicago sociologist Nels Anderson, whose 1923 study entitled *The Hobo* describes the hobo as a mobile worker and the tramp as a mobile non-worker. His classification is derived from that of Ben L. Reitman, who claimed that the hobo "works and wanders" and the tramp "dreams and wanders" (Anderson 87). One can only speculate as to how Anderson would classify "Hobo Jack," who seems to straddle categories: "I start out on Monday, takin' a job to cut grass. Maybe I work all day Monday, maybe not. Some weeks I stick it out till Tuesday..." (727). Other stories and essays present similar difficulties: In his 1907 *The Road*, Jack London uses the terms "hobo" and "tramp" interchangeably; and in his *U.S.A.* trilogy (*The 42nd Parallel* [1930], *1919* [1932], and *The Big Money* [1936]), John Dos Passos uses the noun "hobo" and the verb "tramping." Most historians use the word "tramp" to designate all homeless transients of the industrial era. (See, for example, Monkonnen 1984, Montgomery 1993, and Ringenbach 1973). In this essay, I follow the historians in favoring the term "tramp," but I use the term "hobo" when the more positive connotation of this term is important to my analysis.

⁴ Michael Clark has detailed similarities in style and scope between Whitey's dialogue and Whitman's catalogues.

⁵ Hall is most famous for co-authoring the 1932 nautical adventure novel *Mutiny on the Bounty*.