

# The “Good Lamp is the Best Police” Metaphor and Ideologies of the Nineteenth-Century Urban Landscape

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Emerson slips in an unusual analogy in the middle of his essay on “Worship”: “As gaslight is the best nocturnal police, so the universe protects itself by pitiless publicity.”<sup>1</sup> The assumption that “gaslight is the best nocturnal police” is striking. Only fifty years before he made this point there was no gaslight; there were not even police as we now know them. And yet both author and audience knew the connection between street lighting and police so well that Emerson could use that shared assumption to move on to universal matters.

The metaphor, “gaslight is the best nocturnal police,” can tell us much about the shared value system and ideology of urban citizens who had to cope with immense change that always threatened to dissolve into social disorder. In the nineteenth century, cities expanded and transformed internally, while at the same time they seemed ever more “distant from nature.”<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, new technologies that could be used for water, sewage and gas utilities and pavement became available for citizens to manage the growing metropolis. The usefulness of the new technologies depended in large measure on the perception of need, and those perceptions were nested in the value system of the growing numbers of middle- and upper-class nineteenth-century urban residents.

Why should lights attract our interest? Clean water and adequate waste disposal may have been far more important for the functioning of nineteenth-century towns, but they were hidden underground, and the ultimate enemy, the “germ,” was a small and oft misunderstood foe. Lights, on the other hand, conquered darkness and all that lurked therein, real or imagined. Street lights betokened war on criminals, war on poverty, war on the unenlightened. In time,

lights would also be seen as hygienic, as Dr. Woods Hutchinson wrote in 1916 when he reflected on a century of technological change: “Light put a stop to the unsanitary practice of throwing garbage, waste materials, broken crockery, ashes, dead cats and other refuse into the streets under cover of darkness.”<sup>3</sup> In short, street lights became a highly visible part of the urban landscape.

Certainly, the options for street lighting expanded markedly in the nineteenth century. In 1800, oil lamps, more often provided by private citizens than the municipality, were all that lit the way of the nighttime traveller, unless one carried one’s own lantern.<sup>4</sup> By 1900, gas lamps, kerosene lamps, gasoline lamps, arc electric lamps and incandescent electric lamps were available for cities eager to use them.<sup>5</sup> The story of how lighting technology was invented by people like Peale, Brush and Edison is one of the great tales of nineteenth-century history and the usual approach to the question of street lighting.<sup>6</sup>

But ours is a different task. We need to know the roots of demand, not the routes of supply. For in the realm of ideology we are concerned with intentions, purposes and tacit assumptions. Why did people want lights in the first place? To answer the question about light’s role in creating an “ideology of the land” in an urban setting, then, we must assess the reasons why people chose to light their streets.<sup>7</sup>

## Demand for Lighting

Emerson’s quote might lead us to believe that lights only performed a policing function. However, at least three interrelated sources of demand for street lighting can be identified: utility, urbanity and security.<sup>8</sup> Let us briefly consider the first two, before focusing on the third, security.

The first, utility, seems the most obvious. The nineteenth-century night was simply busier. In the first part of the century, for example, laborers working a twelve hour shift often came home in the dark, seeing sunlight only in the summer months. Agitation for a shorter working day started to have effect by midcentury, but it did not decrease nocturnal street traffic since many workers filled newfound leisure hours with activities that took place out of the house. And by century’s end, increasing numbers worked the night shift.<sup>9</sup>

While many worked at night, others played. For those with limited domestic space, neat distinctions between the private home and the public street were not observed: household leisure activity (and for the poor, important elements of the household economy) seemed inevitably to spill outside the front door.<sup>10</sup> For the middle and upper classes, public/private boundaries were more firmly established in the nineteenth century. Careful rules of appropriate conduct were observed, but the number of opportunities for nocturnal public life burgeoned. Theatres, pubs, brothels, operas and cafes stayed open until late at night.<sup>11</sup>

Street lighting also had increasing utility for businessmen, who discovered that, as one street lighting advocate put it, “Trade follows the light.”<sup>12</sup> Innovative merchants such as Potter Palmer in Chicago used phosgene lighting to highlight

display windows as early as 1852. John Wanamaker in Philadelphia used the brand new technology of arc-electric lighting in his store as early as 1878.<sup>13</sup> After the Civil War department stores remained open up to sixteen hours a day.<sup>14</sup>

All the comings and goings of workers, partiers and shoppers, of teamsters and cabs, generated increased traffic on the streets and called for technological and regulatory response. As Anthony Sutcliffe and Francois Bedarida note, “the concentration of functions in the street made it an exciting and convenient place to be, and growing regulation made it much more comfortable in the nineteenth century than ever before.”<sup>15</sup> Better lighting helped one to avoid running into other pedestrians, the annoyingly frequent mudholes and other traffic. Where lighting was not sufficient, as in Louisville in 1819, one heard comments like this: “not a single lamp lends its cheering light to the nocturnal passenger, who frequently stands a good chance of breaking his neck.”<sup>16</sup>

The second reason, urbanity, is suggested when we think of America’s first gasworks, at Charles Willson Peale’s Museum in Independence Hall; here, says Lewis Mumford, prominent Philadelphians liked to promenade under the gas-lights, an excellent way to see and be seen.<sup>17</sup> As the nineteenth century progressed, the increasingly distinct business districts and wealthy residential areas were lit up earlier and better than other parts of town, so that by mid-century in New York, for example, gas lamps had become “standard in the principal streets and squares as well as in the new homes of uptown residents.”<sup>18</sup> The spatial complement of the areas where such “standard amenities” were consumed were the foul-smelling districts where the gas was actually produced and stored such as New York’s “Gashouse District.”<sup>19</sup> The existence of such areas, as well as others that were still meagerly lighted long after more fashionable zones had gas lamps, are reminders that while the slippery term “urbanity” often refers to city life in general, it also carries strong socially elite implications.

The urbanity theme is also seen in the self-conscious way that cities used street lights to compete with each other and to mark off their differences from smaller places. For example, urbanity and utility were nicely merged in the turn of the century lighting schemes that led to H.L. Mencken’s comment that “Every American town of any airs has a Great White Way . . .”<sup>20</sup> Electric globe lamps on Corinthian pillars lit the way for both shoppers and strollers, and they bestowed a special civic grace on places that aspired to avoid, as one Minneapolis booster put it, “the country town bogey.”<sup>21</sup>

“White Way Lighting” captured attention, but a far greater number of lights in any given city existed for another reason: security. As Thoreau suggested, “. . . men are generally still a little afraid of the dark, though the witches are all hung, and Christianity and candles have been introduced.”<sup>22</sup> There is no doubt that people who were out and about at night simply felt less skittish with a little light.

But such metaphysical fear of darkness was surpassed by fear of crime. If lights as utilities were seen as a way to avoid breaking one’s own neck, lights as security were a way to keep others from doing the job. Richard Wade describes

lightless frontier cities early in the nineteenth century as living “. . . in darkness after sundown, while criminals plied their trade under a black mantle which shielded them from both their victims and the police.”<sup>23</sup>

If we probe more deeply into the security mode, however, we find the suggestion that lights not only *aided* police; they *were* police. So we return to the assumption of Emerson’s day of an identity between lighting technology and police. Why *was* this such a powerful assumption?

## A Good Lamp is the Best Police

Emerson’s comment about gaslight was actually sparked by a visit to London, where he observed that as a result of a new lighting scheme in that city, “there is no more night.” Twice he noted in his journal that “A good lamp is the best police.”<sup>24</sup> The deep-seated appeal of this sentiment was used in the twentieth century by Progressive street lighting engineers and the General Electric Publicity Department to advocate more street lights. (See Figure 1.) In 1924, for example, GE placed this advertisement in *New Republic*, *World’s Work*, *Harper’s*, *Holland’s* and *Scribner’s*:

To Emerson is ascribed the saying that “a light is the best policeman.” The authorities of Fresno, California, have recognized this truth by giving their officers the help of G-E lights in dark corners—allies in the alleys. Light is also a good fireman, a first class salesman, and a wonderful protector of human life. And at what low wages it works!<sup>25</sup>

But there is more than metaphor and promotional rhetoric in the statement that “a good lamp is the best police.” In fact, lamps and police, with their dual purposes of rooting out darkness and crime, were interchangeable. After all, street lights and police have shared much the same history.

Both institutions, for example, had a common origin in the eighteenth century night watch. In Louisville, night watchmen carried “a staff, . . . a pike and hook on one end, a dark lathern [sic], a rattle and trumpet, a small ladder and flambeau, a pair of scissors and a tin pot with a spout for the purpose of filling lamps . . . with oil.”<sup>26</sup> In many English cities, the lamps were literally called “police lamps,” and the “Police Commissioners” had jurisdiction over the placement of the lamps. But ill-paid and ill-trained night watchmen were inadequate to the task of preserving order in the rapidly growing nineteenth-century metropolis.<sup>27</sup>

Nineteenth-century cities were increasingly a world of strangers, as immigrants flooded in from the country and from Europe. The introduction of mass transit fostered the separation of home and workplace and led to the sorting of classes and ethnic groups into homogeneous urban zones.<sup>28</sup> Whole districts of town were now beyond one’s field of immediate experience. While this



## Allies in the Alleys

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Light is also a good fireman, a first class salesman, and a wonderful protector of human life. And at what low wages it works!



You go to your doctor, your lawyer and banker for advice in their fields of specialized knowledge. The lighting of streets, stores and homes is a science also. The experts of the General Electric Company are at the service of your community.

# GENERAL ELECTRIC

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Figure 1. 1924 General Electric advertisement. Courtesy General Electric Company.

rearrangement separated rich from poor, it also highlighted for the first time the popular contrast of areas at once poor and dark with others that were wealthy and bright. While “urbane” light twinkled on fashionable districts, the “other side of the tracks” was terra incognita, a world of darkness and disorder.<sup>29</sup>

To cross the line into districts like these was to cross a social frontier, and in this spatial and moral dichotomy of light and dark, we have something of an “ideology of the land.” If the feeling of “hopelessness and fear” regarding the inner districts of poverty was, as Sam Bass Warner suggests, one of the strongest legacies of the emergence of the modern spatially segmented metropolis, then an expanded police—and street lights—could not be far behind.<sup>30</sup> To control the perceived disorder and reduce the fear, both permanent street lights and police burgeoned in the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup>

What evidence exists for this assertion? We may look briefly at some of the more usual sources, such as municipal records and contemporary fiction. More revealing is the existence of an entire genre of popular non-fiction that exploited the contrast between “sunshine and shadows” in the metropolis.

Municipal authorities often cited police considerations when pressing for new or extended street lighting technologies. This resolution of Cincinnati’s city council in 1827 stands as a good example: “the interest as well as the safety of the City will be advanced from the introduction of Gas lights into general use.”<sup>32</sup>

Adrienne Siegel has written that “The books of the nation’s literary giants during this period paint a dark urban landscape pocked by brutish slums.”<sup>33</sup> Nocturnal pastoral imagery was often inverted to depict the “wicked city.”<sup>34</sup> The urban nighttime sky was illuminated by the Promethean light of artifice, not the pastoral light of the sun.<sup>35</sup> For example, in Poe’s poem, “The City in the Sea”:

No rays from the holy heaven come down  
On the long nighttime of that town;  
But light from out the lurid sea  
Streams up the turrets silently.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, riders on Hawthorne’s “Celestial Railroad” are taken through the gaslit Valley of the Shadow of Death.<sup>37</sup>

In Poe’s short story “The Man in the Crowd” we see combined a general aversion to city life, an employment of the symbolic possibilities of gas lighting, and a willingness to depict urban social zones in terms of light and dark.<sup>38</sup> The tale begins with the narrator looking out the window of a coffeehouse on “one of the principal thoroughfares of the city.” As darkness comes, he becomes absorbed by the crowd, and makes numerous finely detailed observations about the people who parade by in descending social rank. “As the night deepened, so deepened to me the interest of the scene.” Not only did the physical and social types appear cruder and more “infamous,” “but the rays of the gas-lamps, feeble at first in their struggle with the dying day, had now at length gained ascendancy, and threw over every thing a fitful and garish lustre. All was dark yet splendid . . .”

Out of the crowd now steps “a decrepid old man,” which awakens in the narrator the “craving desire to keep the man in view” by following him. The narrator again descends the social scale, this time by moving from rich districts to poor, a passage that also carries him from light to dark corners of the city. He is led down the main thoroughfare to a “brilliantly lighted” square, then to a bazaar, back to the main street and the coffee house—“still brilliant with gas,” (but with few people now to be seen), then to a series of avenues and a “narrow and gloomy lane little frequented,” and finally to the “most noisome quarter of London.” “By the dim light of an accidental lamp, tall, antique, worm-eaten tenements were seen tottering to their fall . . .” Still, there are some people here, and “the spirits of the old man again flickered up, as a lamp which is near its death-hour . . . Suddenly a corner was turned, a blaze of light burst upon our sight, and we stood before one of the huge suburban temples of Intemperance—one of the palaces of the fiend, Gin.” Finally, at daybreak, the old man retraces his steps back to the hotel and coffeehouse. The narrator vows to follow him no more, finding him to be “the type and genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd.”

The flickering lamps, directly tied to the spirit of the man of the crowd and therefore to the impersonality of the city itself, caution us that in a good writer’s hands there is more to lighting imagery than the light/dark landscape distinction. Lights are found wherever the two travel—even the most “noisome” parts of town—and are used to underscore the artificiality and unsociability of the town. As Melville put it in *Pierre* when the main characters have at last left the rural bliss of upstate New York and sadly, bitterly, enter New York City at nightfall, the lamps “seemed not so much intended to dispel the general gloom, as to show some dim path leading through it, into some gloom deeper beyond . . .”<sup>39</sup> For him, “God’s sunlight” is contrasted with “garish night-life” in a scene of urban artifice, danger and evil that is all the more crushing for the new arrivals because they lived the early chapters in an ironically described Elysium.

Other writers appealed to an audience less interested in advanced symbolism and tended to handle the light and dark issue more crudely. Siegel, who has examined mid-century popular writing in detail, points out that “novelists, startled by the high incidence of mugging in mid-nineteenth century cities, showed that citizens had to arm themselves if they wanted to step out at night.” Many of these “hack” writers “suggested the sinister quality of urban life in their numerous scenes of criminals garroting men and raping women after sundown.”<sup>40</sup> “Eroding standards of personal rectitude” caused such behavior, not the social dislocations created by underlying economic upheaval. “Fear of disorder galvanized the guardians of Christian morality.”<sup>41</sup>

In Maria Cummins’ popular mid-century novel *The Lamplighter*, for example, the poor districts of town are naturally dark, and the good and innocent child Gerty is cheered only by a kindly lamplighter, and ultimately, the light of Christianity. The contrast of bright and dark, rich and poor, is made explicit:

It was growing dark in the city . . . a light fall of snow, which had made everything look bright and clean in the pleasant open squares near which the fine houses of the city were built, had only served to render the narrow streets and dark lanes dirtier and more cheerless than ever; for, mixed with the mud and filth which abound in those neighbourhoods where the poor are crowded together the beautiful snow had lost all its purity.<sup>42</sup>

As Gerty lies in bed in her dark garret (“hat[ing] and fear[ing] the dark”), the narrator wonders, “Will [Christ] not send man or angel to light up the darkness within, to kindle a light that shall never go out, the light that shall shine through all eternity!”<sup>43</sup>

Similar attitudes are revealed even more explicitly in the “sunshine and shadow” literature. Here, in social expeditions comparable to the exploration of Africa or Asia, travellers from the realms of enlightenment venture to the dark side of town to expose vice, gain sympathy for the poor, and titillate readers.<sup>44</sup> Of this genre, Siegel says, “Whether fire or crime, riots or pollution, the ‘shadows’ of urban existence were exposed in lurid detail by hack writers.”<sup>45</sup>

The overarching motif in this literature is light and dark. (See Figure 2.) The very titles of novels, books and articles that appeared after 1845 suggest this, for example: *New York by Gas-Light: With Here and There a Streak of Sunshine*; *The Empire City, or New York by Day and Night*; *Light and Darkness, or The Shadow of Fate*; *Sunshine and Shadow in New York*; *Lights and Shadows of New York Life*; or, *The Sights and Sensations of the Great City*; *New York by Sunlight and Gaslight*; *Darkness and Daylight, or Lights and Shadows of New York Life*; and *Under the Gaslight: A Totally Original and Picturesque Drama of Life and Love in These Times in Five Acts*.<sup>46</sup> As Stuart Blumin notes of this literature, citing the author of *New York by Gaslight*, “The most basic social fact in Foster’s depiction of New York City is polarization; more specifically, the increasing wealth and pretentiousness of the very rich and the simultaneous expansion of the numbers of the very poor.” And books after the Civil War emphasized the polarities even more.<sup>47</sup>

As an example, let us briefly examine a few passages from one of the most popular authors, James McCabe. Note his application of the light/darkness theme to specific places and how his prose simultaneously piques the audience’s interest and warns them away.<sup>48</sup> McCabe enjoyed the great lights of the Bowery—“The scene is as interesting and brilliant as that to be witnessed in Broadway; but very different”—yet he cautioned:

Until long after midnight the scene is the same, and even all through the night the street preserves its air of unrest . . . Respectable people avoid the Bowery as far as possible at night. Every species of crime and vice is abroad at this time



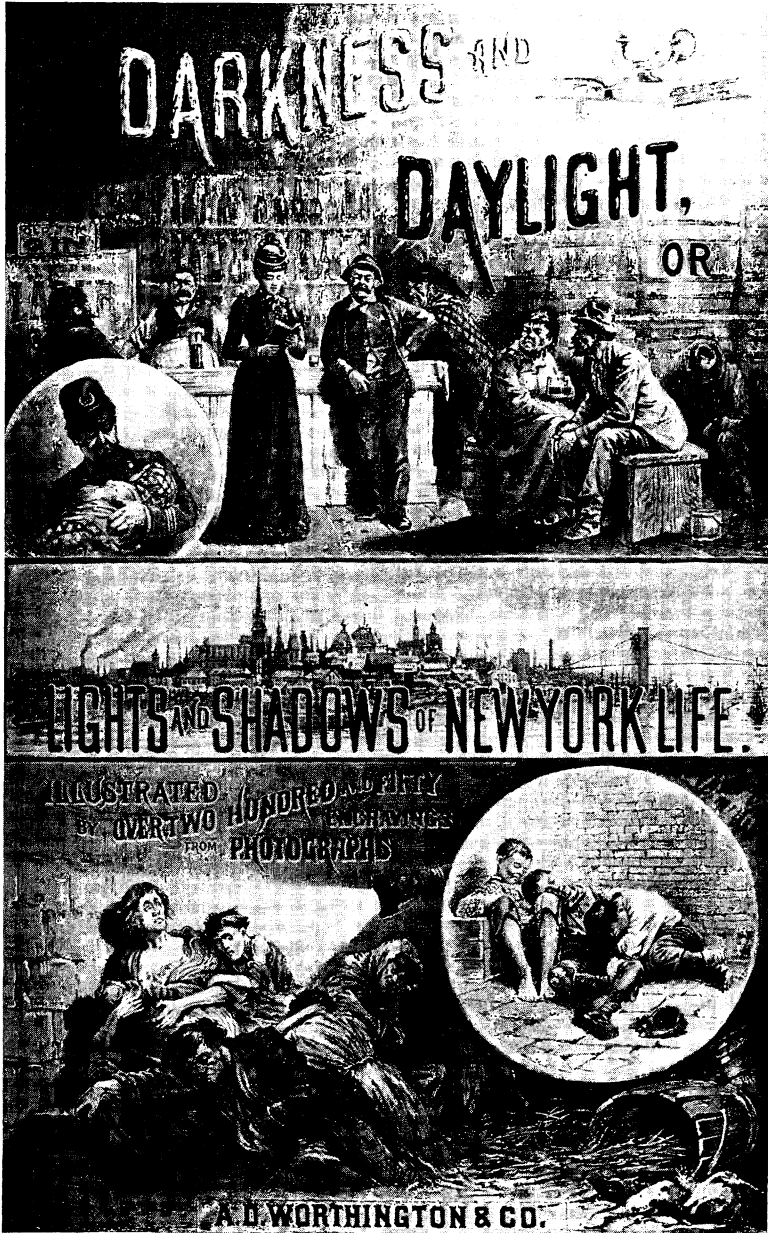


Figure 2. Artist's view of the light/darkness theme. Frontispiece of Helen Campbell, *Darkness and Daylight, or Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (Hartford, 1892).

watching for its victims. Those who do not wish to fall into trouble should keep out of the way.<sup>49</sup>

While the Bowery had a sort of lurid attraction, McCabe depicted the poorer Five Points neighborhood in darker terms:

There [on Broadway] everything is bright and cheerful. Here every surrounding is dark and wretched. The streets are narrow and dirty, the dwellings are foul and gloomy, and the very air seem heavy with misery and crime . . . This is the realm of Poverty. Here want and suffering, and vice hold their courts. It is a strange land to you who have known nothing but the upper and better quarters of the great city. It is a very terrible place to those who are forced to dwell in it.

And, again: “. . . there are some sections of it in which it is not prudent to venture at night.”<sup>50</sup> McCabe, like Foster, found Five Points to be, in Blumin’s phrase, “both wretched and vicious.”<sup>51</sup>

Tied to the image of darkness is the notion of an underworld.<sup>52</sup> George Foster, in fact, followed his nonfiction *New York by Gaslight* with a novel, *Celio: Or, New York Above-Ground and Under-Ground*.<sup>53</sup> The persistence of the imagery was registered forty years later in Benjamin Flower’s *Civilization’s Inferno*: “Below the social cellar, where uninvited poverty holds sway, is a darker zone: a subterranean, rayless vault—the commonwealth of the double night.” Flower then invited his reader to cross the “threshold” and view this zone.<sup>54</sup>

Occasionally, some middle-class people did venture across the threshold, into the vice districts that existed in most metropolitan areas.<sup>55</sup> Even the lights here, however, were not as bright, forthright and urbane as the lights of, say, Fifth Avenue. As Blumin points out, “immorality that is visible is seen dimly, by gaslight, ‘brandy-colored light,’ or ‘broad gleams of red light.’ Hence, the casual observer, most obviously represented by the innocent visitor from the country, was deceived by this concealed or dimly lighted reality.”<sup>56</sup>

We can see by the tone in these examples that the typical reader would find the world beyond the threshold to be unfathomable. Until about 1890, as Lewis Erenberg has pointed out in his study of nightlife, most middle-class people did indeed view the entertainments of the lower classes as exceedingly unseemly and irrational.<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, that this literature was written and widely read is indicative of at least prurient interest in what was on the other side of the social frontier. As Siegel puts it, “Pulp writers presented the perils of city life so colorfully that the very shadows of the metropolis endowed it with charm.”<sup>58</sup>

Perhaps it was his refusal to make the light/dark conceit yield a conventional charm that made it so difficult for Stephen Crane to find a publisher for *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893). Light and dark are used ironically, as when Maggie’s

brother, Jimmie, looks up on a star-lit sky and says “wonderingly and quite reverently: ‘Deh moon looks like hell, don’t it?’”<sup>59</sup> Jimmie, at least, frankly recognizes his urban predicament, unlike naive Maggie, for whom “swaggering Pete loomed like a golden sun. . . .”<sup>60</sup> When his true nature is revealed and her hopes for him are eclipsed, Maggie is drawn into prostitution. Unlike his pulp-writing contemporaries and predecessors, Crane withholds moral comment.

Instead, we see Maggie picking her way through the streets where “electric lights, whirring softly, shed a blurred radiance” on the “glittering avenues.” Her “smiling invitations” coming to no avail, she “went into darker blocks than those where the crowd travelled.” After more refusals, “the girl went into gloomy districts near the river, where the tall black factories shut in the street and only occasional broad beams of light fell across the pavements from the saloons.” Another refusal: she moves “further on in the darkness.” After another, “she went into the blackness of the final block,” where “afar off the lights of the avenues glittered as if from an impossible distance.” She meets her final customer. “At their feet the river appeared a deathly black hue. Some hidden factory sent up a yellow glare, that lit for a moment the waters lapping oilily against timbers. The varied sounds of life, made joyous by distance and seeming unapproachableness, came faintly and died away to a silence.”<sup>61</sup> Here Crane allows the darkening imagery to establish just how hopeless Maggie’s situation really is, as seen from the other side of the social gulf from the conventional middle-class view. Thus he admits no easy solution to her dilemma and marks a turning point, near century’s end, of the literary appraisal of rich and poor, light and dark.

If the nineteenth-century urban poor could not be not ignored—whether because of simple curiosity or compassion—then some sort of imaginative engagement in their problems was necessary. In the main, since root economic causes of poverty were either misunderstood or ignored, then the engagement took the form of control of the poor and the physical disorder they seemingly generated. Street lights and police helped to impose order on what was increasingly viewed as a chaotic social and spatial situation. The moral of lighting lay in its order—so visibly expressed in the geometric neatness of the twin ranks of lights lining streets. Police tracked down specific criminals, while lights dispelled the generalized disorder of darkness.<sup>62</sup> People did see the “pitiless publicity” of lighting as the best way to protect the universe; lights thus became police. As the GE Publicity department and many others saw it, they were “allies in the alleys.”<sup>63</sup>

## Street Lights and the Urban Frontier

To those critics who said city life was unnatural, Mr. Dooley replied,

Ye might say . . . that we’re ladin’ an artyficyal life, but, be Hivins, ye might as well tell me I ought to be paradin’ up and

down a hillside with a suit iv skins . . . an' livin' in a cave as to  
make me believe I ought to get along without shreet cars  
an' ilictric lights . . .<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, by the turn of the century lights were indispensable parts of the modern city. Street lights were useful guideposts; they were elegant street ornaments, booster propaganda, backdrop to the "urbane" social pageant; and, they were seen to control disorder, at least in the minds of those, like Emerson, for whom disorder disappeared under the glare of "pitiless publicity."<sup>65</sup>

Walter Benjamin has pointed out that there are "prophesying places" in cities, "above all the thresholds that mysteriously divide the districts of a town."<sup>66</sup> Urbane districts and "policed" districts were two sides of the same metropolis; social hierarchies, of course, existed prior to the nineteenth century, and rich could control poor with vast entourages of servants and torchbearers, but now, in an expanded and spatially divided metropolis, with the technology of street lighting at hand, old status and class relationships achieved prophetic meaning in the symbolic language of light and dark.

So frontiers were found in the American metropolis even as the metropolis became more distinct from the Western frontier. But just as the myth of the Western frontier provided a way to deny the grim social realities of life in the Age of Industrialization, so the metaphor of light and police may have covered as many problems as it illuminated.<sup>67</sup>

## Notes

This article is adapted from a paper entitled "'A Light Is As Good As A Policeman': Police Aspects of the Demand for Street Lighting in the Nineteenth Century American Cities," delivered at the American Studies Association, International Convention, session on "Ideologies of the American Land," November 23, 1987, New York City. Special thanks are due to Yi-Fu Tuan and Leo Marx, for their constructive criticism as session commentators, and to Mary Jane Keitel, April Veness, Patrick McGreevy, Michael McNerney, Leslie Lindeman, Stuart Levine, David Katzman and the anonymous referees who commented on earlier drafts of this article.

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Worship," in *The Conduct of Life*, ed. Edward W. Emerson (Boston, 1904), 224.

2. The phrase is Yi-Fu Tuan's. See his "The City: Its Distance From Nature," *Geographical Review* 68 (January 1978), 1-12.

3. Woods Hutchinson, "Street Lighting and Health," *American City* 14 (1916), 489-490.

4. New York in 1762, Norfolk in 1765 and Albany in 1771 were the first municipalities to provide streetlamps. "By the close of the colonial period," says Jon Teaford, "America's municipal leaders had accepted the necessity of public illumination and had progressed substantially toward the objective of safe, lighted streets." Jon C. Teaford, *The Municipal Revolution in America: Origins of Modern Urban Government, 1650-1825* (Chicago, 1975), 55.

5. America's first gas street lighting company was formed in Baltimore in 1816. Gary Lawson Browne, *Baltimore in the Nation, 1789-1861* (Chapel Hill, 1980), 104, 148-149. Teaford points out that Philadelphia "considered" gas in 1815. Teaford, *Municipal Revolution*, 108.

6. See, for example, Matthew Luckiesh, *Torch of Civilization: The Story of Man's Conquest of*

*Darkness* (New York, 1940). Even Thomas Hughes's monumental work is supply-oriented, centered more on the technological system than on the specific technology. Thomas Hughes, *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930* (Baltimore, 1983).

7. On the need to study "grounds" for public sector action in individual towns, see Anthony Sutcliffe, "The Growth of Public Intervention in the British Environment During the Nineteenth Century: A Structural Approach," *Papers on Planning and Design* 24 (Toronto, 1980), 12.

8. For a fuller discussion of "utility" and "urbanity", see Mark J. Bouman, "Luxury and Control: The Urbanity of Street Lighting in Nineteenth Century Cities," *Journal of Urban History* 14 (November 1987), 7-37. For extended discussion of pre-nineteenth century attempts to light the streets, see Mark J. Bouman, "City Lights and City Life: A Study of Technology and Urbanity," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1984). Also see Kate Bolton, "The Great Awakening of the Night: Lighting America's Streets," *Landscape* 23 (1979), 41-47.

9. In 1830, more than half the establishments surveyed by the U.S. Census Bureau reported eleven hours or more as the standard working day; by 1860, the number was less than one-third. Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York, 1983), 39-40. Rosenzweig describes the gradual emergence of working class nocturnal amusements, especially the saloon.

10. "For poor children, the streets were a playground and a workplace. Street life, with its panoply of choices, its rich and varied texture, its motley society, played a central role in their upbringing . . ." Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York, 1986), 203.

11. For a brief review of nineteenth-century night life, see the chapter on "Victorian Culture and Amusements" in Lewis A. Erenberg's *Steppin' Out: New York Nighlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Chicago, 1984).

12. Harry Miles, "Installing Ornamental Lighting in Michigan City, Indiana," *American City* 10 (1914), 476-477. Also see John Corcoran, "The City Light and Beautiful," *American City* 7 (1912), 46-47.

13. See Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, 1980), 138. By 1903, Schlesinger and Mayer celebrated the new combination arc and incandescent lighting in advertisements for its Louis Sullivan designed Chicago store. Neil Harris, "Shopping—Chicago Style," in John Zukowsky, ed., *Chicago Architecture, 1872-1922: Birth of a Metropolis* (Munich, 1987), n. 25. Harris notes (p. 145) that when Marshall Field opened its new store a few years later, it gave even greater emphasis to interior lighting, emphasizing their "colossal" number (35,000) in publicity materials.

14. Dr. Ralph M. Hower, "Urban Retailing 100 Years Ago," *Bulletin of the Business History Society* 12 (1938), 91-101.

15. Francois Bedarida and Anthony R. Sutcliffe, "The Street in the Structure and Life of the City: Reflections on Nineteenth-Century London and Paris," in Bruce M. Stave, ed., *Modern Industrial Cities: History, Policy, and Survival* (Beverly Hills, 1981), 27. It is fair to say that Bedarida and Sutcliffe's observation has general applicability for large industrial cities in the United States.

16. Henry McMurtrie, *Sketches of Louisville* (Louisville, 1819), 143; quoted in Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: Pioneer Life in Early Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Lexington, Louisville, and St. Louis* (Chicago, 1959), 90.

17. Lewis Mumford, "Historic Philadelphia I," in Lewis Mumford, *The Highway and the City* (New York, 1963), 180-182. It is perhaps no coincidence that Philadelphia was viewed as "the best-lighted city in America" at the end of the eighteenth century, though the evidence for this is a passing comment in Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus The City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York, 1962), 20. New York's first gaslight was in City Hall Park in 1812, another highly visible area in the center of town. James D. McCabe, Jr., *Lights and Shadows of New York Life; or, The Sights and Sensations of the Great City*, (Philadelphia, 1872; rpt. New York, 1970), 48.

18. Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840-1857* (New York, 1981), 119.

19. *Ibid.*, 120-121.

20. H.L. Mencken, *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*, 4th ed. (New York, 1936).

21. Howard Strong, "The Street Beautiful in Minneapolis," *American City* 9 (September 1913), 227-229.

22. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York, 1960), 92. An intimate of Edison's suggested that the electric light dispelled "night with its darkness . . . from the arena of civilization." unattributed quote in Matthew Josephson, *Edison: A Biography* (New York, 1959), 174. Also see John F. Kasson, *Civilizing The Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (Harmondsworth, England, 1976), 184.

23. Wade, *Urban Frontier*, 91.

24. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks, Vol. XI, 1848-1851*, ed.

A.W. Plumstead, William H. Gilman and Ruth H. Bennett (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1975), 71. Emerson wrote that "there is no night longer for London" and "there is no more night." In an earlier notebook, Emerson had written, "A great deal of money was wasted in . . . providing large cities with a nocturnal police. At last, it is found, that, gas light, & now the new electric light, which destroy night, supersede the police." Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks, Vol. X, 1847-1848*, ed. Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1973), 377.

25. *From Electricity and the American Public: Developing an Electrical Consciousness*, in J. W. Hammond Papers, General Electric Company, Schenectady, New York. #L1916. Corcoran, an engineer, also uses the phrase in "The City Light and Beautiful," 46-49.

26. Quoted in Wade, *Urban Frontier*, 288. Philadelphia's City Wardens had responsibility for lighting and watching the streets in the eighteenth century. Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Growth* (Philadelphia, 1968), 10.

27. See Adrienne Siegel, *Image of the American City in Popular Literature, 1820-1870* (Port Washington, New York, 1981), 23-25, for depictions of the inadequacy of night watchmen in popular literature.

28. Theodore Hershberg summarizes the trend: "Central to the processes of urbanization and industrialization which shaped our cities is the socioeconomic differentiation of urban space." Theodore Hershberg, "Space," in Theodore Hershberg, ed., *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family, and Group Experience in the 19th Century City* (Oxford, 1981), 121. Sam Bass Warner, Jr., adds the element of a rural ideal amongst the middle classes: "The physical deterioration of old neighborhoods, the crowding of factory, shop, and tenement in the old central city, the unceasing flow of foreigners with ever new languages and habits—these negative pressures tended to drive the middle class from the city. The new technology of the street railway and the contemporary sanitary engineering enabled these families to move out from the old city boundaries into an expanded area of vacant and lightly settled land. In this new land the rural ideal, by its emphasis on the pleasures of private family life, on the security of a small community setting, and on the enjoyment of natural surroundings, encouraged the middle class to build a wholly new residential environment: the modern suburb." Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1978), 14. Adrienne Siegel connects the points about social segregation and public disorder: "As urban communities disintegrated under the impact of population growth, ethnic diversity, and an eroding family structure, the incidence of public disorder mounted." Siegel, *Image of the American City*, 20.

29. Gareth Stedman Jones uses the term *terra incognita* in reference to *Outcast London* (Hammondsworth, England, 1976), 14. Though, of course, "darkness" refers to the absence of light, we should also consider the fear among whites of black people in urban areas. Wade, for example, points out how citizen complaints about "large assemblages of Negroes" induced Lexington, Kentucky, to establish a night watch, which by 1813 was conducted on a 24-hour basis; not coincidentally, Lexington also had the best street lighting system in the West at the time. Wade, *Urban Frontier*, 88-90, 287.

30. Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs*, 162.

31. The need for more efficient policing was a major impetus for Western cities to push for charters in the first third of the century. See Wade, *Urban Frontier*, 271. By mid-century, police needed to be even more proficient. According to Warner, the founding of one municipal corporation in Philadelphia in 1844 out of twenty-nine separate jurisdictions was an "essential ingredient in the system of social control of the nineteenth-century big city and the early twentieth-century industrial metropolis. The creation of a large professional police force which could control riots had been the major demand and was the first product of consolidated government in Philadelphia." Warner, *Private City*, 152. In New York, "the major impulse behind the establishment of an organized, bureaucratic police [in 1845] was not the ineffectiveness of the night watch or the corruption of the police officers, but rather the fear of riots and social upheaval." James F. Richardson, "To Control the City: The New York Police in Historical Perspective," in Kenneth T. Jackson and Stanley K. Schultz, eds., *Cities in American History* (New York, 1972), 274. Also see Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1976), 104-113, on the notion of social control.

32. Wade, *Urban Frontier*, 290.

33. Siegel, *Image of the American City*, 77.

34. Paul Boyer suggests of the two decades preceding the Civil War, that "a stereotyped image of the 'wicked city' . . . penetrated deep into the national consciousness." Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America: 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1978), 65. One piece of evidence of the growing use of the night hours in the eighteenth century is the nocturnal/pastoral poetic tradition. John Gay's "Trivia; or the art of Walking the Streets of London," translated the tradition to the streets, and in a way, his urban nocturne presaged those of Baudelaire, Whitman and Benjamin. Charles Peake, ed., *Poetry of the Landscape and the Night: Two Eighteenth Century Traditions* (Columbia, South Carolina, 1970). The "inversion" of which I am speaking, however, concerns those with more rural pastoral concerns.

35. The Whites note the anti-urban language of *The Marble Faun*: "Above all, it is 'dusky,' a

word which is so overworked by Hawthorne in his descriptions of both Boston and Rome that Henry James apologized to William Dean Howells for using it too much in his book on Hawthorne," *Intellectual Versus the City*, 54-55. Leo Marx notes the contrast of fire and sun in his explication of Hawthorne's story "Ethan Brand" in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London, 1964), 265-277. Also see Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness* (New York, 1958).

36. Edgar Allan Poe, "The City in the Sea," in Oscar Williams and Edwin Honig, eds., *The Mentor Book of Major American Poets* (New York, 1962), 95.

37. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Celestial Railroad," *United State Magazine, and Democratic Review* 12 (May 1843), 515-23.

38. I am grateful to Stuart Levine for the reference, and suggest that readers interested in these themes use his and Susan Levine's annotated edition of *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe* (Indianapolis, 1976), 283-289. Though the story is set in London, the Levines remind us that if Poe "did not know the London in which this story is supposedly set, [he] knew Philadelphia and New York very well." (p. 253).

39. Herman Melville, *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities* (1852; rpt. New York, 1964), 264.

40. Siegel, *Image of the American City*, 18-19.

41. *Ibid.*, 45.

42. Maria Cummins, *The Lamplighter* (London, 1854), 1.

43. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

44. An excellent analysis of this literature is found in Stuart M. Blumin, "Explaining the New Metropolis: Perception, Depiction, and Analysis in Mid-Nineteenth-Century New York City," *Journal of Urban History* 11 (1984), 9-38. For the comparison of the exploration of the "dark city" with the "dark continent," see Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (Hammondsworth, England, 1968), 62; Raymond Williams, "Cities of Darkness and Light," in *The Country and the City* (New York, 1973), 215-232.

45. Siegel, *Image of the American City*, 13-14.

46. Peter Schenil [pseud.], "Lights and Shadows of Fashionable Life," *The Knickerbocker* 27 (February 1846), 128-138; George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light: with Here and There a Streak of Sunshine* (New York, 1850); George Lippard, *The Empire City, or New York by Day and Night* (New York, 1850); Cummins, *The Lamplighter*; [James A. Maitland], *The Watchman* (New York, 1855); Mrs. Lizzie Cutler, *Light and Darkness, or The Shadow of Fate* (New York, 1855); [Mrs. Hannah Elizabeth Goodwing Talcott], *Madge, or Night and Morning* (New York, 1863); Augustine Daly, *Under the Gaslight: A Totally Original and Picturesque Drama of Life and Love in These Times in Five Acts* (New York, 1867); Matthew Hale Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (Hartford, 1868); McCabe, *Lights and Shadows*; Helen C. Campbell, *Darkness and Daylight, or Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (Hartford, 1892); James D. McCabe, Jr., *New York by Sunlight and Gaslight* (Philadelphia, 1881).

47. Blumin, "Explaining the New Metropolis," 18, 28.

48. In New York, Blumin notes that "with little variation, Broadway/Wall Street, Chatham Street/The Bowery, and Five Points are the loci of upper-, middle-, and lower-class life in the city, and together these three spaces or zones, along with their characteristic descriptions, constitute...a major part of what Anselm Strauss has called the 'shared symbolization' of the metropolitan 'social world.'" Blumin, "Explaining the New Metropolis," 23.

49. McCabe, *Lights and Shadows*, 191-193.

50. *Ibid.*, 399-400.

51. Blumin, "Explaining the New Metropolis," 20.

52. *Ibid.*, 24; Siegel, *Image of the American City*, 36-46.

53. George G. Foster, *Celio: Or, New York Above-Ground and Under-Ground* (New York, 1850).

54. Benjamin O. Flower, *Civilization's Inferno* (Boston, 1893), 99-109.

55. In the Victorian age, according to Lewis Erenberg, "every major metropolitan area and even some good-sized towns had their segregated red-light districts. Here men found relief from the home and at the same time retained a commitment to the dominant social values. Segregated vice districts separated vice from the respectable woman and the respectable home from vice." Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 21. According to Eric Partridge, "red light district" is a twentieth century term. Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of the Underworld* (London, 1949).

56. Blumin, "Explaining the New Metropolis," 24.

57. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 6.

58. Siegel, *Image of the American City*, 34.

59. Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and Other Short Fiction* (New York, 1986), 16.

60. *Ibid.*, 26.

61. *Ibid.*, 54-56.

62. Michael Frisch suggests that as Springfield, Massachusetts, transformed from a "town into

city” in the mid-nineteenth century, issues like central district lighting and the paving of streets for the downtown became generally accepted by the whole populace, even though they might not specifically benefit. The notion of benefit had thus become abstract. Michael H. Frisch, *Town into City: Springfield, Massachusetts, and the Meaning of Community, 1840-1880* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1972), 48-49, 108-110.

63. See n. 25.

64. Finley Peter Dunne, “The City as a Summer Resort,” *Mr. Dooley's Opinions* (New York, 1906), 45-51. Lights and other utilities were so closely bound up with the popular perception of urbanity by 1900 that boosters in rapidly growing Western towns frequently pointed them out as evidence of greatness, as in this example from Portland, Oregon, in 1886: the Eastern visitor would find “the rows of substantial brick blocks . . . , the well-paved and graded streets, the lines of street railway, the mass of telegraph and telephone wires, the numerous electric lights and street lamps, the fire-plugs and water hydrants, the beautiful private residences surrounded by lawns and shade trees suggesting years of careful culture, the long lines of wharves and warehouses on the river front, and the innumerable other features common to every prosperous Eastern city and commercial port.” Quoted in John Reps, *The Forgotten Frontier: Urban Planning in the American West before 1890* (Columbia, Missouri, 1981), 3.

65. American City Magazine's summary of the functions of modern street lighting in 1912 is useful for its statement of the Progressive urbanite position on lights. Old and new reasons for lights are given: they attracted attention; the central business district benefitted with more business; property values increased; crime dropped; and lights illuminated the geometric City Beautiful aesthetic. C.L. Eshelman, “Modern Street Lighting,” *American City* 6 (1912), 510-517.

66. Walter Benjamin, “A Berlin Chronicle,” in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. with an introduction, Peter Demetz, trans., Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1978), 25. Historian Gunther Barth speaks of the “divided quality of the cityscape in the early 1890's” in *City People* 9.

67. See Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Middletown, Connecticut, 1985), 22: “The logic of myth is the logic of metaphor and narrative. It depends less upon analytical reason than on instant and intuitive understanding and acceptance of a given meaning.”