Paula Harrington

No Mongrels Need Apply

“I want to get one of those. They’re nice to have for the apartment—a dog.”

—Myrtle Wilson in *The Great Gatsby*

In the 1880s, two events occurred in New York that would prove pivotal in the social history and iconography not only of the city but of American culture as a whole. One was as public and deliberately emblematic a moment as the country has witnessed: the unveiling of the Statue of Liberty by President Grover Cleveland before a crowd of thousands in 1886. The other was a private gathering of wealthy sportsmen at Madison Square Garden two years earlier: the first meeting of the American Kennel Club (AKC History). While the former eclipses the latter in its iconic representation of immigration and changing class structures, the introduction of dog breeds—and more broadly the pursuit of canine breeding, showing, and sports known as “dog fancy”—also holds up a prescient and revealing mirror to class in America. We can learn much about American notions of class both from the history of our dogs and from the patterns of our immigration, and an especially revelatory picture emerges when we view the two in juxtaposition. For the embrace of purebred dogs coincided with the scorning of immigrants, and the desire for these dogs among upper and middle classes grew as anxiety increased over a loss of power and status in an altered society symbolized by Lady Liberty.

The craze for purebred dogs and dog shows began in the British Empire. While dogs that look like greyhounds and mastiffs date back to ancient Egypt (Thurston 29-30), breeds as we now know them did not come into vogue until nineteenth-century England. Before that, dogs were known for the tasks they performed, not the bloodlines they represented: “beast dog,” “coach dog,” and “vermin dog,” for example (Thurston 100-101). Queen Victoria, who kept some eighty dogs, is often credited with turning breeding into a popular “sport.” In turn, it took hold with her subjects (Thurston 103-105). The first organized dog show occurred in Newcastle, England in 1859 (National Dog Show), and by the end of the century a purebred dog had become a status symbol among Britain’s growing leisure class.

What had begun in England took on a life of its own on our shores. If in England owning a purebred dog showed social standing
in a rigidly classed culture, in America it signaled family origins in a supposedly classless one. At the height of nineteenth-century immigration, when Irish, German, Italian, Jewish, and other so-called “races” kept arriving, a purebred dog was not a mongrel, much as someone born in the United States—read a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant—was not an immigrant.

Thus, one of the primary tasks of the American Kennel Club was (and remains) to keep the registry of purebred pedigrees. By its own definition, the AKC was a club of clubs, founded by men with WASP-sounding names like Taylor, Smith, Belmont, and Rowe who represented smaller, already-established dog clubs, such as Westminster. They adopted the British practices of registering breeds, promoting dog shows, and creating an official stud book (AKC History). They focused on dog pedigrees when human events were taking the nation in the opposite direction—toward the American melting pot. In that light, the rise of the purebred dog suggests that many privileged Americans were letting their anxieties about class and immigration spill over to their dogs. They feared that immigration was letting the country go to the mongrels. If members of Gilded Age society could not stop the flow of immigrants or prevent the changing face of “America,” they could control the backgrounds of their dogs. The AKC created the dog equivalent of an aristocracy—a canine genealogy—in a land where human royalty could not exist.

Even by the standards of today’s renewed immigration, late nineteenth-century numbers are astonishing. In the 40-year span from 1880 to 1920, over 20 million immigrants entered the US, making them 15 percent of the country’s total population (“Turns of the Centuries”). In some quarters, it became acceptable to malign these newcomers in language that now sounds chilling. One popular poem, Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s “Unguarded Gates,” mocked Emma Lazarus’ famous inscription. Virtually unknown today, Aldrich was a respected writer and intellectual in his day and an editor of the Atlantic Monthly. Yet he had no compunction writing these lines:

Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,
And through them presses a wild motley throng—
Men from the Volga and the Tartar steppes,
Featureless figures of the Hoang-Ho,
Malayan, Scythian, Teton, Kilt, and Slave,
Flying the Old World’s poverty and scorn (13)

As if in direct reaction against the “wild motley throng”—classified by background, like canine breeds—purebred dogs proliferated. From 1885 to 1925, the number of AKC registered breeds more than tripled, from 24 to 77. The AKC now lists some 155
registered breeds, only doubling in the years since (AKC History). Moreover, this growing popularity of purebred dogs coincided with a revival of nativism, the movement of “pure” Americans of the 1840s and 1850s that led to the Know Nothings, with their slogan, “America for Americans.” Nativists had in common the claim to being born in this country (though, of course, their forebears must have been immigrants). They sought to prove cultural identity through parentage.

So too with purebred dogs: the AKC set equivalent standards for breeding. To be a registered member of an American breed, a dog had to have been born one, as documented by the breed registration of its parents. It also had to have been born in the US. To this day, those rules apply: “In order for a litter to be eligible for registration, the sire (Father/stud dog) and the dam (Mother/bitch) must be individually AKC registered and the litter must be whelped in the United States” (AKC Registration).

By the end of the century, the purebred dog had secured its place as the preferred pet of the American upper class, as well as of those who aspired to it. Social critic Thorstein Veblen, best known for coining the term “conspicuous consumption,” remarked upon this class connection between the rich and their dogs. He criticized purebreds as a means to display owners’ wealth through rarity and expense:

those varieties of the dog which have been bred into grotesque deformity by the dog-fancier are in good faith accounted beautiful by many. These varieties of dogs...are rated and graded in aesthetic value somewhat in proportion to the degree of grotesqueness and instability which the deformity takes in the given case. For the purpose in hand, this differential utility on the ground of grotesqueness and instability of structure is reducible to terms of a greater scarcity and consequent expense. The commercial value of canine monstrosities, such as the prevailing styles of pet dogs both for men’s and women’s use, rests on their high cost of production, and their value to their owners lies chiefly in the utility as items of conspicuous consumption. (141-142)

If Veblen thought dog breeding produced “monstrosities,” others, as he notes, considered the breeds beautiful. Hence appearance became the other criterion (besides parentage) for judging purebred dogs. The most famous American dog show, Westminster, held annually in Madison Square Garden and now televised nationally, remains the best known “conformation show,” ranking entrants against AKC physical standards. “The ideal boxer,” for example, “is a medium-sized, square-built dog of good substance with short
back, strong limbs, and short, tight-fitting coat. His well-developed muscles are clean, hard, and appear smooth under taut skin. His movements denote energy. The gait is firm yet elastic, the stride free and ground-covering, the carriage proud.” The perfect Welsh corgi, by comparison, “should be low-set, strong, sturdily built and active, giving an impression of substance and stamina in a small space. Should not be so low and heavy-boned as to appear coarse or overdone, nor so light-boned as to appear racy” (AKC Breeds).

For each breed, the AKC dictates characteristics as objective as specifications for an expensive race car. From head to tail, a worthy dog must conform to requirements with no leeway for irregularities. And, as with American dogs, so again with American culture: in human affairs, too, breeding gained sway. Figuratively, “well-bred” came to mean upper class. It also referred to a belief in the potential to improve upon anything, from crops to animals to people, by mating the “best” of their kinds. Built into this process was a darker desire to eliminate anything or anyone considered inferior. From the end of the century until after World War II—when Fascism exposed the genocidal side of human “breeding”—the eugenics movement in America worked both ends of the equation. As the American Philosophical Society notes, “In pursuit of their social agenda, the eugenics movement adopted two faces, a ‘positive’ one, which concentrated on exhorting the genetically gifted to reproduce, and a ‘negative’ one, which sought to prevent the defective from breeding” (“Promoting Eugenics”).

Eugenics had its roots in anti-immigration hysteria as well as in Jim Crow racism; its “white,” “purebred” adherents feared that mixing “blood” threatened to undermine the nation. By the 1930s, most states had laws allowing “defectives” to be sterilized, including “the feeble-minded, criminals, the sexually wanton, epileptics, the insane, and non-white races.” And, just as in dog breeding, “ideal” standards gave rise to judging events, which amounted to human conformation shows. At state and county fairs, the American Eugenics Society held “Fitter Family” contests to judge the appearance, health, behavior and even intelligence of those who entered, awarding prizes to families who showed “the greatest potential to produce genetically superior children.” These “enormously popular” contests had separate categories for couples, and for small, medium, and large families (“Promoting Eugenics”).

As purebred dogs became signifiers of wealth and status, they also became the subjects of a favorite art form of the wealthy: the oil portrait. Like their European counterparts, upper-class Americans had portraits done not only of their human family members but of their dogs. (Dog art continues today for a larger, middle-class
market, with many websites offering portraits.) A collectors' market still exists for dog portraits from the 1800s, and the 2008 Westminster Dog Show showcased an exhibit, “Nineteenth Century Dog Paintings” from the William Secord Gallery in Manhattan, which specializes in “fine nineteenth century dog and animal art” (William Secord Gallery).

At the same time that purebreds were stealing shows, however, mongrels were melting hearts. Like many poor immigrants in American cities, they often went hungry. By the 1870s, some 300 dogs a day were caught and thrown into New York’s East River (ASPCA). Paid by the dog, city dogcatchers made money by stealing pets, and conditions at the city’s animal shelters rivaled human tenements. Many dogs—“blue collar canines”—pulled carts for working men unable to afford horses (ASPCA). These men often left their cart dogs to fend for themselves at night, until the situation grew so dire that the city passed a law requiring cart dogs to be licensed. In 1885, a city law made the ASPCA responsible for the care of stray dogs, and it began to rely on license fees and donations from wealthy New Yorkers for funding.

With correspondingly deplorable conditions for stray dogs and poverty-stricken people, animal protection groups and organized efforts to help the human poor arose at the same time. As ASPCA efforts got underway on behalf of dogs, social reformers undertook to improve life for the immigrants Jacob Riis called “the other half.” Staffed by volunteers and also funded by wealthy donors, settlement houses opened in Chicago, New York, and other cities. The first, The University Settlement, was established in New York in 1886—again, the year of the Statue of Liberty—followed in 1889 by Jane Addams’ Hull House in Chicago and in 1893 by Lillian Ward’s Henry Street Settlement in New York. These settlement houses were more than the human equivalent of animal shelters; they provided education and arts and vocational training as well as food and shelter. They also marked the beginning of American social work. Yet it’s notable that both movements began at the same time and in reaction to the same problems of poverty and overcrowding brought on by rapid industrialization. If the goal of the animal shelter was to save dogs’ lives and find them homes, settlement houses sought to save human lives and make American cities hospitable, especially to newly arrived immigrants.

The concerns of any culture resonate through its literature, and in American writing, too, dogs embody the class divide. Bret Harte’s 1896 short story, “A Yellow Dog,” pokes fun at rich, poor, and canine alike, bringing upper and lower class characters together through their relationships to the same dog. Harte tells the tale of
an ordinary dog, Bones, who ingratiates himself with a camp of miners at a California settlement and becomes their collective dog. The miner narrator begins with a class distinction centered on a dog: "I never knew why in the Western States of America a yellow dog should be proverbially considered the acme of canine degradation and incompetency, nor why the possession of one should affect the social standing of its possessor" (60). Bones is one of the uncouth gang, albeit a canine version. He shares their tastes for cards, drink, and trouble. He is also of uncertain breed, but he has qualities besides pedigree to recommend him, like an immigrant with the promise of success: "Yet he was by no means a common dog, nor even an unhandsome dog; and it was a singular fact that his severest critics vied with each other in narrating instances of his sagacity, insight, and agility" (61).

Then Bones starts ditching the miners to visit a pretty rich girl, Pinkey Preston. She first deems him a social liability and asks the miners to fetch him—"I've got scarcely a frock that he agrees with" (66)—but then her wealthy father lets Bones stay, inviting the miners to visit him. When they do, though, the dog "not only forgot, but absolutely cut!" them (68). Bones later dies "in the odor of sanctity and respectability," and the miners, by now prosperous, erect a grave marker bearing the words with which the girl "effected his conversion": "Good Dog!" (69).

Harte's story is a humorous diversion of the kind that filled the magazines of its day. Yet it paints a telling picture of class. The girl and her father, a judge, would never have allowed low-class men like the miners into their wealthy world were it not for the dog. Bones brings the classes together, and they cooperate in his ownership. Though he "cuts" the miners, "it also increases the camp's respect" (69). They admire him for taking the opportunity to advance himself. The girl and her father, meanwhile, love Bones despite his background. He achieves, then, what the miners hope to do: the arrivé dog is welcomed into the world of wealth.

Stephen Crane's grim 1901 short story, "A Dark-Brown Dog," envisions no such upward mobility. His nameless dog is a mutt who encounters an equally nameless boy on a street corner. The dog follows the boy home to a tenement apartment, where the family despises it and calls it names. The spiteful father lets the boy keep the dog just to anger the others, but one night he comes home drunk and "in a mood for having fun" and throws the dog out the window (58). The mutt lands "in a heap on the roof of a shed five stories below" (59). With a "dirge-like cry," the small boy goes down to the dog (59). In the final tableau, "they [find] him seated by the body of his dark-brown friend" (59).
In this tale of class determinism, Crane ties the dog's fate to the tenement child's. Neither can improve his lot; both suffer at the hands of those above them. Everyone in the story except the dog—on the lowest rung—lash out at someone beneath in a cycle of inescapable cruelty. The family members punish the boy, the father punishes the family, the world outside punishes the father. In the end, the dog dies a victim of this cycle, bringing it full circle in its bleak portrayal of the urban poor. Crane's dog becomes the whipping mutt of a lower class itself suffering. It's a horrifying image of tenement life: a world where the dogs—and by extension the people—live miserably and die early, awful, undeserved deaths.

By 1925, when F. Scott Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby*, class mobility was an American preoccupation. Often taught as a defining narrative of the "American dream," the novel contains a scene with a dog character also linked to class identity: a nameless mongrel passed off as a purebred, a mutt with pretensions, a pedigree manqué. Daisy Buchanan's rich husband, Tom, buys it for his low-class mistress, Myrtle Wilson, when, en route to an apartment he keeps for her uptown, she sees a man selling puppies on the street:

"I want to get one of those dogs," she said earnestly. "I want to get one for the apartment. They're nice to have—a dog."

We backed up to a grey old man who bore an absurd resemblance to John Rockefeller. In a basket, swung from his neck, cowered a dozen very recent puppies of an indeterminate breed.

"What kind are they?" asked Mrs. Wilson eagerly as he came to the taxi window.

"All kinds. What kind do you want, lady?"

"I'd like to get one of those police dogs. I don't suppose you got that kind?"

The man peered doubtfully into the basket, plunged in his hand and drew one up, wriggling, by the back of the neck.

"That's no police dog," said Tom.

"No, it's not exactly a police dog," said the man with disappointment in his voice. "It's more of an airedale." He passed his hand over the brown washrag of a back. "Look at that coat. Some coat. That's a dog that'll never bother you with catching cold."

"I think it's cute," said Mrs. Wilson enthusiastically. "How much is it?"

"That dog?" He looked at it admiringly. "That dog will cost you ten dollars."

The airedale—undoubtedly there was an airedale concerned in it somewhere though its feet were startlingly
white—changed hands and settled down into Mrs. Wilson’s lap where she fondled the weather-proof coat with rapture.

“Is it a boy or a girl?” she asked delicately.

“That dog? That dog’s a boy.”

“It’s a bitch,” said Tom decisively. “Here’s your money. Go and buy ten more dogs with it.” (31-32)

In Fitzgerald’s version, the dog signifies both upper and lower class, depending on the point of view. It doesn’t reconcile classes like Bones. Nor does it convey only wealth like nineteenth-century dog portraits or only poverty like Crane’s dark brown dog. It may be the first modern dog in American fiction, and its subjective meaning shifts accordingly: it’s a trophy pet for Myrtle, a social climber; a phony purebred to Tom, a rich snob; and a valuable commodity to the salesman, a poor huckster. These lenses expose American class stratification in an era when the gap between haves and have-nots was great indeed. Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* at the height of the Jazz Age; the novel famously describes wealth and ostentation at Gatsby’s endless party, and it is replete with bad behavior among the uppers: Tom’s affair, Daisy’s betrayal, Jordan Baker’s amorality, the partygoers’ snobbery. What’s at stake is a WASP America run by “well-bred” people of inherited wealth. Fitzgerald sees the downside of that world and pins Gatsby’s downfall to it, transferring anxiety about class in the Roaring Twenties to a dog. For Myrtle, the puppy is an accessory, like the dogs of the wealthy women she imitates: she wants “to have” it “for the apartment.” In Veblen’s terms, it’s conspicuous consumption, an expensive display of the status she acquired through Tom’s wealth. As a status possession—a trophy dog—its pedigree is important. So she wants a “police dog,” or German shepherd. The puppy vendor accommodates her class fantasy to turn a few bucks. With his “absurd resemblance to John Rockefeller,” he makes an ironic caricature of a robber baron capitalist. It takes the man of so-called “breeding,” Tom, to spot the class pretender: “That’s no police dog,” Tom knows a bad investment when he sees one, but pays anyway because he can afford it. Yet not without a parting shot. With a capitalist’s head for profit, he tells the man exactly what the puppy is worth: one dollar, not ten.

In the end, Gatsby dies not for love of Daisy but because he oversteps his class station. However hard he tries, he cannot join those born to the ranks of the careless rich. So it is fitting that his death results from a case of mistaken identity involving the dog. Myrtle’s husband shoots Gatsby after finding a “small expensive dog leash made of leather and braided silver” (166) and concluding that Gatsby both seduced his wife and ran her down, when in fact the culprits were Tom and Daisy. Fitzgerald creates a topsy-turvy world
of class that gets righted even though those on top don’t deserve to be there. Myrtle’s dog, in a cameo appearance, plays an indispensable part in signifying and fatally confusing class divisions.

As American culture reinvented itself in decades to follow, American dogs took new cultural forms. The “classified” dog has lived on, though, in works such as *Lady and the Tramp*, the 1955 Disney movie that remains a classic fantasy about class in America. It recasts the rich girl/poor boy story through dogs, again to displace class anxiety, but in the postwar era. Released at the height of the baby boom, it reflects a cultural moment when the future of the middle class seemed unlimited—when the masses could get good jobs, move to the suburbs, buy cars and televisions, and send children to good schools. In a charming, childlike way that also appealed to adults caught up in the American dream of the fifties, Tramp’s rise in the world mirrored this sense of limitless potential. In its treatment of class in America through dogs, *Lady and the Tramp* was at once democratic and unrealistic, creating a meritocracy—Tramp makes it, heroically, by saving Lady’s owners’ baby from a rat—but also peddling a reassuring romantic fantasy. How often, in human affairs, did monied families of the fifties open their ranks to newcomers? At the country clubs of America, the code was still NOK: “not our kind.”

For the truly rich, the preferred dog would continue to be the status purebred. America’s growing middle class was catching on to the trophy dog trick, however. Paul Fussell contends in *Class: A Guide through the American Status System*—his 1983 update of Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class*—that the rich prefer dogs reminiscent of English royalty that signify conspicuous consumption and endless leisure, while middle classes favor other breeds:

In domestic settings whether upper or prole, domestic animals are bound to be in attendance, and like everything else they give off class signals. Dogs first. They are classier the more they allude to nonutilitarian hunting, and thus to England. Top dogs consequently are Labradors, golden retrievers, corgis, King Charles spaniels, and Afghan hounds....The middle class goes in for Scotties and Irish setters, often giving them Scottish or Irish names....Proles, for their part, like breeds that can be conceived to furnish “protection”: Doberman pinschers, German shepherds, or pit bulls. Or breeds useful in utilitarian outdoor pursuits, like beagles. The thinness of dogs is often a sign of their social class. “Upper-class dogs,” says Jilly Cooper, “have only one meal a day and are therefore quite thin, like their owners.” She perceives too that classy people often affect certain breeds of dogs just because the classes below can’t
pronounce them. Thus their commitment to Rottweilers and Weimaraners. Dogs are popular with the top classes...because, if large and rowdy especially, they convey the message that their owner is a member of the landed gentry, or what passes for it here. (95-96)

As old money has given way to new fortunes and upper-class background to mere celebrity, however, a new class of status dog has arrived. While still purebred items of expense, these dogs accompany their owners into scandals and media coverage in a way the old rich would never have allowed. Hotel magnate Leona Helmsley, for example, got rich by marrying a multimillionaire real estate investor and showed no shame when sent to prison for tax evasion. Through it all, she relied on a canine sidekick, her Maltese terrier, Trouble. When she died in 2007, she set off her final scandal by leaving $12 million to Trouble and nothing to two of her grandchildren. Even in death, she put her dog front and center as her surrogate rich bitch.

More recently, scandal-prone celebrities Paris Hilton and Britney Spears have gone to all the best places with their dogs. Hilton has taken her Chihuahuas, especially Tinkerbell, to social events; she also gave that dog cameo appearances on her reality TV show, The Simple Life. Her dog was even the “author” of a memoir, The Tinkerbell Hilton Diaries: My Life Trailng Paris Hilton. Yet she and Britney Spears were named “worst dog owner” (in 2005 and 2006 respectively) in online polls by The Hollywood Dog magazine and The New York Dog, which criticized them for treating dogs “like accessories.”

As such celebrity demonstrates, dogs still possess impressive status power in our culture, and remain a symbol of conspicuous consumption. Before it went defunct for reasons unrelated to popular interest, The Hollywood Dog boasted, “In the parks, on the streets, at the office, in the terrace cafe, or peeking out of a Chanel handbag....Child substitute, proof of the loneliness of city life, date bait, symbol of success and excess—the dog is many things to many people. Fittingly, The Hollywood Dog Magazine...is an upscale magazine with attitude—catering to one of the fastest growing markets in the country” (The Hollywood Dog).

Upscale with attitude indeed. The American celebrity dog of today must keep up with the times by being not the hunter but the hunted—by paparazzi. And, despite its life of privilege, the trophy dog can no longer be satisfied with being a status symbol: it must now multitask as a “child substitute,” “a badge of loneliness,” and “date bait.” Once again, our dogs are mirrors of our culture, and we reinvent them as we continually do ourselves.
The newest example of the reinvented American dog is the so-called “designer dog.” These dogs have pedigree-sounding names although they’re actually “mixed breeds”—the current, “classier” term for “mongrels” or “mutts.” Crosses between the aristocratic poodle and other breeds such as labs, retrievers, cockers, pugs, and schnauzers, they bear names like labradoodles, golden doodles, cockapoos, puggles, and schnoodles. They have developed partly out of a desire for a less allergy-producing pet that combines the intelligence of a poodle with traits of another dog, but they also reflect a craving for the next new thing. A status symbol cannot remain one if *everyone* has it. “The Labradoodle, Yorkipoo, cockapoo, and schnoodle are the latest designer hybrid dogs to hit the catwalk,” *National Geographic Magazine* reported. “Just as people meticulously customize a cup of coffee to suit their mood—a lowfat, decaf, mocha latte with chocolate sprinkles is particularly good—people are designing their pets to match their lifestyle” (Trivedi).

Meanwhile, as in the nineteenth century when cart dogs scavenged on the streets while purebreds paraded in shows, dogs are being left to fend for themselves in the nation’s mortgage crisis. They are “dumped all over” by people facing foreclosure, in the words of Traci Jenning, President of the Human Society of Stanislaus County, California (“Hidden Victims of Mortgage Crisis: Pets”). The Humane Society now asks homeowners in foreclosure to bring their dogs to shelters, which have been swamped with calls from dog owners facing eviction. Despite all the cultural, economic, and technological changes of the past century and a half, then, the American dog remains leashed to class.

Works Cited


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