American naturalists believe that a man’s life is only a piece of dust in the grand scheme of nature. It can be blown and tossed around, beaten into the earth, and killed off by only a small gust of wind or drop of rain. These naturalists may protest that Hamlin Garland’s “Under the Lion’s Paw” is a perfect example of naturalism because nature overcomes and kills (at least financially) a poor man named Mr. Haskins. Does this mean, then, that “the lion” in “Under the Lion’s Paw” is nature? Ben Ganter relates, “[Mr. Haskins] is not a free man as he foolishly believes, but merely a puppet being controlled by something or someone greater than he” (Ganter 1). This “something” could be nature, being much greater than both Haskins and Council throughout the novel. The “someone” in control could be Jim Butler, the richest and greediest man in town, who ends up tricking Haskins into paying a huge mortgage. Any or all of these presumptions could be true, but I wish to dispute that “the lion” implies much more than just nature or a greedy man in Garland’s short story. “The Lion” in “Under the Lion’s Paw” is financial poverty and a lack of knowledge and patience; and, unlike naturalists’ beliefs, it can be overcome through selfless service regardless of circumstance.

As Garland compares different characters throughout the short story, financial wealth seems to play a major factor in determining the “standing” of each character. At first, Haskins is compared to Council as a man who has lost everything—his land, crops, home, pride, and hope—where Council still has a home, farm, and well-fed family. Haskins’ wife is seen as a “small, timid, and discouraged-looking woman…in a thin and sorrowful way”; whereas Mrs. Council is a “large, jolly, rather coarse-looking woman” (Garland 192). The main differences between these women are their sizes (thin versus large) and their dispositions (discouraged and sorrowful versus jolly). When put into the context of their wealth, one of these ladies is obviously stricken with poverty, hunger, and hopelessness, and the other has all that she needs. It may even seem that one is wealthy compared to the other. As the story reads on, however, it clarifies that the Councils “ain’t got much,” but they have enough to get by (192). When compared to Mr. Butler, “one of the leading land-owners of the county,” both the Haskins and the Councils are considered poor (195). Since Butler leads a fairly easy life and the two farmers work diligently each year, it seems that poverty can become a burden as far as time and labor are concerned. Besides that, Butler has much more control over his life and community; whereas Haskins and Council are forced to make decisions based off their ability to provide for their families and preserve their small bits of land. Haskins even becomes desperate at times to find a way out of his financial debt, staying in the home of a stranger and begging Butler for a reduction of price on his land. In a way, his debt is an imprisonment—a lion—that is extremely difficult to surmount.

A lack of knowledge also hinders the characters, particularly Mr. Haskins, in progressing. During the time when Garland wrote “Under the Lion’s Paw,” near the time of the Great Depression, a lack of technology and machinery greatly hindered
the progression of farming production. Nature, obviously, was and always has been a draw-back for farmers as seasons change and dry/wet seasons come and go. However, during the early nineteen hundreds, time management was more of an issue because all labor was done manually – without tractors, machines, sprinkling systems, or even pesticides. Council and Haskins work for hours and hours with their bare hands, even involving their young children in the process, to plant their crops on time. A few tractors and machines could’ve helped speed up their production before winter seasons. In Mr. Haskins’s case, he was “eat up ‘n’ drove out by grasshoppers” (Garland 193). With a little bit of pesticides, this problem could’ve been solved without any problem. During Garland’s time, though, they simply lacked knowledge they needed to speed up production; nature was not always the determining factor in successful farming.

Today, farmers expect seasons to come and go and realize that not every year will bring them just the right amount of water they need to grow healthy crops; but with technology, machinery, and other advances, farming labor is much less difficult and time-consuming compared to earlier days.

Haskins also shows a great deal of naivety when approaching the business world; whereas Council seems to be much more familiar and practiced in “working the system.” When the two approach Mr. Butler, inquiring about his land for sale, Council says to Haskins, “You jest lem me do the talkin…if he thought you wanted a place, he’d sock it to you hot and heavy. You jest keep quiet; I’ll fix ‘im” (Garland 196). In this instance, Council seems to know exactly how Butler will react if he approaches him in a desperate or needy way. He’s doesn’t purposely lie to Butler; he simply says what is necessary to get him to lower his price. Council keeps a cool and indifferent expression throughout the conversation. Eventually Butler lowers his price, and then Council introduces him to Haskins. Council very expertly times his approach, keeps a calm disposition – without ever sounding desperate – and works Butler into a decent price for his land. Unlike Council, Haskins does not understand these ways of business and pulls himself into a deep rut. After working his hardest to fix up the new land, he shows Butler his work before talking about price. This mistake sets him up for disaster – Butler doubles his price on the land because he sees the good work put into it. Furthermore, Haskins grows desperate for Butler to reconsider his price and help his family in their needy situation. Butler replies, “You’re too green t’eat, young feller” (201). “Too green,” in this case, most likely implies young, innocent, naïve, and unknowledgeable. The fact is, though Butler is greedy and unsympathetic, he is right by saying Haskins is naïve. Had Haskins properly timed his approach – closing the deal and paying Butler before showing him the property – and not acted so desperate in front of Butler, he probably would’ve been just fine in his situation. In this way, the “lion’s paw” is having a lack of knowledge because it can truly hinder a person’s ability to step up in the world and progress.

Mr. Haskins also seems to lack a portion of patience in his situation – a characteristic that also holds him back from progressing through difficult circumstances. It is evident that the Council family endures through tough times just as the Haskins,’ but they never give up and never cease to be diligent. Describing Council, Garland writes, “He rode on his sulky-plough, when going with the wind, but walked when facing it” (191). This statement creates an interesting insight into Council’s character – he rides with the wind and enjoys life when he can; and when times get tough he simply “walks,” or goes a little slower, but never stops. His crops are not perfect; his family is
not rich; and times are not easy for him. He never stops enduring, though. Like the “marvelous uncomplaining patience which marks a horse,” he holds out until the end, learns what he needs to know about life to get by (e.g. dealing with greedy people like Mr. Butler), and helps others along the way.

Haskins, on the other hand, can be compared to the wild-geese, “honking wildly, as they sprawled sidewise down the wind… fleeing from an enemy behind, and with neck out-thrust and wings extended, sailed down the wind, soon lost to sight” (Garland 191). These wild-geese are not necessarily completely out of control; they just can’t quite handle the “stress” that comes with different seasons of the year, just as Haskins can’t quite handle the stress that comes with different seasons of life. Usually, his reaction is to “flee” like the wild-geese, become outraged over circumstances, or hardly except selfless service when it’s in front of him. Instead of “working with the wind” and understanding who to trust and who not to trust, his naivety makes him “sprawl sidewise down the wind” and out of sight. He works diligently for as long as he can, but as soon as the wind starts up again (or he encounters another hardship), he loses control and reacts rather than acting upon the situation. This is evident towards the end when Mr. Butler raises the price of Haskins’ farm, and Haskins practically kills Butler from outrage. Though his reaction is understandable and plausible, Haskins has not learned to be patient and calm like Council.

Financial poverty and a lack of knowledge and patience are all “lions” in a way, hindering people from progressing and holding them down like mice, but it is not impossible to escape the lion’s paw. When Council and his wife save the Haskins’ and bring them into their home, Garland writes, “It was an unmeasured pleasure to sit there in the warm, homely kitchen, the jovial chatter of the housewife driving out and holding at bay the growl of the impotent, cheated wind” (Garland 193, emphasis added). The word “cheated” in this case is interesting, implying that the wind wanted the family to freeze or starve to death in the midst of their trial. The wind was cheated by someone pulling the family out of their difficult circumstance. When brought into this light, it seems that acts of selfless service save others from the grasp of “lions.” People will always fall short no matter what circumstances they are in; lending a helping hand is sometimes the only way to pull out of ruts. If everyone in that town – including Mr. Butler – had been as sympathetic and selfless as the Council family was in the story, the Haskins’ would be okay. Though they are poor, unknowledgeable, and somewhat impatient, we all have our own weaknesses or “lions” that pull us down. We all deserve to be helped and saved from the “lion’s grasp,” just as much as the Haskins’ deserved another chance. Service is the only way to safety.

Works Cited
