MURDER IN MIDDLETOWN:
LOWER CLASS LIFE IN 1815

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In 1816, Peter Lung was hanged in Middletown, Connecticut, for the murder of his wife Lucy. Before he died, he wrote a series of letters from his prison cell, telling his side of the story, and, in the process, documenting life in a lower class home in 1815. These letters were printed up for sale, perhaps by his attorney, who otherwise would make nothing from the case. An original copy of this small book is owned by the Middlesex (Connecticut) Historical Society.

Peter Lung was born in Middlefield, Connecticut, in 1768. His father died or disappeared when he was young, and he was bound out to a prosperous young farmer. At 23 he married Lucy Kelley, a girl from an equally marginal family background. Her father had been lost at sea when she was young. Peter and Lucy lived in Middlefield, a distinctly rural area, until the first decade of the 19th century. He suffered financial reverses in Middlefield and began to drink. Then, with serious doubts, he moved with his wife and their several children to a relatively crowded Middletown neighborhood to live with Lucy's elderly mother. The boisterous neighborhood included several free black families and many more whites who probably would have lived in other areas--away from the blacks and probably each other as well--if they had had the resources to do so. Two or three of the families were Irish, and one was the elderly widow of a German immigrant. Among these people were several of Lucy's relatives--an uncle or two, a sister-in-law, a sister, a possible cousin, Lucy's mother, and, until 1812, her grandmother, as well.¹

The Lungs had nine children; one, a daughter, died in Middlefield in 1796. The others appear to have been bound out, or even left of their own volition, as they approached their teens. The 1810 Census shows two boys and two girls under 10 and two daughters between 10 and 16. By

¹ Information on the Lungs and their neighborhood was compiled from the 1810 Census for Middletown, Middletown Vital Records (the Barber Collection), the First Congregational Church records, Christ Church of Middletown records, the Hale Headstone Collection, and the index of newspaper announcements of marriages and deaths, all filed at the Connecticut State Library, Hartford, Connecticut. Middletown Land Records filed in the Middletown City Hall, were also used. (5:503, 8:333, 12:606, 37:84, 43:512, 44:555), as were Middletown Probate Records, (2:289-90, 9:550, 10:77, 13:3), located in the Middletown Probate Court Building. Additional information came from Rev. David D. Field, "Warning Against Drunkenness: A Sermon Preached in the City of Middletown, June 20, 1816, the Day of the Execution of Peter Lung for the Murder of His Wife." Middletown, 1816 (American Imprints, Second Series, Shaw-Shoemaker 37596) and from Peter Lung, "A Brief Account of the Life of Peter Lung, Who Is Sentenced to be Executed in June next, and is now confined in a gloomy dungeon, loaded with chains, awaiting the awful execution of the law," Hartford, 1816 (American Imprints, Second Series, Shaw-Shoemaker 38112).
1815 there were only—in Lung's phrase—"the three small children." Their house was a subdivided five-room-plan, one-and-a-half story Colonial, built in the 1730's. The Lungs had half the house; the other half housed another family, of whom Peter had a very low opinion.

Peter Lung spent the last week of July, 1815, away from home, doing farm work and errands for Ichabod Miller. He returned at 11 P.M. Saturday night. Three days later, his wife Lucy was dead, the victim of domestic abuse. As Lung sat in prison awaiting execution, he wrote letters to his mother, his accusers, his four oldest children, and—most awkward of all—his mother-in-law. They had long disliked one another, and she had accused him of intentional murder in the death of her daughter, so Lung described the fateful weekend in detail to try to establish the innocence of his intentions, at least. The following is excerpted from that letter.

... I must give you now, the particulars respecting the late unfortunate scene, which closed with the death of my poor wife. On Saturday evening the 30th of last July, I returned home at a late hour, from Mr. Ichabod Miller's, of Middlefield, where I had been to work the whole of the week. Mr. Miller gave me a verbal order to call on a Mr. Cowles at the paper mill, for five dollars; and finding him gone from home, I waited until he returned, which was ten o'clock at night; and when I obtained the money, I set out for home. I had then three miles to go, and did not reach home until about eleven. When I came home, I found the front door open, but the inside door was closed— I went into the room where I and my family slept, and found three of our small children asleep with their clothes on— I then went into the bedroom, found both doors open, and my wife apparently asleep on the bed; she awoke as I came up to her, and spoke— I asked why she lay there so with the doors all open, and nothing over her? She said the children all got to sleep upon our bed, and she thought she would not wake them up. I asked her, if she had anything in the house to drink? She made me no answer— I asked again—and she replied, "there is some cider brandy in the corner of the cupboard." I then asked her how she got it, as I knew I left her but little money when I went away, and thought before this she must have been out— she replied. "I did not get it with your money." I then happened to see a piece

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2 A Colonial house (five-room-plan) has a central entry door with interior doors to the right and the left.

3 The buttry or so-called "boring room;" one of the two small rooms which flank the kitchen in a typical five-room-plan Colonial house.
of meat hanging up, and asked her where she got that, and she replied, "Jack brought it in just at
dark, and asked me to cook it for him, and said he would pay me for it." I was then satisfied that
Jack brought the brandy; but said no more about it, and went to bed.

(Jack and Rachel, who is mentioned below, were brother and sister, freed slaves of Middletown’s
prosperous Mortimer family. They were 25 and 23 respectively. They seem to have made an effort
to help the Lungs—in this incident Jack appears to have given Lucy an opportunity to earn some
money, or at least obtain alcohol, by her own labors. Rachel later demonstrates the same helpful
quality when she comes over to knead Lucy’s bread even though she has every reason to suspect
she will be the target of abuse and racial epithets.)

Next morning, which was Sunday, I got up and told my wife I would go to market, and get some
meat—and asked her what I should buy. She replied, "I think you had best buy a harselet." I then
took a pint bottle, and went off to Paddock’s slaughter house; and whilst I was gone, I got some meat,
and some rum, and a gallon of vinegar, and returned home. On coming into the house, I took the rum
out of my pocket, and drank some of it, and gave some of it to my wife. She then asked "how I could
stay so long." I told her, I could not get the things I went after so as to return any sooner. She said,
"I must divide the head then, which I had brought home, for it was time it was a cooking for
dinner."

(Peter did so, getting blood on his clothing, a fact which was later used against him at his trial.)

Being tired, I lay down upon the bed, after my wife had got her meat over, but she soon came and
awoke me, to get up and dig some potatoes. I told her she could dig some for dinner herself. She
replied "she would not." I then said, you can cook for Jack, if he will get you cider brandy. She then
was very mad and said "she would cook no more for me, and that I might go and get Elizabeth Miller,
that I had been with the night before, to cook for me. You was not out on any good business until
eleven o’clock at night—I tell you I wont cook any more for you." finally refused to get the potatoes,

4 A "harselet" is the heart, liver and "lights"--lungs--of a hog.

5 Elizabeth was Ichabod Miller’s unmarried daughter, 50 years old to Peter’s 47 at the time this occurred.
Shortly after Lung’s hanging, Miller made a codicil to his will, giving Elizabeth space in his house for her
and went off into the bedroom, and lay down—but I went in after her, and told her she should go and get the dinner; “she said she would not,” and I then kicked her in her side, and took hold of her and raised her up, and told her to go into the other room; but she still refused—I then gave her a violent push, and she fell upon her hands and knees, but soon got up, and went and set upon a chest in our sleeping room. I then went out and got the potatoes, and finished cooking the dinner, and took it up, and set it on the table. I then went into the room where she was, and she called me a mean good for nothing curse, and mocked me. ... as she sat on the chest, I again kicked her against the shoulder and neck, and she fell over against a chest; but soon got up, and went into the bed-room, and screamed as loud as she could. I asked her what she screamed so for, and told her she would raise the neighbours. She replied, “you have hurt my head.” Soon after this, she went up chamber and lay down upon the floor; and I lay down upon the bed below. When I awaked, I asked my son John where his mother was; he told me she was up chamber yet.

(Peter went upstairs and apologized to Lucy, and they went downstairs together.)

... she appeared to be quiet, and to talk as usual. But pretty soon, Jack came over for his meat, and she told Jack that I had been cross to her since I came home, and would not let her cook his meat. Jack said, well, I will take it home. I told Jack, as his meat was there he might have it cooked. But no, says Jack, I will take it home and have Rachel cook it—and went off. ...

After Jack went off ... we passed the evening, as far as I can remember, in as much peace as we ever did... I conversed with my wife about our conduct—that she did not set good examples; and that we ought to set better examples before our children—go to meeting and not quarrel so any more. And she joined with me, and said we would try to do better.

On Monday morning, when I got up, my poor wife asked me if her eye was not swollen; I looked, and told her it was very much.—She said she could hardly see out of it...She then said, “I feel a pain
in my side where you kicked me yesterday." I told her I was sorry, and would do any thing for her that she wanted done. I asked her if she had any tea or butter, and on finding she had not, I went to the store and got several articles for her; and when I returned, asked her if I should make her some tea, but she said she did not wish me to get any. A little after this she got up and drank some spirits. I got some flour, and asked her, if she could knead some bread; she said she was not well enough to. I then told her I would go and get Rachel to come and do it. She replied "I will have no Negro wet my bread" However, I perceived she was unable to do it, and went and asked Rachel to come over and do it---and she said if Lucy was unwell, she would. ...She asked my wife for her emptins, as she knew I sent my little son John to buy some; and my wife replied, "she had flung them all out doors." She was very fretful during the whole course of the day;--kept herself in a state of intoxication, and was very angry when Rachel came over; and as she refused to let her do any thing, Rachel soon returned home.--In a little time after this, Mrs. Darby came by the window, and my wife asked her into the house. When she came in, I was on the bed, but soon got up--and as I asked Mrs. Darby, to make me a pair of trousers, and promised to pay her the money for doing it, the next day--my wife replied, "I don't believe you have got any money, if you have, I wish you would give me some." I told her I could give her a dollar if she wanted it--What do you want it for? She said, she wanted it to get something to drink; I told her I had just sent the boy after some. She said she did not believe me--but on looking out, she saw him coming with it. She now appeared for some time to be perfectly good natured, said to Mrs. Darby--"Why, my husband is not the worst man in the world, if he does have a high once in a while."

We had no difficulty after this, until some time in the evening when a girl came and looked into one of our windows. My wife spoke to her in a very boisterous manner, "go home you bastard--I don't want any body looking into our windows." I reproved her for calling the girl a bastard; told her she did not know she was one, and ought not to talk so to her; but she continued to rage and talk very loud, and I at last told her to hold her tongue, and not make such a noise, as she disturbed people going by. After this, there was not much said, until my son Joseph came home. ... his mother accosted him in a very angry manner, about his living at old Rann's, as she called him; told him he never would be worth anything, and would kill himself working in the water. I told Joseph he must not mind what

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6 Emptins = emptyings: the lees of beer, etc., used as yeast.
his mother said to him, as she had been mad and scolding all day. She kept talking, and I suppose we made considerable noise, as I know I swore at her, and told her to hold her tongue. And in the midst of this quarrel, you know, Mother, you came into the entry in great fury, and cried out—"Oh dear! I won't live so—I won't have such a noise—I'll go and complain of you," and I replied to you in a very harsh and imprudent manner—"Go back and complain as soon as you have a mind to; keep in your own room, and go to hell where you belong."

...my wife continued to talk with Joseph, and to rage about his living where he did. It was now bedtime, and I said to my wife, come, we had better go to bed. She replied, "you may go to bed as soon as you have a mind to, I will go when I get ready." I went to bed, and said no more to her, as I recollect after this; I went to sleep...When I awoke in the morning, I...found she was dead!

When I found my wife was dead, I went and told Joseph, my oldest son;...as he stood looking at her, he said he heard a noise in the night, and got up and lighted a candle, and came into the room where she was, and found her down upon the floor beating her head against the hearth as hard as she could;...he took her up, and tried to lay her upon the bed, but she refused to lie there, and went and threw herself down upon the hearth again, he...tried to get her to go to bed;...in his second attempt she struck him in his face as hard as she could, with her fist,...he then thought he would let her alone, and that she would go to bed when she got ready."

It seems plausible to take Lung's words at face value, largely because he admits so much misbehavior of his own—hitting and kicking Lucy, swearing, railing at his mother-in-law. There is some evidence from another source that he omitted the words "you damned bitch!" from his speech to her, but the events as Lung tells them do not seem to be particularly white-washed.

The most striking aspect of the Lungs lives is a disordered quality. Peter is forced to wait until ten o'clock on Saturday night to collect his money; the children fall asleep on the bed while Lucy

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7 According to Zephariah Swift, quoting from Lucy's mother's testimony, Lung said "You damned bitch, what do you come here for? Go to hell where you belong!" Zephariah Swift, "A Vindication of the Calling of the Special Superior Court at Middletown, on the 4th Tuesday of August, 1815, for the Trial of Peter Lung, Charged with the Crime of Murder," Windham, 1816. (American Imprints, Second Series, Shoemaker 39040).

8 Peter Lung, "A Brief Account..." 5-12. I have left Peter's spelling and punctuation as I found them.
is probably drifting in and out of an alcoholic stupor; the harselet—the heart, liver and lungs of a hog—is almost not cooked; there is no mention of anyone eating or the children being summoned for dinner. There is almost no mention of the children at all, except for little John being sent to the store to buy alcohol for his listless parents. Though Peter worked the previous week, there is no indication that he would go to work the coming week—he spends all day Monday around the house, doing small things, then sleeping. There is no qualitative difference to Sunday, no “Sabbath,” as it were. Despite Peter’s realization that they should go to meeting, there is no thought of going to meeting on Sunday morning, and the day holds only two trips to the store, both of which result in the purchase of liquor. Curiously, Peter seems to hold many middleclass values—not quarreling, going to church—in another passage he refers respectfully to Lucy’s mother as a visible member of the church in Middletown. He also sounds genuinely concerned that they should set a good example for the children. Yet these values dissolve in the alcohol and the stupor which overcomes the Lungs every few hours.

Both Peter and Lucy came from backgrounds of continued failure, which trained them or made them predisposed to fail on their own. Peter’s mother had come from Boston to marry William Davis, “a transient person,” in 1750. They had had four little daughters in rapid succession when he was lost at sea. Neither he nor she had the long-standing Middletown connections which could offer stability in time of trouble. In 1767 she married Joseph Lung, also a man of little consequence in Middletown. His mother had died in 1765, leaving a small piece of property to be divided between himself and two siblings; his father may have been the “Peter Long” from Middletown who died in 1762 in the French and Indian War. Mature men who went off to fight in the French and Indian War, particularly near its end, were often the castoffs of their communities. Joseph Lung, Peter’s father, allegedly died in the Revolution—that was what the minister implied in Peter Lung’s execution sermon. Yet Joseph Lung collected a pension in 1818—living in New York. Furthermore, he had joined the service in 1777—little Peter had been bound out in 1775. This discrepancy in dates suggests a troubled family unable to care adequately for a seven-year-old son.

Lucy's background was also characterized by poverty and loss. Her grandfather was a Ward in an area of town where Wards owned large farms and several slaves a piece, and ships and West Indies contacts and estates in the thousands of pounds. But there was another branch of the Ward family. This branch was not native to Middletown. Its first Middletown residents included a brother who had drained the resources of his family when he became deranged on a trip to Boston in the 1690's. Allen Ward, Lucy Lung's grandfather, was the second generation of this family. He had married well, but his lack of success is documented by a clause in his father-in-law's will: "...the reason why I have not given my sd son-in-law the land now under his improvement...is because I have been obliged to advance a considerable sum of money to answer his obligations." Allen Ward died before his children were grown. The second eldest, Lucy's mother Hannah, married one William Kelley, again not an old Middletown name. William may have been an Irish immigrant, which would have rendered him even less of a socioeconomic asset. After siring four children, William Kelley was lost at sea, and Hannah was left to carry on alone. She received the old Allen Ward house from her mother, who lived into her nineties, dying in 1812. This was the house where Peter and Lucy lived, and where Lucy died.\footnote{Charles Manwaring, \textit{A Digest of the Early Connecticut Probate Records} (Hartford, 1904), volume III:488.}

The lack of any discernible work schedule is partly a function of the characteristics of preindustrial life. But the Lungs' lives were virtually devoid of the other side of preindustrial life—the dawn-to-dusk battle to wring a living from the soil and its products. There was no milking of the cows, gathering of the eggs, mending the barn, weeding the garden plot, or pursuing cottage industries of any sort. Life—at least when Peter was around—was just an endless cycle of drinking, fighting, and sleeping.

The layout of the old house and the diminutive size of its yard—one-half acre—help to account for some of the Lungs' frequent sleeping. The house was built about 1734 by Lucy's grandfather Allen Ward. From the sound of Peter's word "up-chamber," it was a single story with one or two

\footnote{Middletown Probate Records 1:75R, 1757 guardianship papers for Allen Ward's minor son, William; Middletown Vital Records; Middletown Land Records 37:84.}
attic rooms—there is no suggestion that there was more than one room available to the Lungs on the second floor. Quite likely Ward had built a small house for economic reasons. By the time Peter and Lucy moved in, the house had been divided to permit another family to live in the other side. Consequently the Lungs had one of the front rooms where they slept, the little buttery or "borning room" identified as the bedroom where some or all of the children slept, probably some of the old kitchen or a kitchen ell where they could do their cooking, and a room upstairs with negligible furnishings, since Lucy chose to lie down on the floor when she went up there after being hit. There was scant room for a spinning wheel or much creative activity of any kind, although it is doubtful that Lucy would have chosen to occupy her time constructively, given her drinking patterns. Similarly, the small yard was not enough for much cultivation, had Peter been motivated to grow vegetables or livestock for market.

Part of this lack of household industry might conceivably be attributed to Peter’s lack of awareness of woman’s sphere chores—cooking and cleaning and sewing which Lucy should be doing to keep her family alive and presentable. But within the scope of this weekend at least, he seems to account for most of Lucy’s time, and she seems to do nothing but drink and sleep. D.D. Field’s gallow’s sermon for Lung praised Lucy as a “mild and inoffensive” woman.12 The Lucy Peter describes had soured in response to harsh treatment. One of the reasons that this narrative seems so honest is the grating, subtly provoking quality of many of Lucy’s remarks. Her words are parts of long-continuing quarrels: "...go and get Elizabeth Miller to cook for (you)..." "(Peter has) been cross to (me) since (he) came home and would not let (me) cook (your) meat..." "I don’t believe you have got any money, if you have, I wish you would give me some."13 Her anger is virtually continuous throughout the narrative, except when Mrs. Darby, who may have been her cousin and certainly was her friend, comes to chat.14

12 D.D. Field, "Warning Against Drunkenness...," 23.
13 Pronouns and verb tenses in these lines have been altered to recreate the sentences as Lucy would have said them.
14 Mrs. Darby was the former Elizabeth Ward. Lucy’s mother had been born a Ward. Elizabeth’s parentage has not been determined, but there is a good probability that she was related to Lucy. Like Lucy’s father, she, too, seems to have married a man who was almost certainly of Irish stock.
By 1815, Lucy had developed a severe drinking problem, preventing her from doing even the simplest tasks. Her days were probably spent in a mire of real and alcohol-induced depression. The prevailing opinion of the community was that Peter had set an example in his drinking habits which she had followed, or that she took to strong drink to allay the pain of his repeated beatings. Peter, however, credited others. He made the claim at several points in this and other letters that the bad neighborhood, which he characterized as both immoral and invasive of the family’s privacy, contributed greatly to their downfall. He insisted that Lucy’s female friends in the neighborhood—Mrs. Darby might well have been one of them—taught Lucy to drink. A discussion of the case by Judge Swift suggests that both Lucy and her mother were appropriating Peter’s liquor when he was out.\footnote{Zephariah Swift, “A Vindication..,”13.}

Undoubtedly the neighborhood offered some kind of support for Lucy, filled as it was with friends and relatives. It is even possible that Lucy was hitting her head on the hearth in that peculiar episode shortly before her death in order to make marks that would be visible to the neighborhood women, since most of the blows inflicted by Peter were below the neckline. Just as she said to Mrs. Darby, “my husband is not such a bad man...,” she could say the next day “Look what he did to me, the beast!” and receive their heartfelt sympathy. Probably their sympathy was her largest consolation in a world she believed she could do nothing to change or improve. That emotional support may well have given her more stamina in the battle against Peter. In their physical fights, Lucy never retreated. Peter was unable to beat her into getting the potatoes; occasionally she would go into another room, but she never fled the house.

The position of the children in all this tumult is curiously difficult to determine. The reader has a better sense of Jack and Rachel, the free black neighbors, than of Joseph, little John, or the other nameless Lung children. Where were these children all day long? Did they go to the store with Peter? Did they eat two or three meals, or even one, or did they drop in and pick at food lying about, perhaps? Who put them to bed amidst Peter’s and Lucy’s drinking and their horrifying battles? What did they do when they saw their mother being kicked by their father? Why did Peter and Lucy wake up apparently whenever they felt like it, with no one to talk to but each other?
Perhaps the children had learned early not to ask their parents for anything, that they were emotionally and materially incapable of meeting a child's needs. If the parents were intoxicated or hungover, which they usually were, they might well have lashed out at the child. Besides, Grandma Hannah Kelley and Uncle William, her brother, lived just down the street. Hannah Kelley had received the house for taking care of her aged mother, and it seems likely that she also cared for her nearly abandoned grandchildren, as well. This may account for the shadowy characterization of the children.

One common historical inclination in interpreting the Lungs' experience would be to suggest that they are part of a new, turn-of-the-nineteenth-century phenomenon of landless poor: that diminishing land resources have predestined the failure of an increasing number of men. This idea is a central premise in the true story of Mayo Greenleaf Patch, a similar ne'er-do-well of the same time period. As a younger son of a younger son, Patch received no land by inheritance in a culture which evaluated men by their land holdings. However, careful reading of the story reveals that Patch did indeed get land from his father-in-law--and lost it through his own dishonesty and greed.¹⁶

Lung, too, had had a few opportunities. He had briefly owned land in Middlefield; he had contacts--Ichabod Miller and his old master Captain James Tappan Ward, who could have given him more land and more work, had he seemed likely to prove worthy. But the picture painted by Peter's narrative shows a family in total disorder. Alcohol and a lack of industry are both the cause and the effect. A chain of poverty stretching back at least as far as the mid-1700's hobbled both Peter and Lucy, although they did nothing to prevent it from binding their children. Joseph died five years after the murder, possibly, as Lucy had predicted, from working in the water at "old Rann's." Personality traits--qualities of voice or appearance, a tendency to misinterpretation or paranoia, low intelligence, belligerence--probably contributed to their personal failure in ways which history does not record. Other men were born in poverty and raised their status. While opportunities for land ownership were declining, new opportunities in the developing industrial economy

were arising. But the Lungs, living only in bedrooms where they spent their days drinking, fighting, and sleeping, were lost to opportunity.

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