A (re)conception of the city: commercialization, domestication, and resistance in New York City from Melville to McKay

James Baltrum

Follow this and additional works at: https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/allgraduate-thesesdissertations

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Research & Artistry at Huskie Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Huskie Commons. For more information, please contact jschumacher@niu.edu.
ABSTRACT

A (RE)CONCEPTION OF THE CITY:
COMMERCIALIZATION, DOMESTICATION, AND RESISTANCE
IN NEW YORK CITY FROM MELVILLE TO MCKAY

James Baltrum, Ph.D.
Department of English
Northern Illinois University, 2014
Dr. Deborah DeRosa, Director

This dissertation characterizes the historical changes that shaped nineteenth and twentieth century New York City by examining how Herman Melville, Stephen Crane, Edith Wharton, John Dos Passos, and Claude McKay expressed these changes in their literary works. I employ the ideological principles of scholars such as Henri Lefebvre, who viewed physical spaces including the modern city as socially constructed products, and the methodology of writers such as Michel Foucault, whose genealogical approach prompts an open-ended and multi-faceted analysis. Consequently, my argument shows how various economic, social, cultural, political, and technological developments worked with and against each other to shape (and reshape) people’s perceptions of New York City and how particular writers have work such perceptions into their literature. Starting in the 1850s with the American Renaissance and concluding in the late 1920s with the emergence of Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, my dissertation focuses on Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1856), Stephen Crane’s Maggie: A Girl
of the Streets (1893) and George’s Mother (1896), Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth (1905), John Dos Passos’s Manhattan Transfer (1925) and Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem (1928). I focus on how the developments in the city influenced these authors to continually re-conceive New York City’s commercial and domestic social spaces from the 1850s through the 1920s. Likewise, each text illustrates how certain historical developments produced counter-cultural currents of resistance against hegemonic authorities in each author’s given era.

My research reveals that these literary representations demonstrate just how fluid New York City’s identity has always been. Much of the ebb and flow of the city’s identity has been due to the contentious and volatile nature of the social struggles to which the city has been home throughout its history. Some of the notable developments within the scope of my analysis, starting with Melville, include the labor and real estate contests of the antebellum 1850s as well as the solidification of Wall Street as the city’s financial and commercial center, resulting in de-domestication of the neighborhood and northward migration of many of its residents. In Crane’s texts, the Progressive reformers and the swelling immigrant populations of the 1890s swallowed up the city as they waged combative cultural conflicts over standards and separations of gender identities and gendered spaces such the home, the workplace, public places of entertainment and culture – the saloon, stage hall, and museum. The House of Mirth tracks the emerging status-seeking affluence of the leisure class mentality following the turn of the century. In doing so, Wharton explores how the inverted private-to-public utilization of the family home and dual subjective-objectified nature of the leisure-class woman played into the redefinition of New York society. Other developments, as Dos Passos illustrates, include the rise of the city’s skyscraper-
dominant skyline and the city’s proliferating advertising culture as well as the desensitizing and mechanizing effect they had on New York City’s citizens. McKay’s *Home to Harlem* charts the hopeful but all-too-human influences that the returning and largely marginalized African-American soldier had on the racial sanctuary of Harlem. McKay’s novel also demonstrates the repercussions that the city’s loosening mores and opening economic opportunities had on gender identities as well as hetero-social and homo-social relationships. From Melville to McKay, these authors shed critical and unique light on New York City’s multiple faces and facets.
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
DEKALB, ILLINOIS

DECEMBER 2014

A (RE)CONCEPTION OF THE CITY:
COMMERCIALIZATION, DOMESTICATION, AND RESISTANCE
IN NEW YORK CITY FROM MELVILLE TO MCKAY

BY

JAMES BALTRUM
©2014 James Baltrum

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Doctoral Director:
Dr. Deborah De Rosa
The following thoughts of appreciation are all heart-felt and meant with the utmost sincerity. I owe a great deal of thanks to Dr. Deborah De Rosa for the opportunity to work with and learn from her every fortunate chance I had. A special thank you goes to Dr. James Giles and Dr. Mark Van Weinen for their gifted insights as well as to Dr. Betty Birner and the entire English Department at Northern Illinois University for all the support and assistance that I have received throughout my degree. I gladly thank NIU’s Graduate School for their fellowship assistance, without which this project would not have been completed in such a thorough fashion. Moreover, I gladly thank Dr. Keith Gandal at City College of New York for his patience, encouragement, and advice all along the way. I also counted on Dr. Jeffery Einboden for his insightful commentary and support regarding my work with Melville and gladly give him an appreciative thank you for that.

Paula Diaz, Don Haynes (in memoriam), Carrie Roath-Ernst, Mick McMahon, Peter Stern, Amy Keck, and especially Gerard Wozek and Mary Russell of Robert Morris University, Illinois, must all be acknowledged for the numerous facets and forms of encouragement they have provided over the years. Librarians Su Erickson and Deirdre Rawls each merit a particular note of thanks for their patient and unwavering assistance with my innumerable and sometimes impatient research requests.

Ultimately, A (Re)Conception of the City would not have gotten off the ground let alone completed were it not for the incredible support and inspiration of my wife, Ann, and our two terrific children, Cameron and Loretta, as well as of my parents, Bob and Lorraine Baltrum, and
my in-laws, Dr. Fred and Patricia Rodriguez; for my family, in the scope of this project and in all things beyond it, I am forever grateful.
DEDICATION

For my parents, Bob and Lorraine,

and for Ann,

for everything
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Complicating the Concept of the City, New York 1850-1930”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Melville’s Antebellum New York as Seen Through the Scrivener’s Pen”</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Stephen Crane and the Chaotic Complexities of the Slum’s Social Spaces”</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Personal Privacy Turned Cultural Commodity in the Publi-City of The House of Mirth”</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Mechanized Megatropolis and Destabilized Domesticity of Manhattan Transfer”</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Post-War Sanctuaries and Strictures of Harlem in McKay’s Homecoming Novel”</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sighting New York City in the Citations of New York’s Authors”</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION:

Complicating the Concept of the City, New York 1850-1930

Thrive, cities – bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and sufficient rivers,
Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,
Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.
- Walt Whitman
(“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”)

In an article from the April 2011 National Geographic Traveler titled “New Yorker’s New York City,” Adam Graham opens with an anecdotal conversation between himself and first-time visitors to the city who, after asking for Graham’s advice on where to go and what to see, receive the unexpected response of, “I’ve clocked 40 years living in or near the city, and though my love/hate for the place grows stronger each year, I would be a fool to say I know it, that I’ve seen all of it” (74). Graham’s comments testify to the magnitude and complexity of New York City. Given that, astonishing difficulty awaits anyone attempting to perceive and describe the city as a single entity. Like any cultural construction, New York City has backgrounds and textures that cause it to appear different depending on “where” you are standing to see it.

When looked at from a historical perspective or as a literary subject, the idea of New York City as a singular entity becomes even more problematic. For instance, late in 1609, Robert Juet, sailing as first mate to Henry Hudson and working for the Dutch West Indies Company, described the coasts of Mana-hat-ta in pastoral terms as simply, “a very good Land to fall with …[and] pleasant Land to see” (Willis 29). But by 1664, the year New Amsterdam became New York, the former Dutch trading post had transformed itself into a then-modern city, with a
population reaching about 1,500 people. Later, in 1704, Madam Knight\textsuperscript{1} summarily described New York in her travel journal as “a pleasant, well compacted place” and its residents as “sociable to one another and Curteos and Civill [sic] to strangers” (109). Conversely, Royall Tyler’s \textit{The Contrast} (1787) casts a disparaging light upon New York’s cultural landscape. When asked if he had ever attended one of the city’s theatres, Tyler’s satirical character Dimple responds, “I was tortured there once,” and explains, “there is nothing that is worthy the name of amusement to be found in this city” (45). Since its founding as a Dutch settlement bent on trade and profit through to its post-9/11 transformations, the city has continually and increasingly mesmerized, horrified, and fascinated people from all walks of life. Edward Margolies suggests that New York, “so large and seemingly random, offers an abundance of choices,” generally falls into two classifications: “[t]he city as a savage amoral Wild West… or the city as an imagined New West offering American dreams of self-renewal, self-reinvention, individualism, and promises of prosperity” (11). These perceptions are evident in much of fiction focused on the city, certainly. In short, “no city has played a more important role in American fiction than New York” (Zlotnick 3).

For my purposes, that role proves particularly important when analyzing how certain American writers from 1850 to 1930 employed New York City as a way to investigate the definitions of and relationship between the city’s commercialized (or public) spaces and its domestic (or private) spaces. Accordingly, my project assesses how late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century American writers present the (re)conception of both the public/commercial and

\textsuperscript{1} Boston schoolteacher, Sarah Kemble Knight’s 1704 journal recalls a journey Knight took from Boston to New York City, a feat at that point in time largely considered courageous if not questionable for a woman to undertake.
private/domestic spaces of New York City and the cultural factors that influenced the
development of these varying concepts. Because the city, any city, is often associated with
industry and commerce, it is, in contrast, often considered antithetical to the socially perceived
concepts and values of the home. However, in analyzing the pitfalls of imagining the oft-
imagined pastoral home as the only center of domesticity,\(^2\) Sidney Bremer suggests “It is an
unrealistic, even dangerously deceptive image” in that “[t]he rural rootedness of our mythic
home ignores, moreover, the predominantly mobile, urban realities of modern American life”
(47). As such, analyzing how the commercial and domestic realms interact with each other
provides an enriched understanding of the city as a whole. The chronological scope of this
analysis of New York City begins shortly before the American Civil War and ends in the late
1920s. More specifically, I focus upon Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1856);
Stephen Crane’s Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893) and George’s Mother (1896); Edith
Wharton’s The House of Mirth (1905); John Dos Passos’s Manhattan Transfer (1925); and
Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem (1928). Through close investigation of these works, my study
constructs a complex understanding of each text as a cultural production of its given historical
period and each period’s dominant influences, ultimately reflecting vastly different perceptions
of New York City, starting with the American Renaissance and ending in the Harlem
Renaissance.

\(^2\) Bremer opens her essay with, “America’s mainstream culture has long lodged ‘home’ in the mythic permanency of
a rural cottage” (47).
a.) **Argument and Methodology**

I am not the first to focus upon New York City as a literary subject, and the scholars who have done so primarily fall into two categories. On the one hand, many attempt to analyze a wide historical range of literary works, often starting from the city’s colonial origins through to the twenty-first century. As such, scholars sacrifice a quality of analysis for the quantity of literature discussed; they spend little time delving deeply into any one particular text and, instead, provide brief and cursory interpretative discussions of each text’s conception of the city. Texts of this type include Joan Zlotnick’s *Portrait of an American City: The Novelists’ New York*, Edward Margolies’s *New York and The Literary Imagination: The City in Twentieth Century Fiction and Drama*, and Robert A. Gates’s *The New York Vision: Interpretations of New York City in the American Novel*. On the other hand, edited collections such as Deborah Esch’s *New Essays on The House of Mirth* and single-author studies such as Linda Welshimer Wagner’s *Dos Passos: Artist as American* and Keith Gandal’s *Virtues of the Vicious* present New York City through the work of a single author. Such monographs provide an in-depth assessment of the city through a detailed analysis of the given author’s corpus, but they cannot provide a clear sense of the city in its constant state of flux. My analysis attempts to insert itself between these two approaches by providing a substantially more comprehensive study of the selected literary works than the former type of scholarship provides and, at the same time, covering a wide chronological range and diverse sampling of literary texts. To better organize my in-depth investigations, my argument focuses specifically on how New York City is conceptualized as a dialectic consisting of the city’s domestic and commercial facets. In terms of differentiating my analysis from the
latter type of scholarship, I address a culturally diverse and historically representative scope of authors and primary texts to better illustrate and account for changes to the dominant conceptions of the city as well as for differences in perception based on the social position of the viewer, points that a book profiling a single author or historical period would not be able to consider.

Although my choice of literary works may differ from Gandal’s approach, my analytical methodology borrows greatly from his work and Michel Foucault’s. In The Virtues of the Vicious and its focus on Stephen Crane’s New York fiction, Gandal develops a methodology that reassesses a multitude of social practices as a means of understanding their influence on Crane’s literature and its relation to Jacob Riis’s sociological surveys. Similar to Gandal’s approach, Foucault refers to his investigative process as a method of “eventalization” that works by “making visible a singularity [Foucault’s emphasis] at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant… [and] rediscovering the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies, and so on, that at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal, and necessary” (226-227). As such, Foucault writes, “one is indeed effecting a sort of multiplication or pluralization of causes” (227). My analysis employs a similar Foucauldian methodology. By investigating New York City’s historical context at about the time of each text’s publication, I explore how a “multiplication or pluralization” of social practices enables a series of alternative interpretations, ultimately providing an in-depth understanding of how each text relates to the uniquely urban historical context(s) that influenced it.
Scholars have amassed considerable heuristic work on each of the primary authors and texts under consideration in my analysis. The trends in this work at times inform my analysis but at other times run contrary to and are challenged by it. For instance, much of the scholarship on Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” emphasizes the autobiographical implications of the text in both its narrative content and historical context. Such scholars submit that Melville mourns the writer’s (i.e., Melville vis-à-vis Bartleby) inability to express himself creatively given the limitations of the publishing market in the 1850s. As Mario D’Avanzo contends, Melville’s story warns us that “the ultimate defeat of the artist would be in compromising his craft and his vision by selling out to the marketplace” (261). Furthermore, Richard Zlogar suggests that “Bartleby signifies a literary artist who refuses to produce the popular fiction demanded of him by a commercial society” (505). My approach is much less biographical. Instead, in turning my attention towards the history of Melville’s city and away from Melville himself, my interpretation demonstrates how “Bartleby, the Scrivener” incorporates many of the cultural shifts Melville witnessed in New York City. One of these shifts included the lessening of America’s dependence on European ideologies and models of governance. Another major change that Bartleby resists and rebels against is the concentration of New York City’s industrial and financial interests in lower Manhattan and the relocation of many working-class residences to the northern portions of the city due to the escalation of real estate values around Wall Street.³ Lastly, Melville’s story also critiques the upward mobility desired by but denied to many of the city’s working- and middle-class citizens.

³ As Richard Stott mentions, by the late 1850s “Wall Street became synonymous with America’s financial community” (9).
Shifting from the 1850s to the 1890s, my cultural analysis also shifts from Wall Street to the Lower East Side and the literature of Stephen Crane. Given the often accepted perspective that Stephen Crane is America’s first naturalistic writer, many critics conclude that his characters stand as deterministic representations of people’s biological natures or their environment’s cultural cultivations. While interpretations of Crane’s later writings such as *The Red Badge of Courage* undoubtedly fall into this categorization, a majority of the criticism concerning *Maggie* first established this Crane-as-naturalist vein. The critical consensus viewing Crane as a naturalist suggests that he saw “human character in a pragmatic light, and social environment as it actually existed” (Geismar 3). More particular to *Maggie* and the element of social environment, Max Westbrook writes, “Maggie is a helpless innocent who is betrayed by her lover, her family, her society” and concludes that “the central theme” of Crane’s writings “is that environment, not individuals, ‘shapes lives’” (587). But Crane saw the Lower East Side’s populations not just as products of their environment or even as willing productions of the Progressives’ cultural assimilation process, as many naturalistic critiques have suggested. Rather, partly by concentrating less on the heroine, Maggie Johnson, than others have done, my argument posits that *Maggie* and *George’s Mother* render the city’s slums as socially constructed spaces of resistance and their inhabitants as rebels who destabilize and subvert many of the expectations of the dominant culture. In particular, they challenge the clear categorical divisions between, the city’s economic and residential spheres as well as the roles men and women played within those spheres.
Scholars have examined and understood Edith Wharton’s works through a naturalistic lens. However, whereas Crane’s naturalistic environment consists of the slums along the Lower East Side, Wharton’s hostile and foreboding environment consists of the marriage market of upper-class New York society, which provides the groundwork for a specifically feminist analysis. For example, in looking at similarities between Kate Chopin’s and Edith Wharton’s works, Barbara Hochman proposes, “like many ‘naturalist’ writers, Chopin and Wharton reject a plot in which marriage becomes the ground for closure. . . . Instead, raising questions about marriage at the outset, both *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth* follow their protagonists through progressive isolation to death” (212). Hochman determines, “for Wharton, ‘naturalism’ becomes … a vehicle for conceptualizing a woman’s vulnerability” (213). More specifically, to many critics, Lily Bart “reveals the insecure basis of … the young woman, the product of a lavishly spending respectable family hit by financial ruin, [who] wavers ambivalently each time she is given the opportunity to marry for money and fulfill her mother’s desire to secure her position” (Wilson 124). However, I argue that in much of *The House of Mirth*, Lily stands not as a vulnerable or insecure figure but as a resistant character, one protesting against the upper-class environs of New York City that seek to assimilate her into its ranks or marginalize her entirely. In this reading, Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* turns a critical eye toward early 20th century aspects of New York’s affluent leisure-class society, such as its overemphasis of materialism, its public projections of people’s elevated social status, and its destabilizing of traditional perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Many of Wharton’s characters illustrate the heights
many in New York City could reach financially but also demonstrate a lack of depth ethically, which Wharton feared could lead the city into a sort of cultural bankruptcy.

By the 1920s, the desire for material wealth running through the leisure-class culture at the turn of the 20th century had grown into a fever pitch and resounded through much of the city. However, many scholars simply view Manhattan Transfer as a product of the 1920s and, as such, concentrate on its post-WWI sense of inventiveness, whether it be Dos Passos’s unique characters or his narrative style. Alfred Kazin sees Dos Passos tapping into “the sense of new things opening up everywhere as ‘guys climbed out of their uniforms’ [which] helped to promote the irretrievable memory of the 1920s as a golden age for modern art, free expression, and American individualism” (159). Yet others see Dos Passos’s character development and organizational methods as containing darker inferences connecting to the social conception of New York City, one with which my approach finds common ground. For example, Mason Wade assesses the novel’s critical perceptions by concluding that “The central theme is the corrupting effect of the city upon the individuals that make up the Manhattan masses” (355). Also addressing the city and its relation to its inhabitants, Sidney Bremer suggests that Dos Passos’s narrative style and organizational methodology convey the message that “Without viable dreams for the future or even a single comprehensive structure for what already exists, New York City disintegrates in John Dos Passos’s 1925 novel, Manhattan Transfer” (122). Far from disintegrating, 1920s New York City dominates in my view. My chapter on Dos Passos suggests that Manhattan Transfer reads as a cultural protest novel objecting to the 1920’s strong current of capitalist upsurge that revealed itself in many of New York City’s physical features, from its
corporate skyscrapers to its canvassing advertisements. As a protest piece, Dos Passos’s novel penetrates the city’s dominant cultural dynamics to expose some of their underlying problematic complexities, such as the mechanistic effects on an urban population of a modernizing metropolis, the growing temporariness of the domestic sphere, and the impacts of urban sprawl on the city’s inhabitants, their understanding of each other, and their relationship to the city’s media.

Although much of Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* investigates the urban individual’s transformation at the hands of capitalist, technological, architectural and advertising-saturated developments, Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* examines the individual’s transformation at the hands of his/her fellow individuals, be their relationship militaristic, economic, social, or sexual. McKay’s novel takes its reader uptown to study how the experiences of the post-WWI African American, while both at home and abroad, shaped the cultural construction of Lenox Avenue and its surroundings, Harlem. In keeping with much of the criticism of the Harlem Renaissance in general, many scholars of *Home to Harlem* conclude that McKay celebrates Harlem as a haven to the marginalized African American. According to Maria Balshaw, “In the history of twentieth-century African American experience and letters it is Harlem that has held pride of place as the urban locus for an African American national imaginary,” one in which, “we find a passionate urbanism, where the city stands for the future and more particularly the future of the race” (1). Balshaw also suggests that many Harlem Renaissance writers signify the mid-1920s Harlem as “a fantasy space of freedom, pleasures, and opportunities for African American citizens” (14). However, my analysis argues that McKay’s depiction of Harlem complicates, or at the very least
muddies, such perceptions of the community. As Daylanne English explains, “Regarding his departure from New York … McKay declared in his autobiography that he had to ‘escape from the pit of sex and poverty, from domestic death, from the cul-de-sac of self-pity, from the hot syncopated fascination of Harlem, from the suffocating ghetto of color consciousness’” (814). McKay’s *Home to Harlem* explores the transformative forces found in post-WWI New York City and how such forces particularly influenced African-American cultural practices that shaped the neighborhood of Harlem. Much of McKay’s novel embodies a cultural resistance not only to many of the country’s dominant racially biased and bigoted social developments of the early 20th century but also to some of what McKay saw as biased ideologies that gave rise to the Harlem Renaissance. On the one hand, McKay explores the constructive impact of racial unity among many African-American veterans and working-class, African Americans which runs counter to the belittling stereotypical conceptions of the African American held by a majority of White society. On the other hand, McKay’s novel runs contrary to the positive and productive desires of the Harlem Renaissance movement. Instead, it illuminates some of Harlem’s disturbing aspects by exploring the caustic psychologies that many soldiers brought back from their experiences overseas. Additionally, *Home to Harlem* explores the redefinition of social powers both within and between genders as a result of the city’s developing economic opportunities.

b.) Speaking(s) of Space and the Complicated Conceptions of New York City

In *The Production of Space* (1975), Henri Lefebvre encompasses this perspective when he defines the city as “a space which is fashioned, shaped and invested by social activities during

---

4 Quoted from McKay’s *A Long Way From Home* (1937), pg. 150.
a finite historical period” (73) and understands that a city consists of “social spaces” that contain “a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information” (77). Lefebvre defines social space as a cultural production, not simply a preexisting object but something just as material as commodities or capital. A society’s “spatial practices” – of production and reproduction – generate a distinct type of “social space” (77). Neil Smith summarizes Lefebvre’s concept by stating that Lefebvre sees “space as produced through human activity” (91). In other words and in line with my argument, the city, with its public (commercial/industrial) and private (familial/domestic) social spaces, should not be viewed as something that is as much as something that becomes and becomes through the actions and interactions of a number of responsible parties.

To understand why New York City has held such an allure for so many writers over the years requires a keen insight into its multifaceted history and a clearer understanding of the varying views of its social spaces. In the first half of the nineteenth century, many business-minded individuals viewed the physical space of New York’s urban landscape as an objective commodity, a resource from which to reap the most value while putting the least effort into the process. Famed Central Park architect Frederick Law Olmsted writes of the effects of this economic impulse, even as he manifested it himself:

Decent, wholesome, tidy dwellings for people who are struggling to maintain an honorable independence are more to be desired in a city than great churches, convents or colleges. They are sadly wanting in New York, and why? It is commonly said because the situation of the city, cramped between two rivers makes land too valuable to be occupied by small houses. This is properly a reason
why land, at least in the lower part of the island, should be economized, and buildings arranged compactly. (47)

The growth of New York City typified the growth of the nation. For example, “Between 1820 and 1860 the urban population of the United States … grew from 693,000 to 6,217,000 and, on a percentage basis, almost tripled from 7 percent to 20 percent” across America (Stott 8), and New York City was chief among the expanding urban spaces. Given the population boom, the dominant conception of the city’s living space was economic exploitation, as Roy Lublove points out:

Increasingly after 1825 native New Yorkers vacated their one-family dwellings in the lower wards and moved to more favored northern portions of Manhattan Island. . . . The new owners and lessees, alert to the economic potentialities represented by thousands of immigrants in no position to haggle over the quality or location of their housing, partitioned the homes of the displaced Gothamities. . . . In order to squeeze maximum profits out of their investment, housing speculators erected dwellings upon spacious yards and gardens which had adorned the landscape. (2)

DeForest and Veiller, in their 1903 study The Tenement House Problem - a retrospective study of the nineteenth century’s housing conditions - echo this trend of owners making the most out of each building’s physical space. Early in their report, they conclude,

In most cities the housing problem is the problem of the small house rather than of the large tenement. . . . In New York, however, as in no other city in the country, it is the problem of the tenement house – the problem of the five, six, and even seven story building usually on a lot 25 feet in width and with as many as three or four families on each floor. (3)

Their report continues its account of the effects of this building (and business) practice by describing a specific instance. “A family living in such a building,” DeForest and Veiller write, “pays for four rooms … a rent of $12 to $18 a month. Of these four rooms only two are large
enough to be deserving of the name of rooms” (9). These accounts make clear the perception of space as an exploitable object for maximizing financial gain with consideration for little else.

However, New York City’s various districts eventually began to be perceived not as constructed objects to profit from but as corrective spaces of socialization. Evidence of this evolving perception began strengthening in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1834, New York City’s top health officer, the City Inspector, suggested the following in his annual report: “Some cause should be assigned for the increase in deaths beyond the increase of population, and none appears so prominent as that of intemperance and the crowded and filthy state in which a great portion of our population live” (Lublove 4). From that point on, the physical space of New York City’s different neighborhoods became an ever-increasing focal point from a wide variety of perspectives. The care and condition of the streets, the organization of a building, the layout of a yard, and the ventilation of an airshaft all became the responsibility of a large number of the city’s governing bodies in determining how a plot of space should be perceived, constructed, and utilized. By the mid-nineteenth century, various institutions became far more cognizant of the concept of an urban space as a socially constructed property, a sentiment reflected by many writers from Melville onward.

The sheer number of institutions created in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, each with its own theories and intentions of how space should function in urban centers such as New York City, speaks to the social changes occurring throughout the 19th century and beyond. Such institutions included the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor [or NYAICP] (1843); the Council of Hygiene of the Citizens’ Association of New York (1864); the American Social Science Association (1865), chiefly responsible for bringing scientific inquiry and reform together; the Improved Dwellings [Awaiting further text]
institutions undoubtedly impacted the re-conception of the city’s differing social spaces from simple to constructed objects, from profitable commodities to evolving organisms. Over the years, these organizations engaged with, influenced, and originated a number of different cultural developments that redefined New York City’s social spaces. For instance, as the 19th century drew to a close, in 1890, “New York City … had a total population of 1,515,301, of which 43 percent was foreign-born and 1,219,218 were of foreign parentage” (Gandal 8). The city’s Lower East Side in particular became synonymous with immigration or the unidentified immigrant, and consequently, the social spaces along the Lower East Side became “othered” due to the presence of the immigrant population there. For instance, Christopher Mele proposes, “Spaces like the East Side functioned as ‘immigrant portals’ and ‘staging areas’ where newcomers embarked on the journey toward assimilation – a sociocultural process of shedding antiquated and dangerous ‘Old World’ customs and idiosyncrasies and mastering the enlightened and refined habits and ways of middle-class society” (47). In this line of argument, any organization interested in the spatial developments and practices within these “othered” neighborhoods seemingly functioned as a tool of the “Americanization movement,” summarized as a social movement that “demanded of the immigrant an almost immediate adherence to white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon traditions” (McBride 9), and were often cast as a wolf of social control in the reformers’ sheep-ish clothing. One can easily see from where such conclusions stem, given passages such as the following from the 1868 annual report by the NYAICP:

Association (1879); the Tenement House Commission of (1884); and the Tenement House Building Company (1885).
So large are the aggregations of different foreign nationalities, that they no longer conform to our habits, opinions, and manners, but, on the contrary, create for themselves distinct communities. . . . This principle or tendency of segregation extends to their private, social and public life. . . . They have their own theatres, recreations, amusements, military and national organizations; to a great extent their own schools, churches, and trade unions - their own newspapers and periodical literature. (Ward 44)

A reader need only count the instances of “their own” and the like to understand the sense of divergence from the “American” norm suggested within the report. As such, cultural control over the ever-increasing “othered” population does, indeed, appear an elemental motivation driving special practices in the city.

However, these views of immigrant neighborhoods may be still further complicated. As David Ward explains,

[t]he association of immigrants with the slums was complicated by ethnic heterogeneity and a substantial native-born element in the most notorious slums. Brace described immigrants as “The refuse of Europe [who] congregate in our great cities …” but he also emphasized “Mingled with these [immigrants] are also the offcast children of American debauchery, drunkenness and vice. A class more dangerous to the community … can hardly be imagined.” (16)

In other words, any argument suggesting that the re-conception of space served solely to isolate, marginalize, and/or assimilate the immigrant via “Americanization” would be an oversimplification of the facts given the neighborhood’s heterogeneous population of immigrant and native-born alike. In Chapter II on Stephen Crane, I complicate these oversimplified interpretations.

We may add to this cultural heterogeneity the complication of class because predominantly middle-to upper-class citizens founded and populated many of the governmental
organizations mentioned earlier, and yet, as several of my chapters point out, it was the lower, laboring classes who often questioned, protested, and put up resistance to many of these organizations. In his introduction to *Marginal Spaces*, Michael Peter Smith, on the one hand, writes,

> Spatial practices by centers of wealth and power to legitimate their domination and marginalize, exclude, or contain dominated group, keeping them “in their place,” have been extensively studied in urban and community research. The literature on modernist and postmodernist urban development is replete with this theme – the city envisaged as a mechanism of spatial exclusion, surveillance, and social control. (ix)

On the other hand, Smith continues, “once marginal spaces are socially constructed, the ‘inhabitants’ of these spaces have shown a remarkable ability to act in ways that defy the regulatory intentions of their subordinates” (ix). As Smith surmises, the issue turns out to be far more complicated than the image of one class wielding its power or will via urban development and/or social reform as a weapon of social control and domination over another, more oppressed class. Whether it was the merchants and laborers against Wall Street, the lower-class immigrants against the reformers, the leisure class against the old-moneyed gentry of Fifth Avenue, the middle-class against the mechanical metropolis, or the African American fleeing racism and restrictions, the social spaces of New York City developed as a result of the tensions vacillating between factors of domination and those of defiance.

Lefebvre argues that the social and productive relations responsible for the development of particular spatial practices and the production of specific social spaces often get reduced and simplified to levels of obscurity and abstraction by many scholars. My objective is to lift out of
abstraction the social practices and understandings present at key points in New York City’s history and assess how these elements served to (re)define various forms of the city’s domestic and commercial social spaces and what such (re)definitions suggest about the particular socio-historical episodes found within and interpreted by various literary productions.

In short, A (Re)Conception of the City presents an original analysis of primarily six literary works written between 1850 and 1930 that focus upon New York City and the cultural construction of the city’s domestic and commercial spaces. These texts develop a spatial understanding of the city’s familial and financial spheres within the context of various political, economic, technological, ethnic, geographic, sexual, and scientific factors that served to shape and reshape the city’s numerous identities.
CHAPTER I

Melville’s Antebellum New York as Seen Through the Scrivener’s Pen

Dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar…. What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, - it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.

- Herman Melville
  (Letter to Hawthorne June 1st, 1851)  

Herman Melville was born in 1819, not far from New York City’s numerous waterfront docks, at number 6 Pearl Street (Parker 23). Although Melville’s name often conjures images of life at sea or, perhaps, life within the ocean-front villages along the Massachusetts coastline, much of Melville’s personal and published writings illustrates a mixture of emotions concerning his hometown. As Wyn Kelley puts it, “Even though he [Melville] left New York for significant periods, he remained a New Yorker and kept up his dialogue with the culture throughout his whole life” (16). Prior to taking up New York City as a major motif in Pierre, or The Ambiguities (1852) and later in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853), Melville, through the guise of his enigmatic protagonist Ishmael, takes his readers on a brief walking tour of the city at the outset of Moby-Dick (1851). In the opening chapter, “Loomings,” Ishmael states:

There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs – commerce surrounds it with her surf. Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme down-town is the Battery, where that noble mole is washed by waves, and cooled by breezes, which a few hours previous were out of sight of land. . . . Go from Corlears Hook to Coenties Slip,

---

7 Wyn Kelley explains, “[t]he main problem in talking about Melville and the city is that the subject has traditionally been invisible. Indeed, many of Melville’s early critics saw him simply as anti-urban because his ‘greatest’ books concerned the sea and not the city” (12).
8 In his June 29, 1851, letter to Hawthorne, Melville refers to New York City on a particularly warm day as a “babylonish [sic] brick-kiln” (Davis 132).
and from thence, by Whitehall, northward. What do you see? – Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries. (12)

Ishmael characterizes New York City as a space as much enveloped by financial interests and commercial concerns as by the surrounding sea. As Richard B. Stott explains, “The city’s position as commercial hub of a huge hinterland spurred the growth of financial institutions. The nation’s trading center, New York naturally became the country’s major banking center, and Wall Street became synonymous with America’s financial community” (9). As Ishmael reflects, commercial traffic “surrounds” the city “with her surf.” His reflective walking tour, moving from Corlears Hook down along the island’s east side to Coenties Slip and then along Whitehall, cutting to the northwest, takes the reader past the heart of the city’s financial district.

However, Ishmael does not imbue his characterization of the city with any particular sense of fascination or admiration. In describing these “thousands upon thousands [of] posted… silent sentinels,” Ishmael designates them as “crowds of water-gazers” and explains, “these are all landsmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster – tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desk” (12). Melville’s selection of verbs – “pent up. . . tied to. . . nailed to. . . clinched to” – unmistakably illustrates the city’s buildings, constructed from and held together with lath and plaster, as prison-like spaces of entrapment and despondency – sites individuals should avoid or escape.

Ishmael speaks as one of these same water-gazing landsmen when he confesses:

---

9 Even Corlears Hook, populated by “a small cluster of wild saloons and inexpensive brothels, with most of the latter along Walnut Street” (Gilfoyle 52), represented the city’s interest and success in all things economic. Gilfoyle points out, “Only seven blocks in length and adjacent to the city’s bustling shipyards, coal and granite dumps, mills, and the Allaire Iron Works, Walnut Street probably had the highest concentration of commercial sex in New York” (52).
whenever it is a damp drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me… that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off – then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. (Melville 12)

Seen one way, Melville’s opening chapter frames *Moby-Dick* as a story not about running to the ocean but as one of running away from, escaping really, the city – Melville’s island of the Manhattoes. As Thomas Augst submits, “Ishmael speaks with a peculiar attitude, at once rude and sophisticated, sarcastic and sincere – with the boisterous savvy of someone who long ago learned never to become ‘pent up in lath and plaster,’ spiritually and physically immobilized by the routines and cares of work. Wherever he came from, and wherever he will go, Ishmael is a New Yorker” (59). Seen as a New Yorker, Ishmael, under critics’ interpretive lens, speaks disparagingly of urban life. Indeed, according to Edward Margolies, Melville “envisioned the city’s inhabitants as hellishly trapped or imprisoned” (5). Joan Zlotnick suggests that Melville creates a “damning picture of New York as an inhospitable and even sinister place” (32). Such critical interpretations “support the mid-twentieth-century view of Melville as longing to escape from the city, which he can represent only in dark allegorical terms as a City of Dis” (Kelley 14). 10 While Melville includes evidence beyond Ishmael’s brief walking tour to support such characterizations, Melville’s perceptions of and attitudes towards New York City and its social

10 Many such interpretations turn to passages such as the following from *Pierre or The Ambiguities*, Melville’s 1852 novel loosely set in New York City. When asked about the city dwellers’ cold indifference and apathy, Melville’s protagonist, Pierre Glendinning, states, “[a]sk yonder pavements, Isabel. Milk dropt from the milkman’s can in December, freezes not more quickly on those stones, than does snow-white innocence, if in poverty, it chance to fall in these streets… Forgive me… never yet have I entered the city by night, but, somehow, it made me feel both bitter and sad” (230). Clearly, such passages support the conclusion that Melville characterized the city as a cold and corrupting place.
spaces become much more intricate and complicated given a closer look at a text more deeply rooted in the cultural milieu of New York City: “Bartleby, the Scrivener.”

Melville wrote “Bartleby, the Scrivener” for *Putnam’s Monthly* in 1853 and later anthologized it in his short story collection, *Piazza Tales* (1856). Much of the scholarly criticism surrounding “Bartleby, the Scrivener” roots itself in the sentiment expressed in Melville’s June 1, 1851, letter to Hawthorne (quoted in the epigraph above). In this letter, Melville expresses his frustrations with the economic pressures closing in on him following a series of commercially unsuccessful publications: *Mardi* (1849), *Redburn* (1849), and *White-Jacket* (1850). *Moby-Dick* was not published until five months after this letter, in October of 1851, though its sales would prove disappointing as well. For good reason, then, Melville laments that the contemporary writer cannot freely express him or herself creatively as he or she sees fit. Many critics see “Bartleby, the Scrivener” as a thinly fictionalized autobiographical tract expounding and expanding on similar themes. Leo Marx opens his reading of Melville’s short story by pointing out:

> “Bartleby” is not only about a writer who refuses to conform to the demands of society, but it is, more relevantly, about a writer who forsakes conventional modes because of an irresistible preoccupation with the most baffling philosophical questions. This shift of Bartleby’s attention is the symbolic equivalent of Melville’s own shift of interest between *Typee* and *Moby-Dick*. (12)

Marx suggests that Bartleby’s characterization and quest reflect Melville’s own literary circumstances. Marx strengthens his interpretation, by suggesting that Bartleby can be understood only through an understanding of the entirety of Melville’s corpus: “I believe it may legitimately be accounted a grave defect of the parable [“Bartleby, the Scrivener”] that we must
go back to *Typee* and *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* for the clues to its meaning. It is as if Melville had decided that the only adequate test of a reader’s qualifications for sharing so damaging a self-revelation was a thorough reading of his own work” (12). In short, both Zlogar and Marx emphasize reading “Bartleby, the Scrivener” as a loosely autobiographical and heavily symbolic narrative requiring reader familiarity with Melville’s life and works prior to 1853 to connect the analogies successfully.

Another dominant vein of “Bartleby” criticism comprises writings that follow either a rather overt or somewhat subtle Marxist track.\(^{11}\) Given the story’s subtitle (“A Story of Wall-Street”), an economic interpretation of the story and its title character’s “guerilla warfare of passive resistance against the ethos of Wall Street” (D’Avanzo 260) seems appropriate. Both Barbara Foley and David Kuebrich, for instance, expertly demonstrate Melville’s familiarity with New York City’s labor protests and class conflicts that ebbed and flowed throughout the late 1840s and early 1850s.\(^{12}\) However, as both Dan McCall and Naomi C. Reed illustrate, a purist reading of Melville’s story along these lines rests upon a fundamental misreading of the story’s narrator. The lawyer, a character who intermittently demonstrates sympathy for Bartleby, cannot be esteemed as such a “typical heartless capitalist” (Reed 248), as Foley and Kuebrich both suppose.

\(^{11}\) See, for example, Barnett’s “Bartleby as Alienated Worker” in *Studies in Short Fiction* 11 (1974): 379-385.

\(^{12}\) Foley successfully argues that the historicity surrounding the Astor Place riots of 1849 “provides a covert … subtext” to Melville’s story, ultimately offering “Melville’s critique of the workings of ideology” and his “attempt to contend with the return of the political unconscious” (88). Likewise, Kuebrich accurately contends that Melville, having lived in New York during the years leading up to his composing “Bartleby,” was well aware of the labor tensions and political struggles that arrested the city’s economic fate. Thus, “Bartleby” stands as a “subversive … [and] original analysis of employer-employee relations that stands as fit culmination and enduring witness to this indigenous antebellum tradition of radical political economy” (384).
Although autobiographical as well as varying theoretical readings of Melville’s works undoubtedly produce meaningful interpretations, a return to key aspects of the short story’s representation of urban space and to crucial moments in New York City’s history provides a unique understanding of the city’s cultural development and, therefore, a more sure-footed grounding for stepping into “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” Like the writings of authors as diverse as Fisher Ames, 13 Washington Irving, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and George Foster, 14 “Bartleby, the Scrivener” voices Melville’s concerns on multiple levels: his concerns for America’s cultural advancement as exemplified in the development of New York City; his anxiety over issues facing particularly the commercial and domestic realms of the city for America’s dependence on Europe and England especially; and his worry about the labor-class’s domestic migrations and its diminished prospects for upward social mobility.

a.) How “New” is New York City? Fears of English Mimesis in America’s First Metropolis

Well before it took its place as America’s first metropolitan city, New York carried the moniker New Amsterdam. In 1625, to be exact, as Zlotnick explains,

some fourteen years after Henry Hudson’s historic expedition up the river that now bears his name, the Dutch West India Company founded New Amsterdam as the capital of New Netherland. . . . With its typical dwelling of one and a half stories, with red tile roof, steeped gable, wooden shutters, and front door divided in two horizontally, New Amsterdam, which by mid-century had a population of about one thousand, soon came to resemble a Dutch village. (5)

---

13 Ames (1758-1808) was a notable Federalist and member of the House of Representatives from Massachusetts (1789-1797).
14 Foster, a journalist for Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune, published works such as New York in Slices; by an Experienced Carver (1849), New York by Gas-Light (1850) and Fifteen Minutes Around New York (1854) and dazzled readers with collected, firsthand accounts of the city’s incredible opportunities and harrowing pitfalls.
However, this symbol of Dutch economic success and colonial dominance did not last because “it did not afford great protection against invasion by either the Indians or the English” (Zlotnick 5). In fact, by 1664, the English had toppled the Dutch colonial trading post and appropriately renamed it New York, a name that would remain in place following the American Revolution and, thereby, illustrate the complicated connections and disconnections between the United States of America and Great Britain.

Though working in rather broad strokes and not looking specifically at New York, many American writers have meditated upon the various economic, political, literary, or cultural ties that bind America to Europe, and particularly England, with their conclusions ranging from curious to congratulatory to caustic. For example, Ralph Waldo Emerson made perhaps the most notable call for the founding of a truly American literary tradition, signifying a substantial cultural break from its European counterpart. In his essay “The Poet,” (1844) Emerson remarks,

We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer. . . . Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negros and Indians, our boats and repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and will not wait long for meters. (238)

Emerson’s poet would mine the as-yet untapped American geographical and social depths to produce a literary voice appropriately separate and unique from the European chorus of voices, if only due to the uniqueness of the subject matter serving as its muse. However, Emerson was by no means the first writer to place the pursuit of literary nationalism under the microscope. Nearer
to the opening of the nineteenth century, writers as diverse as Fisher Ames and Washington
Irving laid the foundations for the cross-cultural Anglo-American analysis that Melville would
offer in “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” These writers’ inquiries concerning the fate and face of a
uniquely American literature addressed two primary apprehensions: national mimicry (versus
originality) and the possible effects of economic interests on America’s artistic culture.

In 1803, Fisher Ames, a noted American politician and essayist, wrote “American
Literature,” an essay that contemplates the impact of America’s economic and political make-up
on its artistic culture. Ames cites vices such as vanity and imitation as dangers impeding
America’s progress in the arts and predicts that America’s literary potential will suffer greatly at
the hands of the public’s interests in commerce and politics. Ames calls for America to submit
itself to the scrutiny of Europe. While himself scrutinizing America’s writers, Ames addresses
the subject of originality. He asks Americans, “But has our country produced one great original
work of genius? . . . Is there one luminary in our firmament that shines with unborrowed rays?”
(1001-1002). Ames qualifies America’s literary works as nothing more than poor copies of
European pieces.

Several of Washington Irving’s short stories from The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon,
Gent. (1819), published nearly twenty years after Ames’s essay and nearly thirty years before
Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” illustrate similar trepidations. Satirically illustrating Ames’s
accusations, Irving’s “The Art of Bookmaking” presents contemporary writers repeatedly
borrowing materials from the works of past generations and highlights the consequences of such
actions. Irving’s narrator sits in the corner of a library observing as his peers, fellow authors,
write surrounded by the works of past authors. As the narrator dozes into a dream, the scene
takes on a new significance. Instead of picking words and lines from the past authors’ texts, the
modern authors begin to dress themselves in the past authors’ clothes but are set upon when the
portraits of the deceased authors lining the walls come to life, screaming “thieves,” and attack
the contemporary writers (81-83). As actors on a stage dress in costume and play a part, Irving’s
characters demonstrate, in a very literal depiction, that many authors of the period were little
more than impersonators and not pioneers. In line with the rhetorical question Ames posed,
Irving criticizes the lack of originality in much of the literature originating thus far in the young
nation.

Also, Ames illustrates how the interests of society in the days of writers such as Homer
and Virgil differ greatly from the interests of early nineteenth-century America and concludes
that such differences could undermine the quality of America’s artistic production. Ames
explains:

Homer wrote of war to heroes and their followers, to men who felt the military
passion stronger than the love of life; Virgil, with art at least equal to his genius,
addressed Romans, who loved their country with sentiment, with passion, with
fanaticism. . . . Commerce has supplanted war, as the passion of the multitude;
and the arts have divided and contract the objects of pursuit. . . . Now the
propensities of mankind balance and neutralize each other, and, of course, narrow
the range in which poetry used to move. (1006)

According to Ames, as subjects such as war and nationalism united the people around a common
“passion” in Homer and Virgil’s days, commerce - the solitary interest of early nineteenth-
century America - caused the arts to “narrow” and suffer.
Similarly, Irving limns a like-minded character in his description of Ichabod Crane. Many Sleepy Hollow residents consider Crane educated and cultured. However, Irving humorously illustrates that Crane’s education is heavily based on works such as Mather’s *History of New England Witchcraft* (335). Indeed, Crane seems far more interested in financial pursuits than in educational ones. Irving notes the monetary significance of Katrina Van Tassel\(^\text{15}\) to someone like Crane. Irving describes Crane’s thought process: “His heart yearned after the damsel who was to inherit the domains, and his imagination expanded with the idea how they might be readily turned into cash, and the money invested in immense tracts of wild land, and shingle palaces in the wilderness” (339). Crane exemplifies the seemingly cultured member of the American society primarily interested in profit rather than in the nation’s educational interests and cultural merits.

Ames goes to great lengths to demonstrate how dangers such as unoriginality and an overzealous influence of capital interests upon cultural productions could lead the young American nation to shortchange its potential as a world-wide artistic authority. Authors such as Washington Irving continued this concern. Taken together, these authors and their works demonstrate that America’s future, politically, socially, and especially artistically, was anything but certain in the relatively early stages of the republic, issues which would continue to concern writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and, in a more complicated fashion, Herman Melville.

Melville’s contemplation of a uniquely American literary tradition has been well documented. For example, David Reynolds suggests that Melville’s writings, time and again,

\(^{15}\) Many of Irving’s characters and settings serve to remind his readers of New York state’s earlier Dutch days and colonial history.
illustrate his “search for distinctly American themes and characters” (275) and that, “[l]ike many American writers of the day, he wished to produce literature that was both national and universal” (276). However, critics often turn to texts such as Typee (1846), Omoo (1847), Moby-Dick (1851), and The Confidence Man (1857) to support such conclusions, remaining relatively mute on the subject when it comes to “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” Melville’s short story indeed contains elements of his search for what constitutes a distinctly national literature. In fact, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” problematizes this search by illustrating the difficulties in identifying a national literature and connecting such difficulties to the changing visage of antebellum America as exemplified in the streets and waterfronts of mid-century New York City. Like Ames and Irving before him, Melville focuses on the subjects of economics and originality as his chief concerns for America’s failing to sever its cultural dependence on England. At the center of both concerns is the city in which Melville sets his story.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, New York City realized its economic potential and grew increasingly fixated with furthering that potential. Melville’s narrator in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” explains that as the “drawer-up of recondite documents of all sorts. . . . [t]here was now great work for scriveners” (11). Being in the business of copying legal documents and business contracts, Melville’s narrator had good reason to consider himself in the midst of “great work” both quantitatively (meaning the frequency of work) and qualitatively (meaning the profit brought in from such work). During this time, Melville’s narrator would hardly be alone with such a workload. In fact, as many historians point out, evidence suggests

---

16 In his essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” Melville points out, “It is true, that but few of them as yet have evinced that decided originality which merits great praise” (247).
that much of this “great work” would involve itself in Euro-American business relations because, according to Thomas Augst, “the financial district of Wall Street, by the mid-nineteenth century already symbolized New York City’s central role as the engine of American business and finance” (61). The creation of such a symbol meant strengthening the city’s ties to European capital. Edward Spann explains, “Both [New York City’s] foreign commerce and its population had increased nearly three times since 1815. By the 1840s, it handled over half the imports and nearly a third of the exports of the United States, and these shares would grow larger over the next decades” (2). Spann continues, clarifying, “[New York City] supplied the greatest variety of goods, the greatest number of ships, the greatest quantity of money, and the greatest range of commercial skills in a nation whose expanding society was increasingly infused with commerce. It was fast becoming the American metropolis and a major world city” (2). In regard to what principally fueled this “engine of American business and finance,” Spann continues,

As most imports were bought and sold on credit, the drygoods trade in particular gave South Street and Wall Street special access to British capital, and so was an important factor in making New York the financial center of the United States. The leaders of New York’s generally conservative mercantile community took particular care to maintain their special relationship with Liverpool and London. (6)

In fact, as early as 1815 and the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain had clearly selected New York as its focal point for trade with the United States; the city’s merchants, “who in 1810 had been closely rivaled by Philadelphia and especially Boston in the import trade,” as Spann explicates, were “import[ing] in 1825 nearly three times as much as those two cities combined” (6). Echoing Spann’s comments, Kelley suggests,
although [New York City] held a certain political significance in the early national period, when New York served briefly as capital both of the new United States and of the State of New York, commercially it suffered in the economic rivalry with other dominant ports such as Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston. Nevertheless, when with the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 its superior location in relation both to Europe and the American interior became manifest, New York began to grow in population, land mass, economic importance, and eventually cultural richness. (6)

Though Kelley cites various reasons for New York City becoming America’s dominant (though off-center) economic nucleus and its counterpart to Europe’s financial capitals, both Spann and Kelley arrive at the same conclusion: by the mid-to-late 1820s, New York City erected itself as America’s financial Colossus, all the while standing on the shoulders of European, and particularly English, commerce. As such, the more economic success that sailed between the legs of this metropolitan Colossus, the more business individuals such as Melville’s narrator would find crossing their desks.

Melville’s New York illustrates how, recalling Ames, “[c]ommerce has supplanted war, as the passion of the multitude” (1006). New York’s economic pursuits could potentially “neutralize” the city’s cultural developments or, at best, “narrow the range in which poetry used to move” (Ames 1006). In other words, New York City’s economic success from, and dependence upon, English commerce might limit the productivity and originality of America’s literary and artistic culture. Bartleby manifests such concerns surrounding the city’s economic-artistic dynamic and its resultant effect on the originality, or lack thereof, of America’s artistic community with his first and last acts of resistance (before being fired) to the law office’s ethos. For example, in describing Bartleby’s first sign of resistance, Melville’s narrator states,
I called him [Bartleby], rapidly stating what it was I wanted him to do – namely, to examine a small paper with me. Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when, without moving from his privacy, Bartleby, in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, “I would prefer not to.” . . . “Prefer not to,” echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. “What do you mean? . . . I want you to help me compare this sheet here – take it,” and I thrust it toward him. “I would prefer not to,” said he. (13)

His refusal to take up the copied sheet of paper and fulfill the requested work demonstrates Bartleby’s passive criticism of the rote, redundant, and ultimately unoriginal productivity generated within the lawyer’s offices. Later in the text, Bartleby again passively counters the narrator’s request to compare recent copies against the original, this time in the company of Turkey and Nippers, the office’s other two scriveners, and the apprenticed office boy, Ginger Nut (14-16). Eventually, after Bartleby confounds his co-workers with his preferring not to complete a series of tasks, the narrator demands that Bartleby “must quit this place” (29) because “Bartleby did nothing but stand at his window in his dead-wall revery [sic]” (28) because “he had decided upon doing no more writing” (28) or, to be more specific, as Bartleby states, “I have given up copying” (29). Clearly, the narrator’s request for Bartleby to assist him in proofing a copied document for its exactness in replicating the original work smack of mimicry, a fault Ames voices in his essay and Irving’s fictional authors practice in “The Art of Bookmaking.” However, unlike Ames and Irving, Melville’s choice of Wall Street seemingly asserts the interrelation between lack of originality and commence, especially foreign trade. Melville’s setting his story in the financial heart of New York implicates the city as a key player in the country’s cultural mimicry. In consequence, Bartleby’s refusal to copy symbolizes a resistance to participate in or associate with such imitative practices and productions.
Ironically, in the 1840s, New York State attempted to minimize certain mimetic associations with England, not along economic lines but political ones. The state’s governing body sought to eliminate governmental institutions that too closely imitated English institutions. New York’s then-existing Court of Chancery directly descended from its British counterpart in both form and function. In response, the New York State Constitutional Convention of 1846 created a new Constitution that eliminated or merged many governmental elements and institutions seen as wasteful or inefficient, including the Chancery. J. Hampden Dougherty states, “[t]he new constitution retained the court of impeachment, but abolished the court for the correction of errors. Chancery courts as separate organizations also ceased to exist, and the old expensive and tedious methods of taking testimony in equity cases were abolished” (517). Such governmental alterations introduced a greater sense of decentralization and democratization of power and shifted the functionality of the State’s governing bodies further away from their European antecedents. Prior to such changes, many of these institutions were modeled on a European, or more specifically English, originals. Such revisions not only removed New York’s governing bodies further out of semblance from their European forefathers but also took certain financial advantages out of the hands of the privileged few. In “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” the reader sees the fictional relative of this historical character, as Melville’s narrator states,

The good old office, now extinct in the State of New York, of a Master of Chancery, had been conferred upon me. It was not a very arduous office, but very pleasantly remunerative. I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages; but, I must be permitted to be rash here, and declare, that I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Master of Chancery, by the new Constitution, as a --- premature act; inasmuch
as I had counted upon a life-lease of the profits, whereas I only received those of a few short years. (4)

Although the narrator briefly enjoys the financial benefits that come with the added position as Master of Chancery, the State’s moving away from older models to reduce wasteful structures results in the narrator’s loss of the Chancery’s privileged income. As such, the narrator’s protests against and resistance to accepting the State’s new Constitution illustrate not only his enjoyment of the privilege and profits that came with the title but also his dependence on English models of governance, a cultural aspect from which states like New York were attempting to distinguish themselves.

One aspect of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” supports a reading in which Melville analyzes the Anglo-American relationship and questions the possibility for establishing a wholly separate and original cultural tradition. That aspect appears in Melville’s continued reference to, and the presence of ginger, the spice. Not only is ginger nearly ever-present in the lawyer’s office, given that Melville names the office boy Ginger Nut, but it is almost continuously consumed because Turkey and Nippers “very frequently” send Ginger Nut on errands “for that peculiar cake – small, flat, round, and very spicy – after which he had been named” (10). The scriveners “would gobble up scores of these cakes, as if they were mere wafers” (10). However, the most telling meditation on the subject of ginger comes from one of the lawyer’s observations of Bartleby. Melville’s narrator explains,

I observed that he never went to dinner . . . At about eleven o’clock though, in the morning, I noticed that Ginger Nut would advance towards the opening in Bartleby’s screen . . . The boy would then leave the office, jingling a few pence, and reappear with a handful of ginger-nuts, which he delivered in the hermitage . .
. . . He eats nothing but ginger-nuts. My mind then ran on in reveries concerning the probable effects upon the human constitution of living entirely on ginger-nuts. Ginger-nuts are so called, because they contain ginger as one of their peculiar constituents. . . . Now, what was ginger? A hot, spicy thing. Was Bartleby hot and spicy? Not at all. Ginger, then, had no effect upon Bartleby. Probably he preferred it should have none. (16-17)

Robert Gates suggests that Melville’s references to ginger, and specifically gingernuts, within this passage, play a symbolic and ironic role in what he sees as one of Bartleby’s chief characteristics: unpredictability. Gates, for example, states, “[u]nderstandably the narrator finds himself completely baffled by the unpredictability of Bartleby. Bartleby’s diet consists entirely of gingernuts, but his personality exhibits none of the traits of the spicy food” (23). In contrast, Allan Moore Emery draws from the historicity of mid-nineteenth-century New York and its potential sources of inspiration for Melville. Emery recalls Abram C. Dayton’s The Last Days of Knickbrocker Life in New York (1897) in which Dayton recounts two “real-life counterparts of Bartleby,” one of which he describes as a madman, nicknamed “The Gingerbread Man,” who “aimlessly hurried up and down the streets, had no relatives, acquaintances, occupation, or place of residence, and relied upon gingerbread as his ‘only visible article of diet’” (footnote 14, 178). Granted, ginger may serve as an ironic symbol to better understand Melville’s character or as an historical allusion to a potentially deranged individual who, similar to Bartleby, consumed only ginger-based products.

However, I am far less concerned with the physiological effects of such a diet on a person’s well-being and far more focused upon the implications such a product could have on a larger socio-economic scale. More specifically, with ginger clearly being a non-native American
crop, Melville’s repeated utilization of the spice in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” alludes to America’s importing of such crops found in the East Indies via European trade routes and, as such, emphasizes America’s continued economic and commercial dependence on such trade and the relationships founded within that trade. More particularly, as we should read Bartleby’s preference not to participate in the practices of the lawyer’s office because of its construction as a social space representing the culturally mimetic dependence of America upon England and its colonial trade, then his dietary choices demonstrate an ironic futility to his passive resistance. Bartleby’s chief consumption of ginger illustrates that he participates in, and in fact imbues himself with, products of the same intercultural relationship that he passively resists on the grounds of overdependence and unoriginality. In fact, Bartleby dies within the Tombs when he foregoes consuming all food, including those same ginger-nuts.\textsuperscript{17} Cyrus R. K. Patell, citing philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, points out that “cultures … never tend toward purity: they tend toward change, toward mixing, and miscegenation, toward an ‘endless process of imitation and revision’” (4). Thus, Bartleby exemplifies a cautionary lesson to thinkers such as Ames, Irving, and Emerson – individuals seeking a more chaste American cultural development or the establishment of a more purified American artistry.

Although plausibly read as a semi-autobiographical bombast illustrating Melville’s displeasure over his novels’ reception and the demands of the commercial publishing world - or as a labor-oriented treatise addressing the dehumanizing effects of the financial world on the middle-class worker, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” also assesses early to mid-nineteenth-century

\textsuperscript{17} Melville writes, “The round face of the grub-man peered upon me now. ‘His dinner is ready. Won’t he dine today, either? Or does he live without dining?’ ‘Lives without dining’ said I, and closed the eyes” (45).
America’s socio-economic and artistic dependence on its Anglo ancestors. Entering into a conversation with writers such as Fisher Ames, Washington Irving, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Melville addresses how America’s commercial and mercantile markets, depending upon British and European trade for their success, developed inroads into the nation’s cultural progress. Such influences manifested themselves in the form of America’s artistic mimicry of their European and English predecessors. However, Melville’s construction of the complicated Bartleby illustrates that a certain degree of unoriginality and mimicry is necessary for a culture, including all of its productions and artifacts, to thrive; to seek absolute purity via division and isolation could be just as fatal as the suicidal fate promised in Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” (1841).18 In other words, Bartleby does not die as a symbol of Melville’s growing feelings of separation from the art he wanted to produce but as a symbol of some Americans’ overzealous drive to divide itself from much of its cultural ancestry overseas.

b.) “Light Came Down From Far Above”: Urban Structures and Upward (im)Mobility

Although some residents of New York City seemed invested in amending its resemblance to its European forbearers, such alterations as Melville’s story demonstrates did not guarantee greater social freedoms or economic opportunities for its residents. In “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Melville emphasizes the presence of walls, particularly the walls just outside of the lawyer’s office windows, and many critics have utilized these walls as scholarly fodder to feed various interpretive stances. Many scholars have characterized “Bartleby, the Scrivener” as a story

18 Emerson writes, “[t]here is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide [emphasis mine]; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion” (148).
touching on the city’s isolating and alienating effects, chiefly employing the walls and their relationship to Bartleby as evidence of this. Zlotnick, for example, summarily suggests,

Emptiness is perhaps the key word here, for Melville implies that Wall Street—which is synonymous to him with commerce and materialism—is the cause of modern man’s alienation and despair. This is hinted at early in the story through repeated references to walls, walls that separate and alienate Bartleby from other people, and eventually from life itself. At the end Bartleby is found dead of starvation in the yard of the Tombs, with “his face towards a high wall.” (31)

Zlotnick’s analysis processes the text symbolically, producing an allegorical reading wherein Melville’s story embodies a universal parable in which Bartleby becomes the working world’s everyman and the lawyer’s office, complete with its suffocating atmosphere and oppressive surroundings, becomes the everyday work world. For others, such as Robert Spector, the walls found just outside the law office’s windows and the various characters’ relation to them represent Melville’s philosophical conclusions. Spector states,

it is equally clear that he [the narrator] is faced by the same “unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall” that confronts Bartleby. With the appearance of Bartleby, the narrator discovers that the symbolic universe which is Bartleby is not to be moved by either his injunctions or pleas. Offer what he will, he cannot produce a reaction in a universe that does “not prefer,” that will not be cajoled, that cannot be bribed to respond. (176)

Spector equates Bartleby’s characterization to the narratively ever-present walls -- passive, immovable, silent -- and, according to this reading, the lawyer’s relationship with both the walls and Bartleby represents humanity’s relation to the universe – a dynamic akin to a Naturalistic philosophy found in the writings of Stephen Crane some fifty years later.¹⁹ While admitting the

¹⁹ Take, for instance, the passage from Stephen Crane’s poem “War is Kind” (1899) that reads, “A man said to the universe: / ‘Sir, I exist!’ / ‘However,’ replied the universe, / ‘The fact has not created in me / A sense of obligation” (Crane 548).
validity of such interpretations, I posit that the repeated references to walls throughout Melville’s transcend interpretations such as Zlotnick’s and Spector’s conceptions of separation and isolation to encompass New York City’s history and the city’s social spaces. What others critics see as a story about the philosophical condition of humanity becomes grounded in the physical spaces and structures of the city, a more historically specific though no less devastating representation of New York City’s social conditions.

A closer reading of Melville’s depiction of these much-discussed walls illustrates their ability not only to isolate and alienate but to engender and empower. To begin, Melville’s narrator explains,

> my windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade; which wall required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all near-sighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my window panes. Owing to the great height of the surrounding buildings, and my chambers being on the second floor, the interval between this wall and mine not a little resembled a huge square cistern. (5)

In describing the “small side window” closest to Bartleby’s desk, the narrator characterizes it as “a window which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy backyards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. Within three feet of the panes was a wall, and the light came down from far above, between two lofty buildings, as from a very small opening in a dome” (11-12). Though these descriptions suggest a claustrophobic and estranging space for the law office occupants, how do these walls come to block their view, and what do these adjoining structures, including the
building at “No. --- Wall Street” which houses the lawyer’s office, suggest about New York City’s development in the mid-nineteenth century?

As the nineteenth century neared its midpoint, New York City swelled with a sense of opportunity, manifesting itself in the form of the city’s architectural landscape and in the economic expectations of upward mobility for more in the general population. The hope was that New York City’s demography would imitate its topography. During the decades leading up to the 1850s, New Yorkers witnessed rapid and radical changes in the city’s physical appearance. New developments in engineering and architecture produced new construction projects which, in turn, produced a new city skyline, particularly throughout the lower section of Manhattan. For instance, Spann suggests,

The tear-down and build-up spirit of the emerging commercial metropolis was as much at work in the area half a mile south of City Hall. . . . Wall Street had been briefly humbled in 1835 by the Great Fire, which had ravaged much of lower New York, but it had soon been reborn in even grander form. An English traveller in 1838 called it the most “concentrated focus of commercial transactions in the world. . . . The whole money-dealing of New York is here brought into a very narrow compass of ground, and is consequently transacted with peculiar quickness and facility.” (3-4)

In addition to the 1835 fire, the Panic of 1837 slowed new construction to a crawl, but “[b]ooming economic conditions in the 1840s . . . restored profitability and housing starts” (Margo 607). During this time, many of the structures erected “in even a grander form” employed then-modern architectural developments that allowed for buildings to stand higher and possess more floors than their older neighboring ancestors. As such, two- or three-story buildings such as No. --- Wall Street in which Melville’s narrator rents his office space found themselves
dwarfed by, for example, four- or five-story buildings; thus, as Melville writes, the lawyer’s office windows “commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall… owing to the great height of the surrounding buildings” (Melville 5).

Yet, even as New York’s structures reached for the stars, the image of No. --- Wall Street being dwarfed and boxed in metaphorically echoes the realities of socio-economic mobility for many in the city. The aforementioned 1846 New York State Constitutional Convention attempted to lay the foundation for more New Yorkers to attain a certain degree of upward mobility. According to Dougherty:

The convention of 1846 was the first constitutional convention ever assembled in this state which really deserved to be styled a people’s convention. The deputies or delegates in the convention of 1777 represented mainly the proprietors of great estates and their tenants. The delegates to the convention of 1821 were chosen by owners of real or personal property. The delegates to the convention of 1846 were elected upon the basis of almost universal suffrage. . . . The cardinal distinction between this convention [1846] and all its predecessors is that its work seems chiefly to be a revesting [sic] in the people of the state of delegated power. (511)

In a word, New York’s 1846 Constitutional Convention followed a policy of “decentralization” (516). It attempted to achieve governmental balance and equality, hoping, but not guaranteeing, that such achievements would translate into improved economic opportunities for more New Yorkers.

---

20 Joseph J. Korom writes, “[t]he 1850s and 1860s were a time of flux when America began to embrace the Industrial Revolution and when its cities were looking to assert their own identity… The middle of the nineteenth century saw tall business buildings first emerge in America’s large cities. These were structures that would not be identified as skyscrapers by current definition; still they were substantially taller than what was commonly experienced by most city folk. Standing … four or five stories, these buildings were used primarily for commerce” (22).
However, as economic prospects in clerical or mercantile work and apprentice-oriented careers for New Yorkers improved, the opportunities for upward social mobility for many of those same New Yorkers slowed to a glacial pace, or froze altogether, a notion that Melville captures in Ginger Nut and Nippers. According to Brian Luskey, “[a]s mobility … grew far less certain in an era of demographic and occupational change, antebellum-era clerks wondered whether the educational purpose that had traditionally defined apprenticeship was also failing them” (682). As a point of illustration, Luskey cites the example of one Henry Patterson who, while clerking in a New York drugstore. . . . “studied book keeping by double entrée” and writing in the evenings with his brothers, who were also clerks.21 While one sibling “was promoted to assistant discount clerk,” Patterson ran errands for his employer and did the tedious work of a druggist’s shop, placing oils and waxes into vials. His experiences with menial work speak to a disjunction between what clerks expected to do and what their employers demanded of them. (683)

Luskey concludes that the apprenticeship system by the 1840s, although once consisting of “[s]low and steady preparation, once a hallmark of commercial friendship networks, heralded stagnation and potential failure, instead of eventual mobility” (684). Melville’s short story mirrors Luskey’s conclusions regarding the limitations of many New Yorkers working to enhance and advance their upward mobility. Upon introducing the young apprentice, Melville’s narrator explains that Ginger Nut was a lad, some twelve years old. His father was a car-man, ambitious of seeing his son on the bench instead of the cart, before he died. So he sent him to my office. . . . He had a little desk to himself, but he did not use it much. Upon inspection, the drawer exhibited a great array of the shells of various sorts of nuts.

Indeed, to this quick-witted youth, the whole noble science of the law was contained in a nutshell. (10)

Apprenticed to the narrator by a lowly but ambitious father who wishes a greater social mobility and status for his son, Ginger Nut finds his office training more consistent with that of an errand boy than an apprentice. Along these lines, Kuebrich suggests, “Gingernut has been placed in the office by his father, a cart-driver, with the hope that he will learn law, but this aspiration for advancement seems unrealistic, for the lawyer appears to exercise no … professional guidance, and the office work is so boring that Gingernut eagerly absents himself” (385). Another of the narrator’s employees and office-fellows, Nippers, also exhibits the limits of upward mobility within the Wall Street society. For instance, Nippers, as Melville’s narrator recalls,

was a whiskered, sallow, and upon the whole, rather piratical-looking young man, of about five and twenty. I always deemed him the victim of two evil powers – ambition and indigestion. The ambition was evinced by a certain impatience of the duties of a mere copyist, an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs, such as the original drawing up of legal documents. (7)

Thus, Nippers’s ambition far from being an asset, may be the source of his downfall. In other words, the lawyer’s two clerks, Nippers and Turkey, and his young apprentice, Ginger Nut, stand as critiques of the myth of New York City’s social mobility.

Simultaneously, Melville situates these characters in stark contrast to the period’s firm cultural convictions in self-reliance regarding economic matters, convictions circulated about and mythologized within figures such as the narrator’s much-admired John Jacob Astor. Melville’s narrator, who was once held in “the late John Jacob Astor’s good opinion” (4), admires Astor so greatly that even his name “hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings
like unto bullion” (4). Later in the story, to rid himself of the troubles associated with Bartleby, the narrator takes a trip “for a few days” during which he “drove about the upper part of town and through the suburbs … crossed over to Jersey City and Hoboken, and paid fugitive visits to Manhattanville and Astoria” (41-42). While the final destination clearly illustrates the narrator’s desires to associate himself with Astor, the first stops located in New Jersey are no less significant. Why would Melville’s narrator, an obvious admirer of John Jacob Astor, visit Hoboken during his day trip? Simply put, although John Jacob Astor is often associated with New York City, he built a mansion and took up residence in Hoboken, New Jersey, at the corner of Washington and Second Street while he was involved in a series of lawsuits against the State of New York (Mills 46-50).

Although Melville’s narrator admires and seems devoted to Astor, the era’s popular characterization of Astor runs the gamut from one who “commenced his career on this continent as a journeyman pedlar [sic]” (Kuebrich 382) to someone “who more than any other symbolized in the popular mind the obscenity of great wealth” (Foley 92). The differing perspectives on Astor speak both to the period’s tumultuous class consciousness and to the city’s frustrated economic aspirations. Perhaps no case better demonstrates these concerns and Astor’s associations with them than that of the Episcopal Diocese of New York in the 1840s – the period leading up to Melville’s writing and publishing “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” The Diocese’s most famous and most powerful parish church, Trinity Church, amassed its power by possessing extensive properties throughout the city. In “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Melville’s narrator illustrates Trinity Church’s distinction on the morning that he discovers Bartleby domesticating
in his office as he states, “one Sunday morning, I happened to go to Trinity Church, to hear a celebrated preacher, and finding myself rather early on the ground I thought I would walk around to my chambers for a while” (21). However, Trinity’s fortune proved fortunate primarily to already-wealthy New Yorkers. Much of the land in question was set under long-term lease, and, as such, the rents paid on them were considerably lower than the estimated value of the land. As Spann explains,

This was a boon to Trinity leaseholders, especially to the Astors who paid $269 a year for some 350 lots. . . . While its wealthy lessees prospered from its land, Trinity itself ran into financial difficulties in meeting its religious obligations. . . . Beginning in the mid-1840s, Trinity became more cautious with its religious gifts at a time when Episcopalian missionary efforts in the lower city were near collapse. The result was quick and unfortunate: the demise of the Missionary Society and, within the space of a few years, the closing of three churches which had ministered especially to the poor. (229-230)

In regards to class awareness and the difficulties, or perhaps impossibilities, of social mobility, Mike Walsh, a political radical of New York City, pointed out that Trinity’s properties were “enough to make every person in the United States comfortable and happy” (Spann 233). Walsh also frequently attacked Astor in his newspaper the Subterranean for similar reasons, illustrating, for example, that “it would take thirty-five hundred men, working twenty years … three hundred days in each year … to earn what Mr. John Jacob Astor has saved from what the world calls his ‘industry’” (Spann 233).

Other New York writers, contemporaries of Melville, called attention to the limits to one’s upward mobility as a result of the closed-off nature of Wall Street and the commercial
district. For instance, in his 1854 collection of city sketches *Fifteen Minutes Around New York*, George Foster describes the actions and events seen on Wall Street,

> If you listen to what is said here, unless you are initiated, you will learn very little that will guide you in forming an opinion of what is going on. Half phrases, broken sentences, mysterious gestures and signs – these form the staple of what is doing here. If you have not the key, you might as well be an attendant upon worship at a Chinese temple to Josh (not Silsbee), and chop sticks. (222)

As with Ginger Nut’s treatment in Melville’s fictional law office and the nonfictional experiences of Henry Patterson, advancement within the Wall Street culture is difficult, if not impossible, without proper and effective training. Indeed, Ginger Nut’s apprenticeship training may just as well prepare him for a position as Foster’s Chinese temple attendant as a Wall Street clerk. Foster further explains that even such a “key” to the language of Wall Street can provide only limited opportunity because true upward mobility, that of advancement into the city’s aristocracy, comes from one’s social position (i.e. status) in relation to one’s financial possessions (i.e. money). Foster states,

> at this hour, daily congregate the real, bona fide, no-mistake magnates of our financial and commercial aristocracy. . . . Who, then, are these favored and powerful individuals who exert this immense control over society and the world? . . . [A]s to who and what they are, go to Julien’s or Ole Bull’s, or Sontag’s, and you will see. They are patrons of the Opera – the hope of Art in this country and this age: and the beauty of it is, that they know as much of painting, of statuary, of architecture, and the belles letters, as of music. . . . There is no conceivable subject of poetry, art or literature, upon which they will not pronounce a judgment with the authority of a critic and prolixity of an amateur. They have that which is so much better than knowledge, or study, or experience, or brains, or in fact, than anything but money – they have position; and that position they have obtained and can only keep because of their money. (222-225)

---

22 *Fifteen Minutes Around New York* was published the year after “Bartleby, the Scrivener” appeared in *Putnam’s*. 
Thus, like the diminutive building in which the office is located, neither Melville’s narrator nor any of his employees will likely rise higher than their status at the time of the narrative, never entering into the financial and commercial aristocracy. The irony lies in the fact that although the narrator admires Astor and feels a certain pride by standing in Astor’s “good opinion,” the possibility of his own upward mobility seems stunted at best, given his visually obstructed second-floor office space, the limited productivity coming out of the “good natural arrangement” (Melville 10) of his scriveners, and his often-absente apprentice-turned-errand-boy.

Like so many of Melville’s other writings, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” presents the image and elements of polar opposites. Melville’s short story situates itself into New York City history by alluding to the modern visage of the city with its new and taller buildings. Concurrently, however, Melville uses images of the city’s older and shorter buildings to characterize the limits of upward mobility within the city. Like Ishmael’s observations of the Catskill eagle that “can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces” (Melville Moby-Dick 355), Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” traverses two cultural extremes, commenting upon both the topography and demography of New York City in the mid-nineteenth century.

**c.) Urban Domestication and Northerly Migrations: Resistance to Real Estate**

In “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Melville addresses another then-contemporary issue facing New York’s working class, one not of upward mobility but rather of urban domesticity. Numerous scholars have arrived at many conclusions regarding Bartleby’s decision to reside in

23 This may be, in part due to his losing the title and status of Master Chancery, as discussed earlier.
the lawyer’s office by “squatting.” Although often being read allegorically or somewhat philosophically, this portion of Melville’s narrative speaks directly to many important historical crises facing New York City’s working-class population, namely inadequate urban housing standards and geographical distance between the work place and home.

Understandably, given the limited transportation options, many of New York City’s working class wished to reside within the neighborhoods of lower Manhattan in close proximity to their workplace in the business district, the warehouses, or along the docks. However, doing so proved problematic for many, both hygienically and economically. A report by the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor published in 1853 (the same year that Putnam’s Monthly published “Bartleby, the Scrivener”) titled “First Report of a Committee on the Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Classes in the City of New York, with Remedial Suggestions,” points out,

In the lower wards, there are thousands of poor persons, but comparatively few buildings suitable for their accommodation. . . . Large rooms have been divided by rough partitions, into dwellings for two or three families – each, perhaps taking boarders, where they wash, cook, eat, sleep, and die – many of them prematurely, for the circumstances in which they live make fearful havoc of health and life. And in addition, night lodgers, [author’s emphasis] consisting of homeless men, women and children, are not infrequent, who for a trifling sum are allowed temporary shelter. There, huddled together, like cattle in pens, the inmates are subjected to the most debasing influences. Many of the dwellings, moreover, are out of repair. . . . Yet, however pent up or dirty these places other things being equal, the rents are from 25 to 30 per cent higher than uptown. (7-8)

Indeed, the same 1853 report states, “In the upper wards, there are some habitations for the laboring classes, where their wants and comforts have been regarded, and in which it is possible to maintain the decencies of life” (8). Together, these two passages illustrate the Committee’s
conclusion that although housing conditions throughout the city’s lower wards were deteriorating, the economic demands and cost of housing in the region were escalating. As such, the city began to seek a reconfiguring of its topographic and demographic maps as governing agencies recommended a northern migration of domesticity towards “habitations” possessing “the decencies of life.” However, yet another factor proved more persuasive than the city’s various committees in driving inhabitants out of the lower wards: population growth. Manhattan’s rapid population growth, increasing from 124,000 in 1820 to 814,000 by 1860, resulted in “[b]urgeoning real estate prices… [which] forced workers out of lower Manhattan… [and] created an urban work environment severed from friendly and familiar relationships” (Kuebrich 384). In other words, the city’s population boom and resulting domestic density as well as, again, the ensuing economic pressures in the form of high rents pushed people northward, dividing the city into two spheres: the lower wards consisting largely of the city’s industry and dedicated to commerce, and the city’s upper wards made up of urban residences and devoted to domesticity.

Such division of the city’s social spaces proved problematic to many as it victimized the same working- and middle-class denizens that progressive authorities had hoped to assist via domestic migration and spatial division. For example, according to Robert Margo:

> Single-family housing continued to be built in the 1840s and 1850s, however, particularly in “uptown” neighborhoods catering to middle-class residents who were escaping more densely populated centrally located neighborhoods. . . . Housing was also distinguished by its location, both in terms of distance from the Manhattan Central Business District (CBD) and in the socioeconomic composition of neighborhoods. Prior to the expansion of street railways in the 1850s, the chief form of interurban transport was the omnibus, a horse-drawn
vehicle carting about ten persons. Omnibuses were slow, uncomfortable, and costly; few members of the working class could afford to use them ... on a daily basis. Consequently, most New Yorkers attempted to live relatively near their place of employment, unless they could afford the time and money costs of commuting. (607)

For some of the reasons Margo suggests, a tendency to resist the northern migratory culture developed among working-class New Yorkers. Moving northward and away from the workplaces of lower Manhattan grew undesirable due to the limits of transportation technologies and their financial demands, but living among the lower wards and being closer to one’s workplace seemed ill-advised due to health, safety, and, again, housing cost concerns. The city’s working class found itself stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place, domestically speaking.

Bartleby, however, enacts a form of subversion and rebellion that addresses both of these problematic circumstances. For instance, one particular Sunday morning on his way to Trinity Church, Melville’s narrator stops by his office only to find himself barred from entering on account of Bartleby’s residence on the premises and requesting that the narrator return later. The awkward experience, the lawyer explains, left him “disarmed” and “unmanned” (21), surmising “that for an indefinite period Bartleby must have ate, dressed, and slept in my office” (22) thus making “my office his constant abiding place and home” (24). Leo Marx finds that Bartleby’s actions represent a philosophical commentary on the pitiful conditions and demands of New York’s commercial culture. Marx explains,

the lawyer ... soon discovers that the scrivener has become a permanent resident of his Wall Street chambers, that he sleeps and eats as well as works there. . . . At this strange discovery the narrator feels mixed emotions. On the one hand the
effrontery, the vaguely felt sense that his rights are being subverted, angers him. He thinks his actual identity, manifestly inseparable from his property rights, is threatened. . . . But at the same time the lawyer feels pity at the thought of this man inhabiting the silent desert that is Wall Street on Sunday. (17)

Marx also suggests, “we recall that the side of the office containing the door, which offered a kind of freedom to the others, was in effect a fourth wall for Bartleby. He had refused to walk through it. . . . his problem was not to be solved by leaving the office, or by leaving Wall Street; indeed, from Bartleby’s point of view, Wall Street was America” (23). To Marx, the preponderance of walls in Melville’s story allegorically emphasizes Bartleby’s psycho-social entrapment, representative of the city’s disenfranchised worker. In other words, for Bartleby, the door offers no choice of escape and is yet another wall through which he cannot, as opposed to shall not, pass.

But, as seen in his constant “prefer not to,” Bartleby seems very aware of choice and his chosen decisions. Moreover, his choices read as much sociological as philosophical. As Augst suggests, “[o]ver the course of the story, Bartleby apparently becomes homeless by taking up residence in the office – violating the separation of work and home … by which middle-class citizens sought to organize and manage character” (62).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the dominant cultural attitude on the relationship between domestic and industrial spaces pervading the American city was one of separation. According to Betsy Klimasmith, “Home” operates best as an ideological space when defined in opposition to its surroundings, and in the early years of the republic that other world frequently

---

24 Furthermore, as G.J. Barker-Benfield explains, “[a]fter the Industrial Revolution, industry left the home on an increasingly significant scale, the ‘working’ member of the family followed it, and . . . [w]ork was conclusively detached from residence, with extensive social and psychological effects” (20). Overall, during the nineteenth century, American social life exhibited a “total contrast between the world outside and home life” (20).
was figured as wilderness: space either dangerously savage or empty, implicitly waiting to be transformed by productive landowners a la Jefferson and Crevecoeur. But by the mid-nineteenth century, the burgeoning American city presented a different and more complex specter of wilderness. Urban space became a new anti-home. (3)

Melville’s short story demonstrates a subversion of and/or rebellion against such attitudes. Certainly, Bartleby’s decision to “take up residence” or “squat” in the lawyer’s office stands as a clear resistance to the cultural and topographical shifts occurring throughout the city, shifts that either separated workers farther away from their workplaces or separated the working classes further from the upper classes through the deplorable living conditions found in New York City’s lower neighborhoods.

Bartleby’s rebellious usurpation of the office’s commercial space as domestic space echoes throughout the city, both narratively within Melville’s story and socially within Melville’s New York. With regards to Bartleby’s insistence on utilizing the office as his living space and refusing to vacate the building, \(^{25}\) the lawyer’s former landlord tells him, “[e]veryone is concerned; clients are leaving the offices; some fears are entertained of a mob” (39). As Leo Marx argues, “Bartleby’s rebellion has taken on an explicitly revolutionary character … the whole structure of Wall Street society is in danger of being undermined” (21). As David Kuebrich points out, “In 1850 New York witnessed a broad range of militant working-class political turmoil: mass meetings, parades, rallies, demonstrations, and strikes” (381). Melville would have been familiar with “the essential arguments structuring the radical labor tradition” and had “personally tasted the frustration and oppression fueling its inner spirit” (Kuebrich 381).

\(^{25}\) Bartleby, according to the building’s landlord, “persists in haunting the building generally, sitting upon the banisters of the stairs by day, and sleeping in the entry by night” (39).
As the city began the second half of the nineteenth century, its social spaces, as Kuebrich suggests, found themselves transformed into locales of tension, conflict, and (at least economic if not sometimes literal) combat. Although much of this tension consisted of a dissatisfaction with working conditions, it also involved a concern for the right to space itself, thus emphasizing a merger of industrial and domestic space. In fact, in 1851, as Sean Wilentz cites, the Industrial Congress, an organization of united city laborers, affirmed, “all men are … endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are the right to Life, Liberty, and the fruits of their Labor, and to the use of such a portion of the earth and other elements as are necessary for their subsistence and comfort” (383). These protests, in other words, not only attempted to struggle against the problems that “characterized relations between New York workers and their employees” but also those producing an urban environment “severed from friendly and familiar relationships” (Kuebrich 384). Likewise, in “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Melville lamentably describes New York’s Wall Street after-work hours as a space of “emptiness” (22) and the buildings of the lower wards, like the one in which the lawyer’s office is located, as “entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations” (34). As such, Bartleby takes up residence in the lawyer’s residence not because he has nowhere else to go or because he invokes the spirit of the trapped and alienated industrial worker. Instead, Bartleby’s actions represent a form of

---

26 For a more general interpretation of such social trends in early nineteenth century America, see Wai-chee Dimock’s Empire for Liberty: Melville and The Poetics of Individualism in which he suggests that Antebellum America “was also a period of sharpening tensions and polarities. The economic revolutions that promoted massive migrations westward and southward, and from rural areas to industrial centers, also resulted in … the collapse of the artisan and apprenticeship system, and the breakdown of traditional familial and communal ties” (11).
passive resistance that questions the dominant cultural pressures that pushed the city’s adequate domestic options farther away from its commercial center.

**Bartleby’s New York and Melville’s Urban “Ever-Moving” Dawn**

In his review of Hawthorne, “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850), Melville writes, “For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne’s soul, the other side—like the dark half of the physical sphere—is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black. But this darkness but gives more effect to the ever-moving dawn, that forever advances through it, and circumnavigates his world” (243). The same metaphor fittingly applies to Melville’s characterization of New York City in “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” Within its narrative, Melville’s short story highlights the city’s various advancements such as the construction of taller structures and the strengthening of the city’s financial center, the city’s “Indian-summer sunlight” as it were. He is also quick to draw attention to the consequential “dark half” and the city’s shades of “blackness, ten times black.” Much of the story’s complexity lies in Melville’s ability to show how these opposites exist within the city’s social spaces, oppositions that complement, conflict, and ultimately complicate each other. Like Ames and Irving before him, Melville raises questions of originality and whether the economic Anglo-American commercial relationship reigns too influential over America’s literary future yet also stresses the necessity for a degree of cultural mimesis. In “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Melville creates a story substantially situated in the events of its time, whether grounded in the 1846 New York State Constitution’s disbanding of the Chancery Courts or the 1850s northern migration of many of the city’s working class seeking suitable dwelling. As such, Melville also contrasts the city’s evolving architectural
landscape with the economic prospects and pitfalls awaiting many of its citizens seeking a stable, if not elevated, status within its cultural landscape.
CHAPTER II

Stephen Crane and the Chaotic Complexities of the Slum’s Social Spaces

This work is a mudpuddle, I am told on the best authority.
Wade in and have a swim.

- Stephen Crane
  (Inscribed on an 1893 edition of Maggie) 27

By the end of the nineteenth century, New York City’s urban limits expanded in various directions by consuming ever-increasing tracts of land and transforming them into urban spaces. Throughout the century, the influx of former slaves, European immigrants, and rural workers to the city, largely due to advancements in industrialization produced a spike in the city’s population density and drew the attention of concerned social critics and eager reformers alike.28 Social reformers such as Charles Loring Brace, Helen Campbell, and, perhaps most prominently, Jacob Riis abhorred and underscored the cramped, confined, and overpopulated slums along the city’s Lower East Side. Likewise, fiction writers such as William Dean Howells (A Hazard of New Fortunes, 1890), Edward Townsend (A Daughter of the Tenements, 1895), Brander Matthews (Vignettes of Manhattan, 1894) and, in particular, Stephen Crane (Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, 1893, and George’s Mother, 1896) turned to these same neighborhoods to saturate their narratives with varying characterizations of the slums’ environments and inhabitants. The cultural identity of these neighborhoods became synonymous with the identity of the immigrant in the 1890s. As Riis suggests,

27 This particular copy of Maggie: A Girl of the Streets was given as a gift to Holmes Bassett (Stallman 15).
28 Jacob Riis’s opening chapter to How the Other Half Lives states, “[t]he tenement-house population had swelled to half a million souls… and on the East Side, in what is still the most densely populated district in all the world, China not excluded, it was packed at the rate of 290,000 to the square mile, a state of affairs wholly unexampled” (11).
When once I asked the agent of a notorious Fourth Ward alley how many people might be living in it I was told: One hundred and forty families, one hundred Irish, thirty-eight Italian, and two that spoke the German tongue. Barring the agent herself, there was not a native-born individual in the court. . . . The one thing you shall vainly ask for in the chief city of America is a distinctively American community. (How the Other 21)

Riis focused on the unique identity of the immigrant as “other.” As such, he and others characterized these neighborhoods as removed and “other-ed” as well and painted them in broad and colorful strokes of poverty, crime, and immorality. Because of cultural difference and disconnections, many reformers and reform movements at work in the city sought to ameliorate the immigrant culturally according to certain Protestant, upper-middle-class standards. Riis captures this sentiment by suggesting that any of the neighborhood’s inhabitants who resisted such assimilation “had sunk [emphasis mine] … to the level of their surroundings, and were at last content to remain there” (17). As Riis’s comment implies, efforts to promote assimilation focused on transforming the immigrants’ spatial environment and spatial practices within that environment. Riis’s commentary, though starting out focused on the foreign-born inhabitants of the Fourth Ward alley, ends not with a look at these inhabitants as individuals but with a query regarding the spatial concept of community. As Klimasmith explains, “[a]iming to improve conditions in the slums, they [reformers] animated an architectural determinism that both accounted for the moral degradation that they associated with tenement life and offered the possibility to ameliorate conditions and save lives in the city’s poorest neighborhoods” (91). In

29 Joseph Entin writes, “Riis prevents potentially unsettling sights from threatening his readers by enforcing a sense of social and aesthetic distance between his readers and the slums. The poor constitute a spectacle that Riis’s viewers observe, inspect, and scrutinize from a distance. . . . The ‘other half’ remains thoroughly ‘Other’; the possibility of an exchange of points of view is avoided” (320).
other words, reform-minded procedures, such as the “Americanization” movement, wanted to alter the physical features as well as the cultural appearance of the city’s slums and thus establish the reformers’ own ethical perspective as dominant and ostensibly better. As Cindy Weinstein explains,

Because Riis imagines the tenants to be morally vacant, we never get a sense of what they would like to see happen to their homes and with their lives. . . . We are continually told about their “harsh and unattractive language[s]” (101) but we rarely hear their voices. Their pictures gesture toward some kind of self-representation, but they are of course mediated through the lens of the middle-class Riis. And we know from the prose that Riis is convinced that they have no self that is truly worthy of representation. (212)

Reformers such as Riis did not find the tenement dwellers of the Bowery and throughout the Lower East Side “morally vacant” but, more accurately, morally inferior. But, if, as Weinstein points out, Riis concluded that the tenants of such neighborhoods were not “truly worthy of representation,” then it would seem a moral hierarchy is in place, gauging one’s values as superior while demeaning others’ as inferior.

Indeed, much of the nineteenth century’s social tensions throughout the Lower East Side’s slums existed as a result of the newly arrived immigrants’ refusal to “Americanize” their ethical or behavioral standards. More exactly, while much of Crane’s understanding of the city’s social spaces and spatial practices is borrowed from, or at the very least influenced by, Riis’s writings and the Methodist moralistic treatises on the dangers of the industrial city that proliferated during the era (Benfey 63), Crane’s characters also demonstrate rebellions against and resistance to the transformative machinery of the reform movement. As Benfey states,

---

30 Quoted from Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives.*
“Maggie … takes risks with a familiar subject, boldly cutting new patterns out of old cloth” (63). In fact, many of Crane’s New York sketches, including *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *George’s Mother*, illustrate various examples of the slum’s marginalized and “other-ed” inhabitants resisting the Victorian era’s culturally hegemonic “un-other-ing” measures. As Keith Gandal points out, Crane “never puts his characters on the traditional moral map. Rather, he suggests that the younger generation in the Bowery lives in a separate ethical universe, a world that does not recognize the traditional Protestant values of sobriety, discipline, and chastity, and so on but operates according to an alternative morality – with its own ethical geography” (56). While I agree with Gandal’s assessment that Crane’s New York sketches capture the development of a new continuum of ethical standards at work in the Bowery and throughout the Lower East Side, I judge that Crane’s slum residents indeed recognize the traditional Protestant values that various reformers of the period advocated, but do so largely to challenge and resist them. Out of this resistance, Crane depicts not a new morality but a resistant morality, one born out of the impact of the traditional Protestant ethics as well as the immigrants’ indigenous cultural proclivities. Moreover, Crane makes it a point to illustrate how the conflicts of these warring cultural and ethical systems took place on the battlefields of both the city’s commercial centers and the slum’s domestic home-fronts, suggesting that these two arenas were valued markers indicating the urban ethos of the city.

---

31 I disagree with Gandal’s argument. He views both Riis and Crane as seeing the immigrant in possession of an “alternative morality,” but I see Crane characterizing the immigrant’s morality as specifically resistant and counter-cultural while Riis characterizes the immigrant morality as simply inferior and, therefore, malleable.
Edwin Cady points out, “Stephen Crane has been termed realist, romantic, naturalist, imagist, existentialist, symbolist, impressionist, expressionist, and pointilliste (I may have overlooked some)” (378); however, a sizeable portion of the critical writings addressing his first novel Maggie (1893) centers on the text’s various naturalistic aspects. The different, seemingly deterministic elements of the novella perhaps best explain such a result. After all, by the late nineteenth century, individuals such as “Mendel and Ricardo and Marx and Darwin and Freud and Malthus had seemingly taught … that man was trapped; that he was the unsuspecting victim of genetic and economic and political and evolutionary and psychological forces” (Beaver 186). Donald Pizer’s “Stephen Crane’s Maggie and American Naturalism” illuminates this point in relation to Crane’s texts. For instance, Pizer, although showing how Crane problematizes the traditional concept of naturalistic fiction, suggests that “Crane’s novel about a young girl’s fall and death in the New York slums” ultimately contains “the theme of the overpowering effect of environment” (186). Many contemporary reviews of Maggie: A Girl of the Streets as well as much of the subsequent criticism concerning Crane’s New York narratives suggest that the novel is about the immigrant experience but only as it is determined by the immigrants’ own animalistic, biological nature or their environment’s hostile nurturing.32

Yet, as Gandal points out, many of Crane’s characters “have managed to preserve a sense of self in the face of a tyrannical environment, against which they are thus able to fight” (10). More particularly, Crane’s writings suggest that he saw the inhabitants of these neighborhoods

32 See, for example, Garland’s review “An Ambitious French Novel and a Modest American Story” (The Arena June 1893), Hughes’ review “The Justification of Slum Stories” (Godey’s Magazine October 1895), and/or Howells’ review “New York Low Life in Fiction” (New York World July 1896).
not only as objects to be acted upon by the slum environment or by the assimilative efforts of the various reform movements but also as subjects wielding a certain degree of agency who shaped the spatial and cultural components of the Lower East Side. This composite developed as a merger between the immigrants’ cultural elements flowing through the city’s harbor, on the one hand, and the upper-class ethics and values trickling down from the city’s northerly neighborhoods, on the other. In fact, I would suggest that Crane’s two New York novels and various city sketches look at the city’s slums and their inhabitants not simply as deterministic products of their environment or as willing productions of the Progressives’ cultural assimilation process. Instead, Crane’s texts portray the slums as socially constructed spaces of resistance and their inhabitants, individuals such as Mary Johnson, Jimmie, Pete, and Nellie, as rebels who complicate, destabilize, and subvert some of the governing upper-middle class expectations of, and rigid categorical divisions between, the city’s spheres of commerce and domesticity and the roles men and women played within those spheres.

a.) Words on the Street: Reformers, Resistance, and Crane’s Characterization of the City

Many reformers in addition to Jacob Riis analyzed (what they felt to be) the many oppressive influences of the city’s slums and argued for social changes that would alleviate such oppression. For example, in late 1887, Alice Wellington Rollins, poet and author of several children’s books, wrote a sentimental reform tract titled “The New Uncle Tom’s Cabin” equating
the pre-war living conditions of slaves with those of New York City’s slum populations. To illustrate her point, Rollins comparatively proposes,

In front of Uncle Tom’s cabin, at the South, in summer, there were “strawberries and raspberries and a variety of fruits and vegetables.” So there are in front of the tenement at the North, strawberries and raspberries, oranges and bananas, pears and pineapples, lettuce and squash, beans and cherries and grapes. But they are in carts. They are the refuse, brought down into the poorer streets after they have become unsalable to better customers. They are already beginning to turn black. (108)

Like the abolitionists’ call just a generation earlier, the reformers’ call for improvement echoes loud and clear. Rollins’s reference to Stowe’s novel portrays the slum’s inhabitants as a differently enslaved and marginalized group, characterized by their limited and meager nutritional options. However, in “A Great Mistake,” one of his Tommie Johnson sketches, Crane subverts the reformist’s ethical stance seen in Rollins’s writings. Crane writes,

An Italian kept a fruit-stand on a corner where he had good aim at the people who came down from the elevated station. . . . The babe had investigated this fruit-stand. It had thrilled him as few things he had met with in his travels had thrilled him. The sweets of the world had laid there in dazzling rows, tumbled in luxurious heaps. When he gazed at this Italian seated amid such splendid treasures, his lower lip hung low and his eyes, raised to the vendor’s face, were filled with deep respect, worship, as if he saw omnipotence. (75)

Rollins’s and Crane’s descriptions convey a clear contrast, and the reason lies in the agenda of each. The reform-minded Rollins stands as an outsider looking in on the spatial environment of the Lower East Side and thus assesses the quality of its inhabitants’ conditions as lamentable.

33 Rollins, at one point, suggests, “The one feature of southern slavery, that the slave could be bought and sold, of course outweighs every other, and makes that sort of slavery the most accursed on the face of the earth. But with that single exception … that condition of the slaves of New York is a hundred times worse than that of the southern slave” (109).
34 Published in the March 1896 issue of The Philistine.
But Crane’s story is told from the perspective of the young Tommie Johnson, one of the environment’s inhabitants whom Rollins pities and, therefore, does not read as a lamentation but as a celebration or reverence of the neighborhood’s cultural practices and spatial environs. After all, Tommie is “thrilled” by the “dazzling rows” and “luxurious heaps” of food and holds a “deep respect” for what Rollins views with simple disgust and dismay.

Crane opens *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* with an image that embodies the neighborhood and its inhabitants’ pride and resistance to change and assimilation. As the novel opens, a young Jimmie Johnson “stood upon a heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley. He was throwing stones at howling urchins from Devil’s Row who were circling madly about the heap and pelting at him. His infantile countenance was livid with fury. His small body was writhing in the delivery of great, crimson oaths” (3). Some critical assessments, such as David Fitelson’s “Stephen Crane’s *Maggie* and Darwinism,” suggest that passages like this illustrate Crane’s naturalistic philosophy with its animalistic humans partaking in barbaric combat and following “the law of survival of the fittest” (184). Edwin Cady suggests that “[i]t might be arguable that the trope basic to Crane’s vision was that of the game. . . . The trope is pervasive. He begins his serious efforts at fiction with hunting and camping sketches. The opening scene - and a governing symbol for - *Maggie* shows slum children viciously playing a favorite game, ‘King of the Hill’” (380). I would take Cady’s impressions of this scene a step further to suggest that this “king of the hill” contest, although evoking notions of competition, conflict, territory, and superiority, represents anything but a game to participants such as Jimmie Johnson and his companion, Blue Billie. Although Crane represents the spatial environment and physical
conditions of the neighborhood in a simple “heap of gravel,” something dismissive or even tragic to reform-minded spectators, Jimmie demonstrates his pride by defending what he considers his: his territory, his space - for better or worse.

Perhaps one of Crane’s more blatant examples of the slum culture’s resistance to the reformers’ attempted ethical assimilations lies in Jimmie’s attending a Bowery church sermon. Religion played a primary role in the reform movement’s agenda as an element of cultural transformation. When discussing the general conditions and behaviors found within the Lower East Side, Charles Loring Brace, a nineteenth-century reformer and founder of the Children’s Aid Society - a progressive organization active in New York throughout the latter half of the century - asserts that “[r]efined influences, the checks of religion, and a fairer chance for existence without incessant struggle, will often utterly eradicate these evil habits” (114). Brace ultimately concludes that probably no remedy that man could apply would ever cure this fatal disease [i.e. poverty and its associated vices] of society. It may, however, be diminished in its ravages, and prevented in a large measure. The check to its devastations in a laboring or poor class will be the facility of marriage, the opening of new channels of female work, but, above all, the influences of education and Religion. (118-19)

The power of religion is synonymous with the goal of transformation from the Protestant middle-class point of view. However, Crane remarks on how non-transformative such powers can be when presented within a resistant social space. For instance, Jimmie clad his soul in armor by means of happening hilariously in at a mission church where a man composed his sermons of “yous” . . . Many of the sinners were impatient over the pictured depths of their degradation. They were waiting for soup-tickets. . . . “You are damned,” said the preacher. And the reader of sounds
might have seen the reply go forth from the ragged people: “Where’s our soup?”

(16)

Those present seek entirely physical rather than spiritual nourishment, characterizing the transformative power of religion as lacking if not outright impotent. Jimmie and his fellow slum populace illustrate a culturally bound ethical defiance to the accusatory insistence of the preacher’s “yous” as they re-prioritize the more eminent needs of survival over the moral immediacies of salvation.

Crane clearly suggests that as the nineteenth century came to a close, New York City’s Lower East Side became a topographical map of conflicting moralities resulting from inter-cultural interactions and reactions. Both Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and George’s Mother explore the relations of the neighborhood’s social spaces to its different populations, illustrating, at times, a counter-cultural resistance to the city’s dominant influences.

b.) Cracks Along the (Lower East) Side: Crane’s Public Spectacle of Private Domesticity

During the 1890s, individuals such as Jacob Riis and others interested in improving the conditions within New York’s Lower East Side emphasized the dual purpose of housing reform. Better housing would, in the first place, contribute to the physical safety of both the poor and the community as a whole. . . . The overcrowding, filth, and inferior sanitary facilities in the tenement obviously had an unfavorable effect upon health. . . . But the housing reformer had also considered better housing as an instrument of social control. (Lublove 66)

Indeed, a look at certain statistics explains the socially chaotic cacophony of the Lower East Side and reflects the reformers’ drive to develop increasingly rigorous methods of documenting the social noise, out of hopes of establishing order. For instance, according to Lublove, “[b]y 1890,
the city’s 81,000 dwellings included 35,000 tenements. These tenements, however, contained an
overwhelming percentage of the city’s total population of approximately 1,500,000. Those
tenements alone which housed twenty-one or more contained a total population in excess of
1,000,000” (43). With population increases, the chaos within the neighborhoods increased as
well, and the conditions of the neighborhoods’ tenements declined – ultimately adding to the
reformers’ overall characterization of the Lower East Side’s social and physical spaces as
quagmires. As Riis states in How the Other Half Lives,

> Neatness, order, cleanliness, were never dreamed of in connection with the tenant-
> house system, as it spread its localities from year to year; while reckless
> slovenliness, discontent, privation, and ignorance were left to work out their
> invariable results, until the entire premises reached the level of tenant-house
dilapidation, containing, but sheltering not, the miserable hordes that crowded
> beneath moldering, water-rotted roofs or burrowed among the rats of clammy
> cellars. (10)

Riis later anecdotally turns to a tenement building simply known as “The Ship” explaining, “[n]o
one knows why it is called ‘The Ship,’ though there is a tradition that once the river came clear
up here to Hamilton Street, and boats were moored along-side it. More likely it is because it is as
bewildering inside as a crazy old ship, with its ups and downs of ladders parading as stairs, and
its unexpected pitfalls” (36). In both instances, Riis lamentably assesses the circumstances “the
miserable hordes” endure given the disarray of their physical surroundings.

In both Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and George’s Mother, Crane artistically captures
these chaotic and declining conditions. In the latter text, George Kelcey encounters a young man,
presumably Maggie’s “beau ideal of a man” (Maggie 23), Pete. Pete asks George, “[s]ay, me
frien’, where d’ d’ Johnson birds live in heh? I can’t fin’ me feet in dis bloomin’ joint. I been
battin’ round heh fer a half-hour” (George’s Mother 111). In Maggie: A Girl of the Streets Crane explains that Jimmie “ran to the halls, shrieking like a monk in an earthquake. He floundered about in the darkness until he found the stairs. He stumbled, panic-stricken, to the next floor” (11). In both George’s encounter with Pete and Jimmie’s experience, Crane illustrates the muddled inadequacies and failing physical conditions of the tenements, which also speak to the disorder and decline witnessed in the various characters’ personal interactions. Yet, this disorder, as is assessed, stands not altogether as a detriment to the cultural development of the slum inhabitants but as a method of resistance against cultural assimilation. In her treatment of Riis and the tenement family home, Klimasmith explains,

The idea that a home should be separate guided Riis’s arguments for housing reform and anchors his theory that without the decency engendered by contained homes, the urban environment will produce a culture of deviance. Defining separateness alternately as a separation between houses and as privacy with them, Riis implies that isolation … could protect the home environment [and its inhabitants] from dangerous … influences. (91)

As Klimasmith suggests, Riis, like many of his fellow Progressive reformers, identifies the home and its elements of domesticity with privacy and separation, if not isolation. Crane seemingly rejects, or at least questions, this conception or construction of the city’s domestic space. I argue in this section that, in fact, culturally marginalized characters such as Mary and Jimmie Johnson and Pete welcome their marginality and resist the anticipated cultural conformity by questioning the stability of divisions such as the public from the private elements of the domestic sphere.

In 1891, having moved to New York City after an attenuated stay at Syracuse University, Stephen Crane received a first-hand education of how the city and especially the city’s slums
functioned as a unique sort of social space. He then worked and revised these experiences into his already-started first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (Wertheim and Sorrentino 56-63).

Early on in the novel, Crane writes,

> A dozen gruesome doorways gave up ... babies to the street and the gutter... Long streamers of garments fluttered from fire-escapes. In all unhandy places there were buckets, brooms, rags and bottles. In the street infants played or fought with other infants or sat stupidly in the way of vehicles. Formidable women with uncombed hair and disordered dress, gossiped while leaning on railings, or screamed in frantic quarrels. ... A thousand odors of cooking food came forth to the street. The building quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels. (7)

In Crane’s descriptions of the organization, or rather disorganization, of space throughout New York City’s Lower East Side, the tenement buildings, according to Margolies are anthropomorphized. ... In daylight tenements expel “loads of babies” through gruesome or “yawning open doorways.” Some structures “careen” while others have eyelike windows that look out impassively at a troubled world. ... In effect their images become a kind of kinetic energy cajoling and pushing slum dwellers into smaller and smaller confinements. (96)

Crane’s use of anthropomorphism creates a sense that the buildings, the spaces through which the characters travel and in which they work and reside, are in fact characters themselves, just as capable as human characters of interacting with and effecting change upon the world. My interest in this description of the Lower East Side’s social spaces lies in its illustration of the tenement dwellers’ capacity to destabilize the middle-class’s called-for separation of the private domestic life from the public streets of commerce/industry. Clearly, the domesticated sphere of the home is not categorically separated as its own private space but leaks out or bleeds into the public space of the city’s streets, the symbolic environment of commerce and industry. Perhaps
nowhere in the passage does this breakdown of the divisions between the public/private spheres and its effects on domestic/industrial social spaces appear more clear than in the image of the infants (associated with their on-looking mothers and, therefore, with the home) unwittingly standing in the way of and interrupting the progress of the various vehicles. Clearly, these tenement dwellers do not represent an active protest or rebellion against the middle or upper-middle class standards but instead demonstrate a sense of indifference to those standards via their passivity. Nonetheless, their decisions and actions (or inactions) suggest a resistance to falling in line with the expectations of the dominant culture.

William Dean Howells’s A Hazard of New Fortunes speaks to the city’s developing iconic status as the nineteenth century drew to a close but also, like Riis, argues for the Victorian-ized value system favoring the domesticity of the familial home and heralding the benefits associated with privacy in such social spaces. For instance, in describing the domestic life of the March family living in Boston prior to their move to New York, Howells writes,

Mrs. March was reputed to be very cultivated, and Mr. March even more so, among the simple folk around them. Their house had some good pictures, which her aunt had brought home from Europe in more affluent days, and it abounded in books on which he spent more than he ought. They had beautified it in every way and had unconsciously taken credit to themselves for it. They felt, with a glow almost of virtue, how perfectly it fitted their lives and their children’s, and they believed that somehow it expressed their characters – that it was like them. They went out very little; she remained shut up in its refinement … and he went to his business and hurried back to forget it and dream his dream of intellectual achievement in the flattering atmosphere of her sympathy. (21)

Howells writes, “There’s only one city that belongs to the whole country, and that’s New York” (10).
The Marches’ expectations that their personalities and virtues are seen in their home echo the ethical standards sung by Riis and others. Likewise, their perception that their home stands as a private refuge and site of isolated sanctuary from the troubling, all-too-public business world reinforces the suggested benefits of privacy in one’s space of domesticity. In fact, throughout the first part of Howells’s novel, the Marches obsess over the detrimental effects New York will have on such aspects of their lives and their identities overall.

In *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the Marches construct their domesticated environment in Boston to reflect their identities: their values, ethics, culture, etc. They are tied to and associated with the domestic environment; yet it does not wholly deterministically create them. Likewise, Crane’s characters, at times, illustrate a certain degree of agency in constructing, maintaining, and subverting their slum environments as a means of determining their cultural identity and resisting the assimilating influences of outside forces upon that identity. Within the tenement buildings, Crane’s characters demonstrate how resistance to the reformers’ call for privacy within the domestic space yields social as well as individual benefits. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* illustrates how a powerful sense of community, albeit an exploited one, develops from the neighborhood’s culture and, more specifically, the tenement homes’ tendency towards public spectacle. On numerous occasions, the Johnson family’s neighbors take on the role of spectators to the various quarrels taking place within their home. Looking at one of the earlier incidents, Gandal suggests that when Jimmie “finds himself harassed by the gossip of neighbors, he is not

---

36 As their move to New York City becomes more imminent, Isabel March reflects, “Mr. Fulkerson must not suppose she should ever like New York. She would not deceive him on that point. She never should like it. . . . she heaped him with questions concerning the domiciliation of the family in that city” (29-30).
worried about the fact that Maggie’s soul is in peril but, rather, as he says to his mother, that ‘dis
t’ing queers us’” (52). In such a light, the spectacle inherent in the public nature of the tenement
culture casts the Johnson family in a negative hue. Jimmie submits that the family as a whole is
“queered” or socially stigmatized because the neighbors have transformed the Johnsons’ private,
domestic business into public gossip. However, although Jimmie’s assessment of the tenements’
public nature reads negatively, the same transformative machinery works to certain characters’
advantage at other points in the story. Though Jimmie believes his family to be “queered” by the
public attention, Mary projects a conservative attitude towards female sexuality and sees an
opportunity for herself to garner sympathy from the crowd. For example, when Maggie returns
home for the last time, Jimmie and their mother, Mary, are there to greet her. However, the
incident constitutes anything but a private family reunion. Crane writes,

The loud, tremendous sneering of the mother brought the denizens of the Rum
Alley tenement to their doors. Women came in the hall-ways. Children scurried to
and fro. . . . Through the open doors curious eyes stared in at Maggie. . . .
Maggie’s mother paced to and fro, addressing the doorful of eyes, expounding
like a glib showman at a museum. Her voice rang through the building. “Dere she
stands,” she cried, wheeling suddenly and pointing with dramatic finger. “Dere
she stands! Lookut her! Ain’ she a dindy? An’ she was so good as to come home
teh her mudder, she was! Ain’ she a beaut”? Ain’ she a dindy? For Gawd’s sake!”
(61)

While this demonstration of public spectacle proves unfavorable for Maggie, it serves as a
potential benefit for the other members of the Johnson tenement. Mary’s performance embodies
the Progressive-minded ethics of the respectable mother, publicly condemning her daughter’s
wayward choices. Such a performance proves advantageous for Mary in that it curries favor and
sympathy for her from her observing neighbors. Indeed, had this same conversation taken place
in a more private setting, it would have proven just as damaging to Maggie, but its public nature stands to benefit Jimmie and Mary.

Perhaps a further example can illustrate the point. At the story’s end, the reader witnesses a similar scene. In the novel’s closing chapter, Jimmie informs Mary of Maggie’s death, and “[t]he neighbors began to gather in the hall staring in at the weeping woman as if watching the contortions of a dying dog. A dozen women entered and lamented with her. Under their busy hands the rooms took on that appalling appearance of neatness and order with which death is greeted” (73). While weeping, Mary eventually “staggered into the other room. In a moment she emerged with a pair of faded baby shoes held in the hollow of her hand. ‘I kin remember when she used to wear dem,’ cried she. The women burst anew into cries as if they had all been stabbed” (74). In both instances, Crane depicts the public spectacle, the presence of the neighbors and their role within this private familial dynamic, as useful to the surviving members of the Johnson family. By rejecting the isolating privacy associated with the domestic sphere by Riis and other reformers, the inhabitants of the Johnsons’ tenement develop a sense of community through public spectacle and spectatorship which, in turn, allows Jimmie and Mary to elevate their levels of self-esteem and, perhaps, advance their social reputation through her fellow tenement dwellers’ sympathies. Evidently, the same social power that “queers” Jimmie and Mary benefits them, and does so because of the tenement inhabitants’ defiance of the reformers’ called-for privacy, defaulting toward publicity but also adopting the reformers’ bourgeois and conservative sexual standards. Maggie, who repeatedly aspires to be a product and symbol of the upper-middle class cultural standards, hopes for the family’s affairs to remain
private. However, because Jimmie and Mary subvert those same upper-middle class standards placing privacy over publicity, Maggie instead becomes a victim. Indeed, in a turn of tragic irony, Maggie, a figure who valued the upper-middle class ideals of privacy and domesticity over the public nature of the Lower East Side, becomes a “girl of the painted cohorts of the city” (Crane 66) by the novel’s end, a figure of public spectacle and ridicule, a victim open to the scrutiny of everyone from the men with a metropolitan seal upon their faces (66) to the boy who was hurrying by with his hand buried in his overcoat, his blonde locks bobbing on his youthful temples, and a cheery smile of unconcern upon his lips (67), and finally subject to the gaze of the “huge fat man in torn and greasy garments” whose “body gently quivered and shook like that of a dead jelly fish” (68).

This same instability or blurring of the boundaries between the public and private also appears in Crane’s novel George’s Mother. In Chapter Two, Crane details,

A man with a red, mottled face put forth his head from a window and cursed violently. He flung a bottle high across two backyards at a window of the opposite tenement. It broke against the bricks of the house and the fragments fell crackling upon the stones below. The man shook his fist. . . . From a distant window, a youth with a pipe yelled some comments upon his poor aim. . . . From the window at which the man rages came the sound of an old voice, singing. . . . A little old woman [Mrs. Kelcey] was the owner of the voice. (93)

Again, Crane (re)conceives the familial home by demonstrating how the tenement’s residents have transformed this private space into a public spectacle. Such descriptions read as antagonistic responses to the calls for established divisions between the privacy of the home and the public good of industry that social reformers such as Charles Loring Brace and Jacob Riis advanced in the second half of the nineteenth century.
Throughout Maggie and George’s Mother, Crane reveals how the cultural identities of New York City’s Lower East Side redefined the constructed social space of domesticity as a means of thwarting the dominant middle-class culture’s value systems ethical standards. Crane’s texts also illustrate the neighborhood’s ability to problematize the called-for separation of the domestic from industrial spaces and explore how such breakdowns undermine the social value held by some of his reform-minded contemporaries of other dichotomies, such as gender roles.

c.) New York Domesti-City: Rethinking Gender Roles and the Home as Industrial Space

Throughout the 1890s, the streets of New York City, including the Lower East Side, were pressed to and beyond capacity, demonstrating the city’s commercial upsurge as much as its escalating population. According to Moses King, Broadway, for example, was “packed from sunrise to sunset with processions of merchandise, trucks, vehicles and cars, and the sidewalks [were] crowded with hurrying thousands, all on business intent” (142). This constant bustle and hum of commerce and industry significantly impacted the construction of gender roles and caused a redefinition of the city’s domestic space as well.

Riis, like many of his contemporaries, held the social characteristic of “industry” or the individual trait of being “industrious” in high regard. Its esteemed value manifests itself in such passages as this one from The Children of the Poor (1892): “When it comes to a choice, the tough is to be preferred to the born pauper any day. The one [i.e., the tough] has the making of something in him, unpromising as he looks; seen in a certain light he may even be considered a hopeful symptom. The other is just so much dead loss” (11). The ethos of industry holds such
value in the middle-class conception of New York that actively stealing seems preferable to passively begging.

However, one of Riis’s concerns regarding the spatial practices of New York’s Lower East Side, and more particularly the neighborhood’s domestic residences, relates to this preference for industry and his association of masculinity with this industry. Riis cautioned against destabilizing the boundary between the privacy of the familial home and the public (i.e., productive) workplace. Such a crumbling, Riis feared, could threaten the solidity of gender roles within the American family. Not only would the women become masculinized, but the men could become feminized. In a chapter titled “The Bohemians – Tenement-house Cigarmaking” from How the Other Half Lives (1890), Riis states, “Men, women and children work together seven days in the week in these cheerless tenements to make a living for the family, from the break of day till far into the night. Often the wife is the original cigarmaker from the old home, the husband having adopted her trade here as a matter of necessity, because, knowing no word of English, he could get no other work” (105). Here and throughout the chapter, Riis explicates the confusion in gender roles that results from blurring the distinct division between the home and the workplace, all of which seems a product of the marginalized population’s refusal or inability to assimilate. Riis agrees that industriousness occurs when the family’s worker, the male, physically separates himself from the woman and/or family. The commercially productive workplace, the space of industry, should be divided and removed from the family home. The tenement dwellers’ rejection and refiguring of the home from merely a domestic space to a more complicated space synthesizing domesticity with industry, Riis argues, triggered rippling effects
that questioned the stability of the gender roles associated with the domesticated home and industrial workplace.

This same gender uncertainty and its relation to the home unfold in both Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and George’s Mother. Many critics have looked closely at the Johnson family and the perversion of gender roles within it. As Katrina Irving suggests, “In late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America, the ‘grotesque female’ most often took the form of the monstrous anti-mother. . . . In all cases, the grotesque female emerged as the antithesis of that contemporary ideal, the ‘sentimental mother’” (32). Irving’s argument investigates the tensions and ideologies surrounding the immigration debate and assesses how these tensions utilized the “grotesque female” located in many American naturalistic texts to reach particular political ends. While Crane depicts the tenements solely as a space of domesticity, he does demonstrate the tenements’ cultural abilities for defying the rigid separation of gender roles called for by many reformers. However, such incidents occurring between the Johnson parents and within their domestic space, as Crane details, not only generate a re-conception of their tenement dwelling as a social space (i.e., the home as a locale of chaos and disorder) but re-conceive the gender role assigned to Mary Johnson. For instance, during a typically dysfunctional interaction in the Johnson family’s tenement, Mr. Johnson

[p]uffed imperturbably at his pipe for a time, but finally arose. . . . “You’ve been drinkin’, Mary,” he said. . . . “You’re a liar I ain’t had a drop,” she [Mary Johnson] roared in reply. They had a lurid altercation, in which they damned each other’s souls with frequence. . . . In the quarrel between husband and wife, the woman was victor. The man grabbed his hat and rushed from the room. . . . She followed to the door and thundered at him as he made his way down stairs. (10)
Mary Johnson stands not only as a grotesque and monstrous female but as a greatly masculinized female, one capable of dominating and defeating her husband with “chieftain-like strides” (9). Later in the novel, Mary “shrilly defied the universe to appear and do battle” (36). Such descriptions liken Mary Johnson to more of a Captain Ahab-like figure than to a domesticated matriarch. Further on, as Jimmie attempts to subdue his mother physically during an argument in their tenement, Mary “raised her arm and whirled her great fist at her son’s face. Jimmie dodged his head and the blow struck him in the back of the neck. . . . He threw out his left hand and writhed his fingers about her middle arm. The mother and son began to sway and struggle like gladiators” (37). Focusing on Crane’s naturalistic elements, David Fitelson highlights Mary’s Darwinistic qualities and notes,

The life of Maggie’s mother is the perpetual struggle of a middle-class jungle denizen, an animal not to be ranked among the fittest, but capable of swallowing many others before being swallowed itself. . . . She survives in part by virtue of what Darwin has helpfully called “diversity,” the ability to adopt “variations” which “from whatever cause proceeding, if they be in any degree profitable to the individuals of a species, in their infinitely complex relations to other organic beings and to their physical conditions of life, will tend to the preservation of such individuals.” (189)

Where Fitelson sees variation, or adaptation, as a method of survival, I would suggest a counter-cultural resistance to the dominant culture’s hegemony. Although Mary’s ability to, at the very least, survive rests on her diverse methods of social interaction, her characteristic acuity as a masculinized female lies in direct confrontation with the reform-minded conceptions of gender identity, attempting to make in-roads throughout the Lower East Side sub-culture. Crane’s

37 Fitelson quotes Darwin’s The Origin of Species (74).
descriptive word choice illustrating both Jimmie and Mary as “gladiators” signals an equally matched masculinity, and similar to the previous examples, Crane projects this masculinized side of Mary’s character as she stands, albeit unsteadily due to her intoxication, within the domestic space of their tenement building.

Mary appears grotesque when viewed through the lens of the era’s dominant moralistic perspective of what differentiates male from female. However, in the novel’s closing scene, suggestive of Fitelson’s “diversity,” Mary manipulates the cultural expectation of this same sentimental moralism as she plays the role of the grieving mother or weeping woman given the news of Maggie’s death. Though the Johnsons do not work out of their home or within the tenement in general, Crane’s characterization of Mary Johnson seemingly exemplifies Riis’s concern that the counter-cultural tenements throughout the Lower East Side had become a masculinized domestic space, but it does so not to echo Riis’ concern noted in the Cigar-makers examples. Rather, Crane notes Mary’s complexly dual-gender identity to suggest a method by which the inhabitants of the Lower East Side could resist the social ordering via its expectation of categorical gender roles of the dominant Victorian culture. Mary’s resistant agency lies in the complexity of her gendering; she demonstrates a masculinity when it suits her circumstances and environment (i.e., the brutal physical altercations with her husband and/or Jimmie), but she demonstrates an awareness of the reformers’ sentimentality associated with the feminine and

See Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, Chapter XIX: pgs 72-74.

Mary Johnson presents herself as both the victimized mother worthy of her neighbors’ sympathy, as noted earlier, and as the masculinized “gladiator” able to fend for herself against her husband and her son, Jimmie.
motherhood when that seems to be to her advantage (i.e. the wailing cries seeking sympathy from her neighbors at the novel’s end).

Conversely, Maggie, the feminine flower who “blossomed in a mud puddle” (Crane Maggie 20), manifests the ideal female and the idealized levels of decorum and domesticity held by Riis and others. For instance, in her purchasing and hanging the “flowered cretonne for a lambrequin” from the “slightly-careening mantel, over the stove, in the kitchen” (25), she hopes to catch Pete’s eye by attending to the domestic details. Maggie assumes the lambrequin will ornament the Johnson dwelling with a sense of femininity and domesticity, mistakenly believing such values would be held in high regard by an individual such as Pete. Unlike her mother, Maggie endeavors to play the family’s feminine and maternal role of homemaker. Maggie’s actions and her motivations for such actions stem from a desire to incorporate the conceptions of identity and environment heard within the mission sermons and read in the reformist tracts.

In terms of dual-gender identity, even Mrs. Kelcey, the title character from Crane’s novel George’s Mother, perhaps the most sentimentalized female in any of Crane’s writings next to Henry Fleming’s mother in The Red Badge of Courage (1895), displays evidence of the masculinized female even when being closely associated with the space and spatial practices of domesticity. Introducing Mrs. Kelcey, Crane writes,

> In her arms she bore pots and pans, and sometimes a broom and dust-pan. She wielded them like weapons. . . . There was the flurry of a battle in this room. Through the clouded dust or steam one could see the thin figure dealing mighty blows. . . . Her broom was continually poised, lance-wise, at dust-demons. There came clashings and clangings as she strove with her tireless foes. (93-4)
Several critics have noted the irony of Crane’s allusions to soldiery and knighthoods, to battles and warfare, in his choice of words, a narrative technique employed in the description of several male characters in both *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *The Red Badge of Courage*. Clearly, the literary exaggeration highlights the hostile and un-home-like environment and does so by suggesting the need for a masculine toughness to survive within it. As such, Crane analogizes Mrs. Kelcey to the role of the soldier and/or knight, roles traditionally associated with men. Equally important, Crane does so while locating her, as he does with Mary Johnson, within one of the many culturally destabilized Lower East Side tenements – the very same tenement building where the Johnson family resides. Mrs. Kelcey, like Mrs. Johnson, epitomizes the tenements’ ability to undermine the rigid gender roles that various reformers envisioned as the standard for Victorian ethics and principles. Crane presents Mrs. Kelcey, unlike Mary Johnson, as an image of the sentimental mother throughout the text but also illustrates the slum culture’s ability to destabilize the dominant expectations regarding gender roles and seems, at best, morally ambivalent as to whether or not this metamorphosis, this merger of gender identities, is either a good product or a bad one.

As they heralded the virtues of efficiency and industry, reformers such as Riis also spoke of sought-for regulatory separations between the familial home and the productive workplace, fearing that blurring these spatial boundaries could consequently result in blurring gender

---

40 See, for example, Hart’s “*The Red Badge of Courage* as Myth and Symbol” and Horwitz’s “*Maggie* and the Sociological Paradigm.”
41 Given that the hymn Mrs. Kelcey sings is Isaac Watts’s “Holy fortitude; or, The Christian Soldier” (1854) her role here has been compared to a crusader of sorts, another role associated predominantly with men (Murphy’s “A Woman with Weapons: The Victor in Stephen Crane’s *George’s Mother*”).
identities and roles as well. However, as Crane records in the traits and behaviors of characters such as Mary Johnson and Mrs. Kelcey, many of the inhabitants of the city’s slums blurred these gender lines by usurping the traditionally (en)gendered expectations regarding masculinity and femininity to exhibit their defiance towards or disinterest in the assimilating and hegemonic attempts of the city’s dominant upper-middle class culture. Nonetheless, as Crane’s texts further illustrate, the home was not the only battleground upon which such culture wars would be waged between the city’s upper-middle class reformers and the inhabitants of the neighborhoods that such individuals sought to reform.

d.) Sought-For Asylums and the City’s Cosmopolitan Spaces of Escape

As both Maggie and George’s Mother illustrate, many inhabitants of New York’s Lower East Side slums sought spaces of escape from the troubling social spaces and frenzied spatial practices found throughout the tenements’ domestic territories. Such spaces of escape in Crane’s New York included not only the theatrical halls and stage shows found up and down the Bowery but also some of the city’s other, more culturally venerable public spaces such as its parks, gardens, and museums. These higher-class cultural spaces of escape appear culturally produced along the same lines as the city’s more common social spaces: that is, primarily along the lines of male or female associations. However, though public and to some extent commercialized, these spaces would serve as battlegrounds between the reformers’ cultural assimilation efforts and the immigrants’ counter-cultural resistance.
Crane employs Pete in *Maggie* to demonstrate the close cultural linkage between the masculine identity and industry or commerce, particularly within the context of the city’s public spaces. For example, Crane describes the saloon where Pete works as follows:

A shining bar of counterfeit massiveness extended down the side of the room. Behind it a great mahogany-appearing sideboard reached the ceiling. Upon its shelves rested pyramids of shimmering glasses that were never disturbed. Mirrors set in the face of the sideboard multiplied them. . . . Many-hued decanters of liquor perched at regular intervals on the lower shelves. A nickel-plated cash register occupied a position in the exact center of the general effect. (43)

Crane not only identifies the saloon as a predominantly masculine space by repeatedly associating Pete with the physical environment of the bar and his work there as a bartender, but with the cash register as its altar, this shrine-like portrayal also signifies the saloon as a space focused upon commerce and business. The world of commerce and non-domestic work was largely viewed as a man’s world in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, Pete, as a result, serves to link the economic with the masculine. Such associations explain Pete’s attempts to commodify Maggie’s sexuality when he asks her to give him “a kiss for takin’ yeh teh deh show” after paying for the evening’s drinks and entertainment (28-30). Pete’s exchanging money for products and services such as drinks, food, and entertainment in the “great green-hued hall” (26) extends beyond the bar and, in his mind, transforms Maggie into an objectified product, bought and paid for. Pete, with his economically energized masculine mindset, feels emasculated and thinks himself a “duffer” (30) once Maggie, from Pete’s perspective, refuses the exchange agreement.
Many of the period’s Victorian and reform-minded activists and organizations inadvertently supported and encouraged ideologies such as Pete’s by attempting to disseminate traditional gender role mentalities: that males were business-minded while females were domestically-modeled; that males possessed agency as active, industrious subjects while females were passive objects of the males’ gaze. Robert Dowling explains, “[t]he mores imposed on Victorian women in the streets of New York. . . . were swiftly transferred to the Bowery theater” (63). Crane’s portrayal of the stage-show illustrates how such reformist-oriented ideologies leached into many of the stages’ narratives and attempted to indoctrinate many audience members of the Bowery theatres. Crane writes,

Evenings during the week he [Pete] took her to see plays in which the brain-clutching heroine was rescued from the palatial home of her guardian, who is cruelly after her bonds. . . . The loud gallery was overwhelmingly with the unfortunate and the oppressed. . . . In the hero’s erratic march from poverty in the first act, to wealth and triumph in the final one … he was assisted by the gallery, which applauded his generous and noble sentiments. (27)

Evident in Crane’s general summation, the narrative details prove unimportant except to the point that the “brain-clutching heroine was rescued” by “the unfortunate and … oppressed … struggling hero” during his “erratic march from poverty … to wealth” (27). Crane’s depiction of the stage drama highlights the reform culture’s expected gender roles and such roles’ associations regarding activity and passivity and also echoes the call for assimilation by underscoring the dominant themes of “transformation” or “metamorphosis” found in the period’s Victorian-ized “slum fiction” and morality plays (Gandal 39-41). The effect is clear because, “[t]o Maggie and the rest of the audience this was transcendental realism” (27), and Maggie in
particular believes that the “arrogance and granite-heartedness of the magnate of the play was very accurately drawn” (27).

But this sense of supposed realism contrasts the escapist world of the neighborhood’s theatres and their stage-plays with the everyday world of the workplace. After all, prior to the play’s beginning, Maggie ruminates on her experience at the shirt factory:

The air in the collar and cuff establishment strangled her. She knew she was gradually and surely shriveling in the hot, stuffy room. . . . She wondered as she regarded some of the grizzled women in the room, mere mechanical contrivances sewing seams and grinding out, with heads bended over their work. . . . She felt she would love to see somebody entangle their fingers in the oily beard of the fat foreigner who owned the establishment. He was a detestable creature. . . . His pocket-book deprived them of the power of retort. (25-26)

Maggie’s reflections on her job in the factory focus largely on the almost mechanistic submissiveness and absence of agency. In early stages of the nineteenth century, many Americans believed that “industrial technology and the factory system would serve as historic instruments of republican values, diffusing civic virtue and enlightenment along with material wealth. Factories, railroads, and telegraph wires seemed the very engines of a democratic future” (Trachtenberg 38). However, in the twilight of the nineteenth century following the Civil War, factory life, like the poverty of the characters on stage, came to be seen as an obstacle to either conquer or avoid altogether. Many reform tracts presented images synonymous with those of the Bowery stage-show. Helen Campbell, for example, writes,

As one woman selects, well pleased, garment after garment, daintily tucked and trimmed and finished beyond any capacity of ordinary home sewing, marveling a little that a few dollars can give such lavish return, there arises, from narrow attic and dark, foul basement, and crowded factory, the cry of the women whose life-blood is on these garments. Through burning, scorching days of summer; through
marrow-piercing cold of winter, in hunger and rags, with white-faced children at
their knees, crying for more bread, or, silent from long weakness, looking with
blank eyes at the flying needle, these women toil on, twelve, fourteen, sixteen
hours even, before the fixed task is done. (31)

Though in Crane’s characterization, Maggie’s oppressor is male and the source of oppression
and cruelty in Campbell’s description seems a female- (customer) to-female (worker) relation,
the sentiments of the heroine’s plight in the theatrical stage-show echo Campbell’s description of
the lamentable conditions of the city’s factory floors and the female employees who populate
them daily.

Nevertheless, Maggie also reveals how some inhabitants of this marginalized culture
gained, or attempted to gain, a certain agency within such social spaces as the stage-shows. By
posing challenges to the dominant culture’s idealized gender roles, Maggie and her rival for
Pete’s affections, Nellie, demonstrate the neighborhood’s ability to subvert ideologies thrust
upon them through the reformers’ assimilation agenda. Admittedly, Nellie turns out more
successful by the narrative’s end. According to Kathy Peiss, many young women of the late
nineteenth and early twentieth century, women such as Maggie and her working-class kin,
learned the “need to negotiate sexual encounters … to participate in commercial amusements”
(112). Such an education was seemingly offered at every turn of the young woman’s life.
Maggie’s brother, Jimmie, for example, “remarked to her: ‘Mag, I’ll tell yeh dis! See? Yeh’ve
edder got teh go teh hell or go teh work!’” (20).42 This same era gave birth to the “charity girl”
who, as Nancy Bristow states, “used sexual relations as barter in the heterosocial world of

42 Thomas Gullason’s footnote in the Norton edition of Maggie: A Girl of the Streets points out that “go teh hell”
was a cultural euphemism for becoming a prostitute (16).
commercial amusements in the late nineteenth century. Unable to afford to entertain themselves, these young women exchanged sexual favors for gifts and evenings out” (117). Though she does not turn to outright prostitution until near the novel’s end, Maggie earlier on, as Crane explains, “began to note, with more interest, the well-dressed women she met on the avenues. She envied elegance and soft palms. . . . She speculated how long her youth would endure. She began to see the bloom upon her cheek as valuable” (25). In other words, Maggie begins to see that her gender lends her a measure of power or value when viewed in a certain light, but that light is not from the industrial factory but the streets of the Bowery district. Maggie develops an understanding between her sexuality and material wealth, as Crane writes, “[Maggie] hurried forward through the crowd as if intent upon reaching a distant home, bending forward in her handsome cloak daintily lifting her skirts and picking for her well-shod feet the dryer spots upon the pavements” (66). Maggie attempts to emulate the “well-dressed women” she admires earlier, complete with her “handsome cloak” and “well-shod feet” (66).

But Maggie’s agency is short-lived due to her clinging to the “transcendental realism” she views not in the audience members throughout the hall, members of her own marginalized culture, but amongst the players on its stage, representatives of a reform-oriented idealism. Maggie searches in vain throughout the Bowery for a man to play the hero, willing and able to save the heroine at least economically. Maggie’s search draws to an end as “[t]he varied sounds of life made joyous by distance and seeming unapproachable-ness, came faintly and died away to
a silence” (68). Whether she is murdered or takes her own life seems irrelevant, but the consequences of Maggie’s difficulty in separating the transformatively fictional events set on stage from her own realities are significant. On one hand, as Dowling points out, “[h]ad Crane’s heroine been the more G’hal-like Nell, the street-smart, culturally marginal friend of Pete’s, no one would have read her death as tragic; in fact, few middle-class outsiders would have picked up the story at all” (65). To individuals looking at Crane’s characters from the perspective of the dominant middle-class morality, the tragedy of Maggie’s end rests in her falling victim to “the vile society she keeps, the literature she reads, the business she has chosen or fallen into” (Brace 275). In actuality, the tragedy unfolds in two directions. Maggie becomes a victim of the idealized reformist mythologies she absorbs through the stage dramas as much as she is a victim to the harsh realities and even harsher individuals awaiting her up and down the sidewalks of the Bowery.

In contrast, Nellie moves through the male-dominated halls without witnessing and absorbing the moral lessons of the staged melodramas. As such, she proves resistant to the city’s governing and dominant culture and its assimilation attempts. Nellie only appears twice in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, and in each instance she demonstrates her rebellion against the passive heroine mentality illustrated in the reform-oriented stage narrative and internalized to a large extent by Maggie. Instead, Nellie, like Bristow’s “charity girl,” exhibits a business-minded perspective in her dealings with her male companions, one that provides her with a certain degree of success in gaining agency – something that would be denied to her as well as to

---

43 Critics’ interpretations of if and/or how Maggie meets her death in this chapter (chapter XVII) differ especially in light of the emendations Crane made between the 1893 and 1896 editions of Maggie: A Girl of the Streets.
Maggie by the reformist middle-class morality and its traditional gendered associations. For instance, when the reader first meets Nellie, Pete asks her, “When did yeh git back? How did dat Buff’lo bus’ness turn out?” (55). Nellie replies, “he didn’t have as many stamps as he tried to make out, so I shook him, that’s all” (55). Nellie’s response to Pete explaining that she has recently returned to the city after taking financial advantage of a male companion who took her to Buffalo is matter-of-fact, unemotional, and non-sentimental. Later, when out with an inebriated Pete who has passed out and fallen to the floor with his money on the table, Nellie “stayed behind, taking up the bills and stuffing them into a deep, irregularly-shaped pocket. . . . She laughed. ‘What a damn fool,’ she said, and went” (72). Again, Nellie’s thoughts and actions towards her male companions are business-like, quite contrary to those of the heroine from the staged narrative. Nellie’s actions not only refute passivity but suggest a sophisticated agency, one that subverts the dominant culture’s ideals of gender identity. Unlike Mary Johnson’s masculinized identity, Nellie is described as a “woman of brilliance and audacity” while her actions, in fact, suggest a masculinizing of her feminine identity. Though both Nellie and Maggie are considered physically beautiful,^44^ Nellie shares more in common with Pete than with Maggie. After all, as do Pete and many men like him, Nellie gains her agency and authority over others by maintaining a self-sufficient demeanor and economically savvy mentality.

On the flip side of the gendered coin, Pete questions himself and, more importantly, his status as an alpha-male in social spaces where he cannot associate with commerce or finance. As

^44^ Crane describes Maggie early in the text as “a rare and wonderful production of a tenement district, a pretty girl,” (20) and later, on the night that she meets Nellie, Nellie’s date tells Maggie, “[y]ou ain’t such bad lookin’ girl, you know. Not half bad. Can’t come up to Nell, though. . . . You look damn bad longsider her” (59).
Maggie walks through the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “vaulted rooms, Pete occupied himself in returning stony stare for stony stare, the appalling scrutiny of the watch-dogs of the treasures. Occasionally he remarks in loud tones: ‘Dat jay has got glass eyes,’ and sentences of the sort” (33). Dowling suggests that Pete’s courting of Maggie takes them through a number of middle-class amusements that accommodated increasingly standardized tastes. These include music halls, dance halls, theaters, dime museum freak shows, the Central Park Menagerie, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pete finds the discomfiture of outsider status at the Met, which though open to the public, brings him sidelong glares from the security staff. (61)

Indeed, in 1891 the museum’s trustees reported that some “visitors took the liberty of handling every object within reach; some went to the length of marring, scratching, and breaking articles unprotected by glass; a few proved to be pickpockets, and others brought with them peculiar habits which were repulsive and unclean” (Metropolitan Museum of Art 21st Annual Report 500-501). Although Pete and Maggie do attend each of the social activities Dowling mentions, only while at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (i.e., the Met) does Crane take the time to illustrate Pete’s angst. His discomfort lies not only in the fact that he is an outsider of the Met’s middle-class culture and standards but also in the fact that he cannot translate the sights at the Met in dollars and cents. Rather, Crane points out that in an attempt to make such social spaces and institutions more available to the poorer public and, by doing so, assimilate them into the cultural standards of the city’s dominant upper middle-class, the trustees of the museum may have inadvertently triggered Pete’s defense mechanisms. Pete feels insecure and unsure of himself, and his behavior suggests that perhaps he believes that his masculinity as much as his
morality is under the “appalling scrutiny of the watch-dogs.” His trading “stony stare for stony stare” with the museum’s security guards serve to prove his masculine toughness because he could not relate to the museum in economic terms. In his excellent essay on Maggie, Howard Horwitz summarizes the museum’s genesis and evolution as well as its role in the purposes of the reform movement of the 1890s:

Founded in 1870 by the New York Urban League Club, the museum, William Cullen Bryant reported to the club, would cultivate in citizens “the perception of order, symmetry, [and] proportion of parts” . . . “The taste of the poor” would in particular be uplifted. . . . But if for Joseph Chaote, speaking at the 1880 ceremony to open the museum’s permanent building in Central Park, the museum would “humanize” and “refine” a “laborious people”. . . . those targeted for ennobling were so distrusted that only in 1891, after twenty years of rancorous public debate, did the museum open on Sundays – meaning open itself to the laboring classes. (621)

City officials and various reform-minded organizations targeted the museum as a space of escape where the class of “laborious people” could find culture and refinement and find it more easily should any admission fees get waived. Indeed, according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 21st Annual Report of the Trustees of the Association (1891), “It was the desire of the City authorities that the Museum should be opened free to the public two evenings in the week, and for that purpose they proposed to increase the annual payment of the City to the Museum by $10,000” (475). The following year, the Trustees went further and voted “[t]o open the Museum, until further orders, on Sunday afternoons from one o’clock till half an hour before sunset” (500) and found that in attendance, “[t]he laboring classes are well represented, and young people appear in greater proportion on Sunday than on any other day of the week” (501). By waiving entry fees, the Met chose not to serve as a money-making institution for the city; in fact, the city
made great financial sacrifices to extend the museum’s days and hours – as I will touch upon. But many reform-minded and influential people hoped that exposure to the museum’s cultural articles and aesthetic refinement would help to assimilate “the laboring classes” into the upper-middle class fold.

Traditional slum fictions of the era, such as Edward Townsend’s *A Daughter of the Tenements* (1895), often associate cultural spaces such as the Met with the refinement and softness that many reformers hoped would alleviate the coarse and rough conditions of the working class individuals’ home lives. When Tom Lyon, a Mulberry Bend youth, “took beautiful fourteen-year old Carminella … to the Museum in Central Park on free days, he would tell her what he knew of the great masters whose works they saw” (47-48). Townsend continues, “[i]n their youthful excursions together to the city art galleries and parks, where their pleasure was on a plane far above the hard material conditions of their home surroundings, Carminella grew to mentally group Tom with the other gentler people she had known – the women who came to teach in the mission schools where her own character had been moulded [sic]” (48). Unlike Crane, Townsend sentimentally characterizes Tom and Carminella’s experiences within these social spaces as propagandized reflections of the Victorian upper-middle class expectations, that the inhabitants of areas like Mulberry Bend and other parts of the Lower East Side might be assimilated into the city’s dominant cultural hegemony.

In relation to the economically minded male, Horwitz argues that Pete’s thoughts and behaviors suggest a Crane-ian satire highlighting the failure of what Horwitz terms the “sociological paradigm” - the reformers’ hopes that the museum’s surroundings would produce a
cultured citizenry, even among the lower classes. I suggest that the failure also runs along an economic or financial track. To be more exact, the very absence of economics associated with the Met muddles Pete’s thoughts and affects his behavior. The Met cannot assimilate the likes of Pete because he cannot see an economic value in its culture; the economic culture of the Lower East Side does not translate to that of the Metropolitan Museum. Given this, Pete’s inability to translate his experiences within such a space into industrial terms using capitalistic dollars and cents (as well as sense) explains further his thoughts and behaviors in the museum. Unlike the bar where he works as a bartender and the beer halls where he trades currency for entertainment and, therefore, gains the admiration of his female companion, the museum holds no exchange value for Pete. A reformer’s outside perspective might criticize Pete for his uncouth behavior but herald the museum’s policy changes, which allowed individuals such as Pete easier access to the museum’s social spaces as a method for better disseminating the city’s dominant cultural standards. However, Crane’s criticism falls upon both Pete and the reform-minded policy changes. First, Pete indeed reads as a satirical target of Crane’s social criticism. When compared to the more dramatic forms of resistance illustrated in the character developments of Jimmie and Mary Johnson, Crane characterizes Pete and his behavior within the museum as more of a darkly comedic representation of the cultural resistance existing amongst the working-class populations of the Lower East Side. Second, Crane questions the benevolence of the museum’s reform-oriented policy changes regarding admission and fees and their effects. After all, finding himself in a space he considers void of economic productivity, and given that Pete associates economic
earnings to the masculine gender, Pete’s confident footing becomes unstable at best and his identity a bit emasculated.

In fact, policy decisions leaning towards social reform and away from financial profit caused the museum administration to question the effectiveness of such policy changes. Near the end of the section dedicated to the Sunday policy, the Museum’s 22nd Annual Report of the Trustees of the Association (1892) states that “[a] growing public interest in the Museum is demonstrated by a steady increase in the number of visitors. Nearly two hundred thousand persons have visited the Museum on Sunday afternoons during the seven months it has been open on that day, and the total day and evening visitors for the year number 901,203” (504). But it also cautioned that “[w]hile Sunday opening meets with popular approval, the step remains only an experiment. It has put burdens on the finances of the Museum which they are unable to bear” (510). The Trustees pointed out that even though “eighty thousand persons petitioned for the Sunday opening” and such an action was “represented by the newspapers as a universal demand” (501), the Met economically benefitted minimally in terms of the new policy translating into revenue-making membership subscriptions. As a result, the report concludes, “unless permanent provisions [emphasis in original] can be made for the expense the Museum will have to be closed on Sunday” (501). Ironically, perhaps a move back towards costly (to the lower-classes) admission fees and a sense of exclusivity would attract Pete and his peers much more, thus assimilating them into the capitalist, middle-class ethic endorsed by many reformers of the period.
Whether considered from an economic, moral, psychological, or behavioral stance, nineteenth-century New York City’s socially public spaces, its parks and museums, its halls and theatres, proved as much a contested sphere of cultural assimilation versus cultural confrontation as the private, domesticated home of the Lower East Side tenements. Crane comprehended and characterized the complexity of such spaces, and in texts such as Maggie and George’s Mother, he traced the ebb-and-flow influence such spaces could have on figures such as Maggie, Mary and Jimmie Johnson, Pete, Nellie, and George Kelcey, figures who moved throughout the city to find themselves pushed and pulled by the conflicting currents of oppositional cultural agendas. These figures gave into, strove to resist, or attempted to amalgamate such agendas in spaces including the home, the street, the theatre, and the museums.

e.) The Industrious Ethos of Alcohol: The Homosocial Spaces of a Spirit-ed City

Similar to the more public spaces of the city’s parks and museums, saloons served both as a space of escape from the family home and as a site of resistance to disruptive influences of the middle-class reform-minded ethic. The city’s saloons, though also possessing an element of escapism, appear as a much different type of social space in Crane’s New York novels when compared to his characterization and treatment of the city’s theatres, music halls, and museums. The city’s saloons for Crane, according to Pizer, “are entirely masculine settings and their ethos is that of the masculine codes of camaraderie and the gentleman” (“From Home to the World” 279). However, my analysis takes this concept a step further. If, as both Douglas and Gandal
point out, the general trend of the nineteenth-century upper-middle class culture revealed a tendency towards the feminization of popular American culture, then the saloon, above all other social spaces throughout the Lower East Side, served as men’s sanctuary and site of resistance, a place to preserve their sense of masculinity, in the face of the Met and other higher cultured social spaces, and thereby frustrate the dominant culture’s assimilative attempts. Although individuals such as Charles Loring Brace and later Jacob Riis viewed the city’s many drinking establishments as breeding grounds for sin, vice, and criminality and prized deterministic environments such as the familial home over the social saloon, Crane’s New York narratives, in turn, complicated the issue of just how positively or negatively such social spaces should be perceived.

Writers characterizing New York’s Lower East Side culture often highlight the ubiquitous nature of alcohol and drinking establishments. Brander Matthews’s short story “In Search of Local Color” from Vignettes of Manhattan (1894) traces the pedestrian travels or walking tour of two educated and upper-middle class men, De Ruyter and Suydam, as they make their way along the Bowery and Mulberry Bend as well as nearby alleyways and side-streets. At one point, Matthews points out, “[w]henever they came to a crossing, De Ruyter remarked that three of the corners always, and four of them sometimes, were saloons. The broad gilt signs over

\[45\] See Ann Douglas’s The Feminization of American Culture (1977) and Keith Gandal’s introduction to The Virtues of the Vicious (1997). Gandal suggests that “the outpouring of interest in the slums in the 1890s was also part of a new and diverse quest for intense experience in response to a perceived ‘feminization’ and ‘overcivilization’ of American life” (10).

\[46\] Riis begins Chapter 18 (“The Reign of Rum”) of How the Other Half Lives with, “[w]here God builds a church the devil builds next door – a saloon, is an old saying that has lost its point in New York. Either the Devil was on the ground first, or he has been doing a good deal more in the way of building” (159).
the open doors of these bar-rooms bore names either German or Irish, until they came to a corner where one of the saloons called itself the Caffe Cristoforo Colombo” (71). Similarly, Riis points out, “[i]t is not yet two years since the Excise Board made the rule that no three corners of any street-crossing, not already so occupied, should thenceforward be licensed for rum-selling. And the tardy prohibition was intended for the tenement districts. Nowhere else is there need for it” (159). Typifying the frequency of alcoholic consumption and the severity of problems it caused, Riis indicates that “[t]he alcoholic cells in Bellevue Hospital are a way-station for a goodly share of them [prisoners arrested for alcohol-related violations] on their journeys back and forth across the East River. Last year they held altogether 3,694 prisoners, considerably more than one-fourth of the whole number of 13,813 patients that went through the hospital gates” (195). Clearly, those looking to transform the slums’ social spaces and overall cultural make-up disparaged the integral part alcohol played in configuring their production.

Furthermore, various reform-minded writers of the late 1880s and early 1890s investigated and commented upon the tensions existing throughout the city’s slums resulting from alcohol’s omnipresence and, more specifically, the conflicting cultural definitions of the masculine gender associated with drinking. Riis, for instance, writes, “The dramshop yawns at every step, the poor man’s club, his forum and his haven of rest when weary and disgusted with the crowding, the quarrelling [sic], and the wretchedness at home” (159). Likewise, preceding Riis’s How the Other Half Lives, George Frederic Parsons, a British-born journalist who moved to New York City in 1883, published “The Saloon in Society” in 1887 as a temperance tract for the Atlantic Monthly. In it, Parsons suggests, “[i]t has been alleged by some philanthropists and
penalogists that poverty is in many instances the cause of drinking, and not the effect; that men
drink to forget their sorrows and remember their misery no more” (176). Parsons continues with,
“[t]he poor man who, being husband and father, frequents the saloon runs the risk of betraying
his most sacred trusts. His home may be uncomfortable, his meals may be unsavory, but the
saloon cannot improve his surroundings” (176) and concludes that “[t]he lowering influences of
the saloon react directly and with energy upon the poorest classes” (179). Parsons’s comments
speak to the nineteenth-century reformers’ mindset correlating the poor man’s forgetting his
domestic and familial duties, and therefore overlooking the responsibilities associated with his
gender – husbandry and/or fatherhood, as a result and in favor of the escapist qualities of the
saloon and its promise of amnesia-inducing alcohol. To be sure, the saloon does not emascu-
or feminize the male patrons, but to Parsons’s thinking, it un-domesticates them – they are men
but not husbands or fathers any longer.

In terms of the social stigma of saloons, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, unlike George’s
Mother, at first reads as a traditional temperance tract illustrating the same damaging physical,
familial, and societal effects about which reformers such as Parsons and Riis warned their
readers about. For instance, Crane writes,

A group of urchins were intent upon the side door of a saloon. Expectancy
gleamed from their eyes. . . . The saloon door opened with a crash, and the figure
of a woman appeared upon the threshold. Her gray hair fell in knotted masses
about her shoulders. Her face was crimsoned and wet with perspiration. Her eyes
had a rolling glare. . . . In the frame of a gruesome doorway she stood for a
moment cursing them. Her hair straggled, giving her crimson features a look of
insanity. Her great fists quivered as she shook them madly in the air. (35-36)
Time and again, Mary Johnson’s violent and vulgar behavior in both public and private spaces appears as a direct correlation to her recurrent and excessive alcoholic consumption. However, Mary appears monstrous not only because of her excessive alcohol consumption. Unlike Maggie, Nellie, and the other young women by whom youth was held as “valuable” (31) as a sexual commodity to the male counterparts, Mary enters the bar, a male-dominated sphere, and is therefore outcast once the little money she possesses is spent.

In the triangular relationship between men, the home, and the saloon addressed by certain reformers, her husband, Mr. Johnson, fulfills the role of the alcoholic and troubled father-figure found in traditional temperance literature. For example, after agreeing to purchase beer for the old woman living a floor below the Johnsons in exchange for a place to sleep for the night, Jimmie encounters his father at the saloon. Crane explains, “The father wrenched the pail from the urchin. He grasped it in both hands and lifted it to his mouth. . . . There was a tremendous gulping movement and the beer was gone. . . . He hit his son on the head with the empty pail. . . . ‘Look at deh dirt what yeh done me,’ he [Jimmie] yelled. ‘Deh ol’ woman ‘ill be raisin’ hell’” (13). Crane then summarizes Mr. Johnson’s evening prior to his conflict with Jimmie as: “During the evening he had been standing against a bar drinking whiskies and declaring to all comers, confidentially: ‘My home reg’lar livin’hell! Damndes’ place! Reg’lar hell! Why do I come an’ drin’ whisk’ here thish way? ‘Cause home reg’lar livin’ hell!” (13). Such instances seemingly
suggest that Crane shared much of the angst held by social reformers and Progressive organizations.\textsuperscript{47}

Crane’s later New York writings, particularly \textit{George’s Mother}, demonstrate a complexity to the cultural concept and social purpose of the saloon that temperance workers would be wary to identify. \textit{George’s Mother} at first appears to follow a very similar trajectory as \textit{Maggie: A Girl of the Streets} in terms of its treatment of alcohol’s ubiquitous presence throughout and powerful influence on the Bowery. According to Zlotnick, “George, returning home from work, meets up with an old friend [Jones] who is now an alcoholic. The two stop at a bar, and this marks the beginning of George’s own drinking, which eventually leads to his ruination” (51). Although Zlotnick’s account of the plot is largely accurate, other critics suggest that George’s primary obsession or preoccupation is not alcohol but something more abstract and existential. Thomas Gullason explains, “George Kelcey’s dreams … evolve in the New York slums. Attracted to Bowery outcasts, he sees them as the ‘superior society he always wanted to join’” (62). Gullason concludes that George “cannot see that Bleecker and his friends are weaklings, who blame poverty on a ‘cruel’ social order” (62). Along these same lines, Dowling suggests that Kelcey’s friendship with Jones, Bleecker, and the others, as well as his meeting these men repeatedly in saloons to consume alcohol, constitutes part of “Kelcey’s ‘vast curiosity’ about the city” (73) and serves as Kelcey’s means of gaining “a wholly ‘vast’ knowledge of the city and the cosmopolitan, distinctly modern condition it represents” (70) by “becoming an

\textsuperscript{47} The National Temperance Society (1865), The Prohibition Party (1869), and The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (1874) were amongst the more popular alcohol-reform organizations of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the last of which Crane’s mother, Mary Helen Peck Crane, belonged to (see Benfrey’s \textit{The Double Life of Stephen Crane: A Biography}, 7).
insider in ‘this city’ and thereby understanding the modern complexities it stands for” (70). Thus, George’s Mother, overall, seems “somewhat more ambiguous morally and ideologically than its prequel [Maggie: A Girl of the Streets]” (75).

Along a similar but less existential track than Dowling’s, I would suggest that throughout George’s Mother, Crane characterizes the saloon as a space for fraternal bonding, a union or community-building place, as much as one of domestic detachment. After a chance meeting between the novel’s protagonist, George Kelcey, and a former acquaintance from his hometown of Handyville, the two men retire to a nearby saloon to reminisce. After drinks are ordered and consumed, Jones asks, “Mother’s livin’, of course? I thought she was. . . . Well, you’re th’ last of her boys. Was five of yeh onct, wasn’t there? I knew four m’self. . . . An’ all gone but you, hey?” (91-92). George replies, “‘Yes. . . . I’m th’on’y one left!’ There was an accent of discomfort in his voice” (92). But before the men part ways, Jones invites Kelcey back to the saloon to meet “a great crowd” later that evening (92). Clearly, with the death of not only his father but also his brothers and the responsibilities set upon his shoulders as the only surviving male family member to care for his mother, Kelcey’s sense of masculinity is set adrift by feelings of isolation and loneliness. His reunion with Jones over drinks at the saloon forms the beginnings of an anchor to Kelcey’s masculinity and a bolstering of his self-esteem. To Kelcey, against his mother’s temperance ideology, the saloon plays a positive role in his sense of self and his manhood throughout the opening chapters. In fact, George experiences such a welcoming embrace from Jones’s invitation and so clearly associates it with the fraternal social space of the saloon that the establishment itself becomes personified as “the little smiling saloon” (99).
The masculine-oriented sense of community that Kelcey feels a part of most clearly presents itself as he, Jones, Bleecker, and others gather at a neighborhood saloon and “began to fraternize in jovial fashion” (101). Crane writes,

They had come away from a grinding world filled with men who were harsh. When one of them chose to divulge some place where the world had pierced him, there was a chorus of violent sympathy. They rejoiced at their temporary isolation and safety. . . . They were ready to throttle any invader of their island. They elbowed each other in rivalry as to who should take upon himself the brunt of an encounter. (101)

Such passages display the group’s sense of equality and community and its sometimes violent, yet protective, stance towards their own ideals of the masculine. This instance demonstrates that (to Kelcey) the men are not, or at the very least are more than, drinking partners, and the saloon becomes more than a drinking establishment – the males’ anti-home. These establishments transform into agents of masculine preservation against the feminizing influences of Mrs. Kelcey’s domesticating, church-going, or temperance-oriented beliefs. For these men, the saloon and its culture of alcohol become their own homosocial social space.

The safe haven for masculinity that New York’s saloon culture provided against the pervading feminization inherent in the upper-middle class values becomes clear and takes on ominous tones as Kelcey and his friends take their saloon-culture out of the saloon to a party at “Bleecker’s lodging” (113). Crane’s description of the apartment’s physical space holds obvious clues to the gathering of men’s anti-feminine and anti-domestic sentiments. In describing Bleecker’s place, Crane writes, “Each part of the woodwork was scratched and rubbed by the contact of innumerable persons. In one wall there was a long slit with chipped edges, celebrating
the time when a man had thrown a hatchet at his wife. . . . Old Bleecker felt that he had quite respectable and high-class apartments. He was glad to invite his friends” (113). The hatchet-created gash in Bleecker’s wall, a symbol created out of a violent anti-feminine action, serves as an emblematic reminder to the men to resist the culturally feminine and instead buttress their masculine identities as individuals by coming together as a group (i.e., a strength-through-solidarity mentality).

In fact, Kelcey’s eventual and ultimate exiling from this masculine community comes not so much because he indulges in alcohol, as a traditional temperance piece would suggest, but because he violates the group’s anti-feminine principles. After an evening of excessive drinking and reflecting on his unrequited love for his neighboring tenant, Maggie Johnson, Kelcey bursts out with, “I wan’ shing song er te’ story! G’l’m’n, I lovsh girl live down my street” (119). After Jones and the other men attempt to overrule Kelcey verbally and physically, he replies, “G’l’m’n, I lovsh girl! I ain’ drunker’n yeh all are! She –” (119). Kelcey’s determination to bring Maggie into the men’s presence, even just conversationally, particularly in the light of his sentimental and romanticized feelings for her, brings about his banishment from the masculine-protective kinship. Crane explains, “He felt them hurl him to a corner of the room and pile chairs and tables upon him until he was buried beneath a stupendous mountain. Far above, as up a mine’s shaft, there were voices, lights, and vague figures. He was not hurt physically, but his feelings were unutterably injured. He … had been thrust fiendishly from the party” (119-120). Kelcey, feeling ostracized from the group of men, notes that “something had been reversed” after unsuccessfully querying Bleecker, Jones, and O’Connor about a possible loan. Dowling makes
note that “Kelcey … ‘was below them in social position’” (74), which at first suggests a
difference in their socio-economic status. However, the men do not rebuff Kelcey due to their
higher social status but because of his professed affection for Maggie. In fact, the men counter
Kelcey’s request with their own financial inadequacies. For instance, Bleecker “did not see how
he could loan money at that time” (139) while O’Connor “recited at length some bewildering
financial troubles of his own” (139). Kelcey conveys, in other words, a sentimentality associated
with uptown and reformist cultural standards that violated the masculine codes of the Bowery
saloons. Case in point: to prove his masculinity to himself, to redeem himself, and to regain
some of his self-esteem, Kelcey allows himself to be goaded into a fist fight with Blue Billie
immediately after leaving the men and before receiving the news of his mother’s impending
death (140-3). Kelcey’s not being at his mother’s side at the time of her death reminds him how
far removed he has become from the domestic sphere.

At times, Crane sees the Lower East Side saloon culture as providing a male-centered
refuge from the encroaching reformist culture, but Crane’s characterization of Kelcey and his
ultimate downfall in George’s Mother, like that of the Johnson family in Maggie: A Girl of the
Streets, speaks to Crane’s wrestling with the oftentimes conflicting cultural presences throughout
the slums. The social spaces of the city’s Lower East Side, consisting of its problematic
tenements and public streets, its entertaining museums and escapist saloons, proliferated with
both sound and unsound elements stemming from the neighborhood’s insider-immigrant culture
and the outsider-reformer culture. Crane’s writings illustrate the perils faced by figures like

---

48 Blue Billie, in Chapter XI of Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, assists Jimmie in his fight with Pete over Pete’s
ruining Maggie's and the Johnson family’s reputation.
George Kelcey and Maggie Johnson, who must evaluate such elements as either helpful or hazardous to their individual and cultural identities.

**Closing the Book on Crane**

The economic, technological, and, most importantly, cultural changes New York City witnessed throughout the 1800s redefined the city as a whole. Although nineteenth-century New York City, as Dowling suggests, “unlike many European cities … promoted itself as a city free from rigid economic class distinctions” (77), it did make clearly cut distinctions between the Victorian-styled cultural identities preferred by the governing classes and the identities of the more marginalized populations crowding the city’s culturally marginalized social spaces. In response to such changes and cultural clashes, Stephen Crane created narratives that captured some of the complexities associated with the city’s shifting cultural landscape.

Crane’s New York texts form a significant shift in representing the cultural “other-ness” found throughout the Lower East Side’s social spaces. Not only do his narratives depict the slum’s inhabitants as victims of urban poverty and the repulsive environments produced from that poverty (the view held by such reformers as Campbell, Rollins, Brace, and Riis), but they reflect on the reform movement and its methods of transformative assimilation as well. As such, Crane’s characters, though in part deterministic products of their environment, demonstrate certain degrees of agency by attempting not only to fight off poverty but also to resist the culturally hegemonic and coercive influences of the reform movement. Challenges to such influences appear within the city’s tenement homes (such as those of the Johnson and Kelcey families), in its genteel parks and enriching museums, as well as in its populist music halls,
theatres, and saloons. Such spaces, as Crane’s texts and characters note, witnessed these cultural conflicts unfolding not just along socio-economic lines, widening and narrowing the gaps between the classes, but also along gender lines, (re)constructing and (re)defining masculine as well as feminine roles.

In writing about Michel Foucault and his texts, James Faubion reminds us that “[a]wakening ourselves to the real world of power relations is awakening ourselves to a world of endemic struggle. The history of power is also a memory of struggles and therefore, potentially at least, a reawakening to refusals and new struggles – not least by showing how contingent and arbitrary the given conditions of the present are which we so readily take for granted” (xx). To at least a certain extent, the same can be said for the socially concerned and urban-focused fictions of Stephen Crane and his texts’ cast of complex characters. Overall, perhaps as a result of Crane’s commitment to realism, his New York City sketches illustrate the increasingly confusing and oftentimes combative shifts and developments occurring within the social spaces of Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Crane’s texts also demonstrate how the neighborhood’s oft-times marginalized inhabitants infused instability into the environment’s cultural identity through their resistance to the dominant culture’s ethical standards and cultural expectations, particularly involving the gendered spaces of the city’s public and private spheres.
CHAPTER III

Personal Privacy Turned Cultural Commodity in the Publi-City of *The House of Mirth*

I must protest, and emphatically, against the suggestion that I have “stripped” New York society. New York society is still amply clad, and the little corner of its garment that I lifted was meant to show only that little atrophied organ – the group of idle and dull people – that exists in any big and wealthy social body.

- Edith Wharton
  (Letter to William Roscoe Thayer)

Though Edith Wharton’s literary career did not begin until she was thirty-five years old, it spanned some forty years until her death in 1937 in Saint-Brice-sous-Forêt, France. A source of diverse talents, Wharton’s writings ranged from novels to non-fiction to short stories to poetry, but Wharton is perhaps best remembered for her many novels including *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Ethan Frome* (1911), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Readers voiced a menagerie of opinions following the publication of Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*. Reviewers characterized the novel as an “assault upon New York’s old established families by the new rich and the ways in which vulgarity and coarseness made inroads into the bastions of tradition and gentility” (Zlotnick 106). Although the novel sold well commercially, the contemporary critical reaction to Wharton’s portrait of New York City proved far from complimentary. As Robert Gates points out, “critics reacted with anger and disgust to the ‘vulgar, heartless, uninteresting, or immoral’ characters presented” (47). Mary Moss’s 1906 review for *Atlantic Monthly* explains, “[f]or all its brilliancy, *The House of Mirth* has a certain shallowness; it is thin. At best, Lily can

---

50 *The Age of Innocence* won Wharton the Pulitzer Prize in 1920.
51 Millicent Bell writes, “Wharton’s career is a model of market success attained fairly early and never altogether surrendered. . . . *The House of Mirth*, after all, had been at the top of the best-seller list for four months, and 140,000 copies were sold during the first year after publication” (6).
only inspire interest and curiosity. You see, you understand, and you ratify, but unfortunately, you do not greatly care” (310). A 1905 review in London’s *The Nation* laments Wharton’s depiction of New York society, suggesting, “[i]f this is American society, the American House of Mirth, it is utterly unsuitable for conversion into literature” (312). Despite the negative reactions to Wharton’s controversial characters, tone, and narrative, *The House of Mirth* “reflected the effect upon her of [Henry] James’s advice that she embrace the subject she knew best and tether herself in native ground” (Bell 4). In turning to her native ground of New York City as the setting for *The House of Mirth*, Wharton constructed a “murky territory” made up of “new freedoms and Victorian traditions” (Von Rosk 322). As Nancy Von Rosk’s comments suggest, the novel attempts to capture and comment upon a slice of the city and its people witness to the complicated and competing cultural factors unique to the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Cultural conflicts along class and generational lines proved responsible for some of this complexity.

These same complexities allow for a multitude of readings and interpretations of *The House of Mirth*. However, much of the traditional scholarly criticism has focused on demonstrating the novel’s primary theme as “the purpose and price of marriage for women” (Ammons 345). As such, much of the traditional Wharton criticism figures its analysis around the plight of Lily Bart and her frustrations and failures on the marriage market. R. W. B. Lewis

---

52 Henry James, while favorably commenting on much of Wharton’s novel, *The Valley of Decision* (1902), including the realism of its Italian settings, suggested that she take up “an American subject” and ultimately “do New York” (James 233-236).
saw “New York society” (339) as the host for this problematic marriage market but considered that society to be a

futile and [an] insubstantial affair. The problem, as she [Wharton] recalled telling herself, “was how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller’s reason for telling one story rather than another. . . . The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys.” The answer, she declared in summary, was to be the sensitive and vital Lily Bart. (339)

Lily’s destruction at the hands of the “frivolous” New York society feeds into several different interpretive conclusions. For instance, Diana Trilling suggests that Lily’s downfall represents “the inevitable defeat of art in a crass materialistic society” (109), and Cynthia Wolff suggests that The House of Mirth addresses the “consistent confusion between the ideal and the real as it is manifested by all the characters in the novel – and the resultant depersonalization of the chrysalid character that is Lily’s only inheritance – [that] leads to the heart of the tragedy” (320). However, Lily Bart’s literary characterization proves only one subject of analytical focus. The novel possesses many more potential subjects of discussion. Stepping back from Lily Bart to view her within the city writ large allows for a more complete understanding of the novel and its characters, including Lily, as creations of societal forces surrounding Wharton’s New York. Such an approach permits a more comprehensive reading of the novel and the unique historical period in which it is set. More specifically, analyzing how Wharton addresses and assesses the many cultural shifts and social developments occurring within New York’s class-conscious society around the turn of the century, my analysis unearths a fresh perspective of the city’s definitions of dyads such as privacy and publicity, domestication and commercialization, and
masculinity and femininity. One also gains a unique understanding of characters, including not only Lily Bart but also Bertha Dorset, George Dorset, Gus Trenor, Lawrence Selden, and Percy Gryce, figures resistant to as well as redefined by the cultural re-conception of these social dyads.

Proof of Wharton’s specific interest in the cultural production of the domestic space and the implications of that production precedes *The House of Mirth* by nearly ten years, as evidenced in her first book, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), co-authored with architect Ogden Codman. According to Margolies, in *The Decoration of Houses* Wharton proposes “ways of ridding houses room by room of their Victorian clutter,” all of which carried the “underlying idea … that the basic character of a house is its architecture and that massive overstuffed furnishings conceal character” (23). Wharton’s thoughts on interior design and its relation to architecture speak not only to her understanding regarding the production of spaces via spatial practices, but also to the increasing impact conspicuous consumption was having on the private, domestic sphere. Subsequently, Wharton explores many of these same very private and very public matters, but to much more complex depths, in *The House of Mirth*. No other author discussed in my analysis explores the interwoven complexities of domesticity and commerce emerging within his/her historical era more intensively than Edith Wharton. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton threads together a critical analysis of numerous, fluctuating aspects of New York society at the beginnings of the twentieth century. Such societal aspects included, for one, the emphasis on materialism in New York’s wealthier circles, particularly in members of the city’s leisure-class. This materialism, furthermore, manifested itself in people’s public displays of their social status
within, paradoxically, their domestic realms. Lastly, this desire for and emphasis on material wealth influenced people’s personal understandings of categorical identities relating to masculinity and femininity, ultimately destabilizing seemingly stable cultural constructions.

a.) Everyone’s Home: Domestic Space as Pecuniary Spectacle and Performative Stage

The period between the 1870s and the 1910s saw the emergence and solidification of what sociologist Thorstein Velben named “the leisure class.” “Between the end of the Civil War and the First World War the United States saw” the development of the leisure class, which signified, writes Sarah Way Sherman, “a major cultural transformation heralding a new culture of abundance. Unlike the old Puritan culture of scarcity – this new culture celebrated display, performance, and the consumption of commodity” (318). Members of this new leisure class, in other words, could be identified in part by a lavish spending on and accumulation of material goods and, as Sherman points out, a strategically staged exhibition of such materialism. In The Theory of the Leisure Class, Velben explains a cyclical relationship between status, materialism, and spectacle by stating, “In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth and power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence” (24). In short, the leisure class presumed that observed spectacle of one’s financial status via the consumption of material goods would elevate one’s status within

---

53 It should be pointed out that Velben’s analytical history of the leisure class is not limited to New York society specifically but concerns itself with American culture, and at times international cultures, in general. But given Wharton’s intent to take Henry James’s advice, it is understandable that her novel would question some of Velben’s conclusions and critique the establishment of a leisure-class society in and affecting New York City.
society, affording one the opportunity to accumulate more material goods to be displayed, ostensibly resulting in further elevating one’s status and enabling further accumulation of goods and opportunity to display them, and so on. Ruth Bernard Yeazell writes, “the culture of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption was also increasingly a culture of mass publicity” (717). Thus, the leisure-class nouveau riche relied greatly on this culture of conspicuous consumption given that their social status was not based solely on their wealth but on what they could purchase and put on display with that wealth. Wharton seemed keenly aware and sharply critical of this relationship between consumption, publicity, and status. As such, Wharton populates The House of Mirth with characters from both the old-moneyed New York culture (for example, Lily’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Hudson Bart; and Lily’s aunt, Mrs. Peniston) and members of the newly established leisure-class society (for instance, the Wellington-Brys, Carrie Fisher, Simon Rosedale, and George and Bertha Dorset), situating Lily Bart within this cultural conflict to identify her family history within the old-moneyed culture while at times aspiring to join (and other times resisting to join) the city’s leisure-class circles.

In terms of material goods and the leisure class’s materialistic values, the home in all its varied aspects presented itself as a key commodity to members of the leisure class, one that could display one’s status, wealth, and power with proper and effective staging. As Robert Gates explains, “[t]he mansions of the rich on Fifth Avenue above 49th Street were truly grandiose and represented practically every architectural style imaginable as each merchant attempted to excel

---

54 Lewis Erenberg characterizes this relationship as thus, “Because one’s social position was not fixed, ‘activities which are known as social functions’ came to dominate society. To be a member of society, one had to act as society decreed and attend events that defined society. One’s social status came not from one’s rank but from acceptance by others” (12).
his neighbor in magnificence and splendor. . . . Replicas of the ancestral homes of European nobility were the order of the day,” many of which boasted their share of Vermeers and Rembrandts (30). On the other hand, “other mansions were decorated with the spoils of the East as well as Europe” (31). Many included “[s]tained-glass windows from French monasteries, frescoes from the palaces of Genoese and Roman princes, Persian rugs, Flemish tapestries, Chinese porcelain, historic furniture, illuminated manuscripts, and Renaissance gold work” (31).55 As Gates’s details typify, the design and decorating of these homes clearly symbolized their owners’ cultural and financial opulence; however, such evidentiary signs of one’s status served their purpose only if observed by others. In other words, the domestic home became a source of spectacle to New York City’s wealthy spectators. Gates continues, “Giving a party often became the principal function among many of these people, and they were never simple forms of entertainment. They too became testimonials of wealth and power, where families could parade their glittering jewelry and costumes before an astonished America” (32). According to Wharton, one’s home became a “typical rung in the social ladder” (Wharton, House 126). For instance, in order to maintain her place upon that ladder and above up-and-coming families such as the Wellington-Brys, Mrs. Trenor, Wharton writes, “wants to build out a new ball-room. . . .

The dimensions of the Brys’ ball-room must rankle: you may be sure she [Mrs. Trenor] knows

---

55 The responsibility to decoratively stage these homes fell to the women of the family. As Barker-Benfield notes, “One result was make-work dusting the famous massed clutter of Victorian rooms, clutter accumulated as part of the new workless role, the ‘democratic phase’ of conspicuous consumption. Women immersed themselves in choosing and buying possessions. For men, ‘work … had become an obsession. As for women, conspicuous consumption… occupied them closer to the heart. If it in one way signaled a woman’s freedom from one sort of labor, it also gave her another job … the career of the woman whose busyness is shopping had begun. Man earns, woman spends’” (192-3).
‘em as well as if she’d been there last night with a yard-measure” (127). As Wharton’s descriptions explain, to many in New York’s leisure-class society, the home no longer stood as a private sanctuary in which to escape from the city’s bustling, loud, and crowded streets. Instead it served as a staging ground for establishing and improving one’s socio-economic success via sociability and status. As Amy Kaplan expounds, “domesticity was subordinated to publicity as the home became a stage setting for the gala social events” (93). The better the home and the more crowded one kept it with sociable spectators, the better the chances of improving one’s status.

However, the leisure-class preference towards voyeurism in general and utilizing the home as a status symbol specifically raises substantial questions regarding the home as a cultural commodity and how that utilization redefines the home as an increasingly public space. Edith Wharton concerned herself with and explored such questions. For example, as Nancy Von Rosk explains,

> Boundaries between public and private spaces remain an important consideration for [Wharton]. “Privacy,” [Wharton] writes, “would seem to be one of the first requisites of civilized life, yet it is only necessary to observe the planning of the average house to see how little this need is recognized.” . . . Wharton’s complaint here points to a reconfiguration of domestic space which was well under way while she was writing Decoration of Houses. (330)

Wharton indeed voiced such anxieties in Decoration of Houses and The House of Mirth as the home, as William Moddelmog explains, “emerged as an especially important element in late-nineteenth and early twentieth century debates about the existence of a right to privacy” (338).

---

56 According to Ruth Bernard Yeazell, “In The House of Mirth, it often seems, everyone is a ‘looker-on’” (731).
Wharton worried about the developing predilection of the leisure class to view the home as a public stage upon which to display all manner of material wealth, and thus status.

This domestic materialism became a key target of Wharton’s aim. In *The House of Mirth*, a nouveau riche family, the Wellington-Brys, host a banquet, inviting Lily Bart and other members of the New York social circle into which they hope to gain acceptance. For the setting of this party, the Wellington-Brys’

recently built house, whatever it might lack as a frame for domesticity, was almost as well-designed for a display of a festal assemblage as one of those airy pleasure-halls which the Italian architects improvised to set off the hospitality of princes. The air of improvisation was in fact strikingly present: so recent, so rapidly-evoked was the whole mise-en-scene that one had to touch the marble columns to learn they were not of cardboard, to seat one’s self in one of the damask-and-gold arm-chairs to be sure it was not painted against the wall. (Wharton 104)

The publicity-seeking nature of the Brys’ home creates the two-fold effect of a lack of domestic privacy and an impression of theatricality that merged fantasy with spectacle. Wharton assesses that the marble columns and arm-chairs appear more as stage props to the party guests rather than elements of a private dwelling. Furthermore, Wharton describes the guests, present largely to scrutinize the newly-moneyed Brys’ “display” and to accept or reject them, as “the seated throng, filling the immense room without undue crowding, presented a surface of rich tissues and jeweled shoulders in harmony with the festooned and gilded walls, and the flushed splendours of the Venetian ceiling” (104). Based on Wharton’s descriptions, the party guests become part of

---

57 One party-goer exclaims, “I should have been so sorry to miss seeing it all” (104).
58 The Brys invite so many of New York’s high society that Gus Trenor, in his rejection of their “display,” remarks, “Damned bad taste, I call it – no, no cigar for me. . . . When people crowd their rooms so that you can’t get near any one you want to speak to, I’d as soon sup in the elevated at the rush hour. My wife was dead right to stay away: she says life’s too short to spend it in breaking in new people” (109).
the theatricality and spectacle, materialistically merging with the objects and opulence around
them. As Von Rosk explains, “The guests mesh with the fantastic surroundings so that they no
longer seem like people but rather … objects of visual delight” (338). According to Wharton,
these leisure-class houses invert the traditional conception of home: the domestic turned
economic, the private turned public. Put another way, “Wharton’s city is a city of interiors. But
these interiors are arguably the ultimate urban phenomenon – domestic theaters made possible by
the new urban economy” (Von Rosk 329).

The relationship between one’s interest in privacy and one’s desire for publicity, both of
which often centered around the home, as well as this relationship’s impact on social elements
such as personal finances, social status, and familial credibility, played a complicated role in the
leisure-class society of Edith Wharton’s New York. The effects of these elements’ sometimes
fluid exchanges and other times static tensions manifested themselves in the class’s interest in
what Veblen coined “conspicuous consumption,” and perhaps nowhere could this material
interest be more publicly viewed than in the one place that historically was kept the most private,
the home. The actions and interactions of Wharton’s characters in The House of Mirth
demonstrate the dangers that this (re)conception of the home from private to public space
presented and how these values permeated New York society. For instance, on the one hand,
Mrs. Peniston, a representation of New York’s old-moneyed families, is a wealthy woman, often
paying for Lily’s expensive lifestyle, and owns a luxurious house, characterized by its
“immaculateness and order” (79). On the other hand, unlike the values of the leisure-class
culture, Mrs. Peniston’s opulent house is not utilized to maintain or improve her social standing
by her throwing large banquets and crowding the rooms with wealthy guests. Instead, her home is described by Lily as “a tomb” in which she had been “buried alive in” (79). The danger of this cultural re-conception lies not in the newly-developed utilization of the familial home for publicity purposes, in and of itself, but in the competitive desire for publicity that may victimize the likes of Lily Bart.

This cultural voyeurism and interest in publicity moved beyond the home and proliferated throughout the city. According to Gary Totten:

changes in both physical and social structures, particularly in the city, increased opportunities for people “to see and be seen” during the nineteenth century: “The introduction of public transportation, parks, balconyd apartments, congested tenements, public recreation, spectator sports, office towers, and plate-glass windows gave people an intimate glimpse of others and their possessions” (74).

Such developments solidified the relationship between consumerism and voyeurism, clearly aiding in the exhibitory desires of the leisure class. As Totten argues, if it was easier to see and be seen by more people, then it would likely be easier for members of the leisure class to have their material wealth, their homes, clothes, and goods, observed and their status bolstered. Wharton illustrates the links between cultural comfort, publicity, and voyeurism when Lily returns to New York from her trip to Bellomont and attends the opera. Wharton writes,

If Lily’s poetic enjoyment of the moment was undisturbed by the base thought that her gown and opera cloak had been indirectly paid for by Gus Trenor, the latter had not sufficient poetry in his composition to lose sight of these prosaic facts. He knew only that he had never seen Lily look smarter in her life, that there wasn’t a woman in the house who showed off new clothes as she did, and that hitherto he, to whom she owed the opportunity of making this display, had reaped

Lily’s “enjoyment” at the opera rests in her awareness of how “smart” she looks and the presence of the “several hundred … pairs of eyes” of those at the opera house seeing her dressed so.

Furthermore, Wharton illustrates the leisure-class society’s preference for voyeuristic publicity and theatrical spectacle in Bertha Dorset’s ultimate rejection of Lily.60 Interested in maintaining her social status by adopting leisure-class standards, Bertha understands that she must publicly damage Lily’s social standing to gain the upper hand. Bertha Dorset’s decision not to handle her altercation with Lily privately but instead to do so with a “dramatic gesture in the midst of a fashionable restaurant, a theatrical space ‘crowded’ with people” (Yeazell 726) exemplifies her understanding of New York’s leisure class’s penchant for publicity over privacy. Like the Wellington-Brys’s performative perception of their own home, Bertha’s decision speaks to her valuing publicity, theatricality, and voyeurism over intimacy, privacy, and the intimate. After all, as Wharton (via Bertha) surmises, “the restaurant was crowded with persons mainly gathered there for the purpose of spectatorship” (168). New York society’s preference for publicity and theatricality even influences Lily’s perceptions of her life and those around her. For example, in reflecting upon Bertha Dorset’s dismissal, Lily describes the witnesses as “all the actors” and summarizes the situation as “the miserable drama” (177).61 Lily’s initial notion of the event that instigates her precipitous social downfall reads as little more than a well-spectated

60 Wharton writes, “Mrs. Dorset, who had paused on her way out, moved a few steps back to the table. ‘Miss Bart is not going back to the yacht,’ she said in a voice of singular distinctness” (169).
61 As Yeazell comments, “The brutal truth she [Wharton] emphasizes is that Lily lives in a world of stage sets and mirrors” (731).
theatrical performance. Just as at the opera house but with a much more corrosive result, Lily believes the people present are there to view her as though she were upon the stage itself.

In relation to the leisure class’s development of the non-privacy, anti-home mentality and its molding of a highly voyeuristic lifestyle, New York’s legal system seemingly prioritized publicity over privacy particularly when it came to marital issues. For instance, by the late nineteenth century, “New York allowed divorce, practically speaking, only for adultery. Most states had a broader list. In a few jurisdictions, the innocent party might remarry, the guilty party not” (Friedman 503). As a result, the spouse seeking the divorce would be required publicly to provide evidentiary support to confirm the adultery, thus justifying the sought-for divorce. Thus, one’s private marriage becomes a very public affair. In *The House of Mirth*, after Bertha Dorset’s dismissal and humiliation of Lily, Carry Fisher visits Lily to discuss the possible divorce of George and Bertha Dorset and, in doing so, describes George Dorset as, “the poor creature [who] can’t stand alone. And I remember him such a good fellow, full of life and enthusiasm. . . . He wouldn’t stay with her ten minutes if he knew. . . . If he had positive proof I mean” (187). At a later date, George Dorset himself confronts Lily and says, “Can’t I move you if I ask you to think of me as a prisoner – a prisoner you alone can set free?” (190). Dorset concludes by stating, “all I need is to be able to say definitely: ‘I know this – and this – and this’” (191). Both Fisher and Dorset refer to letters that Lily bought from Mrs. Haffen, the charwoman who worked in Lawrence Selden’s apartment building and stole the letters in hopes of selling them as blackmail. The letters corroborate the existence of an adulterous affair between Bertha Dorset and Lawrence Selden. In other words, the only way in which George Dorset could legally
leave Bertha would be to demonstrate her adultery publicly on record, and the letters in Lily’s possession would allow him to do exactly that.\footnote{I will address Lily’s repeated decision not to hand over the letters but rather to burn them in the following section.}

b.) Lily Bart as Object(ion) and the Fetishized Female

Given the leisure class’s desires for materialism and voyeurism, it is not surprising that one consequence is objectification. Though many critics see Lily as a victim of her culture’s objectifying forces, a commodity worth exchanging on the marriage market,\footnote{See, for example, Elizabeth Ammons’s “Edith Wharton’s Hard-Working Lily: The House of Mirth and the Marriage Market” or Donald Pizer’s “The Naturalism of Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth.”} my analysis argues that Lily’s characterization develops into a representation of resistance to such cultural forces. Although Wharton demonstrates the objectifying effects on the female characters specifically, she also models Lily’s characterization, her thoughts, actions, and decisions, as a form of rebellion against these effects. From Lily’s performance in the Wellington-Brys’s tableaux vivants, to her decision to work in Mme. Regina’s hat-making company, to her privately destroying Bertha Dorset’s love letters, Lily demonstrates alternatives to the leisure class’s preferences for voyeurism, objectification, and publicity.

Early in the novel, Wharton establishes the often-male objectification of New York women seen through the leisure class’s gaze. After a chance meeting with Lily in New York City’s Grand Central Station, Lawrence Selden “led [Lily] through the throng of returning holiday makers, past sallow-faced girls in preposterous hats, and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans. Was it possible that she belonged to the same race? The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly
specialized she was” (Wharton 6). The undercurrent of racially elitist nativism rings clear in Selden’s contemplative suggestion that Lily Bart seemingly descends from a different, superior race in comparison to the women making their way through the train station. But Selden’s thoughts also illustrate a consumer concern equal to his racial or ethnic prejudices. Wharton ties each disparaging physical trait associated with the throng to an equally disparaging materialistic element. The women, in other words, are “sallow-faced” and “flat-chested” and also in possession of “preposterous hats … paper bundles … and palm-leaf fans.” As such, the resulting effect connects the women to the objects in their possession. However, from Selden’s point of view, Lily Bart evades such consumerist objectification, standing seemingly beyond its reach and above the other women making their way in the afternoon rush of Grand Central Station.

Perhaps the Wellington-Brys’ choice of evening entertainments, the performative tableau vivants, best embodies the leisure class’s interests in spectacle and publicity as well as its capacity for disempowering and objectifying women. As a younger but economically successful family and members of the nouveau riche, the Wellington-Brys seek to enter high society through methods that subvert the traditionally understood Fifth Avenue relations between capital, consumerism, and commodity. Mrs. Peniston owns a replica of the Dying Gladiator in bronze as

---

64 See Kassanoff’s “Extinction, Taxidermy, Tableau Vivants: Staging Race and Class in The House of Mirth” (PMLA 115/1 (2000): 60-74) for its excellent treatment of Wharton’s novel as one bound up in the racial attitudes of the period. Kassanoff, for example, sees Lily as “a figure for whiteness, class pedigree, Anglo-Saxon origin, and incipient nativism” that “articulates a central set of early twentieth-century patrician anxieties: that the ill-bred, the foreign, and the poor would overwhelm the native elite, that American culture would fall victim to the ‘vulgar’ tastes of the masses, and that the country’s oligarchy would fail to reproduce itself and would commit ‘race suicide’” (61).

65 Wharton writes, “She stood apart from the crowd, letting it drift by her to the platform or the street. . . . Selden had never seen her more radiant. Her vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous than in a ball-room, and under her dark hat and veil she regained the girlish smoothness, the purity of tint, that she was beginning to lose after eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing” (5-6).
a means of demonstrating her wealth, culture, and refinement, but to whom? The artwork appears as the sole occupant in the drawing room of a house already described as a “tomb” and passively looking out onto the “desert thoroughfare” (77). In contrast, “The Brys’ tableaux vivants invert the way painting functions as a representation of social status” (Kaplan 94) in that the Brys do not demonstrate their economic wealth through the consumption of paintings or cultural objects and artifacts to keep to themselves, but through an imitative performance of such material goods/items. In other words, they invite wealthy members of New York society to perform or enact representations of famous works of art and host even more guests to view these objectified representations.

However, such an inversion, along with the transformation of the home from private to public space, also inverts the role of the female in such a dynamic. Without her “busyness”\(^{66}\) of consumption and the agency that comes with such a role, the female form becomes the object of consumption, fueled and exacerbated by the public spectacle of the home’s newly transformed social space/function. As Wharton details, the tableau vivants consist of “a dozen fashionable women” (103) standing motionless and silent to “exhibit themselves in a series of pictures” (103) for the dinner guests’ voyeuristic enjoyment. Furthermore, Wharton notes that the Wellington-Brys had convinced a celebrated producer of valued cultural objects, “the distinguished portrait painter, Paul Morpeth,” to supervise the displays’ organization (103). According to Jennie Kassanoff, Susie Kirwin, a director and performer of such entertainments, published an editorial in 1894 defending the art form as “‘rational, wholesome enjoyment’ for the whole family” due to

---

\(^{66}\) See footnote #5.
the “‘wonderfully counterfeited’ spectacles” (Kassanoff, Extinction 66). Combating criticism that the use of real models engendered sexual arousal, Kirwin suggests that “[t]he ‘human model’ became ‘an inanimate thing, no more than so much paint or canvas or marble’” (66).

The old-moneyed ideology of “man earns, woman spends” admittedly, at best, provided the wealthy women with limited agency in the form of purchasing power, but the leisure-class female as displayed in tableau seems entirely objectified and stripped of all agency. Indeed, as Wharton illustrates, the divesting of the models’ identities and objectifying of their form proves so successful that “[n]o one … could have made a more typical Goya than Carry Fisher” and “[a] brilliant Miss Smedden from Brooklyn showed to perfection the sumptuous curves of Titian’s Daughter, lifting her gold salver laden with grapes above the harmonizing gold of rippled hair and rich brocade” (105). Overall, Wharton writes, “so skillfully [sic] had the personality of the actors been subdued to the scenes they figured in that even the least imaginative of the audience must have felt a thrill” (106). The loss of the models’ identities proves so complete that even Gerty Farish’s “running commentary” of pointing out and naming which model replicates which work of art “did not break the spell of the illusion” (106). Clearly, the success of the Wellington-Brys’ party rests on their ability to tap into the leisure class’s desires for materialistic wealth and public spectacles, both of which the tableau vivants exhibition fulfill. As a consequence, participation in such entertainments temporarily erases the subjectivity of some of

---

67 Jack Stepney and “the protesting minority” (Wharton 103) echo such criticism while at the Wellington-Brys’ dinner party. In specific reference to their choice of entertainment, Stepney remarks, “Really, you know, I’m no prude, but when it comes to a girl standing there as if she was up at auction – I thought seriously of speaking to cousin Julia” (124).

68 Gerty, for example, states, “Oh, how lovely Lulu Melson looks!” and “That must be Kate Croby, to the right there, in purple” (106).
the leisure class’s own “fashionable women.” After all, as Kassanoff would suggest, these women reproduce rare and expensive works of art to create “wonderfully counterfeited spectacles,” which ultimately results in onlookers viewing them as “inanimate … no more than so much paint or canvas or marble” (66).

However, Lily’s performance in the Brys’ tableau vivants, although also undoubtedly voyeuristic, represents a resistance to the objectifying effects impressed upon the other participating models. Sidney Bremer states, “Although the novel emphasizes social occasions in detailed home interiors, . . . Lily is a commodity on these private stages no less than Dreiser’s Sister Carrie on Broadway” (307). Indeed, the performative and public spectacle of the Brys’ models, Lily included, appears in many ways as theatrical as a Broadway show; however, Wharton prevents Lily’s particular presentation from commodifying her identity under the audience’s gaze. Admittedly, Lily’s agreement to participate illustrates her desire to be counted as a member of New York’s leisure-class culture. Lily ironically69 finds herself modeling Sir Joshua Reynolds’s painting Mrs. Lloyd. Unlike the other models, whose personal identities are “subdued” by the artistic re-creations, with Lily’s unveiling “there could be no mistaking the predominance of personality – the unanimous ‘Oh!’ of the spectators was a tribute, not to the brushwork of Reynolds’s ‘Mrs. Lloyd’ but to the flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart” (106). Lily’s performance in the tableau vivants demonstrates, in short, “that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself” (106). The success of Lily’s performance lies

---

69 I say “ironically” because given Lily’s continued insecurities regarding marriage and her ability to secure a suitable husband for herself, as Elizabeth Ammons annotates in her footnotes to the Norton critical edition to The House of Mirth, Reynolds’ Mrs. Lloyd “shows a full-length view of the voluptuous, diaphanously clad Mrs. Lloyd carving her husband’s name in a tree” (Wharton, House 106).
not in her apt mimicry or her ability to substitute her own identity for that of Reynolds’s heroine, but in her capacity to remain Lily Bart despite her objectifying surroundings: the props, her positioning, and the spectators. Similar to her encounter with Selden in Grand Central Station, Lily possesses the ability to stand beyond the objectifying effects that the leisure-class perspective often imposes. Though at times, she shares many of the same values and goals of the leisure class, she also resists some of its ideologies as well. Kassanoff states, “Were she [Lily] to become the portrait she represents, . . . [s]he would risk, in short, becoming a mere type” (67). Instead, “Lily stands in stylized opposition to the generic and the mechanized” (67). Looked at another way, as Gary Totten explains, “Lily’s subjectivity remains intact in the process” (72). In fact, “Lily manage to retain her own identity during the performance rather than becoming the figure in the portrait … and the spectators praise Lily’s ability to express her own individuality on stage rather than her fidelity to the portrait” (72). As Kassanoff and Totten point out, Lily’s ability to retain her own identity and subjectivity and resist the dehumanizing (or, as Kassanoff might say, mechanizing) and objectifying effects of the tableau vivants represents her increasing dissatisfaction with and, rebellion against the disenfranchising and objectifying ideological perspectives found in New York City’s leisure-class culture of the early twentieth century.

Along similar lines, Lily’s experiences with Mme. Regina demonstrate comparable social associations between the objectification of the female and the materialism of fashion. For instance, a brief article published in the New-York Daily Tribune, June 3, 1894, titled “Fine Raiment for the ‘Summer Girl’” opens with, “And now is the season of the year when the ‘summer girl’ begins to think of her raiment, that she may enslave man” (20). Clearly, the author
associates a woman’s sense of fashion with her ability to attract and “enslave” a man into marriage. Likewise, with technological advancements in newspaper publishing allowing for the incorporation of images and illustrations to either complement a newspaper’s textual content or substitute for it, the potential for objectifying the female gender became more visual as well as more obvious. Focused upon newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century, Lori Merish states that with the arrival of . . . the mass reproduction of illustrations and photographs, advertisements became more pictorial in emphasis. . . . The “pretty girl picture” became such a pervasive presence in American advertising that by 1900, the “bathing beauty” had replaced the “verbal and textual orientation of earlier ads which had typically featured literary allusions and references to well-known authors from Mother Goose to Shakespeare.” (321)

Other evidence illustrates just how obvious the objectification of women was connected to mass-production and the materialistic world of feminine fashion. William Leach states, “By the turn-of-the-century in the wake of the growth of the ready-to-wear clothing industry, female mannequins (and most mannequins were female until the 1970s) were assured a central place in merchandising” (112). Leach demonstrates that women, the primary consumers of the clothing industry, were the primary targets of that same industry. The clothing industry, put simply, objectified its female consumers with female objects.

In The House of Mirth, after falling into financial difficulties, Lily ultimately finds herself enmeshed in the clothing industry when Carry Fisher finds Lily employment “in the work-room of Mme. Regina’s renowned millinery establishment” (222). Although Regina seems
displeased about hiring Lily, she “had been willing from the first to employ Lily in the show-room: as a displayer of hats, a fashionable beauty might be a valuable asset” (222). Mme. Regina’s envisages Lily as a living mannequin, objectifying her feminine beauty and sexuality to attract more customers and sell more hats. However, upon hearing Regina’s proposal, Lily “opposed a negative,” believing that “in the end it would be more useful that she should learn the trade” (222). As such, “[t]o Regina’s work-room Lily was therefore committed” (222), thus sparing her the objectifying effects of being a public spectacle and voyeuristic target as one of Regina’s showroom models. Lily’s decision to disagree with people like Mme. Regina, who see the “value” in Lily’s physical beauty only as a commodity to exchange, which allows Lily instead to garner some agency and independence for herself through her own labor.

---

70 Wharton explains that Regina “was induced to yield only by the fact that she owed the patronage of Mrs. Bry and Mrs. Gormer to Carry Fisher’s influence” (222).

71 According to Yeazell, with a woman of the leisure class such as Lily Bart, “the cult of her physical beauty contributes to her status as an object,” or, in other words, “the more attractive a woman, the greater her value as a vehicle of display” (720).

72 A woman’s sense of agency was not a prized virtue. Instead, the conventional expectation did not see young women, if seen out in social settings, as independent self but more as a man’s accessory. Erenberg explains, “The women who dominated New York society also taught a sexual code. . . . In 1904, for example, Mrs. Burton Harrison, a respected social authority, noted that in order to enter the formal entertainments of society, a young girl had to ‘equip herself in the shining armor of conventionality’. . . . Little leeway was given for public experimentation by the young. In the larger world, she was not expected to dine unchaperoned in a restaurant or enter a theatre, without falling in caste” (14).

73 Olivier Zunz states, “If for Lily Bart … the young women who worked in downtown offices ‘lived a life in which achievement seemed as squalid as failure,’ the young women themselves saw it differently. They perceived their employment as a means of gaining at least partial independence” (117). If, as Zunz suggests, Lily believed earlier in the novel that women and labor amounted to failure, the city’s working-class women often rejected such conclusions in favor of a modest income and moderate sense of autonomy, a conclusion Lily momentarily appreciates but cannot sustain while with Mme. Regina.

74 Admittedly, Lily performs poorly during her employment in Regina’s work-room, but the principles behind her decision to forego the show-room for the work-room nonetheless represent a significant change to her understanding and acceptance of the society within which she is failing to survive. Put simply, Lily’s rebellion and cultural resistance falls into the category of simply too little, too late, in part due to, as Maureen Howard explains, Lily’s “investing heavily in the ornamental woman she was fated to be, given the accident of her birth, [and] placing little value on the useful woman she might have chosen to be against the odds” (141).
represents Lily’s rejection of the leisure class’s propensity for voyeuristic publicity, opulent materialism, and the biased objectification of the female gender. This is a transformed Lily compared to the character who stood by passively at the Wellington-Bry party as woman after woman was objectified in the tableau vivants displays.

Put another way, in discussing Wharton’s original working title for The House of Mirth (i.e., The Year of the Rose), Cathy Davidson summarizes Lily’s narrative predicament stating, “the duration of her season is, like that of a rose, definitely limited: unless a suitable marriage establishes her as a lady presiding over an establishment of her own, her existence is necessarily precarious. Her chief concern should therefore be to market, to her best advantage, her only asset – her flower-like beauty” (10). In contrast, Wai-Chee Dimock characterizes Lily’s predicament thus: “A self-acknowledged ‘human merchandise’ (256), she [Lily] is busy marketing herself throughout most of the book, worried only about the price she would fetch” (“Debasing Exchange” 783). Although such characterizations successfully capture Lily’s preoccupying concerns established earlier in the novel, the changes in her circumstances and her reflexive decisions given such changes reveal her displeasure with and rejection of the cultural ideologies of her contemporaries. To readers, Lily then becomes Wharton’s symbol of resistance against the dominant values of New York City’s leisure-class society.

If Lily appears comfortable and accepting of the spectacle-seeking and publicity-predominant tastes of the leisure class found at the Wellington-Brys’ dinner party and at Mme.

---

75 Additionally, Nancy Von Rosk echoes Davidson’s and Dimock’s sentiments when she states, “Although Lily would like to think of her beauty as a power for ‘good,’ her beauty is really a commodity she must display on the marriage market in order to attract the best buyer” (323).
Regina’s business, she consciously rejects this cultural aspect in one of her last decisive acts. Following her very public humiliation at the hands of Bertha Dorset, no one has a greater motivation to embarrass, publicly and socially, Bertha than Lily Bart. Considering Carry Fisher and George Dorset’s repeated request for Lily to make public the letters substantiating Bertha’s extramarital affair, no one has a better opportunity (187-191). However, to do so would affirm the leisure class’s cultural inclination for and prioritization of publicity and spectacle over the personal and private. Near the end of the novel, Lily visits Lawrence Selden’s apartment. Wharton writes that, while there, “[s]he knelt on the hearthrug, stretching her hands to the embers. . . . She knelt there for a few moments in silence. . . . When she rose he fancied that he saw her draw something from her dress and drop it in to the fire; but he hardly noticed the gesture at the time” (241). Had Lily agreed with Carry Fisher and George Dorset and decided to make Bertha’s letters public, she could have potentially greatly improved her circumstances.76 Lawrence observes just how great Lily’s downfall has been and, as such, how dire her circumstances have become. Wharton writes, “he noticed how thin her hands looked against the rising light of the flames. He saw too, under the loose lines of her dress, how the curves of her figure had shrunk to angularity; he remembered long afterward how the red play of the flame sharpened the depression of her nostrils, and intensified the blackness of the shadows which struck up from her cheekbones to her eyes” (241). Similar to Lily’s circumstances and opportunities at Mme. Regina’s establishment, Lily rejects the leisure class’s values. Despite Lily’s deteriorating situation, she refuses to beat Bertha Dorset at her own game, as it were. Lily

---

76 Fisher, case in point, wants the letters made known so that Lily can secure George Dorset as a husband, stating, “He wouldn’t stay with her ten minutes if he knew” (187).
declines the opportunity to re-enter the leisure class by refusing to acknowledge and lend credence to one of the class’s valued cultural foundations, publicity. Resistant to the end, Lily never regains her social status and, instead, succumbs to her ever-waning circumstances and dies tragically in obscurity.

Throughout *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart appears very much a product of the leisure-class culture that at first envelopes but eventually rejects her. However, Wharton complicates her character with dueling desires to enter into the city’s privileged class and to maintain her individuality. On the one hand, Lily at times greedily thrives on the leisure class’s prioritization of materialistic wealth and voyeuristic spectacle. Conversely, she nearly starves (literally and emotionally) when her financial woes limit her access to this world. On the other hand, Lily, unlike the other female characters, resists and rejects this same metropolitan mindset due to its attempts to objectify her identity. Though her resistance is ultimately futile, Lily Bart’s tragic end illustrates the increasingly influential leisure-class culture, complete with its desire, priorities, and values, as well as Edith Wharton’s awareness of this lamentable fact.

c.) The Benedick, Bachelors, and the “Class”-ified (Re)Invention of the Heterosexual Male

If many leisure-class women experienced the objectifying effects of the class’s proclivity for voyeurism, spectacle, and material wealth, leisure-class men seemingly underwent their own transformation. Wharton imbues *The House of Mirth* with sometimes subtle and other times overt instances of a male-oriented culture. For example, upon leaving Selden’s apartment to catch a train for Bellomont, Lily meets Simon Rosedale unexpectedly and, embarrassed, lies, saying she is in the building to visit her dress-maker. Rosedale responds, “Ah – your dress-
maker, just so... I didn’t know there were any dress-makers in the Benedick... I believe it’s an old word for bachelor, isn’t it? I happen to own the building – that’s why I know” (15). Although Rosedale is not exactly correct in his understanding of the word, it seems a fitting name considering that Lawrence Selden, Wharton’s consummate bachelor, resides in the building. Whether single or married, many of the men in The House of Mirth embody a masculinity quite different from that of earlier eras, one destabilized and transformed by the leisure class’s dominating desires: financial wealth and material goods.

Prior to the rise of the leisure class, the concept of the masculine was often culturally synonymous with heroism, adventure, and productivity as well as antithetical to domesticity, creature comforts, and stasis. Grace Farrell notes, “In prototypical tales from ‘Rip Van Winkle’ to Huckleberry Finn and beyond, males are the good-hearted bad boys of a social order dominated by female forces that aggressively seek to domesticate them. Their escape into adventure is a flight from women who seek to keep them, too, for ever at home” (273). In addition to identifying with an adventurous and dynamic ethos, the nineteenth-century man recognized and accepted a certain primal impulse within himself, present despite the ever-modernizing, and thereby civilizing, world around him. According to Kevin White, throughout the nineteenth century, “a respectable form of primitivism had infused the public discourse. . . . Men admired, for example, the novels of James Fenimore Cooper with their depictions of white men like Natty Bumppo who were as brave as ‘savages’” (10). Cultural icons such as Rip VanWinkle, Huck Finn, and Natty Bumppo provided the nineteen century male reader with

77 Rosedale’s allusion may be to Benedick, the marriage-phobic bachelor from Shakespeare’s comedy Much Ado About Nothing.
representations of cultural values which, if he could not identify with, he could at the very least aspire to possess.

However, by the early years of the twentieth century, the rise of the economic culture, both the old-moneyed guardians and the nouveau riche leisure class, in urban centers such as New York City exchanged discernible values such as heroism, productivity, adventure, and primitivism for its own values: materialism, wealth, and stability due to the powerful influences of the city’s ever-expanding economic systems. As such, these new values, flying in the face of the older values, birthed a new concept of masculinity. Wharton assesses this new category of the American male. For instance, her father, Mr. Hudson Bart, represents Lily’s first encounter with and identification of this new leisure-class male. According to Lily’s reflections, “the hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks” (Wharton 25). Lily’s association with her father is more utilitarian than familial, considering his place in a line of men who performed services for the family more than belonging to the family. Furthermore, Mr. Bart possesses none of the prior values connected to masculinity; he is not heroic, adventurous, or dynamic. Even as figures such as Teddy Roosevelt heralded the active and adventurous lifestyle throughout much of the nation, a different type of masculinity surfaced in many economic centers, such as New York, and within economically centered circles, such as the leisure-class society,. Wharton explains, “Even to the eyes of infancy, Mrs. Hudson Bart had appeared young; but Lily could not recall the time when her father had not been bald and slightly stooping, with streaks of grey in his hair, and a tired walk” (25-26). Based on Lily’s recollections, Mr. Bart was an elderly man, much older than his wife.
However, “it was a shock to her to learn afterward that he was but two years older than her mother” (26). In all, Mr. Bart lacks the expected characteristics tied to the traditional concepts of masculinity. Instead, the only value that Lily seems to attribute to her father, largely due to her mother’s doing so as well, is an economic one. After Mr. Bart loses the family’s money, jeopardizing their future financial security, Lily “knew at once that they were ruined. In the dark hours which followed, that awful fact overshadowed even her father’s slow and difficult dying. To his wife he no longer counted: he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfil [sic] his purpose, and she sat at his side with the provisional air of a traveler who waits for a belated train to start” (28). Mr. Bart’s singular purpose to the women in his life is to make money and thereby provide them with the lifestyle to which they are accustomed. From Mrs. Bart’s perception and therefore Lily’s as well, economic success becomes the only reason to value a man; consequently, his losing their financial security loses him that value; he was “no longer [to be] counted.”

However, Lily’s father is not the only male in *The House of Mirth* who experiences such a transformative reduction. Throughout the novel, Wharton identifies many of her male characters, figures such as George Dorset, Percy Gryce, and Jack Stepney, according to singularly economic values. Although his economic security allows the leisure-class male to maintain, if not improve, his social status, as discussed earlier,\(^78\) it does little to enable his possession of the more traditional values associated with masculinity. For instance, in talking with Lily, Mrs. Trenor remarks that “poor George. . . . is not as dismal as you think. If Bertha

\(^{78}\) See previous section titled “Everyone’s Home: Domestic Space as Pecuniary Spectacle and Performative Stage” for discussion of the leisure class’s interest in conspicuous consumption as a means of establishing social status.
didn’t worry him he would be quite different. Or if she’d leave him alone, and let him arrange his life as he pleases. But she doesn’t dare lose her hold of him on account of the money” (37). From Mrs. Trenor’s point of view, George Dorset proves ineffective in his marriage and overpowered by his wife, Bertha, who sees George as Mrs. Bart viewed her husband, only in economic terms. Likewise, Percy Gryce is another male who, as Lily recalls, “Jack Stepney had once defined … as the young man who had promised his mother never to go out in the rain without his overshoes” (18). As such, Lily decides to put Gryce’s mind at ease upon their first encounter by handling it with “a gently domestic air” (18). Unlike figures who fled the domestic sphere to demonstrate a conception of masculine heroics through the trials and tribulations of adventurous narratives such as Twain’s Huckleberry Finn or Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, Gryce finds solace seemingly by surrendering to the comforts of domesticity, be it his mother’s requests or Lily’s conversation.

Like George Dorset, Percy Gryce is associated with his material possessions and finances. When speaking with Lily, Mrs. Trenor explains, “You know they say he has eight hundred thousand a year – and spends nothing, except on some rubbishy old books. And his mother has heart-disease and will leave him a lot more” (38). Similar to Hudson Bart and George Dorset, Percy Gryce’s role as a man in The House of Mirth goes only so far as to his ability to provide financially for an interested woman. Percy Gryce’s “rubbishy old books” also illustrate a further component of the leisure class’s non-traditional conception of masculinity: non-productivity. Mrs. Trenor’s dismissive description refers to Gryce’s extensive and expensive
collection of Americana, an element only adding to his economic characterization. However, as Wharton notes,

Mr. Gryce’s interest in Americana had not originated with himself: it was impossible to think of him as evolving any taste of his own. An uncle had left him a collection already noted among bibliophiles; the existence of the collection was the only fact that had ever shed glory on the name of Gryce, and the nephew took as much pride in his inheritance as though it had been his own work. (19)

Wharton forcefully illustrates that Percy Gryce’s collection is not his own: not, in other words, his production. Although required to appear wealthy and financially stable, the leisure-class male must disassociate from previously-held masculine characteristics such as labor, industry, and productivity. In other words, and in stark contrast to Jacob Riis’s assessment of the productive, though criminal, young men amongst the Lower East Side neighborhoods and the middle-class ethos of industry found there, the leisure-class conception of masculinity suggests that “a gentleman must somehow occupy his time, but in order to prove he has no need to work, he must occupy it non-productively” (Yeazell 716). Accordingly, Gryce demonstrates his rightful place among his fellow leisure-class males by passively watching his inheritance and collections accumulate in value and doing nothing of his own. After all, “Supposedly dark and dirty, labor, like sex, was … in the Victorian imagination … placed in opposition to the civilized cleanliness of white, middle-class Victorian culture” (Sherman 327).

Similar to Percy Gryce, Jack Stepney illustrates the leisure class’s labor-phobic and non-industrious masculine concept. Wharton explains that Lily had “noticed how stout Jack had grown – he would soon be almost as plethoric as Herbert Melson, who sat a few feet off,

---

79 See page 69 in Chapter III, “Stephen Crane and the Chaotic Complexities of the Slum’s Social Spaces.”
breathing puffily as he leaned his black-gloved hands on his stick. ‘I wonder why rich people always grow fat’” (174). Lily’s observations of her cousin, and consequent reflections on wealthy people on the whole, clearly indict the leisure class for its preference towards stasis and slothfulness over the traditional values of labor and industry associated with masculinity. Clearly, the male members of New York City’s leisure-class culture identified themselves through the wealth to be made on the city’s stock exchange and the material goods that could be bought with that wealth and did not directly associate themselves with the industrial and mercantile side of the city that helped to produce its wealth.

Although the rise of the leisure-class culture at times transformed its own women into objects of voyeuristic scrutiny and spectacle, it also redefined the concept of masculinity for its male members. Perverting the models of masculinity personifying the cultural values of heroism, anti-domestic adventure, and productive industry, the leisure-class male identified instead with both the domestic and commercial spheres as he also stood averse to labor and productivity. In characters such as Hudson Bart, Percy Gryce, and George Dorset, Edith Wharton developed masculine identities dependent on their having a purely financial value, but one produced via non-industrious means, and beholden to domesticating females as well. As such, Wharton seizes upon the molding of a new American male at the hands of the city’s commercial priorities and the leisure class’s luxurious values in the early years of a new century.

**Lily Bart’s War and the Conspicuous Conflicts of New York City**

Edith Wharton’s conception of New York as captured in *The House of Mirth* is a city at war. More specifically, Wharton’s New York City reads as a battleground between two warring
factions: (1.) the old moneyed families of New York from Wharton’s childhood who find themselves under “the assault … of the new millionaires and (2.) the ‘invaders’ as [Wharton] called them, who had been so fabulously enriched by the business growth following the Civil War” (Auchincloss 316). These nouveau riche families gave rise to the city’s leisure-class society which, in turn, gave rise to a series of new cultural values. As such, the city found itself transformed, exchanging old values for new ones and reprioritizing others.

With the increasingly rapid development in mass production via industrialization following the Civil War, materialism and the collecting of material commodities grew in cultural value as well. Hence, Fifth Avenue found itself at the turn of the twentieth century as the home to expensive and extensively gaudy leisure-class mansions. However, similar to Lawrence Selden and Percy Gryce’s first-edition collections of Americana, it is the rare commodity that receives the highest value and most attention by collectors, and Lily Bart’s rare beauty and unique perceptions make her a rare commodity indeed and earn her the attention of man after man. At times travelling across the cultural battlefields of New York society, Lily finds herself at times swept along by the objectifying values of the leisure-class society and at other times resistant to and rebelling against them. Conversely, none of the male characters in The House of Mirth, from Selden to Gryce to Dorset to Trenor, resist the transformative effects that the leisure-class culture had on the modernizing concept of masculinity. Solidifying itself as a financial fount for the world, New York City offered great cultural advantage to those members of society wealthy enough to afford it, and the men of its leisure-class society found themselves empowered by their finances alone. Gone from Wharton’s pages are the male desire for
adventure, heroism, and physical or industrious labor, and instead the reader finds complacency, stasis, and domestic affairs as the males’ comforting companions. Their only drive or ambition is for finances but, again, only to the extent that their static lifestyle permits and their domesticating spouse require. Overall, *The House of Mirth* arraigns the city’s leisure-class culture for its misplaced priorities of wealth via materialism, objectification via voyeurism, and masculinity via anti-heroism. With that, Wharton joins a cultural conversation that writers such as Fitzgerald and Dos Passos, people also concerned with the dehumanizing effects that the modernizing city had upon its early twentieth-century residents.
CHAPTER IV

The Mechanized Megatropolis and Destabilized Domesticity of Manhattan Transfer

The young man walks by himself searching through the crowd with greedy eyes, greedy ears taut to hear, by himself, alone. The young man walks by himself, fast but not fast enough, far but not far enough (faces slide out of sight, talk trails into tattered scraps, footsteps tap fainter in alleys); he must catch the last subway, the streetcar, the bus, run up the gangplanks of all the steamboats, register at all the hotels, work in the cities, answer the wantads, learn the trades, take up the jobs, live in all the boardinghouses, sleep in all the beds. One bed is not enough, one job is not enough, one life is not enough. At night, head swimming with wants, he walks by himself alone.

- Dos Passos (The 42nd Parallel, 1930)

John Dos Passos’s 1925 novel, Manhattan Transfer, has challenged scholars repeatedly and sometimes infuriated readers attempting to capture and characterize its more elusive qualities. A richly rewarding novel with deep deposits of material to mine, Manhattan Transfer allows for a wide-ranging spectrum of interpretations. Yet many Dos Passos scholars focus their remarks on one of two elements: its sweeping, all-encompassing rendition of twentieth-century New York City culture(s), and its experimental, modernist narrative technique. For instance, to the first point, Zlotnick finds that “Dos Passos’s emphasis is on New York itself, and his is a dazzling, panoramic view of the city, of the strains and stresses of life in the modern metropolis, and of the alienation and despair experienced by so many of its inhabitants” (120). Overall, she concludes, the novel’s subject “is nothing less than the whole of Manhattan itself” and that “Dos Passos’s New York is a vital and growing city” (120). Likewise, as Mason Wade states, “Manhattan Transfer is a kaleidoscopic panorama of … New York city [sic] life on all levels of

81 Similarly, while reflecting on his interactions with writers in the ‘20s, Matthew Josephson writes in his memoirs of a “new school of writers calling themselves ‘Unanimists,’ whose novels gave expression to a sort of urban pantheism, and pictured crowds of unknowns rather than individuals treated in detail or analyzed” (97). Though Dos Pass never identified himself with such a label, the description fits texts like Manhattan Transfer perfectly.
society. It is not a character study of one individual or group of individuals, but of a whole city” (355). More specifically, Michael Clark explains that “[r]eaders were quick to catch Dos Passos’s portrayal of urban sordidness in *Manhattan Transfer*” (103). To the first point relating to Dos Passos’s subject matter of the city, Blanche Gelfant considers Dos Passos “one of the most conscious experimenters with urban imagery” (19) and, to the latter point, finds his “dissociated or fragmentalized image … particularly effective in creating the sense of rapid movement within the city” (19). As such commentaries convey, *Manhattan Transfer*, like many other Modernist texts, interpolated an experimental narrative technique but did so while encompassing nothing less than the entire city of New York itself.

As such statements suggest, Dos Passos’s novel problematizes the city’s hegemonic financial focus and subverts its social ramifications. For example, viewing Dos Passos’s novel in part as a subversive political tract, Granville Hicks writes, “No American novelist has written more directly about change, the great social changes, the characteristic and revolutionary changes of the twentieth century, than Dos Passos” (85). Likewise, Phillip Arrington likens many of Dos Passos’s literary allusions and repeated Biblical references to what he sees as quintessentially American principles put to page. Arrington illustrates,

> [i]n the Third Section of John Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer*, both the opening and closing chapter titles are direct quotations from two rather obscure Old Testament prophets. . . . [T]hese prophets sing of the destruction of Judah, Nineveh, and Babylon, cities corrupted by their own wealth and success; and Dos Passos remembers their laments in warning New York, and America, of a similar fate. (438)

Dos Passos, according to Arrington, utilizes America’s Judeo-Christian lineage to allude to and comment pessimistically on New York City’s potential future. However, though Arrington sees Manhattan Transfer as a novel that “continues the Puritan Jeremiad within twentieth-century fiction,” he finds that “[s]imilar to our other major writers, his [Dos Passos’s] quarrel with America, his cry of anger and protest, inevitably renews the very values that constitute America’s mythos: that of the individual’s freedom” (439). To Arrington, Manhattan Transfer reads as a protest novel set against the unbridled successes and uninhibited mores of Americans and New Yorkers emerging in the 1920s, cultural developments, Dos Passos feared, that could lead to cultural ruin by turning into shackles for American values such as freedom, individualism, and independence.

Some critics, such as James Smith, see an even bleaker picture in Dos Passos’s perception of such American principles. For example, “Dos Passos has made it clear that he feels very unhappy about the individual’s chances of survival in a modern industrial society” (Smith 337). Smith suggests such a reading of Dos Passos due to “all the factors he [Dos Passos] sees operating against the independence and growth of the individual” (337). However, given such factors of history, be they political, economic, and/or technological, Dos Passos, as Kazin explains, “though swept along by American history, thought that the function of art was to resist” (161). Similarly, Wade offers the point of view that Dos Passos has the revolutionary spirit, but he is more in the American tradition than in the Marxist. The revolutionary spirit has been called the great tradition of America by Granville Hicks: that it is ... in the old democratic sense of revolt against established canons and smug complacency, against too great power and
threats to liberty of expression. . . . In Dos Passos’ case the revolt has been intensified by the fact that he has lived in the most dollar-dominated era of our nation’s history. (366-367)

Such depictions are not unique to Manhattan Transfer. In fact, from his first novel, One Man’s Initiation: 1917 (1920), onward, Dos Passos’s writings investigated themes of resistance, revolt, individuality, and the failure of such forces.

As much of the scholarship attentive to Dos Passos and Manhattan Transfer attests, Dos Passos offers a complicated text focused upon a complicated era of American history. The city, however, lies at the center of all of it. For Dos Passos, New York City stood as a microcosm within which one could view the ebbs and flows of macro-cultural trends impacting post-war America. In the wake of World War I, as Zlotnick explains, “there was a great sense of power and prosperity throughout the United States; high living, big spending, good times – a determined effort to forget the war – characterized the Jazz Age, and during this period, New York was the pleasure capital of America” (110). Zlotnick goes on to describe Dos Passos’s perspective as a “a dazzling, panoramic view of the city” (120), concluding that Manhattan Transfer is a “powerful ... novel that captures the spirit of the city in the frenetic years following World War I” (122). More specifically, much of Manhattan Transfer addresses the 1920s resilient rush of capitalist confidence that ran throughout the streets of New York City and manifested itself in many of the city’s physical facets, from its megalithic skyscrapers to its ubiquitous advertising outlets. This influential commercial current impacts the New Yorkers crowding those streets as depicted in many of Dos Passos’s characterizations, some defiantly struggling against the current’s effects and others finding themselves victimized by it. Manhattan
Transfer penetrates the city’s capitalist core to reveal some of its problematic underlying complexities, such as the mechanistic effects of modern industry, the destabilization of the domestic sphere, and the perceptual impacts of the ever-expanding metropolis and its forever-functioning media.

a.) Dos Passos’s Auto-“matron”: The Mechanization of the American City-zen

As already noted, many scholars and historians have characterized New York City’s 1920s culture by its quick-paced movement, enthusiasm, and vitality. Both the city’s physical landscape and the citizens populating that landscape seemingly embody and project these traits. This reciprocal relationship between the mutable and modernizing features of the city’s physical space and the citizenry of the city becomes a decisive target of Dos Passos’s commentary in Manhattan Transfer. The catalyst, as Dos Passos saw it, for much of the city’s transformative changes lay in the industrial and technological advancements developing in the first decades of the twentieth century. For instance, some critics have found that the narrative style of Manhattan Transfer, or what E. D. Lowry calls “Dos Passos’ accelerated cutting rhythm,” serves as an “embodiment of ... the unprecedented speed, power, and dynamism of industrial society” (1636). In Dos Passos’s eyes, these mechanistic advancements, gaining momentum in the century’s first quarter, found a strong foothold in fields as diverse as economics and architecture and carried with them both positive and negative ramifications. According to Lowry, “Dos Passos was one of the few writers of the twenties to make extensive use of the machine-conscious futuristic concepts which accompanied the emergence of modernism” (1628). In the periods leading up to and in the wake of World War I, artists such as Dos Passos illustrated that “art and life would
coincide as the artist, utilizing the imagery and mentality of an industrial civilization, drew upon the powerful energies and dynamism of the machine” (Lowry 1628). The question then becomes, how does Dos Passos draw upon these “powerful energies” for his depiction of New York City in *Manhattan Transfer*?

To Dos Passos, the mechanization of the modern city, within its buildings and along its streets, both directly and indirectly influences his characters’ senses of self. According to John Diggins, Dos Passos’s works “looked forward to ruin, backward to hope” (344). Diggins suggests that in works such as *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos circuitously reached “back to a preindustrial world of harmony and dignity, where power had presumably been humanized by character, disciplined by a healthy balance of self-determination and self-control” (346). Conversely, the industrialization and mechanization of New York as a modern city influenced the overall character of the city and its inhabitants’ senses of self. In other words, one of the deterministic drawbacks to how mechanical an industrial city such as New York had become was a dehumanizing effect upon its inhabitants.

The skyscraper perhaps best symbolizes the modern facets of mechanization in both 1920s New York City and *Manhattan Transfer*. As Stanwood Emery crosses the river by ferry, Dos Passos writes, “Across the zinc water the tall walls, the birchlike cluster of downtown buildings shimmered up the rosy morning like a sound of horns through a chocolatebrown haze. As the boat drew near the buildings densened to a granite mountain split with knifecut canyons” (213). No image stood as more iconic of both the potentially positive and negative impacts of the modernizing city than the skyscraper. Stan’s identifying the city with the grandness and
immensity of the city’s modern skyline illustrates exactly how valuable the skyscraper was as a cultural commodity in the 1920s. However, as Stan exits the ferry and continues his reflective observations, the tone and implications become much darker and more disturbing. For instance, Stan’s thoughts continue:

There was Babylon and Nineveh, they were built of brick. Athens was goldmarble columns. Rome was held up on broad arches of rubble. In Constantinople the minarets flame like great candles round the Golden Horn. . . . Steel, glass, tile, concrete will be the materials of the skyscrapers. Crammed on the narrow island the millionwindowed buildings will jut, glittering pyramid on pyramid, white cloudsheads piled above a thunderstorm.” (Dos Passos 213-214)

Dos Passos’s references to ancient cities such as Babylon, Nineveh, Athens, Rome, and Constantinople, cities long destroyed or past their cultural prime, and his alluding to their then-modern building materials in comparison with those of the New York City skyscraper, imply that New York too is destined, or rather doomed, to a similar fate.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century and particularly during the 1910s and 1920s, as David Wade and Olivier Zunz explain, “the push and pull of homogenizing rationality and resisting diversity was shaping New York’s landscape” (12). The image of the corporate skyscraper stands at the heart of this drive towards rationality, even as “the skyscrapers of the rational city were enmeshed in an extraordinary jumble of neighborhoods and cultural clusters, a microcosm of American diversity” (Wade and Zunz 4). The proliferation of the corporate skyscraper along the New York City skyline throughout the 1910s and 1920s demonstrates how, according to Zunz, the city’s skyscrapers were “emblematic of simultaneous and related creations: a new vertical universe at the heart of American cities and a new work culture” (104).
The rationale behind various corporations’ desire to reinvent New York City as a rational, vertical city stemmed simply from the finite nature of Manhattan Island. If one could not grow outwards, then one must grow upwards. Out of this engineered verticality, companies developed a new and advantageous organizing principle for (re)shaping the city’s corporate work culture: centralization.

Much of New York City’s political machinery supported the corporate culture’s desires and drives. As Marc Weiss illustrates, New York City’s zoning tendency “stands as an anomaly in United States urban history because its basic economic, political, and regulatory thrust had its roots in a very different issue than the mainstream of the early twentieth century zoning movement” (47). New York used zoning laws not so much to regulate as “to rationalize and stimulate the growth and development of a central area for modern corporate office buildings, advanced services, and retail trade. The story of zoning in New York is primarily the saga of the growth of Manhattan skyscrapers” (47). In other words, most of the zoning laws developing throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century served to develop lower Manhattan into what Stanwood Emery views as “the tall walls, the birchlike cluster of downtown buildings shimmered up the rosy morning like a sound of horns through a chocolatebrown haze” (213).83

The completion of the Metropolitan Life Insurance building illustrates how the New York City skyscraper achieved the desired goal of a centralized corporate work culture as well as the dominance of technology and mechanization within that culture. According to Zunz:

83 Note this is the solidification of the cultural practices that Bartleby failingly resisted by taking up residence in the law offices, See chapter 2 and my section titled “Urban Domestication and Northerly Migrations: Resistance to Real-Estate” for further details and my analysis.
the Metropolitan Life building was an administrative marvel, an enormous machine dedicated to processing insurance claims. By 1914, five years after the completion of the tower, over 20,000 occupants and visitors entered the building daily. . . . The systems supporting this workforce were a feat of engineering. The building contained forty-eight elevators that traveled a combined 124,090 miles a year. The offices were connected to each other and the outside world by 2,462 miles of telephone wire. The Metropolitan building was “a city in itself.” (116)

The Metropolitan Life building illustrates perfectly how the developing corporate principle of centralization owed a great deal to the developing technology of the vertical city. With the advance of steel-frame construction and the use of mechanical elevators within the structures, the skyscraper could, much like the Statue of Liberty did in 1886, loom high above the city as a powerful beacon drawing others to itself magnetically, be they customers, employees, or small companies in the same or related businesses. According to Thomas Bender and William Taylor, “in the history of urban form in New York ... the tower represents the power of corporate capitalism” (190). In another example, Zunz cites Frank W. Woolworth’s desire for a new office building in the city, which led to his employing architect Cass Gilbert, who, in turn, built Woolworth “a Gothic cathedral adapted to commercial circumstances” (113). Regarding his choice of design, Gilbert noted, “just as religion monopolized art and architecture during the Medieval epoch, so commerce has engrossed the United States since 1865” (113). As such, Zunz suggests, “Thus was inaugurated a ‘Cathedral of Commerce’ built with the fortune amassed in dime stores” (113).84 In a more elaborate assessment, Fenske and Holdsworth connect the corporate ideology with the physically transformative emergence of the skyscraper as they posit,

---

84 Gilbert’s design became so popular that “the Woolworth tower ... marked for all who entered the city from the Brooklyn Bridge the location of both New York civic and business centers. By the time Woolworth died in 1919, his tower was more associated with New York the city than with the man or his business” (Zunz 113).
On one hand, the agents of New York’s transformation from a mid-nineteenth century city, with an extended villagelike character, to a twentieth-century skyscraper city were the large-scale commercial enterprises, whose presence was announced by larger and larger business buildings identified with company names. On the other hand, scores of smaller commercial and professional firms, although less readily identifiable on the urban scene, played an equally important role. . . . [T]heir demand for office space close to key sites and key enterprises influenced the shaping of the emerging skyscraper city. (129)

The skyscraper allowed a corporation to consolidate its workforce under one roof based on a vertical organization and not under a number of roofs spread out throughout the city. This same verticality also served, like a church spire beckoning its parishioners, as a promising emblem to like-minded companies, thus producing even further solidification of the city’s commercial center in lower Manhattan.

However, a slow but certain cultural opposition to the skyscraper aesthetic matured within the city throughout the early parts of the twentieth century. Concerns ranged from the enormity of such construction projects, which created disorganization within an otherwise organized city plan, to the homogeneity and superficiality associated with New York becoming a city dominated by capitalistic interests. For instance, as William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock state, “the priority New Yorkers assigned to the concept of a legible city resulted in a cultural resistance to verticality, even as the world’s tallest buildings were being erected in Manhattan. In one sense, the slow assimilation of the vertical aesthetic may indicate a natural resistance to
Correspondingly, during the first decade of the twentieth century, Bender and Taylor note, novelist Henry James was markedly displeased by the sight of the skyscrapers that had risen over the five-story city he had left twenty-five years before. . . . James suggested that the thinness of American culture rendered it incapable of resisting such expressions of unrestrained commerce. New York grew skyscrapers . . . because it lacked the density of culture required to guide growth away from purely economic and technical considerations. (197)

In James’s estimation, the preponderance of the corporate skyscraper in the city implies a prioritization of capital in the city’s cultural value system, and such an interpretation is only reinforced when counterarguments to the skyscraper are framed in terms not in moral or aesthetic terms but in financial terms instead. Indeed, “the new skyscraper technology had brought much anxiety and uncertainty to the downtown area, where many new tall and bulky buildings blocked the sunlight from older and smaller buildings, causing the latter’s property values to drop and in some cases even driving away their tenants” (Weiss 52). As a case in point, Weiss notes the reconstruction of New York City’s Equitable Building:

When the old nine-story building burned to the ground plans were announced in 1913 for a massive new forty-story, 1.4 million square foot structure covering an entire city block that would “steal” light, views, and tenants from many

---

85 To perhaps combat such cultural resistance, “skyscraper architects of New York adopted another strategy for legibility,” Sharpe and Wallock point out, “trying to make their new buildings instantly intelligible by casting them in historically familiar forms” (21).
surrounding buildings, neighboring property owners organized to stop its construction . . . but failed in their efforts. After the new building was completed, Lawson Purdy, president of the New York City Department of Taxes and Assessments, testified that “the owners of practically all the property surrounding it have asked for and obtained a reduction of the assessed value of their property on proof of loss of rents due to limitations of light and air and other advantages they enjoyed when the Equitable Building was only nine stories high.” (55)

In other words, the question of whether the skyscraper should be allowed to transform the city was not assessed along lines of moral character or architectural aesthetics but judgments of profit and loss. Should the skyscraper increase its corporate founders’ capital gains, and conversely, should the skyscraper be free to lose its surrounding neighbors profits? The simple answer, it would seem, to both questions: yes.

Whereas the skirmishes surrounding the re-conception of New York as a towering vertical city played out in the language of dollars and cents, Dos Passos questioned the import that such cultural ideologies and their physical manifestations held for the city not along financial or artistic lines but on ethical ones. Early in *Manhattan Transfer*, as Jimmy Herf, aged sixteen, meets with his legal guardian, Uncle Jeff, in a restaurant for lunch, his uncle remarks, “The wealthiest and the most successful men in the country eat lunch up here” (99). Based on Uncle Jeff’s reference to “up here” and the fact that, later, Jimmy takes an elevator down to leave, the reader can safely assume that the restaurant is located high in one of the city’s modern buildings. During their lunch, the conversation quickly turns to finances, commerce, and
Jimmy’s potential future in the world of business, as his uncle suggests, “I have not noticed that you felt sufficient enthusiasm about earning your living, making good in a man’s world. Look around you … Thrift and enthusiasm has [sic] made these men what they are. . . . What I advise is that you … work your way up through the firm” (100). Jimmy is reluctant to follow his uncle’s advice, and upon leaving the restaurant, “His stomach turns a somersault with the drop of the elevator” (101). As Jimmy exits the elevator and enters the building’s lobby, Dos Passos’s critical indictment conjoins the city’s capitalistic business culture spouted by Uncle Jeff with the city’s modern mechanical developments such as the elevator and the skyscraper’s repetitively revolving doors:

For a moment not knowing which way to go, he stands back against the wall with his hands in his pockets, watching people elbow their way through the perpetually revolving doors; softcheeked girls chewing gum, hatchetfaced girls with bangs, creamfaced boys his own age, young toughs with their hats on one side, sweatyfaced messengers, crisscross glances, sauntering hips, red jowls masticating cigars, sallow concave faces, flat bodies of young men and women, paunched bodies of elderly men, all elbowing, shoving, shuffling, fed in two endless tapes through the revolving doors out into Broadway, in off Broadway. Jimmy fed in a tape in and out the revolving doors, noon and night and morning, the revolving doors grinding out his years like sausage meat. (101)

Jimmy sees employees of this corporate culture as dehumanized and fed as “endless tapes” into the corporate machine, embodied by the building itself, ultimately predicting his potential future in such a culture as “grinding … his years like sausage meat” (101). To Jimmy, to resist such a cultural process and avoid the city’s structures that he believes embody such a culture epitomizes an ethical struggle for independence and identity, as he later says when plotting an escape from the city: “I’m losing all the best part of me rotting in New York” (150). Ultimately, high above
New York City the skyscraper, along with the modern mechanical developments it embodies and the consuming corporate culture it represents, stands as a beacon for some to gravitate towards but for others, like Dos Passos and Jimmy Herf, as a target of questions and criticism. Dos Passos uses Ellen Thatcher best to exhibit the darker, dehumanizing implications of the increasingly mechanical city. Undoubtedly, Ellen Thatcher’s career as a Broadway actress explains both her objectification in the eyes of men and her evolving identity crisis. However, Ellen’s objectification and identity crisis also illustrate the mechanistic metaphors people saw everywhere within the city, including in its transportation systems, its office buildings, and its department stores. Her career as a stage actress proves itself mechanistic in that it possesses “the horrible endlessness of repetition” or “a numbing redundancy” (Arrington 441). Ellen’s self-identifying associations with such metaphors also demonstrate the dehumanizing repercussions of mechanization. Blanche Gelfant highlights, “The recurrent image that expresses ... dehumanization is that of the puppet, the brittle doll, the marionette, the mummy. . . . There is a general effect Dos Passos’ characters give of being marionettes pulled by strings through compulsive gestures, of lacking the inner resiliency which is perhaps above all the distinctive human trait” (146). Ellen, for instance, suggests, “It’s like a busted mechanical toy the way my mind goes brrr all the time” (339) and admits that her husband, George Baldwin, would like to “show me off all dressed up like a Christmas tree, like an Effenbee walking talking doll” (338).

However, perhaps the metaphor associated with Ellen’s characterization that proves most

---

86 For example, Ellen goes from being Ellen Thatcher to Ellen Oglethorpe to Ellen Herf and eventually Ellen Baldwin. Likewise, friends and acquaintances call her by a variety of names including Ellie, Elaine, and Helena as well as Ellen.

87 A popular toy doll manufacturer.
dehumanizing and objectifying is that of the tall tower (in this case that of a lighthouse), an image that would prove increasingly important to the city throughout the decade of the 1920s as well as throughout *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos writes that, after one of her theatrical performances,

> Ellen sits in the armchair drowsily listening, coolness of powder on her face and arms, fatness of rouge on her lips, her body just bathed fresh as a violet under the silk dress, under the silk underclothes; she sits dreamily, drowsily listening. A sudden twinge of men’s voices knotting about her. She sits up cold white out of reach like a lighthouse. Men’s hands crawl like bugs on the unbreakable glass. Men’s looks blunder and flutter against it helpless as moths. (154)

Overall, Ellen’s metaphoric associations, including the tall tower or lighthouse simile that serves to illustrate her being cut off from any sort of human connections or relationships, work to dehumanize her characterization and typify the adverse effects the city had on its inhabitants. Indeed, as David Vanderwerken explains, “the ultimate danger is that the mechanical will dominate the human” (261). Clearly, Ellen’s experiences within the mechanized metropolis dehumanize her sense of self, creating instead self-perceptions ranging from that of a doll-like device to that of a cold, colorless, secluded structure, similar in nature to Manhattan’s skyscrapers.

b.) The Written (Upon) City: Press, Publicity, and Their Impacts on Urban Perceptions

Beyond reshaping the city’s work culture by centralizing and modernizing it through mechanization, the skyscraper served a third purpose. The verticality of the tall structures functioned as immediate and omnipresent advertising for their corporate builders. According to Weiss, “a key factor behind their [skyscrapers’] continued development and rapid growth in
height, bulk, and numbers was the prestige value of the building’s visual image, which served as a powerful form of advertising for the corporate owners and occupants. Publicity was becoming more important for many large firms” (56). Likewise, Fenske and Holdsworth also submit “visibility” as the skyscraper’s key feature for corporate New York:

Visibility was achieved through the sheer scale and lavishness of construction. . . . but also through siting the new construction such that it had high exposure to urban crowds. Becoming a highly visible architectural presence in the city marked a critical turning point, for now the enterprise began to exercise some control over its urban surroundings. It exerted this control visually – as a dominant structure in its setting, it radiated its influence outward. (131)

For the competing corporations within the city’s commercial culture, successfully garnering “publicity” or achieving “visibility” equaled status, power, and potential domination. Fenske and Holdsworth write that the skyscraper represents the need to assert an increasingly higher profile in America’s commercial capital. . . . To build a tower was the most obvious manifestation of this need. The towers were attention-grabbing cynosures, but they were also wholly dependent on the less visually assertive head office complexes. The low masses of the complexes isolated the towers from surrounding skyscrapers, providing them with maximum exposure in city views. (142)

Status, power, and such perceptual achievements, cultural commodities in reality, often trumped the value of the skyscrapers’ other more tangible elements such as the modern machinery and the physical office space itself. Fenske and Holdsworth explain, “The landmark towers that were so conspicuous in skyline views were rarely of any true functional use to their corporate builders …

---

88 As an illustrative example, Fenske and Holdsworth write, ”Pierre Le Brun, of Napoleon Le Brun & Sons, designed a fifty-story, 700-foot Italian Renaissance-inspired and white marble-clad version of the Campanile of St. Mark’s, Venice, at the suggestion of [Metropolitan Life Insurance’s] president, John Rogers Hegeman. . . . The tower, completed in 1909, was built for the purpose of image . . . an advertisement. . . . The tower functioned equally well as an advertisement for the tenants, to the further advantage of Metropolitan Life, which saw it [the tower] incorporated into a range of letterheads and logos” (140).
The only justification for the towers was an enterprise’s augmented visibility on the urban scene. . . . [T]he visibility afforded by the towers expressed, and ultimately, legitimized a newly powerful commercial order” (154). Fenske and Holdsworth conclude that the tower as “a form typically reserved in earlier civilizations for ecclesiastical ... purposes” came by the 1920s to represent “the dominance of commercial affairs in American life” (154) and visually solidified New York City’s prevailing claim to such affairs.

The significance of the skyscraper-as-advertisement in New York City speaks to the rising importance that image and visibility had in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The ubiquitous advert, whether image or text, illustrates the scale of New York’s mass media and mass consumption culture, and Dos Passos’s novel addresses the saturating effect such ubiquity had on the perceptions of the city’s populace. As David Vanderwerken explains, “the New York of Manhattan Transfer manifests a post-Babel confusion of tongues. The New Yorker hears many languages, many accents, many American dialects. Even more than the spoken word, the printed word assaults the consciousness of the city dweller from a variety of sources: advertisements, signs, billboards, periodicals, and newspapers” (254). Speaking specifically of New York’s mass media culture as embodied in the city’s newspapers, one can see that the development of the written word, or rather the publishing and distribution of it, and the development of the city itself progressed in partnership with each other. Similar to the skyscraper’s nearly ubiquitous visibility, the city is coated in print and advertising, and as the

---

89 The proliferation of advertising throughout the city and, at the same time, the city’s march into the consumer culture of the roaring ’20s signify “the emergence … of what was to become the postindustrial capitalism of the late twentieth century, a capitalism of signs” (Geyh 414).
city grew up and outward, so did its print culture. As David Henkin states, “Cities were built, in part, of words, words that took material form in public space. Newspapers did not simply resemble the streets of Manhattan; they littered them as well. . . . New York’s daily papers and New York’s crowded thoroughfares had much in common; they were mutually clarifying spectacles of a new urban life” (5). Just as the city’s pulse could be felt throughout its streets, it could also be witnessed by any reader in the pages of its many newspapers.

Newspaper headlines thread their way into Dos Passos’s narrative throughout the novel. Dos Passos uses special fonts and altered margins to set such instances apart from his characters and their respective narratives. For instance, Dos Passos opens one chapter with the headline:

**MORTON SIGNS THE GREATER NEW YORK BILL**

**COMPLETES THE ACT MAKING NEW YORK WORLD’S SECOND METROPOLIS (11)**

He later cites newspaper articles with excerpted bylines such as “ADMITS KILLING CRIPPLED MOTHER…” and “PARKER’S FRIENDS PROTECT…” as well as “RELIEVE PORT ARTHUR IN FACE OF ENEMY” (15). Such examples, with the centered texts, bold and capitalized lettering, seemingly demonstrate how such print culture dominated the era’s consciousness. However, Dos Passos also questions the validity of such claims of domination and critiques how useful such communications were, regardless of their ubiquity, by considering how influential they were upon people’s perceptions. For example, Bud Korpenning reads the above headlines as he sits in a barbershop after having a shave and a shoe shine. The article, as Bud reads, continues, “Nathan Sibbetts, fourteen years old, broke down today after two weeks of
steady denial of guilt and confessed to the police that he was responsible for the death of his aged and crippled mother, Hannah Sibbetts, after a quarrel in their home at Jacob’s Creek, six miles above this city: Tonight he was committed to await the action of the Grand Jury” (15). Dos Passos concludes, “The black print squirms before his eyes” (15), and Bud comments, “‘An I’m twentyfive years old,’ he muttered aloud. Think of a kid fourteen…” (16). The news story holds little meaning for Bud, and his incomplete reflections (note Dos Passos’s ellipsis) suggest exactly how dismissive the city’s readership was toward such materials. Bud reads the paper simply as a way to forestall his return to the city’s streets. Later in the novel, Bud’s use of another newspaper proves even more meaningless and uncommunicative as “[h]e took a newspaper out of his pocket and unwrapped a hunk of bread and a slice of gristly meat” (65). Overall, such examples illustrate just how ineffective newspapers, perhaps the most massively produced product of the city’s mass media culture, could be.

Manhattan Transfer contains similar instances of confusion and meaningless caused by the city’s print and advertising culture beyond those of the newspaper. The lawyer George Baldwin, a “leanfaced young man with steel eyes and a thin high-bridged nose” (41) sits in his office and “frowned at the gold lettering through the ground-glass door:

NIWDLAB EGROEG

WAL-TA-YENROTTA. (41)

Baldwin then reflects, “Niwdlab, Welsh” (41). The script advertising his workspace reads as nonsense or, at best, as confusingly misunderstood. Finally, Baldwin “jumped to his feet. I’ve read that damn sign backwards every day for three months. I’m going crazy” (41). Like
Korpenning’s use, or rather misuse, of the city newspaper, Baldwin’s misunderstanding illustrates humorously how easily some of the advertising that canvased the city could be overlooked, or at least looked upon indifferently. Similarly, when Jimmy Herf temporarily escapes the city, as is his continual desire, to walk some of the city’s more rural surroundings, he notices the advertisements blanketing the countryside as well: “The road climbed a hill. There was a bright runnel of water in the ditch, flowing through patches of grass and dandelions. There were fewer houses; on the sides of barns peeling letters spelled out LYDIA PINKHAM’S VEGETABLE COMPOUND, BUDWEISER, RED HEN, BARKING DOG… And muddy had had a stroke and now she was buried” (95). Paula Geyh, seeing such instances as Dos Passos’s commentary on the era’s pervasive current of capitalism, remarks, “There appears no outside to this all-pervasive discourse of consumer capital. . . . the products’ very names, with their references to vegetables, hens, and dogs, [serve] as an ironic gloss on the changing countryside and on the precession of the sign over the real wrought by capitalism and its desiring-machines” (432). Although Geyh presents a valid interpretation, I would instead shift focus to the aged condition of the advertisements as “peeling” as well as the nonsensical and un-contextualized listing of the products and Jimmy’s reflections away from them to the unrelated subject of his mother’s passing. Taken together, these elements illustrate Dos Passos’s overall estimation of the adverts as ultimately dismissable and forgettable.

In Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (1925), Nick Carraway echoes a similar commentary involving the area outside of the city described as the “valley of ashes.” After detailing the ash dumps, Fitzgerald writes,
But above the grey land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic – their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens and then sank down himself into eternal blindness or forgot them and moved away. (27-28)

Similar to Jimmy’s findings along a rural road, Carraway sees Eckleburg’s advertisement as ineffective, especially considering that the advert, though weather-beaten and fading, has long outlasted the success of the business which it was meant to advertise; Eckleburg’s practice itself has dropped “into eternal blindness.”

However, not all the instances involving advertisements within Manhattan Transfer support the premise that Dos Passos views the city’s commerce-based print culture as ineffective. On the contrary, several occasions within Dos Passos’s narrative exemplify the coercively enveloping effects that some mass media advertising could have on people’s perceptions.90 As Geyh asserts, “Since the early 1920s, the architectural spaces of American cities have been awash in texts and images. . . . These signs have arguably become the dominant constituents of phenomenal urban space, filling our perceptual fields, obscuring the streets and buildings that once comprised the city” (413). Ultimately, Geyh explains, this production and proliferation of images produced a plethora of “different types of urban subjectivities” (413). One such subjectivity would be connected with sexual desire, which became effectively intermingled with the advertisements and images of the city’s fashionable clothing industry. Dos Passos writes that,

---

90 John Ogletorpe, while criticizing Jimmy Herf and his career as a journalist, states, “I know that every sentence, every word, every picayune punctuation that appears in the public press is perused and revised and deleted in the interests of advertisers and bondholders. The fountain of national life is poisoned at its source” (165).
as Phil Sandbourne and his associate, Hartly, make their way along 34th Street, “’Gad,’ burst out Phil Sandbourne, suddenly, ‘The girls in this town get prettier every year. Like these new fashions, do you?’” (144). Sandbourne later laments, “all us old fellers can do is watch em go past” (144). The women falling under Sandbourne’s gaze become sexual objects of his desire as he interprets their sense of fashion as a sort of advertising spectacle, serving as a catalyst to heighten such desires. However, Sandbourne’s consumption of such images reaches its peak and turns dangerous as well as destructive as he:

caught sight of a girl in a taxicab. From under the black brim of a little hat with a red cockade in it two gray eyes flash green black into his. He swallowed his breath. The traffic roars dwindled into the distance. . . . Two steps and open the door and sit beside her, beside her slenderness perched like a bird on the seat. . . . Her lips are pouting towards him, her eyes flutter gray caught birds. ‘Hay look out…’ A pouncing iron rumble crashes down on him from behind. Fifth Avenue spins in red blue purple spirals. (144)

Sandbourne’s confusion between the imagery of the compelling advertising world and the dangers of the real world of New York City’s crowded streets proves life threatening. As Gelfant points out, “the seductive image of the woman in the taxicab is so compelling that [Sandbourne] actually tries to force his way through the traffic into her cab – but unfortunately he is run over on the way” (145). Like an advertisement, Dos Passos ties the physically seductive elements of the woman in the taxicab, her eyes and lips for instance, to her fashionable clothing choices (i.e., the “little hat” with its “black brim” and “red cockade”). Sandbourne’s confusing the illusionary
and seemingly harmless elements of advertising with the very real and dangerous streets of New York City proves costly.\textsuperscript{91}

A recurring advertisement in \textit{Manhattan Transfer} that impacts the perceptions of several characters is the Danderine Lady. Ellen first sees this “roving advertisement for Danderine, a popular dandruff shampoo” (Geyh 429) in Lincoln Square where she sees a young woman riding “slowly through the traffic on a white horse; chestnut hair hung down in even faky waves over the horse’s chalky rump and over the gilded saddlecloth where in green letters pointed with crimson, read DANDERINE. She had on a green Dolly Varden hat with a crimson plume; one hand in a white gauntlet nonchalantly jiggled at the reins, in the other wabbled a goldknobbed riding crop” (Dos Passos 115). Yet again, when joined by George Baldwin and Stan Emery, the Oglethorpes see the young woman riding on horseback along 34\textsuperscript{th} Street (Dos Passos 121). At this sighting, Stan samples an old English nursery rhyme and simply, almost dismissively, remarks, “Rings on her fingers… And bells on her toes, And she shall cure dandruff wherever it goes” (121).\textsuperscript{92} But for Ellen, a character, as Geyh suggests, whose “conceptions of herself are incessantly filtered through and produced by her consumption of the signs of the city” (428), the Danderine lady serves a more meaningful function in affecting Ellen’s self-perception as well as

\textsuperscript{91} Similarly but not nearly as costly, Daisy Buchanan comments to Gatsby during their lunch together during a very hot summer afternoon, “‘you look so cool. . . . You always look so cool. . . . You resemble the advertisement of the man,’ she went on innocently. ‘You know the advertisement of the man—’” (125). Either Daisy filters her perception of the world around her through familiar media advertisements or Gatsby has succeeded in reinventing himself in the model of such images (just as he models many of his mannerisms and idioms after millionaire Dan Cody) so that it is impossible for Daisy not to make the connection.

\textsuperscript{92} Admittedly, Dos Passos illustrates the lasting impression of the advert on Stan’s consciousness when, much later in the novel, Stan “sat down on a bench” along the Battery while “[h]is mind went on jingling like a mechanical piano” and inexplicably recalls “With bells on her fingers and rings on her toes/Shall ride a white lady upon a great horse/And she shall make mischief wherever she goes…” (213).
that of the city around her. For example, after her first spotting the nomadic advertisement, Ellen perceives the young woman and herself both as the objects of men’s sexual gaze and as agents resistant to such forces. As Ellen watches the advertisement pass and continues walking, Dos Passos writes, “Two sailors were sprawling on a bench in the sun; one of them popped his lips as she passed, she could feel their seagreedy eyes cling stickily to her neck, her thighs, her ankles” (115). In addition, Ellen catches “the black eyes of a young man in a straw hat” whose “eyes twinkled in hers” (115). However, the Danderine lady becomes far more than a dandruff shampoo ad for Ellen. While walking along under the scrutiny of these men, Ellen reflects, “All in green on a white stallion rode the Lady of the Lost Battalion… Green, green, danderine… Godiva in the haughty mantle of her hair…” (116). As a sort of psychological defense mechanism, Ellen associates the advertisement, and by proxy herself, with the defiant figure of Lady Godiva who, as legend states, rode through a crowded market as a method to defy her husband’s oppressive and objectifying actions. As a result of her reinterpreting the Danderine advert, Ellen learns how one signifier can become associated with multiple significations, hence her interest in and ability to reinvent herself throughout the novel.

New York City sprinted into the “roaring twenties,” carried in large part on the backs of its commercially gigantic corporations. As such, advertising proved necessary to develop an equally gigantic consumer culture. With the explosion of mass media outlets especially in metropolitan centers such as New York City throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, the impact such products would have on the cultural identity of the city as well as on the

---

93 As Geyh states, “The primary sign defining Ellen’s subjectivity and its economy of desire is the Danderine Lady” (429).
individual identities of the city’s inhabitants would be indisputable. In *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos assesses the complicated ramifications of these effects. He also addresses how the over-production and over-consumption of advertisements and their images could lead to a saturation effect, producing neither positive nor negative effects but a desensitization or indifference on the part of the consumer.

c.) The Mega-ness of New York’s Megatropolis: the Omnipresence of Dos Passos’s City

In his modernist reflection on post-war European culture, W. B. Yeats opens his poem “The Second Coming” (1919) with the lines, “Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” (192). Dos Passos, another denizen of the Modernist era, writes of similar feelings of chaos, confusion, and disorientation. However, while Yeats’s source of cultural confusion stems from the systemic rupture of World War I traversing Europe, Dos Passos’s fount is a foundational principle of any growing city: urban sprawl.

Early in *Manhattan Transfer*, Bud Korpenning exits the ferry and walks the streets of Manhattan explaining at one point that he wants “to get to the center of things” (4). Bud is one of several characters from *Manhattan Transfer* searching for “the center” of things, each receiving different directions on how to get there and none of them finding such a center. A sense of disorientation resulting in an inability to pinpoint a true center reads as apt given the expansiveness of post-war New York City.

Dos Passos goes to great lengths in *Manhattan Transfer* to ground much of his critique of America’s modernizing urban culture in specific historical fact and events. For instance, Chapter
2, titled “Metropolis,” opens with the earlier-mentioned newspaper headline reading “MORTON SIGNS THE GREATER NEW YORK BILL” (11). Indeed, in May of 1896, Governor Levi P. Morton signed into law a bill that consolidated the five boroughs (Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens, Staten Island, and Brooklyn) into what unofficially came to be known as the City of Greater New York. Most New Yorkers celebrated the consolidation, but a vocal faction, primarily in Brooklyn, and in such organizations as the Loyal Citizens League of Brooklyn, presented a notable resistance to the bill. Many of Brooklyn’s politically minded citizens feared the corrupting influences such a merger would expose their borough to, such as Manhattan’s political machine, Tammany Hall. However, Brooklyn and Manhattan had been all but wedded financially with the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883, which allowed commerce to move freely between the cities and avoid the previous interruptions caused by ice flows and bad weather along the East River.

As the Greater New York Bill went into effect on January 1, 1898, New York City and its surrounding boroughs formed the second largest city in the world. Dos Passos’s reference on page eleven suggests that New York City entered the twentieth century by spreading its wings, illustrating that the city’s social space extended beyond the island of Manhattan. As the twentieth century progressed, the city saw an expansive re-conception particularly in terms of what would be viewed as rural as opposed to residential as opposed to industrial. “In 1910,” as Robert Gates explains, “nearly half of the City’s inhabitants were concentrated on Manhattan island. But by 1930, Manhattan contained less than one-fifth of the City’s seven million people. Brooklyn had two-and-one-half million, Queens more than one million, and the Bronx one-and-one quarter
million” (66). The city moved into the new century possessing new organizational ideas and changed conceptions of urban space with the surrounding boroughs largely representing the residential or domestic spaces of New York City as Manhattan solidified itself as the city’s commercial nucleus.

Dos Passos sought to illustrate the modern complications blurring the lines between business and domesticity as well as city-space and rural environs.94 After all, the opening decades of the 1900s developed a more porous understanding of the borders between these dichotomies. According to Eric Lampard:

The twentieth century witnessed an altogether unparalleled expansion and reorganization of macro-urban space. From its outset the “necessity” for, and “advantage” of, a central location for certain types of manufacture and selected classes of residence were being substantially reduced by improved transport and communications. Many businesses as well as households sought relief from the burden of local rates and property taxes in what William Ashworth once called “the social opportunism” of the suburbs. (73-74)

Works such as Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby also problematized the expansion of the city and its relation to its more rural and residential surroundings by illustrating the effects, or rather the byproducts, of such a relationship. Like Fitzgerald himself, who lived in Great Neck, Long Island, in the early 1920s,95 Nick Carraway travels between West Egg and New York City, thereby passing the Corona Dumps, coining them “the valley of ashes,” and describing them, as Fitzgerald writes, as "a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and

---

94 See, for instance, the section titled “New York Domesti-City: Rethinking Gender Roles and the Home as Industrial Space” in my chapter on Crane for a discussion of the Progressives’ attempts to separate the home and commercial interests by removing the home’s industrial connotations and emphasizing its domestic elements via femininity.
95 See Zlotnick’s Portrait of an American City, pg. 115.
grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air” (27). The Corona Dumps, owned by the Brooklyn Ash Removal Company and located (at the time) not in Manhattan nor in Brooklyn but in the far more rural borough of Queens, served as a repository for the refuse of the city’s extensive coal-burning furnaces. As the city expanded and its commercial as well as residential spaces further developed, so did byproducts of that expansion such as the furnaces and their ash production. As Fitzgerald illustrates, the removal and disposal of such byproducts became an increasingly pressing problem for the city. Similar to the Corona Dumps, the numerous ash cans placed throughout the city became a disconcerting eye sore, if not a health hazard. In fact, as early as 1914, the New York newspaper, The Sun, voiced concerns along these lines. The March 30, 1914, edition of The Sun reads,

Practically all sanitary experts in the city agree that the cans and carts for the handling of ashes should be covered so as to protect pedestrians from the annoyance of flying ash dust. . . . Despite the length of time that has elapsed since that report was made and the fact that in the meantime almost every country in Europe has adopted covered carts which absolutely prevent ashes from being blown in the faces of women and children. . . . [n]o impression has been made on the city officials to stimulate them to do something to eradicate a nuisance of which hundreds of persons constantly complain. (“Covered Ash Carts” 7)

Not only were the escalating numbers of ash barrels and carts problematic for people making their way up and down the streets of Manhattan, but in 1923, the people of Corona and Flushing, the two towns neighboring the increasingly enormous piles of ash in the Corona Dumps, took the
Brooklyn Ash Removal Company to court to wrestle a solution, if not compensation, out of them.96

Similarly, in the opening chapter of Manhattan Transfer, titled “Ferryslip,” Dos Passos focuses on various types of refuse. Dos Passos writes, “Three gulls wheel above the broken boxes, orangerinds, spoiled cabbage heads that heave between the splintered plank walls, the green waves spume under the round bow as the ferry, skidding on the tide, crashes, gulps the broken water, slides, settles slowly into the slip” (3), as people exiting the ferry “press through the manuresmelling wooden tunnel of the ferry-house, crushed and jostling like apples fed down a chute into a press” (3). In contrast, “Sun Down Poem” (1856) (eventually retitled and better known as “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”), Walt Whitman reflectively stands at the Manhattan-Brooklyn slip, from the same location where the Brooklyn Bridge would stand, and notices the “shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east” (116). The poet also asks such questions as, “Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-hemm’d Manhattan?” and also declares, “Stand up, tall masts of Manhatta! stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!” (119). The contrast between Whitman’s and Dos Passos’s visions of New York City’s waterfront shipping yards is obvious. Whitman’s portrait reads of industry, unity, and productivity whereas Dos Passos’s depiction contains images of decay (e.g., “spoiled”), waste (“manuresmelling”), and chaotic destruction (“like apples fed down a chute into a press”). To Dos Passos, 1920s New York proves commercially industrious and productive (i.e. the “broken boxes, orangerinds, [and] … cabbage heads”), but for Dos Passos the byproduct

96 One ash pile in the dumps allegedly reached nearly 100 feet high and was mockingly named Mount Corona.
of that commerce deserves its own attention. As the city expanded, Dos Passos’s attention seems to suggest, so did its need for imported goods and, as such, so did its accumulation of waste. Like Fitzgerald and his perception of the Corona Dumps, Dos Passos demonstrates the price paid for urban expansion.

Furthermore, another dichotomous theme problematized by writers like Fitzgerald and Dos Passos lies in the designation of certain spaces, such as urban versus pastoral or city versus rural. Writers of the American Renaissance and Romantic era often associated nature with the feminine, the good, the ideal, and contrasted it with the city, often being masculine, industrial, negative, and/or corrupt. Some scholars argue that Dos Passos follows the same tradition with Manhattan Transfer. In fact, Clark writes, “[t]he structure of Manhattan Transfer resulted from Dos Passos’s continuing appreciation of nature” (99). Likewise, some argue that Jimmy Herf’s exodus from the city and the images he sees along the way in the novel’s closing pages symbolically suggest that “the novel affirms the agrarian America now lost to the encroachments of urbanization” (Arrington 442). However, many of Dos Passos’s references to nature or any non-urban elements outside the traditional spheres of the city do not demonstrate an appreciation for the power of nature as they reflect how the city’s industrialized spaces have overpowered the perception of, and conjoined themselves to, conventional images of nature. The natural and the urban, the country and the city, become spliced and combined instead of opposed to each other.

97 See Leo Marx’s excellent The Machine in the Garden (1964) for its extensive analysis on the history of these associations throughout American texts.

98 Specifically, the “broken-down springwagon loaded with flowers, driven by a little brown man with high cheekbones. . . . the little warped wagon is unexpectedly merry, stacked with pots of scarlet and pink geraniums, carnations, alyssum, forced roses, blue lobelia” (342).
For instance, the newlyweds Ellen and John Oglethorpe travel by train on their way to their honeymoon. During the trip, Ellen looks at “the brown marshes and the million black windows of factories and the puddly streets of towns and a rusty steamboat in a canal and barns and Bull Durham signs and roundfaced Spearmint gnomes all barred and crisscrossed with bright flaws of rain” (97). Dos Passos represents nature as anything but pastoral, uncorrupted, and ideal. Instead, like Fitzgerald’s “grotesque gardens” of ashes, Dos Passos connects the brown-ness of the marshes with the factories’ black windows and the rural barns with the “puddly” town streets. His steamboat is not rustic, in other words, but simply rusty.

Likewise, Dos Passos’s Bud Korpenning is not a native of New York City, admitting to a stranger at one point to being “born and raised on a farm upstate” (102). As such, Dos Passos uses Korpenning to problematize the oft-held conception that the rural landscape is purifying but urbanity is poisoning for people. Bud continues reflectively by saying, “[e]very spring I says to myself I’ll hit the road again, go out an plant myself among the weeds an the grass an the cows comin home milkin time, but I don’t: I juss kinder hangs on” (102). At first, Bud seemingly feels trapped in the prison-like city and is nostalgic for the rural life and pastoral environs of his childhood, suggestive of the dichotomous associations mentioned above: nature – good, innocent, ideal, etc., versus city – bad, corrupt, cruel, etc. But Bud’s extended monologue regarding his previous environment complicates this dichotomy and its categorical associations. Bud shows the stranger his back, covered in a “mass of white and red deepgouged scars” (102-3), and explains,
That’s what the ole man done to me. For twelve years he licked me when he had a mind to. Used to strip me and take a piece of light chain to my back … I mashed his head in with a grubbinhoe, mashed it in like when you kick a rotten punkin … I told him to lay off’n me an he wouldn’t … I let him lay till night with his head mashed in like a rotten punkin. A bit of scrub along the fence hid him from the road. (103)

As mentioned earlier, notions of nature or the rural country recalled the innocence of an ideal, bucolic existence for many American writers. Nonetheless, Dos Passos superimposes these with the traditional elements associated with the city. Kopenning identifies his rural upbringing on the farm with a masculine figure, his father, and as such the entire connection smacks of violence, immorality, and corruption. The dangers that lie ahead of him in the city win out, or at best balance out, the danger from his past, causing him to “juss kinder hangs on” (102).

Fitzgerald also blurs these lines between the pastoral and its associations with those of the city. Early on in The Great Gatsby, Nick travels into the city with Tom Buchanan and his mistress, Myrtle Wilson. As they arrive in the city, Nick reflects, “we drove over to Fifth Avenue, so warm and soft, almost pastoral, on the summer Sunday afternoon that I wouldn’t have been surprised to see a great flock of white sheep turn the corner” (32). Such idealized and sentimental associations do not last long in that, by the end of their afternoon together, Nick witnesses an argument between the two lovers in which “making a short deft movement Tom Buchanan broke her [Myrtle’s] nose with his open hand” (41). Like Korpenning’s reflections, Nick’s observations resist the oft-perceived separations between urban and rural spaces, instead observing how, by the 1920s, the traits of one social space were bleeding into the other.
According to writers such as Dos Passos and other writers, the expansive spread of the city, or the evolution of New York’s metropolis into a megatropolis, did not outright overtake America’s more rural spaces. Instead, it physically transformed them into an amalgamation of characteristics in that the country can be pastoral but also a place of violence and the city can be a place of violence but also idyllic. Such shifts signaled a cultural transformation in people’s perception of the two intermingled worlds, previously thought of as and fought to be segregated.99

d.) Surrogated Space: Othered Dormitories and the City’s Unstable Domesticity

The fast-paced, or roaring, dynamic culture of the 1920s, in Dos Passos’s estimation, indirectly destabilized people’s understanding of the domestic sphere. Though the domestic spaces within the city were previously fought over as places of security and sanctuary by many Progressives, societal shifts began to identify the home as temporary or in flux as a consequence of the city’s changing demographics, developing transportation mechanisms, and both commercial and domestic building booms. Dos Passos dots Manhattan Transfer with such associations, and historically as well as biographically speaking, Dos Passos’s own life serves as a source of such instances as well. For example, both Robert Butler and Townsend Luddington100 highlight the “unusual mobility of Dos Passos’s life” (Butler 82). Looking particularly at Dos

99 For instance, one need only think of Jacob Riis and other reformers who worked to increase the city’s “green spaces” due to their convictions in such spaces therapeutic abilities against the concrete jungle’s polluting effects.
100 Townsend Luddington’s John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey estimation of Dos Passos’s early childhood mirrors that of Robert Butler.
Passos’s early life,\textsuperscript{101} Butler specifies, “Literally born in a hotel, he spent his childhood always on the move with his mother as the two bounced back and forth between the United States and Europe” (82).\textsuperscript{102} Clearly, influenced by his own experiences as well as his observations of the city, Dos Passos associates the 1920s conception of domesticity with temporality, mobility, and instability.

The young Jimmie Herf and his mother arrive in New York City and quickly establishes residency in a Manhattan hotel. As Blanche Gelfant states, “the return to a homeland in which the hero has no home is epitomized in Jimmy Herf’s arrival in New York, after years of travel abroad, on the Fourth of July. . . . Like a holiday tourist, he is shown New York’s landmarks, the Statue of Liberty, Brooklyn Bridge, Broadway, the Flatiron Building, and like the tourist he comes at the end of the day to a strange hotel where he lies ‘hemmed in by tall nudging wardrobes and dressers’ in a ‘tall, unfriendly room’” (135). Shortly thereafter, Jimmy loses his mother, a symbol of domesticity, due to a stroke and declining health while staying in a hotel room (Dos Passos 71-73). Consequently, he is socially and psychologically set adrift, not having any of the traditional elements to anchor him domestically – a mother or a stable home. By having Jimmy and his mother live in a city hotel, Dos Passos develops the conventional link of

\textsuperscript{101} Alfred Kazin details this period of Dos Passos’s life with further specificity by stating, “Born in a Chicago hotel room in 1896, Dos Passos was the illegitimate son of a 42-year-old Southern gentlewoman, Lucy Sprigg Madison, and the 51-year-old John Randolph Dos Passos, who was a married man unable to divorce his Catholic wife . . . The father, a great figure in respectable business and political circles of the time, tried to hide his son’s existence. Mother and son were forced to live abroad, and the son remained John Roderigo Madison for two years after his parents finally were married” (156).

\textsuperscript{102} In light of this biographical sketch and its underlying accents of instability and temporality, Kazin notes that, when at Harvard, Dos Passos submitted an assignment titled “Trains: Fragments of Memoires” to his composition professor, in which Dos Passos characterized the concept of travel as “the trembling joy that is akin to terror” (158).
the feminine with domesticity but complicates this association with a sense of instability and fleetingness signified both by the mother’s death and the setting of a hotel room instead of a stand-alone house. Additionally, after Jimmy’s mother suffers the stroke, his aunt, Aunt Emily, brings him to live with her and her family, and Dos Passos uses great detail to describe Jimmy’s new, albeit temporary, residence:

> There were pillars of pink marble in the lower hall of Aunt Emily’s apartmenthouse and the elevator boy wore a chocolate livery with brass buttons and the elevator was … decorated with mirrors. Aunt Emily stopped before a wide mahogany door on the seventh floor. . . . At the end of the hall was a leaded window through which you could see the Hudson. . . . In the room where the piano was the rug was thick and mossy, the wallpaper was yellow with silvershiny roses between the cream woodwork and the gold frames of oilpaintings of woods and people in a gondola and a fat cardinal drinking. (83)

Dos Passos details the opulence and sophistication of the domestic space. An emphasis on such lavishness goes not without reason. Betsy Klimasmith writes,

> From moderate walk-up flats to high-rise luxury “apartment hotels” as they were called, apartments became the trademark urban dwellings in New York, lining the streets, altering the skyline, and introducing a mode of domesticity that radically transformed the ways in which New Yorkers … conceived of the urban home . . . . Some of the alarm over apartments stemmed from the fact that most nineteenth-century New Yorkers associated multi-family dwellings with the dread tenement – a spatial arrangement considered unsuitable for the middle class. . . . To attract middle-class tenants who needed reassurance that apartments were not tenements, developers cited the cleanliness, convenience, and classiness that characterized the gleaming towers. (131-2)

However, the effect of such luxury does not create a feeling of establishment, permanence, or a stable history, as associated with the families of the Old Guard portrayed in *The House of Mirth*. Instead, the effect becomes one of irony when Aunt Emily’s daughter, Maise, responds to Jimmy’s question about the trains in the nearby train yard with, “I think they are horrid. Daddy
says we’re going to move on account of the noise and smoke” (84). In short, Dos Passos’s “apartmenthouse,” although luxurious, by no means resembles the Fifth Avenue mansions of Wharton’s New York.

Furthermore, the apartment’s impermanence inhibits it from providing some of the basic qualities often associated with the domestic space: community, tranquility, and refuge. During his stay at Aunt Emily and Uncle Jeff’s apartment, Jimmie witnesses an unexpected visit from Emily’s drunken cousin, Uncle Joe. Upon arriving, Joe states, “Why Emily you must… er… excuse me; I felt an evening… er… round the family hearth… er… would be… er… er… beneficial. You understand, the refining influence of the home” (88). Joe’s interruption, his condition, and his overall behavior so upset Aunt Emily and Uncle Jeff that his sentiments about the “refining influences of the home” can only be read ironically.

Dos Passos suggests that 1920s New York City stands as a city of change in his analysis and assessment of the city’s modern mode of domestic life and the social spaces increasingly associated with domesticity found throughout Manhattan Transfer: the hotel room and apartment building. Dos Passos characterizes these spaces as temporary, unstable, and/or in-flux – all of which add to the novel’s theme of city space and overall urbanity as chaotic and disorientating. After all, the redistribution of domesticity from Manhattan to the outer boroughs, as mentioned earlier, did not lead to construction of many large mansions like the homes detailed in Wharton, but thousands of “apartments [that] pushed aside the sprawling farm communities of the previous century” (Gates 66). As evidence of both Manhattan’s role as the city’s center of commerce and the increasingly unstable, or at best temporary, nature of the city’s domestic spaces, Zlotnick
points out, “[i]n a decade that put a premium on bigness [the 1920s], several huge department stores were built along Fifth Avenue” (111) consequently relocating the avenue’s former inhabitants further northward to “luxury apartment houses [that] had been constructed during the postwar building boom” (111).

*Manhattan Transfer* contains many instances of temporariness or instability in regards to the city’s domestic spaces. After leaving John Oglethorpe, Ellen Thatcher, having nowhere else to go, moves into a hotel. As such, Ellen’s life is in a state of transition, as is her sense of home. Clark explains that, “[h]aving abandoned Oglethorpe, Ellen checks into a hotel feeling ebullient at first, then terrified” (101). In fact, Dos Passos describes her being “hungry and alone. The bed was a raft on which she was marooned alone, always alone, afloat on a growling ocean. A shudder went down her spine. She drew her knees up closer to her chin” (142). Clark suggests that Dos Passos employs elements of nature as “an expressionistic image to note how far Ellen is divorced from her own natural self” (101). However, in wedding Ellen’s psychological state with her surroundings, Dos Passos’s choice of metaphor colors not only Ellen’s reaction to her situation but also exemplifies her hotel room as a space in which she finds herself adrift and unstable. Such, Dos Passos implies, is the experience of practically all dwellers in the megatropolis.

**The Ghost in the Machine: Manhattan Transfer and the Mechanics of the Modern(ist) City**

Various scholarly interpretations present Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* as a Modernist archetype with its fragmentary narrative and multi-charactered consciousness. Although such assessments accurately apply, *Manhattan Transfer* can be read as a narrative less
tied to such literary inventions and far more invested in exploring the complicated tensions developing in America’s urban spaces, and specifically New York City, throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century. Within this era, Dos Passos’s images of the city’s technological and architectural developments - embodied in the corporate skyscrapers, luxury hotels, and domesticated apartments - and their modernizing effects on the city’s workforce and familial lifestyles allow for a historically grounded and critically oriented reading of *Manhattan Transfer*. Consequently, Dos Passos’s questioning of these supposed advancements give his text a revolutionary flavor. Supporting such an interpretation, one need only look at Dos Passos’s similarly questioning treatment of the city’s proliferating mass media culture and its commercial connections to the profit-producing world of capitalism within *Manhattan Transfer*.

The solidification of lower Manhattan as the country’s financial center, started in the 1840s and 1850s as noted in my analysis of Melville, dug its roots in even deeper as the “vertical city” of the city’s skyscraper blossomed high above the city, beckoning greater amounts of commerce to the city. Conversely, the city’s concept of the home pulled up its roots almost entirely, Dos Passos notes, with a proliferation of hotels and apartment-houses increasingly dotting the city’s layout throughout the 1920s. As such, in *Manhattan Transfer*, the strife of the city’s inhabitants was neither one of class identity, as it was with Melville’s struggling middle-class office workers; nor was it of cultural identity, as it was with Crane’s rebellious Lower East Side immigrants. Instead, Dos Passos’s characters at times wrestle with the effects of the city out of a concern for a struggle to save their very humanity.
CHAPTER V

The Post-War Sanctuaries and Strictures of Harlem in McKay’s Homecoming Novel

Take me home to Harlem, Mister Ship!
Take me home to the brown gals waiting for the brown boys
that done show their mettle over there.
- Claude McKay
(Home to Harlem, 1928)\textsuperscript{103}

Though relatively insubstantial compared to the population surges of European immigrants to New York City throughout the 1800s, a significant African American presence existed in New York City prior to the 1920s.\textsuperscript{104} From generation to generation dating back to before the Civil War, the city’s wards and neighborhoods claimed small pockets of black New Yorkers, the numbers of which rose or fell based on migratory patterns driven by economic, political, or other cultural factors. Prior to 1860, for example, as Marcy Sacks writes,

the majority of black people living in the city resided in the lower tip of the island in the infamous Five Point neighborhood, known then as the most depraved of the city’s neighborhoods. . . . From this notorious district, the black population escaped to Greenwich Village. . . . Italian immigration drove blacks still farther uptown into the Tenderloin district, extending from Twenty-fourth Street to Forty-second Street. . . . At century’s end, the San Juan Hill district, stretching between Sixtieth and Sixty-fourth streets and Tenth and Eleventh avenues, claimed the bulk of the city’s black population. (5-6)

Indeed, New York City’s Black population, a demographic who “paid the highest rents in the city but had the smallest number of organizations to serve their needs … and received the least

\textsuperscript{104} According to Mary White Ovington, “With gradual emancipation and the cessation of the sale of slaves, the Negroes numerically became unimportant in the city. In 1800 they constituted 10.5 per cent of the population. Half a century later, while they had doubled their numbers, the immense influx of foreign immigrants brought their proportion down to 2.7 per cent. In 1850 and 1860 their positive as well as their relative number decreased, and it was not until twenty years ago [from 1911] that they began to show some gain” (5).
support from reformers” (Sacks 5), struggled throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to find a place of their own within the city.

Eventually though, African Americans from inside and outside of New York City identified the northern neighborhood of Harlem as a place of their own, perhaps unexpectedly given its history. In the early 1880s, for instance, James Weldon Johnson visited New York as a child and recalled Harlem as “a region … inhabited largely by squatters and goats” (Sacks 1), though, in reality, it constituted a rather homogeneous residential community of upper-class whites. However, like other parts of the city, Harlem changed over the years. Harlem went from a neighborhood housing some 50,000 Blacks in 1914 to one which 165,000 called home in 1930 (1). In other words, as Robert Dowling writes,

Unlike the comparatively diminutive black Tenderloin of the 1890s, Harlem occupied a rectangular area of approximately forty-five city blocks: from One Hundred and Thirtieth Street to One Hundred and Forty-fifth south to north and from Fifth Avenue to Eighth east to west. Though the numbers of African-American residents uptown were widely scattered, this section was visibly a black city within the much larger, predominantly white one. About two-thirds of New York’s African-Americans lived within its borders. (140)

Geographically at least, by the 1920s, if not earlier, the Black population of New York had by and large found a home in Harlem. But, the question of defining a representative African American identity and assessing its identity’s relationship to the city’s urban environment as well as to the wider American, and thereby predominantly White, socio-political landscape embodies a far more complicated prospect.

105 Named “Neiu Haarlem” (or New Land) by its Dutch founders, Harlem started out as a rural, isolated village but eventually came to be absorbed into the city with the construction and expansion of railroad services in the 1830s.
Addressing the difficulty in clearly defining the African American identity, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., explains, “[t]he problem … can perhaps be usefully stated in the irony implicit in the attempt to posit a ‘black self’ in the very Western languages in which blackness itself is a figure of absence, a negation” (“Criticism in the Jungle” 7). Gates elaborates with:

Ethnocentrism and “logocentrism” are profoundly interrelated in Western discourse as old as the Phaedrus of Plato, in which one finds one of the earliest figures of blackness as an absence, a figure of negation. If Keats called the Enlightenment in Europe “the grand march of intellect,” then logocentrism and ethnocentrism marched together in an attempt to deprive the black human being of even the potential to create art, to imagine a world and to figure it. (7)

As Gates suggests, Western cultural traditions in general have often allied blackness with a sense of absence, either an absence of value or of meaning. As such, by association, Gates argues, such traditions have largely viewed the Black figure as absent from the artistic stage, unable to contribute any significant meaning or value to its cultural production. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, America’s cultural history and its dominantly Anglo-centric perspective, with few exceptions, carried on this tradition. However, within the first quarter of the twentieth century, as Gates suggests, “Harlem” and the Harlem Renaissance associated with the neighborhood were

invented by those writers and artists … determined to transform the stereotypical image of Negro Americans as ex-slaves, members of an inherently inferior race – biologically and environmentally unfit for mechanized modernity and its cosmopolitan forms of fluid identity – into an image of a race of culture-bearers. (“Harlem on Our Minds” 10)

In the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance; however, Gates also observes particular pitfalls plaguing the city’s African American population. Gates explains, “What does [Gates’s emphasis]
seem curious to me about the Harlem Renaissance is that its creation occurred precisely as Harlem was turning into the great American slum” (11). At this time in Harlem’s history, “[t]he death rate was 42 percent higher than in other parts of the city. The infant mortality rate in 1928 was twice as high as in the rest of New York. Four times as many people died of tuberculosis as in the white population. The unemployment rate … was 50 percent” (11). This is ironic given that many of the Harlem Renaissance writers, Gates argues, attempted “to create the fiction of Harlem as a model of civility and black bourgeois respectability” (11).

Many hoped to see Harlem, as Alain Locke’s opening remarks in The New Negro: An Interpretation suggest, as “a cosmopolitan capital” (quoted in Lowney 416) for the African American citizenry. To achieve this, according to David Davis, “new works of literature by African-American writers – the movement known as the New Negro Renaissance or the Harlem Renaissance – projected an image of defiant racial identity” (477). A representative list of individuals and works must include intellectuals and activists such as Alain Locke, Marcus Garvey, and W. E. B. Du Bois, and writings such as Jean Toomer’s Cane (1923), Carl Van Vechten’s Nigger Heaven (1926), Langston Hughes’s The Weary Blues (1926) and Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927), Rudolph Fisher’s The Walls of Jericho (1928), Nella Larsen’s Quicksand (1928), and James Weldon Johnson’s Black Manhattan (1930). Many scholars view Claude

106 Gates addresses, in particular, James Weldon Johnson’s Black Manhattan (1930) and its characterizations of Harlem which Johnson describes with, “the Negro’s situation in Harlem is without precedent in all his history in New York; never before has he been so securely anchored, never before has he owned the land, never before has he had so well established a community life” (36).

107 Speaking in broader terms but clearly with an eye to the Harlem Renaissance, Sidney Bremer writes, “some of New York’s most powerful ethnic minority writers bravely claimed the city – at least, their neighborhood microcosm of the city – as a home for the transient outcasts of American society” (48).
McKay’s first published novel, *Home to Harlem* (1928),\(^{108}\) as one of these texts as well. However, unlike many of these texts – and in line with the irony noted by Gates – McKay’s novel does not seek to establish a Black bourgeois respectability as a counter to the stereotypes and social conditions troubling the African American population in the 1920s. Instead, *Home to Harlem* complicates, subverts, and ultimately revolts against the overly simplistic and dismissive Anglo-centric cultural understandings that Gates references by problematizing the establishment of an established Black bourgeoisie identity.

Given McKay’s attempted war on two fronts against the imposing circumstances of many African Americans in the 1920s and the call to action by many Black writers against these circumstances, many critics struggle to agree on the novel’s true merit. Robert Dowling, for example, concludes that “*Home to Harlem* represents black Manhattan as a formidable region with an effectual culture” (166). But, Marcus Garvey’s 1928 review of McKay’s novel suggests, “The time has come to boycott such Negro authors whom we may fairly designate as ‘literary prostitutes.’ We must make them understand that we are not going to stand for their insults indulged in to suit prejudiced white people who desire to hold the Negro up to contempt and ridicule” (358). According to John Lowney, W. E. B. Du Bois, perhaps most famously, chastised McKay “for catering to ‘that prurient demand on the part of white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of that utter licentiousness which conventional civilization holds white folks back from enjoying,’ a demand that McKay met amply with his scenes of ‘drunkenness, fighting, lascivious sexual promiscuity and utter absence of restraint’” (413). Given *Home to Harlem*’s commercial

\(^{108}\) In 1925, McKay wrote but never published *Color Scheme*, a novel he subsequently abandoned and later destroyed.
success, many of the initial reactions to McKay’s novel characterize the novel as antagonistic to African American progress. However, recent critical perspectives of *Home to Harlem* have reassessed the novel’s positive value as a cultural commodity. Joan Zlotnick suggests that McKay’s “emphasis is on the good times to be found in Harlem – on what he calls its ‘contagious fever’ and he explains how those ‘wearied of the pleasures of the big white world, wanted something new – the primitive joy of Harlem’” (134). Similar to Zlotnick, Catherine Rottenberg compares McKay’s *Home to Harlem* to Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (1930) and concludes that the novels paint a vivid picture of blacks and Jews who have not made it in US society. Moreover, the texts present complex male protagonists who are resistant to and often contemptuous of dominant US culture. These protagonists inhabit the marginal spaces of the already marginalized Harlem and the Lower East Side and are not portrayed as aspiring to integrate into mainstream middle-class US society. (119-120)

Speaking specifically of McKay’s portrayal of Harlem, Rottenberg explains, “Harlem is construed as a positive all-black space whose very ‘blackness’ seems to have a certain radical potential to counter dominant white society and engender political renewal” (120). Although such interpretations aptly illustrate the positive and celebratory elements inherent to McKay’s novel, they often overlook the ways that the novel explores complex transformations at work in post-WWI New York City and how such transformations impacted African American cultural practices of Harlem. *Home to Harlem* reads as resistant not only to dominant Anglo-American cultural trends in the first quarter of the twentieth century but also to the bourgeois bias of the

---

109 *Home to Harlem* was the only book from the Harlem Renaissance to earn reviews in the New York Times, World, Sun, and The Bookman magazine as well as make it onto the New York Herald Tribune’s best seller list (Bronz 83).
Harlem Renaissance voiced by, amongst others, DuBois. McKay organizes this dual defiance by exploring the constructive impact of racial unity that the Harlem culture afforded returning African American veterans and also illustrating the destructive dynamics many of those same veterans brought back with them from their experiences overseas. Furthermore, Home to Harlem assesses how economic developments within the city promoted a redistribution of social power between the genders, showing how women enjoyed it even as men within the city’s African American community were disempowered.

a.) Apathy in Military Service and Affinity along Metropolitan Streets

Scholars commonly cite the return of African American soldiers from World War I as the most widely held starting point for the Harlem Renaissance. According to Daylanne English:

The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature, for example, offers 1919 as the first year of the Harlem Renaissance. Historian David Levering Lewis concurs, identifying the “authentic beginnings” of the Harlem Renaissance with the 1919 return of soldiers. But when The Norton Anthology, Lewis, Nathan Huggins, and others date the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance from African-American soldiers’ return from the Great War, they are also necessarily masculinizing its genealogy. (811-812)

Although I concede English’s point that to emphasize the soldiers’ return as an influential benchmark to Harlem’s cultural development masculinizes it and ignores the obvious female artists and activists who contributed to the evolving Harlem culture, the returning Black veterans and their migration to Harlem deserve credit as an influential factor in the city’s shifting social terrain, which merits a closer look. Surprisingly, few critics have addressed how this particular

---

110 For a more general treatment of the relationship between WWI and American literature of the 1920s, not specifically focused upon the Harlem Renaissance writers, see Keith Gandal’s The Gun and The Pen (2008).

111 English refers here to Lewis’s When Harlem Was in Vogue (1981).
demographic of African Americans, given their experience prior to the Great War and lack of experiences abroad during the Great War, shaped the physical and cultural environs of 1920s Harlem. McKay’s *Home to Harlem*, I would argue, given its characters’ social interactions and their socially constructed spaces, illustrates such activities.

By the mid-1920s, “Harlem presented,” for many African Americans, “a city of urbanity and urban sophistication, particularly as this defines a race capital in Harlem in opposition to the rural or Southern history of African-Americans” (Balshaw 16). Indeed, to put Harlem into a contrasting context, as Stephen H. Bronz writes, “The first two decades of the twentieth century were difficult for the Negro. By 1900, Jim Crow legislation and an unwritten caste system were entrenched in the South” (9). As such, during these years, the average African American “had little chance of availing himself [*sic*] of America’s economic opportunities. . . . [and] even less chance of developing self-pride and maturity, for the debilitating caste system, carried over full force from slavery days, all but compelled him to act like Uncle Tom” (9). As the twentieth century progressed and America entered into World War I, many Americans wondered how such an event, one that created key transformations along economic, industrial, and cultural lines, would impact racial outlooks and interactions in America. Many among the African American population in particular hoped that the war would serve as an opportunity for African American men to prove their worth, to bolster racial pride within African American communities, and to set race relations in America on a more constructive course. Others, however, feared African Americans’ involvement in World War I would do nothing or might even worsen already-troubled relations between Blacks and Whites in America.
By the time World War I drew to a close, prevailing attitudes towards and the conditions of African Americans in many parts of the United States had only grown more disagreeable. The connotation assigned by many Whites to African Americans associated with the Great War often made matters worse and more overtly hostile. For example, when Wilbur Little, an African American, returned home to Blakely, Georgia, after his military service in World War I, a group of White men who met him at the train station forced him to take off his uniform. Little ignored the group’s warnings to never wear the uniform in public, and, several days later, a mob lynched him (Davis 477). Likewise, Chad Williams recounts the story of Charles Lewis, an African American veteran honorably discharged after the war. Shortly after returning to his home in Tyler Station, Kentucky, Lewis was arrested on suspicion of robbery and resisting arrest, and after being transferred to the nearby town of Hickman, Lewis was pulled from his cell by a crowd of masked men and hanged from a tree outside the jail. Williams continues, “Daybreak on December 16 brought with it the chilling sight of Lewis’s suspended body, viewed by hundreds of white spectators, relieved that this ‘very dangerous character’ had been disposed of” (224).

Williams concludes,

Scarcely a month after the conclusion of the war, a war in which African Americans fought to make the world “safe for democracy,” the lynching of Lewis challenged the meaning of their sacrifice. As the New York Evening Sun questioned in its report of the incident, “And the point is made that every loyal American negro who has served with the colors may fairly ask: ‘Is this our reward for what we have done?’” (224)

These and similarly tragic events in the years following the Great War, according to Davis, “sent the message to all African American soldiers returning from the war that their sacrifices for the
cause of liberty in Europe would not lead to racial equality in America” (477). Davis notes, albeit ironically, that at the start of America’s involvement in WWI, civil rights leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois supported African Americans’ participation in military service. “Du Bois,” Davis explains, “much like Frederick Douglass during the Civil War, saw the war as an opportunity for African-Americans to gain civil rights through military service. African-American soldiers wearing the uniform while fighting and dying for the cause of liberty… would make an unassailable case for racial equality” (480). Unfortunately, as in the cases of Wilbur Little and Charles Lewis, the image of an African American male in uniform, representative to some of a hoped-for nationalistic symbol of racial uplift, stood to others as an abomination in need of being torn down and wiped away.

Horrific incidents such as those of Wilbur Little and Charles Lewis serve as the context for literary works such as Langston Hughes’s “The Colored Soldier,” in which Hughes adopts the persona of a returning WWI vet. Hughes writes,

 My brother died in France – but I came back  
We were just two colored boys, brown and black,  
Who joined up to fight for the U.S.A.  
When the Nation called us that mighty day.  
We were sent to training camp, then overseas –  
And me and my brother were happy as you please  
Thinking we were fighting for Democracy’s true reign  
And that our dark blood would wipe away the stain  
Of prejudice, and hate, and the false color line –  
And give us the rights that are yours and mine. . . .  
It’s a lie! It’s a lie! Every word they said.  
And it’s better a thousand times you’re in France dead.  
For here in the South there’s no votes and no right.  
And I’m still just a “nigger” in America tonight. (147-148)
In other words, as evidenced in the Little and Lewis cases and understood from Hughes’s disappointed tone, “the lynched African-American veteran has functioned to … highlight the depths of postwar racial injustice” (Williams 225). W. E. B. Du Bois’s “Returning Soldiers” captures the emotional confusions and ethical conflicts enveloping many returning African American soldiers such as Wilbur Little. Du Bois writes,

we fought gladly and to the last drop of blood; for America and her highest ideals, we fought in far-off hope; for the dominant southern oligarchy entrenched in Washington, we fought in bitter resignation. For the America that represents and gloats in lynching, disenfranchisement, caste, brutality and devilish insult – for this, in the hateful upturning and mixing of things, we were forced by vindictive fate to fight, also. (4)

Du Bois’s tone captures his disappointment and defiance. As Du Bois regretfully watched the African Americans’ military service fail to work as leverage towards civil rights, he maintained an attitude of resistance, adamant against allowing conditions to return to the pre-war status quo.

Claude McKay’s early poetry clearly possesses a comparable tone of resistance. The opening eight lines of McKay’s most famous sonnet, “If We Must Die,” published in the summer of 1919 read,

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead! (290)

Similar to the tone of Du Bois’s essay, McKay’s tone is clearly defiant. These lines, in particular, speak of an awareness of the dehumanizing effects of past race relations in America yet also
suggest the possibility for a new, though still difficult and challenging, future. Mark Helbling suggests that McKay’s verse in “If We Must Die” epitomizes “a testament to McKay’s own commitment to forge through art a new social and political awareness” (51). Indeed, McKay’s poem speaks of a constant threat surrounding and menacing the “we,” McKay and his fellow African Americans, and the need to resist this threat’s attempts to dehumanize them and diminish their potential. The question then becomes, how does Home to Harlem address the dangers, disenfranchisement, and disappointment experienced by many African Americans in postwar America and captured in these poetic works by McKay, DuBois, and Hughes?

In Home to Harlem, McKay sketches how the returning African American soldiers’ disappointing experiences and defiant reactions influenced the developing Harlem culture of the 1920s, a micro-culture within the macro-metropolis. McKay’s “social and political awareness” lies in his identifying Harlem as a space of what Rottenberg calls “subculturality” (120). In its most positive light, the residents of McKay’s Harlem, “rather than dwell on their marginality or strive for a higher status, c… revel in the life available to them. This can be read as a rejection of the mores and norms of dominant white society and an attempt to carve out an alternative mode or way of being in the world” (121). Although conceding and wishing to delineate further McKay’s positive depictions of Harlem, I would urge a more complicated reading of the novel, one in which the celebratory and defiant attributes of its social spaces lay the ground work for far more negative and problematic cultural outcomes.

---

112 In establishing a specific definition of “subculturality,” Rottenberg writes of “a liminal space in which a group of marginalized subjects produce and circulate a set of practices and norms that are at variance with and sometimes in active opposition to the dominant white culture that surrounds them” (120).
Although many of the civil rights leaders held conflicted feelings about African Americans’ involvement in World War I, others expressed an optimism to, as McKay expresses, “show their mettle over there” (Home to Harlem 9). As Mjagkij explains, “Immediately following America’s entry into the war, 4,000 black volunteers enlisted in the Army, filling the ranks of the four segregated all-black Regular Army units. Since it was Army policy not to accept black men for service in white regiments, the War Department suspended any further black enlistments” (52). As a result, at the start of America’s involvement in the war, many black men were turned away at recruitment offices, but those who successfully enlisted seemed eager for, if not energized by, the opportunity to fight in the A.E.F. and thereby prove their loyalty and patriotism as Americans.

However, such opportunities proved quickly fleeting, at best, and the enlisted Blacks’ optimistic energies and enthusiasm, the U.S. military feared, could turn subversive. The Military Intelligence Branch commissioned an investigation, headed up by Major Walter H. Loving, a retired African American bandmaster, into the morale of Black soldiers, which concluded that “[v]arious charges and allegations of unfair treatment have been made by colored officers and enlisted men. . . . These all have their origin in the conviction that colored soldiers do not invariably receive the same treatment as the white soldiers” (quoted in Mjagkij 175). Loving’s primary finding centered on the fact that “many colored service battalion [sic] have received no military training at all” (175). Pressured by organizations like the NAACP, the U.S. military sought to pacify such criticism with various efforts, but the experience of the typical African
American soldier in WWI fell far short of fulfilling his optimistic desires. For instance, according to Davis:

The War Department [offered] modest concessions, including the formation of segregated combat units, a segregated officers’ training camp at Ft. Des Moines, and an integrated conscription process. . . . The vast majority of African-American soldiers were assigned to the service of supply – labor battalions modeled after Southern chain gangs – with the exception of two combat units, the 93rd Division, a National Guard unit that fought under French command, and the 92nd Division, a unit of African-American draftees that fought under American command. (478)

Overall, as Bronz explains, “After training, virtually every Negro sailor worked as a stevedore or messman, and most Negro soldiers had non-combat, manual jobs. Some officers even distributed warnings to French civilians to stay away from Negro troops, claiming that all were likely to be rapists” (11). Clearly, with this sort of discriminatory treatment, the average African American’s initial optimism for going to war and the hoped-for resultant reward of respect and equality deflated into experiences of disappointment and isolation.

Jake, McKay’s protagonist in Home to Harlem, embodies the characteristic African American soldier both in his expectations before arriving in Europe and in his experiences upon arriving there. According to McKay, Jake
sailed for Brest with a happy chocolate company. Jake had his daydreams of going over the top. But his company was held at Brest. Jake toted lumber – boards, planks, posts, rafters – for the hundreds of huts that were built . . . to house the United States soldiers. Jake was disappointed. He had enlisted to fight. For what else had he been sticking a bayonet into the guts of a stuffed man and aiming

---

113 Stressing Bronz’s choice of words (“virtually every”), I should concede here Ann Douglas’s statistical point that “proportionately more black soldiers than white lost their lives; 14.4 percent of the enlisted blacks, compared to 6.3 percent of the whites” (87).
114 A town along the Northwest coast of France.
bullets straight into a bull’s eye? Toting planks and getting into rows with his white comrades at the Bal Musette were not adventure. (4)

Jake summarizes his military experiences overseas and reasons for returning home by explaining, “I was way, way ovah there after Democracy and them boches, and when I couldn’t find one or the other, I jest turned mah black moon from the A. E. F.” (130). Likewise, Zeddy Plummer, a fellow African American veteran of the Great War with whom Jake reunites upon his return to post-war Harlem, responds to Jake’s inquiry: “Didn’t them Germans git you scrambling over the top?” with “Nevah see’d them, buddy. None a them showed the goose-step around Brest” (18-19). Together, Zeddy and Jake reminisce about the experiences abroad, which involved “the everlasting unloading and unloading of ships and the toting of lumber” (21).

Zeddy, in particular, reminisces about

[t]he house of the Young Men’s Christian Association, overlooking the harbor, where colored soldiers were not wanted. . . . And the cemetery, just beyond the old medieval gate of the town, where he left his second-best buddy. ‘Poor boh. Was always belly-aching for a chance over the top. Nevah got it nor nothing. Not even a baid in the hospital. Strong like a bull, yet just knocked in the dark through raw cracker cussedness. (21-22)

Both Jake and Zeddy’s reminiscences capture the disappointing discrimination and racial violence that many of the war’s African American combatants experienced, effects resulting from the policy decisions of the same government and military these soldiers were trying to protect and gain protection under. By early 1918, as Arthur Barbeau and Florette Henri write, the War Department authorized the organization of black draftees into labor battalions of 3,500 men each, without the earlier injunction to seek volunteers. By that time it was the clear and consistent military policy to make practically all

115 French slang used by Allied soldiers for Germans during WWI, loosely translated as “rascals.”
black draftees “laborers in uniform.” They would work on the docks, clean up (“police”) the camps, haul coal, wood, and stone, dig ditches, take care of livestock, dispose of garbage, and care for animals. In some instances they were trained for more technical duties as drivers or mechanics, but they ended up loading, digging, and performing general fatigue duties. (93-94)

As Barbeau and Florette demonstrate, Jake and Zeddy’s wartime experiences were typical for the common African American soldier.

What, if anything, would become the focal point of these optimistic-turned-upset energies held by the homecoming African American vets? As a result of his disappointment and malaise, Jake reflects, “Why did I ever enlist . . . ? Why did I want to mix mahself up in a white folks’ war? It ain’t ever was any of black folks’ affair. Niggers am evah always such fools, anyhow. Always thinking they’ve got something to do with white folks’ business” (8). As Jake’s thoughts suggest, African Americans who returned from the war and reflected on their mistreatment within the armed forces grew increasingly concerned as to whether or not such mistreatment would continue, if not escalate, once state-side. As Mjagkij elaborates,

Wilson – the first Southern president since the Civil War – had permitted the deliberate and systematic segregation of African-Americans in civil service jobs as well as the introduction of a flood of racist bills into Congress. Moreover, his administration had made no efforts to stop discrimination, end mob violence, or overturn the Army’s policy of segregating black troops. . . . The war, they [African Americans] concluded, was a white man’s war from which African-Americans had nothing to gain. (xx)\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{116} Further illustrating such points, a propaganda leaflet dropped behind A.E.F. lines titled “To the Colored Soldiers of the United States Army” reads, “Hello boys, what are you doing over here? . . . Of course, some white folks and the lying English-American papers told you that the Germans ought to be wiped out for the sake of humanity and Democracy. What is Democracy? Personal freedom; all citizens enjoying the same rights socially . . . Do you enjoy the same rights as the white people in America . . . or are you not rather treated over there as second class citizens?” (Mjagkij 177).
Mjagkij continues, “when World War I ended … African-Americans quickly realized that the nation was not willing to grant them civil rights. As the military demobilized, many black workers lost their jobs to returning white veterans, lynchings increased, and numerous race riots erupted in cities throughout the country” (xxii-xxiii). Overall, African Americans discovered that the optimistic social, civil, and economic outcomes they had hoped for as a result of America’s involvement in World War I would not manifest. To further illustrate this point, Ann Douglas explicates, “at the war’s conclusion, the American government refused to let its Negro soldiers participate in the victory parade down the Champs-Elysees in Paris … black American soldiers were not included in the frieze depicting the Great War’s troops on France’s Pantheon de la Guerre. It was time, much of white America clearly believed, to put blacks back in their place” (87). In this light, many writers and artists looked to Harlem and its growing density of African American citizens as a potential bastion of opportunities and optimism in post-war America. However, as my analysis demonstrates, McKay suggests that the defiant aggression many African American soldiers anticipated unleashing on some remote battlefield, but which was denied them, would follow them home and come to poison the optimism and confidence found within many of Harlem’s social spaces.

b.) Defiant Drives Deferred and ‘Homo Homini Lupus’ Along the Streets of Harlem

The many Black soldiers returning from WWI as well as other African Americans migrating north and fleeing the disenfranchisement they typically experienced within the post-Reconstruction southern culture successfully established a significant Black culture in 1920s Harlem. McKay conveys a clear sense of Harlem as a repository for African American unity and
affirmation. For instance, Lowney sees Jake’s settling in Harlem as inspired not so much by the “mythic pull of Harlem as a black Mecca” but more of a “more pragmatic need to escape the ‘white folks’ business,’ to find refuge among black migrants like himself” (422). Additionally, shortly after returning to Harlem, Jake “went for a promenade on Seventh Avenue between One Hundred and Thirty-fifth and One Hundred and Fortieth Streets. He thrilled to Harlem. His blood was hot … Seventh Avenue was nice, a little too nice that night” (10). For McKay, Jake is not alone in being stirred with such positive reactions to Harlem’s opportunities. McKay writes, “Lenox Avenue was vivid. The saloons were bright, crowded with drinking men jammed tight around the bars, treating one another and telling the incidents of the day. Longshoremen in overalls with hooks, Pullman porters holding their bags, waiters, elevator boys. Liquor-rich laughter, banana-ripe laughter” (204). Even McKay’s characterization of Ray, who does not identify overtly or positively with Harlem, demonstrates similar reflections. McKay writes,

Any upset – a terror-breathing, Negro-baiting headline in a metropolitan newspaper or the news of a human bonfire in Dixie – could make him [Ray] miserable and despairingly despondent like an injured child. While any flash of beauty or wonder might lift him happier than a god, … The warm, rich-brown face of a Harlem girl seeking romance … a late wet night on Lenox Avenue, when all forms are soft-shadowy and the street gleams softly like a still, dim stream under the misted yellow lights. (266)

---

117 In contrast, in a pre-war and pre-Harlem Renaissance conception of New York as a whole, James Weldon Johnson’s “Ex-colored man” suggests that, “New York City is the most fatally fascinating thing in America. She sits like a great witch at the gate of the country, showing her alluring white face and hiding her crooked hands and feet under the folds of her wide garments – constantly enticing thousands from far within, and tempting those who come from across the seas to go no farther. And all these become the victims of her caprice. Some she at once crushes beneath her cruel feet; others she condemns to a fate like that of galley slaves; a few she favors and fondles, riding them high on the bubbles of fortune; then with a sudden breath she blows the bubbles out and laughs mockingly as she watches them fall” (36).
For Jake and Ray, Harlem resembles a sanctuary, one where African Americans come together, at least at first, in a spirit of support and camaraderie. In other words, Harlem, as Rottenberg cites, “which is described as a uniquely black space filled with places of entertainment and houses of pleasure, signifies and seems to make possible – to a large degree – the good life” (121). As such, Rottenberg concludes, “the descriptions of Harlem in McKay’s text are almost always positive” (123), and Gunter Lenz writes, “McKay describes the physical presence of Harlem and its avenues and streets as well as the great variety of its inhabitants in many colorful passages of the novel” (325). However, as Home to Harlem develops and runs counter to the intentions of the Harlem Renaissance movement, the communal and sanctuary-like culture of McKay’s Harlem grows problematically restricted, if not claustrophobic. As a result, the communal turns competitive, and the city’s cultural vibrancy becomes sallow.

McKay found himself at odds with many of the torchbearers of the Harlem Renaissance partly because writings such as Home to Harlem subverted what many 1920s civil right leaders believed should embody a common precept of the Harlem Renaissance and African American literature: a sense of racial pride via moral uplift. As Bronz explains, “[t]he unifying characteristic of the Harlem Renaissance was racial pride” (12), which would be achieved, many thought, “by depicting only respectable Negro characters” (17). Although characters such as Jake and his railroad-employed friend Ray could, for the most part, be defined as respectable, many of the figures found in McKay’s Harlem behave in less than civilized fashions. Wayne F.

---

118 On the other hand, Rottenberg admits that Home to Harlem possesses “negative aspects of Harlem” but suggests they “tend to fade in comparison … or are depicted as having helped to make possible the welding of a rich urban subculture that endeavors to produce, circulate, and live by counter-hegemonic norms” (124).
Cooper suggests that McKay’s novel posits a “less optimistic recognition that Afro-American life in Harlem... was too confined and congested. Frustration and self-hatred often resulted from such conditions, and self-inflicted violence was a constant threat to everyone in the community” (xxiv-xxv). Likewise, McKay states succinctly, “New York ... molds all peoples into a hectic rhythm of its own” (191). Indeed, Home to Harlem suggests that urban social spaces transformed their residents, often with negative consequences, and if those social spaces were significantly overcrowded, the effects upon the residents would be all the more negative. For instance, after a friend is badly beaten with a liquor bottle along a sidewalk in Harlem, Billy Biasse and Jake discuss the incident, and Billy suggests that Harlem has become unsafe “with all these cut-throat niggers in Harlem ready to carve up one another foh a li’l’ insignificant hump” (285) and concludes, “Wese too thick together in Harlem. Wese all just lumped together without a chanst to choose and so we nacherally hate on e another” (285). Jake agrees angrily with Billy, stating, “Niggers fixing to slice one another’s throats. Always fighting. ... Wese too close and thick in Harlem” (287). As a fixed region of the city with little chance of expansion, McKay’s Harlemites found themselves suffering from the adverse effects of urban crowding, and such behavioral instances illustrate such effects.

McKay incorporates another cause for the inevitable dimming of Harlem’s vibrancy, one beyond the urban crowding and more directly tied to African Americans’ involvement, or lack thereof, in World War I. While talking with Jake and their friend Grant about Yaller Prince, a Harlem pimp and friend of Jake’s, and debating the state of the average African American, Ray

---

119 At one point, McKay refers to the neighborhood as “compactly-built, teeming Harlem” (279).
states, “The things you call fine human traits don’t belong to any special class or nation or race of people. Nobody can pull that kind of talk now” (242). Ray continues by suggesting that “[a]ll men have the disease of pimps in their hearts... We can’t be civilized and not. I have seen your high and mighty civilized people do things that some pimps would be ashamed of” (243-244).

Standing in the wake of World War I, McKay demonstrates a modern understanding of humanity and illustrates how such an element of humanity manifests itself on the streets of Harlem. Critics view such passages from McKay’s novel as a type of “primitive, uninhibited emotionalism” (Bronz 82) or offer them as evidence that Home to Harlem “rejoiced in the ‘Return to the Primitive’” (Dowling 162).120 Indeed, as Douglas explains, “the younger blacks of the Harlem Renaissance were rebelling against the rules of polite and well-spoken Negritude laid down by their most distinguished elders ... Booker T. Washington ... [and] W. E. B. Du Bois” (82).

However, a keener analysis of the post-war era and the era’s developing scientific discourses, such as the field of psychology, illustrates more particular purposes for such passages. According to Ann Douglas, many aspects of America’s 1920s culture “were inseparable from Freud’s new psychoanalytic discourse” (94). However, as she explains, “it is not surprising that the writers of the Harlem Renaissance did not feel the strongly marked, almost compulsive affinities with Freudian thought evident among white writers” (94). Douglas supports this claim by suggesting that Freud’s concept of the “‘family romance,’ the tortured triangle of mother, father, and child that produces the Oedipus complex, had little to do with the African-American experience” (95).

She concludes this argument by addressing biographical facets such as the proportionately higher

---

120 Dowling also states that “McKay’s Home to Harlem stands as the most deliberate attempt to render Harlem at its most strikingly and poetically primitive” (163).
number of homosexual Black male writers, including McKay, and unmarried or childless Black female writers compared to the era’s White writers. Begging to differ with Douglas’s point, I argue that certain aspects of McKay’s conception of Harlem, and particularly the returning veterans’ (i.e., Jake’s and Zeddy’s) part in its cultural construction, touches on the concept of Thanatos, another Freudian theme separate from the “family romance” and clearly indicative of the post-WWI period. Many writers of the 1920s examined and reexamined their thoughts on human nature and, given such natures, humans’ abilities to live side-by-side within the framework of a civilized society. Like McKay, for whom Ray serves as a mouthpiece, many cognizant of WWI’s events and aftermath concluded that humanity’s natural instincts leaned towards the irrational, aggressive, and (self-)destructive. In the late 1920s, after a two-year silence due to a prolonged illness, Sigmund Freud penned Civilization and Its Discontents (1930). With a similar perspective to that found in Ray’s comments, Sigmund Freud concludes,

Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved … [T]hey are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour [sic] is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. Homo homini lupus. Who, in the face of all his experience of life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion? (68-69)

---

121 According to James Strachey, Freud’s primarily explored theme in the book is “the irremediable antagonism between the demands of instinct and the restrictions of civilization” (4).
122 Freud translates this as “Man is a wolf to man,” taking it from Plautus’s Asinaria.
123 Three years earlier, in The Future of an Illusion, Freud makes a similar but more generalizing statement about human nature: “One has, I think, to reckon with the fact that there are present in all men destructive … trends and that in a great number of people these are strong enough to determine their behavior in human society” (5).
According to Freud, this instinctual Thanatos, or death-drive, stands as one of the primary psychological forces that influence human nature. In other words, according to Freud, in order for humans not only to survive but to thrive and unite as a society, they must defer or redirect such drives and channel their energies into positive constructs. One ostensibly positive outlet for such a devastating and destructive an instinct could be the battlefield. The potentially positive results of such an outlet may be nationalism, patriotism, loyalty, fraternity, courage, heroism, etc.

However, what happens psychologically to men who were promised but then denied such an outlet and instead find themselves living in close proximity to other men of a like mindset? The answer seems evident near the conclusion to McKay’s Home to Harlem. After Jake and his friend, Zeddy, have a falling out and near-lethal altercation due to their competing interests in the same woman, Zeddy exclaims, “You kain kill me, nigger, ef you wanta. You come gunning at me, but you didn’t go gunning after the Germans” (327). However, Jake points out, “I didn’t run away because I was scared a them Germans. But I beat it away from Brest because they

---

124 The other major drive that Freud discusses in Civilization and Its Discontents is libidinal in nature (Eros). While Jake doesn’t demonstrate much evidence of a Thanatos-oriented disposition, a strong libido drives his character given his focus upon and repeated desire for “[b]rown flesh draped in soft colorful clothes. Brown lips full and pouted for sweet kissing. Brown breasts throbbing with love” (8).

125 Recapping events from WWI, Anthony Sampson recalls, “The attempt of the Germans to break through at Verdun in 1916 … engaged two million soldiers, and results in one million casualties … The battle of the Somme, aimed to pressure the Germans to suspend the Verdun offensive, cost the British 420,000 dead – 60,000 on the first day alone” (79). Sampson concludes that “[b]y 1917 the French had lost 1,000,000. The British practically lost an entire generation, 800,000 young men, while the German paid the toll of 1,800,000 dead” (80). He recollects such statistics “to recall the sheer size of the massacre and the profound effect it had on European culture” as well as place Freud’s post-war works “on war and death in their immediate context” (80).

126 Sampson’s analysis also draws from two other Freudian texts on the topic: "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915) and “Why War?” (a collection of 1932-1933 correspondence between Freud and Einstein).

127 McKay explains that Zeddy “moved upon Jake like a terrible bear with open razor” and only stops when Jake brandishes Billy Biasse’s loaded pistol, pointing it at Zeddy’s chest (326-327).
wouldn’t give us a chance at them, but kept us in that rainy, sloppy, Gawd-forsaken burg
working” (331). Zeddy’s accusations of Jake’s cowardice for not fighting the German army and
instead nearly killing his long-time friend illuminate for Jake a realization that being denied the
potentially positive opportunity to fight for his country created a need for another outlet which
released in him a “vivid brutality” that “tortured his imagination” (328). Though Jake shows a
sense of self-control in not giving in to this “vivid brutality” and fighting Zeddy, he nonetheless
“was infinitely disgusted with himself to think that he had just been moved by the same savage
emotions as those vile, vicious, villainous white men who, like hyenas and rattlers, had fought,
murdered, and clawed the entrails out of black men” (328). As Freud penned just two years after
the publication of *Home to Harlem*, McKay identifies Jake as tapping into a universal desire for
violence, one that could have proven positive if released on a European battlefield but instead
turns dangerous in its self-destructive potential along the streets of Harlem, just as it had proven
in the inter-racial relations between Whites and Blacks. In other words, the smoldering angst
lying just below the surface of many of McKay’s Harlemites, in addition to the numerous
outbursts of overt violence witnessed throughout the novel, illustrate that Jake’s apprehensions
are not unique; instead, McKay suggests that the disenfranchisement and pent-up aggression of
African American soldiers returning from WWI and settling in Harlem played a key role in both
the constructive and destructive outcomes of Harlem’s cultural development.

c.) The Strictures of Living “Sweet”: Gender Identities via the Trappings of Economics

Like Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, *Home to Harlem* explores the socially constructed
sexual politics of the era and how those politics defined gender roles based on sexuality,
commodity, and economic power. However, whereas Wharton largely problematizes traditional gender roles by representing the commodification of the White female figure due to the male’s possession of economic agency, McKay at times demonstrates the same objectification of the Black female in *Home to Harlem*. However, he also illustrates a cultural shift in the perceived gender roles, one that dislocates the agency traditionally held by men and denies it to women. As such, this dislocation affords certain opportunities, as many of McKay’s female characters exemplify, as it also imposes certain strictures, evident in some of McKay’s male characters. In other words, McKay’s depiction of Harlem particularly illustrates how the relaxing of the era’s ethics and opening of economic patterns sparked a redefinition of traditional gender roles.

In *Home to Harlem* McKay complicates the characterization of the post-war Black male and male desire developing within the 1920s as, in part, subverting the societal expectations of the objectified female by granting her a larger degree of agency. The male response to the commercial agency of the African American female and the feminine sexuality that consumes much of McKay’s Harlem seems, in large part, responsible for the subversions and complexities my analysis addresses. The muddying of the gender role waters demonstrates McKay’s resistance to some of the more conservative principles of the Harlem Renaissance.\(^{128}\) For example, near the novel’s outset, McKay equates the physical spaces of Harlem (its streets, residences, and businesses) with the allure and sexuality of the African American woman. As

\(^{128}\) According to Kimberly Roberts, “While the late-Victorian sensibility was waning in the rest of America at this time, the arbiters of the New Negro movement, men like W. E. B. DuBois, maintained the importance of strict sexual mores for the betterment of the race” (109). With a critical attitude towards such ethics, McKay’s novel possesses “a series of interconnections between sexuality, economics, and color … [which] opens up a space for the analysis of the commodification of the exotic/erotic during the Harlem Renaissance as well as of the class and gender oppression forced upon Harlem society by the dicta of the bourgeois black elite” (109).
Jake endures the discomforts of the long boat ride from London to New York City, he reflects, “Jest take me ‘long to Harlem is all I pray. I’m crazy to see again the brown-skin chippies ‘long Lenox Avenue. Oh boy!” (3), and McKay concludes the chapter by pointing out that “[i]t had been two years since he [Jake] had left Harlem. Fifth Avenue, Lenox Avenue, and One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street, with their chocolate-brown and walnut-brown girls, were calling him” (8). The gendering of and sexuality associated with Harlem appears obvious given Jake’s perspective and association of Harlem’s popular streets with its women and their Siren-like allure.

The Harlemite female represented more than an object of desire and conquest. For instance, as James Giles suggests, “in frequent passages that must have made DuBois cringe, Jake and his friends assert the black woman’s superiority in matters of sex” (75). Although I agree that such characterizations of female sexuality ran contrary to the ideals of many of the founders of the Harlem Renaissance, I would emphasize that McKay intertwines this sexual liberation of the African American female with an economic empowerment as well. The two aspects co-exist within the female identity for McKay. By the 1920s, the broadening of vocational options and the loosening of moral codes afforded some women (Black and White alike) better economic opportunities, thus complicating Harlem’s gender dynamics. At first, McKay’s tone is celebratory in his assessing the relationship among female sexuality, Harlem’s socio-economic cultural expectations, and gender equality. Early on, upon his arrival in Harlem, Jake enters a Lenox Avenue cabaret and meets Felice, a young prostitute and the on-again-off-again object of Jake’s narrative quest throughout the novel. McKay writes, “They walked along
Lenox Avenue. He held her arm. His flesh tingled. He felt as if his whole body was a flaming wave. She was intoxicated, blinded under the overwhelming force. But nevertheless, she did not forget her business. ‘How much is it going to be, daddy?’ she demanded” (12-13). Likewise, after his encounter with Felice, Jake reflects that “she was a particularly sweet piece of business” (17). Felice’s business-like attitude and commodification of her sexuality do not desensitize or dishearten Jake but rather heighten the pleasure he receives from the exchange.

However, this re-conception of the female identity via economics creates ominous undertones in regards to the power dynamic within male-female relations. For instance, McKay’s concept of the Harlem female, empowered by her economic mobility and independence, liberates herself from traditional female associations (i.e., those of a more maternal or familial role) and, therefore, subverts those often allied with her male counterpart: freedom, autonomy, competition, etc. When speaking to McKay’s construction of the female characters in *Home to Harlem*, Cooper explains that the women “had their own incomes as cooks, domestics, entertainers, waitresses, or clerks; some worked as part time prostitutes. Between the men and women in *Home to Harlem*, there existed both passionate tenderness and competitiveness, a mutually jealous independence of spirit that often resulted in antagonism and separation” (xxi).

Or, as Roberts writes,

In *Home to Harlem* a prostitute can experience many of the same freedoms that a man can, for she is both economically autonomous and geographically mobile. However, as a result of this form of female freedom, a curious tension develops in McKay’s novel. On the one hand, he seems to celebrate the sexual freedom certain women experience as an index of their ability to participate more fully and

---

129 Jake only later realizes that Felice betrays her own business ethics and, in an uncharacteristically sentimental moment, quietly returns the money he paid her (*Home to Harlem* 15-16).
equally in the society at large. On the other hand, many of these same women are
configured as obstacles in the way of black male freedom. (120-121)

Indeed, Felice, Jake’s romantic interest at the novel’s end, suggests they flee Harlem and move
to Chicago because, “This heah country is good and big enough for us to git lost in. . . . [and]
Ain’t nothing in Harlem holding me, honey” (332-333). Felice’s quick-thinking decision and
outspokenness illustrate a lack of domestic ties and instead an aptitude for, as well as openness
to, alteration, variability, and mobility. As much as Jake associates Felice with the pervasive
Harlem female sexuality, her thoughts and actions challenge the more conservative concepts of
gender roles and instead align her with characteristics traditionally held as masculine.

McKay’s clearest examples illustrating the complications of changing gender roles
revolve around his foreboding assessment of the “sweet life” afforded to certain Harlemite men.
The “sweet life,” which McKay defines via the misguided perception of Zeddy, consists of being
“an extravagantly-dressed dark dandy” and “the adored of a Negro lady of means … or of a
hard-working laundress or cook,” concluding, as Zeddy believes, “It was much more respectable
and enviable to be sweet – to belong to the exotic aristocracy of sweetmen than to be just a
common tout” (82). With a broad, generalizing stroke, Mary White Ovington disparages such
relationships as disadvantageous to both genders, concluding that “Negro women, able to secure
work, support idle, able-bodied Negro men. The loungers at the street corner, the dandy in the
parlor thrumming on his banjo, means a Malindy of the hour at the kitchen washboard” (81). The
male “lounger,” as Ovington expresses, reads as an un-industrious, nonproductive drag on the
male-female relationship, but in McKay’s post-war Harlem, the “lounger” becomes the
“sweetman” and seemingly, at first, sheds such negative connotations. From Zeddy’s point of view, any male who did not have to work to earn his own means and instead lived off of an able-bodied female, the “sweetman,” was Harlem royalty.

An analysis of certain statistical shifts occurring amongst the city’s African American culture in the years prior to McKay’s novel offers insight into some of the economic and gender presumptions his characters generate. For instance, according to Ovington, “In 1900, whereas 4.2 per cent of the white married women in New York were engaged in gainful occupations, 31.4 per cent of the Negro married women were earning their living, over seven times as many in proportion as the whites” (79). Furthermore, in comparing the statistical information of foreign immigrating females to that of African American women migrating from the south or otherwise rural areas of America to New York City, Ovington states, “unlike the foreigner, the Negro women find larger opportunity and come in greater numbers than the men” (80). As a result, Ovington concludes that New York City hosts a “surplus [of] Negro women,” suggesting that “New York shows 123 [African American women] to every masculine one hundred” (81). This “surplus” of African American females in relation to their male counterparts in the decades leading up to the 1920s, coupled with the fact that many African American women were becoming increasingly independent economically, explains the interest in and opportunity to live the “sweet life.” In other words, because men were the rarer gendered commodity, the law of supply and demand placed an attractive value upon each available male, and given that more women were earning a living through various means, economics appears the logical solution for
many women interested in edging out their competition. Two of McKay’s male figures and their
two female counterparts illustrate the pros and cons of just such a dynamic.

In *Home to Harlem*, both Zeddy and Jake find themselves in a similar position of
demand. For example, Rose, a singer at the Congo, one of the Harlem cabarets Jake and Zeddy
frequent, suggests that Jake become her “sweetman.” McKay writes, “‘If you’ll be mah man, you
won’t have to work,’ she said. ‘Me?’ responded Jake. ‘I’ve never been a sweetman yet. Never
lived off no womens and never will. I always works.’ ‘I don’t care what you do whilst you is
mah man. But hard work’s no good for a sweet-loving papa’” (40). Zeddy finds himself at the
receiving end of a similar offer from Susy, a long-time and successful cook. Unlike Jake, Zeddy
seemingly accepts Susy’s proposal, suggesting, “Susy ain’t nothing to look at … but she’s
tur’bly sweet loving … [S]he treats me right. Gimme all I wants to drink and brings home the
goodest poke chops and fried chicken foh me to put away under mah shirt” (77).³ Zeddy’s
earlier conceptions and these descriptions of his relationship with Susy exemplify the apparent
freedoms and opportunities promised by the “sweet life.”

However, the restrictive realities soon set in, which McKay then uses to illustrate how
such economic shifts simultaneously caused shifts in gender roles as well. When Zeddy
announces to Susy that he is “gwine ovah wif Jake to see soma-them boys,” (79) the
conversation devolves into an argument. McKay writes, “‘You ain’ta gwine to do no sich thing
as that” Susy said. ‘Yes I is,’ responded Zeddy. ‘Wha there is to stop me?’ ‘I is,’ said Susy” (79).
McKay concludes, “The enjoyment of Harlem’s low night life was prohibited to Zeddy. Susy

³ McKay summarizes Zeddy’s position with, “Zeddy was well kept like a prince of his type. He could not
complain about food … and bed. Susy was splendid in her matriarchal ways” (83).
was jealous of him in the proprietary sense. She believed in free love all right, but not for the man she possessed and supported” (82). Conversely, Susy discovers that this gender role confusion, resulting from the one-sided economic dynamic in her relationship with Zeddy, allowed her to be “proud to have a man to boss about in an intimate and casual way” and that “[t]o have an aggressive type like Zeddy at her beck and call considerably increased Susy’s prestige and clucking pride” (84). When reflecting on his circumstances and comparing them to Jake’s relationship with Rose, Zeddy asks Jake, “You ain’t in no pickle like that with Rose, is you?” Jake replies, “Lawd, no! I do as I wanta. But I’m one independent cuss, buddy. We ain’t sitchuate the same. I works” (81). In other words, Jake points out that his economic identity and independence secures his masculinity. This subtle but significant difference explains why, as McKay states, “Zeddy,” unlike Jake, “in his own circles in Harlem … had become something of a joke. It was known that he was living sweet. But his buddies talked about his lady riding him with a cruel bit. ‘He was kept, all right,’ they said, ‘kept under ‘Gid-head’ Susy’s skirt” (87). The analogy of Zeddy’s being placed under Susy’s skirt and his being likened to Susy’s vagina clearly emasculates him in the eyes of his fellow Harlem males. Perhaps ironically, Jake’s economic independence does not preclude him from falling victim to certain gender expectations associated with the “sweet life,” too. His refusal of Rose’s offer, for example, causes her to be “disappointed in Jake. She had wanted him to live in the usual sweet way, to be brutal … and take away her money from her” (113). Instead, Jake’s “always acting so nice and proper” causes Rose to think he “was getting sissy,” sparking a physical confrontation between them in which “Jake gave her two savage slaps full in her face” (116). To Rose, this demonstration of his
physical strength and brutality does what his economic success cannot; it admirably proves his manhood to her. Rose reflects, “When I comed to I wanted to kiss his feet” (117). But to Jake, this perversion proves too disturbing, causing him to leave Rose and end the relationship. As such, McKay demonstrates that the economic realities of the “sweet life” do not promise Harlem’s men the advantageous opportunities of aristocracy as much as threaten them with the trappings of economic dependence and, thus, the stripping away of one’s gendered and cultural value.

McKay’s depiction of many of Harlem’s females as economically independent and, as such, autonomous if not dominant in their relationships with men flies in the face of the expectations of many of Harlem Renaissance forefathers such as W. E. B. Du Bois. To Du Bois and others who viewed the Harlem Renaissance as an opportunity to solidify traditional gender roles, the African American woman’s primary duty was “to create and keep alive, in the breast of black men, a holy and consuming passion to break with the slave traditions of the past; to spurn and overcome the fatal, insidious inferiority complex of the present, which … bobs up ever and anon, to arrest the progress of the New Negro Manhood Movement; and to fight … for the attainment of the stature of a full man” (McDowell 156). In other words, the woman’s obligation stresses bolstering the esteem and ego of the man, to support him not from an economic position of dominance but from one of spiritual submission and humility. Clearly, McKay’s characterization of the relationship between men and women in Harlem, like that of Zeddy and Susy, is antithetical and subversive to such conceptions. Instead, characters such as

131 McDowell cites a 1923 report from the Messenger titled “Negro Womanhood’s Greatest Needs.”
Susy and Felice demonstrate how the positive economic mobility of some African American women promised the luxury of aristocratic freedom to the “sweetman” but delivered to him the confusion of emasculation and restrictions of economic reliance, a conclusion that problematized the hoped-for empowerment sought by many of the Harlem Renaissance founders.

**McKay’s Leaving Lenox and Swimming Against the City’s Stream**

Since its advent, the Harlem Renaissance has stood as an era marking a significant shift in America’s social perceptions and artistic expressions. For instance, through much of the works of the Harlem Renaissance period, including those of Claude McKay, African Americans, according to Bronz, “had their first opportunity to express fully their feelings towards themselves, the white race, and America without recourse to the traditional stereotypes” (90). In particular, McKay’s *Home to Harlem* portrays the city in the years following World War I as a canvas upon which the reader can see both the favorable and also detrimental cultural effects resulting from the period’s many fluctuations along racial, economic, and gendered borders.

As many scholars have advocated, *Home to Harlem* is accepted as a protest novel, but not everyone can agree upon exactly what McKay protests. Upon a closer look, McKay weaves his affinities for defiance and subversion into the pages of *Home to Harlem* more complexly than many of the other African American writers of the era. McKay’s tones of resistance emanate partly from a desire to defy the oppressively iconic stereotypes of Black cultural identity commonly held by many in White society during the early parts of the twentieth century, thus making it akin to other Harlem Renaissance writings. After all, while Jake, early on, fears having

---

132 No other African American Harlem Renaissance writer, as Bronz states, “protested so fiercely and single-mindedly … as did McKay” (89).
“to take a back seat” to the city’s “ofays”\(^{133}\) (91), McKay ultimately concludes in a celebratory and defiant tone, “White folks can’t padlock niggers outa joy forever” (336). Thus, the social spaces of 1920s Harlem read as a sanctuary for many of the disenfranchised African Americans seeking shelter from the storm of White-on-Black hatred and animosity exacerbated throughout the Reconstruction era and experienced anew during World War I.

However, in terms of protests, McKay also sets his subversive sights on the cultural practices and principles of the Harlem Renaissance writers themselves. McKay viewed the Harlem Renaissance leaders’ demands for a racial representation imbued with moral uplift and bourgeois principles as problematically misrepresentative and claustrophobically narrow-minded. At the same time, McKay angered many fellow African American writers and social activists by infusing his novel with a positive and celebratory attitude towards many of the working-class’s baser elements of life in Harlem. As such, *Home to Harlem* captures the unity, festivity, and opportunity found along the streets of Harlem. But even as it celebrated Black life, McKay’s novel also troubled its contemporary readers and reviewers by exploring the many negative realities of Harlem’s 1920s culture. In the hands of McKay and much to the chagrin of his fellow Harlem Renaissance writers, Harlem becomes a paradoxical association of social spaces: a safe haven for the African American citizen seeking escape from the Reconstructionist south, a raging rapid of violence as a result of urban overcrowding and repressed urges for aggression, and a double-edged sword in which the opening of economic opportunities and loosening of social mores inverted many of the previous generations’ expectations toward gender.

\(^{133}\) A slang term from the period for Caucasians.
roles, particularly in terms of objectification and agency. Consequently, McKay finds himself standing at “the outer limits of the Harlem Renaissance” (Bronz 89) as he produces in Home to Harlem a unique assessment of the complicated dynamics at play between race, gender, and economics within the social spaces of post-WWI Harlem.
CONCLUSION

Sighting New York City in the Citations of New York’s Authors

... the physical will of the city, the ego fevers, the assertions of industry, commerce and crowds shape every anecdotal moment.

- Don DeLillo (Cosmopolis, 2003)

Throughout its history, New York City has fascinated historians and artists of varying types for various reasons. Writers have captured and characterized the city’s shifting demographics and dominant social developments since its inception as a trading outpost in a largely unknown land. Recently, New York City in the 1980s gave birth to the overtly materialist “yuppie” (young urban professional) culture as captured in Jay McInerney’s Bright Lights, Big City (1984) and Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho (1991). Perhaps the most dramatic shifts occurring within the city’s cultural landscape could be found in the years leading up to and immediately following September 11, 2001. Texts such as Don DeLillo’s Underworld (1997), Cosmopolis (2003), and Falling Man (2007) as well as Paul Auster’s The Brooklyn Follies (2006) and Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2005) fittingly represent these years in the city’s recent history. But perhaps no other period in the city’s history showed more dynamic demographics and developments than the years between the American Renaissance and the Harlem Renaissance.

This period provides an ample and diverse selection of cultural products that unearth the diverse cultural practices associated with New York City’s domestic and commercialized social spaces within the city to develop sometimes in step with each other although other times in spite

of each other. For my study, Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *George’s Mother*, Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*, and Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* prove valuable for a better understanding of these social spaces, the cultural practices that produced them, and the challenges facing writers attempting to comprehend “the people and forces and institutions that bring about urban form” (Kostof 11). As my analysis proves, New York City did not develop on a linear, evolutionary track; rather, the city changed from one historical period to the next as a result of numerous social factors that either concurred or conflicted with each other to mold its new identity. Writers such as Melville, Crane, Wharton, Dos Passos, and McKay sought to construct a (re)conception of the city as they assessed the impact made by the dominant social factors of their particular period, specifically on the domestic and commercial spheres of the city.

For instance, Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” integrates various social shifts including, for example, the artistic and economic arguments revolving around America’s dependence on traditional British ideologies and governing institutions as well as the assessment of the city’s Wall Street area as real estate too valuable to remain largely working-class residences. Melville understands the difficulty, if not impossibility, in breaking America’s cultural ties to England and developing a singularly American artistic movement due to such potential consequences as cultural stagnation and economic suicide. Furthermore, Melville utilizes the rapid construction of increasingly taller buildings around the lawyer’s offices at “No. --- Wall Street” and the limited view that such constructions afforded the smaller structures to illustrate the commercial booms and busts occurring throughout Wall Street, allowing some a
chance for upward social mobility but denying it to others. This same opportunity for new buildings on and around Wall Street presented the neighborhood a chance to establish itself as the country’s financial center. However, as New York City’s financiers hoisted the flag of commerce high above Wall Street, they drove working-class laborers from their homes and away from their workplaces in the warehouses and offices and along the docks of lower Manhattan. As such, Bartleby’s “I’d prefer not to” and refusal to vacate the law offices that he had domesticated serve as acts of resistance and protest against such cultural practices.

Similar to Bartleby’s acts of cultural resistance, Crane’s New York City sketches portray the city’s slums as culturally diverse social spaces of reform as well as resistance. The slums’ inhabitants find their lives shaped by the hegemonic forces dividing the slums’ largely immigrant populations from their cultural backgrounds, the private home from the public workplace, and the commercial from the familial. As such, characters such as Jimmie, Mary, and Pete, recognize the traditional values many reformers advocate but do so largely to challenge and resist them. Out of this resistance, Crane’s characters depict a resilient morality, one born out of the impact of the accepted ethics as well as the immigrants’ indigenous cultural influences. Maggie’s downfall lies in her desire to embrace wholly the traditional values, as evidenced in her wish to emulate the rescued heroine in the Bowery’s stage shows, as she wholly denies the cultural practices of the slum residents that conflict with such values. Her inability to adopt these heterogeneous cultural practices and attitudes foreshadow her inability to survive in the culturally hostile environment of the city’s Lower East Side. Many of these conflicting cultural values and practices flaring up throughout the 1880s and 1890s took the family home as their
battleground. Questions of the home as a place of privacy as opposed to productivity raised further questions over gender roles and each gender’s responsibilities within the home and workplace. Crane recognizes these conflicts and understands the value of the Lower East Side’s streets and structures that serve as the canvas upon which the neighborhood’s residents blur the line of the reformers’ sought-for separation of the domestic dwelling from the chaotic cultural practices of the city’s public places.

As my third chapter stipulates, Wharton’s Lily Bart stands not as a helpless heroine but as a figure of resistance to the leisure class environs of the city interested in commodifying her identity due to its emphatic desires for material goods. *The House of Mirth* turns an unsure eye towards many different aspects of New York’s affluent leisure class society, which came into being in the early years of the twentieth century. Such aspects included the overvaluing of material wealth that many of Wharton’s characters utilize through public demonstrations to garner a better social status. Bart illustrates her resistance to a culture in which she was raised to seek entrance by refusing to be objectified as a material good at the Wellington-Brys’ dinner party and their entertaining tableaus vivants. She also rejects the leisure class’s preferences for publicity in her repudiation of George Dorset and Carrie Fisher and their requests to shame Bertha Dorset publicly as a means to regain her own social standing. Wharton also critiques the overreaching influence that materialism had on leisure class values as the leisure class destabilized the societal perceptions of masculine and feminine gender roles, as seen in Wharton’s characterizations of male figures like George Dorset, Percy Gryce, and Jack Stepney.
In attempting to grasp 1920s New York City in its totality and also accounting for the cultural developments from the previous decades that produced the 1920s, Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* represents “the new kind of urban life which was emerging as a consequence of demographic movements, consolidation after 1898 of the five boroughs into one city, and a transportation revolution which linked those boroughs and altered the inhabitants’ conceptions of time and space” (Tallack 27). New Yorkers’ understandings of their city and of themselves were “being changed by the new perspective offered by the emerging skyscraper city” (Tallack 27) as Dos Passos illustrates with the mechanizing and dehumanizing effects of the city that Jimmy Herf resists, but to which Ellen Thatcher falls victim. Similar to the domineering skyscraper, the ubiquitous nature of New York City’s print culture and advertisements proves influential, and dangerously so, to characters such as Phil Sandbourne and yet ineffective to others such as Jimmy Herf, George Baldwin, and Bud Korpenning due to its over-saturation. Through these characters’ experiences, Dos Passos illustrates the dangers of an advertising-saturated culture. *Manhattan Transfer* also highlights the cultural and material by-products of the exponentially expanding city as a result of the Greater New York Bill of 1898. As New York City grew in its production of commerce and trade, so too did its waste and refuse, and the Greater New York Bill allowed the city to consume greater tracts of land in which to deposit its greater wasteful productions. Just as Dos Passos demonstrates how New York City’s expanded borders redefined the city as a transformed megatropolis, he also turns his attention to the setting of the domestic home. Long considered a site of stability, the home by the 1920s, as Dos Passos depicts, reflected the frequently frenetic culture of New York City as the pastoral home gave way to the
“apartmenthouse” (Dos Passos 83) or the “apartment hotel” (Klimasmith 131) and transportation improvements destabilized the permanence of the familial home by increasing the family’s mobility.

Also set in the 1920s but almost exclusively set in uptown Harlem, McKay’s *Home to Harlem* addresses how certain socio-political and socio-economic forces in post-war New York City defined African-American cultural practices and, thus, shaped New York City’s Harlem neighborhood. McKay presents a twofold exploration of Harlem, one that critiques both the realities within and representations of Harlem. In other words, *Home to Harlem* establishes a cultural resistance not only to many of the country’s dominant Anglo-American developments of the early twentieth century but also to what McKay saw as prejudicial ideologies that gave rise to the Harlem Renaissance. As Jake returns to Harlem, he witnesses the constructive impact of racial unity that Harlem afforded returning African-American veterans. But, McKay’s novel also questions and contradicts the overt optimism and positive desires of the Harlem Renaissance movement. Instead, it illuminates some of Harlem’s disturbing aspects by exploring the caustic psychologies that many of those same soldiers brought back from their experiences overseas and that other African Americans sought to escape in other parts of the country. As such, the sanctuary that many such as Jake hoped Harlem would provide them proved unsatisfactory, again calling into question the ideologies of many Harlem Renaissance writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Alain Locke.

---

135 Prejudicial in the fact that McKay felt the bourgeois values driving much of the Harlem Renaissance by turning a blind eye to working-class African Americans as well as the virtues that bolstered them and the plights that plagued them throughout Harlem.
In my assessment, the primary texts demonstrate a unique understanding of the urban living and labor that comprised New York City in their given historical periods. Given the scope, depth, and organization of my analysis certain implications and opportunities arise concerning these texts. When looked at collectively, these writings present a series of thematic conclusions, unique to each other but tied together by several common cords. The cultural conceptions of the home and the workplace appear throughout the texts but do so with great variance, largely due to particular cultural practices of the given historical period. For instance, in “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Bartleby’s taking up residency in the office rooms suggests that the home is conceptualized as a rebellious stance against the increased concentration of lower Manhattan as a place of commerce and less as a place of domesticity. In Maggie, the home becomes a cultural war zone with battles over traditional and subversive gender identities as well as industrious and familial responsibilities. In her critiques of the city’s leisure-class culture, Wharton characterizes the home not as a space of domesticity but as a symbol of economic domination. In The House of Mirth, Wharton demonstrates how members of the leisure class utilized the home as a public spectacle, one used to display their status via material wealth, thus re-conceptualizing the home from a private space to an overtly public one. Both Dos Passos and McKay destabilize the home further but in vastly different ways compared to Wharton and to each other. On the one hand, Dos Passos illustrates how the concept of the stable domestic home is uprooted in the 1920s due to developments in transportation, the expansion of the city, and the proliferation of apartment buildings and hotels throughout the city. At the same time, Dos Passos believed that the increasingly mechanical workplaces and professions did not so much destabilize New Yorkers’
identities as it did dehumanize them. On the other hand, McKay’s concept of the home is complicated by the roles African-American men and women played within the home. Given the vocational and economic opportunities many African-American women in the city took advantage of, the “kept man” found himself dissociated from the work world, a traditionally male-associated sphere, and living a “sweet” life at home under the thumb of a providing woman. Last, as demonstrated above, whether embodied in the home or workplace, each text weaves within these cultural accounts a thread of resistance - passive or violent, successful or futile -- to many of the cultural practices that created and refined the domestic and commercial conceptions, thus highlighting New York City’s sometimes hectic, sometimes harrowing, but ultimately heterogeneous nature.
WORKS CITED


Irving, Katrina. “Gendered Space, Racialized Space’ Nativism, the Immigrant Woman, and Stephen Crane’s Maggie.” College Literature. 20.3 (1993): 30-43.


Riis, Jacob. Children of the Poor. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1892.


- - -. The Decoration of Houses. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1897.


