Domestic visions and shifting identities: The urban novel and the rise of a consumer culture in America, 1852-1925

Nancy Helen Von Rosk
University of New Hampshire, Durham

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact Scholarly.Communication@unh.edu.
INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700  800/521-0600

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
DOMESTIC VISIONS AND SHIFTING IDENTITIES:
THE URBAN NOVEL AND THE RISE OF A CONSUMER
CULTURE IN AMERICA, 1852-1925

BY

NANCY VON ROSK
B.A., SUNY Oneonta, 1984
M.A., Northeastern University, 1987

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

May, 1999
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

Brigitte Bailey, Associate Professor of English

Lisa MacFarlane, Associate Professor of English

John Ernest, Associate Professor of English

James Kremer, Associate Professor of English

Ellen Fitzgerald, Associate Professor of History

[Signature]

May 3, 1999

Date
For Pete and Cameron
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**DEDICATION**  
iv

**ABSTRACT**  
vi

**INTRODUCTION**  
1

57

**II. DESIRE, DOMESTICITY AND THE AESTHETIC VISION: URBAN HOMES AND HOMELESSNESS IN THE BOSTONIANS AND A HAZARD OF NEW FORTUNES**  
83

*The Bostonians*  
83

*A Hazard of New Fortunes*  
109

**III. DECRYPTING THE SPECTACLE AND DISMANTLING THE HOME: THE NEW PUBLIC SPACE AND URBAN CONSCIOUSNESS IN SISTER CARRIE**  
136

**IV. COON SHOWS, RAGTIME AND THE BLUES: RACE, URBANITY AND THE LOSS OF HOME IN PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR'S THE SPORT OF THE GODS.**  
176

**V. SPECTACULAR HOMES AND PASTORAL THEATERS: GENDER, URBANITY AND DOMESTICITY IN THE HOUSE OF MIRTH**  
210

**VI. 'GO, MAKE YOURSELF FOR A PERSON': URBANITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS OF ABRAHAM Cahan AND ANZIA YEZIERSKA**  
250

*The Rise of David Levinsky* **"Ever Conscious of My Modern Garb"**  
258

*Bread Givers* **"My Beautiful Aloneness"**  
287

**CONCLUSION**  
310

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**  
331
ABSTRACT

DOMESTIC VISIONS AND SHIFTING IDENTITIES: 
THE URBAN NOVEL AND THE RISE OF A CONSUMER CULTURE IN AMERICA, 
1852-1925

by

Nancy Von Rosk
University of New Hampshire, May, 1999
Adviser: Professor Brigitte-Bailey

Domestic Visions reexamines the tradition of the urban novel in America by reading the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Edith Wharton, Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezierska within the historical and cultural contexts of an evolving urban consumer culture. Bringing together not only a wide range of canonical and non-canonical texts, but also an analysis of America's shifting domestic ideals over the last half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this study traces the impact of a new spectacular urban public culture on both the private realm and those who are marginalized. As it illuminates the intersections between public and private realms of experience as well as the intersections between dominant and marginalized cultures, Domestic Visions complicates traditional approaches to urban literature. Analyzing canonical works such as The Blithedale Romance and Sister Carrie alongside such lesser known works as The Sport of the Gods and Bread Givers, this study highlights how urban novelists across the varied spectrum of gender, race, ethnicity and class shared a certain vision of America's new urban culture, and yet diverged in that vision in important and oftentimes surprising ways.
INTRODUCTION

The urbanite is faced with a never-ending series of partial visibility, of gaps—figures framed in the windows of high-rises, partly drawn blinds, taxis transporting strangers, noises from the other side of a wall, streets on maps or around the bend but never traversed, hidden enclaves in adjacent neighborhoods. Faced with these and unable to ignore them, the city dweller reconstructs the inaccessible in his imagination. Because no urbanite is exempt from this partial exclusion and imaginative reconstruction, every urbanite is to some extent an outsider. Modern urban life then is a landscape of partial visibility and manifold possibilities that excludes in the very act of inviting.

Hana Wirth-Nesher, from City Codes

"London," Hardy wrote in 1887, "appears not to see itself. Each individual is conscious of himself, but nobody is conscious of themselves collectively, except perhaps some poor gaper who stares round with a half idiotic aspect." There is still the sense of paradox: that in the great city itself, the very place and agency or so it would seem of collective consciousness, it is an absence of common feeling, an excessive subjectivity, that seems to be characteristic.

Raymond Williams, from The Country and the City

Focusing on the last half of the nineteenth century, the historical moment when America's modern metropolis was born, this dissertation examines the development of the urban novel in the United States while keeping in mind the paradoxical qualities of urban life described by Hana Wirth-Nesher and Raymond Williams: that somehow an “inviting” landscape of “manifold possibilities,” excludes, is impenetrable, and that amidst such a collective space as the city, we find an “excessive subjectivity.” As I analyze a wide range of American writers' responses to the new urban landscape, I explore how the city is envisioned during this period and how, in turn, the city transforms vision—how urban culture creates new ways of seeing and new ways of thinking about public and private space. Moreover, I highlight how issues of gender, race or class are used to construct urban space and urban popular culture. While my first three chapters focus on canonical texts by white male authors—Hawthorne, James, Howells and Dreiser—my readings of these texts foreground not only specific “urban” issues, but issues of gender, race and class as well. Continuing in this vein, my last three chapters analyze novels written by female, black and Jewish-American writers, for these "marginalized" writers draw our attention to the
racialized, gendered and class-bound aspects of the white male writers’ visions. Indeed it is in studying a progression of urban novels written by writers of various gender, racial, ethnic, and class positions that we are better able to understand the varied implications of the cultural transformations which accompanied urbanization.

Although my project focuses on novels which were published at or near the turn of the century, I begin with Hawthorne because he is the first American novelist to probe the implications of modern urban life for the middle-class mind. While The Blithedale Romance (1852) is generally known to be about a pastoral communal experiment, it is more importantly a study of urban consciousness—the first American novel that specifically focuses on the “gaps and partial visibility” Wirth-Nesher describes which render every urbanite an “outsider.” Indeed Hawthorne looks forward to the “modern” concerns which preoccupied turn-of-the-century writers. I end my project with Anzia Yezierska’s Bread Givers for similar reasons. Although published in 1925, this book is about life in the 1890s, and since Yezierska looks back while Hawthorne looks forward, the novels, in a sense, function as bookends. Yezierska’s working-class heroine Sara Smolinksy idealizes the lives of the middle class—their “freedom from the worry for a living”—while Hawthorne’s narrator Miles Coverdale, in his bourgeois comfort, looks to the overworked seamstress Priscilla with wonder and longing (211). Indeed by ending with Yezierska, we finally see America’s middle-class culture through the eyes of the weary seamstress; it is almost as if the object of Coverdale’s gaze—the working-class female Other—can now speak back across the divide.
Historical and Visual Contexts

As the United States became more urbanized during the last half of the nineteenth century, its culture inevitably shifted in new directions. Many of these new directions placed an emphasis as well as a new dependence on vision, for hand in hand with urbanization came the rise of a spectacular visual consumer culture. Indeed the century's technological innovations would introduce an "unprecedented amount" of imagery into American lives, and more and more Americans would find themselves passive spectators in a world of dazzling new spectacles (Trachtenberg 122). By the late nineteenth century, the wonders of photography, chromolithography and the stereoscope had made "vicarious experience" a "major commodity in the American marketplace... preparing the ground for the mass market visual narratives that were to come in the twentieth century in the form of movies and television"(Orvell 73). Miles Orvell points out that "within twenty years of the invention of photography in 1839, it became a commonplace to speak of the practical advantages and pleasures of 'touring' without having to leave home: 'With a pile of pictures by their side, which cost almost nothing, even the humblest Americans can make the European tour of celebrated places,' wrote Scientific American in 1860"(Orvell 73-4). Indeed "steam-powered printing presses, improved methods of lithography and photoengraving, and, in the 1890s, the halftone method of mechanically reproducing photographs in..."

---

newspapers, periodicals and books” would lead to an overwhelming traffic in “visual data” (Trachtenberg 122).

Stewart and Elizabeth Ewen help us to see the crucial implications of this mass production and distribution of “visual data.” “The elegant tokens of wealth and high culture now became reproducible” they declare (124). “The monopoly over the image began to crumble” (Ewen 123). “While original oil paintings continued as an expensive investment and diversion of the wealthy, the new technique of chromolithography was able to capture and replicate much of their aura” (Ewen 125). “Chromos,” they insist, “were a dramatic display of democracy” as well as a catalyst for the new consumer culture:

Many chromolithographs were brilliant reproductions of paintings, previously unknown and unseen by their now broad audience. In addition, chromos spurred an evocative impetus to the embryonic field of advertising. Billboards reached out to command the attention of passersbys; advertising cards gave the goods of the industrial age the aura of sumptuousness and the magic of allegory. Goods and alluring images were linked, forging one of the most basic and prophetic alliances of contemporary capitalist culture. (126)

As the Ewens put it, “a democracy of surfaces was being born, even while the disparities of society remained and industrial conditions worsened” (127). Nevertheless, it is essential to remember how important this “democracy of surfaces” would be to the masses of the late nineteenth-century city. Many of these people were European immigrants, “people coming out of a history of deprivation”; for them, “the power of these images cannot be underestimated” (Ewen 127).

Alan Trachtenberg has also examined the cultural transformations which took place in late nineteenth-century urban America. Calling attention to the “emerging culture of the marketplace, of incorporation,” he focuses on the “new modes of experience” resulting from the period’s technological developments (122). “In technologies of communications,” he writes, “vicarious experience began to erode direct physical experience of the world.
Viewing and looking at representations, words and images, city people found themselves addressed more often as passive spectators than as active participants" (122-3). The evolution of the theater over the course of the century illustrates this in particularly telling ways. In the early nineteenth century, "an evening at the theater was a rowdy affair" (Cullen 55). "House lights were never dimmed (this was too complicated before electricity) and people went as much to see and be seen as to watch the show" (Cullen 55). "As paying customers, they felt entitled to comment on the entertainment... and the crowd's wishes often determined which pieces the orchestra would play" (Cullen 55). This would change later in the century as the theater would increasingly make its appeal primarily to the eye, becoming a place of passive spectatorship rather than informal socializing and interaction with performers and other members of the audience. As Trachtenberg notes, "Pageantry and broad pantomime replaced the clever repartee and jostling of the earlier mode. In theatrical productions, machinery of illusion took over, lavish scenic effects becoming the keynote of impresarios like Augustin Daly" (123). The period's Expositions and World's Fairs would also incorporate pageantry and spectacle as they displayed the wonders of Progress for an increasingly passive audience; they would, above all else, delight the eye with their visual excess and extravagance.

Not only would public entertainment become more spectacular, department stores would also become more grand; they too would be spectacular theaters appealing to the eye; indeed they would turn shopping into an "aesthetic experience" (Saisellin 19). Describing the "transformation of merchandise into spectacle" during the last half of the nineteenth century, Rachel Bowlby writes (6): "No longer do goods come to the buyers as they had done with itinerant hucksters, country markets or small local stores. Instead it is the buyers who have taken themselves to the products; and in this case, not to buy, but merely to 'see'" (1). Indeed
as the Ewens point out, the department store employed "compelling visual dramas within which mass-produced goods played the starring role":

[W]hile the initial clientele of the department store was largely middle class, its conspicuous presence as a new, urban institution gave consumable products the aura of modernity and gentility, while newspaper and display advertising spread the connotation even among people who could not afford the emporiums. The department store was more than a site for consumption; it was a sight of consumption; goods were graced in monumental splendor. Shopping was a perceptual adventure... From their beginnings department stores were publicized as ‘cathedrals and palaces.’ This mixing of sumptuous metaphors was revealing; the department store surrounded practical concerns with a religious intonation, a touch of royalty, the promise that the mundane could become glamorous... Things customarily defined in terms of the long labor of home production reappeared as primarily aesthetic objects. (Ewen 45-46)

“In exchange for adopting a consumerized understanding of survival,” the Ewens write, “people could hope to enjoy aesthetic pleasures traditionally the province of the very rich or even unimaginable in times past”(Ewen 47).

As more goods and new luxuries as well as more images and new kinds of aesthetic experiences make their way into American life, we see an inevitable change in American culture—the altered perceptions and shifting identities explored in this dissertation. Indeed, the novels examined here help to illustrate and interrogate the new habits of vision emerging out of this historical shift. Beginning with Hawthorne, we encounter a distinctly modern,

2 Coming to understand the profound implications and meanings of this cultural shift has occupied the minds of many recent scholars. Bowlby sees the years between 1890 and 1910 as a time of “reorientation,” a time when “the limits of an older economy of scarcity and moral restraint had given way to the impersonality and boundless scale of monopoly capitalism, where responsibility is superceded by desire” (61). William Leach looks to the transformation of “work” as a crucial element in understanding this cultural shift: “By the 1890s large numbers of men (and many women) worked in factories and in big corporate bureaucracies... these people had lost individual control over their own work and were subject to new disciplines and stresses that often rendered the work they performed wearying and unsatisfying. Such a situation also transformed the meaning of leisure and consumption as both became more and more the focus of individual fulfillment.” (101). And Karen Halttunen referring to observations made by Warren Susman notes: The transition from Victorian to modern American culture involved the replacement of the nineteenth-century concept of the self as “character” with the twentieth-century concept of “personality.” The culture of character had focused on moral concerns and preached the virtues of self-control; the new culture of personality was more concerned with emotional temperament and the techniques of self-expression.” (61)
'urbane' way of being in the world. Hawthorne's narrator is, above all else, a spectator whose aesthetic way of seeing enables him to read the impenetrable spectacle of city life. While the later novels will continue to focus on as well as embody this habit of seeing, they will also make more explicit how such habits of perception are interwoven with the new consumer economy. Indeed while all the novels illustrate America's embracing of a new consumer-oriented culture of visual extravagance, they also illustrate the anxiety, uncertainty and the resistance which accompanied this cultural revolution. Moreover, the class-bound, racialized and gendered implications embedded within the new visual consumer culture—implications which Hawthorne begins to explore in *Blithedale*—become, in the later novels, more dramatically insistent.

**The Public Spectacle and the Private Self**

When first thinking about the impact of urbanization, I was primarily intrigued by the new public spaces created by nineteenth-century urban culture—the department store, the vaudeville theater, the dance hall, the park, the "El" train—and the effects these spaces would have in constructing subjectivity. I realized along the way, however, that the new public spaces were also transforming the meaning of home, so it became crucial to turn my attention to the private sphere as well. According to Janet Wolff, the urban literature of modernity "ignores the private sphere" (44). "The particular experience of 'modernity,'" she writes, "was for the most part equated with experience in the public arena. The accelerated growth of the city, the shock of the proximity of the very rich and the destitute poor, and the novelty of the fleeting and impersonal contacts in public life, provided the concern and the fascination for the authors of the 'modern'" (Wolff 44). This "silence" regarding the private sphere, she insists, is "detrimental to any understanding of the lives of the female sex; it obscures a crucial part of men's lives too" (44). Wolff's points are well taken; however, while

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
she describes the 'authors of the modern' as "sociologists and other social commentators who documented their observations in academic essays, literary prose or poetry," she bases her argument on just the work of Baudelaire, the critic Walter Benjamin and sociologists Richard Sennet, Georg Simmel, and Marshall Berman. She does very little analysis of urban literature. If Wolff looked more closely at the urban novelists writing in the last half of the nineteenth century, I believe she would have found a more complicated picture. Many of these authors are not at all "silent" regarding the private sphere. Indeed the making of the home as well as the transformation of home is a crucial element in all of the novels I will discuss; some works, for example, illustrate a longing for a nostalgic "sentimental" home, while others show us a desire to escape from such an ideal, and still others will demonstrate how both these impulses might manifest themselves in the text. Wolff's perception that writers automatically align the city with "the public" does not necessarily hold up when we examine a variety of urban novels. My dissertation, therefore, will bring together a discussion of 'modern urban literature' and an analysis of domesticity in order to complicate our approach to 'the urban.' In doing so, I hope to not only better understand women's role in modern urban culture, but to also see how the "public spectacle" and the "private self" intersect.

The notion of a private domestic life is, after all, an urban phenomenon. Indeed the sentimental family emerges as a subject at about the same time that the city does. This new domestic ideal whereby a woman would devote herself to caretaking work within the home could only take place when a woman's other traditional work (as well as the man of the house) was taken out of the home and brought to the new factories and offices. This is also a middle-class ideal. It requires a certain level of wealth to adhere to this notion of gendered spheres. Obviously it requires that a man's earnings alone be enough to sustain the family; the family also must be able to afford the extra space needed to maintain the privacy so
essential to this ideal. As James Machor notes in his analysis of nineteenth-century urban culture, "[R]emaking the physical home was the answer for a better family life in the city.

The new domestic architecture that arose in this period stressed the importance of a separate parlor for socializing, a secluded nursery, and individual bedrooms for family members" (155). Indeed Sam Bass Warner's description of this "new domestic architecture" makes this new emphasis on privacy as well as gender boundaries particularly clear:

In the years between 1827 and 1860 the new middle class enjoyed a number of important advances in everyday consumption. The bare floors, whitewashed walls and scant furniture of middle-income eighteenth-century homes gave way to wool carpeting, wallpaper and all manner of furnishings. The houses themselves became relatively cheaper and grew in size from three rooms to four to six rooms in row houses or flats in row houses. The children slept one to a bed, and indoor toilets became common...In contrast to the 18th century when the middle-income house generally included the shop, the husband now commonly worked in an office, store or shop outside his home and the first floor front room became a parlor instead of a work room. Mid-nineteenth-century families of the new middle class did not need to put their children to work in the family trade or shop; they could take full advantage of the new public grammar school education. Finally they had grown prosperous enough to attend the increasing variety of offerings of commercial downtown entertainment.(as quoted by Blumin 157)

As Warner's description points out, "advances in everyday consumption" help to create a new family ideal. Family members would not need to work together as an economic unit as they traditionally had to for generation upon generation. Work—and even entertainment—would be taken out of the home, and yet much more would be invested in the home—materially and emotionally—since home was now a haven, a refuge from the stresses and strains and the theatricality of urban public life.

While many in reality could not achieve this ideal, the "Cult of domesticity," as scholars have so termed it, nonetheless spread its influence.3 Indeed the culture's elevation of the

---


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
sentimental home or 'The Empire of the Mother'—to use domestic author Henry Wright's term—dominated the antebellum period, shaping the ideals of Americans across a wide range of class, racial and ethnic positions. This sentimental middle-class ideal of domesticity continues to be a central issue in the last half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the urban novels explored here challenge, interrogate or revise the "cult of domesticity."

As my readings will illustrate, in a gradual yet persistent shift, the sentimental home of the mid-nineteenth century will eventually be transformed into a more "theatrical" space where individuals, and not necessarily families, can express their personalities. As the home becomes part of the theatricality of urban life rather than a haven from it, these writers highlight that the boundaries between public and private realms become more fluid and permeable with the rise of the new consumer culture. Indeed "home"—how it is defined, how it is imagined—is crucial to understanding these writers' visions of urban life. As Amy Kaplan puts it, home provides a "refuge from the city as well as a lens for viewing it" (49).

Indeed by looking at how the home is imagined in the new urban consumer culture, we can see deep cultural shifts at play, for the new consumerism's marked individualism as well as its emphasis on visual delight and desire become deeply enmeshed with the earlier antebellum cult of domesticity. Essentially, what my dissertation traces then, is the rise of a spectacular consumer visual culture in the public realm and its impact on the private

---

*Page 97, Mary Ryan's The Empire of the Mother: American Writing About Domesticity, 1830-1860. New York: Haworth, 1982. See also, David Lubin's Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994. While we see this image of the family with its strict gender divisions as primarily conservative, Lubin highlights that for many Americans of the time, this notion of the family was too liberal as it seemed to lessen the authority of the patriarch: "Although the ideology of the home as a haven in a heartless world gained its ascendancy during the antebellum period, its route to acceptance was anything but uncontested. A wide range of sources provided what many Americans took to be compelling criticism of or alternatives to the sentimental vision of the nuclear family. Orthodox Protestants clinging to Calvinist tradition decried the new liberalization of the family, in which the status of mother and children was elevated at the expense of the patriarch. Feminists argued that the sentimental family was unduly binding of women. Socialists urged that household labor including childcare and kitchen work be reapportioned through public cooperatives" (163-4).
realm—the home, subjectivity, consciousness. And as I trace this rise, I attend to its white, middle-class nature and its impact on those who are marginalized.

**Urbanization in Antebellum America**

History tends to equate the end of the nineteenth century with urbanism and consumerism, yet urbanization and the cultural changes which followed were not so sudden, and not limited to this particular period. As Dana Brand observes, “The development of consumer culture and the modern culture of images was a much more gradual process” (13). In the early nineteenth century we can see the start of this development with the arrival of the new print culture. Readying the way for a spectacular consumer culture of imagery, this print culture would already begin to transform class relations as well as habits of perception. Indeed with the explosive growth of the publishing industry in the first half of the nineteenth century, we already see the beginnings of mass consumption. John Kasson reminds us “with the 1830s, there came a dizzying leap in the world of print from an age of scarcity to an age of abundance: books, magazine and newspapers became far more widely available in the United States at far lower prices than ever before” (37). “Economic and technological developments converged to produce what was arguably the greatest single advance in printing... since the fifteenth century” (Kasson 37). As Nina Baym puts it, “Between 1814 and 1840, the profession of authorship in America took on the shape we know today, becoming a part of the business of selling identical copies of the same printed work for profit to the largest possible number of buyers. A century before Henry Ford’s assembly line,” she declares, “the publishing industry pioneered mass production” (301 Columbia).

As books became available to a wider portion of the population in the early nineteenth century, class prerogatives as well as traditional forms of authority began to shift:
Extensive book ownership and book learning remained through the eighteenth century a badge of the gentry just as did refined manners and mode of dress... By contrast, the new age of print in the nineteenth century made available to a wide public the possibility of extensive reading that had hitherto been limited to a relatively narrow economic and social group. As works proliferated and passed into the hands of a new body of readers, the social authority of learning and the major texts of the dominant Protestant culture grew more diffuse. (Kasson 39)

By 1841, William Ellery Channing, the leading liberal minister of the day, proclaimed that “the press is mightier than the pulpit” (Reynolds 15). Richard Brodhead, highlighting the enormous implications of the period’s widespread novel reading—its signaling of a cultural shift—connects this reading to spectatorship. “What could the proliferation of novel reading at this time reflect,” he asks, “if not a mass extension of habits of bodily deactivation and the reconcentration of self into sight” (62)? “Novels,” Brodhead insists, “offer adventure, via the eye for the residents of immobilized private space” (62).

Indeed by the 1840s, technological and economic changes were beginning to occur that would launch the nation into an age of consumerism and spectacle. With the opening in 1846 of A. T. Stewart’s Marble palace, the first department store in New York, shopping too would become an “adventure through the eye.” Stewart’s “use of a rotunda in department store architecture would shape commercial architecture for some time to come,” and “the extravagant size of the plate-glass display windows bestowed an aura of security and splendor upon the downtown streets” (Barth 125, 111). And as “regional railroad systems began to reach proportions that facilitated cheap and speedy delivery of raw materials and finished products, urban culture could now expand beyond the confines of metropolitan centers” (Chudacoff 35). As Gunther Barth points out, Sidney George Fisher, a Philadelphia gentleman and diarist, had noticed the “dawn of the corporate stage of metropolitanism” as early as 1848 during a trip through upstate New York (Barth 25-26). “In every little village,” Barth writes, “he found well-filled stores selling urban artifacts and goods, an entire culture
on Hudson River and the Erie Canal exported from New York City. Marveling at such
development, Fisher exclaimed, ‘Fifty years ago the whole country was a pathless forest’
(Barth 26). Indeed metropolitan culture was now being carried across the continent,
introducing rural populations to urban products and ideas, and the technological and
economic changes which enabled this would inevitably encourage them to leave those rural
lives behind:

The burgeoning industrial economy . . . opened new jobs to both young men
and women at the same time squeezing out the family economy. Increasingly
with each generation, ambitious youths of both sexes could expect to leave
their villages to make their fortunes: to seek work in the cities or the new
factory towns and to train in an expanding array of schools, seminaries and
colleges. Whereas earlier generations . . . learned their trades from their
parents, relatives, or neighbors close at hand in an apprenticeship, beginning
in the early nineteenth century, more and more youths would leave these
models behind as they launched themselves into the “world of strangers” of
the commercial cities. (Kasson 41)

In the thirty years preceding the Civil War, American cities were reeling with the impact
of these thousands who arrived to “launch themselves.” The urban population increased
from about 500,000 to 3.8 million (Boyer 67). As early as the 1830s, Barth points out that
“intense urbanization drove large numbers of residents into boarding houses and
tenements” (46). “Increasingly this surge of growth was fueled by foreign immigration. Over
540,000 immigrants arrived in the 1830s, and in the 1840s and 50s, Ireland’s devastating
potato famine, coupled with economic and political upheavals in Europe drove totals far
higher” (Boyer 67). The scale and pace of this urban growth and development was so great
that as early as 1844, William Cullen Bryant warned, “commerce is devouring inch by inch
New York’s harbor, shore and land’ (Barth 35).

Indeed as Karen Halttunen has emphasized, it was during the first half of the nineteenth
century—between 1820 and 1860—that the “fastest rate of urban growth in all American
history took place” (35, my emphasis). “The proportion of people living in cities rose by 797
percent while the national population increased only 226 percent" (Halttunen 35). And while migrating people overwhelmingly settled in cities, once in cities they did not necessarily "settle." Peter Knights has estimated that between 1830 and 1840, a total of 35,775 households moved into and out of Boston alone . . . viewed in another way only two in every five residents at one point in time were likely to be present in Boston a decade later. Evidence indicates that other cities underwent similar extensive turnover" (Chudacoff 47). Echoing the transitory qualities of its inhabitants, the city’s gridiron system of building "accommodated a distinctly modern attitude . . . that considered nothing permanently fixed, but the parcels of real estate. These parcels "enabled people to make maximum use of property for purposes which changed with their interests. They made city building and rebuilding an obsession" (Barth 31). "New York is never the same city for a dozen years," stated Harper’s Monthly in 1856 . . . 'Anyone born there forty years ago finds nothing, absolutely nothing of the New York he knew,' the editor emphasized" (Barth 31).

This ever-shifting world, Halttunen points out, generated much anxiety among America’s middle classes, and the new publishing industry was quick to respond. In her analysis of cultural material—advice and etiquette manuals, fashion magazines and mourning guides—Halttunen demonstrates that the middle classes were intent on ordering and interpreting this new mobile urban environment—this new world of strangers—for the city presented a "serious problem":

How could one identify strangers without access to biographical information about them, when only immediate visual information was available? In the preindustrial city . . . strangers were coded largely on the basis of personal appearance. Costume, manner, body markings and linguistic patterns could indicate status or rank, occupation, nationality and because of the practice of punitive mutilation, even moral character. With the Industrial Revolution, however, the rising classes began to imitate the dress and conduct of the older elites; legal regulation of dress styles declined, bodily mutilation for moral offenses disappeared and language grew more standardized.
Identifying the urban stranger on the basis of personal appearance became almost impossible. (Halttunen 36)

Since the city became increasingly difficult to "read," the American middle class, she observes, became preoccupied with reading the public space, and the advice manuals of the period sought to help them by continually stressing the ever present danger of urban hypocrisy embodied in "the confidence man" and the "painted woman." Again and again these guides prescribed sentimental sincerity as the antidote to urban hypocrisy. Eventually, however, at mid-century, Halttunen argues that these anxieties ease, for the middle class "adjusts" to urbanization by moving away from insisting on transparency and honesty in public life to accepting the inevitable theatricality of social relations. In other words, the middle class learns to live with a public space which is now inevitably masked, a space which could only be partially visible. As we move toward the end of the nineteenth century, the growth of cities will only continue to problematize reading and interpretation, and Trachtenberg's description of the new urban markets of the late nineteenth century helps us understand why. "As the domestic making of goods receded, city dwellers became more enmeshed in the market, more and more dependent on buying and selling, selling their labor in order to buy their sustenance; the network of personal relations, of family, friends, neighbors, comes to count for less in the maintenance of life than the impersonal transactions and abstract structures of the market" (122). Referring to the work of sociologist Georg Simmel, Nicholas Spykman elaborates on the social and psychological implications of this new market economy: "The modern urban dweller depends on more people, but much less on a specific individual. Because he is dependent on the function and not on the bearer of the function, he can change and select the latter according to his own choice. This gives him an inner independence, a feeling of individual self-sufficiency. His freedom consists in his ability to change the individuals on whom he shall depend" (as quoted by Smith, 102). "In
this way,” Michael Smith observes, “the money economy fosters not only an increased potential for self-sufficiency but also an increased emotional detachment from others. Relationships become less personal and more functional. Urban life becomes more and more rationalized”(102). Indeed in the emerging culture of the “marketplace,” the direct personal relationship between production and consumption, and between buying and selling would be lost, leaving urbanites less able to see the city as a network of vital social relationships, and more inclined to view it all as an impersonal spectacle.

The first chapter of my dissertation situates *The Blithedale Romance* within this historical framework. Hawthorne’s work, published in 1852, arrives at a particularly fascinating juncture where we see the earlier sentimental modes, the insistence on sincerity, in dialogue, so to speak, with this new-found acceptance of the theatricality of social relations. Reflecting the cultural transformations Halttunen describes, I argue that Hawthorne’s narrator Miles Coverdale embodies the contradictions of domestic ideology as it changes over the course of the century. While he yearns for that Christian sincerity, that sentimental transparency, a world he can easily read, Coverdale nevertheless embodies a more urbane domesticity, one based on leisure, consumption and display. Hawthorne’s novel also suggests that urban life contributes to a mystification of reality, and he highlights the increasing urban necessity for masking and dramatizing. Coverdale, for example, chooses not to see the overworked seamstress in Priscilla because he prefers the “fancywork” he has “decked her out” with (94). It is much more pleasurable to look at life aesthetically, to take delight in visual surfaces and, as Halttunen’s study shows, urban life only contributes to this visual dependency, even when that visual dependency is no longer adequate for “reading” the city’s complexities.

This emphasis on vision and spectatorship also aligns Hawthorne’s narrator with a well-known urban figure of the nineteenth century: the flaneur. This urban spectator who
delights in and depends upon the visual surface originated with the stroller of nineteenth-century Paris who “relished the kaleidoscope of urban public life,” creating from it “a new aesthetic, perceiving a novel kind of beauty in streets, factories and urban blight” (Wilson 5). Recalling the flaneur, Hawthorne’s narrator is also an urban spectator/consumer, a “botanist on asphalt”—to use Walter Benjamin’s term—who “reduces the disorienting diversity of the city to accessible images that can be collected and consumed” (Brand 7). And “through his improbable pretensions to epistemological control,” the flaneur, “saves himself from chaos and indeterminacy” (Brand 7). Moreover, as Brand points out, the figure of the flaneur also “represents a historically significant accommodation of the bourgeois to the urban cosmopolitan world they were creating” (176). This, I argue, is what makes Coverdale so intriguing. Hawthorne’s flaneur is also complex; his “epistemological control” often wears thin. Indeed it is the novel’s anxiety regarding interpretation—the spectator narrator’s inability to read the spectacle of urban culture—which not only positions Hawthorne within the crucial historical moment Halttunen describes, but also connects him with the writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although Coverdale is dissatisfied and wrestles with the meaning of his urban life, he is profoundly attracted to it—its artifice, its social formalities, its aestheticizing gaze, and, in particular, its extremely private domesticity. Beginning with Hawthorne, then, I trace how American writers register the changes wrought by an urban environment, and more specifically how their responses illuminate the relationship between urban and domestic spaces, between public and private selves.

The Beginnings of American Urban Literature

I use Hawthorne as a starting point because of the specific figures and themes I am tracing, and also because of his prominence and influence. From my research, I have learned that Cahan and Dreiser as well as James, Howells and Wharton were influenced by or
familiar with Hawthorne. I believe I can safely speculate that Dunbar and Yezierska were familiar with his work too, since by the turn of the century, Hawthorne's reputation as a "classic" writer was confirmed. But there were other writers in the antebellum period who tackled the subject of the new city besides Hawthorne. Indeed the beginnings of our urban literature can be found in these early decades, so rather than suggesting an evolution of "Romanticism" to "Realism"—the stark differences between Pre-Civil war literature and Post-Civil War literature—this introduction will link up various works and writers who have been thought to have very different aims and concerns: "Romantics" like Poe, Melville and Hawthorne, for example, and "Realists" like Howells, Dreiser, and Cahan. Moreover, when we move away from the works of canonical writers, we are better able to see that although nature was in vogue in antebellum America, it was because urbanization preoccupied the nation. The idealized romantic view of nature espoused by Transcendentalism and The Hudson River School, for example, could only become powerful when Americans lived apart from nature, when the wilderness was "tamed" and no longer something one had to struggle against. Indeed although much of our canonical antebellum literature evolves out of this romanticism, the popular writers of antebellum America were increasingly turning to the city for their subject matter.

If we look to the penny press and the popular fiction of the day, we can see just how many books were devoted to the city. Adrienne Seigel notes that during the 1840s and 50s—the "heyday of the western frontier"—there were "more than three times as many books written about life in the city as about conditions beyond the Appalachians" (6). Perhaps the most popular of these works is George Lippard's *Quaker City*, written in 1845, a book which passed through twenty-seven editions by 1849 (Lippard 12). As David Reynolds' description notes, Lippard's city is a particularly difficult city to read:
Lippard creates an entire nightmare world that is always threatening to
destroy ordinary perceptions of objective surroundings. In the first chapter
we see, through the eyes of the drunken Gus Lorimer, the lampposts and
sidewalks of Philadelphia perform dizzying pirouettes in the air. This is a
confused and confusing city, in Gus’s words, with ‘every thing fleeting and
nothing stable, everything shifting and changing and nothing substantial . . .
The most nightmarish place in the city is Monk Hall where outwardly
normal folk become ‘entangled in the mazes of some hideous dream.’
(Reynolds 42)

Intent on exposing the hypocrisy many believed characteristic of urban life, Lippard
“transforms the medieval monks of the Gothic novel into modern monks—wealthy or
aristocratic Philadelphians and New Yorkers, outwardly moral, but secretly devoted to
sensualism and vice”(Reynolds Lippard 50). Like Lippard, journalist George Foster also set
out to expose the city’s sordid realities. His popular works New York in Slices by an
Experienced Carver (1848) and New York by Gaslight (1850) told of his night rambles through
the city’s gas-lit streets, and the “realities that lie beneath the deceptive appearances of the
city and its people” (Blumin 53). Like the flaneur, Foster orders the city’s spectacle, and,
speaking to the cultural anxieties Halttunen describes, he “offers the reader a solution of
expertise”(53).

Poe and Melville also took the mysterious city as their subject. In “Man of the Crowd,”
published in 1840, Poe’s narrator is a detached flaneur observing metropolitan life from a
London coffeehouse which affords him an expansive view. Just at the time middle-class
urbanites worried they could no longer read the new public realm, Poe’s narrator makes the
crowd legible; he has the uncanny ability to read the crowd with ease and precision. With his
meticulous attention to visual details, he effortlessly reports the various stations and classes
of the people who come into his line of vision:

The tribe of clerks was an obvious one; and here I discerned two remarkable
divisions. There was the junior clerks of flash houses—young gentlemen
with tight coats, bright boots, well-oiled hair and supercilious lips . . . the
division of the upper clerks of staunch firms . . . it was not possible to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
mistake. These were known by their coats and pantaloons of black or brown, made to sit comfortably with white cravats and waistcoats . . . I observed that they always removed or settled their hats with both hands and wore watches with short gold chains of a substantial and ancient pattern. (181)

Although Poe’s narrator exhibits the flaneur’s great powers of interpretation and invisible detachment, in the end, unlike Foster and Lippard, he cannot reveal what lies at the heart of urban life—there is something unspeakable, something impenetrable about the spectacle. The city remains a realm of mystery as one “man in the crowd” continues to elude him and defy interpretation.

Melville also explores the impenetrability at the heart of urban life in his short story “Bartleby the Scrivener” (1853). Again, we have a confident urbane narrator who is unable to interpret a mysterious urban figure, but unlike Poe’s narrator who traverses the city streets at night, Melville’s narrator is a “safe man” (2446) He keeps to his home, to his Wall Street office and in his relishing of domesticity and privacy, his bourgeois attitude, he brings to mind Hawthorne’s Coverdale:

Though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous . . . yet nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace. I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury or in any way draws down public applause, but in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat do a snug business among rich men’s bonds and mortgages and title-deeds. All who know me consider me an eminently safe man. (2446)

Like Hawthorne’s narrator, Melville’s lawyer will be shaken out of his comfortable private life, and like Coverdale he will be unable to face the challenges the new urban space demands of him. Both tales end on a false sentimental note with their narrators retreating back into their extremely private lives: Melville’s narrator bemoaning the loss of Bartleby, and Coverdale declaring his unlikely love for Priscilla.
While the difficulty of deciphering the city preoccupied many antebellum writers, there were nevertheless other writers who found within the city’s confusing spaces a reassuring text. For these writers, the city would be aligned with American ideals of individualism and opportunity—aspects of urban life which will later be interrogated by writers like Dunbar, Dreiser, Cahan and Yezierska. As Siegel observes, “For a generation captivated by the myth of the self-made man, the urban novel of the mid-nineteenth century provided compelling reasons to migrate to the metropolis” (144). “Many a city novel was a modern Cinderella tale promising that people of worth would be discovered in as unlikely an environment as the far flung mysterious and crowded American metropolis” (Siegel 144). Osgood Bradbury’s Jane Clark (1855), Joseph Scoville’s Clarence Bolton (1857) and John Beauchamp Jone’s Life and Adventures of a Country Merchant (1854) to cite a few of the many, many examples during this period, all “fed the national dream of self advancement through hard work, creating a collective myth of the city as a place where the stalwart could hold fast to agrarian righteousness while at the same time pursuing material abundance” (Siegel 175).

Was the city a realm of golden opportunity for all individuals or was it an impenetrable landscape occupied by dangerous and alien types? Here were two questions nineteenth-century urban dwellers asked themselves again and again. Although the two visions implicit in these questions seem like oppositions, they both have at their heart the cultural anxieties Halttunen describes. Both views make the class divisions of the new urban economy easily understood as well as extremely palpable and comforting to an anxious middle class. In one view, class distinctions are seen as “natural,” as a result of insurmountable obstacles of

---

5 Brand also highlights this point in his discussion of the story in The Spectator and the City. “Ultimately,” he writes, ‘The Man of the Crowd’ suggests that the urban crowd cannot be reduced to a comfortable transparency.” (88). “By representing this encounter between the narrator and the old man, Poe shows what the flaneur cannot read, in the crowd and in himself” (88).
Difference; in the other, the uncomfortable reality of class in a democratic society is erased altogether as the city is a place where anyone who works hard might improve their position.

**Class and Urbanity**

In her *Letters from New York* (1845), Lydia Maria Child decides that New York has much improved “because bloated disease, black gutters and pigs, uglier than their ugly kind, no longer constitute the foreground” (15). “I have become more familiar with the pretty parks ... and sunny spots of greenery,” she remarks (15). Insisting in her letters that the city needs something of nature, Child goes to Battery Park to be refreshed again and again. Her letters reinforce for us that in the antebellum years, nineteenth-century leaders had sought the pastoral as a “corrective” for urban ills (Schuyler 4). Indeed the park movement would gain momentum at mid-century as reformers and landscape architects like Frederick Law Olmstead envisioned the park as not only a way to “mitigate the physical ills of urban congestion,” but more importantly, a way to “mitigate the country’s social ills”; the park, they believed, would bring together all social classes of the city (Schultz 157). As Olmstead envisioned it, “people would gather with a common purpose,” and all would be “helping to the greater happiness of each” (as quoted by Schultz 157).

In 1890, Jacob Riis made it dramatically clear that the middle class did not know how “The Other Half” lived, yet this fear had already been articulated nearly fifty years earlier. Scholars have pointed out that in the early nineteenth-century city, diverse populations were used to mixing together, but as the city expanded, it became increasingly segmented and divided along class and racial lines. Lewis Erenberg observes that “amusements in the early nineteenth century ... were part of an informal heterogeneous public life with little

---

6 See Mary Ryan’s *Women in Public*, Gunther Barth’s *City People* and Lewis Erenberg’s *Stepping Out*.
segregation by class or sex. After 1830 however, and increasingly after 1850, the informal street life and mixed amusement characteristic of the pre-industrial city gave way to the increasing complexity and specialization of the industrial city. Amusements stratified along the lines of class, sex, and race” (Erenberg 15). Siegel also emphasizes the dramatic class and spatial divisions which were beginning to take shape in the antebellum American city:

Between 1820 and 1870, the rich became much more visible and lavished upon themselves a standard of living that anticipated the conspicuous consumption of the Gilded Age. De Tocqueville’s observations of an egalitarian society notwithstanding, we now know... that in the cities of America, a privileged minority representing less than 5 percent of the urban population owned about 50 percent of the community’s wealth. Enjoying an opulent standard of living that compared well with that of the Southern planter aristocracy, this urban oligarch built marble fronted townhouses which they staffed with retinues of servants and decorated with elaborate furnishings of mahogany and gilt. Where once they had lived on streets in proximity to their poorer neighbors, by 1845, encouraged by improvements in intraurban transport they had moved from the heart of the business district to distinctive neighborhoods occupied by their social equals. Where once they had enjoyed a comfortable but unostentatious manner of life, they now paraded themselves before the masses in costly garments and handsome private carriages. Experiencing a splendor that sharply separated them from the vast majority of ordinary citizens, they vacationed at expensive watering spots, sat in special boxes at the theater, and socialized with each other in exclusive clubs. (61)

Precisely because of this growing separation between classes, Joseph Tuckerman, a Boston minister in the 1830s, believed that urban poverty was far worse than rural poverty. “Rural and village poor were an integral part of town and parish he had argued. The family’s condition and wants were known by their comparatively ‘opulent’ neighbors who would personally attend to their needs. This connection of the rich and the poor was severed by urban growth. Moreover, Tuckerman believed that the ‘anonymity of the city encouraged viciousness’” (Bender 141): “There is in the city a hope of escape in open shame and crime, and, for those who are inclined to crime, a hope of safety from detection in it; and as the differences of condition are here more real and sensible, and the sympathies of the classes with each other far weaker, the suffering of the virtuous poverty will not only be often far
greater, but greater too, will be the recklessness of vicious poverty” (as quoted by Bender 141).

Well before the famous Haymarket bombing and the labor strikes of the late nineteenth century, Americans were worrying about class conflict and with good reason. Urbanization had created a concentration of wealth and a growing laboring underclass in what not too long ago had been a republic of farmers and artisans. Paul Boyer notes that “the period from the 1830s to the 1850s was a time of almost continuous disorder and turbulence among the urban poor” (69). After describing several New York riots—the New York Flour Riot in 1837, the 1849 Astor Place riot, the Five Points Gang War of 1857 and the 1863 Antidraft riots—he remarks, “In fact these well-known riots were only the tip of the iceberg” (69). “The 1834-1844 decade saw more than 200 major gang wars in New York City alone, and in other cities the pattern was similar” (Boyer 69).

Indeed by the 1850s, the class divisions exacerbated by the new urban economy were shaping the American city into two cities. As Christine Stansell describes it, “New York contained extremes of wealth and poverty” (198). “There was an elegant downtown of expensive shops and residences, mostly serene. In the poor parts of town, wretched new arrivals stumbled about, ragged and gaunt . . . Entire families crowded into sublet small back bedrooms. In some pockets of what is now the Lower East Side, population densities approached those of London’s worst neighborhoods” (Stansell 199). After 1850, she notes, the “idea of the tenement classes” became popular, “due to publicized police investigations . . . and to accounts written by journalists who accompanied policemen on their rounds” (Stansell 201). “These were voyeuristic journeys,” Stansell writes, “into the heart of darkness, the enthralling, unimaginable sinfulness of working-class life hidden away behind the façade of bourgeois society” (201).
While the Otherness of working-class life provided a fascinating spectacle for middle-class observers, it also triggered much anxiety. What especially disturbed the middle-class was that so much of working-class life was not "hidden behind the façade of bourgeois society." Much energy, therefore, would be invested in teaching the communal culture of the working class the middle-class values of privacy and individualism. Indeed by mid-century, middle-class values would be the remedy to unite a divided America. In order to counter the looming threat of a large working class with alternative values, both the work of reformers and the new consumer culture of images would assert the cultural authority of the bourgeoisie. As a result, many of those from the working classes would begin to identify more and more with the nation's middle-classes. In the new consumer culture, class identity would be a fragile and ephemeral thing.

One of the aspects of working-class life that had elicited harsh condemnation from middle-class reformers was the behavior of the children of the urban poor, their ubiquitous presence on the street. Reformers, Stansell observes, did not understand that "family economies bridged the distance between public and private to make the streets a sphere of domestic life" (203). "For poor children," she explains, "the streets were a playground and a workplace. Street life, with its panoply of choices, its rich and varied texture, its motley society played a central role in their upbringing, part and parcel of a moral conception of childhood that emphasized early independence contingent on early responsibility" (Stansell 203). Due to a population explosion and changes in hiring practices, the streets took on even more importance, beginning in the late 1840s (Stansell 203). "As masters rearranged work to take advantage of a labor market glutted with impoverished adults," apprentices "virtually disappeared" from workshops (Stansell 203). Huckstering now became the most reliable, legitimate employment, and "the growth of the street trades meant that large numbers of children who, two decades earlier, would have worked under close supervision as
apprentices or servants spent their days away from adult discipline" (Stansell 204). New York’s police chief George Matsell’s portrayal of the children of the urban poor in his annual report of 1849, as a “corrupt and festering fountain, endlessly flowing into brothels and prisons” was, in part, a reaction to this great expansion of children’s presence on the street (Boyer 96, Stansell 203).

Also responding to this sense of crisis was Charles Loring Brace, who, in 1853, founded the Children’s Aid Society (Boyer 94). Brace “shared the alarm of reformers like Matsell at the homelessness of the poor, the numbers of children on the streets,” but he differed from many of his contemporaries in his view of urban life (Stansell 209). He “took heart” as Stansell puts it, from his belief that the “absence of family life so deplored by his contemporaries actually operated to stabilize American Society” (Stansell 209). While many Americans worried about the anonymity of urban life, and only saw harmful consequences to come out of it, Brace, as early as 1858, began to reassess Tuckerman’s position on city life and class relations:

Even in our New England villages, it is well known ... that there are families, sometimes two or three generations old, of inveterate paupers ... There is in New York very little of this state of things, outside of the public institutions. In our stable and conservative villages, wicked families tend to remain together, but in the city with its incessant change, these families are constantly broken up and there is little inherited criminality and pauperism. (as quoted by Bender 141-2)

According to Boyer, “Brace welcomed the social upheaval wrought by urbanization. The city, with its anonymity, deradication and weakened communal ties was the crucible from which would emerge a stronger and better human type: Flexible, self reliant, autonomous ...” (Boyer 103). Implicit in this, of course, is the ideology of individualism which would diffuse any “collective consciousness”; Brace’s “corrective domesticity,” as Stansell calls it, would break up working-class families and neighborhoods. “Placing out” meant sending poor city
children to foster homes in rural areas where labor was scarce; "it was based on the thoroughly bourgeois belief in the redeeming influence of the Protestant home in the country side" (Stansell 211). The great duty of the visitor, the Children's Aid's Society declared, is "to get these children of unhappy fortune utterly out of their surroundings and to send them away to kind Christian homes in the country. No influence we believe is like the influence of a home" (Stansell 211). While the Children's Aid Society blatantly incorporates a sentimental domesticity into its ideology, it exhibited no hesitation in pulling poor children away from their families. Indeed for Brace, "the great obstacle" was the "superstitious opposition" of parents (Boyer 102). Although he was far more rational than sentimental regarding the "family," Brace's view of the city's "waifs," was often charged with sentiment and idealism. As Boyer observes: "He did not entertain romantic notions about the moral superiority of the country or a nostalgia for a social order based on the scrutiny of the family and a close-knit community. He had no desire to restrain the freewheeling autonomy that he so admired in the children of the urban poor. Rather he sought to give it a wider and more secure social arena in which to operate" (99). The "aim was to not turn slum urchins into meek conformists, but to direct their tough individualism and resourcefulness into acceptable channels." (Boyer 97). To Brace, the neglected children were a "collective" menace, but individually he admired them tremendously: "Far from being degenerate human specimens, the newsboys, bootblacks, match sellers and even petty thieves who swarmed Manhattan's thoroughfares were," as Brace put it, 'quick to understand and quick to act, generous and impulsive, with an air of being well used to steering their own canoe" (Boyer 97). What Brace saw in these street children were essentially American ideals—a rugged individualism and self-reliance. Indeed his attitude and approach to urban reform would be largely successful since he suggested that the urban poor embodied American values; they were worthy recipients of care; these alien others were really not so alien at all.
Around the same time that Brace was embracing the street-wise child of the urban poor, working-class urban types which had been depicted in popular culture for years—Mose, the Bowery b’hoy, a “brash, swaggering lower-class urban youth,” and Lize, the Bowery g’hal—had finally become “all American” types (Reynolds 463). According to David Reynolds, “By the late 1840s, the b’hoy had his greatest cultural prominence” (465). “In the course of his transformation from real life rowdy to a central character in popular literature, the b’hoy went through a remarkable broadening and deepening of his image” (Reynolds 463). George Foster, in his *New York by Gaslight*, illustrates this “broadening”:

In no other country could Mose or Lize exist . . . There are the great middle classes in all other countries—but in none other does any branch of them display anything like the peculiar and distinguishing attributes of the American b’hoy and g’hal. All through our own country, the type is found in abundance, but very slightly modified by location . . . The b’hoy of the Bowery, the rowdy of Philadelphia, the Hoosier of the Mississippi, the trapper of the Rocky Mountains, the gold hunter of California are so much alike that an unpracticed hand could not distinguish one from the other while the Lize of the Chatham Theater and the belle of a Wisconsin ballroom are absolutely identical and might change places without anybody being the wiser. (170)

Although profoundly urban and working class in their origins, Mose and Lize come to embody a geographical and class fluidity; Moze and Lize could be at home anywhere and with anyone, and their appeal is somehow universal. Reynolds notes that “what made the b’hoy an especially rich figure was that he was not only feisty; he was also smart. Whereas the anti-intellectual frontier type had firmly denounced “larnin,” the b’hoy was the punchy working-class man who behaved like a cultural dandy. He was restless, wicked, pugnacious, but shrewd and altogether lovable. He struck out against aristocratic ‘upper ten-dom’ but also aped its habits” (Reynolds 464).

Indeed what we see in the development of this figure then is a blurring of class boundaries, for Mose and Lize’s working-class identity also embodies middle-class values.
Moreover, as Foster writes, "The “secret and key of the entire class of characters represented by Mose . . . is just this—free development to Anglo Saxon nature” (170). All these varied geographical types fall under the umbrella of a national and racial identity, helping to deflate any potential class antagonism. Indeed with its double-edged, paradoxical effect on class relations, the rising consumer economy would also help deflate class antagonism. As capitalism creates an exploited working class, it also makes more material wealth and the trappings of the middle class available to its exploited workers. Economic class divisions are stronger, more pronounced in a sense, but class identity becomes more vague, diffuse, weaker. The b'hoy, after all, was a “dandy” as well as a “cheerful, disciplined worker.” Indeed with the rise of an urban consumer culture, class seemed both more solid and more fluid than ever before.

In the urban literature over the course of the century, reading class will remain a central issue, for class is an essential means of mapping and interpreting urban space, yet with urbanization class becomes more fluid, confusing, a category no longer easily read or acknowledged. In both Hawthorne’s and James’s works, class is denied even while it is recognized. Both Coverdale and Olive Chancellor, for example, do not like to be reminded that the women they so admire come from struggling working-class environments. Coverdale declares that he does not care for the “realities” of Priscilla, “the poor little seamstress”; He prefers, as he puts it, “the fancy work with which I have idly decked her out” (Hawthorne 94). And even though Olive claims she is “sick of the Back Bay” and wants to reach the people, she keeps Verena sheltered in the Back Bay, away from her parents and her questionable class origins (James 62). The often paradoxical complexities of class will become more insistent in the later novels. Dreiser, for example, while depicting a working-class communal culture during his novel’s strike scenes, also shows us the fragility of class identity in the new “topsy-turvy” consumer economy. We are repeatedly shown that
Carrie’s working-class background is irrelevant; she has no allegiance to her family or her co-workers, for she models herself solely on the consumer individualism of bourgeois life. Focusing on the incompatibility of middle-class individualism and working-class communal life, Dunbar, Cahan and Yezierka, writers emerging from America’s underclasses, will interrogate this bourgeois ideal. Indeed, for these writers, aspiring to America’s middle-class remains an elusive as well as a questionable goal.

As these brief summaries suggest, many of the novels’ depictions of class relations obscure the very real contentions and interactions which were taking place between Americans of different class positions. In her work, Melville’s City, Wyn Kelley helps us see how these interactions often revolved around various conceptions of what constituted private and public realms of experience:

In a city where poor and working people could claim little private space, the public space of New York—streets, parks, and public buildings became places to do business, meet friends, dump garbage, make love, make deals...everything refined people do behind closed doors. They also made visible the tensions between class interests as people tried to use the streets for different purposes... Merchants and homeowners were offended by the use working and poor people made of the streets—for peddling, scavenging, prostitution and theft, and their lack of privacy. As Nathaniel Parker Willis said of the Five Points, “Nobody goes in doors except to eat and sleep. The streets swarm with men, women, and children...they are all out in the sun, idling, jesting quarreling, everything but weeping, sighing or complaining...a viler place than Five Points, by any light, you could not find.” Reform efforts focused on clearing the streets of unsightly people and their traffic...and missed the point that the streets were the homes of working class people, that from these uses of public space came the bonds of community life that homeowners, by moving behind closed doors had to find elsewhere—in the club, church, or theater, as Melville shows in his sketches, if they found it anywhere. (218)

These opposing views of what should be public and what should be private remain an obstacle in class relations, especially as middle-class domesticity becomes the norm, the only version of a “moral” household. As Kelley points out, “when reformers entered tenement households they saw a domestic sparseness which contradicted their deepest understanding
about what constituted a morally sustaining household; material effects and domestic morality were closely connected" (214). Kelley observes that in Melville's short fiction, "The middle-class characters . . . have homes; the working class and poor characters either do not have homes or have homes that do not fit the middle-class definition of domestic space" (214). She believes that Melville's work is highly critical of middle-class values, and that "the real separate spheres in his short fiction are not so much those of gender as those of class": "By peopling his narratives with working and poor people struggling to make homes in the city under the now sympathetic, now censorious eye of a middle-class narrator," she argues, "Melville makes the most of this opportunity to expose bourgeois family values" (214).

In her reading of Bartelby, Kelly highlights how the issues of class and domesticity are central. "Throughout their entire association, the lawyer sees Bartleby's problem as one of moral homelessness; 'keeping bachelor's halls all by himself'—smacks of deviance" (Kelly 215). Bartleby's use of the office for living space, Kelley emphasizes, "affronts the narrator's sense of propriety" (215). "Thus, although Bartleby keeps house with admirable economy," as Kelly points out, "the lawyer judges him for not having a home" (215). Bartleby, who declares, 'I like to be stationary,' is "much more secure and domestic an urban inhabitant than the lawyer who keeps 'veering about'" (Kelly 215). Nevertheless Bartleby's "lack of a conventional home makes him seem to the lawyer 'the victim of an innate and incurable disorder'" (Kelly 215). Although a reader might be inclined to admire Bartleby's thrifty use of space for domestic purposes, the lawyer casts doubt on his sanity (Kelly 215). Kelly concludes that "Bartleby does not submit to the choices urban characters commonly make" (224). "He does not allow himself to be excluded from the city's public and private spaces, does not force himself to choose between domestic and working spheres. Instead he creates his own space, an alternative space, where he stands his ground" (Kelly 224).
These contentions which Kelly so tellingly observes surfacing in Melville will reverberate later in the century. We revisit the moral homelessness of Bartleby when Olive is horrified by the home life of Verena Tarrant—a young woman whose parents not only do not respect the boundaries between public and private realms, but whose home is clearly lacking in the right "material effects." And whether the material effects of urbanity enhance or detract from middle-class domesticity is the central issue Basil March struggles with when trying to decide whether it is tenements or flats that bring out "family consciousness." While Dreiser shows us Carrie's sister's sparse domestic realm is sparse on family feeling, Wharton will associate moral order with the sparsity of Netty Crane's tenement. In Dunbar, Cahan and Yezierska's work, we see how those outside of a white, middle-class domesticity strive to nevertheless emulate it, often with devastating implications for the integrity of their racial or ethnic cultural identity. And while white, middle-class ideals may be aspired to, these novels reveal the importance and necessity of creating and maintaining an alternative domesticity.

Gender and Urbanity

In her landmark study of antebellum women's fiction, Nina Baym notes that while the "hundreds of melodramatic fictions of the 1840s . . . all turned on the sudden growth of the city, and its emergence as threat and temptation . . . women authors were more ambivalent. They saw much more clearly . . . the distressing rural conditions from which city migrants were fleeing. If the country might mean peace, stillness, rest, beauty and harmonious nature, it did not in fact mean these to the impoverished majority that toiled on farms and lived in dread of drought and foreclosure" (Baym 45). Indeed, as Baym suggests, for many antebellum women, the city is not an "impenetrable mystery," but a realm of promise and new possibilities.
Lydia Maria Child's *Letters from New York* (1845) is among our earliest examples of urban writing—a fascinating document rendering early New York in all its complexity. Child's tone is also multi-faceted, mixing the delight of the "flaneuse" with the concern of the reformer. Observing its "infinite variety of characters," she finds New York a "place of rapid fluctuation and never-ceasing change" (68). "A large portion of the population are like mute actors," she writes, "who tramp across the stage in pantomime or pageant and are seen no more" (68). In New York's "ever moving panorama," she assures us she has seen "humanity under such winning aspects" (279). Bringing Coverdale to mind, she speculates on the sublimity of the crowds sweeping her on; she finds "something impressive in this dense crowding . . . as if I were unknown, unnoticed," and at times, the demands of urban life make her feel as if she were "turning to stone by inches" (69, 194). More so than Coverdale, however, Child is distraught by the misery of what she sees, haunted by the image of the ragged newsboy, the woman sprawled on the pavement, her powerlessness to help. Always she brings to the forefront the extremes of wealth and poverty she finds in the city, as when she watches a "ragged emaciated woman" sitting on the "cold stone steps" (97). "I raised my eyes above the woman's weather beaten head," she writes, "and saw behind the window of clear, plate glass, large vases of gold and silver . . . That this homeless outcast would sit shivering beneath their glittering mockery," she remarks, "spoke significantly of the sad contrasts in this disordered world" (97).

While her letters reveal much of the misery and injustice of New York, Child ultimately finds in the city cause for hope. She decides that "May Day" is "an appropriate emblem of the country and this age" (286). May day is moving day in New York—"one house empties itself into another all over the city" (285). "That people move so often in this city," she observes, "is generally a matter of their own volition. Aspirations after the infinite lead them to perpetual change in the restless hope of finding something better and better still" (286).
Child however, says she is “averse to frequent changes,” and begins to invoke a sentimental notion of home (287). Significantly, what she recalls is an old German home, an ideal that seems especially distant in time and place: “Oh for one of those old German homes where the same stork with his children and grandchildren builds on the same roof, generation after generation . . . oh for a quiet nook in good old Nuremberg, where . . . the same family inhabits the same mansion for five centuries . . . where the great grandson makes watches in the same shop that was occupied by his watchmaking great grandfather.”(289). After making this lament Child nevertheless decides, “But after all this is a foolish, whining complaint. A stork’s nest is very pleasant, but there are better things. Man is moving to his highest destiny through manifold revolutions of spirit, and the outward must change with the inward”(288). Opting to side with change and progress rather than security and tradition, her closing lines attempt to resolve the tensions between traditional values and urbanization, between the competing claims of public and private realms of life. “Do you fear that the patriot will be lost in the cosmopolite?” she asks her readers (288). “Never fear. We shall not love our own household less because we love others more”(288). Speaking to the anxieties which will also surface in the later urban novels, Child assures the reader that Americans can only progress by embracing the new possibilities offered in the cosmopolitan city.

Much of this anxiety regarding cosmopolitan life stems from women’s ambiguous role in the new urban landscape. Elizabeth Wilson writes: “Almost from the beginning the presence of women in cities, and particularly in city streets has been questioned, and the controlling and surveillance aspects of city life has always been directed particularly at women. Urban life potentially challenged patriarchal systems. Civilization which meant luxury and consumerism (although only for a minority) threatened the virtuous authority of the family”(Wilson 14-15). Mary Ryan also attends to the emancipatory as well as the
controlling and surveillance aspects of city life in her analysis of women in nineteenth-century urban America:

Because their traditional behavior and status were turned topsy-turvy in the big city, women’s conduct on the streets was monitored with special care. Heretofore, women’s social status had largely been circumscribed by the spaces and relations of the household. In farmhouses, artisans’ shops and small face to face communities, most women were under the close surveillance of fathers, husbands and civic patriarchs. Now the city streets offered them new attractions, new freedoms and a veil of anonymity under which to pursue them. (63)

As she examines the nineteenth-century American city, Ryan emphasizes the heterogeneous confusion of the street. “Neither the multiple functions of a mixed urban economy, nor the diverse ethnic, racial and class groupings of the metropolis were neatly sorted out in urban space before 1880,” she notes (Ryan 60). Though there were “segregated residential districts” by the 1870s, “these segregated spots were measured by blocks, not wards, and bordered immediately on the residences of the foreign born and lower class” (61). “Compartmentalization was imperfect and at mid-century, a city’s diverse population often had to share common neighborhood services on an everyday basis . . . above all the streets themselves defied attempts at segregation” (61). Echoing Halttunen’s observations, Ryan points out that city dwellers “stranded in this limbo between the face to face communities of the past, and the more segregated social geography of more recent times, devised intermediary methods of imposing order on the urban maelstrom” (61). To help the “public man” navigate the hazardous streets of the big city, Ryan explains, journalists provided maps that pinpointed sexual dangers; the “mental maps” which helped nineteenth-century Americans negotiate the new and uncertain terrain of the city were gender-coded, and this code was complicated by class. (68). Cities came to be seen as places where the middle/upper class man and woman was “endangered,” and the laboring/lower class woman (equated with prostitute) was the source of that danger (73). As Ryan
summarizes this situation, she emphasizes the difficulties facing women when society's "mental maps" are drawn along such gender lines:

In the very act of opening up urban territory for females, the architects of urban geography branded the women who walked the streets of the nineteenth-century city as either endangered or dangerous women, emblems of propriety and vulnerability or object lessons in social differences and sexual danger. When ladies and respectable working-class girls stepped out on city streets, they carried the cumbersome baggage of gender stereotypes. They were subject to intense male scrutiny. (86)

Even Child, the confident "flaneuse" finds herself the object of "intense scrutiny." In a move highly uncharacteristic of the flaneur, she feels "aversion for the multitude" in Battery Park when she discovers the city can also be a realm of restriction, for as a female spectator, she is just as likely to be the object of the gaze: "I cannot overcome my aversion to a multitude. It is so pleasant to run and jump and throw pebbles and make up faces at a friend without having a platoon of well-dressed people turn around and stare and ask, "Who is that strange woman that acts so like a child?" (121). Since women in particular are subjected to "intense" scrutiny, being in public space demands a genteel lady-like performance.

Indeed to succeed in urban life meant mastering the codes of gentility, something Maria Cummins' novel The Lamplighter highlights repeatedly. Written in 1854, this was an enormously popular work, a sentimental novel in which an abused and neglected slum orphan is taken to the heights of urbane theatricality as well as Christian salvation. While focusing on Gertrude Flint's sentimental journey, the novel is full of vivid urban details. Its opening paragraph, for example, draws our attention to the class divisions exaggerated by city life:

Upon the wooden doorstep of a low-roofed, dark and unwholesome looking house sat a little girl who was gazing up the street with much earnestness. The house door which was open behind her was close to the sidewalk, and the step upon which she sat was so low that her little unshod feet rested on the cold bricks. It was a chilly evening in November, and a light fall of snow which had made everything look bright and clean in the pleasant open
squares, near where the fine houses of the city were built, had only served to render the narrow streets and dark lanes dirtier and more cheerless than ever; for mixed with the mud and filth which abound in those neighborhoods where the poor are crowded together, the beautiful snow had lost all its purity. (1)

What is stressed here is the inability of the homes of the urban poor to protect and nurture their inhabitants. Even beauty cannot survive here as the “beautiful snow” mixes with mud and filth and loses its “purity.” As the “open door is close to the sidewalk,” we see a loss of boundaries between public and private space, and in the back of the building Gerty lives in, there is a “large wood and coal yard, and beyond that a wharf and the thick muddy water of a dock”; from a “miniature shed” in the woodyard, Gerty watches the sailors at work (11). As houses are not sealed off from urban commotion, work and home spheres tend to spill into one another and Gerty finds a “haven” of rest in the woodyard; when she hears the men’s voices at their work “so lively,” she “would for a time forget her woes”(11). Gerty does not stay in this district for long, however. Unlike Bartleby, she will be indoctrinated into middle-class domesticity and hence, saved. True Flint, the lamplighter who lives in “humble comfort” adopts her and although he is poor, “industry and frugality” secure him from want (49). Once taken in by Flint, the city becomes a wonderland of possibility for her, and the class divisions highlighted in the novel’s opening seem to fade away. Indeed these divisions are easily overcome as classes work together in Cummins’ city, for Flint’s genteel neighbors and sometime employer, the Grahams, are quick to help Flint care for Gerty, never hesitating to invest in what will be her genteel education.

Part of Gerty’s education comes in viewing the spectacle only city life can provide. This novel is probably one of the earliest examples of depicting the magic of the city at night; its emphasis on vision and the city as a living theater will not be fully realized until the end of the century with works like Howells’s *Hazard of New fortunes* and Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*. Taken on a tour of the gas-lit streets by Willie, Flint’s nephew, Gerty’s “delight knew no
bounds" (59). "The brilliant colors displayed in the windows now for the first time seen by the evening light, completely captivated her fancy" (59) When Willie takes her to see Uncle True light the lamps, he tells her it is "first rate" because "you can look into the windows and see folks drinking tea, and sitting all round the fire in the parlors" (59). As they peer into the windows of the houses on the "finest" street in Boston, the city’s domestic theater educates them in matters of desire:

Many of the front windows were shaded so that the children could not see in; some, however, either had no curtains or they had not been drawn. In one parlor, there was a pleasant wood fire around which a group were gathered; and here Gerty would fain have lingered. Again in another, a brilliant chandelier was lit, and though the room was vacant, the furniture was so showy, and the whole so brilliant that the child clapped her hands in delight, and Willie could not prevail upon her to leave the spot, until he told her that further down the street was another house equally attractive where she would perhaps see some beautiful children. (60)

In these scenes where the rich provide a spectacle for the urban poor, class divisions seem solid and secure since one group of children is out in the cold while the other is gathered around a warm fireplace, yet Cummins aligns the classes somehow. There is identification and recognition here. Upon watching the three children at the window of the next house, Gerty discovers that she "was not the only child that loved to see the lamps lit" (61) Soon these children see Gerty, and though she hides at first, not liking "the idea of being stared at and talked about," Willie laughs and tells her it is "her turn to be looked at" (62).

These "first impressions of luxurious life" instill in both Willie and Gerty desire—a desire to grow rich, but primarily a desire to work (61). At the end of the novel, after years of hard work, Willie glances "round the well-lit and pleasantly furnished parlor of his own and Gertrude’s home," and the possibilities of urban life are fully realized. The spectacle the city provides only instills a will to achieve; there is no alienation, despair nor longing; at the end
of Cummins’ novel, a sentimental domesticity as well as a more urbane and plush parlor are easily brought together.

Indeed the new opportunities for visual pleasure as well as the opportunities to move up in class and station are emphasized throughout the novel. As a companion and friend to the blind Emily Graham, Gertrude can even join the urbane crowds gathered at Saratoga. As she describes the spectacle of the crowd, and the uncertainty of reading class and station, Cummins’ narrator seems not only accepting of, but absolutely delighted with the theatricality she finds there:

The acknowledged belle, the bearer of an aristocratic name, the owner of a well-filled purse, the renowned scholar, artist or poet have all a conspicuous sphere to shine in. There are many counterfeits too. The nobodies at home stand a chance to be considered somebodies here; and the first people of a distant city accustomed to consider themselves somebodies, sit in a corner and pout at suddenly finding themselves nobodies... gay assemblages crowded upon the piazzas of the hotels constitute a lively and festive scene; and he who loves to observe human nature may study it here in its most animated form. (359)

While she often attends to the visual pleasure of urban life with the eye of a flaneur, Cummins, like Child, also makes clear that the city holds other kinds of opportunities for women, particularly in the realm of reform. Gerty and Emily spend “a blissful and improving winter” at Mrs. Warrens boarding house, a time Gerty will look back on as “a beautiful world of their own”(319). The city is a place of culture which educates and ennobles them; their “season of sweet tranquility” involves attending lectures, concerts and art galleries (319). Bringing to mind the winter Verena spends with Olive Chancellor in Boston, Gertrude and Emily find opportunities for individual growth as well as opportunities for mission and reform:

They lived not for themselves alone; the poor blessed them, the sorrowful came to them for sympathy and the affection which they both inspired in the family circle was boundless... Spring came and passed and still they lingered there, loath to leave a place where they had been so happy and
nothing at last drove them from the city but a sudden failure in Emily’s health and Dr. Jeremy’s preemptory command that they should at once seek the country air as the best restorative. (319)

While many of the nation’s urban cartographers saw the city as a place where the middle-class woman was endangered, middle-class woman writers were insistent upon showing the liberating aspects of urban life. Moreover, they suggested women could make the city a better place. Like Gertrude Flint, other female characters will also find a freedom in the city, even if it is a limited one—Zenobia, Olive, Verena, Carrie, Nettie Crane, Gerty Farish, and Sara Smolinksy all forge a kind of self reliance that frees them from tradition or oppressive family ties, even if only temporarily.

Perhaps the novel that most powerfully illustrates the liberating qualities of city life for women is Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* written in 1855. Fern’s work, in particular, revises the theme of the city as an “impenetrable mystery.” Indeed reading the urban literature by both men and women during this period reveals a different sensibility at times, suggesting that it was men rather than women who found the city’s mystery and theatricality more threatening. For women, the tumult of urban life, the anonymity it provided could work in their favor; living in the city might actually expand their vision and power. Indeed one of the most startling aspects of *Ruth Hall* is Ruth’s penetrating and wide-reaching gaze.

After the death of her husband, Ruth goes off to the city to seek work and, once there, her identity is dramatically transformed. No longer belonging to the middle/upper class world she once knew, nor the working-class neighborhood she must now reside in, she is viewed simultaneously as an endangered middle-class woman, and a dangerous/laboring woman, and she is indeed the object of “intense scrutiny.” When Ruth first arrives in the city, she is seen as an “endangered,” helpless widow by Jim, a lodger at her boarding house who decides that while he wouldn’t like to marry Ruth, he “shouldn’t mind kissing her,”
and boasting to his friend Sam, he describes how he "always" puts his coat on "in the front entry" to "get a peep" at Ruth's foot (73). Though Jim's look is described as a kind of violation, it is one which Ruth seems unaffected by, for men like Jim do not wield too much power. Indeed the boarding houses, and the contact with rough working-class men prove less dangerous for Ruth than the institutional offices of "tyrannical benevolence" (148). Fern's novel then, while reflecting the fears of nineteenth-century America regarding the potential corruption of urban space, also radically revises those "mental maps" of the city which Ryan notes were so prevalent at this time. Danger is not on the streets in the form of the dangerous woman or prostitute, but in the paternal offices of order and discipline. It is when Ruth enters the counting house, the editorial office, the committee room, that she finds herself most vulnerable—for it is these "wooden" men with their "tyrannical benevolence" which pose the greatest danger to Ruth, a much greater danger to her than any leering look from the likes of Jim or Sam (99, 148). As she moves in and out of oppositional spaces—the upper /middle class male preserves of power and the working class neighborhoods—Fern dramatizes how Ruth's identity shifts between the images of "endangered" and "dangerous" woman, leaving her in uncertain territory, and while this unnerves her, this very uncertainty will eventually begin to empower her. Because of her gender and her class, Ruth is not able to enter either the male preserves of power, nor the community of the working class neighborhood, and this leaves her extremely isolated, but it is in that isolation that she is able to establish for herself a "room of her own," a room from which she might gaze back at the world that seeks to define her so rigidly.

Indeed it is from her dark and gloomy room that the connection between vision and power are depicted most dramatically. From there, Ruth remains aloof from the heterogeneous hubbub of the streets, and Fern underscores Ruth's growing powers, her changing awareness as she secures a private space of her own, a "lens" from which to view
city life. Rather than one who is blinded under the glaring lights of the "inquisitors," Ruth becomes one who sees; her enormous "prospect," from her window is therefore described in great detail:

Opposite was one of those large brick tenements let out by rapacious landlords, a room at a time at griping rents, to poor emigrants... At one window sat a tailor, with his legs crossed and a torn straw hat perched awry upon his head... at another, a pale-faced woman with a handkerchief bound round her aching face, bent over a steaming wash-tub, while a little girl of ten staggering under the weight of a basket of damp clothes was stringing them on lines... at the next window sat a decrepit old woman feebly trying to soothe in her palsied arms the wailings of a poor sick child... (90)

Clearly seeing the extent of this "ragged procession," Ruth's vision takes in "tier above tier," and moves "[f]rom window to window" (90). Ruth also sees "further on": a brothel—"a pretentious-looking house, the blinds of which were almost always closed"—does not escape her gaze either and Ruth can even see the tear-stained faces of the women who "appear at the window"(91). Indeed Ruth's view of the tenements dramatically echoes Foucault's description of the Panopticon:

By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. (200)

We now have a most dramatic reversal of the novel's opening. No longer subjected to her family's intense surveillance, Ruth is now the one who surveys, and now that she has visual access to a multitude of spaces—counting houses, editorial offices, servant's washing quarters, lower-class tenements, even insane asylums—her gaze becomes the most powerful gaze in the novel.

These works by antebellum women writers seem to come out of a more optimistic age when the city, for all its dangers, temptations and hardship, was ultimately a realm of possibility, a place for redemption. Years later, Edith Wharton and Anzia Yezierska will tell
rather different tales. Although their heroines do achieve a kind of self reliance in the city, it is cut off from any meaningful connection to a wider public world. Their spartan domesticity, therefore, seems hardly victorious. Lily Bart, like Ruth Hall, loses her class position, but rather than a Horatio Alger kind of success story, her story is a desperate and poignant tragedy. Like Ruth Hall, Lily also becomes “anonymous” in urban space, but in the theatrical, leisure-class world Lily has lived in, to be anonymous is not to exist at all. Bread Givers, meanwhile, resembles Ruth Hall in more obvious ways; both tales are about struggling upward and achieving independence, and both Ruth and Sara rise out of oppressive family situations. Sara, however, is ultimately drawn back to the family. Her hard-won self reliance is not only lost, it is interrogated, opposed by an ethnic tradition which places more importance on the family than on the individual, especially when that individual is female.

Perhaps the antebellum woman writer, coming out of the heyday of the cult of domesticity and “sentimental power” was more inclined to see the city as part of her terrain for moral housekeeping. Perhaps as traditional “separate spheres” unravel at the end of the century, woman’s role becomes less defined, more uncertain, and perhaps the leisure-class status of Lily and the ethnicity of Sara prevent them from achieving the middle-class and American ideal Fern’s novel sets forth. Indeed Fern’s as well as Cummins’ ideal seems to be interrogated in these later works which illustrate instead the rigidity of class, the impossibility of creating a new identity. And as the readings of the later novels will demonstrate, the increased commodification of women with the growth of consumer culture will only problematize the role of women in urban space even more. Indeed unlike Ruth

---

I am referring here to the term Jane Tompkins uses when she reinterprets Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Tompkins shows us the radical nature of Stowe’s sentimental novel, how it is actually a political work that relocates the center of power in American life with women. See Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860. New York: Oxford University Press
Hall, Lydia Maria Child or Gertrude Flint, Lily Bart and Sara Smolinky seem unable to make themselves at home in the new city.

**Race and Urbanity**

The output of literature by African Americans during the antebellum years was particularly rich. There were several significant novels published, and two of these would begin to examine the implications of urban space: Martin Delany's *Blake* (1859) and Frank Webb's *The Garies and their Friends* (1857), published in London.8 Autobiographical sketches or slave narratives, however, formed the bulk of early African American Literature. Since ending slavery was the priority for African Americans, this is not surprising, and as Arna Bontemps points out "good sales had become the rule for slave narratives in antebellum America" (xviii). By 1849, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, for example, had achieved seven editions since its publication. “While the vogue lasted, the number of narratives published may have run into the hundreds” (Bontemps xviii). Although much of this early African American literature focused on exposing the evils of slavery, if we look closely at it, we may find “urban moments” in the literature, moments which help us see how urbanization began to shape the lives of African Americans, and how, in turn, African Americans began to transform American cities and culture.

Just as the anonymity of urban space could sometimes provide women with more freedom from family or tradition, the slave in antebellum America also found a kind of “freedom” in the city. Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* (1845) for example, emphasizes in no uncertain terms how the city is pivotal in not only shaping him, but ultimately in freeing

---

8 The other novels published during the antebellum period are William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853) and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859).
him: “Going to Baltimore laid the foundation and opened the gateway to all my subsequent prosperity,” he declares (75). First of all, the city offers him better living conditions:

I had resided but a short time in Baltimore before I observed a marked difference in the treatment of slaves from that which I witnessed in the country. A city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation. He is much better fed and clothed, and enjoys privileges altogether unknown to the slave on the plantation. There is a vestige of decency, a sense of shame, that does much to curb and check those outbreaks of atrocious cruelty so commonly enacted upon the plantation. He is a desperate slaveholder who will shock the humanity of his nonslaveholding neighbors with the cries of his lacerated slave. Few are willing to incur the odium attaching to the reputation of being a cruel master, and above all things, they would not be known as not giving a slave enough to eat. Every city slaveholder is anxious to have it known of him, that he feeds his slaves well; and it is due to them to say, that most of them do give their slaves enough to eat. (79)

The city’s diverse population (slaveholder and nonslave holder) as well as its emphasis on a visual display of wealth and gentility work together here to improve conditions for Douglass. While the slave might be better treated in the city as opposed to the rural plantation, there was also another element to city life besides better food, better clothing and fewer beatings, and this was the margin of independence it could offer.

Living in the city provides Douglass with more opportunities—from learning to read when he is a child, to learning a trade when he is an adult. Soon after arriving in Baltimore, his mistress Mrs. Auld, teaches him to read, and even when Mr. Auld forbids this, Douglass is able to get the poor white boys in the neighborhood to teach him. Recalling how he made friends of all the little white boys in the street, Douglass writes, “As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers” (82). “The bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge” (83). Later on, Douglass will train with ship carpenters, and as he learns “caulking,” he gains a sense of pride in his accomplishments. “Very soon I learned the art of using my mallet and irons,” he writes. “I was able to command the highest wages given to the most experienced of caulkers.
I was now of some importance to my master" (134). Learning such a skill means his master will hire him out, which in turn enables Douglass to move far away from his master's watchful eye. Through his new-found mobility and wage-earning capabilities, Douglass comes to a more keen awareness of his individual power and soon makes his bid for freedom.

Indeed the very small pocket of freedom found in urban space could mean a lot. This is something Martin Delany also emphasizes in his novel *Blake*, (1859). In the chapter entitled "New Orleans," he shows us why the city is the best site for rebellion, for in the anonymity of the great city, there are more nooks of privacy where blacks may secretly organize. Here an insurrection may be planned behind closed doors, and even when whites discover that there is a meeting under foot, it is easy for the slaves to escape detection: "In the midst of the confusion ... Henry, Seth, Phebe, and Kits and fellow leaders from the fifteen plantations immediately fled, all having passes for the day and evening, which fully protected them in any part of the city away from the scene of the disturbance" (106). As the writing of Douglass and Delany emphasizes, slavery in an urban context would have to have undesirable repercussions for the white establishment:

City slaves partook of a wider world. They had access (even when it was illegal) to the food, drink entertainment and common sociability of urban life. They had their own churches, and they often sneaked away to talk and drink with fellow slaves, free blacks and lower class whites in speakeasies and other clandestine places. Some even obtained permission to work and live away from their master's supervision. Their only obligation was to bring their owners a certain amount of money each week or each month. All evidence indicates that urban slavery was profitable for the owners as well as for those who hired or rented slaves. But the contrast with rural slavery presented whites with a dilemma. All slavery thrived on absolute control by masters of their bondsmen. Yet the nature of urban life made it impossible for owners to supervise the activities of their chattel every minute of the day. The varied conditions of social and economic activities loosened the chains of discipline, and gave urban slaves a narrow parcel of freedom—freedom that the prevailing order could not tolerate. The ultimate reaction was two pronged: 1. Cities enacted more stringent laws to restrict the activities of all
blacks... resulting in formalized segregation. 2. Owners limited urban slave populations by either selling their blacks (particularly young males) to rural masters or failing to replace slaves who died or ran away. In 1840, the total slave population of the ten largest southern cities equaled 67,755; in 1860 it was 68,013. Meanwhile the total white population of the same cities ballooned from 233,000 to 690,000... Urbanization left most southern blacks deurbanized. (Chudacoff 53)

Northern urban blacks, meanwhile, with the ending of slavery in the north, began to create their own unique metropolitan culture. As the work of Shane and Graham White demonstrates, the African American culture of the early nineteenth century city was a theatrical one—a culture of parades, dances and flamboyant dressing, and for many whites, "there was a feeling of disquiet about free blacks"(White 88) "This concern was not limited to the appearance of well dressed individuals, but broadened out to include unease at black collective behavior such as that displayed by churches"(White 88). "In the early decades of freedom, there was also an explosion of dancing and music in northern cities" (105). These feelings of "disquiet," the Whites observe, "coalesced around the perceived lack of self control African Americans expressed in the presentation of their bodies"(88). And this "disquiet" grew even though blacks and whites would have less contact with each other. "As slavery wound down in the North, the physical separation of blacks from whites, particularly that between blacks and the class of whites who had been slaveowners, increased... only the poorer whites, especially the Irish immigrants, lived in the same areas as African Americans. A concomitant development as many observers noted was that the free northern black bore the brunt of an increasingly virulent racism"(White 89). "Even if whites living in northern cities were prepared to accept African Americans were no longer slaves," the Whites assert, "most still recoiled in horror from any suggestion that blacks were in any way their social equals"(White 104). Indeed the antebellum northern city was a hotbed of racial tension. In 1834, there were race and anti-abolitionist riots in New York City which featured white workers seeking to protect their women from "amalgamation," and in
1840, blacks celebrating the Christmas season as part of the street processions were set upon by attackers in blackface (Roediger 108). "Christmas racial clashes initiated by blackface mobs took place regularly between 1837 and 1848, with the last erupting into full scale riot" (Roedigger 106). Indeed although blacks "deliberately, consciously and publicly tested the boundaries of freedom," all too often the "free" city of the antebellum north was a violent arena where African Americans were besieged on all sides (White 95).

Frank Webb makes this violence a central element in his novel of Philadelphia, The Garies and Their Friends. Arthur Davis notes that the novel is important because of "the information it gives concerning the free Negroes in the North—their problem with segregated transportation, their lack of police protection, their dislike of the antagonist immigrant Irish, their difficulties in trying to be apprentices. We see the little shops of these struggling Negroes; we go to their teas, their reading circles, and above all else we note their desperate efforts to imitate white people in manners, speech, morality and business" (v). What Davis does not mention, but what I find so striking in Webb's work, is the violence at the heart of this life. In the middle of the novel, Webb describes riot scenes in such vivid horrifying detail that they evoke the atmosphere of a surreal gothic nightmare. As crowds of whites head for the black homes on their "list," a "dull roar is heard in the distance" (211). "There was something awful in the appearance of the motley crowd that like a torrent foamed and surged through the streets," Webb writes (211). "Some were bearing large pine torches that filled the air with a thick smoke, and partially lighted up the surrounding gloom. Most of them were armed with clubs and a few with guns and pistols" (211). Mr. Garie, a white man married to a mulatto woman, is woken in the night to the shouts of this crowd: "Down with the Abolitionist, down with Amalgamation, give them tar and feathers" (221). While his wife hides outside in the wood shed, giving premature birth to their child and dying of exposure, Garie is murdered and the crowd "ransacked the house, breaking all they could not carry
off, drinking the wine in Mr. Garie's cellar, shouting and screaming like so many fiends”(223). Ellis, the friend who comes to warn the Garies is then chased down a dead-end street, stalked through an empty building, and cornered up on the roof. In a particularly brutal scene, two of Ellis's fingers are hacked off while he clings to the edge of the rooftop; miraculously he survives his fall, but is maimed for life.

Although Webb's novel highlights white brutality and black victimization, the blacks in this novel are by no means passive. They organize; they assert their rights as citizens; they defend their lives and property. When Mr. Walters first discovers the rioter's plot, he goes to the mayor, and when the mayor says he can do nothing, Walters then stashes stones and weapons in his home to stave off the attack of the mob. In scenes reminiscent of a medieval fortress being stormed, “a shower of heavy stones came crashing down” among the crowd gathered round Walter's residence, and when “the stones are exhausted,” a “volume of scalding water came pouring down” driving the crowd off “entirely”(214). Indeed Webb's novel highlights the intensity with which whites enforced a racialized geography in American cities, the lethal and vicious force they often used in attempting to maintain absolute control of urban space.

While white racism did often materialize into riots and acts of physical violence in antebellum America, it also found expression in the new minstrel show. Eric Lott writes that “working people hit hard by economic disaster in the 1840s were to turn even more urgently to the new minstrel shows” (137). “Their response was a much muted sense of class resistance, an attempt to shore up white class identities” as they targeted Jim Crow as a common enemy (Lott 137). The contents of the minstrel show “were largely inspired by what many whites perceived as the newly freed blacks' socially transgressive behavior in the public spaces of northern cities, behavior that whites in blackface appropriated and did their
best to ridicule out of existence" (White 119). Elaborating on minstrelsy's urban origins, Roediger helps us understand the show's extraordinary appeal. He argues that blacks became associated in white minds with a preindustrial past, and that "to black up was an act of wilderness in the antebellum U.S." (118). "Just as the minstrel stage held out the possibility that whites could be black for awhile, but nonetheless white, it offered the possibilities that via blackface, preindustrial joys could survive amidst industrial discipline" (Roediger 118).

Blacking up, Roediger declares, could "assuage the tension between a longing for a rural past and the need to adapt to the urban present" (119):

Minstrelsy idealized the preindustrial pastimes familiar to its white and often formerly rural audience. Hunting, especially coons and possums was a recurring delight during blackface performances which also featured the joys of crabbing, eel catching, eating yellow corn, fishing and contact with animals not about to be killed. 'Niggas,' one song had it, 'lived on clover.' But the identification with tradition and with preindustrial joy could never be complete. It was after all, 'niggers' who personified and longed for the past. Contradictions abounded. (Roediger 119)

Lott has described this sense of abounding contradiction in minstrelsy as "love and theft," a "simultaneous drawing up and crossing of racial boundaries" (6). Highlighting how the repressed desires of whites could find expression in the minstrel show, Lott points out that minstrelsy's early emphasis was on "spectacle" rather than on narrative since it relied on objectification of black bodies (white eyes rolling, oversized clothes): "Black figures were there to be looked at, shaped to the demands of desire," Lott writes, "screens on which audience fantasy could rest and the fundamental outcome was to secure the position of the white spectator as superior controlling figure" (140).

Indeed the rise of an urban consumer culture, with its emphasis on visual pleasure and the fulfillment of individual desire, begins early on and its repercussions vary as we make our way across the varied spectrums of gender, race and class. While Delaney's novel and Douglass's slave narrative may align antebellum urban space with moments of freedom or
rebellion, it is important to keep in mind Webb's novel as well the rise of the minstrel show. Urban space, even in the north, could be hostile, and the city does not necessarily get less hostile by the end of the century. Indeed by the time we get to *The Sport of the Gods*, written during the country's racial nadir, Dunbar will interrogate the emancipatory possibilities of the city for the African American. Though there will be more of a black presence and more of a black culture there, this presence and culture is still marginal. Moreover the city's white urban culture will continue to commodify and degrade African American culture with its craze for the "coon show." Although there is less violence in Dunbar's novel than in Webb's—we do not see direct physical violence occur between the races—we do see how white culture violates blacks in more insidious ways. We see how a new urban consumer culture exacerbates divisions within black society, and we see how a more pronounced pattern of self destruction can become prevalent in black life.

As I have emphasized in this introduction, America's visual consumer culture emerged gradually and antebellum writers were already beginning to examine the racial, gendered, and class-bound implications of this culture. Here indeed are the beginnings of what American urban novelists will explore in more detail later on. I think it might serve us well to see America's urban novels anew—to see not only their "differences," or "uniqueness," but to also see them as somehow related, as partaking in the same conversation, albeit the tone, length, and the intensity of this conversation changes over time, for it is a conversation we are still having today. We too wonder about the impact of the image on our lives—the effects of MTV, television, the endless bombardment of advertising. And the technological communications revolution with its e-mail, its faxes, and its cellular phones continues to redefine for us the boundaries of public and private space. In addition to helping us better understand the impact of urbanization at the end of the nineteenth century, I believe the novels this study brings together are crucial for any understanding of America at the end of
the twentieth century—for here we find the roots of our consumer culture, a culture where we find ourselves wondering what has happened to our cities, to our public spaces, a culture where we too often find ourselves passive spectators in our ever-more isolated, ever-more insulated private homes.

A Note on Terminology

My dissertation uses several terms, which reinforce the primacy of the visual in urban culture, but by their very relatedness, they tend to be slippery. I use the word “aesthetic” in the traditional sense—in having to do with beauty, in cultivating a sensitivity to beauty. I stress that many of the characters in these urban novels find opportunities for aesthetic contemplation in the city, and that within urban space there is much that delights the eye. Many of the urban spectators in these novels, like that popular journalistic and literary type, the flaneur, need to order the spectacle of city life, and one way of doing this is by viewing the city aesthetically.

Indeed many scholars’ discussions of the new habits of vision emerging in the nineteenth century convene around the figure of the flaneur. Drawing upon Walter Benjamin’s study of Charles Baudelaire and Paris, Dana Brand, observes that the flaneur, a “fantastically gifted urban interpreter,” assured “a literate bourgeois audience that urban crowds were not as illegible as they appeared to be, that social life was not as incoherent as it appeared to be, and that the masses were not as politically threatening as they appeared to be” (Brand 6). Moreover, Brand points out:

Benjamin perceived a significant analogy between the flaneur’s consumerist mode of being in the world, and the new public spaces that were creating that mode of being . . . Producing his benign readings, the flaneur reduces the city to a panorama or diorama, a scale model, in which everything is, in effect, brought indoors, transformed into a legible, accessible and nonthreatening version of itself, encompassed by the comforting arc of the flaneur’s sensibility. As a grand magasin of all experience, the flaneur is
analogous to the arcades, department stores, grand boulevards, and world expositions that were his natural and contemporary habitat. Just as these new environments of consumer capitalism could contain an encyclopedia of objects, controlling their potentially disorienting diversity in order to make everything accessible to a consuming spectator, so the flaneur, through the medium of journalism, could impose order upon the potentially disorienting diversity of the city, by reducing it to accessible images that could be collected and consumed. (7)

Also examining the role of the flaneur, Remy Saisselin, notes that Benjamin's work "poses the existence of a new aesthetic observer; the flaneur, the walker in the city. And what happened in the city as one walked about with only the purpose of seeking what it had to offer, is that it affected the imagination. One was stimulated as never before" (19-20). In these new urban spaces, he notes, "the nineteenth-century aesthetic observer discovered the most powerful aesthetic activity and experience of the modern man, and even more important, the modern woman: the attraction of commodity and luxury items and the pleasure of purchasing" (Saisselin 19). As Brand and Saisellin's observations demonstrate, the ramifications of the flaneur's aesthetic contemplation are inextricably intertwined with the new consumer economy, an economy that sustains itself by appealing primarily to the eye.

Consumerism aligns itself with an aesthetic gaze—creating new aesthetic experiences for the urban spectator. Indeed one of the tendencies I trace in the urban novels is this preoccupation with visual pleasure, and at times the uncertainty and anxiety which accompanies vision in urban spaces.

To take this a step further, the aesthetic gaze I trace in urban spaces can be related to what Marx had described as the "fetishism of the commodity" (Marx 73). In Capital, Marx explains how a commodity is not just a thing; it is also a container of invisible social relationships: "A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is
presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour" (73). As Marx summarizes it, "a definite relation between men . . . assumes . . . the fantastic form of a relation between things" (73). Since the value of commodities "appears to result from their physical properties, not from the hidden social relationships, the filling of abstract labor . . . it mystifies our perception of capitalist realities," and the conflict between the classes is therefore "screened from view" (Helbroner 102-3). One of the themes I develop in my readings of the urban novel is the mystification of the public sphere—in other words, urban life's tendency to mask "capitalist" realities. It is in the space of the modern city that we confront most dramatically a world of commodities and spectacle that delights the eye, that just seems to appear—spectacles whose "makings" are not revealed to us. Indeed one of the paradoxes of modern culture is that so much, and yet so little is revealed to the eye. Its visual excess, its endless traffic of imagery, mystifies rather than clarifies. All of these novels, to some degree, wrestle with these paradoxes which are inherent in our visual consumer culture.

The other terms which I often use are "spectacle" and "spectacular." Referring to the visual pleasure the city has to offer, these words most often refer to city scenes and public life. While the spectacle may be "aesthetically pleasing," this is not its primary characteristic; the spectacle, above all, is a remarkable, elaborate show, something displayed on a grand scale. All of the novels, to some extent, highlight how the city provides a show for the eye—its department store windows, its immigrant neighborhoods, its grand hotels and theaters. All these spaces are elaborate, overwhelming visual experiences which fascinate and often dazzle the urban spectator.

The pleasure provided by the spectacle, however, may also have its darker side as certain kinds of spectacles become essential components of the new consumer economy. In
their analysis of the transformation of popular entertainment in the nineteenth century, Brodhead and Trachtenberg observe that as entertainment becomes more spectacular and more of a "visual" experience, there is a passivity on the part of the observer which hints of alienation; an individual is more awed, more overwhelmed—silenced even—by what they see. Guy Debord has written at length on this passivity as well as the implications of a world dominated by spectacular images. In his work *Society of the Spectacle*, he emphasizes the predominance of the visual as well as the pervasiveness of vicarious experience in contemporary life: "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation" (2). According to Debord, our modern urban culture of imagery generates a particular kind of mystification, for there is always an interpenetration between the image and the "real": "When the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior. The spectacle, as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstractions of present-day society" (18). Indeed as he extends Marx’s theories, Debord’s analysis of a consumer-driven world dominated by ‘spectacle’ suggests a most profound form of alienation: “This is the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by ‘intangible as well as tangible things,’ which reaches its absolute fulfillment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves

---

as the tangible *par excellence*" (36) At times, my readings too will draw attention to the way in which the spectacle created by the new consumer economy "imposes" itself so that "simple images" become "real beings" and "effective motivations."

Finally, I use the terms "theatrical" or "theatricality." As opposed to spectacle which refers to the scenes and settings, the objects of vision or consumption, theatricality, as I use it, usually refers specifically to people's behavior, or to a kind of attitude or mindset that is affected, vivid, striking or dramatic. What people wear, how they decorate their homes, their elaborate manners, their social customs—all of these would encompass urban theatricality.
CHAPTER 1

THE LURE OF THE CITY AND THE LONGING FOR HOME:
URBAN SPACE AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE

Hawthorne's Blithedale Romance is, in many ways, a remarkable excursion through the varied spaces of nineteenth-century America—a journey that takes us through city streets, hotel rooms, communitarian farmhouses, village lyceums, and pastoral fields—yet this expansive journey that seems to take us everywhere ultimately leaves us nowhere. As Richard Brodhead observes, "Blithedale includes a richness of social representation," but "it does not hurry to tie together its fragments of a world into a coherent social vision"(97). "Stranded as in a series of surrealistic perspectives," the reader, in a sense, becomes like Coverdale: a consciousness struggling to make sense of a world that has become increasingly more difficult to interpret (Brodhead 115). This consciousness has been described by many critics as a distinctly modern one, and Dana Brand helps us see specifically what this modernity entails. 10 Hawthorne’s narrator embodies a subjectivity that is distinctly urbane: the passive spectator/consumer, recalling the flaneur of the nineteenth century, the “botanist on asphalt,” “who reduces the disorienting diversity of the city to accessible images that can be collected and consumed” (7). “In the flaneur,” Brand emphasizes, “we recognize our own consumerist mode of being,” and as Brand’s analysis makes clear, what is so fascinating about Hawthorne’s flaneur is that he is so tormented—content at times with just viewing, indeed taking enormous pleasure with viewing, and yet
so desperately discontent—for he is trapped in a panopticon where he sees nothing, exerts no power (7).\textsuperscript{11}

Miles Coverdale hopes to transcend his urban, “flaneur” ways by joining the Blithedale experiment, yet as the novel moves back and forth between Blithedale and urban space, Hawthorne shows us how Coverdale’s habit of spectatorship as well as his domestic yearnings and his exaggerated sense of a private self—other aspects of a distinctly urban subjectivity—prevent the success of his project from the very start. Although Coverdale wrestles with the meaning of his urban life, he is profoundly attracted to this urbanism—its artifice, its social formalities, its aestheticizing gaze, its extreme privacy. While the novel suggests that what Coverdale desires is a sentimental version of “home,” intimacy and community are the very things he fears most of all. This threat of intimacy, the contradictions within his own identity, as well as his perception of the shifting identities of those around him, highlight the novel’s incessant concern with the problematic nature of interpreting, the impossibility of reading the “private” self behind the public persona.

Highlighting this inaccessibility of the private subject are the novel’s suggestive images: veils, masks, and costumes. Indeed the language of the theater runs insistently throughout Blithedale. Coverdale looks at his own life as if he were playing the role of the Chorus “in a classic play,” “set aloof from the possibility of personal concernment”\textsuperscript{(90)}. The characters he is so fascinated with are the “indices of a problem” which play on his “private theater”\textsuperscript{(65)}.

\textsuperscript{10} Leo Levy believes Hawthorne invented a “new mode of fictional discourse in order to come to terms with the quality of contemporary life”\textsuperscript{(318)}. Kelley Griffith points out how Daniel Hoffman notes the “stream of consciousness quality in Blithedale” and Roy Male sees Hawthorne’s Coverdale as a “prefiguration of the modern self-conscious narrator—a nineteenth century Prufrock”\textsuperscript{(381)}.

\textsuperscript{11} In Discipline and Punish, Michele Foucault contrasts the dungeon, an archaic institution that evokes darkness, invisibility and secrecy to panopticism which reverses the principles of the dungeon. Modern society is ruled by what Foucault sees as the principle of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, a prison model based on a system where every prisoner is visible from the supervisor’s tower. As a result, prisoners internalize prison norms and discipline themselves. The major effect of the Panopticon is “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power”\textsuperscript{(207)}. Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Using her “public name,” Zenobia “comes before the world in a sort of mask,” “a contrivance like the white drapery of the veiled lady, “retaining all the privileges of privacy”(8). Hollingsworth is also a “masquerader” who wears a “disguise of self deception”(201). And while Priscilla in her transparency and purity seems the ideal of the sentimental culture’s epitome of true womanhood, she displays her purity as a commodity—her purity might also be called a ‘dramatic effect.’ Powerless and passive Priscilla also has a tremendous “will to power”(Brand 149). As one critic puts it, “she ends up inheriting a substantial fortune and marrying the man she wants whom she dominates through submission” (Herbert 29). Indeed all of the characters, with the exception of Silas Foster—who significantly is not an urban character—are not what they seem, and in this topsy turvy world, interpretation becomes well nigh impossible.

The novel’s anxiety regarding interpretation as well as its insistent theatrical background highlight an important period in middle-class American culture, a time when the middle-class was adjusting to an increasingly urban, formalized world, a phenomenon which Karen Halttunen has discussed at length in Confidence Men and Painted Women. Indeed, as Halttunen’s observations suggest, the crisis experienced by Coverdale reflects the crisis experienced by the urban middle-class culture at large. According to Halttunen, “the period between 1820 and 1860 demonstrated the fastest rate of urban growth in American history. The proportion of people living in cities rose by 797 percent while the national population increased only 226 percent”(35). This growth of the industrial metropolis created a kind of crisis in social relations because people could no longer “read” each other. Halttunen’s comparison of the preindustrial city with the industrial one makes this dilemma dramatically clear:

In the preindustrial city, strangers were coded largely on the basis of personal appearance. Costume, manner, body markings and linguistic
patterns could indicate status or rank... and because of the practice of punitive mutilation, even moral character. With the Industrial Revolution, however, the rising classes began to imitate the dress and conduct of the older elites, legal regulation of dress styles declined, bodily mutilation for moral offenses disappeared and language grew more standardized. Identifying the urban stranger on the basis of personal appearance thus became almost impossible. (37)

To meet the "crisis of social identity" faced by people who were, as Halttunen puts it, "on the move both socially and geographically," a vast literature of advice on personal conduct was published in America after 1830 (xv, xiv). This literature assumed the form of an extended attack on two archetypal hypocrites: the confidence man—the pimp, the gambler—"who prowled the streets of American cities in search of innocent victims to deceive, dupe and destroy," and the painted woman, "sometimes a prostitute but more often a woman of fashion who... poisoned polite society with deception and betrayal by dressing extravagantly and practicing the empty forms of false etiquette"(xv). The remedy for the poisonous hypocrisy of urban space was a "sentimental antidote in sincerity"; "proper conduct was to demonstrate above all a perfect sincerity or 'transparency' of character"(Halttunen xvi).

This concern for sincerity as well as the fear of hypocrisy, Halttunen argues, was an integral part of the culture of sentiment; however, beginning in 1845, "the sentimental demand for perfect sincerity was losing its tone of urgency and being replaced by a new acceptance of the theatricality of social relationships"(157). This was most evident in the explosive popularity of theatrical parlor games in the 1850s, games which were eventually "praised as an excellent form of training in genteel expressiveness"(Halttunen 182). Gentility, the games suggested, was a part to be played by wearing the right clothing, cultivating the proper manners and engaging the correct forms of social ritual" (Halttunen 187). Dramatizing the separation of, as well as the fluidity between public and private selves, Halttunen describes how "parlor players often freely crossed the invisible boundary
between stage and audience, and dropping briefly out of their stage characters, revealed themselves in their private characters” (185). As stressed by Halttunen, “the parlor amateurs implicitly pointed to the fact that they too lived more of their lives out of character than in character” (185). The popularity of these theatrical parlor games, as well as the changes in fashion, funeral rituals and advice literature, Halttunen maintains, reflected a newfound ease with the theatrical nature of middle-class urban existence. The American middle classes, Halttunen concludes, had entered a “new phase of their cultural history” which was a product of the bourgeoisie’s “economic self-confidence” (174). Hawthorne’s Blithedale Romance then—published in 1852—arrives at a particularly crucial juncture. Reflecting the cultural transformations Halttunen describes, Coverdale himself embodies the contradictions of domestic ideology as it changes over the course of the century. While he yearns for that Christian sincerity, that sentimental transparency, a world he can easily read, Coverdale nevertheless embodies a “theatrical” domesticity, one based on leisure, consumption and display.

Indeed The Blithedale Romance is a “romance” with the artifice of urban life as much as it is a romance with the agricultural pastoral ideal. In Hawthorne’s novel, the nation’s symbols of urban hypocrisy—the confidence man and the painted woman—are highly seductive and never very far away. Coverdale’s readings of Westervelt, and oftentimes his interpretations of Zenobia, bring to mind the moral peril embodied in these urban types, and the novel is likewise haunted by a sentimental wish for transparency, familiarity, a yearning for home. In Blithedale’s world of bachelors, veiled ladies, actresses, social reformers, con men and vagrants, the sentimental image of the family only seems absent. A close reading of the novel reveals that the image of the family haunts Coverdale; its shadowy presence becoming a significant component of his distinctly urban consciousness.
 Appropriately the novel opens with an allusion to a theatrical urban spectacle—the Veiled Lady—as well as Coverdale’s insistence that she has “little to do with the present narrative” (6). We come to realize, however, that the veiled lady has much to do with this narrative, and like those parlor theatricals, this urban spectacle also, while signaling a cultural transformation of sorts, becomes an important means of creating a distinctly urban subjectivity. Exploring the suggestive implications of Hawthorne’s veiled lady, Brodhead sees her as a representation of the exaggerated female public figure or performer of the antebellum period (276). Focusing on female performers such as Jenny Lind and literary domestics such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Brodhead demonstrates how these women were managed, packaged and produced. Although these women were entering the public sphere, many of their activities there only served to reinforce the domestic, private nature of women. As Brodhead puts it, “the Veiled Lady is a lady, but in being veiled she is made into a lady who does not appear in public. As such she images woman being publicly created into a creature of private space” (49). The Veiled Lady then, in Blithedale, “registers the creation of a newly publicized world of popular entertainment taking place simultaneously with the creation of a newly privatized world of women’s domestic life” (Brodhead 53). Brodhead further speculates that these new spectacular entertainments, along with the rise of the novel help to create a newly privatized self in men as well as in women—a “Coverdalean” self, a passive domestic self locked into a private realm, condemned to living life vicariously (61). While the parlor games strengthened the notion of a private self distinctly separate from the public world of social ritual, a self that might move in and out of the public world with the right kind of mask, these antebellum entertainments and novels, Brodhead suggests, reinforced a more extreme version of the private subject:

One historical use of the Blithedale Romance is to take us back . . . to the early history of a social system held together by the public simulation of “life” as a marketing art and a private imperative to remedy deficiencies of “life” in
one’s life—a system Blithedale tells us had its first large scale manifestations in the 1840s and 50s, and that begins its operations in the entertainment sphere. But if the hunger for a “life” felt as alienated into other lives drives the man or woman of this time into spectatorial dependence onto commercial entertainment, we might ask what gives rise to this driving sense of lack? Blithedale’s answer is privacy: that this need is a product in the self of a social-historical construction of privacy as the self’s living “world.” Quite as much as he is an observer, Coverdale is a figure of private life. (64)

Indeed for Coverdale privacy is most sacred of all, and what he stands to give up at Blithedale is this sense of a private self. Urban space therefore is domestic space; the city is a place Coverdale can navigate; it is home, and Hawthorne’s language continually invests urban scenes with domestic overtones. Urban space is not sinister or threatening, but rather confining, and in that confinement there is a sort of protection. Coverdale is nestled in one of the “midmost houses of a brick block,” where each house is “partaking of the warmth of all the rest” (10). Later when Coverdale falls sick at Blithedale, he thinks fondly of this urban space:

*My* pleasant bachelor parlor, sunny and shadowy, curtained and carpeted . . . *my* centre-table, strewn with books and periodicals; *my* writing-desk . . . *my* morning lounge at the reading room or picture gallery; *my* noontide walk along the cheery pavement, with the suggestive succession of human faces, and the brisk throb of human life, in which I shared; *my* dinner at the Albion where I had a hundred dishes at my command . . . *my* evening at the billiard club, the concert, the theatre, or at somebody’s party, if *I* pleased—what could be better than all this (37, my emphasis).

It is important to note the language here. Domesticity becomes aligned with an almost grasping possessiveness and assertion of individuality. Here in domesticated urban space is where the self is protected, where the self rules over its kingdom, free from threats and disorder. In this private space which is a distinct creation of middle/upper class urban life, Coverdale imagines complete control over his environment. Even his ventures into the public realm have a private aura. He has *his* “morning lounge” in the reading rooms or picture gallery, and “a hundred dishes” at his command at the Albion. The entire city seems to be an extension of his private subjectivity—the “*my*” extending into public diversions.
and spaces so that this sense of command, this private urban self becomes the most valued of Coverdale's possessions.

Like a domestic space, the city then, can infantilize; it can also enclose one, protect one too much, and Coverdale seems to realize this, for he remembers upon leaving how "the buildings seemed to press too closely upon us, insomuch that our mighty hearts found barely room enough to throb between them" (11). By escaping the comforts and confinement of a domesticated urban space, Coverdale believes that he will escape its artifice, that the air at Blithedale is "pure air"—"air that had not been spoken into words of falsehood, formality and error" (11). But upon arrival at Blithedale, the air is harsh and unforgiving; the pure air that he praises knocks him out for several days. It is also significant that while he wishes to escape from a too comfortable domesticity, Coverdale cannot help but upon his arrival to fixate on the hearth, investing it with particularly telling associations. Blithedale's fire becomes superior to the merely "good" fire of his urban bachelor's quarters. "[W]ithin the fire there seemed the butt of a good size oak-tree"; its "crooked and unmanageable boughs could never be purchased in merchantable chords for the market" (13). That fire of the city is now associated with uniformity and market demands while Blithedale's fire is invested with a superior nature as well as a sentimental domestic power: "A family of the old Pilgrims might have swung their kettle over precisely such a fire as this" . . .(13). As these images of the kitchen hearth demonstrate, this desire for what is natural will continually be intertwined with images of an ideal domesticity.

Such desires however cannot be fulfilled at Blithedale. The emphasis on the hearth signals what Blithedale cannot provide, for the community there is enjoying "the radiant luxury of a somewhat too abundant fire," which alone, Coverdale admits, "would have sufficed to bespoke us as no true farmers" (22). Nevertheless Coverdale is happy; because of
the fire’s magical properties, men look “so full of youth,” and women “so very beautiful,” that he would “cheerfully have spent his last dollar to prolong the blaze” (23) Already
Coverdale points to the incompatibility between desire and utopian experiment. Later that evening, Coverdale’s need for a protective domesticity, and Blithedale’s inability to provide such protection is emphasized again in his “reading” of Priscilla:

She had been bred up no doubt in some close nook, some inauspiciously sheltered court of the city, where the uttermost rage of tempest, though it might scatter down the slates of the roof into the bricked area, could not shake the casement of her little room. The sense of vast, undefined space pressing from the outside against the black panes of our uncurtained windows, was fearful to the poor girl heretofore accustomed to the narrowness of human limits, with the lamps of neighboring tenements glimmering across the street. The house probably seemed to her adrift on the great ocean of the night.(33)

Coverdale’s own anxieties are revealed in his speculations here. The “uncurtained windows” suggest a living space stripped of domestic comforts, adornments and securities, a living space vulnerable to that “awfulness that exists in the limitless extent.” It is interesting that while Coverdale imagines Priscilla’s oppressive urban origins, his language still manages to give this urban space a domestic security (31). Oppressive urban space becomes a “close nook,” something that protects one from the “rage of the tempests,” and the glimmer of “neighboring lamps” seems a security against that “great ocean of night” (33).

Though Coverdale has come to Blithedale to experience the “limitless extent”—new possibilities—he will be continually needing that “close nook” which urban space provides, its extreme privacy, its protection. Indeed Blithedale’s potential to “overset all human institutions” provokes anxiety rather than enthusiasm in Coverdale (41). When Zenobia suggests that “it may be that some of us who wear the petticoat will go afield and leave the weaker brethren to take our places in the kitchen,” Coverdale responds, “what a pity that the
kitchen and the housework generally cannot be left out of our system altogether”(16). He comes to Blithedale not to experience new ways—but to become more masculine, to define himself against women. He fears his urban life has made him “effeminate,” so what he seeks at Blithedale is not a subversion of gender roles but a place where he might assert his masculinity.

Coverdale’s response here to Zenobia not only shows us his investment in a separate spheres ideology, but also how his mythic layering, his way of reading, contributes to his inability to distinguish between what is artificial and what is natural: “It is odd enough,” he continues, “that the kind of labor which falls to the lot of women is just that which chiefly distinguishes artificial life—the life of degenerated mortals—from the life of paradise. Eve had no dinner pot and no clothes to mend and no washing day”(16). His evocation of paradise highlights his desire to throw off the body’s requirements—the “life of degenerated mortals.” His desire for a “purer” life leads him to denigrate what is natural; the body must be denied. Coverdale hopes to find a truly spiritual existence without the “artificial” claims of the body, yet ironically it is at Blithedale that he is most tormented with bodily desires. Laughing at Coverdale’s mythical reveries, and reminding him of the harshness of the winter, the needs of the body, Zenobia declares, “we will find some difficulty adapting the Paradisiacal system for at least a month to come”(16)

Zenobia, while showing an awareness, a realism which Coverdale lacks, is no child of nature, however. She is as urban as Coverdale, but she is more comfortable with her urbanity. While some critics look to her flower as a symbol of her sensuality, that flower may also highlight other aspects of Zenobia’s character. It is important to attend to the specifics of this flower, for it is a flower “so brilliant, so rare and so costly,” a flower Zenobia gets “out of a greenhouse” each morning (54, my emphasis). Disregarding what New England nature
provides, Zenobia "scorns the rural buds and leaflets," wearing nothing but her "invariable flower of the tropics" (54). Halttunen's description of the changing fashions at mid-century also highlights Zenobia's theatricality and love of display, as well as the contrast Hawthorne sets up between her and Priscilla: "Whereas the sentimental woman had been slim, pale, and vaguely transparent, the fashionable woman of the 1850s was ample, brilliant and decidedly opaque... Hairstyles... acquired greater width as the hair was turned under or worn in plaits and decorated with gems and flowers" (163).

Though Zenobia cannot cook, though she is not a traditional wife or mother, and seems to embody an alternative vision of womanhood, she embodies another kind of stereotype—woman as aesthetic object. And while Coverdale's gaze creates this image to a certain extent, the novel also suggests that, even as Zenobia resists such objectification, she cannot help striving to attain these aesthetic results. Always exhibiting dramatic flair, we are repeatedly told Zenobia would have been a great actress, for she is fond of giving readings, "often with depth of tragic power or breadth of comic effect" (98). Even in her day to day routine, she shows a self-consciousness, a keen awareness of how she looks. While preparing the evening meal at Blithedale, she looks "at herself in the glass, and perceiving that her one magnificent flower had grown rather languid, flings it upon the floor" (20) At times, she even seems to take pleasure in Coverdale's attempts at reading her, challenging him to look into her eyes, where he admits he "sees nothing, unless it be the face of a sprite laughing at me from the bottom of a deep well" (44) Always conscious of the theatricality of her life, she turns to Coverdale after Hollingsworth's rejection and says, "it is genuine tragedy is it not" (206). While Zenobia declares that Priscilla is "the type of womanhood man has spent centuries making," we are continually made aware that it is Zenobia who makes Priscilla (113). She "decks" out Priscilla and truly enjoys making her an aesthetic object, so much so that Coverdale wonders "what Zenobia meant by evolving so much loveliness out
of this poor girl"(156). And when she throws the veil over Priscilla during her dramatic performance, “she plays the role of jailer herself” (Baym 198). As highlighted by her cry to Westervelt—“With what kind of a being am I linked?”—Zenobia is indeed aligned with the ideology she so rails against (97).

Like Coverdale, Zenobia often grows tired of the Blithedale experiment, returning to the city to be renewed, refreshed. She yearns for the anonymity, the distance and the specific pleasures of city life, and before her dramatic telling of the legend of the veiled lady, she explains why: “Our own features show through all the characters we assume. We have so much familiarity with one another’s realities that we cannot remove ourselves at pleasure into an imaginary sphere”(99). Zenobia, like Coverdale, has a desire to remove herself to an "imaginary sphere," but hers does not seem to be a guilt-ridden or confused desire. She embodies that confidence Halttunen describes which had begun to characterize the middle class—a subversive, self-conscious delight in the theatricality of life.

The chapter “Zenobia’s Drawing Room” reinforces this opposition between Zenobia and Coverdale. Highlighting the theatrical qualities of urban space, a “rich triumphant burst of music from a piano” greets Coverdale’s entrance, and he is “dazzled” by Zenobia’s appearance, her elaborate costume (151). She now has “costly robes, “flaming jewels,” and “even her flower had undergone a cold and bright transfiguration—it was a flower exquisitely imitated in a jeweler’s work and imparting the last touch that transformed Zenobia into a work of art” (151, my emphasis). Lingering over the extravagance of Zenobia’s room, Hawthorne stresses how the effects of this space play on Coverdale’s mind:

Her manner bewildered me. Literally moreover, I was dazzled by the brilliance of the room. A chandelier hung down in the centre glowing with I know not how many lights . . . the furniture was exceedingly rich . . . it struck me that here was the fulfillment of every fantasy of an imagination reveling in . . . costly self indulgence. Pictures, marbles, vases; in brief, more shapes of luxury than there could be any object in enumerating, except for an
auctioneer’s advertisement—and the whole repeated and doubled by the reflection of a great mirror which showed me Zenobia’s proud figure, likewise and my own. It cost me I acknowledge a bitter sense of shame to perceive in myself a positive effort to bear up against the effect which Zenobia sought to impose on me. I reasoned against her in my secret mind and strove to keep my footing. In the gorgousness with which she had surrounded herself—in the redundance of personal ornament... I malevolently beheld the true character of the woman, passionate, luxurious, lacking simplicity, not deeply refined, incapable of pure and perfect taste.

(152)

Extremely uneasy and confused, Coverdale alternates between feeling repulsion for this extravagant display, and feeling implicated himself, for as he says, the mirror reflects "Zenobia’s proud figure and like-wise my own." As he struggles against the effect she imposes on him, Zenobia, in a sense, becomes a "painted woman"—a real moral threat to Coverdale. Heightening the ambiguity, the problems of interpretation here, is how much Zenobia’s drawing room resembles some of the bordellos of the period. Indeed the similarities between this room and the typical upper-class “parlor house” of the 1850s, as described in Dr. Sanger’s History of Prostitution is striking:

The houses in which this class of courtesans reside are furnished with a lavish display of luxury, scarcely in accordance with the dictates of good taste and mostly exhibiting a quantity of magnificent furniture crowded together without taste or judgment for the sake of ostentation... Large mirrors adorn the walls, which are frequently handsome frescoes and gilt. Paintings and engravings in rich frames, vases and statuettes add their charm. Carpets of luxurious softness cover the floors, while sofas, ottomans and easy chairs abound. (Sanger as quoted by Lefcowitz 346)

The sincerity of Zenobia at the Blithedale kitchen hearth cannot be reconciled with this urban Zenobia, this morally ambiguous, formal, and distant Zenobia, this painted woman. Coverdale cannot believe that both Zenobias can be true, and yet he cannot deny his attraction to this urbane Zenobia either. Ultimately he decides “in both there was something like the illusion which a great actress flings around her”(152).

This scene also dramatizes how Zenobia, much more so than aspiring flaneur Miles Coverdale, embodies a truly cosmopolitan consciousness. After Coverdale’s questioning of
her dedication to Blithedale, she declares: "I should think it a poor and meagre nature that is capable of but one set of forms... why should we be content with our homely life of a few months past to the exclusion of all other modes? It was good; but there are other lives as good or better" (152). Uncomfortable with this cosmopolitan attitude, Coverdale believes that Zenobia should "be compelled" to give him a "glimpse of something true; some nature, some passion, no matter whether right or wrong provided it were real" (153).

Coverdale yearns for "transparency"—a way beyond the mask, beyond the shifting identities and uncertainties, yet the possibility of removing his own mask, of being seen, being known is terrifying to him. This scene then also makes clear the irreconcilable conflicts within Coverdale, his own self deception, his refusal to see the "urban" tendencies of Zenobia as part of his own character. Like Zenobia he too feels smothered and stifled by Blithedale; he needs something only the city provides. Not only does he need to "retreat" to the city from time to time, but also even while at Blithedale, he is compelled to create a private retreat for himself, a domestic bachelor's quarters of sorts. Indeed it seems that only in a specific kind of domestic space can Coverdale preserve his fragile self, and in his moments of crisis, when he fears he is losing, as he puts it, "the better part of my individuality," Blithedale's pastoral space becomes invested with imagery usually associated with the city (83).

When he walks away from Blithedale at one point, Coverdale feels "as if the heavy floodtide of social life were roaring at my heels and would outstrip and overwhelm me without all the better diligence in my escape" (83). But urbanism cannot be evaded. The confidence man can now be found prowling in the woods. While he is seeking sanctuary in the "green cathedral," Coverdale is disturbed by the figure of Westervelt, a figure who violently disrupts his reflections, a disruption Coverdale likens to "when you thrust a finger
into a soap bubble" (84). Like the confidence man, Westervelt, the city urban skeptic, is "a liminal man on the make," a moral threat, "the man," as described by the antebellum advice manuals, "whose final purpose was to lure his victim until your character and destiny become identified with his own" (Halttunen 32). There is, without a doubt, a seductive quality to Westervelt, and just as Coverdale was dazzled by the material extravagance of the painted woman's drawing room, so he is both attracted and repelled by the confidence man's urbanity:

His eyes were black and sparkling and his teeth remarkably brilliant. He was rather carelessly but well and fashionably dressed... There was a gold chain, exquisitely wrought, across his vest. I never saw a smoother or whiter gloss than that upon his shirt bosom which had a pin in it set with a gem that glimmered in the leafy shadow where he stood... He carried a stick with a wooden head carved in vivid imitation of that of a serpent. I hated him partly I do believe from a comparison of my own homely garb with his well ordered foppishness (86).

While he is repelled by Westervelt, Coverdale cannot help admitting that Westervelt "was as handsome a man as ever I beheld" (85). After Coverdale discovers the golden bands around Westervelt's teeth, however, he feels as if "the whole man were a moral and physical humbug and that his wonderful beauty of face... might be removable like a mask" (89). Still, the irresistible influence of the confidence man seems to act upon Coverdale. After Westervelt describes Hollingsworth's devious intentions regarding Zenobia, and bursts into laughter, Coverdale joins him: "I soon began to laugh as loudly as himself," and "by and by," Coverdale reveals, "My own cachinnation lasted a moment longer" (89). Echoing the fears Americans had of the confidence man, Coverdale seems to succumb to the lure of Westervelt, and Westervelt is indeed a man who would "identify your character and destiny with his own." As he articulates the innermost concerns of Coverdale, Coverdale is forced to admit, "I detested this kind of man because a part of my own nature showed itself responsive to him" (95).
After encountering Westervelt, Coverdale is intent upon finding protective "domestic" space, and his hermitage provides such a refuge. Hawthorne's imagery reinforces how this refuge fosters a kind of infantile desire—fraught with delusions of grandeur, a desire evoking violent fantasies. As we follow Coverdale into his hermitage, the domestic space he needs in order to preserve himself takes on extreme dimensions. Described as a "leafy cave," the hermitage becomes a kind of womb (91). It also resonates with sexual imagery. While this leafy cave is a retreat, a haven, it is also an "entanglement"—a "knot of polygamy," where love and death are inextricably intertwined:

"A hollow chamber . . . had been formed by the decay of some of the pine branches, which the vine had lovingly strangled with its embrace, burying them from the light of day in an aerial sepulchre of its own leaves" (92). Here in this exaggerated private space where his only neighbors "would have been two orioles," is where Coverdale would spend his honeymoon (92). Here is also where—in his infantile regressions—Coverdale feels superior, imagining himself as an "idol in a niche," where nothing else seems real but himself, where everything looks "ridiculous" (92-93).

The scene also becomes comical, for Hawthorne dramatizes how Coverdale's transcendental hopes of communing with nature are at odds not only with the flaneur's need for epistemological control, but also with the domestic, intensely private subjectivity Coverdale wishes to maintain:

It was an admirable place to make verses, turning the rhythm to the breezy symphony that so often stirred the vineleaves or to mediate an essay for the Dial in which the many tongues of Nature whispered mysteries and seemed to ask only a little stronger puff of wind . . . Being so pervious to air currents, it was just the nook too for the enjoyment of a cigar. This hermitage was my one exclusive possession . . . It symbolized my individuality and aided me in keeping it inviolate . . . So there I used to sit . . . I counted the innumerable clusters of my vine and forereckoned the abundance of my vintage. It gladdened me to anticipate the surprise of the Community, when like an allegorical figure of rich October, I should make my appearance with

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
shoulders bent, beneath the burthen of ripe grapes, and some of the crushed ones crimsoning my brow as with a blood-stain. (92)

The language here brings to mind Coverdale’s earlier description of his urban bachelor quarters—the confidence, the authority, the claims to power. This hermitage too is his possession, and as Coverdale sits in the trees smoking cigars and making verses—waiting for nature to whisper its mysteries—Hawthorne highlights how his urban domesticity makes a mockery of his transcendental aspirations. There is no giving up to nature, no experiencing of a boundless universe, but instead a need to cut it down to size, to revel in what is “mine.” There is no transcending of individuality, but an assertion of Self, an assertion of a possessive, materialistic self—intent on controlling, intent on preserving an exclusive private space. In a kind of miserly mindset, Coverdale even counts the clusters on his vine—imagining his abundant harvest—and, reinforcing the destructiveness of this deranged domesticity, Hawthorne invests Coverdale’s harvest with violent undertones. The crushed grapes crimson Coverdale’s brow “as with a blood-stain” (92). At Blithedale then, Coverdale withdraws even further, becoming a more exaggerated version of that urban bachelor who revels in his own private space, a space which heightens his sense of power, and fulfills his needs for ownership and control.

In addition to dramatizing how the domesticity and theatricality of urban life create an extreme kind of private subjectivity, the novel also begins to probe the implications of such an urban consciousness. Jonathan Arac writes that “one of the concerns of nineteenth-century observers” was the psychological problems of the city, “especially the deadening effect of city bustle and hubbub” (53). Many believed that as a result of city life, “the intellect hypertrophies, the feelings decay and one becomes blasé, responsive only to gross and violent stimulants” (Arac 53). In his famous essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Georg Simmel theorized on the particular type of personality encouraged by urban life. Although
written in 1900, Simmel's work describes, in many ways, the urbanity of Miles Coverdale. Because of "the intensification of nervous stimulation" in an urban environment, Simmel speculated that "the metropolitan type of man" develops an "organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment which would uproot him. He reacts with his head instead of his heart" (48). "Intellectuality" he writes, "preserves subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life" (48). We hear these concerns echoing throughout Hawthorne's novel, for again and again, Coverdale wonders how "cold-hearted" he is (67). He wants to attribute his "cold-sceptism" to the influence of Westervelt (93). That "cold tendency" which made him "pry with a speculative interest into people's passions," he believes, appeared to have gone far towards "unhumanizing" his heart (93, 142). Coverdale's self-questioning seems to elaborate this view that "in order to ward off the shock characteristic of urban life," "consciousness grows at the expense of feeling" (Arac 53).

Most disturbing perhaps, is that Hawthorne's dark and eerie conclusion to *Blithedale* echoes the dire, ominous conclusion made by David Harvey as he concludes his discussion of capitalism and urban consciousness: "The urbanization of consciousness intoxicates us and befuddles us with fetishisms, rendering us powerless to understand let alone intervene coherently into the trajectory. The urbanization of capital and of consciousness threatens a transition to barbarism in the midst of a rhetoric of self-realization" (276). Indeed Coverdale's experiment is immersed in the "rhetoric of self-realization," and he is continually "intoxicated" and "befuddled." His narrative does begin with hope, with expectations, with the memories of that "radiant" fire, yet his story inevitably degenerates into violence, into suicidal thoughts, into fantasies of self-destruction as well as the gruesome death of Zenobia and the horrendous retrieval and mutilation of her body. Coverdale is befuddled throughout—powerless, unable to understand the meaning of his own life, and in the
rhetoric of high ideals and self-improvement, there is a transition to "barbarism," for Blithedale becomes the scene of competitive selfishness, a place of intense power struggles.

Hawthorne's vision is undoubtedly a dark one, and echoing Harvey's thoughts regarding the "urbanization of consciousness," the novel does suggest that urban life contributes to a masking of reality. And perhaps most disturbing is the pleasurable aspect of this danger, the urban necessity and desire for masking and dramatizing. Coverdale chooses not to see the overworked seamstress in Priscilla because he prefers the "fancywork" he has "decked her out" with (94). Though Coverdale has met Moodie a "hundred times" in town, he amuses his fancy with wondering who he is; he has to admit to Hollingsworth that he knows "not a circumstance" of his history (77). Even after Moodie finally tells Coverdale his story, Coverdale still must adorn the tale: "my pen has perhaps allowed itself a trifle of romantic and legendary license"(167). Significantly, earlier in the tavern, after observing the paintings surrounding him, Coverdale concludes that there is a superior delight to be found in representations: "All these things were so perfectly imitated, that you seemed to have the genuine article before you, and yet with an indescribable ideal charm it took away the grossness from what was fleshiest and fattest"(162). Echoing his desire for a paradise without degrading domestic chores, Coverdale would rather deny uncomfortable realities. It is much more pleasurable to look at life aesthetically, to take delight in visual surfaces, and as Halttunen's study shows, urban life only contributes to this kind of visual dependency, even when that visual dependency is no longer adequate for "reading" the city's complexities.

While Hawthorne's vision of urbanity seems dark, the novel nevertheless is still a "romance" with urban life. Coverdale's observations also reveal that the city satisfies an emotional pleasure which leaves him dizzy and overwhelmed. The imagery of the city—"the
thick foggy stifled element,” “the entangled life of many men together”—take “a strenuous
hold” upon his mind (135). The city has an aesthetics of its own where one might even find
moments that are sublime. After leaving Blithedale, he decides that the city noises, the
tumult of the streets is “just as valuable as the sighing of the breeze among birch trees that
overshadowed Eliot’s pulpit” (136). And as he observes the backyards of the city apartments
from his hotel window, Coverdale also recognizes the beauty of artifice, the necessity of
artifice even, if certain kinds of beauty are to thrive:

There were apple-trees and pear and peach trees, too, the fruit on which
looked singularly large, luxuriant, and abundant; as well it might, in a
situation so warm and sheltered, and where the soil had doubtless been
enriched to a more than natural fertility... The blighting winds of our rigid
climate could not molest these trees and vines; the sunshine though
descending late into this area, and too early intercepted by the height of the
surrounding houses, yet lay tropically there, even when less than temperate
in every other region. (137-38)

The tropics and warmth of this scene bring to mind Zenobia; like Zenobia’s beauty, these
trees and vines are also products of urban conditions, and like Zenobia they also put on a
different face in urban surroundings.

Indeed there is a delight in seeing nature in urban space, an aesthetic satisfaction.
Coverdale is bewitched by “all those nooks and crannies where nature, like a stray partridge
hides her head among the long-established haunts of men”(138). The irony and the illusion
is that Coverdale sees a richer nature in the city—more luxuriant, more abundant. He sees a
protected nature whose grape vines are “already purple” and “promising richness”(137).
Indeed it is in the city where nature takes on more aesthetic value; while working in the
fields at Blithedale, Coverdale finds that nature did not often wear such an aesthetic aspect.
Only “sometimes,” Coverdale remembers, “I used to discern a richer picturesqueness in the
visible scene of earth and sky”(61). For the most part, working the earth interfered with his
viewing of it; the clods of earth were “never etherealized”(61).
Ultimately the city provides Coverdale with scenes that he can read, giving him that epistemological confidence characteristic of the flaneur, but just as often these city scenes reveal his anxiety, and highlight what torments his consciousness. After admiring the luxurious fruit trees and vineyards of the back apartments, he notices what seems to be a reflection of himself—a young man in front of a mirror obsessed with his image, a man whose long detailed preparations emphasize the theatricality of urban life: “I saw a young man in a dressing gown standing before the glass and brushing his hair, for a quarter of an hour together. He then spent an equal space of time in the elaborate arrangement of his cravat, and finally made his appearance in a dress coat, which I suspected to be newly come from the tailor’s”(140). Immediately after this view, Coverdale sees in the window below, a family, which provokes in him an intense emotional reaction, for the image seems to save him from feelings of despair and loss. “God bless these folks,” he exclaims, “I have not seen a prettier bit of nature in all my summer in the country” (140). In this domestic scene there is no isolation, no self-absorption, just intimacy and ease, and most significantly, Coverdale’s commentary reveals that he views this domestic scene as natural. He is also relieved because he can interpret this scene. The relationship between a man and a woman here is clear, whereas the confusing “knot of polygamy” that he must unravel at Blithedale—those knots of power, sexuality, and desire—only subvert and deny this scene of domestic bliss. Almost immediately after “reading” this scene, he projects his isolation onto a dove outside his window: “the dove sat looking very dreary and forlorn; insomuch that I wondered why she chose to sit there in the chilly rain, while her kindred were doubtless nestling in a warm and comfortable dovecote”(141). Indeed what these flaneur-type city sketches reveal is the domestic yearnings of Coverdale, his longing for a home.

The family is not only significant in Coverdale’s narrative, but also in the urban consciousness of the culture at large. The family was thought by many to be under siege in
the nineteenth century. As Arac writes, "to nineteenth-century observers, the city appeared
to further individualism by freeing people from the old bonds that fixed them, particularly
by destroying stable family existence that was believed to have marked the previous rural
condition" (52). In Blithedale, we do not see many families—only a family torn asunder. Old
Moodie's greed and depravity destroy his family, and ultimately the half-sisters Zenobia and
Priscilla turn on one another, but this only seems to be an absence of sentimental domesticity.
The family is the image that haunts Coverdale, reinforcing a more recent view that "the
family was not threatened by the city, but strengthened as an adaptive and defensive
response to urban life" (Arac 54). "The urban history of England and America in the
nineteenth century," Arac notes, "reveals then not the disruptive triumph of the streets over
the family, but the strengthening of the family against the city. Such a mentality produces
intense families, small nuclear families that believe family life embodies all significant social
experience" (Arac 54). In Blithedale, we do see the family under siege, relegated to the
margins, the shadows, but we also see the family assert itself—in the images which haunt
Coverdale's consciousness. As the family becomes associated with something natural,
something pure, it becomes the image which wards off urban chaos, despair and isolation.

Earlier when trying to articulate his discontent at Blithedale to Hollingsworth,
Coverdale decides that the "spic and span novelty" of the project is somehow inauthentic,
and he couches his discontent in the rhetoric of sentimental longings: "But I do long for the
cottages to be built that the creeping plants may begin to run over them, and the moss to
gather on the walls, and the trees to cover with a breadth of shadow... It is time too for
children to be born among us. The first born child is still to come. And I shall never feel as if
this were a real, practical, as well as poetical system of human life until somebody has
sanctified it by death" (120). From the image of that family of pilgrims around the hearth, to
his yearning for children and cottages to be built, to his relief at the sight of the family from
his hotel window, Coverdale aligns the family with nature, with authenticity—thereby locking himself out of living an authentic life—since he is the “dove” who chooses to sit in the chilling rain. Though searching for new possibilities, new ways of arranging life, Coverdale is unable to truly believe in alternative possibilities; he has already decided that the Blithedale experiment goes against nature. 12

Although he comes to see Blithedale as an unreadable text, a “knot of polygamy,” he still wants to believe it may provide him with the home he needs. Near the end of the novel, in fact, he decides that this is his home. Affirming that there he “earned bread and eaten it and so established” his claim to be on earth, he declares, “I could have knelt down and laid my breast against that soil . . . The red clay of which my frame was moulded seemed nearer akin to those crumbling furrows than to any other portion of the world’s dust. There was my home; and there might be my grave” (190). In a state of high-pitched emotional fervor, Coverdale hurries to Blithedale with thoughts of home and fears of impending catastrophe. He imagines a scene of domestic bliss and harmony where, as he puts it, “my entrance might be so quiet, my aspect so familiar, that they would forget how long I had been away and suffer me to melt into the scene as a wreath of vapor melts into a layer of cloud” (191). The imagery here suggests a kind of easing of ego boundaries, a melting into the Other, and when Coverdale imagines a “family” scene, there are no tensions, no distances to overcome:

---

12 While Hawthorne suggests the Blithedale communal experiment fails because of the competitive individualism at the heart of urban life, Edward Bellamy, in 1888 will create in his novel, Looking Backward, a utopian city where human selfishness ceases to exist and all citizens strive to better themselves. As Doctor Leete explains the new society to Julian West: “the excessive individualism which then prevailed was inconsistent with much public spirit. What little wealth you had seems almost wholly to have been lavished in private luxury. Nowadays, on the contrary there is no destination of the surplus wealth so popular as the adornment of the city, which all enjoy in equal degree” (57). Bellamy’s utopian vision comes at a time when the strife between labor and capital seemed to be moving toward anarchy—the many strikes of these final decades, and, in particular, the Haymarket Riot of 1886 seemed to symbolize for Americans that they were on the brink of disaster. In Bellamy’s novel the city itself is “domesticated,” purged of any wilderness or disorder, becoming, in a sense, the protected realm of comfort and stability which Coverdale wishes to escape from. The immense popularity of Bellamy’s futuristic city of order and cleanliness is, in part, a response to this sense of impending crisis in the 1880s.
“Beholding me at table, Zenobia would send me a cup of tea, and Hollingsworth would fill
my plate from the great dish of pan dowdy, and Priscilla, in her quiet way would hand the
cream” (191). But as Halttunen’s study emphasizes, home is where the parlor games are
enacted; there is no authentic, pure space resistant to urban pressures. Coverdale’s
“homecoming” is, in reality, a scene of confusion where he feels something “evil is about to
befall” (191).

Unable to see a “single human figure on the landscape,” angry that the cows give
him a “cold reception,” Coverdale finds a surreal, mad quality to this scene (192). Instead of
being welcomed, he is seen as an intruder; the partridge “whirred away”; the squirrel
“chattered angrily,” and he begins to think suicidal thoughts at the dark pool where Zenobia
will later drown (191). In a kind of desperate attempt to comfort himself, he retreats to the
hermitage where he “devours” grapes like a greedy child. Eventually hearing “voices and
much laughter proceeding from the interior of the wood,” he discovers a “concourse of
strange figures”:

Among them was an Indian chief . . . and near him looking fit to be his
woodland-bride the goddess Diana . . . Another group consisted of a
Bavarian broom-girl, a negro of the Jim Crow order, one or two foresters of
the middle ages, a Kentucky woodsman in his trimmed hunting shirt and a
Shaker elder . . . Shepherds of Arcadia and allegorical figures from the Faerie
Queen were oddly mixed up with these. Arm in arm or otherwise huddled
together in strange discrepancy, stood Puritans, gay cavaliers and
revolutionary officers . . . (193-94)

The group is “oddly mixed up,” yet “huddled together,” impossible for Coverdale to
interpret, for “they appeared and vanished and came again, confusedly” (193). Unable to
read these masqueraders, Coverdale is threatened by them; his description of their dancing
suggests a loss of individuality which so frightens him: “So they joined hands in a circle
whirling round so swiftly and madly and so merrily . . . that their separate incongruities
were blended all together and they became a kind of entanglement that went nigh to turn

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
one's brain with merely looking at it” (194). While this scene is unsettling to Coverdale, it is nevertheless a scene of joyous community. As Dale Bauer emphasizes, Zenobia's masquerade "recalls the comic sense of masking"; "these masks allow a free and familiar contact among people, and serve as symbols of difference, of communal heteroglossia" (41). Zenobia "celebrates" a new vision, "neither a perverse individualism nor a falsely unitary community" (Bauer 38).

Coverdale, however, remains the urban skeptic. Marking his separation and his intruder status, he cannot refrain from a burst of laughter when the group has fallen into a deep silence (194). Just as he is threatened by this vision of community, the community is in turn threatened by him. The goddess Diana calls him a "profane intruder," and the Indian chief, "brandishing his tomahawk," cries out that he will take Coverdale's scalp (195). Calling him one of Zenobia's "vassals," the group commands Coverdale to "approach and pay his duty" (195). Unable, however to join in this "brisk throb of human life," Coverdale makes his escape while "the whole fantastic rabble streamed off in pursuit" of him (37,195).

"Like a mad poet hunted by chimaeras," Coverdale frantically runs from what seems to be something evil in this forest. All the dizzying motion is finally brought to a standstill, however, when Coverdale stumbles over a "green mound," "the accumulation of moss and the leaves . . . decaying" (195). "[T]he softened outline of a wood pile was still perceptible," and in his "fitful mood," Coverdale recalls, "I imagined the long dead woodman and his long dead wife and children coming out of their chill grave and essaying to make a fire with this heap of mossy fuel" (196).

Once again the image of the family stems the emotional confusion, and in this strange vision, the family is again associated with nature, for the figures seem to literally emerge from the decaying moss. This vision is also something that Coverdale can read, and
significantly he imagines this ghostly family trying to start a fire; this eerie vision suggests a
desperate attempt to revive the family. Perhaps even more importantly, is that while
Coverdale is able to read this—his own imaginary vision—he cannot interpret the reality of
his costumed cohorts at Blithedale—the “rabble” of masked merrymakers, the explosion of
difference, the carnival. His narrative powers fail him there. Indeed as the novel’s stumbling,
awkward conclusion highlights for us—its reaching for the sentimental ending, the
conventional ending—Coverdale’s sentimentality and conventionality cannot adequately
describe the complex and inescapable urban reality he lives in, a reality that seems to be, by
the novel’s end, hopelessly masked and mystified.
CHAPTER 2

DESIRE, DOMESTICITY AND THE AESTHETIC VISION:
URBAN HOMES AND HOMELESSNESS IN THE BOSTONIANS AND A HAZARD OF NEW FORTUNES

The Bostonians

Critics have often noted The Blithedale Romance’s affinity to Henry James’s The Bostonians published in 1886. Given that Hawthorne was a model and inspiration for James, the similarity between the novels is not surprising, yet Hawthorne was even more on James’s mind while he was writing The Bostonians. As Brodhead reminds us, “the year James plotted and contracted for The Bostonians, 1883, was the year Houghton Mifflin brought out the Riverside edition of Hawthorne’s complete works, an event that called forth in the journals James was to publish his new novels in, a flood of reconsideration of Hawthorne’s art” (147). And as scholars take into account James’s criticism of Hawthorne, they suggest that in writing The Bostonians, James wanted to improve upon Hawthorne, for he believed Blithedale had “insufficient social realism” (M. Bell 129). “The human background was left vague,” James complained, “we get too much out of reality and cease to feel beneath our feet the firm ground” (M. Bell 129). Although James set out to construct a more realistic urban milieu in his work, some critics nevertheless maintain that his novel too is marked by “insufficient

---

13 As Robert Emmet Long observes, Blithedale and The Bostonians illuminate each other. He points out that “both novels deal with appearance and reality, reform and sham, and both employ the motif of masquerade to imply a disguise of the self” (122) Alluding to James’s assertion that the “least felicitous aspect of Hawthorne’s book had been the mysterious relationship of Priscilla and Zenobia,” Milicent Bell notes that “James’s novel would explore the bond between Olive and Verena” (130).
social realism." As Brodhead puts it, "he fills in the scenery he found lacking in Hawthorne but in such a way that it remains scenery—a backdrop the characters pass in front of, not the physical dimension of their life" (157). "And since the physical and social world it concretizes fails to become the ground of motivation—the realism of The Bostonians however brilliant it is is an act of stylistic notation . . . an ornate marginal decoration . . . (157).

Brodhead’s comments, I would suggest, are rather sweeping and fail to consider the varied ways James uses setting in the novel. Rather then merely embodying aesthetic value, setting is also used as a means to speculate on the aesthetic gaze—the seduction and dangers of a strictly aesthetic viewpoint. And as often as character and setting seem to have little relationship to each other, they are just as often profoundly, inextricably connected. Think of the pure and plain Miss Birdseye and her bare home “white and featureless” or the vulgar and careless Tarrants and their shabby home with its rickety porch (27). This scenery is not mere “backdrop,” but does indeed function as a “physical dimension” of character. It is perhaps only Basil Ransom and Verena Tarrant who are “figures without a setting”(171). Verena who seems to have “dropped straight from heaven” is at home anywhere and nowhere while Basil Ransom, a genteel southerner, boards in a poverty-stricken immigrant neighborhood in New York (77). If these characters seem “to pass in front of” the scenery as Brodhead puts it, it is because James wishes to highlight their homelessness; indeed the central struggle in the novel is a struggle for domestic space. James’s depiction of the physical and social world therefore, rather than failing in social realism, gives us a more realistic depiction of urban life and consciousness with all its idealization of private life, with all its sense of dislocation, mobility and shifting notions of identity.

14 Alfred Harbegger in his biographical approach to the novel says that “James’s wish to give a picturesque representation of contemporary types and manners was undermined by a concealed animus. “Pardon,” he
Indeed James extends Hawthorne's view of urban space—sketching in more detail that "human background" which was left "vague" in Blithedale. James, in particular, uses class in more pronounced ways to construct his urban vision. The domestic desires and conflicts of the novel's main characters—Olive Chancellor, Verena Tarrant and Basil Ransom—are inextricably interwined with and complicated by class. Olive's "organized privacy," her comfortable, upper-class domesticity is an ideal which Basil, who has lost his fortunes with the fall of the South, covets. Basil needs a secure domestic sphere to help him remake his identity in the north; he needs the power and prestige aligned with a private, "well-appointed" home. Indeed the successful public man depends upon a well-tended female domestic sphere to support his public endeavours as well as to show off the success of them. Basil's homelessness alongside Olive's richly furnished established home, therefore, adds another important dimension to their conflict.

Like Basil, Verena too is in need of a home. Traveling with her father, a "mesmeric healer," Verena has had a bohemian existence, and not only do her parents disregard traditional notions of domesticity and propriety, they are willing to exploit Verena for their own material gain. Olive, therefore, for all her progressive feminism, will also play the role of a more conservative reformer when she finds the Tarrant home not up to the task of nurturing her protégé. Indeed as she rescues Verena from her questionable origins, Olive is reminiscent of those middle-class reformers like Charles Loring Brace who had no hesitation in breaking up the family so that a child might reach his or her individual potential. Moreover, Verena's "less distinguished" origins are a source of fascination as well as dismay, for Olive "had long been preoccupied with the romance of the people" (103, 32):

observes, "is not a product of sharp social observation but rather of the author's angry and private determination to settle old scores" (337).
what she would have liked to impose on the girl was an ineffectual rupture with her past. That past she by no means absolutely deplored, for it had the merit of having initiated Verena (and her patroness through her agency) into the mysteries and miseries of the People. It was her theory that Verena (in spite of the blood of the Greenstreets, and after all who were they?) was a flower of the great Democracy, and that it was impossible to have had an origin less distinguished than Tarrant himself... She liked to think that Verena in her childhood had known almost the extremity of poverty, and there was a kind of ferocity in the joy with which she reflected that there had been moments when this delicate creature came near (if the pinch had only lasted a little longer) to literally going without food. These things added to her value for Olive; they made that young lady feel that their common undertaking would, in consequence, be so much more serious. (103)

If Verena seems an "empty" character, perhaps it is because she—like Priscilla—is a screen upon which a more privileged classes' fantasies may be projected. And in her pliancy of character, her willingness to dedicate her life first to Olive's ideal and then to Basil's, she looks ahead to another urban heroine of "the people": Carrie Meeber. Carrie too, in her need to perform, in her desire to be desired, in her fluid sense of self, and in her ultimate commodification, will also point to the darker side of the new consumer culture, particularly its impact on the lives of women.

James's novel, like Hawthorne's also vividly shows how an idealization of private life is central to urban consciousness. Indeed it is significant that for a novel about public life and public movements, so much of the novel takes place in secluded interiors. Just as Hawthorne critiqued Coverdale's domesticity, James's work too examines the dangers of urban culture's heightened sense of privacy, yet because public life in the 1880s is more spectacular, more explicitly aligned with the consumer machinery of a growing mass media, many critics see James's novel as only a critique of the new public realm and publicity. Philip Fisher, for example, sees Verena's withdrawal from public life as triumphant. Her "disappearing in public" as he calls it, is the only means of recovering an authentic self. The novel's final scene is, in his view, "an escape from the life of performance—a climactic act that asserts the full possession of an individual self in the act of disappearing"(178).
This "disappearing in public," however, does not necessarily guarantee a recovering of an authentic self as Fisher contends; in choosing the private realm over the public, a more sentimental domesticity over the fantastic world of publicity, Verena does not necessarily "escape from a life of performance." James's final image of Verena rushing away to the traditional role of wife and mother is ominous, and we know that performance and playing will continue to characterize her life as Ransom had earlier talked of setting up their dining table as her platform (361). Indeed by the 1880s, the idea of a domestic sanctuary separate from the public world of spectacle and performance is perhaps more elusive, more out of reach. As Ian Bell rightly observes, the privacy which Basil so desires, "clearly invokes fictions of solidity, an authenticity of experience that itself is becomingly increasingly precarious in the world of consumption" (144.) James then invariably shows us that the public world of spectacle makes its way into the home in insidious ways; indeed both an idealization of the private realm as well as an uneasiness regarding the sanctity of that realm are central to The Bostonians.

In the years following the Civil War, the tendencies Halttunen had traced in antebellum urban culture—its inclination to theatricality, its emphasis on the visual, its mystification of the public sphere—not only continue with the growth of technology and the market economy, they are dramatically intensified, taken to new heights that even Hawthorne perhaps could never imagine. In particular, public life grew more difficult to interpret, more of a spectacle. As Philip Fisher remarks: "The public realm in the years following the Civil War was giddy, intoxicated with the newly available energies for the magnification of personality... the force of mass circulation newspapers to create overnight sensations or faces instantly recognizable to millions permitted the newspapers to create a common focus of attention" (156). Alan Trachtenberg also in describing the transformation of public life notes that "there was a thrust towards the spectacular in mass entertainment. Pageantry and
broad pantomime replaced the clever repartee jostling of the earlier mode. Audiences were now passive, prisoners of their own excitement and bewilderment” (123). This “thrust towards the spectacular” could also be seen in the renovation of urban space; business districts too were now becoming more theatrical, more concerned with visual display, with putting on a show. Traveling through Boston in the 1870s, Frederich Ratzel was struck by the city’s transformation after the fire of 1872: “Business after business is springing up in the iron and granite palaces which have been constructed within the space of a year” (87). “Everything standing today,” he writes, “is entirely devoted to commercial pursuits. Shopping arcades, department stores, factories occupy these palaces. The columns, medallions and whatever else is put up as decoration are to help . . . sell products . . . this central method of building is simply an advertising style” (Ratzel 88).

As urban growth, technology and advertising combine to transform the city’s public space, perception, consciousness and the very texture of private life is transformed as well. “Various innovations, some as simple as the penny postcard (introduced in 1873) others as complex as the linotype machine (1884) and the handheld camera (1888) stimulated what many historians regard as a “communications revolution” (Schelereth 177). Describing the evolution of the nineteenth-century newspaper, Thomas Schelereth helps to highlight for us the dramatic differences between Hawthorne’s urban world and James’s: “The typographical boredom of the pre-Civil war newspaper layout gave way to new graphic displays. By the 1880s, dailies made woodcuts and steel engraved illustrations essential to news reporting” (185). So filled was the culture with visual stimuli that by 1884, Charles Congdon labeled his age the “age of over-illustration.”(Schelereth 193). With advances in photography and lithography, chromolithographs, stereoscopes and snapshot albums filled middle class homes” (Schelereth 177). “Into the parlor thus came an extraordinary gallery of sights: the great art works from European museums . . . industrial scenes, architectural views
of the city, railroad trains . . . and rural vistas . . . “(Orvell 73). As Trachtenberg tellingly observes, “The stereoscope transformed the bourgeois drawing room into a theater for private panoramic viewing, spectacles for the pleasure of the hungry eye and the sedentary body” (Trach, Reading Photographs. 89)

Recognizing the revolutionary impact of the new visual stimuli, and that “photography opened up a whole new world to consciousness,” Oliver Wendell Holmes, as early as 1859 had tried to come to grips with the effects of this new traffic in representations. Holmes pronounced with “speculative abandon” (Orvell 76): “form is henceforth divorced from matter” (Orvell 76). Indeed according to Miles Orvell, Holmes is the first person to articulate the “paradoxical experience of the camera”: “While one side of Holmes’s mind is entranced by the literal descriptive power of the camera, its ability to make us appreciate the concrete thingness of reality, . . . another side of his imagination responds to a rather different quality of the stereography, its capacity to transport us away from the literal into a kind of dream like exaltation of the faculties, one that leaves the body behind” (76). Holmes shows “an appreciation of the camera’s ability to direct our close attention to the real thing, and of its simultaneous capacity to estrange us from ourselves . . . to compel our entrance into the aesthetic world of the image” (Orvell 77).

It would seem that in transporting us to “the aesthetic world of the image,” the new visual technologies would take us out of our homes, expose us to other worlds; instead they may have helped to turn our focus inward in a most profound way. Some scholars have suggested that the period’s increased attention to the individual was enabled by the advent of photography, by the period’s proliferation of images. In The History of Private Life, Alain Corbin notes how some of the period’s new products and practices contributed to this emphasis on the individual: “During the second half of the nineteenth century, the mail
contributed to the proliferation of symbols of self and signs of individual possessions. By 1900 some eight million postcards were being sent annually. Similar signs of change can be seen in the common use of visiting cards and personal calendars . . . "(458) He also reminds us that with the spread of the mirror in the nineteenth century, "contemplation of one's own image ceased to be a privilege" (460). The "most important factor," however, in the development of individual self awareness, he declares, was "the spread of the portrait," which "was a "direct consequence of the efforts of individuals to assert their individuality and to gain insight into their personalities" (460) Indeed Corbin shows us how the communications and technological revolution of the late nineteenth century helped to transform consciousness by creating a new kind of self awareness. "The ability to portray the self and the possession of self images," he explains, "enhanced the individual's sense of his own importance" (Corbin 463). In a way, that inflated sense of "self" which so disturbed Hawthorne, that possessiveness and self absorption one might argue, becomes even more characteristic of urban American culture by the late nineteenth century.

Indeed this privileging of both the individual and the visual, are perhaps the most obvious new components in the domestic ideology of the post-Civil war period. As Clifford Edward Clark summarizes in his History of the American Family Home: "Although the mid-century ideal of the family had stressed the separation of public and private, the protective role of the household and the importance of order and hierarchy in domestic life, the emphasis in the 1870s and 1880s on creativity and artistic self expression placed a new stress on individual talents, the display of material possessions and the equality of household
members” (108). In decorating and constructing the home, the goal was now “visual
delight” (Clark 78). 15

Americans were in the midst of a “hypercommercial aesthetic craze” fueled in part by
Charles Eastlake’s *Hints on Household Taste*, a popularization of Ruskin and Morris; first
published in 1867, by 1888 the book had gone through ten subsequent editions’ (Freedman
105). Shifting the emphasis of domestic ideology to an “ethos that privileged the experience
of beauty as a valuable experience in and of itself, Eastlake’s work served wittingly or
unwittingly to celebrate the act of consumption” (Freedman 107). As Eastlake emphasized
the home as a place of “public self presentation,” home became a critical component of
urban theatricality, and to many, home and family seemed threatened by this new
sensibility. By the 1880s, conservative reformers worried about the breakdown of family
hierarchy. John Durand, in comparing American and French families, argued that
Americans have too much freedom, that there is a “haphazard combination of individuals
into a family” (Clark 111). Foreign observers also noticed the emphasis on individuality in
American families. One Frenchman, Thomas Bentzon, remarked in the 1890s that “there is
in France a constant exchange of consideration and protection which scarcely exists in an
American family—where the individuality of each member asserts itself from the cradle,

15 Related to this fascination with “visual delight,” is the desire for as well as the anxiety towards artifice
and theatricality which Jackson Lears observes in late nineteenth-century American culture. He describes
this as the “tensions between authenticity and artifice,” which increased between 1880 and 1920 for a
variety of reasons”: “The most obvious reasons involved the increase of wealth, the elaboration of ornament,
and the strutting social performance among elites—the tendencies that Veblen anatomized and
anathematized in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Another reason was the rise of European aestheticism,
which exalted fluid theatricality and the manipulation of surfaces. The career of Oscar Wilde personified
these tendencies. His delight in language as artifice, as well as his flamboyant self-fashionings, rejection of
conventional gender roles and dramaturgical conception of life, all dramatized the blurring of boundaries
that Victorians attempted to control . . . an additional reason for increasing anxiety over the issues of
authenticity and artifice was the arrival of immigrants from non-Protestant traditions of ritual and
carnivalesque display. Finally within what might be called the vernacular enterpreneurial tradition, there
was a continuing elaboration of exotic, sensuous display in trade card iconography and . . . the rise of two
new institutions for popularizing exoticism and commercial theatricality: the department stores and
where each one is astonishingly eager to follow an independent career and to assume the responsibility of his own destiny!" (Clark 112).

It is this world—a world where families are not sentimental unities, where heightened individuality is more valued, where the visual is privileged and “form is often divorced from matter”—which James vividly shows us in *The Bostonians*. His work especially dramatizes the shift towards a more theatrical consumer-oriented domesticity, and in so doing, examines the problematic nature of home as well as the problematic nature of “seeing” in the new city. Like Hawthorne before him, James charts the transformation of an earlier sentimental culture to a more theatrical one. However, while Coverdale would see the artifice of urban life as something separate from a more “natural” sentimental family life, for James’s characters aesthetic notions of home and sentimental notions of home are not so easily separated. Indeed aesthetic values and aesthetic vision have become essential ingredients of the ideal home so that rather than a refuge from the theatricality of the city, home is more and more self consciously a stage, a platform where one practices, prepares for public life, and as the sentimental home of the antebellum period is transformed, it becomes a more compelling, more idealized and aestheticized space, a space where one is more likely to be transported into the world of the image.

At the opening of *The Bostonians*, urban theatricality as well as family division are immediately brought to the fore as Mrs. Luna meets Basil Ransom in Olive Chancellor’s Back Bay residence. One of the first things she tells Ransom is “nobody fibs in Boston; I don’t know what to make of them all” (1). Having been “three long weeks in this unprevaricating city,” Mrs. Luna is eager to return to New York (1). The tension between her and her sister is clear, yet she seems to take delight that Olive so disapproves of her, that Olive thinks her a

amusement parks” (85). See “Beyond Veblen: Rethinking Consumer Culture in America” in *Consuming*
“painted Jezebel”(8). Wearing a “tight bodice which seemed to crack with vivacity” and a “feathery white shawl,” Mrs. Luna’s extravagant theatricality is juxtaposed to the severity of Olive who is “habited in a plain dark dress without any ornament” (9). This severity however is deceiving, for Olive too has a sensuous side to her, a desire for beauty, for pleasure, but rather than adorning herself, she adorns her home. And while Boston may be called “unprevaricating” by Mrs. Luna, by the time we reach the novel’s final pages, Boston and New York no longer seem like the oppositions she claims them to be. When Basil Ransom waits outside the Music Hall in a city with “glowing” shop fronts, with “photographs of actresses exhibited seductively,” and “westerners stretching their legs on divans” in “interiors of hotels white with electric lamps,” James shows us that Boston has come to resemble New York remarkably (397). Rather than a high-minded city of reform, Boston too is a sensual electric city, “big and full of nocturnal life . . . and preparing for an evening of pleasure”(397).

For the most part this city is viewed from a distance in the novel, from a comfortable domestic space, a space that is often as theatrical and sensuous as the city’s own theater district. What is stressed in this first meeting between Olive and Ransom is that Olive’s home is a theatrical component of self presentation. By “reading” the objects in Olive’s parlor, Basil is able to learn something about her, for he had never seen “so many accessories,” “so much organized privacy that spoke of habits and tastes” (15, 14). Olive’s home even exhibits the contradictory elements of her personality. Restrained and intensely private, she has a “corridor-shaped” room, and yet reflecting the sensuous materialistic side of her which she tries to repress, this room is overflowing, stuffed with bibelots and spared no cost (14). This private as well as theatrical nature of Olive’s home is especially clear when

---

contrasted with Miss Birdseye’s residence. Miss Birdseye’s “long bald room” is compared to “an enormous streetcar” (28). Her home had “a collection of newspapers piled up in corners” and there “prevailed much vagueness of boundary” (28, 26). Here there is no place where one might seclude oneself, and take in an aesthetic, expansive view of the city; instead Miss Birdseye’s home seems itself to be an earlier city or a city not represented by the theater district: a meeting place for crowds where “men were in their garb of toil, many of them in weary looking overcoats” (29). Miss Birdseye, the narrator tells us, recalls “the heroic age of New England life—the age of plain living and high thinking,” whereas Olive had, “no difficulty persuading herself that persons doing the high intellectual and moral work . . . owed it to themselves . . . to cultivate the best material conditions” (162). Although an ardent admirer of Miss Birdseye, Olive must endure the “injury” on her aesthetic taste, expose herself to “offense and laceration” when entering Miss Birdseye’s home; unlike Miss Birdseye, who “had never had any needs but moral needs,” Olive, we learn, values a more private, aesthetic domestic space where she can “elevate daintiness to a religion” (27, 162). Indeed “her interior shone with superfluous friction . . . with winter roses” (162).

Olive’s home, however, makes Basil Ransom feel “unhoused and underfed” (16). He looks at her cozy domesticity with envy even though this domesticity is a solitary materialistic kind, reminiscent of Coverdale’s bachelor apartments. Olive’s coziness is an “effect” achieved by much upholstery and thick curtains, a warmth from artistic arrangement, not a warmth from Olive herself who extends a “cold and limp hand” to her cousin (7). What James emphasizes in lingering over her domestic space is how important “things” are to Olive—not only art and fine furniture, but her books as well become aestheticized—“placed on little shelves like brackets (as if a book were a statuette)” (15). Living intensely in a world of art, beauty and abstract ideas, she actually shuns real community; like Coverdale, she needs her solitude, her “organized privacy.” She too has
difficulty reading people—tending to see them as all evil (men) or all good (the poor). Eventually we discover she cannot even read Verena, her closest companion, for it is really her idea of Verena that she is so in love with. Bringing to mind Coverdale's idealization of the seamstress Priscilla, Olive too idealizes a young woman of the working class, turning her into an exotic Other. Through Verena, Olive hopes to express herself, to find form for her own forbidden impulses, to reach "the people," for like Coverdale, she longs to escape her privileged position, to know "real" life. As she tells Mrs. Farrinder, "I'm sick of the Back Bay!", but as the novel makes clear, Olive cannot tolerate living anywhere else (62).

For it is in Olive's parlor, and perhaps nowhere else, that she has power; indeed she almost seems to possess the city itself. Basil Ransom is particularly irked when she shows him the view of the Back Bay and "takes credit for it," but he cannot deny the aesthetic delight he experiences in looking out from her window; from there sordid urban realities are transformed (16):

[T]here was a view of the water; Miss Chancellor having the good fortune to dwell on that side of Charles Street toward which ... the afternoon sun slants redly, from an horizon indented at empty intervals with wooden spires, the masts of lonely boats, the chimneys of dirty "works" over a brackish expanse of anomalous character, which is too big for a river and too small for a bay. The view seemed to him very picturesque though in the gathered dusk little was left of it save a cold yellow streak in the west, a gleam of brown water, and the reflection of the lights that had begun to show themselves in a row of houses ... he thought the prospect from a city-house almost romantic. (14)

Though Ransom sees this as "picturesque," James's narrator is quick to tell us that his artistic sense had not been "highly cultivated" (14). And the details the narrator reveals make clear that this is a scene of decay and decline, that Ransom has missed the essential details; indeed with the setting sun, the narrator reminds us, "there was little left of the view" (14). Continually juxtaposing a character's view with the narrator's more "realistic view," the novel is very much concerned with vision, with the characters' tendencies to misread their
environment. Echoing Holmes's earlier observation on America's new abundance of visual stimuli, the novel seems to be anxiously aware of the dangers of "divorcing form from matter", the dangers of adopting a strictly aesthetic viewpoint.16

Olive's home especially encourages this, for it is depicted as an aesthetic sanctuary, a work of art cut off from the urban blight and decay around her. Indeed from her home, the urban blight itself becomes a work of art,—framed and pictured—the smells, the noise, the conflict gone—leaving only color, form, design, leaving only the eye to linger over the play of light and shadow. James's narrator, while pointing out the aesthetic delight to be found from within Olive's home, nevertheless continually lingers over the harshness of the scene beyond Olive's window, reinforcing the inability or refusal of the characters to truly see the city:

The western windows of Olive's drawing room, looking over the water, took in the red sunsets of winter . . . the casual patches of ice and snow, the desolate suburban horizons peeled and made bald by the rigour of the season; the general hard cold void of the prospect, the extrusion at Charlestown, at Cambridge of a few chimneys. There was something inexorable in the poverty of the scene, shameful in the meanness of its details, which gave a collective impression of boards and tin and frozen earth, sheds and rotting piles, railway-lines striding flat across a thoroughfare of puddles, and tracks of the humbler, the universal horse car, traversing obliquely this path of danger; loose fences, vacant lots, mounds of refuse, yards bestrewn with iron pipes, telegraph poles and bare wooden backs of places. (163)

After obsessively detailing this dreary and depressing view, a kind of inventory which zooms in on the refuse and waste of the city, the narrator suddenly shifts gears and surprises us with the next line, "Verena though such a view lovely"(163). Excusing her because "as the afternoon closed the ugly picture was tinted with a clear cold rosiness," the

---

16 Robert Martin asserts in his article, "Picturesque Misperceptions" that each of the main characters has "faulty vision and allows desire to overcome accurate perception." It is this sustained misperception that he believes is James's "real subject" (77)
narrator nevertheless dramatically highlights the disjunction between the reality of the urban scene, and the aesthetic view of such a scene, a view from a great distance, under receding light where sordid details might disappear. Scenes like this emphasize that Olive's privacy is extreme, cut off, that such privacy distorts perception, limits vision. Watching the city from Olive's house, all seems beautiful, the outside world a dream, all becomes "agreeable effects" which "light up" the drawing room (163). This aesthetic gaze, this kind of "divorcing form from matter," is something Olive's home encourages, is what indeed makes her home so desirable. As Olive and Verena create an idealized private life together, James stresses their isolation, their being cut off from not only urban blight but urban energy and life. Olive only "occasionally" went into other houses and received occupants in her own (165). Indeed when Verena comes to live with Olive it seems a perpetual winter. With "nights of deep snowfall," Charles Street was "white and muffled and the doorbell foredoomed to silence" (164). These were nights "which seemed little islands of lamplight, of enlarged and intensified vision" (164). In this private realm, consciousness does indeed seem to expand, for we learn "among these soft influences, Verena herself bloomed like a flower" (162).

Although Verena does not necessarily feel unhoused and underfed the way Basil Ransom does, her lack of a "sentimental" home makes her seem, in Olive's view, a kind of homeless and deprived figure. While Verena's life with Olive will evoke a sentimental ideal—"the peaceful picture . . . of still winter evenings under the lamp"—James's portrait of Verena's family and home suggests not only the intrusion of market values into the private realm but the increasing impenetrability of the new urban landscape as well (163). Verena's parents are practitioners of humbug and scam, and they do not hesitate to "sell" their own daughter for profit. Indeed Selah Tarrant brings back to mind Hawthorne's Westervelt, the mesmerist with the golden teeth, and the mask-like face. Tarrant, James makes clear, is duplicitous and greedy for material gain, yet this confidence man is not so
seductive; he is shoddily dressed and his extravagant theatrics comical. Moreover, he is rendered impotent by the dynamics of the new city where power moves in more obscure ways. Tarrant realizes that fame can be had only through the powerful machinery of media; only advertising and newspapers have the power to create overnight sensations; indeed only when he and Verena are advertised, only when they are “spectacles,” stars, only then will he have truly succeeded. As James’s sarcastic narrator puts it: “the newspapers were his world, the richest expression in his eyes of human life and for him if a diviner day was to come upon the earth it would be brought about by copious advertisement in the daily prints . . . ”(94). This quest for “publicity” is what drives him to haunt “the vestibules of the best hotels,” and although he thinks these places are “national nerve centres,” the narrator assures us that “he could not have told you at any particular moment what he was doing” (97). Unable to gain entrance into these new bastions of power, his ramblings around town to get “advertised” are comical and ridiculous, for he wanders around a public space he cannot seem to penetrate, a realm that leaves him traversing in circles, hovering around the edges. James’s novel then emphasizes that there is a new kind of confidence game being played in the late nineteenth-century city; it is newspapers, advertisers—the machinery of an emerging mass media—which has the power to seduce and influence. In this urban landscape, the confidence man no longer seems threatening; indeed the lone confidence man in Hawthorne’s city now seems almost benign, even quaint.

While the confidence man’s loss of power in the public realm seems to make him less threatening, he is nevertheless still a disturbing figure because of his ability to poison the private realm; indeed James’s portrait of Tarrant highlights how urban theatricality undermines any notions of the family as a sentimental unity or as a realm of authentic experience. The Tarrant home is a home of individuals, James emphasizes, individuals whose sentimental ties to each other are easily pushed aside in order to achieve fame or
material gain. Tarrant, we learn, avoids home; he prefers the streets, the hotels, the rail cars. As the narrator says, "He was 'off' so much of the time." (94) "The vision of publicity so haunted his dreams he would gladly have sacrificed to it the innermost sanctities of home" (95). "Absent for hours"—long periods during which Mrs. Tarrant "wondered how in the world he stayed his stomach"—Tarrant does not receive nor provide any nurturing in the home (97). James even hints at infidelity as Mrs. Tarrant "had a private conviction that he partook at the houses of his lady patients little lunches ... an episodical repast at any hour of the twenty four" (97). There is no private realm for Tarrant, no private self. There is no relief to be found at home, no rest, no repose. Selah is always performing—"his hands were now always in the air, as if he were being photographed in postures" (94). "Even in the privacy of domestic intercourse," his wife notices, "he had phrases, excuses, explanations ... which were too sublime for just herself; they were pitched as Selah's nature was pitched, altogether in the key of public life" (67). And while Mrs. Tarrant is said to have "a reverence for home," we learn that rather than a sentimental version of home, she clearly values home more as property, as a kind of class marker. She is not in a hurry to see Verena "meet her sterner fate"—a traditional home for Verena would be an image "wanting in brightness": "a tired woman holding a baby over a furnace-register that emitted lukewarm air" (91). It is Mrs. Tarrant who urges Verena's visit to Olive, but rather than being overly concerned for her daughter's future, we learn Mrs. Tarrant is more concerned with enhancing her own social standing. Since Olive has "prop' ty," Mrs. Tarrant doesn't mind Verena's leaving to set up a home with her.

Indeed James makes clear that Verena's family does not subscribe to a traditional middle-class domesticity and it is this—Verena's "absence of a home life"—that helps assure Olive she is right to take her away from her parents. Olive's insistence on "saving" Verena from the influence of her family recalls a familiar drama played out in nineteenth-century
American cities—the middle class reformer providing the child of the poorer classes with a "proper" home. Indeed what is so disturbing to Olive is the disregard of traditional sentimental domestic ideology, the loss of boundaries between public and private realms in Verena's upbringing, boundaries Olive is always so careful to maintain:

She had been nursed in darkened rooms, and suckled in the midst of manifestations, she had begun to attend lectures when she was quite an infant, she had sat on the knees of somnambulists and had been passed hand to hand by trance speakers; grown up among lady editors of newspapers, advocating new religions and people who disapproved of the marriage tie. (77)

When Verena actually tells Olive she "prefers free unions," Olive is stunned and murmurs, "I wish you would let me help you"(78). Ironically what emerges is that for all her radical views, Olive, unlike Verena and her family, upholds the "sentimental family," the values of a more traditional domesticity, and with this a more pronounced boundary between public and private realms of experience.

James's description of the Tarrant home also reinforces this, and while evoking that loss of boundary that so disturbs Olive, it also brings to mind those scenes of urban blight and decay viewed from Olive's window:

The bald bareness of Tarrant's temporary lair, a wooden cottage, with a rough front yard, a little naked piazza which seemed rather to expose than to protect, facing upon an unpaved road, in which the footway was overlaid with a strip of planks. These planks were embedded in ice or in liquid thaw according to the momentary mood of the weather and the advancing pedestrian traversed them in the attitude and with a good deal of the suspense, of a rope dancer (107).

James's use of "temporary lair" reinforces the wolfishness, the predatory qualities of Tarrant, the complete lack of sentimental attachment to his family. The words "bald," "bareness," "naked," "unpaved," "exposed" all highlight the inadequacy of this home, its inability to protect its members from the corrupting influences of publicity and spectacle. Since the planks are "embedded in ice," entering this house is treacherous and as we later learn
“there’s a hole in the porch” because “Dr. Tarrant couldn’t remember to go for the man to fix it” (107, 123) In this scene Olive can no longer look at urban blight from a distance, but must actually enter it, feel it, smell it, and it proves unbearable to her—the woman who wanted so much to know “how the other half lives” is affronted by the poverty she sees, but even more shocking is the lack of aesthetic taste and beauty. Inside Olive observes, “there was nothing in the house to speak of, nothing but a smell of kerosene” (107). “Verena’s interior is as bad as she could have desired” and Mrs. Tarrant in her own house “became a complete figure; there was no manner of doubt left as to her being vulgar” (104). Olive it seems steps in to provide not only a proper home life and education, but also an aesthetic refuge for Verena. Olive gives Verena both a “sentimental” version of home as well as that ideal home the aesthetic movement was selling during the 1880s: home as an idealized aesthetic private space where one’s individuality, one’s artistic expression could be nurtured, could expand and grow.

Perhaps even more so than Verena however, Basil Ransom is in need of such a home. Ransom desires above all that “organized privacy” which Olive possesses, a privacy from which he might launch his public writing career, from which he would be able to express himself, develop his talents. As Lynn Wardly observes, “Characteristically Basil turns from exposure to crowds in which he is touched and almost extinguished to enclosures where he expands or spaces in which he can stand apart from the crowd” (49). While Olive’s “sentimental” home with Verena is unsure, unstable, she still has a house, a private aesthetic space that belongs to her, that protects her, that gives her a sense of power; Ransom on the other hand, James reminds us, has no private space whatsoever.

Far from his southern home, Basil is an exotic, out of place, “his discourse was pervaded by something sultry and vast, something almost African in its rich basking tone” (4) With his
southern accent, his poverty, James dramatically emphasizes Ransom's homelessness—perhaps this is why (in addition to their tendency to demonize Olive) critics have tended to sympathize with him. Moreover, Ransom comes north to the city with diligence and ambition, hoping to win at "the game of life" (173). Instead he seems to lose everything. Unable to navigate the city, unable to truly see it, he is even taken in by a confidence man whom he forms a partnership with: a "young man from Rhode Island," who "prior to an unexplained and sudden departure to Europe had drawn the slender accumulations of the firm out of the bank" (173). Living in the city also leads Basil to question his identity: [A]t last he began to wonder whether there were not a prejudice against his Southern complexion. Perhaps they didn't like the way he spoke. If they could show him a better way, he was willing to adopt it; but the manner of New York could not be acquired by precept... He wondered whether he were stupid and unskilled, and he was finally obliged to confess to himself that he was unpractical" (173). Finding himself alienated by this new world, he declares it to be, "talkative querulous, maudlin, full of false ideas..." (175).

Lingering over Basil's residence in New York, the narrator highlights his disconnection from his new urban home. Indeed this New York scene is striking in its minute details, its emphasis on smells and textures. Because "here there is no fading light to work magical transformations," David Howard calls this scene the "most intensely vulgar scene in the novel" (63):

17 Walter Wright asserts that "Romance and James are on the side of Ransom... If Verena were not dramatically rescued by Ransom, she would be in danger of the loss of her very freedom itself." Irving Howe believes that "despite all of James's qualifications in regard to Ransom, he grants him certain attractions and powers." Theodore Miller claims that "Basil's conservatism allows him to keep his capacity for sexual feeling. Indeed his conservatism is his only defense against psychological castration." See Judith Fetterly's discussion of The Bostonians in The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Literature, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1977. She writes that the novel "scares the phallic critic," that it "raises questions that strike at the root of 'the heterosexual basis of existence'" (108-9).
Basil Ransom lived in New York... he occupied two small shabby rooms in a somewhat decayed mansion which stood next to the corner of the Second Avenue. The corner itself was formed by a considerable grocer's shop, the near neighborhood of which was fatal to any pretensions Ransom and his fellow lodgers might have had in regard to gentility of situation... The two sides of the shop were protected by an immense pent-house shed, which projected over a greasy pavement and was supported by wooden posts fixed in the curbstone. Beneath it on the dislocated flags, barrels and baskets were freely and picturesquely grouped, an open cellarway yawned beneath the feet of those who might pause to gaze... a strong odour of smoked fish combined with a fragrance of molasses hung about the spot; the pavement toward the gutters was fringed with dirty panniers, heaped with potatoes, carrots and onions and a smart bright wagon with the horse detached from the shafts, drawn up on the edge of the abominable road (it contained holes and ruts a foot deep and immemorial accumulations of stagnant mud) imparted an idle rural pastoral air to a scene otherwise perhaps expressive of a rank civilization. (171)

While Howard observes that "there is real excitement and relish here; an almost visceral closeness," he adds that the scene is "frankly irrelevant," that it doesn't exist for Ransom, but this I would suggest is just the point. The vividness of this scene reinforces the extent of Basil's homelessness, his alienation from all the life going on around him. Even in this scene of stimulation with its noise, textures, smells, we are told Basil came and went with an "unperceiving step"(172). Since there is no magical light to "transform" this scene, Basil, it seems, chooses not to look at all. Howard also notes that "the scene invites... exploration and discovery, a peering even, a falling into one fascinating hole or box or cage after another" (64). As his comments suggest, this scene also dramatizes a lack of privacy. Indeed James's description suggests a kind of fluidity between the street and the boarding house. The odors of the kitchen spill out onto the street while the open cellarway "yawned" beneath the feet of pedestrians (171). Bringing to mind the mud of the "abominable roads" outside, interiors too "felt sticky"(172). In Basil's urban world—the boundaries between public and private realms erode away, for privacy James emphasizes is indeed a class privilege.

Because this scene "provides us with important clues to Basil's situation," Janet Bowen also points out its significance:
The site and type of housing are immediate keys to Basil’s status. He resides in America’s center of immigration, a city in which between 1820 and 1860, nonnatives came to account for approximately two thirds of the population. By the end of the 1860s New York was a city of foreigners. The majority of newcomers and indigenous residents were renters. The location of Basil’s rooms on the East Side, specifically in one of the many East Side mansions converted to rental housing upon abandonment by the upper-class wealthy New Yorkers fleeing the influx of foreigners, reinforces Basil’s marginal transient status... Through these initial exterior details, James suggests Basil’s alienation from the American dream. He is one of the young men targeted by the authors of self-culture handbooks of the 1870s and 1880s. He is separated from family and alone in the city. His rental apartment is a sign of his vulnerability. It informs the reader that he is prey to the dissolution from which a single family suburban house would, according to domestic ideologues, protect him. (19).

Certainly Basil’s lack of his own domestic space in the new city contributes to his sense of vulnerability, his shaky uncertain identity, for as James’s narrator reminds us in this scene, “a figure is nothing without a setting”(171).

This scene is also worth comparing to *Blithedale*; evoking Coverdale’s observation posts, we are told that there are balconies with little boxes, “posts of observation” for “peeping unseen into the street,” but even more so than Coverdale, Basil Ransom is trapped in a Panopticon where he exerts no power, for these posts have a “repressive cage like expression” (172). As Bowen observes, in *Blithedale*, such a scene is an opportunity for narrator and reader to look into the secret lives of the characters (19). “Coverdale from his ‘post at the window’ of his hotel room,” she writes “is a sentry who looks into Zenobia’s drawing room; from Basil’s rooms, in contrast, one sees only architectural facades and public life” (Bowen 20). James’s work then even more dramatically suggests the impenetrability of the new urban landscape. Ransom is not able to see his surroundings to the extent Coverdale can nor does he delight in his surroundings the way Coverdale often does: the “entangled life of many men together” do not take a “strenuous hold” upon his mind (Hawthorne 135). Also, Basil is residing in an ethnic neighborhood—unlike Coverdale—and the ethnicity of this neighborhood makes it more of an impenetrable spectacle.
But perhaps we cannot compare Ransom to Coverdale, for Ransom does not have the leisure, nor the secure class-based position to play the flaneur. Since Ransom, unlike Coverdale, does not possess a secure private space of his own, his desire for home may be more intense, for James even has him contemplating a cozy domesticity with Mrs. Luna, a woman whom he finds overbearing and obnoxious: "The lamplight was soft, the fire crackled pleasantly, everything surrounded him betrayed a woman’s taste and touch; the place was decorated and cushioned in perfection, delightfully private and personal, the picture of a well appointed home" (181). As the narrator puts it, "he had a moment of almost complete illusion" when he "seemed to see himself in that very chair, in the evenings of the future, reading some indispensable book in the still lamp-light—Mrs. Luna knew where to get such mellowing shades" (182). Echoing Olive’s very thoughts regarding her comfortable domestic life with Verena, Ransom asks himself, "was it not one’s duty to put one’s self in the best conditions for such action" (182). "He ...almost persuaded himself that the moral law commanded him to marry Mrs. Luna" (182). Mrs. Luna’s "pretty mellowing lampshades," her exquisite decor would help nurture his talent, his individuality, launch him into public life, make possible his writing career, for without a home, Ransom cannot prepare for public life, the life that he really desires (174).

While showing us the theatricality of home, the fluidity between public and private realms, the novel nevertheless also shows us that a sentimental domesticity with its clear separation of public and private realms is more desirable than ever. Both Basil and Olive each in their own way are insecure in this urban world of strangers; both are uncomfortable with the "spectacular aspects" of public life and feel cut off from the life of the city. Recalling Coverdale’s domesticity, both Basil and Olive subscribe to a "sentimental" domestic ideology with its clear demarcations of separate spheres, with its sense of privacy, and yet
this domesticity is now even more explicitly aligned with an aesthetic gaze, with a will to power.

It seems of all the main characters it is Verena who does not need a home—nor the security of an extremely private space. Unlike Basil and Olive, she is comfortable with the “giddiness” of public life. Walking to Central Park, to Harvard Yard, riding the streetcars, moving back and forth between Cambridge and Charles Street, Verena is the most mobile, ephemeral and elusive character in the novel. Happy in her parents’ shabby Cambridge home as well as Olive’s opulent parlor, she can be at home anywhere. The public spaces of New York stimulate her and she does not need the solitude, the shelter that Olive and Basil insist upon. Not only is she a “figure without a setting,” she also seems to be a figure without a grasping possessiveness, a materialistic greed, a will to power. Even when she is ensconced within a comfortable domesticity, Verena never becomes self satisfied. James even implies that this snug domesticity Olive has created for her is a kind of prison, that she would rather have her freedom than this heightened privacy, this post from which she looks out at the world. When she watches the ladies who “trotted by” Olive’s Back Bay residence, the narrator remarks: “Verena, who when Olive was not with her, indulged in a good deal of desultory contemplation at the window... At almost any time, for she envied their preoccupation, she would have taken the chance with them” (165).

Though seeming to escape the ramifications of the rising urban consumer culture—an extreme desire for privacy, a grasping possessiveness—Verena nevertheless epitomizes another crucial characteristic of urban consciousness as it develops over the course of the nineteenth century. She is an easily malleable figure whose desires are shaped by those around her. Unlike the other characters, Verena’s desires are uncertain, fluctuating; her desires shift with the “attractiveness” of the product sold. Public life with its sense of
mission and grandeur captures her imagination for awhile, and later Ransom's idealization of home and his notions of authenticity seduce her. We sense that just as she becomes restless in Olive's domestic space, she will one day grow dissatisfied with her private life as Mrs. Ransom. Though Verena herself seems empty of desire, she really embodies the shifting, uncertain and vague desires generated by the new consumer culture. It is Verena of all the characters who has the most trouble figuring out what she wants; her fluid sense of self makes her especially vulnerable to the gaze of others.

Commodified by both Basil and Olive, she is the novel's object of desire, and as Bowen puts it, "for this warring pair, home—a home centered on Verena Tarrant—is the only ground for unification of the self." (7). For Basil she "was meant for privacy, for him, for love" (249). Yet her value for him is primarily aesthetic; he, like Olive, is seduced by beauty and ends up idealizing her, "divorcing form from matter." After hearing her speak, he finds "The effect was not in what she said ... but in the picture, and figure of the half bedizened damsel (playing now again with her red fan)" (56). It is "to his starved senses she irresistibly appealed" (56). Although deriding feminists, he sees Verena as "standing apart": "You are unique, extraordinary, you constitute a category by yourself" (313). To him Verena is "incorruptible" (313). Olive too sees Verena as pure and untouched and James suggests again and again that Verena's value for Olive is primarily aesthetic as well. Verena tells her mother that Olive "is going to have a tree in next week" and wants to see her "sitting under a tree"; it's some "oriental idea" (93). Olive finds Verena useful because as Verena tells her mother "it's a great advantage to a movement to be personified in a bright young figure" (93). For Olive, Verena's "bright vulgar clothes," her exotic appearance have "immense merit" (73). She hovers over Olive's committee meetings—"smiling listening, dropping an occasionally fanciful though never an idle word, like some gently animated image placed there for good omen" (162). Like Zenobia, Olive too wants to "evolve loveliness out of the
girl,” for it is only through Verena’s beauty and charm that her politics will gain publicity, and hence power (Hawthorne 156).

Although Verena’s aesthetic value, her “appeal to starved senses,” makes her especially desirable to both Olive and Basil, it may be that it is her confidence, her assurance, “her serenity while exposed to the gaze of hundreds” that proves to be her greatest attraction, for this is something which Basil and Olive especially wish for themselves (93). For Olive, Verena is the aesthetic “form” for her ideas; for Basil she embodies that “sentimental” space where his ideas might be nurtured. In a city where they often feel like strangers, where they feel unable to participate in public life as they would so desire, to possess Verena is to possess access to the public realm that so eludes them, that so mystifies them, that so unsettles them. For Verena on the other hand, becoming a figure with a setting, becoming settled into domestic private life is not an escape from the aesthetic role she plays in public life. In both private and public realms, James suggests, Verena will play an aesthetic role—neither realm will lead to authenticity of experience, for she is literally erased at the end and her search for authenticity leads her nowhere. James’s final image of Verena hidden and veiled as Ransom “thrust the hood of Verena’s long cloak over her head, to conceal her face and identity” only serves to reinforce the parallels between her public life with Olive and her future private life with Ransom (418). Bringing to mind an earlier scene in the novel, this image recalls the scene when Olive asks Verena to promise her not to marry, for Olive is described as drawing Verena near her, “flinging over her with one hand the fold of a cloak... and holding her there with the other” (125). Moreover, this image also aligns Verena with Priscilla, the ‘veiled lady’ of Hawthorne’s novel, for Verena, like Priscilla is controlled by others, even when she leaves the stage and is no longer a spectacle. Both Olive and Basil then, seek to shape Verena as well as protect her from what they perceive to be worldly corrupt influences. But what James makes clear in his novel is that private life is not
untouched nor more pure, that home does not necessarily provide one with authentic experience and that rather than enabling one to live life more fully, it may shield one, insulate one instead. Nevertheless the belief that private life is the authentic life is so strong that even Verena, the one character who seems to not need a home, gives up everything to have one.

**A Hazard of New Fortunes**

Like James, William Dean Howells in his urban novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, published in 1890, also reveals the problematic nature of seeing and the problematic nature of home in late nineteenth-century urban America. Set entirely within the fantastic spectacle of New York City, a city larger and more diverse than Boston, the public realm is even more spectacular, more difficult to read in this work. The novel’s focus on New York also reflects Howells’s own move from Boston to New York City when he took over “The Editor’s Study” for Harper’s in 1888. Realizing that the center of the publishing world—the center of the production of representations—was no longer in Boston, Howells, like his character Basil March, decided to go to New York for new opportunities. While Howells captures this sense of a new frontier in *Hazard*, he also reveals a persistent anxiety towards the changes taking place in the publishing world, in particular, the era’s proliferation of visual stimuli. And

---

18 See Eric Sundquist’s essay “Realism and Regionalism” in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. Sundquist elaborates on the significance of Howells’s move to New York. He notes that *Hazard* is the symbolic center of Howells’s career. Because he had become the leading figure in the world of letters, his move to New York represented the transformation of American culture that occurred during the age of realism. In the last decades of the century the genteel, largely Anglo-Saxon tradition of American letters gave way to challenging representations of a more ethnically diverse, urbanized culture, a change that Howells portrayed with simultaneous approval and apprehension.

19 For more discussion of Howells’s unease and exhilaration in coming to New York, see page 4 of Alfred Kazin’s *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1942. Howells, Kazin points out, had written to a Cambridge friend in 1888, “New York’s immensely interesting, but I don’t know whether I shall manage it; I’m now fifty one, you know. There are lots of interesting young painting and writing fellows and the place is lordly free, with foreign touches of all kinds all thro’ its abounding Americanism: Boston seems of another planet.”

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
although there is more anxiety in Howells's work regarding the traffic of representations and the new impenetrability of the public realm, there is, however no ominous retreat into an extremely private domesticity as there is in the work of Hawthorne and James. Howells's main characters, in their confrontation with the city, seem to be educated out of such an unhealthy domesticity.

While the novel is very much about the aestheticizing glance, the need to contain confusing, uncomfortable information into something cohesive, and nonthreatening, into the "picturesque," the novel is anxiously questioning this tendency and seems acutely aware of the dangers of privileging the visual. Indeed there is a more explicit critique here of both the extremely private domesticity of urban consciousness as well as its "faulty" aesthetic vision, for in Howell's novel, it is not just the narrator who comments on characters' misperceptions; the characters themselves often exhibit anxiety regarding vision and question their own perceptions. Indeed the city in Howells's work seems to make the characters aware of the limitations of their strictly aesthetic viewpoint as much as it encourages such a view point. It is a much more powerful force, a force to be reckoned with, a force that can easily collapse those distinctions between public and private space the urbanite is so intent upon maintaining.

As Sidney Bremer has pointed out, "A Hazard . . . is not any particular individual's story at all. In this lies . . . its greatest breakthrough in urban literature. Here the city is, for the first time, the subject rather than the setting of a U. S. novel "(53). Indeed by making the city the main character, so to speak, Howells brings in what is largely absent from James's work: the presence of an ethnic urban underclass and the transforming power of technology. In James's novel, for example, Verena and Basil are oblivious to the "[g]roups of the unemployed, the children of disappointment from beyond the seas, who propped
themselves against the low, sunny wall of the park . .”(316) Only James’s narrator observes them and they are still not a persistent presence, but merely another part of the scenery along with the “chocolate houses,” “the horse cars,” “the street saloons”(316). In Howells’s work, on the other hand, the immigrant underclass is a central—if shadowy—presence that Howells will not let us ignore; neither the reader nor the characters are allowed to limit themselves to aestheticizing this class into “picturesque” scenes and types. Not only does this later novel explicitly attend to ethnicity and class issues, it is also especially interested in technology’s effects on consciousness. Unlike the predominantly walking cities envisioned by James and Hawthorne, in Howells’s city, the experience of riding aboard the new technology is central, and as the El takes on great symbolic significance, its effects on perception are dramatically depicted. Indeed since Howells was more interested in presenting the city itself as a subject, in figuring his characters Basil and Isabel March onto, as he puts it, “the largest canvas I had yet allowed myself” (From biographical intro 1911 edition), his work places some of the issues raised by Hawthorne and James—the impenetrability of the new city, the problematic nature of urban consciousness and the idealization of private life—into a broader context, into a more heterogeneous, dynamic cityscape.

While Howells’s work explores the difficulty of reading public space, it is like the work of Hawthorne and James, especially concerned with private space, with finding and making a home in the new city. As Mario Maffi notes, “Despite the numerous excursions along city streets, Howells’s novel takes place largely (and increasingly, as the plot winds up) in interiors: the Every Other Week office, the Marches’ flat, the Grosvenor Greens, the Leightons. The interiors are carefully described, their planimetry and furnishings accurately shown in an almost Veblenesque approach” (Maffi 40). For Maffi, this “confirms Howells’s difficulties in grasping and coming to terms with the urban milieu,” but I would argue
rather that "home"—how it is defined, how it is imagined—is a crucial and central element to Howells's urban mapmaking as it also was for Hawthorne's and James's. (Maffi 40). As Amy Kaplan reminds us, "The Marches seek a home—both as a physical space and a locus of value—to provide a refuge from the city as well as a lens for viewing it" (Kaplan 49).

In the opening pages of the book, Howells explicitly critiques the Boston home of Basil and Isabel March, the insularity of their private life. Echoing Coverdale's anxiety regarding a too comfortable life, the narrator wonders about the moral effects of their snug domesticity. We learn their world is narrow, that "they had the fame of being ... very much wrapped up in themselves and their children" and that "the danger that really threatened them was they should grow too well satisfied with themselves, if not with each other" (23, 22). Their home is the center of their existence and defines them, a mirror of themselves as well as an excuse for feeling self satisfaction: "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" (23). While the Marches take this well-kept house as a sign of their virtue, the narrator implies otherwise; in reality, they are stagnating, living in a protective, illusionary world: "They went out very little; she remained shut up in its refinement, working the good of her own; 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" (23). The Marches' 'sentimental home' is a place where illusions are catered to, where the self is sheltered and protected. Isabel caters only to her own refinement, and Basil finds that home lets him forget about the public realm where he feels small and insignificant.

By highlighting the narrowness of their lives, and the illusions bred by an extremely private domesticity, Howells emphasizes that home must be given up. It is only when the Marches experience dislocation and a kind of urban homelessness that they begin to really see.
This uneasiness regarding middle-class domesticity reflects a larger cultural unease which became more insistent at the end of the nineteenth century. As The Bostonians reminds us, the sentimental home of the mid-nineteenth century was eventually transformed into a more aesthetic and democratic ideal by the 1870s and 80s, and in his history of the American family home, Clifford Edward Clark describes how this ideal continues to evolve as the century comes to its close. Indeed the traditional Victorian home was 'under siege,' being interrogated, and, under the pressure of various cultural forces, it would begin to evolve into a new ideal—an ideal less insulated from the public realm. As Clark points out, "The smaller number of children, the increase in labor-saving equipment, and the tendency to purchase more goods and services from outside the home in the 1880s and 1890s gradually undermined the older Victorian assumptions about women’s proper roles" (Clark 135). "By 1890," Clark writes, "a growing number of architects, feminists, builders and homeowners were developing serious misgivings about certain aspects of the older ideals ... The Victorian house seemed overly ornate and overly specialized ... The family ideal similarly seemed artificial and awkward" (135).

We also find these "misgivings" about the "older ideals" in Edward Bellamy’s enormously popular utopian novel of 1888, Looking Backward, for it criticized not only the ornateness of the Victorian home, but the stronger thread of competitive individualism now running through American culture. As Dr. Leete, the spokesman for Bellamy’s future city explains to Julian West: "[t]he splendor of our public and common life as compared with the simplicity of our private and home life, and the contrast which, in this respect, the twentieth bears to the nineteenth century" illustrates the difference between the "age of individualism and the age of concert" (126, 122). "To save ourselves useless burdens," he tells West, "we have as little gear about us at home as is consistent with comfort, but the social side of our life is ornate and luxurious beyond anything the world ever knew before" (126). To many of
Bellamy’s time, this over-investment in private life alongside little investment in public life seemed foolhardy, for the economic gaps between America’s classes were widening and strikes were plaguing American cities.

Indeed Bellamy’s utopian world of ‘full employment, material abundance and social harmony’ spoke to the fears and hopes of his age. “The 1880s witnessed about 10,000 strikes and lockouts,” observes Trachtenberg (89). These strikes “crested in what labor historians call the Great Upheaval of 1886, the year of the Knights of Labor’s great strike against Jay Gould’s railroad in the Southwest, the peak of agitation for an eight hour day, and the Haymarket riot in Chicago” (Trachtenberg 71). Other voices invariably joined Bellamy’s in responding to the decade’s social unrest. “Home minister Josiah Strong took note in 1886 . . . of an almost impassable gulf existing between industrial employees and employers. His widely reprinted popular tract Our Country warned a ‘present crisis’ to social peace and the integrity of the Protestant faith and the Anglo Saxon race” (Trachtenberg 78). As Strong’s observations reinforce, the widening gap between classes seemed more dramatic now that more and more industrial workers were from Catholic and Slavic nations (79). By 1870, “one out of every three industrial workers was an immigrant” and the popular image of the industrial worker “underwent a major revision; the worker now appeared as foreign, alien and in need of Americanizing” (88,87). Responding to this influx of immigrants as well as to the widening gap between the immigrant worker and the nation, Chicago’s Hull House, run by Jane Addams would open its doors in 1889, beginning “one of the great social movements in modern America”—the Settlement House movement which would not only help many immigrants adjust to American life, but also support them in their struggle for justice and a decent living. (Commager ix).
Howells's novel of 1890, like the work of Bellamy and Addams, also makes clear that Americans must turn their attention to the public realm—as much as that realm frightened and unnerved them. Unlike Strong, however, Howells seems to realize that we would have to accept the ethnic diversity which was now defining our cities. In Howells's novel, traditional notions of home as a "haven" from the wider public realm—the competitive marketplace and its labor and ethnic strikes—no longer seem to make sense, for Basil March comes to believe that his highly private home life in Boston, while being "pretty," was nevertheless "not life"(265). Indeed as Howells's novel will make clear, those boundaries between the domestic and the public are no longer so sacred, nor so secure.

Upon arrival in New York, the Marches' ideals of family and domesticity are, in a sense, put to the test. The search for a home forces Basil and Isabel March to articulate what they want from a home, what they expect, what is necessary, and what is revealed in these house hunting scenes is also what is revealed in the work of Hawthorne and James: the culture's uneven and uneasy shift to a more theatrical domesticity. There is an emphasis on show and self expression, on individuality; there is a confusion regarding aesthetic ideals and sentimental ideals, for the two become intertwined. And though Basil and Isabel consider themselves family-oriented, there is an emphasis on individuality within the family—as Isabel reminds her husband: "Then we must each have a room, you must have your study and I must have my parlor..." (39) It is important to demarcate individual portions, to draw boundaries and carve up space. As in The Bostonians, the sentimental vision of the family informs the text, but the "real" families the writers choose to show us are divided or indifferent. There is little hierarchy in the March household and at the book's beginning, the family's disunity is stressed. What seems particularly clear is the detachment of the children—the insistence that they have separate lives and separate interests. (22). Bella "wailed" and Tom "growled" as he "deigns to look up at his father" and March's irony falls
"harmless from the children's preoccupation with their own affairs"(21,22). When the Marches first venture to New York, this distance is pointed out again when "they tried to be homesick" for the children "but failed"(35). Later in the novel when they return home from one of their city excursions, "they found the children had not missed them"(258). Though March continually idealizes and praises family life in the novel, we see little of this sentimental family life as we watch his own family interact. The March family has far more modern values than "sentimental" Victorian ones, and because they see the home as a means of "self presentation," searching for a home also becomes a highly charged and difficult undertaking.

"Every detail of parting" from his Boston home is "anguish" to Basil, yet the sense of dislocation that New York brings is invigorating (32). The charms of the hotel even seem superior to the charms of home: "the magic of its always being there, ready for anyone, everyone" . . . (36). Though Basil and Isabel insist on finding a certain kind of home, and are looking for the genteel domesticity they left behind in Boston, they are nevertheless fascinated by boarding in hotels, by all the various types of flats; as Isabel puts it, "you can settle yourselves in a hundred different ways in New York; that is one merit of the place." (37) This fascination with the variety of New York's domestic spaces fades however as Isabel is unable to find her "ideal" home. After she explores New York's housing market and the variety of its neighborhoods, including the tenements and picturesque ethnic enclaves, the narrator remarks: "She was not humbled in the least by what she had seen in the tenement house street; she yielded no point in her ideal of a flat and the flats persistently refused to lend themselves to it. She lost all patience with them . . . She denounced their stupid inadequacies to the purposes of a Christian home" (58). At this point the Marches are looking for familiarity, for a traditional Victorian home; only later will they be comfortable with the alternative lifestyle New York provides, finding in it an exhilarating as well as a
disturbing freedom. This process however takes time, and is so gradual and subtle that many critics see Isabel and Basil as essentially the same naïve, self-centered people they were when they first arrived in New York. What they see in New York however, begins to work upon their consciousness at the very start.

Most importantly, the Marches' journey exposes them to the tenements of New York's ethnic neighborhoods. Significantly, this was a journey many Americans were making at this time—if not literally, then vicariously—for the "exploration of forbidden and menacing spaces emerged in the 1890s as a leading mode" of the daily newspapers, "making spectacles of the nether side of New York or 'the other half'" (Trachtenberg 126). Published in 1890, the same year as A Hazard of New Fortunes, Jacob Riis's work, How the Other Half Lives was the most famous and the most compelling of this genre as the vicarious journey he provided for his middle-class audience seemed so much more "real." Unlike the various sketches and illustrations which had appeared in newspapers during the 1870s and 1880s, Riis, for the first time, took the camera into this forbidden underworld. What made these photographs particularly powerful was that they were "encoded in the symbolic language of late nineteenth-century American middle-class Victorianism, invoking the culture's most cherished ideals . . ." (Schloss 128). As Peter Hale observes, Riis "successfully manipulated the principal symbols of the Victorian age to his purposes: the child, womanhood, motherhood, the home, privacy, separation of the sexes, and the virtue of work" (203). And while Riis's work consciously serves to buttress and reaffirm middle-class values, Howells's novel will also highlight the line between 'us and them,' for Basil and Isabel must continually separate themselves from 'the other half,' and affirm their middle-class identity.

---

20 Amy Kaplan argues that Howells's "picturing" frames the chaos of late nineteenth century environment and that Basil March "aggressively composes the fragments of urban life into a spectacle for observation." Miles Orvell remarks that the Marches "assimilate the shocking poverty of the city to their comfortable perceptions which remain for the most part, unchallenged" (110).
Both works show how the middle class "reads" the other half to affirm their own sense of worth and power, and both works show us how the middle-class mind must order the heterogeneous confusion of the city. Indeed Jacob Riis and Basil March seem to speak the same language as they both talk of how "tenements abolish the family consciousness."

Yet while both Howells and Riis make "spectacles" of the other half in order to unsettle the middle-class viewer, their strategies differ in some ways. Most obviously, Howells uses fiction as his vehicle for social criticism while Riis uses photography, and Howells, unlike Riis, focuses on the spectator, not the spectacle. What Howells shows us and what Riis does not, is a middle-class observer questioning the validity of his observations. We see how the spectacle of the urban poor works upon the consciousness of Basil March in complicated and contradictory ways; indeed exposure to the tenements has March questioning as well as defending his middle-class domesticity. March's struggle and confusion is particularly evident during the house hunting scenes when he attempts to define the ideal home, for his definition soon runs away from him, and he ultimately moves away from his earlier assertions. Besides revealing how his exposure to 'the other half' forces him to look at his middle-class values more critically, March's confusion regarding the ideal home also shows us that uneasy shift from a sentimental domesticity to a more consumer-oriented theatrical one.

March equates domesticity with a sentimental family togetherness but he also reveals that he believes a home should be theatrical, that it should express its owner. And until a home has that theatrical quality, it cannot really be a home. As March sees it, tenements abolish domesticity: "Of course no child born and brought up in such a place as that could have any conception of home. But that's because those poor people can't give character to their habitations. They have to take what they can get. But people like us—that is of our
means —do give character to the average flat” (58). This ability to adorn, to embellish
domestic space is essential for March, and these notions also recall some of the observations
Riis makes in his work. Again and again, Riis highlights the importance of aesthetic values.
One of the key problems as Riis sees it is that “tenement-houses have no aesthetic resources”
(124). For Riis, beauty can influence, instruct. “I have seen an armful of daisies keep the
peace of a block better than a policeman and his club,” he writes (138). This ability to adorn
and embellish domestic space is so essential that, according to Riis, “The German has an
advantage over his Celtic neighbor in his strong love for flowers” (124). [W]herever he puts it
in a tenement block it does the work of a dozen police clubs” (Riis 124). It is “the tenement
unadorned” that is responsible for the police force doubling its patrol at night (Riis 126). As
March thinks through these aesthetic values, however—this notion of “giving character to
the average flat”—he begins to wonder if it is the embellished genteel flat rather than the
bare, shabby tenement which would “abolish the family consciousness” (59):

Think of a baby in a flat! It’s a contradiction in terms; the flat is the negation
of motherhood. The flat is society life; that is, the pretense of social life. It’s
made to give artificial people a society basis on a little money, too much
money for what they get. So the cost of the building is put into marble halls
and idiotic decoration of all kinds. I don’t object to the conveniences but none
of these flats have a living room. They have drawing rooms to foster social
pretense and they have dining rooms and bedrooms but they have no room
where the family can all come together and feel the sweetness of being a
family. (58)

As March criticizes the theatricality of urban life—the pretense, the show, the cost put into
“idiotic decoration” of all kinds—he ironically comes to the conclusion that “those tenements
are better and humaner than these flats! There the whole family lives in the kitchen and has
its consciousness of being” (59). At this point, his speech has moved far away from another
key theme in Riis’s work: “A locked door is a strong point in favor of the flat. It argues that
the first step has been taken to secure privacy, the absence of which is the chief curse of the
tenement” (Riis 121). In contrast to Riis who evoked a social conscience which served to
"confirm the high value of the clean, well-equipped privately owned home as the norm of American life," Howells has March questioning some of middle America’s most cherished ideals (Trachtenberg 127). For all its profound and important social criticism, Riis’s work may not criticize the system to the extent Howells’s work does, for Howells has Basil March eventually indict, as he puts it, “the economic chance world we live in”; moreover Basil March will begin to see himself as implicated in this system. As Maren Stange observes, Riis’s criticism only goes so far:

Already a consummate publicist, Riis was proposing... that conscientious personal philanthropy might function both as good public relations and self improvement, reaffirming the benignity of middle-class values and of wealth itself, even as the respectable classes girded themselves anew against the threat breeding in the slums. That such a “solution” in no way challenged capitalist social and economic relations, Riis himself tacitly admitted when he compared “the extra trouble of looking after... tenement property” to a penance of “penalty” exacted for the “sins of the fathers.” Far from radical, Riis’s solution affirmed the centralist and social worth of traditional individualist and entrepreneurial values even as it specified a new class duty... (5)

Basil March, however, feels more ambiguous towards these “traditional individualist and entrepreneurial values,” and his attempt to define the ideal home only reinforces his shifting uncertainty. First he aligns the ideal home with aesthetics, with possession, with ownership, with displaying one self, and then he aligns it with sharing space, with sentimental ties, with family consciousness. And as March moves between rationalizing the poverty of others—it is good it brings families together—and subtly critiquing the values of his own class—too intent on show and display—we can see how his notions of family and domesticity are shifting, uncertain. Already the city has made some impact on March’s consciousness, if only to bring his confused values to the fore, and what he sees, what he experiences in the city will continue to move him and confuse him as he moves between rationalizing his situation and explicitly critiquing it.
This anxiety regarding urban theatricality permeates the novel. Not only does March have to question the "aesthetic" values of urban culture when searching for a new home, in the workplace too he is threatened by the privileging of the visual, the spectacle, the show, the packaging. At the beginning of the novel, when March and Fulkerson are discussing the probable success of their New York magazine, Fulkerson persuades March with "we can make it work in America—with illustrations." (13). When March asks "Going to have illustrations?," Fulkerson responds with astonishment, "My dear boy! What are you giving me? Do I look like the sort of lunatic who would start a thing in the twilight of the nineteenth century without illustrations? Come off!" (13). Since he doesn't know anything about art, March is a bit anxious but Fulkerson says he does not need to know anything; he "shall have an art man," for Fulkerson is eager "to get a design for a cover which should both ensnare the heedless and captivate the fastidious" (13). As he enthusiastically tells the staff later on, "There ain't anything in this world that sells a book like a pretty cover, and we're going to have a pretty cover for Every Other Week every time . . . we're going to have . . . paper that'll make your mouth water; and we're going to have a fresh illustration for the cover of each number and we ain't a going to give the public any rest at all" (121). The contrast between March's ambivalence and Fulkerson's enthusiasm becomes even more explicit when Fulkerson gives all the credit for the magazine's initial success to Beaton's cover: "Beaton has given us the start because his work appeals to the eye. There's no denying that the pictures have sold this first number. . ." (174). As a writer March feels personally threatened; his work seems less important, overlooked, disregarded. "It was

---

21 By "using the establishment of a new journal as a narrative frame," Emily Fourmy Cutrer argues that Howells was able to "reveal his fundamental ambivalence toward the visual, which much of the novel seems otherwise so intent upon privileging" (271). She notes that Howells "not only examines the whole process of learning to see but also questions the means of representing that sight" (271). She sees the novel as pointing "to one of the era's major cultural and artistic issues—that is the significance of vision as a means of understanding and representing experience" (260).
different when the illustrations used to be bad,” he explains to his colleagues. “Then the text had some chance.”(122). But this is the age of “over-illustration,” a “chromo-civilization,” and March too cannot deny the appeal of the visual. When Fulkerson says to Beaton, “If March had his way he wouldn’t have any illustrations at all,” March interposes: “Not because I don’t like them, Mr. Beaton, but because I like them too much. I find that I look at the pictures in an illustrated article but I don’t read the article very much, and I fancy that’s the case with most other people. You’ve got to doing them so prettily that you take our eyes off the literature, if you don’t take our minds off”(122).

This conflicting attitude towards privileging the visual in publishing also reflects one of the crucial conflicts March must continually struggle with in his own mind: his own tendency to be seduced by the pretty picture, to privilege the visual, to confuse an aesthetic impulse with another kind of impulse. Indeed the entire book is about learning to see in a more self conscious way. Unlike James’s novel, Howells’s novel is much more explicit in making the aesthetic impulses of its characters problematic. While we see Howells’s characters being aesthetically inclined, we also see them very much aware of the aesthetic impulses that inform their behavior. Although coming to New York may encourage them to look at life from an aesthetic viewpoint, it also teaches them the limitations of doing so. When they first arrive at Broadway, for example, they discover that the “roaring gaily painted omnibuses, the picturesque traffic of ten, twenty years ago has been banished and they are “disappointed “ because “the eye misses the tumultuous perspective of former times”(47). Since Broadway was no longer impressive, since “all that processional, barbaric gaiety of the place is gone,” they turn and go into a church to feast their eyes, to be transported into a kind of aesthetic realm (47): “Rapt far from New York, if not from earth, in the dim richness of the painted light, the hallowed music took them with solemn ecstasy; the aerial, aspiring Gothic forms seemed to lift them heaven ward. They came out reluctant into
the dazzle and bustle of the street with a feeling they were too good for it” (47). March, however, confesses, “no matter how consecrated we feel now, we mustn’t forget we went to the church for precisely the same reason that we went to the Vienna Café for breakfast—to gratify an aesthetic sense . . . it was a purely pagan impulse Isabel and we’d better own it.” (47). While Isabel agrees, she wishes they didn’t always have to “face facts.” She tells her husband that she knows her motives are “always mixed,” but wishes to “give them the benefit of the doubt sometime” (47).

The Marches’ need to “gratify an aesthetic sense” leads them not only to the interiors of Gothic churches but to the very heart of immigrant neighborhoods. And here again there is the temptation to confuse the aesthetic sense with a moral one. In confronting Otherness and urban poverty, the Marches at first refuse to see beyond the “picturesque” and the self consciousness March displays when talking of the church is not at all evident when he journeys through these immigrant neighborhoods. It will be a gradual process before March begins to see more clearly, to see the difference between a purely aesthetic stance and a moral one. Indeed Howells’s most powerful critique regarding aesthetic vision, the privileging of the visual is dramatized in March’s perceptions of the city’s poor immigrants. Though there is a continual need to see them as “happy,” as “gay,” as merely colorful, there is also an increasing underlying anxiety in doing so and a gradually revision of such a view. Not only does Howells’s narrator consistently comment on the limitations of this vision, the characters themselves sense these limitations. The spectacle of urban poverty does not leave them unchanged. It works on their consciousness in often subtle ways.

As they begin their apartment hunting, the narrator takes special care to highlight this limited vision:

They met the familiar picturesque raggedness of southern Europe with the kindly illusion that somehow it existed for their appreciation and that it
found adequate compensation for poverty in this. March thought he sufficiently expressed his tacit sympathy in sitting down on one of the iron benches with his wife and letting a little Neapolitan put a superfluous shine on his boots. (48)

Here they feel superior, bestowing favors upon a less fortunate man, for the shine the Neapolitan gives the boots is "superfluous," but soon afterwards they are no longer feeling so superior, nor secure. After all they are just faces in the crowd in New York, still without a home, their gentility no longer obvious. When the janitor of the apartment they are viewing examines them as if in doubt that they could afford the apartment, "Their self love had received a wound and they questioned each other what it was in their appearance made him doubt their ability to pay so much" (49). They wonder about their presence in the Square, if the janitor had seen Basil with the bootblack. They feel they have been misread, misunderstood. The Marches worry they may have crossed some boundary which places them out of the genteel class they normally see themselves in. Like Basil Ransom in New York, their identities shift in the new city, and their "self love" will continue to receive "wounds."

While they continue house hunting, the Marches' comfortable secure view of themselves as well as their aesthetic way of viewing is dramatically undermined when they drive through a poor neighborhood. Though they are riding by in a carriage, seemingly sealed off and in motion, their experience cannot remain on the purely visual, aesthetic plane, for the stench wafts up to them and they are forced to experience something beyond visual delight and local color. The narrator's commentary in this scene points to the change in sensibility this disruptive experience brings:

The time had been when the Marches would have taken a purely aesthetic view of facts as they glimpsed them in this street of tenement houses, when they would have contented themselves with saying that it was as picturesque as a street in Naples and with wondering why nobody came to paint it; they would have thought they were sufficiently serious about it in blaming the
artists for their failure to appreciate it and going abroad for the picturesque when they had it here under their noses. It was to the nose that the street made one of its strongest appeals. And Mrs. March pulled up her window of the coupe. Why does he take us through such a disgusting street? (56)

What would have been “picturesque” is now “disgusting.” By experiencing some discomfort, the Marches can no longer remain detached and cling to aesthetic illusions, and this contributes to a sense of shifting identity and uncertainty. The experience has Basil thinking more profoundly; he wonders “what they think of us”: “I suppose they think we are rich and hate us—if they hate rich people they don’t look as if they hated anybody” (57). While his wife suggests he “could work some of these New York sights up for the magazine very nicely,” Basil does not want to leave the “personal ground”; he does not want to remain a detached aesthetic observer. He feels morally implicated and questions Isabel regarding their family’s domestic needs: “doesn’t it make you feel small and unworthy when you see the kind of street these fellow beings of yours live in, and then think how particular you are about locality and number of bell pulls”(57)? Yet as he does this he has to check himself—with humor, with rationalizations. The discomfort is too great. Soon after he suggests to his wife that they should “be as patient” with their discomfort as the tenement dwellers since “seven rooms and a bath would be more than the largest and genteelest family would know what to do with,” he undercuts his empathy with “they wouldn’t know what to do with the bath anyway” (57). Rationalizing and joking away his unease, March will continue to fluctuate between taking a detached, aesthetic view and a more “personally” involved—one might say—moral view where he begins to imagine how “the other half” might actually feel.

Indeed the limits of the purely aesthetic view press heavily upon him as the novel continues. When Conrad Dryfoos suggests that March’s sketches of life in every part of New York “might do some good,” March at first does not really understand what Conrad is
driving at; only his “authorial vanity is tickled” and he tells Conrad, “Not only is the general average of people fascinated with life in New York City, I found myself intensely interested in the place, and . . . yes I believe I can get something quite attractive out of it. . . . yes I think it might be a good thing for us”(128, italics mine). Conrad, assuming that any sketch on the urban poor would have to have a social reformist impulse behind it, tells March, “if you can make the comfortable people understand how the uncomfortable live, it would be a very good thing”(128). As March jokes a bit at Conrad’s suggestion, the narrator’s commentary suggests March is caught off guard, not sure how to respond: “That’s true, said March from the surface only, “and those phases of low life are immensely picturesque. Of course we must try to get the contrasts of luxury for the sake of full effect. That won’t be so easy. You can’t penetrate to the dinner party of a millionaire under the wing of a detective as you could to a carouse in Mulberry Street . . . ” (129). And as March laughs, “the young man turned his head away”(129). Later March confesses to his wife, “I was a little ashamed before him afterward for having looked at the matter so entirely from the aesthetic point of view. But of course, you know, if I went to work on those things with an ethical intention explicitly in mind, I should spoil them” (129).

While March continues to waver and feel divided, the city’s dissonant images become more compelling, more insistent. As his journey continues, the narrator does point out the very subtle—nearly imperceptible differences in his perception, in his consciousness; coming to New York is a kind of awakening even if it is a subtle and gradual one:

Their point of view was singularly unchanged and their impressions of New York remained the same that they had been fifteen years before: huge noisy, ugly kindly it seemed to them now as it seemed then. The main difference was that they saw it more now as a life and then they only saw it a spectacle; and March could not release himself from a sense of complicity with it, no matter what whimsical or alien or critical attitude he took. A sense of the striving and the suffering deeply possessed him and this grew the more...
intense as he gained some knowledge of the forces at work—forces of pity, of destruction, of perdition, of salvation. (265, my emphasis)

Indeed living in New York leads March to questioning, to searching; it pulls him away from home. On Sundays, “he wandered about . . . not only through the streets, but into this tabernacle and that as the spirit moved him” (265). Seeking out different viewpoints, the diversity of the city opens his mind; this heterogeneous public life of New York brings Basil out of the kind of insulated private life he led in Boston. It seems difference is not something Basil is eager to erase now, but something he begins to embrace. His Sunday walks around the city listening to all the various belief systems seem “fantastic and menacing” to Isabel, and while “she lamented the literary peace, the intellectual refinement of the life they left behind, March “owned it was very pretty, but he said it was not life, it was death in life” (265).

Besides bringing in the heterogeneous confusion of the new city and how it might work on middle-class urban consciousness, Howells also brings in another key ingredient of modern urban space: technology. Unlike earlier urban novels, the experience of riding the new transportation is central in Howells’s work. In his discussion of the urban pedestrian in American literature, Michael Cowan reminds us of the impact technology must have had on American writers:

Motorized transportation . . . provided American writers with a new source of materials, metaphors and viewpoints for the interpretation of urban and even national experience . . . such rapid transportation could be seen to offer new kinetic experiences increasingly reflective of the characteristic pace of modern life. Equally important it offered—in what Emerson called annihilation of space”—a temporal equivalent of a visual overview of the city. If one could no longer easily walk around the city, one might still encompass it by motorized rail or wheel” . . . [S]eeing the city in new ways might also mean missing much, and what was missed might be moral as well as visual.

While Cowen points out that the elevated railway’s movement through New York is “striking as a possible perspective for the aesthetically inclined,” he concludes that “the
question March must increasingly face is whether the liberating thrill of the machine can be had without the destruction that often accompanies it" (288). Indeed while the El offers new aesthetic experiences, it transforms perception in some disturbing ways, ways that echo in fact the dilemma Holmes had earlier articulated about the stereoscope and the camera. Like the stereoscope, the El brings new scenes before the eyes of the Marches, but like the stereoscope again, the speeding train also wrenches those scenes from their contexts. As Kaplan puts it, "The El as a vehicle for the Marches' line of vision has a double edged effect: it expands their perspective to otherwise inaccessible corners of urban life and it violently dislocates what they see" (Kaplan 50). To highlight this "double-edged" effect, the El itself becomes a double-edged entity and the Marches struggle to make sense of the new technology as it becomes something both monstrous and magnificent.

At the beginning of the novel, Howells seems to emphasize in particular the mystique, the seductiveness of the new technology. Even just observing the machines, not yet riding in them, the Marches are literally transported, emotionally overcome by the El's sheer beauty, by its marvelous effects. The El train is seen as "the most beautiful thing" in New York and this aesthetic view of the El aligns it with power, beauty, progress, mystery, exotica, wealth. Indeed, Howells's language evokes a kind of technological sublime:

The track that found and lost itself a thousand times in the flare and tremor of the innumerable lights; the moon-sheen of the electrics mixing with the reddish points and blots of gas far and near; the architectural shapes of houses and churches and towers, rescued by the obscurity from all that was ignoble in them; and the coming and going of the trains marking the stations with vivider or fainter plumes of flame-shot steam—formed an incomparable perspective... They... looked down upon the great night trains lying on the tracks dim under the rain of gaslights that starred without dispersing the vast darkness of the place. What forces, what fates, slept in these bulks which would soon be hurling themselves north and east and west through the night! Now they waited there like fabled monsters of Arab story for the magicians touch, tractable, reckless, will-less—organized lifelessness full of a strange semblance of life. (66-67)
The machine also becomes naturalized here—aligned with fire, with stars; the electrics have "moon-sheen" and "the great trains slept under the rain of gaslight." Howells’s diction—"innumerable lights," "far and near," "coming and going," "lost itself a thousand times"—evokes not only endless motion, but infinity, the outer reaches of space. Embodying the mysteries of the universe, Howells’s description of the El echoes Henry Adams’s famous description of the Dynamo; the El too becomes a kind of god one prays to, for as the Marches look down upon the train, "they were inarticulate before it; they had a moment of rich silence" (67). The El is something sacred here, something which embodies all their desires regarding the city, regarding America—its promise, its power, the future.

But Howells’s language also reveals the dark side to this power. Even when explaining the March’s “satisfaction in the El roads,” sinister, destructive, frightening forces are inextricably intertwined with their perceptions: (54) “They kill the streets and avenues; but at least they partially hide them, and that is some comfort and they do triumph over the prostrate forms with a savage exultation that is intoxicating” (54, emphasis mine). Not only is the sheer monstrous force of destruction emphasized, Howells also makes clear that there is exhilaration in witnessing such force, such power. Howells’s language suggests that the Marches are “intoxicated” by the forces of the machine; such intoxication may lead them to not see clearly, to miss the chaos created by the El’s ordering of the city. Indeed Sidney Bremer’s observations remind us of the devastating impact the El had on the city, particularly on certain populations within the city:

The El symbolizes three deadening effects of technological organization. First while it displays the heterogeneous city—even better than the theater for the middle class voyeur, it also embodies the power that private monopolies like the traction companies then exercised over poor lives. It disrupts their homes by “killing the streets” and when the city workers strike against the surface street car lines, the elevated overrides their efforts and ensures their failure. Second and more fundamentally, the El epitomizes Howells’s vision of the city’s increasingly powerful physical environment.
The El kills working-class street life... Finally the El makes it clear that the violent invasion of private life by the city's public machinery will not stop at the city limits. The West Side lines show the Marches the "city pushing its way into the country." (56)

 Unable to reconcile the El's contradictory elements, the Marches struggle to explain, to define it. Their description seems to evoke the impenetrability of New York itself—it is "splendidly gay" or "squalidly gay but gay always"(54). The El becomes one of "the gayest things in the world": "Perfectly atrocious of course, but incomparably picturesque"(54). This exhilaration is confused, ridden with anxiety. As Isabel tells her husband, "Yes gay is the word. But frantic, I can't get used to it. They forget death Basil, they forget death in New York" (54). Here Howells suggests that the El (as well as the spectacle of New York) hides what it kills, that it is a veil, that it prevents one from seeing what is real. With speed and power one can run by the uncomfortable aspects of life, obliterate them, forget them, since when one speeds by, one is detached, disconnected.

Richard Sennett points out in his study of the body and the city that, "Individual bodies moving through urban space gradually became detached from the space in which they moved and from the people the space contained. As space became devalued through motion, individuals gradually lost a sense of sharing a fate with others" (323). In speculating on the effects of speed in urban transportation, Sennet argues that while, "In the poetry of Baudelaire, speed was depicted as a frenetic experience. . In point of fact, speed took on a different character in the nineteenth century, thanks to technical innovations in transportation. These made the travelling body comfortable. Comfort is a condition we associate with rest and passivity. The technology of the nineteenth century gradually made movement into such a passive bodily experience. The more comfortable the moving body became, the more it withdrew socially, traveling alone and silent"(338). Sennet concludes that "in the course of the development of modern urban individualism, the individual fell
silent in the city. The street, the café, the department store, the railroads, the bus and
underground became places of the gaze rather than scenes of discourse" (358). Speeding by
in comfort, gazing at the delightful spectacle, one can easily “forget death” as Isabel March
puts it. And while this exhilarating gay motion of New York does disturb Isabel, she cannot
deny that the El’s “savage” triumph over the city orders the chaos for her; it provides a kind
of map, a means of viewing and navigating. Though Isabel “used to say that nothing under
the sun would induce her to travel” the El, she eventually “confessed an infatuation” with
the El, particularly the nighttime transit which “was even more interesting” since it provides
a spectacle for her pleasure, a domestic theater she finds reassuring:

[T]he fleeting intimacy you formed with people in second and third floor
interiors while all the usual street life went on underneath had a domestic
intensity mixed with a perfect repose that was the effect of good society with
all its security and exclusiveness. He (March) said it was better than the
theater, of which it reminded him, to see those people through their
windows: a family party of workfolk at late tea, some of the men in shirt-
sleeves, a women sewing by her lamp, a mother laying her child in its cradle;
a man with his head fallen on his hands upon a table; a girl and her lover
leaning over the windowsill together. What suggestion! What drama! What
infinite interest! (66-67) 22

For Amy Kaplan, the El functions here as an “updated lens for viewing and controlling this
urban spectacle. Adopting the reassuring stance of the spectator, Basil can . . . transform the
bewildering anonymity of the tenements into homey tableaux. Voyeuristic intrusions into
the homes of the poor allow the Marches to externalize these interiors as mirrors of their
own genteel values. Observed through these windows, the other half in effect
disappears” (50). She concludes that “the El can be read as a metaphor for the violence
implicit in not seeing in order to make the city visible and real” (50). While the El does
promote a kind of detachment, a divorcing form from matter, it is important to remember

22 These scenes of urban theater bring to mind the urban poetry of Walt Whitman. In poems like “Crossing
Brooklyn Ferry,” for example, Whitman too finds the city spectacle of “infinite interest,” and much of that
interest is a result of his seeing his own reflection in the faces of the urban crowd.
that the El itself has a doubleness and may work upon consciousness in other ways. The fact that the El does indeed bring March into close, physical contact with people he wouldn’t otherwise, is vitally important; and in this sense, the El can unsettle aesthetic views as well as promote them. It is important in this context to remember perhaps the most revolutionary impact the El had for people at this time—how it differed from earlier forms of public transport. In his history of Old New York, Luc Sante emphasizes this: “The El was democratic in a way that no other means of transportation had been: higher priced luxury street cars ran on Third Avenue for many years, and for a while the Sixth avenue surface line even maintained a Jim Crow wagon. The El mixed everybody up together” (Sante 53).

It is this “mixing” of everyone up that has the greatest appeal for March, and it is this mixing up which may help unsettle his purely aesthetic view of the city’s immigrant Others. Eventually it is viewing his fellow riders that becomes more interesting for March. The novel shows us his moving away from viewing those cozy domestic interiors the train speeds past, scenes which serve as mirrors for himself, to trying to understand difference, to wondering how “the other half” may feel. Eventually Basil does not need to be reassured with mirror images of his own values. He seeks out diversity and—though not fully understanding it,—he does move beyond his earlier ways of viewing. Though he still is the passive spectator, he seems a more thoughtful, self aware one. Riding the El, one could also argue, works on awakening his consciousness. While for the most part Basil thinks of his El riding as entertainment, the narrator shows us it nevertheless does provoke him in more serious ways:

Now and then he had found himself in a car mostly filled with Neapolitans from the constructions far up the line, where he had read that they are worked and fed and housed like beasts; and listening to the jargon of their unintelligible dialect, he had occasion for pensive question within himself as to what notion these poor animals formed of a free republic from their experience of life under its conditions; and whether they found them practically very different from those of the immemorial brigandage and enforced complicity with rapine under which they had been born. (158)
Mixed in with March's sense of ethnic and class superiority here is a kind of budding social conscience. Though he calls them "poor animals," he is wondering what they think; he is beginning to question the ideals of the republic. The city is unnerving, unsettling him; the El does not always provide mirror images, but images that need sorting, thinking through. Staring at the "aspects" of immigrants in the El car would not only give him "abundant suggestions for personal histories," the narrator remarks, it would also provide him with "material for the more public spirited reveries in which he dealt with the future economy of our heterogeneous commonwealth" (159). While there is this continual shifting between enjoying the entertaining spectacle and speculating on social injustice, and while the narrator says the result of March's El reveries is only a "vague discomfort" in "his half recognition of the facts," this nevertheless marks a subtle transformation of consciousness, the beginning perhaps of a new way of seeing.

Indeed riding on the El enables March to experience the confusion of the new modern city in a physically powerful way. As this quote suggests, the El is not by any means always a "lens for viewing and controlling" the urban spectacle (Kaplan 50):

There were certain signs, certain facades, certain audacities of the prevailing hideousness that always amused him in the uproar to the eye which the strident forms and colors made. He was interested in the insolence with which the railway had drawn its erasing line across the Corinthian front of an old theater, almost grazing its fluted pillars and flouting its dishonored pediment . . . the vagaries of the lines that narrowed together or stretched apart according to the width of the avenue, but always in wanton disregard of the life that dwelt, and bought and sold, and rejoiced or sorrowed, and clattered and crawled, around, below above—were features of the frantic panorama that perpetually touched his sense of humor and moved his sympathy. Accident and the exigency seemed the forces at work to this extraordinary effect as free and planless as those that force the forest from the soil to the sky; and the fierce struggle for survival . . . The whole at moments seemed to him lawless, Godless; the absence of intelligent comprehensive purpose in the huge disorder and the violent struggle to subordinate the result to the greater good penetrated with its dumb appeal the consciousness of a man who had always been too self-enw rapt to perceive the chaos to which the individual selfishness must always lead. (160)
Echoing Henry Adams, March in this scene seeks out the chaos, confronts it; he is not necessarily eager to order it into familiar scenes. He experiences the clash of the new technology with older urban forms in a physically concrete way as the El almost "grazes the pillars of an old theatre." The pediment is "dishonored" by the El which moves in "wanton disregard" of life. The El threatens the older traditions of the city, its force depicted here as madness, irrational, uncontrollable. Rather than the "gayness," the beauty, the wonder, what is stressed here is "disorder," violence, lawlessness. Technology rushes one forth into chaos and rather than providing comforting reassuring mirror images, riding on the El could be a wild disorienting experience.

By the time we get to the scenes of the transportation strike, March is struggling more and more with his divided consciousness. When he is rebuffed by a policeman on the cross-town car, "it gave him a fine sense of the ferocity which he had read of the French troops putting on towards the populace just before the coup d'etat; he began to feel like the populace, but he struggled with himself and regained his character of philosophical observer. In this character he remained in the car and let it carry him by the corner where he ought to have got out and gone home, and let it keep on with him to one of the furthermost tracks westward, where so much of the fighting was reported to have taken place"(360). Though regaining his character as "philosophical observer," March does decide to avoid the protection of home. As March takes the El to the scene of the strike and gets closer and closer to the trouble, he is no longer as detached from it all, physically or mentally. Indeed Cowan argues that although Howells does not find a solution to the moral detachment encouraged by the "mechanized city," he suggests here that "the most morally defensible way of wrestling with it may be to leave the security of middle class flats and rapid trains and take to the streets as a compassionate walker"(288).
Though March is still a spectator, he is no longer a detached one; the scenes he has witnessed in New York lead him to question the very middle class values and security he once held dear. In his “economic chance world” speech near the novel’s end, March moves beyond his detached musings and jokes to an impassioned plea: “But what I object to is this economic chance world in which we live and which we men seem to have created. It ought to be law as inflexible in human affairs as the order of day and night in the physical world that if a man will work he shall both rest and eat and shall not be harassed with any question as to how his repose and his provision shall come” (380). Not only does March go on to criticize this “chance world,” he recognizes his own role in it: “We go on trembling before the Dryfooses and living in gimcrackeries” (381). We teach our children that “having and shining” are “the chief good in life.” “We all know they are not the chief good,” he declares, “perhaps not good at all” (381). For a man who once hurried home in order to be surrounded by the flattering atmosphere of his comfortable middle-class domesticity, for a man who merely enjoyed the picturesque raggedness of urban poverty, March has come far indeed. Living in the city, riding on the El, experiencing the heterogeneous richness and confusion of New York complicates his vision of the world and though the city unsettles, and the “strike is the most horrible thing to have happened to them,” the Marches remain to “hazard their fortunes”; they do not hurry back to the comfortable but deadening private domesticity they left behind. They stay in New York, and their domestic situation, in the end, even seeming to combine public and private worlds, for although living above the Every Other Week office seems at first “odd,” to Isabel, she finally decides “[I]n NY you may do anything” (430).
In his work examining the legacy of Hawthorne, Richard Brodhead points out that when Theodore Dreiser was drafting part of *Sister Carrie*, he had thought of Hawthorne, for when Carrie first enters the theater, he originally wrote but later excised the following passage:

"The life of the world behind the curtain is a fascinating thing to every outsider with theatrical leanings, as we well know. It would require the pen of a Hawthorne and the spirit of the *Twice Told Tales* to do justice to that mingled atmosphere of life and mummery which pervades the chambers of children of the stage. The flare of the gas jets... the scattered contents of the makeup box... in short all the nameless paraphernalia of disguise have a remarkable atmosphere of their own..." (from Brodhead 207). Brodhead asserts that "while we could say that Dreiser goes back to Hawthorne and carries him forward to "new circumstances," this passage is not really an allusion; in its "perfect vagueness," it is just a reference to Hawthorne in general, to his most " cliched public reputation," and "the text's activation of Hawthorne is so on the surface that cutting it makes no difference whatsoever" (207). Brodhead argues that while the naturalist writers of the 1890s had read Hawthorne, he "is no longer a forceful presence in their consciousness... He no longer helps shape the terms in which they think through their work" (207). Similarly Larzer Ziff
maintains that *Sister Carrie* "stood as a new creation, speaking of a world which had not existed before in fiction..." (335). 23

Indeed by 1900, the publication date of *Sister Carrie*, towering skyscrapers, electric lighting and transportation as well as palatial department stores with their theatrical display of goods had transformed the American landscape. Although this urban world with its dazzling electric light and glitter seems a far cry from the secluded nooks and dark alleyways of Hawthorne's Boston, the concerns Hawthorne raises in *Blithedale* regarding urbanity do resurface in *Sister Carrie*; indeed I would argue that seeing Dreiser's work solely as a "new creation" may lead us to ignore this work's historical complexity, its evolving out of a specific literary tradition reflecting specific cultural circumstances. Placing Dreiser's work in dialogue, so to speak, with the urban novels which come before it enables us to see more clearly, not only how the novel signals the 'newness' which Ziff describes, but also how it carries within it the lingering weight of the past. Following in the manner of Hawthorne, James and Howells—writers whose urban novels attempt to come to terms with the city's increasing theatricality, its impenetrable public spaces—Dreiser then does not necessarily give us a "new creation" that once only referred to Hawthorne's "cliched reputation," but rather a work that explores the more "modern" issues Hawthorne is perhaps less well known for. *Sister Carrie* like *The Blithedale Romance* is about the seduction of the city, the delight in artifice, and the dangers of adopting a purely aesthetic view of life. Moreover, like Hawthorne, James and Howells, Dreiser explores the transformation of the

23 What Ziff finds remarkable in Dreiser's detailed world is that "for all his details, he does not see families, friendships or other forms of community which act as a protective screen between the individual and the environment" (339). "Like the serious poetry of the day," he later writes, "*Sister Carrie* also demonstrated that the gods were dead, but unlike the poets' contentions, Dreiser's were unacceptable because he went on to show that life continued all the same" (341).
home in urban space, and the increasingly permeable boundaries between public and private realms of life.

*Sister Carrie* depicts a world where even more dramatically, family relationships are dominated by the market. While Hawthorne, James and Howells had shown us the beginnings of this invasion of the marketplace into the private sphere, Dreiser signals that this shift in values is well under way. In Dreiser’s novel, the boundaries between home and the wider public realm seem more than permeable, they seem to give way completely; indeed this urban world is a wholly public world where private life no longer seems to exist. As Wirth-Nesher points out, “Unlike the metropolitan dweller as conceived by Georg Simmel and Louis Wirth, whose response to the barrage of stimuli in his environment is to develop his inner life, to retreat into a highly sophisticated interiority, Dreiser’s city dwellers lose themselves in the visual stimuli of city life, defining themselves by their location in the visible landscape . . . self and home are constructed through vision, not memory” (68). In such a world, those sentimental longings which were central to the work of Hawthorne, James, and to a lesser extent Howells, become displaced onto consumer objects, for Dreiser highlights how by 1900, Americans were more specifically looking to the world of things—not nature, nor an ideal community or family—for their fulfillment. As if to highlight the declining value of the sentimental home, Dreiser aligns domestic space with sparseness, darkness, limitations. Rejecting the domestic role of woman, Carrie will venture out into public space, and as the stagelights and the signs advertising her become bigger and brighter, her domestic space with Hurstwood will become smaller and darker. For light and life are on the city streets—its store windows, its theaters, its restaurants—and if one does not participate in the spectacle of public life, one dies, fades away. In Dreiser’s world the human inclination to theatricality is, in a sense, a kind of will to live, for when the performance stops, so does life.
Dreiser's work suggests then that there is no private self, only a performing one and perhaps this is what might be considered "a new creation": the extent to which the public realm shapes or defines the private subject. As Philip Fisher points out, Dreiser "refuses to contrast acting with sincerity, oppose the representation of what one is not to authentic self representation. Dreiser is the first novelist to base his entire sense of the self on the dramatic possibilities inherent in a dynamic society" (167). And as Irene Gammel observes, "Critics have discussed the theatricality of Sister Carrie in negative terms such as deception, inauthenticity, a diction that assumes the existence of an essential self... Sister Carrie presents a female protagonist who ... transcends the notion of selfhood as a fixed identity" (214). The urban theatricality in Hawthorne then which was associated with masks, duplicity, and deception is no longer so explicitly problematic, no longer a source of dread or anxiety. Indeed Hurstwood's retreat from self display and performance marks the beginning of his long decline. Even the confidence man's performance generates less anxiety. Once embodied in the sinister Westervelt, he is now embodied in the rather benign Drouet who brings an emotional as well as a physical warmth and shelter the family can no longer provide. Dreiser's world then is much more topsy-turvy than that imagined in previous novels. Indeed men and women move in and out of their precarious class positions as they move in and out of domestic and public space—in more extreme and dramatic ways and with more moral ambiguity. In this world, the successful "man about town," saloon manager George Hurstwood with his "shiny" silk cravat and his "mother of pearl buttons" ends up a Bowery Bum who can't afford a shave, but rather than fear regarding the uncertainty and unpredictability of urban life, there is more attraction, more desire—for anything seems possible (73). Entering Dreiser's fantastic city, however, requires that the sentimental Victorian home be left far behind, for family ties hinder individual desire, and
identity is a continual performance shaped not by private relationships, but by public spectacle.

Indeed while the impulse of the previous novels—particularly those by Hawthorne and James—is to find a domestic space where the self can be nurtured and protected, the impulse in *Sister Carrie* is to escape such confines; to be seen, to be on display, to become wholly public is to fulfill the self. Yet while this seems to suggest a break from the earlier urban novels' idealization of private space and the sentimental family, Dreiser does not necessarily embrace this theatrical public realm he so vividly portrays. Throughout the novel he wants us to be aware of the illusions it generates—so much so that perhaps Dreiser's novel is not so different in its impulses. Home has been lost, and Carrie's "lack of home influence" contributes to her seduction (60). As the narrator tells us, this leads her to be "a victim of the city's hypnotic influence" (60). Carrie is especially vulnerable to Drouet because she "had no excellent home principles fixed upon her. If she had she would have been more consciously distressed" (60). Hurstwood's home, we are told "could scarcely be said to be infused with the home spirit" (63). Indeed Dreiser's work shows us that this lack in their lives is part of what drives them, and therefore his work of determinism, though seemingly "a new creation" and a break from what came before, has echoes of longing that characterize the earlier urban novels. It still struggles with the question of home, and Carrie's incessant rocking—a highly potent domestic symbol—clearly gives her inarticulate longings a sentimental edge. Indeed her lack of any familial ties, her increasing isolation and dissatisfaction may actually place her in the company of the perpetually dissatisfied Coverdale—forever cut off from what she desires, and unable to truly read the world she must live in.
Dreiser's work then continues to reflect that shift from an earlier sentimental domesticity with its clear demarcations between public and private space to a more theatrical, consumer-oriented domesticity where the boundaries between home and marketplace are more fluid. In the earlier novels, this shift is an uneasy one in that there is a continual fluctuation between the appeal of the theatrical public realm and the appeal of the sentimental private realm. By the time we get to *Sister Carrie*, however, the appeal of the sentimental home is so slight it seems to have disappeared. 24 The novel's fascination with and nearly exclusive attention to the public realm, as well as its insistence on the inadequacy of private life to meet our desires reminds us that *Sister Carrie* emerges during a period when private life and public life were being reimagined and debated. As men's and women's spheres were coming undone, the lines between public and private would be reformulated.

As *A Hazard of New Fortunes* suggested, by 1890 the traditional Victorian home was beginning to be questioned, and this interrogation would only intensify as the century came to its close:

What started in the 1890s as an attempt to revise housing standards and family ideals became after 1900 a full blown crusade to demolish the older Victorian beliefs. In place of the elaborated Victorian dwelling, they substituted the rustic bungalow or the modest colonial home. In place of the romantic Victorian justification of art and beauty as complex and inspirational was a new theory of aesthetics that stressed practicality and simplicity, efficiency and craftsmanship. Middle-class family ideals similarly changed dramatically at the turn of the century. Instead of a stress on manners and decorum, reformers emphasized informality and spontaneity... Mothers were expected to be more active outside the home. Children too were viewed as more independent and self sufficient. (131-2)

---

24 Although she does not attend specifically to the "sentimental home" in her discussion of *Sister Carrie*, Amy Kaplan looks at the conventions of sentimentalism in Dreiser's style and form. Moving away from the debate which sees his highly sentimental chapter headings and moralizing at odds with his realistic account of the city's dark side, she sees the novel as an "interpenetration of sentimentalism and realism," and insists one is no more "real" than the other. "Sentimentality in *Sister Carrie* does not simply lurk as a vestige of a residual convention, it is recontextualized and given new life in Dreiser's aesthetics of consumption"(140)
Clark also points out that the new theories of sanitation, and efficiency as well as the extending of the rhetoric of domestic life into the outside world also made a dramatic impact on people’s attitudes (155). “The abrupt and dramatic transformations of the middle-class family home ideal which took place between 1890 and 1910 was,” he reminds us, “part of a more general reorientation of American culture” (Clark 135). In the end “the persistent pressure created by the depression of 1893 . . . the revolution in communications, and the emergence of the consumer culture fueled a massive attack on Victorian standards that took place on many fronts” (Clark 143). Eventually, Clark observes, there was a “willingness to use outside agencies . . . to interfere directly in family relationships.” While “the Victorians had respected the sanctity of families and had hoped to reform them primarily by moral suasion,” the “Progressive reformers were persuaded that the new technical expertise justified actual interference in family affairs,” leading Clark to conclude that, “Whatever the American family home had been thought to be in the nineteenth century, it was now clear that the ideal division between the home and the outside world had been eroded” (155).

Rachel Bowlby also sees the years between 1890 and 1910 as a time of general “reorientation”; as she puts it, “the limits of an older economy of scarcity and moral restraint” was giving way to “the impersonality and boundless scale of monopoly capitalism, where responsibility is superceded by desire” (61). William Leach highlights issues of “restraint” and “desire” as well in his examination of this period, paying particular attention to the improvements in standard of living, the growth of disposable income, and above all to the changes in work which help create new attitudes towards play, leisure and consumption. Indeed these new attitudes would loosen the boundaries between home and the marketplace:

By the 1890s, large numbers of men (and many women) worked in factories and in big corporate bureaucracies that demanded differing degrees of
professional expertise. In both instances, these people had lost individual control over their own work and were subject to new disciplines and stresses that often rendered the work they performed wearying and unsatisfying. Such a situation also transformed the meaning of leisure and consumption as both became more and more the focus of individual fulfillment. This change in emphasis, perceivable as early as the 1850s in major American cities, was reinforced by the weakening of religious, domestic familial, and republican scripts that had once vigorously mediated between people and an expanding market economy, protecting them from what Dreiser called in 1898, “the boundless, limitless desire within our hearts.” (101)

Indeed by 1898, this expanding market economy was catering to that “boundless limitless desire” with a vengeance; in addition to the growing number of consumer goods available, the realm of leisure and public amusements, as Leach’s comments suggest, would also expand and transform.

In his analysis of New York at the turn of the century, Lewis Erenberg shows us that a rebellion against Victorian values played an essential role in the growth of the city's nightlife. He reminds us of the changes which took place over the course of the century, changes which show us how public amusements “became more and more the focus of individual fulfillment.” After 1850, amusements were increasingly stratified along the lines of class, sex and race (15). The legitimate theater “divorced itself from the popular stage of minstrelsy, variety and burlesque,” and made itself “fit for respectable women by leaving the masses to their own amusement, eliminating the male anarchy and drinking of the pit and gallery and removing the prostitutes from the third tier” (Erenberg 16). “An informal street life and mixed amusement scene characteristic of the preindustrial city gave way then to the increasingly complexity and specialization of the industrial city” (15). Public life was “increasingly divided,” and “the private realm of home diverged from the values of public life” (Erenberg 5). By the 1890s, however, Erenberg notes, “this Victorian cultural style would disintegrate as both sexes were drawn to a popular culture rooted in the lower orders” (5-6). “Out of the questioning of sex roles and cultural precepts,” he argues, “emerged a newer
conception of the family, a redefinition of success, a new set of amusements, and a new urban culture. One prominent new amusement was the cabaret, a place where respectable men and women could gather to dine, drink, dance and view risqué entertainment together" (24-5). The cabaret "evolved," Erenberg points out, from the luxury hotels, restaurants, and new amusements of the turn of the century (25). Beginning in the 1890s then, "a new era in nightlife was in the making, an age of mammoth glittering hotels, restaurant parties, and ragtime tunes" (Erenberg 33). "A rising standard of living had changed the nature of status and success. The restraints surrounding individual pleasures were being loosened" (Erenberg 43).

Indeed this new era in nightlife which Dreiser so vividly portrays in *Sister Carrie* would be a crucial force in disturbing Victorian notions of private and public space as well as Victorian notions of propriety. Erenberg’s description of the Waldorf, the hotel Carrie will eventually reside in, highlights the role the city’s hotels would play in this era of changing attitudes:

The expansion of fashionable nightlife started in 1893 with the opening of the Waldorf Hotel on Fifth Avenue . . . George C. Boldt . . . engineered the growing emergence of the wealthy from the sanctity of their private homes to the public opulence of his hotel dining rooms . . . With the continuous and even more rapid influx of new industrial wealth from the Midwest and West in the 1880s and 1890s, the wealthy began to abandon its more formally restrictive social life for a more public one. The hotel stands as the symbol of a new openness by the late 1890s. According to Lloyd Morris, the Waldorf Astoria symbolized New York’s "aspiration to lead an expensive gregarious life as publicly as possible." (34)

Erenberg concludes that "the Waldorf’s ability to attract the wealthy to its public dining room marks a transition in New York nightlife," and that the Waldorf became a "public place that advertised and purveyed luxury to the masses" (35, 39).
Conspicuous Consumption and the Shaping of Desire

Even in the early days of the nineteenth century, hotels had important 'public' roles, and the splendor of various hotels had earned them the name of "palaces of the public," setting them apart from European inns and hotels (Boorstin 135). Alexander Mackay, an English barrister who traveled around the United States in 1846, was especially struck by the uniqueness of American hotels. "With us," he writes, "hotels are regarded as purely private property, and it is seldom that in their appearance, they stand out from the mass of private houses around them. In America, they are looked upon much more in the light of public concerns and generally assume the character of public buildings" (Boorstin 135). "Lacking a royal palace as the center of 'society,'" Daniel Boorstin observes, "Americans created their counterpart in the community hotel" (135). "In the period of most rapid urban growth, it was not by churches or government buildings but by hotels that cities judged themselves and expected others to judge them" (Boorstin 135). "The hotel lobby like the outer rooms of a royal palace became a loitering place, a headquarters of gossip, a vantage point for a glimpse of the great, the rich and the powerful" (Boorstin 135). Hotels were also important because they were "testing places for the most advanced domestic conveniences":

The great amount of capital employed in hotel construction and the desire to outshine competitors for both business and civic reasons made them laboratories and showcases of progress in the technology of everyday life. The large transient population of hotels provided a rare opportunity to whet public appetite for machines, conveniences and gadgets of all kinds. And this opportunity for large scale experiments and display eventually played a part in developing an American standard of living.(137)

Well before the arrival of the Waldorf then, much of the nation's wealth and energy had been concentrated around the hotel. What also set American hotels apart was the number of hotel residents who called the hotel 'home': "Travelers from abroad, impressed by the number, size and conveniences of American hotels were also shocked by how many
Americans lived in them permanently" (Boorstin 145). Isabel and Basil March, for example, find "there was no place in the world so delightful as a hotel apartment," and before they begin searching for their new home, Isabel assures Basil, "if everything else fails, we can come back to this" (Howells 37). Indeed as Elizabeth Wilson points out, in the nineteenth century, the large number of people living in hotels was a prominent feature of urban life in America:

To a greater extent than in Europe, housing forms developed to suit the needs of those not living in the traditional family. Hotel and boarding house life were particular prevalent in American cities. Although criticized as a danger to morals and a threat to the family, the fashionable boarding house extended throughout all classes in American society from the mid-nineteenth century. Married couples as well as single persons lived in them, and they were important architecturally as well as socially. Purpose-built blocks such as Astor House in New York City and Tremont House in Boston were early examples, and by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, innovative middle-class apartments blocks continued this tradition of semi-communal living. Blocks of French flats such as the Hotel Pelham in New York were provided with the 'modern' 'labour saving' luxuries of elevators, central heating and bathrooms with hot and cold water... there were communal laundries and public dining rooms—so that in some ways these apartment blocks were reminiscent of Edward Bellamy's Boston of the year 2000. (74-5)

One of the significant aspects of Dreiser's urban vision is the attention he draws to the hotel, highlighting the crucial role it played in the nineteenth century American city—not only was the hotel an alternative domestic realm for a people 'on the move,' it was also a means of displaying the nation's wealth, a spectacle creating and shaping desire.

Like his contemporary Thorstein Veblen, Dreiser's work also emphasizes that the values of conspicuous consumption were now the defining characteristic of American culture.25 Expanding his focus beyond the leisure class, Dreiser, however, dramatizes how an ethics of conspicuous consumption makes its way across the varied spectrum of class—resulting in a blurring or erasing of class identity even as real economic disparities between classes widen.

Carrie, a young working-class woman does not see herself as such; significantly, she does not identify with the struggles of her class. Even as they journey across a wide range of class positions, both Carrie and Hurstwood will remain committed to an ethos of competitive individualism, and in Dreiser’s city, there seems little room for any other view.

Only the strikers with their sense of class solidarity oppose the consumer economy’s competitive individualism. Making an impassioned plea to Hurstwood, one of the strike leaders persuasively presents his case: “Listen we’re all working men like yourself . . . you wouldn’t want anyone to do out your chance to get your rights, would you?”(309). Although Hurstwood, like the strikers, cannot find a secure place for himself in the new economy, he does not see himself as partaking in their struggle. Even though the strike leader’s voice had “something appealing in it, ” he keeps his eye “straight on,” pretending not to see (31).

Hurstwood remains unaffected, unchanged—separate from these other workers, and in that separation, that isolation, he will die. As Dreiser’s depiction of the strike reinforces for us, a communal sensibility can only exist on the outskirts of the city, on the margins of the text. Indeed Kaplan’s comparison of the strike scene in Sister Carrie with the strike scene in Hazard of New Fortunes illuminates the way Dreiser’s vision of the city contains the threat of class conflict:

March and Hurstwood each confront a strike that shatters their previous conceptions and eliminates their comfortable distance from such events. In Hazard, however, the strike crashes through the closed world of the characters in the foreground, and is viewed in terms of its effects on that settlement. The strike itself remains shadowy; it serves as a catalyst for the changes in the lives of the characters in the narrative . . . In Sister Carrie, Hurstwood leaves the world of his life with Carrie and enters an entirely separate realm in which the strike takes place. While in Sister Carrie, we do view the strike from the inside, its depiction, like the individual details in the text, has little effect on the trajectory or the lives of the characters. Carrie knows little about it and Hurstwood continues on the same downhill direction as before. While the representation of the conflict is more vivid and detailed than in Hazard, it is also more contained and less threatening—as though roped off in a separate sphere.(154-55)
Although Dreiser depicts class struggle within a more compelling style of realism, these scenes, as Kaplan stresses, almost superfluous to the world of the novel. What Dreiser’s novel does make compelling and central to the “trajectory” of his narrative is the fluidity of class, its instability as a kind of signifier in the new consumer culture. Through the character of Carrie, Dreiser suggests the irrelevance of class in shaping one’s consciousness, for it is the values of the leisure class which shape the desires of his working class heroine. Indeed as his novel dramatically demonstrates, a culture of conspicuous consumption was redefining American life, shaping and creating desire, and changing the tone and atmosphere of city life for everyone.

The wealthy class’s “stepping out” as Erenberg calls it, their propensity in the late nineteenth century to use America’s ‘public palaces’ to display their increasingly spectacular public life eventually trickles down to the middle classes, for the 1890s also saw the growth of the lobster palace restaurants which “glorified material pleasures and revealed an urban nightlife moving beyond the formalism of the Victorian world” (Erenberg 41). Mimicking the extravagance of the elite Fifth Avenue establishments, the “lobster palaces” with their heterogeneous crowds especially helped to redefine traditional Victorian boundaries and notions of propriety. “The Broadway restaurants helped make the life of conspicuous consumption available to a wider portion of the city and the nation”(Erenberg 41):

While Fifth Avenue and new wealth remained at the core of the Waldorf’s patronage, Broadway catered to the theatrical and sporting worlds’ new money, and the vast urban populace who wanted a good time . . . Unlike the Fifth Avenue hotels, Broadway restaurants were always open to the fast crowd made up of actors, actresses, those in the music business, chorus girls, wealthy stockbrokers and business men, and men seeking escape from the stifling formality of the exclusive circles. (Erenberg 50)

Indeed as Carrie dines at Sherry’s and later frequents those “rosy” Broadway restaurants “filled with merry lovers of late hours,” Dreiser vividly portrays this “new era of nightlife in
the making,” and as he does so, he shows us a growing resistance towards Victorian ideals of the family with its strict divisions between public and private, and male and female spheres (323). And as domesticity unravels in Dreiser’s novel, we see the increasingly important role of the public realm in constructing identity, in shaping desire; hotels and restaurants become spaces for “private” matters as well as spaces for public display. While we see a vague confused yearning for that sentimental version of home, there is nevertheless a persistent dissatisfaction with home, a sense of home’s inadequacies to deal with the larger, more complex urban environment. The novel not only shows us the failure of families to stay together and provide a sense of community, it also shows us various types of alternative domestic situations, experiments in living. Indeed Dreiser’s novel reinforces for us that home and family were being looked at with an especially critical eye at the same time that the city’s public spaces were consciously working at drawing people out of their homes.

**Dismantling the Home**

In the opening paragraph of the novel, Dreiser immediately does away with home. He tells us that the moment Carrie steps onto the train and passes the “familiar green environs of the village,” the “threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken” (1). Now and again Carrie will sigh as she thinks of the cottage in Columbia City, but these yearnings become muffled and lost as she encounters the spectacle of the metropolis. Carrie is immediately swept up by its “hypnotic influence,” and what Dreiser stresses at the novel’s very beginning is the extreme difficulty in reading the spectacle, its dangerous effects on perception:

A blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human hives, appeal to the astonished senses in equivocal terms. Without a counsellor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations, what falsehoods may not these things breathe into the unguarded ear! Unrecognized for what they are, their beauty, like music, too often relaxes, then weakens, then perverts the simpler human perceptions. (2)
Bringing to mind the concerns of earlier novels, the city here is a moral danger and an aesthetic view of it is a severely limited one. With its "blare of sound" and "roar of life," this city is more overwhelming than the Boston of Hawthorne or James. Like Howells's New York, its assault on the senses is more confusing, but it is also more dangerous. An interpreter is needed to "whisper caution," yet Carrie's "counsellor at hand" is more of a confidence man whose clothing and flair bring to mind Hawthorne's Westervelt, and whose theatrical posturing brings to mind James's Selma Tarrant. And like Westervelt who seemed to embody the temptations of the city for Coverdale, Drouet too appeals to all that Carrie desires. "In the great department stores he was at his ease," and when he tells Carrie "I know quite a number of people in your town, Morgenroth the clothier and Gibson the dry goods man," this increases her interest as she is "aroused by memories of longings their show windows had cost her" (4). Drouet, the narrator tells us, now "had a clew to her interest and followed it deftly" (4). Recalling the advice manuals of the antebellum period, here again is "a man whose final purpose was to lure his victim until your character and destiny become identified with his own" (Halttunen 32). Although Coverdale was attracted to Westervelt's urbanity, he was also suspicious and even claimed at one point, "I detested this kind of man because a part of my own nature showed itself responsive to him" (Hawthorne 95). Carrie however, falls completely under the influence of Drouet. Drouet is flashy, vain and a smooth talker but he is not sinister. The "masher" is a different type of poser; he is "actuated not by greed but by an insatiable love of pleasure" (3). Moreover, this confidence man will be conned as Carrie ends up deceiving him.

Rather than danger and anxiety, Drouet brings a warm radiance to Carrie while her sister only brings "cold reality" (8). Indeed sentimental family ties are subverted as "she felt something lost to her when he moved away," for "with her sister she was much alone, a lone figure in a tossing thoughtless sea" (8). Right at the onset then, Dreiser sets up a dramatic
contrast between home and the city’s spectacle by highlighting the magnetism and warmth of Drouet alongside the cold starkness of the Hanson’s apartment. The flat is a “narrow hum drum place” with walls “discordantly papered” (259). There is no delight in this domesticity, it is a “conservative round of toil” (10). The Hansons do not go to the theater, do not venture out of their small narrow world and they expect the same of Carrie. When Carrie stands in the doorway and Hanson comes down for bread so “he would see what Carrie was doing,” she feels “her first shade of real antipathy to him” (39). “She knew now that she did not like him. He was suspicious” (39). Here Carrie is confined, watched; stepping out towards the street is disapproved of; a young woman’s proper sphere in the evenings is within the domestic realm, but Carrie is chafing against these boundaries already. Not only does she feel an infringement on her freedom to enter public space, her desire for individual fulfillment is suppressed in other ways, for Dreiser makes it clear that Carrie’s value to her family is purely monetary, and that the needs of the family and the individual are at odds: While Hanson “contemplated increasing his Building and Loan payments,” Carrie “studied over the problem of finding clothes and amusements on fifty cents a week” (41). Carrie works hard, turning nearly all her earnings over without receiving any thanks or gratitude from her family. Unable to buy herself winter clothing before the cold weather sets in, she falls terribly ill and loses her job. Indeed at home, Carrie is most vulnerable; she experiences loneliness as well as physical hardship. With Drouet, however, she is sheltered, well protected. As Dreiser puts it, “she felt so relieved in his radiant presence, so much looked after and cared for” (44).

Indeed Drouet will take on the role of family. When he shows Carrie the outside of the rooms he will provide for her, he tells her, “Now you’re my sister” (54). Described as a “brotherly sort of creature,” he will nurture and encourage Carrie’s self expression, and like Westervelt and Tarrant he will “dress” up Carrie, and “evolve loveliness out of her”
Expanding Carrie’s vision, he takes her to the “old Windsor dining room,” selecting a table “close by the window where the busy rout of the street could be seen” so she too could enjoy “the changing panorama of the street”(44). He then helps a pale and listless Carrie to “a rousing plateful” and “contributes the warmth of his spirit to her body until she was a new girl”(45). Like Westervelt who seems to control the veiled Priscilla with his spirit, Drouet “captivated Carrie completely” (45). But it is as if he brings her back to life, not away from it. He does not veil Carrie; they enjoy the spectacle of public life together. We never see Carrie cower in fear, we never see her resist Drouet’s sexual advances. We only see him comfort her, shelter her, feed her. Whereas traditional domestic arrangements are repressive and lonely, Carrie’s illicit domesticity with Drouet is an opportunity for self discovery. There “were no household laws to govern her now,” Dreiser writes, and she feels her “first thrill of power” after putting on her new clothes (58). Her rooms with Drouet are warm and cozy whereas her sister’s home is bare, spartan, a place where she becomes depressed and sickly. As if to reinforce the lack of sentimental bonds in this new urban world, Drouet refers to Carrie’s family as “those people”(47). “Don’t you bother about those people,” he tells her, “I’ll help you”(47). But even in this alternative domestic arrangement, relations are still dominated by the market, for it is when Carrie takes money from Drouet, that she feels especially “bound by a strange tie of affection”(47).

It is not just the struggling working-class home, however, that fails to sustain its members. Moving up the social ladder, we continue to see the stifling and inadequate nature of domestic spaces when Dreiser elaborates on the “lovely home atmosphere” that is missing from Hurstwood’s home:

A lovely home atmosphere is one of the flowers of the world, than which there is nothing more tender, nothing more delicate, nothing more calculated to make strong and just the natures cradled and nourished within it. Those who have never experienced such a beneficent influence will not understand
wherefore the tear springs glistening to the eyelids at some strange breath in lovely music. The mystic chords which bind and thrill the heart of the nation, they will never know. (63)

The narrative voice here hearkens back to an antebellum sentimental domesticity—recalling the voices of the period’s many domestic novels and manuals. Since Hurstwood’s home is not “infused with this home spirit,” Dreiser emphasizes just how much this home has become a product of the marketplace (63).

There was fine furniture, arranged as soothingly as the artistic perception of the occupants warranted. There were soft rugs, rich upholstered chairs and divans, a grand piano, a marble carving of some unknown Venus by some unknown artist, and a number of small bronzes gathered from heaven knows where, but generally sold by the large furniture houses along with everything else which goes to make the “perfectly appointed house” (63).

In a house where the furnishings are products of mass production, home seems to lose all of its sentimental associations. Indeed rather than a sentimental space which shelters personal objects with private meanings, home becomes a marker of status only, a home like many other homes conforming to the dictates of fashion. Hurstwood notices “the house looked nice,” but he also notices that he is estranged from his family; “he was losing track of their doings” (66, 106). Bringing to mind the families we see in Hawthorne, James and Howells, an ethic of individualism rather than sentimental community predominates. Like the Marches in *Hazard of New Fortunes*, this too is a family of individuals, but even more so as husband and wife as well as parent and child are indifferent towards one another. Moreover, in the Hurstwood family, indifference has turned to resentment and anger, and Hurstwood can only watch the “indifference and independence growing . . . while he looked on and paid the bills” (106). The Hurstwood family display little affection towards one another; each is wrapped up in their own individual quests for power and prestige. Jessica wants new clothes, Mrs. Hurstwood conspicuously consumes her husband’s earning in a desperate attempt to enter society, and the secretive George has “considerable vanity and a love of
pleasure” (64). Since Hurstwood has little authority or respect in his own home, “The life of the resort which he managed was his life. There he spent most of his time” (66). An outsider in his own family, he will eventually be locked out of his home as his wife files for divorce – the “game” was to “shut him out and make him pay” (173). As Dreiser remarks of this family home, it “ran along by force of habit, by conventional opinion,” and “must eventually be tinder, easily lighted and destroyed” (68). Once again the traditional Victorian notion of home and family is desentimentalized and destabilized as the home merely becomes an extension of the urban theatricality and hypocrisy it was supposed to protect its members from.

Besides portraying stifling homes which harbor little affection and afford no protection, Dreiser also shows us alternative types of domesticity which reflect the period’s inclination towards “individual fulfillment.” Mr. And Mrs. Hale, for example—Carries’ neighbors—are described as the “common sort today who live respectably from hand to mouth... Mrs. Hale affected the feeling of youth, and objected to that sort of home life which means the care of a house and raising of a family”(77). When she enters the theatrical world of New York, Carrie is exposed to even more alternative domestic arrangements. Lola Osborne, from the chorus line shows Carrie her “comfortable back room” on 18th Street and explains why she can’t live with her family: “I can’t get along with my people.” “They always want me to do what they want”(289). Carrie and Hurstwood will also eventually set up their own alternative domestic arrangement, reversing traditional gender roles as their needs and desires change. And in the end, Carrie will give up her own private space for the wealthy splendor and public life offered her in one of New York’s exclusive hotels. Indeed traditional domestic arrangements are no longer held sacred or immutable. As characters remake their identities, these spaces must also be revised and reformulated.
Deciphering the Spectacle

When Carrie first arrived in Chicago, she would leave the somber interior of her sister’s flat each evening to stand at the doorway because, as she puts it, “I want to see something” (42). While the novel insists that one must leave domestic space to expand vision, what one sees does not necessarily educate as it does in Howells’s work. The paradox of Dreiser’s city is that although there is so much more to see—with electric lighting, broad avenues, glass plate windows, tall buildings affording panoramic vistas—this visual excess only results in a kind of emptiness. As Wirth Nesher points out:

Dreiser’s city is a visual world propelled by the suggestiveness of partial views and the desire to both see and be seen . . .  [t]he divisions in Dreiser’s city are not the literal geopolitical or legal boundaries . . .  The only walls are walls of economic and social difference internalized by the city dwellers themselves. The city is actually experienced then as a place dominated by the promise of accessibility as represented by visual access made possible by high density, high-rises, and the newly fashionable plate-glass windows, transparent walls inviting the outsider to enter and to partake of the interior. The city seduces its dwellers with visual plenitude then mercilessly shuts them out. (66)

When Carrie is beginning her job search, Dreiser stresses this “visual plenitude” which seduces and yet overwhelms Carrie with a sense of her own insignificance: “She walked bravely forward, led by an honest desire to find employment and delayed at every step by the interest of the unfolding scene, and a sense of helplessness amid so much evidence of power and force which she did not understand“ (12). Dreiser emphasizes Carrie’s inability to read the abundance of visual stimuli. The city’s “vast railroad yards,” its “huge factories lining the water’s edge,” and its “ vast offices”—“what they dealt in, how they laboured . . .  she had only a vague conception” (13). “She could have understood the meaning of a little stone-cutter’s yard at Columbia City, carving little pieces of marble for individual use but when the yards of some huge stone corporation came into view . . .  it lost all significance in her little world’ (13). Carrie is unable to interpret the city’s facades—they become a spectacle
evoking a kind of fantasy world for her. Her view, in a sense, erases what Jacob Riis would call "The Other Half." Workers, sweat, toil disappear. She could only think of people connected with these buildings as "counting money, dressing magnificently, and riding in carriages"(13)

Carrie’s experience brings to mind Alan Trachtenberg’s observations regarding the “Chicago School” of architecture of the late 1880s and 1890s, an architecture that had a “practical effect” of “dressing new structures bearing modern functions in old garb, confusing their identity with spectacle”(119). “Thus architecture came to stand for educated and tasteful ‘picturing,’ and in its academic practices it reared buildings which furthered the sense of dislocation in everyday life: discontinuity and fracture between what facades and interiors implied, between allusions of visible designs and invisible organizations of life performed in the building”(119). Indeed the theatrical inclination of the city’s buildings, their “high and mighty air” make interpretation exceedingly difficult for Carrie as well as encourage her seduction and estrangement:

The large plates of window glass, now so common, were then rapidly coming into use, and gave to the ground floor offices a distinguished and prosperous look. The casual wanderer could see as he passed a polished array of office fixtures, much frosted glass, clerks hard at work and genteel business men in nobby suits and clean linen lounging about or sitting in groups. Polished brass or nickel signs at the square stone entrances announced the firm and the nature of the business in rather neat and reserved terms. The entire metropolitan centre possessed a high and mighty air calculated to overawe and abash the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep. (12)

Viewing these buildings generates conflicting feelings for Carrie: “it was wonderful, all vast, all far removed and she sank in spirit as she thought of entering any one of these mighty concerns . . . ”(13) What is also emphasized here is the masculinity of these spaces. What is displayed, what is seen is the gentlemen in “nobby suits and clean linen.” The female
workers are hidden away in the back; it is a male preserve that Carrie must enter, and this too contributes to her feelings of being shut out.

When Carrie finally does enter one of these imposing buildings, she discovers that somewhere in the background of these “mighty concerns” there will inevitably be a factory. At first she is taken to the stock room, “which gave no idea of the general character of the place,” so “she could form no opinion on the nature of the work” (21). After being told to report on Monday, however, Carrie believes “her new firm was a goodly institution. Its windows were of huge plate glass” (21). It is only later when she is taken to the “factory proper,” when she is “led the way through dark, box-lined aisles . . . until they come to an iron door,” and a “large, low-ceiled room with clacking, rattling machines,” that she sees what else makes up that successful store front (27). Carrie, however, never wants to hold on to this connection for too long. She prefers to view the city spectacle aesthetically. Carrie’s inability to perceive echoes the concerns Dreiser had earlier expressed about vision and the city in the magazine Ev’ry Month in 1896. What troubled Dreiser is precisely what characterizes Carrie’s way of seeing: the inclination to see only the aesthetic view, the spectacle, the surface and therefore to be blind, to be unable to see:

Men do not ask themselves whether once in the great city its wonders will profit them any . . . They never consider that the life, and dash and fire of metropolitan life is based on something and not a mere exotic sprung from nothing and living on air . . . Perceive first that what delights you is only the outer semblance, the bloom of the plant. These streets and boulevards, these splendid mansions and gorgeous hotels, these vast structures which thousands surge and toward which luxurious carriages roll are the fair flowers of a rugged stalk . . . Down in the dark earth are the roots, drawing life and strength and sending them coursing up the veins; and down in alleys and byways in the shop and small dark chambers are the roots of this luxurious highlife starving and toiling the long year through . . . These endless streets which only present their fascinating surface are the living semblance of the hands and hearts that lie unseen within them. They are the gay covering which conceals the sorrow and want and ceaseless toil upon which all this is built. (398)
Though Carrie experiences some of that "ceaseless toil," her work experience is far less influential in shaping her consciousness than the city's spectacle. Though Carrie sees what lies beyond the beautiful, imposing plate glass window, she detaches herself from the reality of working class life, leaving it behind, and remaking her identity. She identifies with the upper classes, with the people in power. Her consciousness is more of a mirror of the culture's dominant values; her desires dictated by the trends in the department store, the Broadway parade and the theater crowd. Like Coverdale, Carrie surveys the city and peers into its many mysterious spaces, feeling desire heighten as well as a sense of despair in being an outsider. More so than Coverdale, however, she feels the power these city spaces have over her—as much as she gazes and enjoys the spectacle, she too is being gazed upon. While at first this pains her, eventually this becomes her one desire—to be the object of everyone's gaze. Unlike Priscilla and Verena who ultimately wish to be rescued from this fate, Carrie will rush headlong into it. To be seen, to be a spectacle—to make a visual display—is now the very sign of success.

In her discussion of the novel, Gammel also looks at how the city's public spaces shape Carrie's consciousness. She sees these spaces as determining Carrie's consciousness to such an extent that she compares them to Foucault's notion of the Panopticon, whereas the domestic spaces and the factory which deny pleasure and the body are comparable to the dungeon. As she puts it, "Dreiser emphasizes the architectural and spatial transformation that creates panoptic city spaces... the darkness of the dungeon is swept away by a flood of everlasting light, a space that conquers the blackness of night with lamps, lanterns and electricity" (219). "The panoptic city," she writes, "inevitably takes hold of the individual not through repression and denial of the body, the more primitive strategies of the dungeon, but by exploiting desire, by tempting the victim into pleasurable submission" (Gammel 220). Gammel believes that the novel's "specular pleasure" is "a metonymic representation for the
seductive power of the city, for the fact that modern power works through seduction rather than repression" (Gammel 221).

Indeed it seems the more Carrie sees in the city, the more she is seduced, and the less she understands. As Dreiser writes, "she did not grow in knowledge so much as she awakened in the matter of desire" (86). Driving with Mrs. Hale, for example, to view the great mansions of Chicago, she experiences that "specular pleasure," that awakening of desire, and Dreiser’s language highlights the seductive quality of this scene:

Across the broad lawns, now first freshening into green, she saw lamps faintly glowing upon rich interiors. Now it was but a chair, now a table, now an ornate corner which met her eye, but it appeared as almost nothing else could. Such childish fancies as she had had of fairy palaces and kingly quarters now came back. She imagined that across these richly carved entrance-ways, where the globed and crystallized lamps shone upon panelled doors set with stained designed panes of glass, was neither care nor unsatisfied desire. She was perfectly certain that here was happiness. If she could but stroll up yon walk... Oh how quickly sadness would flee... She gazed and gazed wondering, delighting, longing and all the while the siren voice of the unrestful was whispering in her ear. (86)

It is interesting that what the eye lingers on here are “things”—it is things that speak to Carrie. She imagines that “here was happiness,” but she does not see a contented happy family, only a table, a chair. These richly adorned homes are strangely empty. Indeed Dreiser’s description reinforces for us that “within the logic of consumer imagery, the source of creative power is the object world, invested with the subjective power of ‘personality’” (Ewen 49). And as longings are continually displaced onto objects, what Carrie longs for becomes unclear, confused. Later on, as she rocks to and fro and thinks of these mansions, her own rooms seem insignificant, and she asks herself, “What was Drouet? What was she?” (87). Her wondering about her relationship with this man who still has not married her is jumbled up with her desire for more things so that she “longed and longed and longed” (87). Her feelings seems to reflect the tension of the culture at large as they...
fluctuate between the longing for the past sentimental version of home and the present material wealth she encounters in the city: “It was now for the old cottage room in Columbia city, now the mansion upon Shore Drive” (87).

These longings for material wealth and status only increase when she reaches New York with Hurstwood, for New York even more so than Chicago is a city that “mercilessly shuts one out.” As Dreiser puts it, “The great create an atmosphere which reacts badly upon the small”:

The atmosphere is easily and quickly felt. Walk among the magnificent residences, the splendid equipages, the gilded shops, restaurants, resorts of all kinds; scent the flowers, the silks, the wines; drink of the laughter springing from the soul of luxurious content, of the glances which gleam like light from defiant spears; feel the quality of the smiles which cut like glistening swords and of strides born of place, and you shall know of what is the atmosphere of the high and mighty . . . One day of it . . . will so affect and discolor the views, the aims, the desire of the mind, that it will thereafter remain forever dyed. A day of it to the untried mind is like opium to the untried body. (214)

What characterizes the language of this passage is its mixture of pain and pleasure. “Flowers” “silks,” the “drink of laughter” are experienced alongside the glances that gleam like a “defiant spear.” Smiles too are sharp, potentially deadly as they “cut like glistening swords.” The reference to opium conjures up a sense of fantasy and pleasure as well as a sense of oblivion and deterioration, a loss of consciousness. Here in New York is seduction and danger—the heights of ecstasy, the agony of withdrawal. This is the city where Hurstwood had heard the “most inviting stories of pleasure and luxury,” yet this is also the city where he is the “inconspicuous drop” (215). Carrie’s promenade on Broadway, meanwhile, shows her a most “imposing procession of pretty faces and fine clothes,” yet this will also only serve to “cut her to the quick” (226-7).

For awhile Carrie and Hurstwood’s domestic life functions as a haven from the cruel extremities found in New York. For awhile they are shut off from its luxurious pleasures, its
degrading hardships. Watching it all from a distance, Carrie seems content, “She looked
much at what she could see of the Hudson from her west windows and of the great city
building up rapidly on either hand. It was much to ponder over and sufficed to entertain her
for more than a year without becoming stale”(220). At this point, home itself provides the
setting for aesthetic delight. When Hurstwood arrives for dinner, “the white covered table
was arrayed with pretty dishes and lighted with a four armed candelabra, each light of
which was topped with a red shade”(221). Since she takes delight in beautifying the flat,
Hurstwood believes that Carrie is “of the thoroughly domestic type of mind”(222). As his
business picks up, and he allows himself to sometimes stay away from home, he does not
think about bringing Carrie with him: “He supplied the furniture, the decorations, the food,
and the necessary clothing. Thoughts of entertaining her, leading her out into the shine and
show of life, grew less and less. He felt attracted to the outer world, but did not think she
would care to go along”(222). Extremely isolated in her New York flat, Carrie “had not
gained any friends or associates”(222). As she tells Hurstwood, “I don’t know a soul” (223).
Indeed while Hurstwood lives more separate public life, and Carrie tends to her domestic
tasks in isolation, the boundaries between domestic and public space seem secure and solid.
As he did once before, Hurstwood becomes a mere supplier of goods and nothing else. Male
and female spheres, private and public life become rigidly opposed and separated, but this
domestic haven from urban temptation can only be a temporary, tentative interlude, for
forces are at work which will undo this extremely private space. It too “must eventually be
tinder”(68).

The temptations, the wealth, the pleasure of New York’s nightlife, as well as the city’s
economic uncertainties will inevitably infringe upon their domesticity. Old longings
reappear with the arrival of the Vances—a flamboyant couple who take advantage of the
rich public life New York has to offer. The dramatic Mrs. Vance plays piano and wears the
latest fashions, while Mr. Vance's flattery and attentive ways remind Carrie of what "she had subconsciously missed in Hurstwood" (225). Mrs. Vance brings Carrie to the theaters, the Broadway parade and reminds her what styles are "all the rage," so that just as Hurstwood's business begins to fail, Carrie's desires expand, and she feels her "life was becoming stale and therein she felt cause for gloom" (231, 225). It is at Sherry's that Carrie becomes more acutely aware of the sparseness, the dullness of her domestic life, for here she gets a taste of that nightlife which Erenberg tells us was beginning to undermine Victorian boundaries and propriety during the 1890s. Indeed entering the lavishness of New York's public spaces she crosses another threshold of desire:

Carrie had noticed the appearance of gayety and pleasure seeking in the streets... At fifty ninth street Fifth Avenue a blaze of lights from several new hotels which bordered the Plaza Square gave a suggestion of sumptuous hotel life... At Sherry's an imposing doorman opened the coach door and helped them out... In all Carrie's experience she had never seen anything like this. In the whole time she had been in New York, Hurstwood's modified state had not permitted his bringing her to such a place. There was an indescribable atmosphere about it which convinced the newcomer that this was the proper thing. Here was the place where the matter of expense limited the patrons to the moneyed or pleasure-loving class... Carrie had read of it often in The Morning or The Evening World... Now at last she was really in it. (233-4)

Carrie, for the moment, feels that she is a part of the city's wealth and splendor and the restaurant's decor works to create this exclusive atmosphere. Reinforcing the power of a consumer culture's "world of goods," Dreiser points out the ability of brand names to create remarkable effects as well as the restaurant's use of light and color to create drama and richness: "The tables were not remarkable in themselves and yet the imprint of Sherry upon the napery, the name of Tiffany upon the silverware, the name of Haviland upon the china, and over the small, red shaded candelabra and the reflected tints of the walls on garments and faces made them seem remarkable" (235). As Philip Fisher observes, Carrie seeks to be "absorbed temporarily into the magical life of things" (134) "The vitality of objects in the
city—what Walter Benjamin called the 'sex appeal' of objects—is generated by the style and atmosphere that they propose to us” (Fisher 134). Indeed as Wirth Nesher points out:

Dreiser tends to privilege commercial landmarks over historical, political or religious ones, and he names them specifically, for the names invoke the only magic in his world: Lord and Taylor, Altman’s, the Plaza, and the Gilsey, along with the Waldorf Astoria, Sherry’s and Delmonico’s . . . The concept of “brand, “ . . . according to Baudrillard, “summarizes well the possibilities of a language of consumption . . . the function of the brand name is to signal the product; its secondary function is to mobilize connotations of affect” (Wirth-nesher 82).

The effect the restaurants strive to produce requires more than brand names, however. What impresses Carrie most about the restaurant’s extensive theatricality is “all the little things that were done—the little genuflections and attentions of the waiters . . . the air with which he motioned them to be seated” (234). Customers, in a sense, are to be treated like royalty, for as Erenberg reminds us, many of the new restaurants of the period would “heighten the impression that their patrons were part of the world of wealth and opulence . . . From the elaborate exteriors to the gilded interiors, the restaurants removed their patrons from the humdrum business activity of Broadway and brought them fantasies of Europe and the past” (45). “The regal and aristocratic imagery testified to a patron’s ability to consume” (45). “Here,” Erenberg asserts, “was an urban architecture that turned its back on the cramped, small spaces of genteel institutions and the dark design of gothic structures of the past generation and identified with an urban concern for comfort, pleasure and well being” (45).

Indeed Dreiser’s description of Sherry’s interior reinforces this concern for comfort and pleasure as well as the new architecture’s playing to aristocratic pretensions:

[O]n the walls were designs in colour, square spots of robin’s egg blue, set in ornate frames of gilt, whose corners were elaborate mouldings of fruit and flowers, with fat cupids hovering in angelic comfort. On the ceilings were coloured traceries with more gilt, leading to a centre where spread a cluster of lights . . . and in every direction were mirrors—tall, brilliant, bevel-edged
mirrors—reflecting and re-reflecting forms, faces, and candelabra a score and a hundred times.

This passage highlights not only the attention to creating an aristocratic Old World atmosphere, but also to creating an atmosphere of excess and abundance as the mirrors reflect and re-reflect forms "a score and a hundred times." The mirrors also reinforce another central characteristic of New York nightlife at the turn of the century—this concern with seeing and being seen, this inclination for private gatherings to become opportunities for public display, this "stepping out" from private formalities to a more gregarious and theatrical public space.

While Carrie is overwhelmed by all the visual plenitude at Sherry's, Ames, the philosophical engineer from the Midwest casts a critical eye upon it. Ames's assertion that one "doesn't need this sort of thing to be happy" is a "new attitude" to Carrie and unsettles her as Ames seems to be far "wiser" —"to get a hold of things she did not quite understand" (237). Though Ames seems to represent an alternative to consumerism, he does not function as such for Carrie. As Walter Benn Michaels points out, for Carrie, he is "someone who puts an end to her self-satisfaction by creating for her a new desire." (43) 'If I were you,' he tells Carrie, 'I'd change' (42). "The ideal Ames represents is not an alternative to her consumer mode of being, but an ideal of dissatisfaction, of perpetual desire" (Michaels 43). After her meeting with Ames, Carrie rocks in her chair that night, and Dreiser repeats, "Through a fog of longing and conflicting desires she was beginning to see. Oh ye legions of hope and pity—of sorrow and pain! She was rocking and beginning to see" (238). Through her encounter with Ames, Carrie's desires expand. She is beginning to see Hurstwood's neglect, and her outsider status more sharply, and eventually, she will begin to see and desire so much more. Her view of the city will change as will Hurstwood's when they are both in effect catapulted
out of their precarious class positions—one to grand new heights and the other to unspeakable, unimaginable depths.

**The Spectacle and the Flaneur**

Carrie’s rise begins when she perfects urban theatricality, when she instinctively frowns and delights her audience who see her as “a delicious little morsel” (326). “All the gentlemen yearned toward her. She was capital” (326). As she is commodified and ‘consumed,’ she becomes a kind of precious object, something of value to the culture who will pay dearly to see her dance and act. Bringing to mind Priscilla and Verena, we see once again a spectacle of exaggerated “feminine” performance as well as an audience of spectators shaped by “masculine” desire. Priscilla in her veiled mystery, Verena in her role as an aesthetic object, and Carrie playing her part as the “demure and dainty” Quaker maid “in need of protection,” all appeal to familiar stereotypes of women (138). And as these stereotypes are performed and commodified, they become an inextricable part of the spectacle of consumer culture.

In their readings of *Sister Carrie*, both Lori Merish and Rachel Bowlby discuss the implications of consumer culture for women. Merish argues that in coming to the city, Carrie “awakens to the practice of compulsory self-scrutiny that feminists have seen to be endemic to consumer culture. While Carrie is “learning to look—becoming a consumer subject—she is also learning to see herself as an object according to increasingly exacting commodity standards of taste and social distinction. Crucially the gaze which determines value is male as well as culturally specific; that gaze is authorized by a masculine aesthetics underwritten by male economic power” (321). Bowlby also looks at the “forms of modern consumer subjectivity and the making of willing female consumers” (11). “It was above all to women that the new commerce made its appeal,” she writes, “urging and inviting them to procure
its luxurious benefits and produce sexually attractive images for themselves. They were to become in a sense like prostitutes in their active, commodified self display and also to take on the one role almost never theirs in actual prostitution: that of consumer" (Bowlby 11). Here perhaps is the crucial difference in Carrie’s commodified self display. Unlike Priscilla and Verena, Carrie plays the role of ‘consumer’; she is able to reap the economic benefits of her performance. Both Priscilla and Verena are ‘managed’ by others, and their desire to perform is not as clear or insistent as Carrie’s desire is. Moreover, it is suggested that both of these women are ‘saved’ from public life, even though the more traditional domesticity they enter into is far from liberating. What is startlingly different in Dreiser’s work then is that Carrie is not saved from a life of conspicuous display, and that this display is the sure sign of her success.

Indeed recalling the flamboyant theatricality of Zenobia which so unsettled Coverdale, Carrie becomes the consummate actress, at home in the cosmopolitan whirl of city life. Hurstwood, on the other hand, becomes more like Coverdale, the detached spectator, retreating ever more deeply into his private domain. Indeed while Carrie’s life becomes more public, more of a performance, Hurstwood stops performing. He no longer even shaves or dresses. Looking for a job, he will not play the right part—he does not act humble enough and his refusal to perform, to dress himself up for the theater of life contributes to his inevitable failure and decline. As his business begins to fail, the Vances move and Carrie feels Hurstwood’s neglect and indifference more acutely. They must move to a humbler flat which significantly has no view—“there were no trees, no west view of the river”—and here Hurstwood can only brood. (243) At this point Dreiser emphasizes the darkness of their domestic space. When Hurstwood comes home, “the flat had only a light in the kitchen, where Carrie was working”(248). Another night he finds “Carrie reading quite alone. It was rather dark in the flat, shut in as it was”(255). Soon Hurstwood craves this darkness, where
the “busy distracting suggestive scene” could be “shut out”(255). Eventually he will move to a fifteen cent lodging house where “his preference was to close his eyes and dream of other days”(336). Hurstwood will remain at home—completely detached from public life—while Carrie will take center stage as performer. A once flamboyant performer himself, a master of theatricality, Hurstwood now has a new identity; he has become a kind of flaneur.

Reminiscent of the distinctly modern, urbane consciousness Hawthorne created in Miles Coverdale, Dreiser’s Hurstwood also recalls the flaneur who “reduces the disorienting diversity of the city to accessible images that can be collected and consumed”(Brand 7). Like the flaneur, Hurstwood will collect and consume the bewildering details of the city to achieve a sense of distance and control, but he does this in such a way that he is even more detached from the urban world he observes. Unlike the flaneur, Hurstwood depends on the newspaper for interpreting the spectacle, for Hurstwood is a sedentary passive flaneur: the confusing details of the city have already been ordered for him.

Indeed Dreiser’s depiction of Hurstwood’s decline dramatizes in vivid detail the role of the newspaper in shaping urban consciousness and contributing to the unreality of city life. While the newspaper eventually becomes his one link to city life, as argued by Kaplan, it also enables him to escape from that life. Indeed the newspaper often portrays a spectacular city that seems more and more unreal:

He buried himself in his papers and read. Oh the rest of it—the relief from walking and thinking! What Lethean waters were these floods of telegraphed intelligence! . . . Here was a young, handsome woman, if you might believe the newspaper drawing, suing a rich fat candy making husband in Brooklyn for divorce. Here was another item detailing the wrecking of a vessel in snow and ice off Prince’s Bay on Staten Island. A long bright column told of the doings of the theatrical world . . . Fannie Davenport was just opening at the Fifth Avenue. Daly was producing King Lear. He read of the early departure for the season of a party composed of the Vanderbilts and their friends for Florida. An interesting shooting affray was on in the mountains of Kentucky. So he read and read, rocking in the warm room near the radiator and waiting for dinner to be served. (252)
Slipping into this highly private domestic realm, the world outside becomes less real, far removed. The newspaper keeps Hurstwood safe; one could say it provides that aesthetic distance he so needs to feel any kind of power in his life, a life which has gone so awry.

Gunther Barth's observations regarding the rise of the metropolitan press in the nineteenth century illuminate how the newspaper both helped urban dwellers interpret the spectacle of the city at the same time that it made sure that the city, in a sense, remained a spectacle. First of all, Garth emphasizes the necessity of the newspaper to interpret an increasingly urbanized world: "The rapid increase of the population, its heterogeneous nature, and the steady extension of the city into the countryside invalidated daily gossip and personal experience as sources of information in the modern city" (Barth 61). "Being informed," he points out, "was a substitute for the visible ordering of people by appearance or location that in earlier centuries had allowed throngs of strangers to live city lives" (62). Also, "the fluid geography of the city, in which buildings, viaducts and bridges gave way to new ones before they had aged, increased the residents' longing to see in black and white what the city had in store for them" (Barth 61). "The burgeoning newspaper industry," Barth concludes, "represented the response of one instrument of communication to a new market created by the longing of urban masses for identity" (59). Indeed P.T. Barnum reinforces the urban masses' need for the newspaper when he announces, "He who is without a newspaper is cut off from his species" (Barth 61).

As the metropolitan press strove to make the city spectacle readable, a new format in the latter part of the nineteenth century was developed. The paper was "divided into sections" and "subdivisions" were created "with the help of columns, corners, and pages" (Barth 80). "The sections of news reports, editorials, human interest stories and advertisements imposed a rational order on a chaotic urban life" (Barth 80). "The practice of throwing all news items
together into the columns of a paper without reference to either character or locality is gradually but surely dying out," one journalist observed in 1887, "It is comparatively rare now-a-days to find a wedding following a murder, and a church dedication a raid on a disorderly house" (Barth 80). Along with ordering the bewildering diversity of the city, the press also sought to attract a wide audience by making the paper entertaining. Indeed "in 1891, a French journalist viewed American newspapers as servants of the people who wanted straight news as well as entertainment, and compared the metropolitan press to a large store, with its goods—stories—merchandised attractively so as to strike the shopper's attention as quickly as possible" (Barth 65). Dreiser himself learned before he quit newsreporting in 1895 that his city editor wanted not merely accuracy and facts, but a "flair for the ridiculous or the remarkable, even if it had to be invented, so that the paper and life itself might not seem so dull" (Barth 67).

Indeed in order to make the city readable, the press inevitably makes the city "unreal." As Alan Trachtenberg explains, "the dailies dramatized a paradox of metropolitan life":

[T]he more knowable the world came to seem as information, the more remote and opaque it came to seem as experience. The more people needed newspapers for a sense of the world, the less did newspapers seem able to satisfy that need by yesterday's means, and the greater the need for shock and sensation, for spectacle. Yet in providing surrogate experience, the newspaper only deepened the separations it seemed to overcome—deepened them by giving them a precise form: the form of reading and looking... News represented in typographical form of columns of print serves, suggested the German critic Walter Benjamin in the twentieth century, "to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader." Unlike the printed page of a novel, the newspaper page declares itself without mistake as good only for a day... as if today's history of the world has nothing in common with yesterday's or tomorrow's except the repetition of the typographical form. Thus by isolating information from experience, the daily newspaper deadens memory while making reality banal... Assuming separation in the very act of seeming to dissolve it... the newspapers expressed concretely this estrangement of a consciousness no longer capable of free intimacy with its own material life. (125)
Echoing Holmes’s earlier concerns regarding decontextualization and the camera, information is now divorced from experience. In order for an event to become a story, in order for that story to be digested as information, it must be wrested to a certain extent from its rich and complicated context. Processing information from a newspaper is far different from physically encountering the city’s complexity. While the newspaper may widen vision as it provides information, in another sense that widened vision is superficial and may give one a false sense of community or identity. Kaplan’s discussion of Hurstwood and the strike illustrates this point particularly well:

While reading about the strike, he can sympathize with both sides, just as he can read about different social classes. The newspaper in this respect, evokes a sense of community, of shared community filtered through information at the same time that it upholds the reader’s sense of himself as outside observer. Hurstwood’s experience of the strike dispels both senses—of community and neutrality; when he ventures out of his apartment as a scab, he is not prepared for the intensity of social conflict, and is forced to take sides. He must either be seen and attacked as a scab, join the strikers, or leave. There is no neutral position. Reading the newspaper allows him to take all three positions simultaneously. (154)

As it enables him to empathize with all sides, the newspaper widens Hurstwood’s vision, but it also keeps him forever an outsider, a nonparticipant. In order to avoid conflict, maintain some sense of control, some sense of power, Hurstwood wants to remain the detached spectator, and it is the newspaper which provides him with the privilege of spectatorship. As it teaches him to read the city, it also provides relief and an escape from “real life.” It is this living life at a distance, this emotional detachment which recalls the flaneur, and the troubled consciousness of Miles Coverdale. Indeed eventually, Hurstwood’s view of the city will illustrate this alienation: “He began to see as one sees a city with a wall about it. Men were posted at the gates. You could not get in. Those inside did not care to come out to see who you were. They were so merry inside there that all those outside were forgotten and he was on the outside” (241).
After he loses his job and his comfortable middle-class position, Hurstwood invariably sees differently. The walls are no longer transparent or seductive; the windows are shut, the doors are barred and public space is really not so public anymore. He is no longer as comfortable in hotel lobbies as he is a "lounger," and as his situation deteriorates, he is more noticeably a "bum"; "police hustled him along, restaurant and lodging house keepers turned him out promptly the moment he had his due" (361). As Hurstwood descends into darkness, into rented domestic spaces, into rooms without views, and eventually to the point where "his eyes were beginning to hurt him," and "he did not attempt to read," Carrie rises beyond the confines of her spartan domesticity, beyond those city gates Hurstwood imagines, to the glamorous highlife of Broadway.

Carrie’s entrance into the theater which is described in religious terms also suggests a kind of escapism, a sense of unreality—a place where Carrie can forget about the struggle, the hardship, the conflict she encounters in the city. It is her version of the "Lethean waters":

She saw a large empty shadowy playhouse, still redolent of the perfumes and blazonry of the night, and notable for its rich oriental appearance. The wonder of it awed and delighted her. Blessed be its wondrous reality. How hard she would try to be worthy of it. It was above the common mass, above idleness, above insignificance. People came to it in finery and carriages to see. It was ever a center of light and mirth. And here she was of it. Oh, if she could only remain, how happy would be her days! (280)

As she enters this fantastic realm, she gains a sense of power—no longer dependent on Hurstwood, she earns a substantial salary and spends less and less time at home. Eventually she rejects her domestic role totally—"I'll not do it... He can take his meals out,"—she declares, leaving Hurstwood so she can partake in the myriad delights the city’s public spaces offer her (282). Reminiscent of her experience at her sister’s home, Carrie again resents having to turn her money over to "family." Hurstwood’s dependency, his need for Carrie are in conflict with her need for freedom, her individual fulfillment. Hurstwood is
now a burden, an embarrassment, a handicap. Dreiser shows us again how the family and the individual, the domestic and the public persona are at odds. Domestic space is a space of entrapment, confinement rather than community or comfort, and only when she leaves Hurstwood behind can Carrie truly join in that nightlife that so seduced her at Sherrys: "Carrie found her purse bursting with good green bills of comfortable denominations. Having no one dependent upon her, she began to buy pretty clothes and pleasing trinkets, to eat well and to ornament her room. Friends were not long in gathering about" (323).

In the end, however, Carrie is still dissatisfied. "In the rosy restaurant filled with the merry lovers of late hours," she finds herself criticizing her companion. "He was too stilted, too self-opinionated" (323). Though "[s]he could not help sharing in Lola's love for a good time," and "the metropolitan whirl of pleasure," what Carrie ultimately discovers is that "the metropolis is a cold place socially" (323). "She could feel that there was no warm, sympathetic friendship back of the easy merriment with which many approached her" (324). "All seemed to be seeking their own amusement, regardless of the possible sad consequence to others" (324). Carrie's observations here sound very much like those made by Oscar, the maître d'hôtel of the Waldorf who described the behavior of this urban culture as "Unsocial sociability," a behavior "practiced on Fifth Avenue as well as across town in an even more mixed crowd" (54): "It is not the sociability of friends, the intercourse of congenial people, but the looking on as if it were at a pageant" (as quoted in Erenberg 55, my emphasis). "Instead of intimate participation through entertainment or a joyous group atmosphere, the visitor dines in silence broken only by the whispered communications of his friends respecting the identity of some fresh arrival" (Erenberg 55). Here was the epitome of the new style, Erenberg asserts, "to display one's women and to learn and communicate social skills and prestige . . . . This was an urban state of mind: a sense of sharing a community and a set of behaviors without the need for intimacy and actual experience" (55, my emphasis).
Erenberg's commentary brings to mind both the spectatorship of the flaneur as well as the experience of reading the newspaper—there is that aesthetic distance in "looking on as if it were a pageant" as well as that sense of sharing a community without the need for actual experience. This passage suggests then that though she is a performer, Carrie's life off stage is, in many respects, still that of a spectator, and like Coverdale, Carrie finds this way of living unsatisfying. Moreover, like Priscilla and Verena, Carrie's performance, in the end, does not seem to be fulfilling or liberating. Just as Hurstwood's economic failure dehumanizes him, Carrie's economic success is also dehumanizing. Ultimately, she is just a commodity who becomes more valuable as her market price rises. Drouet's thoughts at the end of the novel only reinforce this: "Ah what a prize! He thought. How beautiful, how elegant, how famous! In her theatrical and Waldorf setting, Carrie was to him, the all desirable" (351). For Drouet, it is primarily Carrie's new theatrical "setting" which makes her so valuable, her affiliation with "brand names." That final image Hurstwood sees of Carrie is also particularly telling. As Hurstwood stumbles through the cold, "[a]ll the wet snowy sidewalk is bright with the radiated fire" of Carrie's name, a sign so bright it even attracts Hurstwood's weakened gaze, but this is the power of the commodity, not the power of Carrie, and this fire does not provide any warmth. Unable to approach the real Carrie, Hurstwood is left staring at the only Carrie left, "a large gilt-framed posterboard on which was a fine lithograph of Carrie, life size" (362). Encased in a gilt frame, high above the city streets, this image of Carrie is especially appropriate as she is now not only so far away from Hurstwood, but so curiously empty, detached and withdrawn from the urban highlife she had so desperately wanted to join. Now that she is a Broadway star, money makes plain its "impotence, providing the desires are in the realm of affection" (335). "With her one hundred and fifty in hand, Carrie could think of nothing particular to do" (335). "I get lonely" she tells Lola (335). Even the spectacle of the city fails to attract her; "in her walks on
Broadway, she no longer thought of the creatures who passed her" (369). Like Hurstwood, Carrie too eventually stops looking; the spectacle affords her no pleasure.

Lonely, longing and rocking in her chair—without friends or family, Dreiser stresses Carrie's isolation, her being cut off from any source of community—"shall you long, alone," he writes (369). The quest for individual fulfillment leads one far away from home and yet that final image—Carrie rocking in her chair— is essentially a domestic and sentimental one, an image far removed from the gilded, mirrored atmosphere of Sherry's, the lights and oriental facades of the theater district. Although Dreiser shows us that the Victorian sentimental home could not withstand the pressures of the new marketplace, the longing for the sentimental home lingers on in subtle ways. And in this lingering longing, it seems Dreiser foresees the recent insights made by Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen regarding our culture of consumption. In the end, the experience of Carrie Meeber reinforces the liberating possibilities of our consumer culture as well as the great price it exacts from us:

In so far as this consumption cosmos liberated people from certain forms of oppression of the past ... Consumerism, engendered passivity and conformity within this supposedly ever-expanding realm of the new . . . Customary bonds of affection and interdependence, born of other circumstances disintegrated . . . Alongside the considerable achievements of industrial development, the logic of consumption has become increasingly universal in our way of life. It is embroiled in our intimacies, tattooed upon our hopes; demanding of our energies. The 'constant rapidity' with which we are encouraged to tire of consumable objects, of our elusive pleasures, is generalized as an axiom for existence . . . The insatiable urge for new things . . . finds its painful corollary in the insatiable need for new and different love objects . . . The politics of consumption must be understood as something more than what to buy or even what to boycott. Consumption is a social relationship, the dominant relationship in our society— one that makes it harder and harder for people to hold together, to create community. (49-51).

Alone and rocking in a kind of void, Carrie seems condemned to perpetual dissatisfaction, longing for what home can no longer provide and longing for what the city promised but could not provide either. This final image suggests that Dreiser recognized just how
profoundly our culture of consumption could impact our lives; indeed there may not be anything to protect us from that “limitless boundless desire of our hearts.”
CHAPTER 4


The same themes explored in the white nineteenth-century urban novels—the emphasis on vision, the aesthetic delight and moral peril of the city, the desire for and limitations of middle-class domesticity—are also explored in African American writer Paul Laurence Dunbar's early twentieth-century novel The Sport of the Gods. Here again we find the figures of the confidence man, the painted woman, and the enthralled spectator, yet Dunbar's novel published in 1902, is more explicitly aligned with Dreiser's Sister Carrie, for both novels are essentially naturalistic works where individuals are overwhelmed by the forces of their environment. And like Dreiser, Dunbar attends to the beginnings of the mass entertainment industry, thereby showing the "disintegration" of Victorian culture Lewis Erenberg observes when "both sexes were drawn to a popular culture rooted in the lower orders" (8). Moreover, as Dunbar highlights the lure of the city's new public spaces, he draws our attention to the breakdown of the sentimental Victorian home. Indeed private and public realms blur in both Dunbar's and Dreiser's novels as homes are now "public" places—boarding houses and hotels—and public places like The Banner Club must now suffice for home. The ramifications of this "disintegration" of Victorian culture, however, are different for the African American whose adherence to white notions of gentility, propriety and privacy are inevitably problematic. Moreover, the "lower orders" within which America's new urban popular culture was "rooted" was inextricably intertwined with blackness or rather with what Americans imagined blackness to be. Dunbar's work then wrestles with the
"doubleness" of the new urban culture—its threatening racist elements as well as its seemingly liberating potential.

Indeed Dunbar's work draws our attention to the urban spaces that even Dreiser's dense panoramic view of New York leaves out. While Dreiser creates an essentially "white" city, Dunbar shows us how the "color line" divides and maps urban space, and rather than focusing on the haunts of the rich and famous such as the Waldorf and Sherry's, or the lodging houses for the truly down and out frequented by the likes of Hurstwood, Dunbar shows us the vibrant realm of the African American—the ragtime and blues bar, the vaudeville stage and the boarding house. His theater is a racially mixed one, a theater which shows the wildly popular "coon" shows of the 1890s and early 1900s, a phenomenon that is never mentioned in Dreiser's work but is ubiquitous in turn- of- the- century American popular culture. Dunbar attends therefore, not only to the disintegration of the boundaries between male and female spheres, and public and private spaces, he also attends more specifically to issues of race and class, to the unique difficulties of the African American encountering the fantastic spectacle of city life. Not only were African Americans overwhelmed by a popular culture that celebrated and ridiculed "blackness," the "individualistic" orientation of city life was a dramatic contrast to traditional African American patterns of community.

In their work, Long Memory, Mary Frances Berry and John Blassingame remind us of the important cultural differences between the white family ideal of middle America and the typical African American family:

One of the major functions of the lower class black family was to toughen its members to a world of systematic brutalization by the police, by businessmen, and by other facets of white caste restrictions. Lower class culture helped to minimize the pain this involved. Within the family as in no other area of life, white America freed the black man to work out his response to systematic oppression. One mode of adaptation was the
extended family. After slavery the extended family was prevalent in the black community. Generally black households had twice as many relatives outside the immediate family as did white ones. Egalitarian in nature, the family was marked by flexibility of roles, informal adoption of children and care for the aged. Blacks seemed to have greater abhorrence for institutionalizing the aged than whites did. When aged blacks did not live with their children, several other members of the local community took responsibility for them. (85)

With the high value it places on privacy and individualism, the urban environment would be particularly hostile to such notions of family. Indeed as Dunbar interrogates and probes the varied spaces of the new city—its coon shows, its theaters, its ragtime bars—he shows us the tension not only between traditional middle class white Victorian values and the new urban mass culture, but the tensions and conflicts which erupt when this culture intersects with—to use his contemporary W.E.B DuBois's term—"The Souls of Black Folk."

Primarily recognized for his poetry, Dunbar’s work as a novelist has not been met with enthusiastic critical acclaim. His earlier novels have been described as “white” since all the characters are white and virtually no reference is made to the presence of black people (Revell 139). Dunbar has also been seen as a black writer who “sold out” to his white audience by writing in the plantation tradition—a genre that sentimentalized the Old South by depicting the relationship between a master and slave as a benevolent, paternal one. Robert Bone, for example, views Sport of the Gods within this tradition when he asserts that the novel “reiterates the plantation-school thesis that the rural Negro becomes demoralized in the urban north”(42). “Thus at the height of Post-Reconstruction repression,” he writes, “Dunbar was urging Negroes to remain in the South where they could provide a disciplined labor force for the new plantation economy”(42). Recent criticism however, has begun to revise such earlier judgments; indeed critics have begun attending to the radical nature of Sport of the Gods, viewing the novel as Dunbar’s protest work, as something distinctly different from what he had produced beforehand. Peter Revell, for example, emphasizes that
Sport of the Gods, unlike Dunbar's other novels, is a "black" novel and one of the first significant contributions by African American writers to the art of the novel (139). He believes that "the naturalism of Sport of the Gods . . . is an indication that Dunbar wanted and tried to extend his range and break free of the old forms" (171). Houston Baker views the novel as subversive; "from the outset," he writes, "one is alerted that Dunbar's text is a fiction whose implied goal is to avoid a monotonous iteration of traditional patterns of narrative" (130). Gregory Candela, on the other hand, points out that critics have not seen the irony in Dunbar's work. (71, 72). "Rather than place him outside black authors' march toward realism," Candela declares, "he should be placed in the vanguard as a novelist able to mix inflexible elements of melodrama with the consciousness of an ironic mask" (Candela 72). Critic Lawrence Rodgers also places Dunbar "in the vanguard." He credits Dunbar with creating a pioneer work of extreme importance—the "African American Great Migration novel." He sees Dunbar's work as initiating what may be found again and again in migration fiction—the centrality of Southern folk culture (39, 54). Casey Inge, in another recent reading of the novel, believes it is "a reply to Post-Reconstruction domestic novels" (228). Rather than reading the novel as "buying into the legacy claimed by plantation literature," he contends, "we should understand the presence of the idyllic extended family of the plantation novel . . . as a challenge to the idealization of the family by many Post-Reconstruction African American novelists" (Inge 228). "Dunbar," he writes, "argues against relying upon domesticity as an emancipatory discourse" (228). Charles Scruggs also views Dunbar's work as breaking new ground since it concentrates on issues which will be especially important for later twentieth-century African American writers; as he puts it, "the city's moral ambiguity would become an ongoing black tradition" (Scruggs 50). "Already recognizable," he observes, "are the beginnings of mass culture and the ambiguous state of isolation in the city" (Scruggs 16).
This survey of critical commentary reinforces Dunbar’s precarious and difficult position. It makes sense that some critics see him as the very embodiment of white middle-class values, while others see him as especially black, radically-minded and subversive. He inevitably had to be both; writing for a white audience, he would have to speak to that audience’s values, yet for a black man in 1902, the very act of writing itself is radical, and always potentially subversive. Indeed Dunbar’s critical reception emphasizes the doubleness of Dunbar as well as the doubleness of his project. He is examining not only what happens when a Victorian middle-class sentimental (white) culture collides with the new urban mass culture, but also what happens when an African American family who subscribes to the values of this dominant culture encounters the new urban mass culture. Not only is Dunbar’s work then a crucial text for understanding African American literature and history, it is also a crucial text that continues to examine the meaning of urbanity, a text that follows in the tradition of Hawthorne, James, Howells and Dreiser, and yet expands the boundaries of that tradition in some remarkable ways. Dunbar’s text makes visible what had been for the most part invisible in the urban novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—a viable and vibrant black presence in Northern American cities well before the Great Migration was under way. Moreover, his work makes clear how this new urban space is shaped by, and intertwined with notions of “blackness”; indeed the city especially held irresistible appeal as well as insidious danger for the African American.

Although scholars have generally referred to the Great Migration as beginning during World War I, significant numbers of African Americans were on the move long before this. As Laurence Levine observes, “There has been an unfortunate tendency to equate Negro migrations with the Great Migration to the North during the World War I period. In fact significant movement of Negroes began as soon as freedom made it possible” (263). In his analysis of black folk songs after emancipation, Levine draws our attention to the emphasis
on movement and the predominance of the railroad (262). "The raw statistics of black migration north," he insists, "only begin to give a sense of the movement involved since so much of this was secondary migration. The route from the southern farm to the northern city was not necessarily direct but frequently was preceded by migration to a southern town or city" (263). Carole Marks also observes that many blacks moved to southern cities first, and that "farm laborers set in motion between the 1890s and 1910 three migration streams. Although these were relatively small, they resulted in urbanizing 22% of the black southern population by 1910" (34). Thus, many of the migrants who arrived North were not rural agricultural workers, but people who were, to a certain extent, socialized in urban mores much like the Hamilton family in Dunbar's novel. Instead of setting up that familiar opposition then of rural/urban, Dunbar undermines it. Rather than the benevolent patriarchal Southern home where blacks are taking care of and protected by their white "father," the rural Southern plantation is a theater where lies are told and secrets withheld, a space as dangerous and as theatrical as any to be found in the urban north. Indeed the "comfortable" dependency the Hamiltons experience living down South on the "master's" estate is as problematic as the racist popular culture they will encounter in the city of New York.

As historians emphasize, Northern cities held a promising allure for Southern blacks, however, black communities were only just beginning to form there, and life was especially harsh for these early urban pioneers. The Hamiltons arrive in a New York that has "an Afro-American community in the process of evolution, where black migrants . . . find pockets of black people but no localized sense of community," for turn-of-the-century Harlem was not yet the center of African American culture, but rather an area for well-to-do white residents. (Scruggs 45). "New York's black population lived in a number of scattered blocks . . . not in a single area of predominantly black residence" (Revell 94). When the black population of the
city expanded by 25,000 during the last decade of the nineteenth century, the primary area of concentration of black residents was the Tenderloin, from 20th street to 53rd street and San Juan Hill (Revell 94). "In these areas the black residents were usually concentrated in one or two densely populated blocks, set here and there in areas of white occupation, usually of first and second generation Irish and German immigrants" (Revell 94). This community "had many of the problems of later Harlem—overcrowding, drastically unhealthy and insanitary living conditions, and a rent system that operated unfairly" (Revell 94). As Kevin Gaines points out, "Real estate agents were often unconcerned with preserving the middle-class character of black neighborhoods and profited from the residential segregation that produced crowded slums. This, combined with municipal policies confining prostitution, saloons and gambling to black sections away from white residential and commercial areas, led elite blacks, among others to see a correlation between urbanization and moral chaos" (Gaines 180).

In addition to providing grim living arrangements, work was often hard to come by in Northern cities like New York. As Jacob Riis remarks in How the Other Half Lives: "Ever since the [Civil] war, New York has been receiving the overflow of the colored population from the southern cities . . . Whether the exchange has been an advantage to the Negro may well be questioned. Trades of which he had practical control in his Southern home are not open to him here" (115). Indeed the Northern city posed as many obstacles perhaps as its Southern counterpart. According to Theodore Kornweibel:

Blacks were systematically barred from industrial jobs except as strikers. Readily available employment was found only in low-paying servicing occupations or occasional unskilled labor where few prospects for advancement or security existed . . . Blacks found themselves suffering under a job ceiling in which entrance into some professions and skilled trades was being increasingly curtailed, and sometimes blocked entirely, while opportunities for employment and subsequent upward mobility were being accorded non-English speaking immigrants. In trades where blacks had
traditionally enjoyed good employment opportunities and sometimes near monopolies like barbering catering and waitering, they found themselves faced with organized and often successful attempts to force employers to discharge blacks and hire only whites... The result was that by the turn of the century, in city after city of the North, the proportion of Blacks in unskilled or service occupations numbered 80 percent or more. (110)

Despite the harshness and limited opportunities of northern city life, these cities nevertheless still "symbolized... places to which one might escape the imprisonment of sharecropping and agricultural peonage" or places where one could "perhaps find greater prospects for political and social expression" (Kornwiebel 110). Eventually the city would became the hub for the black arts and entertainment industry. As Erenberg points out: "Many of the early hot spots in New York were run and frequented by blacks. Northern and southern cities allowed blacks to find a degree of neighborhood hegemony outside white society. For the first time, they had the opportunity to express aspects of their identities and their cultures, unmolested by white society. It was in the cities that blacks developed ragtime and jazz, for it was there they had a degree of personal freedom and also where they underwent a process of secularization" (22-23). One African American's reminiscences of growing up in Harlem in the 1930s reinforces as well as qualifies this sense of "freedom" experienced in the city. Although as a child William Dixon recalls, "It did seem to a little boy that even in Harlem these white people really owned everything," he adds, "But that wasn't entirely true. They didn't own the music that I heard played" (Levine 297). This music, Levine concludes, "gave a sense of power, of control. If it did not affect the material being of its creators, it certainly did have an impact upon their psychic state and emotional health" (297). In turn-of-the-century New York, those smaller, more fragmented black neighborhoods were also spaces where blacks could feel this sense of power. They had many of "the vital and hopeful qualities that can be found in the Harlem of today" (Revell 94). The Tenderloin, for example, was the meeting place for the "Negro Bohemia" made up primarily
of performers, agents, songwriters and the general hangers on of the vaudeville world in which black artists had by this time gained considerable success” (Revell 95). The city then for African Americans, in particular, is especially highly charged with paradoxical meaning, with hope and despair, with vitality and futility.

Indeed while New York City does not turn out to be “all the glory, all the wealth and all the freedom of the world” the Hamiltons imagine it will be, Dunbar nevertheless shows us a vibrant city where there seems less racial oppression and more freedom (78). Blacks and whites intermingle as “equals” at The Banner Club. Joe watches the black youths promenading in their “spruce clothes,” walking the streets “so knowingly, so independently”(87). Mr. Thomas and Mrs. Jones enjoy dancing to ragtime and Thomas’s enthusiasm for New York is contagious: “It’s the only town on the face of the earth . . . We git the best shows here, we git the best concerts—say, now what’s the use o my callin it all out—we simply git the best of everything”(90). Besides highlighting his enthusiasm for urban living, Thomas’s speech is revealing in another sense. What Thomas emphasizes in his praises is the world of public amusements, the entertainment industry, the beginnings of mass culture. And it is this new culture which holds such contradictory meanings for the African American.

Beginning with the antebellum minstrel shows, America’s popular culture had consistently celebrated black culture at the same time that it ridiculed it. Eric Lott describes this inherent doubleness when whites would “black up” and portray African Americans as “the simultaneous drawing up and crossing of racial boundaries”(Lott 6). “Minstrel performers often attempted to repress through ridicule the real interest in black cultural practices they nonetheless betrayed—minstrelsy’s mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation,” what Lott terms “love and theft”(6). Lott also remarks that even in its early
days, the emphasis of the minstrel show was on “spectacle rather than narrative... Black figures were there to be looked at, shaped to the demands of desire; they were screens on which audience fantasy could rest, and while this purpose might have a host of different effects, its fundamental outcome was to secure the position of white spectators as superior controlling figures” (Lott 141). By the time we reach the end of the nineteenth century, however, the face of blackface has changed. Unlike the days of the antebellum minstrel show when mostly whites would be “blacking up,” and portraying African Americans for white audiences, blacks are now performing, portraying themselves for racially mixed audiences.  

26. But the African American comedians, singers and dancers who begin to appear on the vaudeville stage in the middle 1890s are required to portray—in a more authentic fashion—the “darky” characters constructed by white performers in blackface (Nasaw 54). Indeed this popular culture with its “coon” shows and its love of ragtime denigrates the black culture it supposedly celebrates as it packages it for consumption. And as this “low brow” culture rises in popularity and more and more people—black and white—begin to enthusiastically “consume” it, the white cultural establishment becomes fraught with great anxiety. As Edward Berlin observes in his History of Ragtime:

Ragtime’s emergence in the 1890s coincided with new technical means of mass music communication—recordings and piano rolls—and a vastly expanded publishing industry. Growing in mutually beneficial ways, these developments combined to alter drastically the nature and scope of popular culture; whereas regionalism continued to exist, it became possible to introduce trends on a nationwide basis, creating a degree of national homogeneity. Many of the nation’s cultural leaders looked on with horror as ragtime, the first recipient of the new music technology, engulfed the nation. They had envisioned the country’s music life “maturing” along the supposedly well-ordered lines of European musical academicism. Instead

26 There were some black minstrel performers before the end of the nineteenth century—Ira Aldrich and William Henry Lane, for example. Also William Wells Brown, in addition to lecturing would perform blackface at antislavery meetings to gain financial and popular support. See Paul Gilmore’s “De Genuine Artekil”: William Wells Brown, Blackface, Minstrelsy and Abolitionism.” American Literature 69: 4 December 1997 743-780.
they witnessed the intrusion of a music that stemmed not from Europe but from Africa, a music that represented to them not the civilization and spiritual nobility of European art but its very antithesis—the sensual depravity of African savagery, embodied in the despised American Negro. (32)

The indignation of cultural leaders, however, could not stop the public's demand for the new music. According to Berlin, "Ragtime's proponents were quite as outspoken as its critics. Ragtime, they claimed, was liked by most people, including European royalty and some notable European musicians; its rhythms were distinctive, unique and innovative; it was the only music characteristically American" (Berlin 44).

In addition to the cultural debates within the white establishment, there were divisions within the black community. "[M]any black intellectuals and leaders expressed alarm at the impact of urbanization, migration and the homogenizing forces of mass consumer culture on the black community" (Gaines 179). These "new secular pastimes and attractions" meant "challenges to religious traditions of black leadership and authority" (Gaines 179). Indeed according to Bell "one of the great American paradoxes Dunbar reveals in his novel is the Puritan and Victorian attitude of many blacks toward forms of folk music. To pre- World War I rural black southerners, especially those with middle-class ambitions, there were two kinds of ethnic music: the Lord's (spirituals) and the devil's (blues ragtime and jazz)" (Bell 73). Willie the Lion Smith, a jazz pianist recalls that "back in those early days, churchgoing Negro people would not stand for ragtime playing; they considered it to be sinful. Part of that feeling was due to the fact that the popular songs you heard played around in the saloons had bawdy lyrics and when you played in a raggy style, folks would right away think of the bad words and all the hell-raising they heard about in the red-light district" (Levine 178). In his analysis of the black upper class, Gatewood points out how plantation melodies and especially ragtime were "shunned" (192). Indeed upper-class urban blacks tended to insulate themselves from this new world of public amusements and mass culture.
Since blacks of all classes were often barred from places of social amusement frequented by whites, and many found black owned establishments socially unacceptable because they encouraged indiscriminate mixing of all classes, upper class blacks centered their social world in the home. "Reception dinners, musicales, literary gatherings and dances"—all were held at home and "only those whose public and private lives conformed to the requirements of the genteel performance were invited" (Gatewood 194).

Dunbar too seems to see the rising mass culture as particular harmful to African Americans, yet as a writer for the black theater, Dunbar himself embodies the cultural divisions of his times. Moreover, Dunbar, the son of former slaves, lived at the "margins of the black leisure class" (Gaines 189). "Although he, as rising poet of the race spent many social hours with the intellectuals of... black society, he would simultaneously bask in their attention while maintaining a fascination for "low life" that others, particularly his wife Alice, would find abhorrent" (Gaines 184). Indeed in Sport of the Gods, the narrator may criticize the show—"It is strange how the glare of the footlights succeeds in deceiving so many people"—but he cannot help pointing out the importance the show has for the audience, the sense of power and pride it generates: "There were a large number of coloured people in the audience and because members of their own race were giving the performance, they seemed to take a proprietary interest in it all" (102, 101). And after criticizing the costumes of the performers, the narrator admits, "But they could sing, and they did sing, with their voices, their bodies, their souls" (102). Dunbar's attitude towards the coon show and its "detestable ditties" was, according to Gaines, "understandably deeply ambivalent" (Gaines 190). "New York cabaret life was a world that Dunbar knew intimately"; as Gaines observes, "he saw value in blacks performing their own syncopated songs and dances for black audiences even while it galled him that they so avidly consumed the stereotyped entertainments that he believed were foisted on them" (190). Revell also
comments on the difficulty Dunbar had in reconciling this contradiction—his career moved from appeasing the white establishment to increasingly chafing against it. “His contributions to musical comedy,” he writes, “demonstrate an initial willingness to abide by the relatively degraded standards of the minstrel show and its early successors, and a later reluctance to contribute to this kind of production at all” (Revell 106).

Dunbar’s increasing reluctance may have been encouraged by the fact that these “degrading standards” became even more degrading by the end of the nineteenth century. Historian Rayford Logan has described this period as the “nadir,” in race relations, and C. Vann Woodward points out that segregation in the South was a creation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Blassingame 348). “Deprived of political power and the protection of law enforcement agencies, blacks faced a virtual reign of terror in the South . . . between 1882 and 1900, there were 3,011 lynchings in the United States” (Blassingame 349). Moreover, influenced by the Social Darwinist movement, scientists in England, the United States and South Africa tried persistently to “prove” that blacks were intellectually inferior to whites (351). An especially vicious racist atmosphere, therefore, combining with the improvements made in mass production ensured that the entertainment industry’s portrayal of blacks become not only more insidious, but more wide reaching. Indeed in the 1890s, according to many scholars, America witnessed a “coon song craze,” a “major pop culture phenomenon” (Dorman 450).

Insisting that “it is impossible to overstate the popularity of black misrepresentations” during this era, David Nasaw declares that “African American caricatures were a staple of
the vaudeville bill; black musicals were playing on Broadway and touring the first class theaters of the country and coon songs were the hottest selling item in sheet music” (54).

Moreover, “the intent to caricature and humiliate blacks was evident not only in the coon song lyrics but in the illustrations for the sheet music as well. The comic black figure had existed for a long time before the coming of the coon songs, but according to J. Stanley Lemons, ‘the treatment of blacks in illustrations had presented them as humans’” (Nasaw 104-5). “Not so the sheet music of the 1890s that pictured them with animal features . . . the sheet music showed blacks with big mouths, big ears, oversized hands and feet, and sloping foreheads (meant to indicate limited intelligence) . . . ” (Nasaw 56). Indeed as we move away from the dandy of the antebellum minstrel show to the urban Coon of the 1890s, James Dorman argues that we encounter a major shift in white perception of blacks (450). The coon song craze, Dorman argues, was a “necessary sociopsychological mechanism for justifying segregation and subordination,” and his analysis of the period’s “coon” songs leads him to make some disturbing generalizations (Dorman 466):

Blacks began to appear as not only drunk and ignorant and indolent but also devoid of honesty or personal honor, given to drunkenness and gambling, utterly without ambition, sensuous, libidinous, even lascivious. Coons were in addition to all of these things, razor-wielding savages, routinely attacking one another at the slightest provocation as a normal function of their uninhibited social lives. The flashing steel straight razor became in the songs the dominant symbol of black violence while the coon himself became that which was signified by this terrible weapon. The subliminal message was clear: Blacks are potentially dangerous; they must be controlled and subordinated by whatever means necessary. (450)

That so many coon song writers and performers were black makes this industry even more insidious and problematic. Indeed what Dunbar seems to stress throughout his novel is the

27 The term coon as a designation for black did not come into widespread use until the 1880s. (Dorman 452). Dorman notes American blacks had long been associated with the raccoon . . . “By ascription blacks loved hunting, trapping and eating raccoons. Moreover, the minstrel figure, “Zip Coon” had come to be symbolically identified with blacks in general” (452). David Roediger, on the other hand, reminds us that what had once been a common word for “white country persons,” had by the early twentieth century been transformed into a racist slur (97).
profound alienation and confusion of the African American who must live and survive within America’s deeply racist culture. As we see the Hamiltoms rejected by the Southern black community and later embrace the northern urban coon show, Dunbar shows us that they have no other cultural frame of reference within which to imagine themselves. The Hamiltoms cannot move beyond that Southern patriarchal “plantation”—even when they encounter the freer environment of the more liberal north, for the “genteel” white culture that betray them knows no geographical bounds. The very atmosphere the Hamiltoms breathe in—be it in the North or the South—is poisonous, self destructive. Indeed this dominant, “overdetermined” white culture seems to close in on the Hamiltoms even more insistently during their bid for opportunity and anonymity in New York City. After this urban encounter, their lives are only reduced to stereotypical simplifications; Joe embodies the worst stereotype of the coon—drunken, vain and violent—while his parents recall the “Uncle Tom” stereotype as they return South to live “in back of the big house.”

As the novel opens, however, the Hamiltoms are more complex and their lives seem to hold much potential. We learn Berry Hamilton is an ambitious man who strives to better himself much like the urban heroes created by Horatio Alger, heroes like “Ragged Dick” who show us the power of individual ambition. For Berry as well as Alger’s hero, hard work, perseverance and virtue are always rewarded: “He was one of the many slaves who upon their accession to freedom had not left the South, but had wandered from place to place in their own beloved section, waiting, working struggling to rise with its rehabilitated fortunes” (2, my emphasis). Like Alger’s hero, Ragged Dick, who carefully lays away his meager earnings in the savings bank, Berry too feels “the advantage of steady self denial” (Alger 105). What is stressed alongside the Hamilton’s industry and hard work is their loyalty to the Oakleys. Berry is described as “following” the example of his employer, Maurice Oakley (3). The Hamilton house is “replenished with things handed down from ‘the
house'... and with others bought from the pair's earnings"(3). "Flowers bloomed in the little plot in front and behind it; vegetables and greens testified to the housewife's industry"(4).

Highlighting its adherence to white middle-class values, the Hamilton home is also marked by a gendered ordering of separate spheres: "Berry had time for his lodge and Fannie had time to spare for her own house and garden"(3). As in the other urban novels, we see changing notions of the meaning of home, for the Hamiltons also embody that shift from a sentimental domesticity with its more pronounced boundaries between public and private realms to a more theatrical, consumer-oriented one. While Fanny and Berry work hard, save their money and view their home as a haven to be protected, their children are inclined to value a more theatrical domesticity based on leisure, consumption and display. Indeed although this home which Kitty and Joe are born into is described as a "bower of peace and comfort," the narrator is quick to undercut this, for into this pastoral ideal enter urban values, materialistic desires.

Joe, we are told, is of a "cheerful disposition," yet he nevertheless "from scraping the chins of aristocrats came to imbibe some of their ideas and rather too early in life bid fair to be a dandy" (4). Later when the Hamiltons move to New York, Dunbar reminds us of Joe's experience down South; his downfall is not wholly a result of encountering the dazzling spectacle of northern city life: "Down home he had shaved the wild young bucks of the town, and while doing it drunk in eagerly their unguarded narrations of their gay exploits, so he had started out with false ideals as to what was fine and manly. He was afflicted by a sort of moral and mental astigmatism that made him see everything wrong"(100). Kit, on the other hand, is spoiled by her mother since there was "nothing too good for her to wear," and she "had the prettiest clothes of any of her race in the town"(5). Indeed Dunbar highlights
how the family’s love of finery and clothing, their aspiration to genteel theatrical manners is central to their identity. The morning after Francis’s farewell dinner, the Hamiltons talk of “de way dem woman was dressed” and Joe “contented himself with devouring the good things and aping the manners of the young men whom he knew had been among last night’s guests”(35). Significantly, Dunbar’s narrator also describes these “doting” parents as “doing their duties and spoiling their children much as white fathers and mothers are wont to do... what the less fortunate Negroes said of them and their offspring is not worthwhile”(6, my emphasis). Immediately then, the Hamilton family is aligned with the “genteel” white family, but this genteel white family is, to use John Ernest’s words, “morally bankrupt,” and the Hamilton’s dedication to the Oakleys as well as their alienation from the “less fortunate Negroes” will only heighten the bitter irony of their tragedy.

Although loyal to the Oakleys for so many years, the Hamiltons are banished promptly and efficiently when Berry is suspected of theft. Unlike Alger’s hero, who is rewarded for adhering to traditional middle-class values, Berry Hamilton is punished, for his bank account only convinces Oakley of his guilt. Indeed Dunbar shows us that the sentimental ties between these families is a fiction; the Oakley home is ultimately a theater where the dishonest and charming brother recently arrived from Paris stages his own melodrama. Frank’s finely cultivated urbanity, Dunbar suggests, prevents the Oakleys from seeing him clearly: “He had the face and brow of a poet, a pallid face framed in a mass of dark hair. There was a touch of weakness in his mouth, but this was shaded and half hidden by a full mustache that made much forgivable to beauty-loving eyes“(11). Just as the Oakleys cannot see beyond Frank’s urbane charm, they ultimately cannot see beyond Berry’s blackness. It is easy therefore for Frank to play the role of innocent victim while Berry plays the “depraved black man.” Caught in a white melodrama which needs a criminal, Berry resists this script to
no avail; even his adherence to white middle-class values, his careful savings of his earnings, only renders him all the more deviant.

While there is only circumstantial evidence, and much of it not fully convincing, Oakley insists on seeing Berry as a guilty man. When the detective called to investigate the case expresses serious doubts, pointing out that Berry would not have had time to switch that number of bills to smaller denominations without “exciting comment,” Oakley only becomes more adamant (39). Even Berry’s desperate appeal and reminder—“[A]ftah de way I’ve put you to bed f’om many a dinnah, an’ you woke up to fin’ all yo money safe?”—cannot move Oakley, who prides himself on being a “hard-headed businessman”(45, 26). Instead he responds vindictively, refusing to even honor his brother’s wishes to go easy on Berry: “He is gone and will never know what happens so I may be as revengeful as I wish,” he tells his wife. Both brothers, we learn, are liars and “do as they wish” when they believe no one is looking.

Dunbar also highlights how Berry becomes a scapegoat for both black and white communities. For the whites, this is a case to “review and comment on”: “It had been long since so great a bit of wrong doing in a negro had given them cause for speculation and recrimination”(52). Those who have their doubts then, like the detective and the Colonel, are either ignored or unwilling to voice their concerns in such a hostile environment. As Dunbar’s narrator summarizes: “The Colonel saw or said he did. And he did not answer what he might have answered, that Berry had no rent and no board to pay. His clothes came from his master, and Kitty and Fannie looked to their mistress for the larger number of their supplies. He did not call to their minds that Fannie herself made fifteen dollars a month and that for two years Joe had been supporting himself”(57). No one speaks up or protests, and the “gentleman assembled in the Continental bar” have their way, for to them “Berry was
already proven guilty” (57). As disturbing as this is, perhaps the reaction of the black community is even more so. When the accounts of the lodge Berry was a treasurer for are audited, the lodge members “seemed personally grieved when his books were found to be straight” (49). The A. M. E. church “hastened . . . to purge itself of contamination by turning him out” (49). Dunbar’s narrator explains this rejection: “In the black people of the town the strong influence of slavery was still operative, and with one accord, they turned away from one of their own kind upon whom had been set the ban of the white people’s displeasure. If they had sympathy, they dared not show it. Their own interests, the safety of their own positions and firesides demanded that they stand aloof from the criminal” (50). The community’s response, however, also reveals that the Hamiltons have “sinned” against their black brethren: “He wanted to dress his wife an chillen lak white folks, did he? Well he foun out he foun out” (51). “W’enevah you see niggahs gittin so high dat dey own folks ain good enough fu em, look out,” asserts another neighbor (52). The family is described as “shut in upon itself away from fellowship and sympathy” (61). And yet this seems to describe the situation of the Hamilton family all along—living on the Oakley’s property, holding themselves above the rest of the black community. With no dissent within the black community, no protest, no mustering up of any support for Berry, Dunbar highlights that much has not changed since the Civil War; black families and communities continue to be broken up, divided, rendered silent and powerless. When Maurice Oakley wonders where the Hamiltons will go, his wife assures him “oh some of their people will take them in” (79). She mistakenly assumes that the black community is united but, as Dunbar shows us, class often divides those of the same race. Indeed when Joe looks for work in a colored barber shop, he is ridiculed and turned away. With nowhere to turn, the Hamiltons look to New York—“a city that like Heaven . . . seemed the center of all the glory, all the wealth and all the freedom of the world” (78).
Dunbar’s chapter detailing The Hamiltons’ arrival in New York brings to mind the descriptions of opportunity, delight and danger one finds in Dreiser’s work. The lengthy opening paragraph of chapter seven highlights the aesthetic delight to be found in the city—the seduction of the eye and the danger of succumbing to all this visual plenitude:

To the provincial coming to New York for the first time, ignorant and unknown, the city presents a notable mingling of the qualities of cheeriness and gloom. If he have any eye at all for the beautiful he cannot help experiencing a thrill as he crosses the ferry over the river filled with plying crafts and catches the first sight of the spires and buildings of New York. If he have the right stuff in him, a something will take possession of him that will grip him again every time he returns to the scene and will make him long and hunger for the place when he is away from it. Later the lights in the busy streets will bewilder and entice him. He will feel shy and helpless amid the hurrying crowds. A new emotion will take his heart as the people hasten by him—a feeling of loneliness, almost of grief, that with all of these souls about him he knows not one... after a while he will find a place and give a sigh of relief as he settles away from the city’s sights behind his cosey [sic] blinds... then he will be out in it all again. He will be glad to strike elbows with the bustling mob and be happy at their indifference to him so that he may look at them and study them. After it is all over, after he has passed through the first pangs of strangeness... even after he has got beyond the stranger’s enthusiasm for the metropolis, the real fever of love for the place will take hold upon him. The subtle insidious wine of New York will begin to intoxicate him. Then if he be wise he will go away... But if he be a fool, he will stay and stay on until the town becomes all in all to him; until the very streets are his chums and certain buildings and corners his best friends. Then he is hopeless and to live elsewhere would be death. The Bowery will be his romance, Broadway his lyric... and he will look down pityingly on all the rest of humanity. (81-83)

This passage evokes themes we have seen in Hawthorne, James, and Howells as well as Dreiser. There is the emphasis on the visual, the importance of private space in a world of swirling spectacle as the “provincial” gives “a sigh of relief” behind his “cosey blinds.” There is also the isolation and yet the liberating feeling associated with being an individual amongst the crowd. Indeed encountering the city for the first time is to experience a kaleidoscope of emotion. If one has an “eye” for the beautiful, the city is the place for aesthetic delight, but in order to experience this visual delight, one must also experience the isolation and loneliness of the detached spectator. This passage also stresses the importance
of finding a home in the new city—a realm of privacy where the self can, in a sense, gather itself together after experiencing the disorienting fragmentary nature of urban space. But the spectacle of city life is addicting and eventually one discards the older self and becomes adjusted, transformed. One is "happy" regarding the indifference of the crowd since one can now look and study that crowd better. Eventually, the passage implies, one comes to believe it is better to be a spectator than a participant. Eventually the faces of the crowd fade away so that it is the very streets that are one's "chums," and certain buildings and corners are one's "best friends." The city becomes oddly depersonalized, and yet one can experience a thrill of power from this detachment by "looking down pityingly on all the rest of humanity." While there is an explicit recognition of the power one experiences in detachment and widening vision, there is even more wariness here of the power of the new urban space to shape the individual, to wrest the individual away from community. Perhaps Dunbar more so than the other writers sees this space as especially threatening—"if he be wise he will go away, any place," he writes. Although for the African American the city may harbor more dreams, more symbolic significance, it also harbors more threats, more obstacles and less opportunity.

Once in New York the Hamiltons' home is no longer "shut in upon itself" and detached from the outside community as it was down South. Immediately upon arrival, the Hamiltons look for some community, a community they did not need when they worked for the Oakleys. They look for familiarity, "for some colored face" and they "finally saw one among the porters who were handling the baggage"(84). Although they feel comfortable addressing themselves to Mr. Thomas, he is a problematic figure, a kind of confidence man and Dunbar's contradictory description highlights this: "He was exceedingly polite" yet "he looked hard at Kitty"(84). As Thomas guides them, the narrator emphasizes the family's naiveté, their inability to read the new urban environment. What the narrator stresses is that
the Hamiltons are too easily impressed, too easily over-awed. The boarding house Thomas
leads them to seems "too much for their pockets"; they are surprised at its "apparent
grandeur" (84). Even inside, the narrator notes "The sight of hard gaudily upholstered
installment plan furniture did not disillusion them, and they continued to fear that they
could never stop at this fine place" (84). They learn, however, that the proprietor Mrs. Jones
is "willing to come to terms with them" (84). Moreover, the boarding house reveals itself to
be neither grand nor genteel, and though Mrs. Jones seems "gracious and home-like," the
boarding house's difference from "home" will soon become dramatically clear (84). During
their first evening, Mr. Thomas brings in the beer and Mrs. Jones brings in the glasses, and
the "Rag time man came down" so that Mr. Thomas and Mrs. Jones could "two-step" (95).
Offering Kitty and Joe beer, and encouraging them to come out and see the coon shows, Mr.
Thomas and Mrs. Jones challenge the authority of Mrs. Hamilton who feels her notions of
propriety are under siege. "Oh let em stay, a little beer ain't going to hurt em," urges Mrs.
Jones, while Thomas claims "they'll get out o that, all right if they live in New York" (93). As
the nightlife of the Tenderloin district—its ragtime music, its dancing and beer drinking—
makes its way into the Hamilton "home," the boundaries between public and private realms
are no longer so secure.

This intrusion especially unsettles Mrs. Hamilton; she finds the city a strange and
confusing place. Although the "bigness of New York frightened her and made her feel alone,
she sees advantage in living in the city since "no one knew them or could taunt them with
their past trouble" (86). Echoing Isabel March's response that New York was too big and yet
there was a liberating freedom in experiencing such anonymity, Mrs. Hamilton is much
more divided in her response to the city than her children. Joe, on the other hand, blindly
embraces New York; his desires continually expand; like Carrie, the more he sees, the more
he wants. Also, the city immediately works on his self image: "A revelation came to him—
the knowledge that his horizon had been very narrow and he felt angry that it was so” (87).

He looks at the young fellows “dressed in their spruce clothes and he wondered with a sort of envy where they could be going. Back home there had been no place much worth going except church and one or two people’s houses. But these fellows seemed to show by their manners that they were neither going to church nor a family visiting” (87). The nature of public life down South had been to reinforce domesticity and community; it was centered around the family and the church. Public life in New York however, is not about family nor church socials; it is about individual pleasure. This public life is characterized by a new theatricality and style, an emphasis on vision where promenading to be seen and to see is most important. Like Carrie, Joe yearns to be a part of the spectacle. He wants to be looked at, and “things” seem to call out to him. He imagines himself “red-cratated,” and “patent leathered,” being admired by others (87). Like Carrie, Joe also quickly forgets his family and sees them as an impediment to his own success. He grows increasingly distant from his mother and sister and “forgot to feel the natural pity for his father, toiling guiltless in the prison” (88). Eventually his family will be a burden that he must cast off, much as Carrie decides to cast off Hurstwood, but Joe’s casting off does not expedite any rise in his fortunes.

Forsaking family ties are not rewarded in Dunbar’s city; indeed Dunbar suggests that cutting family ties can only have devastating consequences.

When Thomas takes the Hamiltons out to their first “coon” show, we see the fragility of these family ties since the generations within the family are dramatically divided. This division reflects a larger cultural division as well: traditional Victorian manners coming into conflict with the new urban mass culture. As Gaines has pointed out, many black leaders were “alarmed” at the impact of urbanization and mass consumer culture, and upper-class blacks tended to insulate themselves from the city’s new realm of public amusements (179). Unlike the upper-class blacks, Mrs. Hamilton, however, cannot insulate herself though there
is much in this popular culture which she too finds “alarming.” Indeed while Joe and Kitty enthusiastically embrace the popular “coon” show, their mother feels uncomfortable and out of place as she watches the performance:

At first she was surprised at the enthusiasm over just such dancing as she could see any day from the loafers on the street corners down home, and then like a good sensible humble woman, she came around to the idea that it was she who had always been wrong in putting too low a value on really worthy things. So she laughed and applauded with the rest, all the while trying to quiet something that was tugging at her away down in her heart.

(106)

This entertainment rooted in “the lower orders” as Erenberg would call it, tugs at the very “white” Victorian values she holds dear, values which uphold a more definitive boundary between highbrow and lowbrow as well as public and private realms of experience. The new urban mass culture calls those boundaries into question. She wonders if she had been too much of a highbrow, if “she had always been wrong in putting too low a value on really worthy things”(106). Her ambiguous response to this black culture may also remind her of her estrangement from the black community “down home.” The caricature, this exaggeration of rural life—the use of the rural buffoon—to make the northerner laugh and feel superior makes her uneasy as she has not completely embraced a northern urban identity. Neither rooted in the southern community, nor in this new urban one, Mrs. Hamilton is not sure what to laugh at. There is also the very unsettling situation of having something familiar made into something spectacular. Familiar types from her former community become strange and unreal as they are now exaggerated and packaged for consumption. As Scruggs explains, “the coon show made the past more attractive by sentimentalizing it, while the packaging process called attention to the falsity of the spectacle”(Scruggs 46). This theatrical spectacle then is something alien, yet something familiar, something that delights her and yet something that disturbs her, that keeps “tugging away at her heart.”
We also see in this scene the intentional division of the family orchestrated by Thomas, our new urban confidence man. Like such figures as Westervelt, Tarrant and Drouet, Thomas must display his power by controlling a woman and putting her on display. Thomas’s taking the Hamiltons out is for his benefit, not theirs; he is eager for others to see him with Kitty. Indeed what Dunbar emphasizes is how “Thomas at once possessed himself of Kitty” (97). “A good many men bowed to Thomas and turned to look enviously after him” (97). At the door of the theater they had to “run the gauntlet of a dozen pair of eyes” (97). This is painful to Kitty as well as her mother, and though Kitty wishes to go back and sit with her mother, Thomas “overruled her” (99). He shows Kitty off to his friends and does not “think it necessary to include the brother or the rest of the party in his miscellaneous introductions” (105). Mrs. Hamilton, meanwhile, continues to feel uneasy because of the “proprietary air” with which Thomas treats Kitty (107). Eventually, however, Kitty forgets her objections to Thomas and is fascinated by the mystery and glamour of the theater. As they watch the show, the narrator points out her inability to see; Kitty is described as “enchanted” and she falls under the influence of Thomas’s “confidential” voice which assures her she could be an actress some day (104. 102). Joe too is “lost, transfixed, his soul floating on a sea of sense” (103). Even Mrs. Hamilton cannot withstand all the temptations of the stage as “she was divided between shame at the clothes of some of the women and delight with the music” (103). The narrator too gets caught up in the performance he is for the most part critical of: “But they could sing and they did sing . . . they threw themselves into it because they enjoyed it and felt what they were doing, and they gave almost a semblance of dignity to the tawdry music and inane words” (102). Finally the fact that the Hamiltons are welcomed within this public place affects their perception as well. Because the family does not have to sit “far up in the peanut gallery in the places
reserved for people of color,” even the “garishness of the cheap New York theater seemed fine and glorious” (98).

Indeed nothing it seems can compete with the glamour, the magic, the wonder of the theater. The theater is the beginning of deception, seduction as well as freedom and independence. Bringing to mind the experience of Carrie Meeber, the theater calls up more desires within Joe: “Whatever else his visit to the theater may have done for Joe, it inspired him with a desire to work and earn money of his own, to be independent both of parental help and control and so to be able to spend as he pleased” (109). After describing the coon show, Dunbar focuses on Joe and “his heart’s desire” (108). Single-minded and obsessive, Joe is determined to be part of the urban crowd, to be admired and popular. He wishes to secure employment so that Thomas will take him out, and Thomas does but only to get closer to Kitty. When Thomas brings Joe to The Banner Club and tells the gang “I’ve got a friend with me tonight. He’s got some dough on him. He’s fresh and young and easy,” and the men grow excited with the prospect of making some money, he tells them to “go easy” and to not frighten him off, to “make him believe that you’ve got coin to burn and that it’s an honour to be with you” (111). “A smart man don’t need to show nothin,” Thomas tells them, “All he’s got to do is act” (112). Thomas then returns to “the lamb” and soon they all “treated him with a pale dignified high-minded respect that menaced his pocket book and possessions” (113).

While Dunbar highlights the moral depravity of The Banner Club, he nevertheless gives us a portrait of an unusual community—an all-inclusive community. As Erenberg’s, Nasaw’s and Berlin’s work remind us, both blacks and whites were enthusiastically consuming “black” culture at the turn of the century, particularly black music. Ragtime piano playing is a regular feature of The Banner Club as is “free” concerts which promote
the latest "coon song," 'Come Back to Yo Baby Honey' (123). The Banner Club is also a popular place for "slummers," or, as Dunbar puts it, "the curious who wanted to see something of the other side of life"(118). The white reporter, Skaggs, was "a constant visitor," and his lady friend Maudie "had a penchant for dancing to Rag-time melodies as only the 'pussessor' of such a club can play them"(118). Indeed although The Banner Club is a black club, Dunbar draws our attention to the heterogeneous nature of the crowd gathered there:

[It was composed of all sorts and conditions of men, educated and uneducated, dishonest and less so, of the good, the bad and the unexposed. Parasites came there to find victims, politicians for votes, reporters for news and artists of all kinds for color and inspiration. It was the place of assembly for a number of really bright men who after days of hard and often unrewarded work came and drunk themselves drunk in each other's company, and when they were drunk talked of the eternal verities. (117)]

The Banner Club's diversity, and its many functions suggest its vibrancy, its necessity to the urban dwellers who frequent it. It is an "institution for the lower education of Negro youth. It drew its pupils from every class of people and from every part of the country"(117). Highlighting the importance of the period's public life and public institutions, "it stood to the stranger and the man and woman without connections for the whole social life. It was a substitute—poor it must be confessed—to many youths for the home life which is so lacking among certain classes in New York"(117). Indeed before long, The Banner Club does become a home for Joe, and rather than the Horatio Alger figure of his father, the confidence men within The Banner Club will become role models for him.

Dunbar also stresses how the club's theatricality is self conscious, for here everyone performs and the role playing is acknowledged, necessary. Skaggs is a "monumental liar" and must tell a story of growing up with "darkies" to explain why he associates with blacks—"the same old story that the white who associates with Negroes from volition
usually tells to explain his taste” (121). Here Joe meets Hattie Sterling, a chorus girl, a kind of “painted woman” who teaches him much “because it was her advantage to do so” (131). He made enough to “show her a good time” and “nothing could keep her from being glorious in his eyes—not even the grease painting which adhered in unneat patches to her face, nor her taste for whiskey in its unreformed state” (125). Dunbar emphasizes over and over again not only the theatrical nature of the city’s public life but the enormous influence and power this life has over the individual. Though the Hamilton family was divided well before they reached the city, the urban environment exacerbates those once subtle divisions. Soon Joe is not only distant from his family, but feeling contempt for them. Instead of obeying his mother and watching out for his sister, he leaves his sister in the care of Thomas so that eventually “the poison of the unreal life about her had already begun to affect her character. She had grown secretive and sly. The innocent longing . . . she had expressed that first night at the theater was growing into a real ambition and she dropped the simple old songs she knew to practice the detestable coon ditties which the stage demanded” (130). Eventually Kitty will work alongside her mother in “sullen silence” (130). Even Mrs. Hamilton, in her despair, “drifted farther away from her children and husband and all the traditions of her life” (131).

Unlike Dreiser’s work, where the past can be cut off, family left behind and new identities created, the characters in Dunbar’s work are ultimately unable to escape their past. Though they hide the fact that Berry Hamilton is in jail, this secret is revealed by their former neighbor Minty Brown when she visits New York. In his reading of the novel, Rodgers sees the family’s attempts to preserve their reputation after her arrival as their inability to read the city (53). “That Berry’s prison sentence is regarded as a point of honor,” he writes, “aptly illustrates how badly the family has misread the values of their new home” (Rodgers 53). I would argue, however, that Rodgers overlooks some important facts
and that this illustrates something else. Rather than their "misreading" of the city, the family's attempts to "preserve their reputation" illustrate the dramatic divisions within the urban black community, divisions which show a sentimental Victorian culture coming into conflict with a more modern individualistic one. Only the Banner Club sees the family's "fugitive status" as "a point of honor." Mrs. Jones, on the other hand, responds just as Mrs. Hamilton fears she would. The family must leave or as Mrs. Jones puts it, "it'll soon be all over town and tha'ud ruin the reputation of my house" (139). Moreover, Kitty informs Joe that "Minty's story had reached their employers and that they were out of work" (159). This division of values—the Club's disregard of propriety and reputation and Mrs. Jones's concern with it—exacerbates the divisions between Joe and his family. While his mother and Kitty are thrown out on the streets and out of work, he is embraced at the Banner Club, for Sadness "reads" the fugitive status of the Hamilton family in a very different way. According to Sadness, all are "suffering from fever and no one edges away from the other because he finds him a little warm" (147). Sadness tells Joe of his own family tragedy—the lynching of his father—and then reveals the tragic histories of other Banner Club regulars: Viola who "killed another woman" and Barney "indicted twice for pick pocketing" and Poor Wallace who lost the money his father left him and now knows "already how to live on others as they have lived on him" (147, 148). His talk makes Joe feel "wonderfully in it" (149). Here in The Banner Club, but not in other urban spaces such as Mrs. Jones's boarding house or the workplace, the father's supposed crime is not a mark of shame, but a mark of solidarity with the other individuals of the club, with all those who have experienced racial oppression. Indeed The Banner Club is a place where family reputations need not matter, where eccentricities are tolerated and the lonely outcast may find redemption and community.
Within this context then it is interesting to consider Bernard Bell's assertion that Sadness is a "living embodiment of the blues" (73). "Instead of turning to the Bible, the bullet, or the bottle to cope with the searing experience of racism," Bell declares, "Sadness survives by plumbing the depths of his soul and affirming the resiliency of the human spirit. In order to maintain some control of reality and some measure of dignity, Sadness has developed a tragicomic vision of life, which in the Afro American tradition affirms the redemptive power of suffering and humor" (Bell 74). Indeed the fact that Joe begins to feel "wonderfully in it" suggests that Sadness who is described as "sadly gay" does function as a "living embodiment of the blues" (145): According to Levine, "[B]lues performed some of the functions for the secularized masses that religion did: it spoke out of a group experience; it made many individual problems—dislocation, loneliness, broken families, economic difficulties—seem more common and converted them into shared experiences" (Levine 235). Still while creating a "shared experience," for African Americans, the blues also Levine maintains "represents a major degree of acculturation," a shift in African American culture towards a privileging of the individual. Levine points out that although the call and response form of earlier African American folk music—the communal work songs and the spirituals—may have remained, it was the blues singer who responded to himself or herself either verbally or on an accompanying instrument (Levine 221). Indeed Levine argues that Blues singing "signaled the rise of a more personalized individual-oriented ethos among Negroes at the turn of the century" (Levine 221):

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, blues songs were increasingly common and it was not coincidental that a new emphasis upon the individual and individual expression was taking hold in black song at the very time Booker T. Washington's philosophy was taking hold among black intellectuals and the black middle class. The individualist ethos, always strong in the U.S. was perhaps ideologically most persuasive in the decades before and after the Civil War. In the latter period especially, the nation was imbued with the notion that Man could progress according to the Horatio Alger model, that the individual molds his own destiny. Freedmen had this
message thrust upon them. This is not to suggest that the blues mirrored the moral and economic lessons of the Alger message; the opposite would be closer to the truth. But there was a direct relationship between the national ideological emphasis upon the individual, the popularity of Booker T. Washington's teachings, and the rise of the blues. Psychologically, socially and economically, Negroes were being acculturated in a way that would have been impossible during slavery. (Levine 223)

It is this "individualist ethos," however, which Dunbar seems unable to embrace. Just as he shows us that believing individual virtue and hard work will always be rewarded is naïve through the example of Berry, he is also critical of the street wisdom of the Banner Club, the indifferent, nonchalant attitude of the individuals there. Although Sadness's humor and revelations make Joe feel "wonderfully in it," Sadness's tragicomic view of life is essentially an urban one stressing an individual-oriented sensibility. Sadness himself is a performer who embodies an urban theatricality rather than a sentimental sincerity, and while Dunbar exposes the inadequacy of the sentimental culture's insistence on transparency, he is at the same time uncomfortable with the newer urban values which stress a conscientious fashioning of the self. Bell even argues that Sadness belongs to the "tradition of the confidence man"(74). As the narrator puts it, he is part of the class that lives "like the leech upon the blood of others"(150). So while Dunbar shows us the solidarity of this group of eccentric individuals who seek refuge from a cruel world which has shut them out, he cannot help moralizing on their tragic-comic view of life. He says it gives Joe a "False bravery"(149). And even Sadness cannot help sarcastically criticizing the isolation and loneliness of such extreme individualism as he describes Wallace to Joe: "From now on Wallace will live, eat, drink and sleep at the expense of others . . . He will go on this way until, broken and useless the poor house or the potter's field gets him. Oh it's a fine rich life my lad. I know you'll like it"(149). We are told that Sadness's laugh is "peculiar," and "the look in his terrible bright eyes made Joe creep"(149). "Joe might have turned back," the narrator remarks "if he could only understand all that the man was saying to him. But he
Sadness’s sarcasm is lost on Joe who begins to see the want of a “good reputation as an unpardonable immaturity.”

While one might argue that Sadness is a blues figure, a survivor, Dunbar nevertheless also sees Sadness as part of an underworld of indifference, a “fraternity of indolence,” where individuals ultimately only look out for themselves (150). Indeed Joe’s association with the Banner Club’s characters ends in tragedy. While it seems he finds a community where eccentric individuality is tolerated, he really only finds solace in a bottle and eventually is such a pitiful drunk that Hattie no longer wishes to be seen with him. Joe kills Hattie because he sees her as the cause of his downfall, and the Club which seemed to be a substitute family for Joe quickly forgets him: “[S]o Sadness and all the club with a muttered ‘Poor devil’ dismissed him. He was gone. Why should they worry” (212). There were some in the club who “sermonized” “for an earnest hour,” but Joe is dismissed with “gratuitous pity,” and in the end the club offers no solace, no authentic community; only the “mother heart” had room for grief and pain (214).

Like her brother who had found a new freedom in New York before his eventual addiction and imprisonment, Kitty too must negotiate the contradictory elements of urban life. Though one could say she is the survivor of the family, the most successful, her success is treated ambiguously, bringing to mind the success Dreiser affords Carrie. When first entering the theatrical world, Kitty is a country innocent much like Carrie; unsure at first, she soon learns to play the role required of the chorus girl. She drinks the beer Hattie offers her though she does not like it, and puffs on a cigarette. While Mrs. Hamilton feels her daughter is degrading herself, Kit tells her mother that nowadays people think stage people are respectable. Moreover, she says, “I’m doin it to help you“ (167). Recalling the situation of Carrie when Hurstwood was unemployed and times were difficult, Kitty enters the stage to
help out the family, but eventually we see that the younger members of the Hamilton family live ultimately for themselves alone. When her heartbroken mother speaks of marrying the "Race horse man" out of desperation, Kitty thinks it will be "splendid" because "race horse men most always have money" and "you got to live for yourself now" (169). An individualist ethos prevails. Family becomes an impediment, an obstacle. At the end of the novel, Dunbar’s description of Kitty’s rise reinforces this: “From the time she went on the stage she had begun to live her own life, a life in which the chief aim was the possession of good clothes and the ability to attract the attention which she had learned to crave” (216). While Dreiser depicts Carrie’s family life as oppressive, suggesting she has lost nothing in leaving her family behind, Dunbar suggests Kitty has lost much indeed, for he implies that her success will be short lived and fragile, and unlike Dreiser, he expresses little sympathy towards his character; his stance is instead detached and judgmental: “Miss Kitty Hamilton had to be very careful about her nerves and her health. She had had experiences, and her voice was not as good as it used to be and her beauty had to be aided by cosmetics” (217).

In the end, the family is broken apart as the younger individuals within it look to their own fate. As Dunbar’s tragic ending reinforces for us, an individual-oriented ethos is especially problematic for the African American who must live within a hostile culture, for family ties may be one’s only safety net. Indeed his novel seems to stress the foolishness in subscribing to a white culture that privileges the individual but at the same time does not recognize the individual worth of an African American. With Joe in prison, Kitty wandering from show to show, and Berry and Fannie returning to their cottage down South, Dunbar’s vision of urban space then seems especially hopeless and grim. But this pessimism is not limited to the city. While Joe and Kitty are criticized for embracing an individually-oriented urban life and abandoning family ties, Dunbar suggests Berry and Fanny have been maintaining sentimental ties to the wrong community. Now that Mr. Oakley is insane, his
mind snapped with the burden of keeping Berry's innocence and his brother's guilt a secret, Leslie Oakley begs the Hamiltons to return South, to spend the rest of their days in "peace and comfort," since it was the only "amend she could make" (255). The Hamiltons return to their old cottage "as much to satisfy her as to settle themselves," yet even here at "home" the Hamiltons are pawns controlled by powerful forces; they are still the "sport of the gods," still obeying white orders, and Dunbar leaves us with a particular chilling image to reinforce this (255): "Many a night they sat together with clasped hands listening to the shrieks of the madman across the yard and thinking of what he had brought to them and to himself" (255). Trapped in the past, reminded of the horrors, the madness of slavery's legacy, the Hamilton home has become a nightmare—a scene of madness from which one can not escape. At the end of Dunbar's novel then we are left with nowhere to go, for both the impulse to go home as well as the impulse to leave home is self destructive. Although he shows us the "doubleness" of the new urban mass culture for the African American, in the end, Dunbar concludes that both America's urban present as well as its rural past were characterized by the overwhelming power of white culture to define what it means to be an African American.
Near the beginning of Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*, Lily Bart tells Lawrence Selden that she needs a friend who will be honest with her, who won't be afraid to say "disagreeable" things. "You don't know how much I need such a friend," she confides, "My aunt is full of copy-book axioms but they were all meant to apply to conduct in the early fifties. I always feel that to live up to them would include wearing book-muslin with gigot sleeves" (30). Along with admitting her need for a trustworthy friend, Lily's statement here hints at the murky territory she must navigate in 1905 as new freedoms and Victorian traditions collide in confusing ways. Although she is poised and self-assured, always ready to interject just the right comment, Lily is nevertheless often misinterpreted, her behavior so often unpredictable. At times she is calculating and rational; at other times she seems thoughtless, spontaneous. Indeed Lawrence Selden observes that there is a "sylvan freedom" to Lily's "artificiality," and the extensive criticism on the novel also reinforces the paradoxical nature of her character (34).

While some critics see her as wrapped in the guise of the sentimental heroine—the orphan looking for a home, the only moral figure in a corrupt universe—others see her as more of a "painted woman": vain, narcissistic, blind to the plights of others. Still other critics view Lily as a kind of "New Woman"—rebelling and resisting the constrictions of a
patriarchal society. Indeed one of the images Lily has of herself recalls the Victorian ideal of true womanhood, an ideal whereby a women’s worth was realized in both her benevolent influence and her detachment from the competitive marketplace: “She liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste. She was fond of pictures and flowers and of sentimental fiction . . . Lost causes had a romantic charm for her”(52-53). 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. Yet despite her sentimental notions and her displaying herself as a commodity, Lily is nevertheless in many ways bold and modern—a “New Woman.” She cannot help but assert herself—be it in taking a risk in gambling, in smoking another cigarette or in visiting Selden’s bachelor apartment. Performing for different audiences with different values, Lily is either revealing herself in a risqué dress or demurely covering herself.

28 Wendy Gimbel characterizes Lily as an orphan “desperate for a sheltering environment”(3). Ellie Sullivan writes that “Lily Bart’s tragedy lies in the innocence of the neurotic who continues to obey parental dicta in adult life as if she were a child”(478). Jeanne Boydston asserts that Wharton’s vision is “close to the domestic tradition,” and Carol Singley discusses Lily’s “spiritual homelessness,” declaring that, in the end, she “becomes a Christ figure destined to die for principles that her self-absorbed, ignorant well-wishers fail to recognize or honor” (32). Joan Lidoff and John Clubbe, on the other hand, make much of Lily’s narcissism and arrested development. Lidoff writes that Lily’s life is “nourished like an infant’s by an amniotic bath of sensual satisfaction,” and Clubbe claims that Lily is “unable to love anyone but herself” (150, 554). Although both see Lily as primarily a victim of a capitalist market economy, Wai Chee Dimock’s and Robert Shulman’s Marxist approaches help to illuminate Lily’s paradoxical nature. Dimock notes that “Lily is clearly caught up in the ethos of exchange” while “her repeated and sometimes intentional failure to find a buyer, her ultimate refusal to realize her asset makes her something of a rebel”(376). Robert Schulman also observes that Lily “reacts against her involvement in the buying and selling of her alienated self as a commodity,” but that she has also “interiorized the alienated habits of mind of the society she reacts against”(269). Finally, rather than focusing on her victimization, some feminist critics focus on Lily’s rebellion. See for example, Frances Restuccia who makes much of the “doubleness of Lily” as an “epitome of femininity” or Dale Bauer who in her Bakhtinian approach, argues that Lily “struggles to overthrow her upbringing,” and that “consciously or not she cannot accept the restrictions that marriage would place upon her “ (92-93, 414).

29 In her analysis of antebellum literature, Barbara Welter observed that the stereotype of the ideal woman had four distinct attributes: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. While men governed by law, women governed by persuasion. From her home, woman performed her great task of bringing men back to God. See “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” American Quarterly 18 (Summer 1966): 151-74.)
in a cloak of morality, for she is caught in the conflicting tensions between the Victorian past—with its more rigid formalities and hierarchies—and the present atmosphere of New York nightlife where “the restraints surrounding individual pleasures were being loosened” (Erenberg 43).

Like the urban novels which precede it, The House of Mirth dramatizes the shift from an earlier Victorian sentimental culture to a more modern consumer culture based on leisure and display, and Wharton’s work in particular shows us how the role of women and domestic space was inextricably intertwined with this shift. By 1905, the home was a theater where one might express one’s personality, and the painted woman did not necessarily evoke decadence and moral danger but rather style, sophistication. Indeed what makes Wharton’s work so compelling is the extent to which it embodies the psychic and cultural shifts of her time, a time when the self as a moral character was giving way to the self as a personality to be “performed.” As we watch Lily try to escape the stuffy parlors of the past in order to find “a room of her own,” a room that will express her identity, and as we watch her fluid sense of “self” increasingly merging with the commodities surrounding her, she seems a most modern woman indeed. Yet by the novel’s end, Lily is in many ways a sentimental heroine—embodies restraint, self sacrifice—a woman who imagines Nettie Struther’s simple home as a noble alternative to her own tainted public life. A spectator as well as a spectacle, a new woman as well as an embodiment of Victorian propriety, Lily Bart embodies the ambiguous and uncertain role of woman in the new urban landscape in an especially dramatic way.

As Mary Ryan’s Women in Public illustrates, urbanization transformed the lives of white middle-class women and generated anxiety and uncertainty for the culture as a whole. “Heretofore women’s social status had largely been circumscribed by the space and relations
of the household. In farmhouses, artisans' shops, and small face to face communities, most women were under the close surveillance of fathers, husbands and civic patriarchs. Now the city streets offered them new attractions, new freedoms and a veil of anonymity under which to pursue them" (Ryan 63). “Almost from the beginning,” Elizabeth Wilson writes, “the presence of women in cities and particularly in city streets, has been questioned, and the controlling and surveillance aspects of city life have always been directed particularly at women. Urban life potentially challenged patriarchal systems. Civilization which meant luxury and consumerism (although only for a minority) threatened the virtuous authority of the family and this theme has been a potent and enduring source of ambivalence towards city life” (14-15). Indeed Ryan demonstrates the extent to which the “controlling and surveillance aspects” of city life were directed at women in nineteenth-century America. Examining the writings of urban officials and architects as well as the journalists who made literary careers out of “penetrating the mysteries of the city,” Ryan shows us how the ways in which women were imagined were intertwined with the desire to order America’s increasingly heterogeneous cities (61).

The big city of the industrial age was first and foremost,” Ryan reminds us, “a marketplace circulating goods, services and people in a dense physical environment,” and this “amorphous social geography... was not particularly precise about the spatial boundaries between either male and female or public and private. Before 1840... the household was still a center of production... It was also the site of relatively open socializing rather than a cloister for immediate kin. The household’s border with the streets and squares was permeable and heavily trafficked” (Ryan 61, 64). Moreover, there was a mixing of classes and races in the early nineteenth-century city as “a diverse population had to share common neighborhood services on an everyday basis, and shops, factories and dwelling units still abutted one another” (Ryan 60). Only in the age of automobiles, suburbs,
and electronic communication,” Ryan points out, “would distinct social groups and
different economic functions be assigned to distinctly separate territories” (60). “Stranded in
this limbo between the face to face communities of the past and the more segregated social
geography of more recent times, city dwellers of the last century had to devise methods of
imposing order on the urban maelstrom” (Ryan 61). One way of doing this, Ryan asserts,
was to draw “exact and dualistic gender boundaries” (74). Referring to the work of Mary
Douglas, Ryan argues that the public spaces of nineteenth-century cities present an extreme
case of what Douglas calls “untidy experience” (Ryan 75). “Relations with women, clearly the
Other,” Ryan writes, “provided male writers with metaphors that neatly encapsulated the
central problem of urban social space: How to create order and hierarchy in an environment
where social differences coexisted in close physical proximity. Sexuality was perhaps the
most powerful metaphor for the interplay of diversity and proximity in the big city” (Ryan
75). Indeed to help the “public man navigate the hazardous streets of the big city,”
journalists provided a map that pinpointed sexual dangers personified by women. The
dangerous woman assumed her most threatening guise as a prostitute and she was a threat
to women as well as men. Indeed the greatest moral risk that women encountered on the
public streets was presented not by men but by these “members of their own sex who
converted public space into an erotic marketplace” (Ryan 73). “Images of chance meetings
and near collisions between virtuous and sinful women were a mainstay” of popular culture.
In order to account therefore, for the discrepancies between the chaste and domestic

---

30 Ryan believes that the cartography of public spaces in nineteenth-century American cities invites some
references to anthropological interpretations of symbols of sexual danger, particularly the theories of Mary
Douglas. An obsession with sexual differences conforms to Douglas’s belief that ideas about separating,
purifying, demarcating, and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an
inherently “untidy experience.” “It is only by exaggerating the differences between within and without,
above and below, male and female, and with and against that a semblance of order is created. Drawing
exact and dualistic gender boundaries in other words is a frequent recourse of human cultures seeking to
create symbolic order out of social multiplicity” (74-5)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
feminine ideal, and the untidy realities of gender on the streets in everyday life, writers devised a dualistic classification of womanhood—the "endangered woman" and the "dangerous woman." The endangered lady was clearly of the middle and upper classes; the dangerous woman came from the ranks of the poor and laboring classes (Ryan 73). The result was that "whenever women did make forays into public space," they were subject to "intense male scrutiny"; they were "branded as either endangered or dangerous, emblems of propriety and vulnerability, or object lessons in social differences and sexual danger" (Ryan 86).

Although Ryan's work focuses on the period before 1880, these categories still resonate at the turn of the century; indeed they resonate throughout Wharton's novel, for they structure how Lily is perceived. Lily is "endangered" through much of the novel because she not only traverses the dangerous spaces the city provides—bachelor apartments, working class tenements, factory workrooms, boarding houses, the tableau stage—she also has no domestic space of her own which renders her very identity insecure, unstable. Ryan's categories continue to resonate for us after 1880 because they also structure the dramatic changes which will ensue in the last half of the nineteenth century as Americans order their "urban maelstrom." The last half of the nineteenth century is a period, one might say, when the urban wilderness was "domesticated" for the "endangered" woman.

This anxiety regarding women's presence in public space (as well as the anxiety regarding the increasingly heterogeneous mixture of urban life) would ironically lead to a more "feminine" public space. While many worried about urban culture's effect on women's lives, this culture in many respects began to revolve itself around women's needs. Indeed "the provision of public space for the endangered woman was a major civic project during the latter half of the nineteenth century" (Ryan 78). The accommodation of "ladies" was a
major incentive, for example, behind the development of the nation's urban parks. Frederick Law Olmsted "proffered his designs as especially responsive to female needs, both of country girls who came to the city in a 'frantic desire to escape from dull lives,' and of urban housewives reputedly idled by their diminished household responsibilities" (Ryan 78). And while the upper-middle class woman's presence on the city streets rendered her vulnerable because of her possible contact with undesirables, by mid-century her presence in public space would be encouraged. "Ladies" would help keep the city orderly and refined. One newspaper of the period for example, explains why women should be recruited into the audience of a baseball game: "The presence of an assemblage of ladies purifies the moral atmosphere of a baseball gathering, repressing as it does all the outbursts of intemperate language which the excitement of combat so frequently induces" (Ryan 79). "This prescription for treating urban ills," Ryan observes, "became the rationale for a multi-phalanxed campaign to construct heterosocial spaces as barricades against urban dangers" (79).

The city's developing consumer culture would also assist in this "campaign" for "treating urban ills." When the department store opened its doors to all, and, in particular, made "downtown" an inviting place for women to gather, urban dilemmas regarding gender and class seemed less threatening; urban space was again somehow domesticated. Gunther Barth reminds us that the department store accompanied "the rise of the modern city," and "made the new phenomenon of a feminine public possible" (121). Serving large numbers of women from all segments of society, the department store made the presence of women a distinct attribute of the downtown section of the modern city... By the 1860s and 1870s... the attention the department store devoted to its female customers changed the urban environment" (Barth 129). As they "witnessed the transformation of the center of the city, which during working hours at least had been almost an exclusively male domain, into
A downtown area where clean sidewalks enticed women to linger in front of store windows without fear of being harassed by draymen, both men and women felt the social impact of the department store" (Garth 146). And the department store was just the beginning of "an extended network of commercial enterprises that capitalized on a female market" (Ryan 77). "Big city hotels corded off special places for women" (Ryan 77). "Feeding a lady became another lucrative business as the central business districts of each city featured signs for ladies' dining rooms and ladies restaurants. Ice cream parlors became identified as women's spaces" (Ryan 77). Theaters also "courted the female audience by providing matinees and wholesome play bills catering to the ladies' amusement" (Ryan 77). Indeed by the beginning of the twentieth century, an Italian visitor to Boston, "fighting his way along Washington Street" through a "solid immovable congestion of femininity," concluded that 'The Public is here a common noun of the feminine gender'" (as quoted in Garth 21).

America's public spaces were "feminized" in other ways while woman's role in society was being reimagined during the last half of the nineteenth century. As Wharton's Gerty Farish reminds us, women were workers and reformers as well as consumers in the new city. This is the era of the "New Woman," the era of Settlement House work, and dress reform. The Suffrage Movement continued to gain momentum and the number of woman entering the workplace continued to grow. "Burgeoning urban centers and rapid industrialization in the two and a half decades after the Civil War strengthened the need for—if not the respectability attached to—women's wage earning... Almost 4 million—close to 20 percent of all American women... were by 1890 what the Census Bureau classed as gainfully employed" (Hapke 1-2). Yet even though so many women were entering the public realm, there was still a great sense that to do so was dangerous. Indeed as more women streamed into the workplace at the end of the nineteenth century, "the traditionalists defended the ideology of the hearth ever more vigorously" (Hapke 6). Part of what was so
distressing to these traditionalists was that “19 percent of urban wage earning women lived alone in boarding houses or furnished rooms” (Brooks 105). They saw this “female subculture as a sign of moral decay” (Brooks 105). Although “more sympathetic writers saw the wage earning women as the victims of a ruthless urban and industrial society,” they also feared that “women without the anchor of family would starve or drift into prostitution, the association between single working women and prostitution was a common one” (Brooks 105). Society therefore often viewed these New Women as “endangered women,” and Kristin Brooks reminds us that Lily Bart eventually becomes part of this larger historical phenomenon of “woman adrift” in turn-of-the-century American cities (105).

This anxiety and confusion regarding woman’s new role could also be seen in the visual artifacts of urban culture. In her work Imaging Woman, Martha Banta observes that by the end of the nineteenth century, images of women had grown increasingly contradictory: “[T]he image of the American Girl had had thrust upon it the double-edged meanings of bloody force and saving grace, innocence and destructiveness; meanings which had been honed even more sharply since 1898 and the events of the Caribbean and the Philippines. By 1904 this image had been lifted with increasing frequency to that plane of masculine monumentality it had begun to occupy in 1886 and 1893 with the installation of Bartholdi’s Liberty in New York’s harbor and of Daniel Chester French’s Republic at the Columbian Exposition” (Banta 481). Indeed images of women saturated the culture in a new insistent way. Not only was woman’s image increasingly aligned with imperialistic ventures, and eventually wartime propaganda, it would also be intertwined with the most mundane projects. “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” (Leach 112). And Lori Merish points out that “During the 1890s with the arrival of the screen half-tone which enabled the mass
reproduction of illustrations and photographs, advertisements became more pictorial in
emphasis and advertising images became increasingly realistic. Ads from the period
frequently featured images of women, such as the “Sozodont Girl” (used to advertise
Sozodont Dentrifice) and the “Gibson Girl,” images which became, in the words of one
historian, “a popular means of attracting attention to an advertisement” (321). Indeed the
“pretty girl picture” became a pervasive presence in American advertising so 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” (Merish 321). As Merish’s observations emphasize, by the late
nineteenth century there was a shift into a more visual consumer culture; Americans were
being inundated with ever more imagery. Moreover, it is the image of woman which is used
to sell, to influence. Interestingly then, as woman becomes increasingly more mobile and
independent, more visible in the public realm, she is also increasingly objectified in this
urban culture, her role an abstraction as she becomes either a commodity or a representation
of cultural ideals.

Perhaps the role of the leisure class woman in particular is the most paradoxical—for she
is the most visible, the most powerful and yet the most commodified. If married, she was
granted more freedom than most women. She could break traditional rules without being
branded as “fallen.” She could divorce, smoke, have affairs with impunity because as Lily
says of Bertha Dorset, she has a “good backing.” Since her realm expanded beyond the
concerns of family and home, she was an extremely powerful figure. Ensconced in plush,
protected interiors, the leisure class woman was nevertheless always in the public eye. As
Amy Kaplan puts it, “For the lady of leisure, domesticity was subordinated to publicity as
the home became a stage setting for the gala social events orchestrated and acted out by
women. The upper class home functioned less as a private haven from the competition of the
marketplace than as the public stage for that competition . . . In *The House of Mirth* it is the dealings of the business world which seem private and unspeakable while the cultural work of women dominates the public scene" (Kaplan 93). And as Lewis Erenberg observes "the chief social leaders" of the late nineteenth century were the "wives of powerful men"(13). "With few economic or political roles open to them and with the highly unsure social scene, these women could achieve self importance through society . . . "(13). Emblematic of woman’s role in the new urban culture—more visible, more powerful and yet more alienated, more commodified, more of an aesthetic object, her privilege, her “public” power comes at a great price.31

The leisure class woman is a paradoxical figure in another sense. As society’s ultimate painted woman, she is the epitome of urbanity, and yet she remains at the margins of city life, insulated and protected from the city that to a great extent revolves around her and her needs. This most urbane and theatrical type, in a way, sees very little of the city, experiences little of its fragmentary alienating dissonance. Perhaps the most distinctive quality of urban high life is this ability to keep the city at a distance, this luxury of privacy. It is this insularity which Wharton makes palpable and real in her work, for in this novel of New York, the city is in a sense absent, invisible. Even though to a great extent the urban “maelstrom” had been "ordered" by 1905, and the public in America was now "feminine," Wharton’s leisure class heroine remains apart as that scene in the ladies’ restaurant near the end of the novel reinforces. Surrounded by “preoccupied women,” “engrossed in their own affairs,” Lily is alone, stranded in a “great waste of disoccupation”(282).

31 In his famous analysis of the leisure class, Thorstein Veblen spends much time examining the role of the leisure class woman whose value lies in her “uselessness and expense.” “By virtue of its descent from a patriarchal past, our social system makes it the woman’s function,” he notes, “to put in evidence her household’s ability to pay . . . In the ideal scheme as it tends to realize itself in the life of the higher
Sheltered in lavish mansions and pastoral gardens, Lily does not need to navigate the city until the very end of the novel when she is unmoored from her class position. Indeed perhaps more dramatically and insistently than the cities imagined in other urban novels, Wharton’s city is a city of interiors. But these interiors are perhaps the ultimate urban phenomenon—domestic theaters made possible by the new urban economy, the activity on Wall Street by men such as Gus Trenor. And as we travel through these interiors— their long corridors, their rooms overstuffed with furniture, their conservatories of tropical plants and fountains—all is protected from harsher elements. Indeed it seems that while the urban world was expanding out for most woman, and a new world of goods and public amusements became available to a broader section of society, Wharton’s leisure class heroine is nevertheless drawn inward, into more narrow interiors, into an idealization of home. By rendering Lily homeless then, by taking away her leisure class insularity, Wharton will draw Lily out; like Basil March she too experiences a widening vision, and like Hurstwood, she experiences a tragic change of fortunes. Like the urban novelists before her then, Wharton explores the often contradictory meanings of private space in city life, and as a novel which takes the upper class as its subject—a class that has a vested interest in preserving the past—the collision between traditional Victorian mores and a more modern consumer-oriented sensibility will be all the more dramatic.

Some critics have pointed out that the novel’s emphasis on interiors reflects not only Wharton’s own interests in interior design but a tendency in the culture at large during the pecuniary classes, this attention to conspicuous waste of substance and effort should normally be the sole economic function of woman”(180).
last half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{32} Just as the categories of “endangered” and “dangerous” woman helped urbanites order an increasingly diverse cityscape, this new preoccupation with the interior was essentially an urban phenomenon which also enabled people to draw boundaries, to create order. Jean Christophe Agnew explains:

Against the broad brush portrait of an expansive grasping society, it is possible to trace a countervailing or centripetal movement toward social and cultural isolation: a movement of interiorization. Even so intrusive a work as Jacob Riis’s \textit{How the Other Half Lives} depended for its appeal on a new yet increasingly common assumption among its readers that for the first time in American history, classes had somehow become inaccessible to one another. Why else resort to the midnight visit to East Side tenements or to the candid snapshot of groggy basement lodgers if such images and information were otherwise readily available to Riis’s middle class audience? . . . It is not surprising that this gradual segmentation of American society into class, ethnic, and gender enclaves found one of its expressions in a growing middle class preoccupation with the household interior, both as a practical problem of habitation and as a figurative representation of newly discovered personal and social boundaries. This preoccupation with the interior expressed itself in the occasional writing on interior design and decoration that appeared during the 1870s and 1880s and that developed soon thereafter into the highly profitable specialty periodical literature of the 1890s and 1900s. (137-8)

Because of the growing middle class interest in interior decoration, Wharton’s \textit{Decoration of Houses} written in 1897 with Ogden Codman Jr., sold well for many years (Halttunnen 172). Caught up in the period’s reaction to the stuffy formality of the Victorian parlor, Wharton’s work has a modern emphasis on individual expression: “It is not enough to ticket a room with such general designation as drawing room,” she insists, “individual tastes and habits of the people who are to occupy that room must be taken into account” (17). Yet Wharton’s work also has an “enduring Victorian sensibility” (Halttunen 173). Boundaries

\textsuperscript{32} Benert sees interiors as mirroring Lily’s social position and part of her “very unsentimental education” (30). The houses Lily inhabits she observes, “become stages, warehouses, showpieces, mortuaries, none of which works for her” (31). Judith Fryer argues that the principles of tradition, balance and proportion represented in \textit{The Decoration of Houses} are “increasingly violated” in \textit{The House of Mirth} as “a disorder in spatial arrangements comes increasingly to reflect chaotic human intercourse” (82). John Clubbe writes that Lily is “incapable of valuing interiors except as stages for her ego,” but points out that her final hotel room gives “her insight regarding true poverty” (559).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
between public and private spaces remain an important consideration for her. "Privacy," she 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" (22). Wharton's complaint here points to a reconfiguration of domestic space which was well under way while she was writing Decoration of Houses. In the 1890s, Karen Halttunen explains, there was a move away from the formal Victorian Parlor to a more open, informal "living room." Halttunen aligns this shift with what she calls a "historical psychic disruption in the American model self," a shift in emphasis from the Victorian concern with the moral self and its improvement, to a modern concern with personal temperament and self expression (187). Referring to Warren Sussman's description of this cultural shift, Halttunen elaborates:

The transition from Victorian to modern American culture involved the replacement of the nineteenth-century concept of the self as "character" with the twentieth century concept of "personality." The culture of character had focused on moral concerns and preached the virtues of self-control; the new culture of personality was more concerned with emotional temperament and the techniques of self expression... Nineteenth-century character had been associated with reputation, duty, honor and integrity; its aim was to be respected. Twentieth-century personality connoted magnetic attraction, fascination, aura, and charm: personality endeavored to be liked (187).

This shift, Halttunen and Sussman emphasize was "essential to the transformation of a producer-oriented society which rested on the virtues of self denial into a mass consumer society with its new reliance on demands for self fulfillment" (187). Elaborating on the implications for domestic space, Halttunen writes: "The nineteenth-century parlor had encouraged a clear distinction between the public and private self, demanding perfect moral restraint by those who sat erect upon its horsehair sofas... But the living room collapsed that distinction between the public and private self by dragging the private self out on center stage, exposing it to any and all visitors and insisting that it be open, warm, and charming" (188). The gradual acceptance of the living room as "the very heart of the
American home”—was accompanied by a “new approach to interior decoration that emphasized the power of the house to express the personality of its occupants” (Halttunen 180). In addition “the new focus of interior decoration collapsed the distinction between the self and the commodities surrounding it” (Halttunen 189). It is this “conviction that the things around us are reflections of our essential idiosyncratic selves, and that our possession of them ensures the vitality and charm of our personality, which has proved a potent force behind the twentieth-century culture of consumption” (Halttunen 189).

In addition to a new way of thinking about domestic interiors, changing ideals of feminine beauty also reflect this shift into the new culture of “personality.” In her history of fashion, Valerie Steele observes that in the literature on feminine beauty during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, personality and expression become more important than morality and restraint. “Rather than the inner spiritual beauty that so many Victorian writers had praised,” fashion and beauty writers increasingly stressed the erotic elements of feminine beauty by emphasizing the importance of “personal magnetism,” “fascination,” and “charm” (Steele 213). “By the turn of the century, writers were much less likely to posit a rigid distinction between ‘true’ inner beauty and its false artificial counterpart” (Steele 213). “On the contrary they usually argued that ‘the aids of adventitious arts and the advantages of a fine setting’ were both necessary and desirable” (Steele 214). “Some writers went so far as to argue that devotion to personal appearance constituted a new religion for women” (214). Mrs. Eric Pritchard “focused on pleasing men” while the Comtesse de Tramare emphasized the “pleasure women obtain from adorning themselves” (Steele 214). These writings, Steele points out, suggest that “happiness was associated with ruling men through their sexual passion and not with either feminine submission or the moral improvement of men” (214). As her observations make clear, we have come a long way from the 1850s, for fashionable ladies who excel in the arts of clothing,
dress, and makeup are now heroines; the painted woman is now someone to emulate. Indeed *The House of Mirth* could not have been imagined in the first half of the nineteenth century, for then Gerty Farish would be the heroine—her sentimental sincerity, and her inclination to self sacrifice would be signs of virtue rather than signs of dullness. Indeed what makes Lily’s character so compelling is the extent to which she embodies this psychic and cultural shift of her time, a time when the self as a moral character was giving way to the self as a personality to be “performed.”

As Lily moves through the varied interiors of the novel, we see the power that tradition wields in her life as well as the influence of a new urban culture which revolves around self expression, fulfillment and personality. On one end of the spectrum we have Mrs. Peniston’s home, a home of the past where woman’s private domestic nature, her detachment from public life is exaggerated, and at the other end of the continuum we have the divorced Norma Hatch’s showy hotel routine, her trendy, contemporary public life. In between these two extremes, there are the theatrical mansions of the leisure class, the cozy apartments of genteel cousins Lawrence Selden and Gerty Farish as well as the nostalgic, romanticized working class tenement of Nettie Struther. Within these spaces we find more fluidity between women’s public and private roles. In the private homes of the rich, for example, women may display themselves before a large audience, and in the more sentimental interiors of Gertie and Nettie, we have women who are domestic as well as public. They take pride and delight in their domestic space but do not rigidly define themselves by it, nor lose themselves in it the way Mrs. Peniston does. For much of the book, Lily seems to be most “at home” in the mansions of her “old set” where her aesthetic sensibilities merge with her surroundings, and where she can display herself in a semi-private environment, but these mansions can never provide the home she eventually comes to yearn for.
With its formality, and strict divisions between public and private, inside and outside, Mrs. Peniston’s home is a proper Victorian home. Its boundaries are so pronounced however, that this home seems more like a fortress, and Mrs. Peniston, a hidden and protected spectator, looks out at the city from a great distance: “Her mind resembled one of those little mirrors which her Dutch ancestors were accustomed to affix to their upper windows so that from the depths of an impenetrable domesticity they might see what was happening in the street” (55, my emphasis). Described as a “looker on in life,” Mrs. Peniston even hides herself away when she leaves the city for a holiday; in the “populous watering places,” she installs herself “impersonally in a hired house and looks on at life through the matting screen of her verandah” (55). Although Mrs. Peniston’s domestic interior is safely sealed away from the turbulent world outside, it is not a “sentimental home” by any means, for Mrs. Peniston is most concerned about the “things” in her home. It is a house occupied primarily by statues, heavy furniture and drapery, and Wharton continually highlights its deadly oppressive atmosphere: The statue of the “dying Gladiator in bronze” surveys “the deserted thoroughfare” (107). Her “icy drawing room grate shone with forbidden luster: the fire like the lamps was never lit except when there was company” (115). Indeed it is impossible to be comfortable here. Compared to the “sinking” of Lily into one of Selden’s shabby leather chairs, we have Mrs. Peniston who “always sat on a chair never in it” (115, my emphasis). When she returns to her residence in the Fall, Mrs. Peniston locks herself away to take a domestic inventory: “She went through the linen and blankets in the precise spirit of the penitent exploring the inner folds of conscience; she sought for moths as the stricken soul seeks for lurking infirmities. The topmost shelf of every closet was made to yield up its secret, cellar and coal bin were probed to their darkest depths, and as a final stage in the lustral rites, the entire house was swathed in penitential white and deluged with expiatory soapsuds” (107). This “domestic renewal” however evokes death rather than life.
"The house in its state of unnatural immaculateness and order was as dreary as a tomb," and Lily turns from her "brief repast between shrouded sideboards" to the "glare of the drawingroom" to feel as though "she were buried alive"(109). When Mrs. Peniston discovers with dismay "a streak of light under one of the blinds," Wharton reinforces for us how her desire for a private, purified realm cut off from all disorder is ludicrous, life-denying. Not only Mrs. Peniston's home, but Mrs. Peniston herself evokes death and constriction: "her grey hair was arranged with precision"(115). "She always wore black and tightly fitting . . . Lily had never seen her when she was not cuirassed in shining black, with small tight boots, and an air of being packed and ready to start; yet she never started"(115).

Lily's room at Mrs. Peniston's is also weighed down with the past. Opposed to the "light tints and luxurious appointments" of the guest rooms at Bellomont, her room at Mrs. Peniston's was as "dreary as a prison": "The monumental wardrobe and bedstead of black walnut migrated from Mr. Peniston's bedroom and the magenta "flock" wallpaper of a pattern dear to the early 'sixties was hung with large steel engravings of an anecdotic character"(117). Lily tries to "mitigate the charmless background by a few frivolous touches," but it is "futile"; the room is so dramatically opposed to the elegant setting she pictures for herself where "every tint and line would combine to enhance her beauty and give distinction to her leisure" (117). Her domestic interior, in other words, would somehow reflect her elegance, her contemporary taste, her refinement, her 'personality.' The furniture here, however, is overly masculine as it "thrust forth its most aggressive angle"(118). And the heaviness of the upholstered wallpaper compares unfavorably with her feminine room at Bellomont with its "softly shaded lights," its "silken bedspread," its "vase of carnations"(45). "She had always hated her room at Mrs. Peniston, its ugliness, its impersonality, the fact that nothing in it was really hers"(151, my emphasis). Indeed Lily wants to find a space where she can "assert her own eager individuality"(110).
It seems that Lily finds such a space in Selden’s apartment. Reflecting a more contemporary and informal attitude, a relaxation between public and private spheres, Selden’s domestic space brings to mind the popular “cozy corner” of the 1890s, a dramatic manifestation of the late Victorian reaction to the moral parlor” (Halttunen 164). Writing in the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1893, James Thomson’s promotion of the “cozy corner” highlights the difference between Mrs. Peniston’s and Selden’s domestic spaces: “We cannot forget the parlor of the not very remote past,” he writes, “that period which may be termed the dark age of decorative affect. . when everything in what was often spoken of as the “best” room assumed such a funeral aspect, that one never entered without a chill, nor departed without delight . . . but now artistry, taste and originality are transforming that funeral apartment and nowhere was the change more evident than in the artistic cozy corner” (as quoted in Halttunen 164). As Halttunen explains:

The cozy corner openly violated the stiff immutable laws dictating the placement of furniture along the walls of the moral parlor. A divan was placed diagonally across the corner of the room with a rod overhead from which Baghdad curtains were draped, looped back in a calculatedly asymmetrical fashion. The divan was piled with cushions and usually decorated with some mix of Japanese, East Indian, Turkish and Egyptian motifs, suggesting what was popularly regarded as ‘The sluggish temperament of the Orient.’ The desired effect of the cozy corner was one which invites repose and freedom from conventionality by offering a place to sprawl and lounge at ease. (165)

This “calculated” informality brings to mind Lily’s visit to Selden’s apartment where she notices “a pleasantly faded Turkey rug,” and “sinks” into one of the “shabby” leather chairs (28). Admiring Selden’s space, his freedom to arrange the furniture “just as one likes,” she declares, “How delicious to have a place like this all to oneself”(28). “If only I could do over my aunt’s drawing room,” she continues, “I would be a better woman” (29). Unable to decorate her interior space in a way that reflects her personality leaves Lily unfulfilled, feeling deprived. And it is not just notions of “self expression” which Lily finds so
appealing; there is something sentimental here, a warmth compared to the “glacial neatness” of Mrs. Peniston’s. Indeed part of Lawrence’s appeal is manifested in this cozy corner his apartment provides, a warm domestic space that invites “repose and freedom from conventionality.” In Selden’s apartment, Lily can be frank, can share a cigarette, can reveal her worries. Later in the novel, while standing outside this apartment, she looks up to see a light in the window, and thinks of “his quiet room, the bookshelves and the fire on the hearth”(284). Her thoughts regarding Selden’s home also emphasize its organic fluidity, its changing with the seasons as opposed to Mrs. Peniston’s home frozen in a distant time: “[T]hen the wide September light had filled the room, making it seem part of the outer world: now the shaded lamps and the warm hearth, detaching it from the gathering darkness of the street, gave it a sweeter touch of intimacy” (284).33

In contrast to the intimacy of Selden’s “cozy corner,” we have the expansiveness of Bellomont, and opposed to the empty house of Mrs. Peniston, there is Bellomont’s “crowded existence”(62). This home is a theatre, a spectacle; it is a home where tradition is disregarded and the boundaries between public and private space give way. John Clubbe calls Bellomont a home of “pretension and hodgepodge,” and while there is no genuine community nor moment of sentimental connection here, compared to later more extravagant interiors—The Wellington Brys and the Emporium Hotel for example—Bellomont has at least some aesthetic appeal (549). Above all else it offers visual delight.

33 Clubbe also points out the warm domesticity enjoyed by Selden. He writes that although Lily “enjoys relaxing in Selden’s shabby leather chair, she dreams of herself ensconced in far grander settings”(547). He argues that Lily never really comes to appreciate this comfortable and humble domesticity. And even when she arrives at his apartment near the novel’s end, Clubbe insists that Lily can not “share the flat’s intimacy in part because she has not cultivated the values it represents”(557).
Less formal and more lively than Mrs. Peniston's home, this is a home full of delightful scenes. Highlighting this is the opening of Chapter three in which Lily surveys Bellomont's visual splendor:

She lingered on the broad stairway, looking down into the hall below, where the last card players were grouped . . . the hall was arcaded with a gallery supported on columns of pale yellow marble. Tall clumps of flowering plants were grouped against a background of dark foliage in the angles of the walls. On the crimson carpet a deerhound and two or three spaniels dozed luxuriously before the fire and the light from the great central lantern overhead shed a brightness on the women's hair, and struck sparks from their jewels as they moved. There were moments such scenes delighted Lily when they gratified her sense of beauty, and her craving for the external finish of life; there were others when they gave a sharper edge to the meagerness of her own opportunities. (44)

Emphasizing color, light, elements of contrast—"pale yellow marble" and a "background of dark foliage"—Wharton's language here evokes a painting, a still life. Everything seems arranged for just the right effect; even the dogs seem to be posing as they doze "luxuriously" on a "crimson carpet." Echoing the delights experienced by the flaneur, Lily takes in the visual plenitude of Bellomont's spectacle, yet this scene also brings to mind Carrie Meeber's first visit to the department store, for such scenes also remind Lily of the "meagerness of her own opportunities." Bellomont too is a place of temptation; it is so easy to part with one's money here. She "could not remain long without playing bridge and being involved with other expenses." "She knew the gambling passion was upon her and that in her present surroundings there was small hope of resisting it"(46). Lily also finds her "present surroundings" so irresistible because she sees herself reflected in its beauty and luxury. It is the perfect setting for her personality:

Everything in her surroundings ministered to feelings of ease and amenity. The windows stood open to the sparkling freshness of the September morning, and between the yellow boughs she caught a perspective of hedges and parterres leading by degrees of lessening formality to the free undulations of the park. Her maid had kindled a little fire on the hearth and it contended cheerfully with the sunlight which slanted across the moss
green carpet and caressed the curved sides of an old marquetry desk. Near the bed stood a table holding her breakfast tray, with its harmonious porcelain and silver, a handful of violets in a slender glass, and the morning paper folded beneath her letters. There was nothing new to Lily in these tokens of studied luxury but though they formed a part of her atmosphere she never lost her sensitiveness to their charm. Mere display left her with a sense of superior distinction; but she felt an affinity to all the subtler manifestations of wealth. (57)

The language in this passage reinforces not just a “subtle manifestation of wealth,” but a sentimental, tender atmosphere of feeling to the room. The fire “contends cheerfully” with the sunlight, which in turn “caresses” the desk. The open windows let in the “freshness of the September morning,” and Lily’s “perspective” of the hedges is one of “lessening formality” and “free undulations.” As Bellomont provides a warm domestic space of “repose and freedom” here, it even brings to mind Selden’s cozy corner (Haltunen 165). And reminiscent of the cozy corner’s “calculated” informality, Bellomont also, with its tokens of “studied luxury,” creates an inviting atmosphere

Not only does Bellomont offer Lily so many opportunities to delight in visual splendor, and to see her taste reflected in her surroundings, it also offers her many opportunities to perform, to display. As Lily stood “leaning on the balustrade above the sunken garden,” for example, she not only watches the interchanges between Carrie Fisher and Percy Gryce, she also includes herself in their performance: “[H]e cast agonized glances in the direction of Miss Bart whose only response was to sink into an attitude of more graceful abstraction. She had learned the value in throwing her charms into relief and was fully aware of the extent to which Mrs. Fisher’s volubility was enhancing her own repose” (63). Like Lily herself, much of Bellomont’s visual delight is calculated and contrived to achieve just the right effect. The appearance of tradition for example, is much more important than actually adhering to it. Tradition in the Bellomont household has primarily theatrical value; it is also a useful prop for performance, and the Trenors’ old library highlights this:
The library was almost the only surviving portion of the old manor house of Bellomont: a long spacious room, revealing the traditions of the mother country in its classically cased doors, the Dutch tiles of the chimney, and the elaborate hobgrate with its shining brass urns. A few family portraits of lantern-jawed gentlemen in tie wigs and ladies with large head-dresses and small bodies hung between the shelves lined with pleasantly shabby books: books mostly contemporaneous with the ancestors in question and to which the subsequent Trenors had made no perceptible additions. The library at Bellomont was in fact never used for reading though it had a certain popularity as a smoking room or a quiet retreat for flirtation. (73)

There seems little sentimental attachment to the family portraits; they are just things to hang between the shelves, and the ancestors themselves seem especially distant and detached. With their “lantern” jaws and “large headdresses,” they seem more like anonymous types rather than particular individuals. Moreover, the Trenor’s use of the library not only shows their disregard of tradition, it also illustrates Wharton’s disapproval of the new tendency in interior design for boundaries between rooms to become more ambiguous. As she wrote in Decoration: “Each room in a house has its individual uses: some are made to sleep in, others are for dressing, eating, study or conversation, but whatever the uses of a room, they are seriously interfered with if it be not preserved as a small world by itself. If the drawing room be a part of the hall and the library a part of the drawing room, all three will be equally unfitted to serve their special purpose” (22). As the library at Bellomont is no longer a private space for contemplation and study, but rather a stage for performance, the boundaries between the drawing room and the library disappear. Though a “book lay on his knee,” Selden’s attention was not “engaged with it”—this is the room where the “lace-clad figure” of Bertha Dorset demands his attention (74).

Going to church is also a performance staged by the Trenors: “The observance of Sunday at Bellomont was chiefly marked by the punctual appearance of the smart omnibus destined to convey the household to the little church at the gates. Whether any one got into the omnibus or not was a matter of secondary importance since by standing there it not only
bore witness to the orthodox intentions of the family but made Mrs. Trenor feel when she finally heard it drive away, that she had somehow vicariously made use of it"(66). Intent on securing the attentions of Percy Gryce, Lily also hopes to use the omnibus for her own performance. Gryce, who is "frightened by the talk of the men and the looks of the ladies" at Bellomont, is "glad to find that Miss Bart... is not at home in so ambiguous an atmosphere," and would be attending church on Sunday morning (67). Though Lily has a "grey dress" ready as well as a "borrowed prayer book," this is one performance she cannot seem to manage (72). As she imagines life with Gryce, she pictures a life adhering to obligations which she decides are "not especially arduous," but "stood for a fraction of that great bulk of boredom which loomed across her path"(72):

A small spark was enough to kindle Lily's imagination and the sight of the grey dress and the borrowed prayer book flashed a long light down the years. She would have to go to church with Percy Gryce every Sunday. They would have a front pew in the most expensive church in New York and his name would figure handsomely in the list of parish charities. In a few years, when he grew stouter he would be made a warden. Once in the winter, the rector would come to dine and her husband would beg her to go over the list and see that no divorcees were included except those who had showed signs of penitence by being remarried to the very wealthy (72).

With the arrival of Selden, Lily eagerly abandons this church date, for she finds Selden's easy going informality so much more appealing. Indeed while Gryce finds Bellomont's superficial adherence to tradition rather alarming, Lily is comfortable in the house's "large tumultuous disorder." In many respects, Bellomont resembles the home Lily grew up in. Her home had "no grave endearing traditions," and her parents had been "rootless, blown hither and thither on every wind of fashion" (296). Emphasizing the frantically active public life of this home, Wharton describes it as a "turbulent element" (47). Indeed with its "doorbell perpetually ringing," and its "series of French and English maids giving warning amid a chaos of hurriedly ransacked wardrobes and dress-closets," Lily's childhood home is above all an arena of performance and publicity (47).
Like Bellomont and the Barts' home, the Wellington Brys' mansion is also seen as "lacking a frame for domesticity," but this home is even more "well designed for the display of a festal assemblage" (136). Not only do the Brys set up a stage within their home for a grand and highly publicized tableaux vivants performance, the very structure of their home, as well as the visitors who attend their "show" are suffused with drama. The house is so theatrical, a sense of unreality pervades it: "One had to seat one's self in one of the damask and gold arm chairs to be sure it was not painted against the wall" (136). The guests mesh with the fantastic surroundings so that they no longer seem like people but rather textures, fabrics, colors—objects of visual delight: "The seated throng filling the immense room... presented a surface of rich tissues and jeweled shoulders in harmony with the festooned and gilded walls, and the flushed splendors of the Venetian ceiling" (136). As the Venetian ceiling "flushes," and the guests become a "surface of rich tissues," human and object merge. Indeed in the spaces of Bellomont and the Wellington Brys, Lily does seem to merge with her surroundings, to find expression of her self in the decor of these mansions. As Agnew puts it, "Lily is a figure whose boundaries occasionally dissolve into the ornamental world that surrounds her" (149). "She thrives in the luxuriant hot house atmosphere of New York's mansions and begins to die only when she is driven out of them. Their furnishings are her soil, their mirrors are the pools in which she finds the security of her own reflected beauty" (Agnew 149). Also, unlike the secluded severe home of Mrs. Peniston, these more public interiors provide Lily with the opportunities to perform, to display herself.

With Lily's fall from grace, however, she finds herself forced out of this "hot house atmosphere" to interiors that are as alienating as Mrs. Peniston's. Indeed the contemporary and trendy world of the nouveau riche is as oppressive as the stuffy formal Victorian parlor of Mrs. Peniston. As secretary for Norma Hatch, Lily finds herself living in the Emporium Hotel, which like Bellomont, provides a wonderful comfort and luxury, a "sense of being
lapped and folded in ease," but there is a crucial difference (257). Even for Lily this extravagant lifestyle with its more pronounced emphasis on individual pleasure is strange and unreal:

She was unacquainted with the world of the fashionable New York hotel—a world over-heated, over-upholstered and over-fitted with mechanical appliances for the gratification of fantastic requirements while the comforts of a civilized life were as unattainable as in a desert. Through this atmosphere of torrid splendor moved wan beings as richly upholstered as the furniture, beings without definite pursuits or permanent relations who drifted on a languid tide of curiosity from restaurant to concert hall, from palm garden to music room, from art exhibit to dress maker's opening. High stepping horses or elaborately equipped motors waited to carry these ladies into vague metropolitan distances whence they returned still more wan from the weight of their sables to be sucked back into the stifling inertia of the hotel routine. Somewhere behind them in the background of their lives, there was doubtless a real past, peopled by real human activities: they themselves were probably the product of strong ambitions, persistent energies, diversified contacts with the wholesome roughness of life, yet they had no more real existence than the poets' shades in limbo. (258)

Harshly criticizing the new urban wealth, Wharton is horrified by the excesses of a consumer culture whose technology and abundance of goods create numbness rather than comfort. Indeed she depicts a life just as dehumanizing as Mrs. Peniston's rigid and formal Victorian home. These interiors are also stifling, overstuffed with things. And what Wharton keeps repeating here is the word "real." In the background, in the past there was something authentic; now women's lives are dictated by trends, whims, fashion. There is a homelessness here of profound proportions, for not only are these women without a domestic interior of their own, (and a humble domestic interior will do just as well or maybe better as demonstrated by Gerty Farish's and Nettie Struther's homes) they are without any traditions, any ties to the past, and hence Wharton suggests, without any sense of self. These women seem hardly human, they are "upholstered," "wan beings." With "no room of their own," these women have no substance, no "real life." Their visibility in "high stepping horses" or "elaborately equipped motors" is a spectacle not even worth watching.
Associated with physical decline, deterioration, and alienation, their highly public life is as empty and dehumanizing as Mrs. Peniston’s “impenetrable domesticity.” As traditions give way to a “jumble of futile activities,” and the dominion of the new urban mass culture, Wharton suggests that meaning and purpose give way as well: “Mrs. Hatch and her friends seemed to float together outside the bounds of time and space. No definite hours were kept, no fixed obligations existed, and night and day flowed into one another” (258). Reinforcing mass culture’s disregard of tradition and its emphasis on individual pleasure, Mrs. Hatch is “in the hands of her masseuse” at the tea hour which was usually dedicated to social rites (260). Eventually Lily comes to see this lifestyle as a “vast gilded void,” and the life of her former friends as “packed with ordered activities” since “even the most irresponsible pretty woman of her acquaintance had inherited obligations, her conventional benevolence, her share in the working of the great civic machine; and all hung together in the solidarity of these traditional functions” (259). But Norma Hatch’s world is not about “grave endearing traditions”; it is about the present moment, the trends; it is constructed by the new urban mass culture: “Mrs. Hatch swam in a haze of indeterminate enthusiasms, of aspirations culled from the stage, the newspapers, the fashion journal and a gaudy world of sport still more completely beyond Lily’s ken” (259).

In addition to the predominance of lavish, insulated interiors, so many of the scenes in this city novel take place in idyllic, pastoral settings. It is only towards the end of the novel that Lily traverses the city streets, and feels the elements—the weather, the wind, the cold, the grit. For the most part, nature in the novel is an ideal pastoral realm, an urbanized nature, a nature suffused with artifice. As a leisure class woman, Lily dwells in a “hot house” atmosphere where even nature is a continual pleasure park, a perpetual spring. The novel’s pastoral scenes therefore function like those of the domestic interior; they provide a pleasing backdrop for the expression of personality as well as an intimate sentimental realm.
outside the tainted corrupt marketplace of New York. Indeed as various scholars have emphasized, the creation and use of pastoral space within the city was an important project during the last half of the nineteenth century, for alongside the culture’s preoccupation with domestic interiors, this insistence of the pastoral would also help urbanites draw boundaries and order the city’s maelstrom. Annette Larson Benert points out that the continual retreat to pastoral space in *The House of Mirth* reflects the Campaign for City Beautiful of the Progressive Era, an era which focused on “beautifying” the city with many public parks. Montgomery Schyler, an architectural spokesman for the age, she points out, emphasized the urban need in 1900 for the “illusion of rural scenery and the physical and moral benefits that come from it” (Benert 29). And while the setting of “Freedom” is insistently “pastoral,” Benert notes that “Part of what destroys Lily in fact are the evasions into transcendental philosophy and romantic metaphor, into sea going yachts and country houses that the pastoral myth encourages” (32). Although Benert does not extensively examine the novel’s pastoral scenes, she concludes that both pastoral landscape and elaborate interiors are “degraded cultural ideals” (33). A close reading of several scenes from the novel dramatizes not only how the pastoral realm offers a “degraded” ideal, but how this realm becomes an extension of the elaborate interior, how nature too acts as a “living room” for Lily Bart’s personality and self expression, how nature becomes another “thing,” another commodity whereby one might express one’s personality.

When Selden and Lily are together at Bellomont, their conversation takes place in just such an idealized and yet “degraded” realm. In order to place Lily and Selden in this realm apart, to oppose their “republic of the spirit” to the theatricality which surrounds them, 

---

Wharton details a harsh grotesque scenario at the Trenor's dining table beforehand. Bellomont with its beautiful scenes which had made Lily sigh is now transformed into a surreal nightmare because Selden has a way of "readjusting her vision" (70). Indeed the description of the Trenors is particularly repulsive: "She looked down the long table, studying its occupants one by one, from Gus Trenor with his heavy carnivorous head sunk between his shoulders as he preyed on a jellied plover to his wife... with her glaring good looks of a jeweler's window lit by electricity" (70). Judy Trenor becomes a garish commodified thing while her husband becomes animalistic, a gluttonous carnivore. Everyone at the dining table takes on caricature aspects and a sense of theater is pervasive. Each person has a role they must play. Miss Corby, for example, whose role was "jocularity" must enter the conversation "with a handspring" (71). After the fatigue of performing, the heat and the over eating, the stuffed plates and the little enjoyment, Wharton takes Lily and Selden to the rarefied atmosphere outside Bellomont where the "light air seemed full of powdered gold," and "below the dewy bloom of the lawns, the woodlands blushed and smoldered and the hills across the river swam in molten blue" (72). As if to call attention to the artifice of the scene, the language in this passage is overwrought, melodramatic. And while the morning suggests promise to Lily, and she goes out in quest of exercise in a garment more "rustic and summerlike," Lily is no transcendentalist; she cannot appreciate the charms of nature in solitude (73). Waiting for Selden, she sees her presence as "enhancing" the charm of nature, and feels depressed since there is no one around to watch her—"the combination of a handsome girl and a romantic scene too good to be wasted" (75). Even nature is another stage set, another theatrical scene in which to perform. As Wharton's language reinforces for us, this is a nature suffused with artifice; it is not nature per se that appeals to Lily, but the romantic scenes that she has read of, what she imagines takes place there. Nature is not valued in and of itself for its own beauty, but is valued for its function as
a suitable backdrop for Lily’s beauty. As Wharton writes, “Lily had no real intimacy with nature, but she had a passion for the appropriate and could be keenly sensitive to a scene which was the fitting background of her own sensations”(77).

As Lily and Selden ascend the “long slopes beyond the high road,” and “reach a zone of lingering summer,” Wharton’s description of their pastoral interlude rises to extravagant metaphorical heights. Indeed her description here places the couple in a mystical sphere of radiant light while the day to day world is lost in the hazy distance: “On the nearer slopes the sugar maples wavered like pyres of light; lower down was a massing of grey orchards and here and there the lingering green of an oak grove. Two or three red farm houses dozed under the apple-trees, and the white wooden spire of a village church showed beyond the shoulder of the hill; while far below in a haze of dust the high road ran between the fields”(77). The scene here is sentimental as well as pastoral. As they “doze,” the farm houses are homey and personified, and the simple wooden spire of the village church provides a dramatic counterpoint to the flashy theatricality at Bellomont. Looking out at this scene with Selden, Lily feels a sense of “buoyancy,” and asks herself “Was it love?” but she can, like Selden, detach herself and analyze her emotions (78): “Or was it just the combination of fortuitous circumstances?” she wonders. And while she begins to feel “love,” she appraises Selden’s “value” for her:

One of his gifts was to look his part; to have a height which lifted his head above the crowd and the keenly modeled dark features which in a land of amorphous types gave him the air of belonging to a more specialized race, of carrying the impress of a concentrated past... everything about him accorded with the fastidious element in her taste, even to the light irony with which he surveyed what seemed to her most sacred. She admired him most of all perhaps for being able to convey as distinct a sense of superiority as the richest man she had ever met. (79).

While Selden has been consistently criticized for perceiving only Lily’s aesthetic value, surely Lily is guilty of doing the same to him. Indeed this scene reinforces the similarities...
between Lily and Selden. What Lily sees in Selden is herself—although she is not rich, she too is able to convey a sense of superiority (think of her success at the Wellington Brys). She also shares with Selden an impatience with society, and both of them enjoy looking at the other. Both are types that appeal to the other’s aesthetic sense.35

Even while Lily appraises Selden’s “value,” Wharton suggests that they have found a pastoral realm outside the theatrics of high society. There is a feeling of vulnerability here and emotions once repressed are suddenly released:

The soft isolation of the falling day enveloped them: they seemed lifted into a finer air. All the exquisite influences of the hour trembled in their veins and drew them to each other as the loosened leaves were drawn to the earth... she leaned on him a moment as if with a drop of tired wings... They stood silent for a while after this, smiling at each other like adventurous children who have climbed to a forbidden height from which they discover a new world. The Actual world at their feet was veiling itself in dimness and across the valley a clear moon rose in the denser blue. Suddenly they heard a remote sound, like the hum of a giant insect, and following the high road, which wound whiter through the surrounding twilight, a black object rushed across their vision. (86)

With its exaggerated diction and its comparison to children, there is a sense of nostalgia and sentimentalism suffusing this passage, but then there is also the disruption of the machine.

Upon hearing the car engine, Lily suddenly shifts—her smile “faded,” and she moves to the lane speaking to Selden “almost impatiently”(86). Afraid of being caught in her deception of Gryce, she suddenly wrests herself free from any emotional entanglement with Selden. Lily, like Selden, must remain detached and in control.

Lily and Selden experience a moment of fleeting intimacy once again in a later pastoral scene. After her successful tableau vivant, the two pass through a glass doorway and find

35 Lois Tyson believes “Selden’s appeal can be seen as a direct outgrowth of Lily’s role as art object and the desire for emotional insulation it represents.” Selden shares with Lily her desire to “aestheticize her body”(5). “Thus Lily and Selden’s mutual attraction,” she argues, is “grounded in a shared transcendental project”(6).
themselves once more in a realm apart: "Gravel grated beneath their feet, and about them was the transparent dimness of a midsummer night. Hanging lights made emerald caverns among lilies. The magic place was deserted: there was no sound but the plush of the water on lily pads and a distant drift of music that might have been blown across a sleeping lake" (141). But as the glass doorway suggests, this realm apart is an illusion, for Lily, in any event, must continue her performance. In their "strange solitude," there is an "unreality to the scene," and Wharton elaborates its artifice by having Lily, even in this moment of emotional vulnerability, continue to pose. Indeed she seems to step back into the dramatic tableau she had just performed: "At length Lily withdrew her hand and moved away a step so that her white-robed slimness was outlined against the dusk of the branches" (141). Even after Selden professes his love, she is still posing; her reaching for desired effects continues: "Before he could speak, she had turned and slipped through the arc of boughs, disappearing, in the brightness of the room beyond" (142). This garden is not an escape from performance, but an extension of the tableau stage. Selden does not follow because it would ruin the "effect"; rather than act, he remains a spectator choosing to watch Lily run away as "he knew too well the transiency of exquisite moments" (142).

At the opening of Book II, Selden and Lily once again find each other in idyllic landscapes. In a garden in Monte Carlo, Selden feels his "renewed sense of spectatorship," as nature provides a dramatic backdrop for leisure class theatrics: (179) "[G]roups loitering in the foreground against mauve mountains suggested a sublime stage setting forgotten in a hurried shifting of scenes." (178). "The quality of the air, the exuberance of the flowers, the blue intensity of sea and sky produced the effect of a closing tableau when all the lights are turned on at once" (179). Lily too is a spectator, losing herself in discovering new scenes on board the Dorset's yacht: "Lily leaned awhile over the side, giving herself up to a leisurely enjoyment of the spectacle before her. Unclouded sunlight enveloped sea and shore in a
bath of purest radiance. The purpling waters drew a sharp white line of foam at the base of the shore; against its irregular eminencies, hotels and villas flashed from the greyish verdure of olive and eucalyptus; and the background of bare and finely penciled mountains quivered in a pale intensity of light—how beautiful it was—and how she loved beauty" (189). But again the pastoral landscape is far too temporary. Eventually Lily and Selden find themselves under a sky "gusty and overcast" (209). They move to the "deserted gardens" where "spurts of warm rain blew fitfully against their faces" (209). "The deeper shade of the gardens receive them," and "the electric lamp at the bend of the path sheds a gleam on the struggling misery" of Lily's face (209). This scene echoes a later scene where Lily is without shelter and comfort, where she is sitting in the "penetrating dampness" of Bryant Park in a "wide circle of electric light," and is discovered by Nettie Struther. Unlike Nettie's sincere nonjudgemental concern, Selden's assistance in this scene comes with nagging doubts. In this deserted garden, Lily continues to fluctuate for him between the categories of "endangered" and "dangerous." "Fearful lest any word he chose should touch too roughly on her wound," he remains silent, and yet he is "also kept from free utterance by the wretched doubt which had slowly renewed itself within him" (209). Selden continues to sees Lily as someone he must save or the sight of moral corruption: "He would lift her out of it, take her beyond! . . . she was at once the dead weight at his breast and the spar which should float them to safety" (159-60).

Throughout the novel, Selden is plagued by doubts, and in Monte Carlo he plays a hesitant hero, who, while standing by Lily's side, cannot refrain from judging her, from maintaining a kind of detachment, from protecting his emotions. Many critics have pointed out the detached spectatorship of Lawrence Selden: his aloofness, his coldness, his inability
to take a risk. His delight in "looking" certainly aligns him with Miles Coverdale, particularly his failure to save the lady he delights in watching, perhaps too his implication in her death. And Lily, the object of this gaze, also has similar tendencies to the "painted woman" of Hawthorne's novel. Like Zenobia she has the awareness of her divided nature; she rails against being of no use, of being just an ornament, and yet like Zenobia, Lily delights in it; she wishes to be "decked out in loveliness," to be an aesthetic object. Both women are self aware of their oppression, but cannot seem to imagine themselves existing outside the male gaze. Both are actresses, "painted woman" who thrive on performance, deception, on having an audience of spectators. Zenobia, at the moment of her death, however, seems to resist being turned into an aesthetic object, for Coverdale must confront a Zenobia whose arms and knees are "bent" and "rigid with the act of struggling"; her hands are "clenched in immitigable defiance"(217) So disturbing and horrifying is her appearance that Silas Foster tries to "arrange the arms of the corpse decently"(217). Zenobia's death is horrible and there is no masking of this fact. Lily's death, however, becomes a moment of aesthetic contemplation for Selden. Lily, the more modern woman, in the end, seems less able to escape the male gaze.

And while much has been written about Lily as a victim of the gaze, she is much more complex than this. She is drawn to Selden because as was said before, she is in so many ways like him. She is also a spectator of life, and she too has an aloofness, a desire to remain detached. Like Coverdale and Selden, Lily avoids the physical realities of life. She "resented the smell of beeswax" and "behaved as though ... a house ought to keep clean of

---

36 Lori Merish observes that Selden "enjoys the easy mobility and urbane detachment of the flaneur"(335). Bruce Michelson writes "constantly moving between sentimental involvement and ironic or scientific or aesthetic detachment, between loving, acting, spectating, Selden confounds the emergence in The House of Mirth of either a true sentimental drama or of any coherent realistic viewpoint "(210). Maureen Howard points out how "Selden constantly aestheticizes his view of Lily at the expense of her humanity"(144).
itself" (110). At Gerty Farish's home she is appalled by the "steam heat beginning to sing in a coil of dingy pipes and a smell of cooking penetrating the crack of the door" (168). At Gerty's, Lily must confront her "evening dress and opera cloak lying in a tawdry heap on a chair" (167). Wharton writes that "Finery laid off is as unappetizing as the remains of a feast" and that Lily's maid's "vigilance had always spared her the sight of such incongruities" (167). Later at the boarding house Lily again is not "spared" from such incongruities. She hates the "intimate domestic noises of the house," and yearns for "that other luxurious world whose machinery is so carefully concealed that one scene flows into another without perceptible agency" (281). Lily's attitude brings to mind Coverdale's when he observed that it was a "pity that the kitchen, and the housework . . . cannot be left out of our system altogether" (16). Perhaps the republic of the spirit she and Selden discuss is not all that different from the ideal pastoral realm Coverdale wished to attain, but could not find, since the sweat of his brow often got in the way of his experiencing a beautiful aestheticized nature.

Indeed from the novel's beginning we see a recurring theme: Lily's alienation, her self-disgust, her self-division. Remaining on the stairs at Bellomont, she watches the card players because she is "feeling no desire for the self-communion which awaited her in her room" (44). Her desire for beauty and order always to surround her perhaps compensates for the disorder within. Although she tells Selden she would like to enter the "republic of the spirit," her "whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury" (45). She, in a sense, has that division that so tormented Coverdale: searching for spiritual ideals, for some meaning beyond the material world she lives in, she nevertheless thrives in that material world, needs its luxuries, cannot do without them. Moreover her narcissistic self-absorption prevents her from achieving intimacy. Like Coverdale she stands aloof, and her tormented and paradoxical nature is reinforced throughout the novel: "She wanted to get away from
herself and conversation was the only means of escape she knew” (37). “When she made a
tour of inspection of her mind, there were certain closed doors she did not open” (94). “She
had never learned to live with her own thoughts” (177). Indeed Wharton’s strange inhuman
description of the life Lily “longed to live” reinforces that her detachment from others, her
avoidance of human contact is extreme: “The glow of the stones warmed Lily’s veins like
wine. More completely than any other expression of wealth they symbolized the life she
longed to live, the life of fastidious aloofness and refinement in which every detail should
have the finish of a jewel and the whole form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like
rareness” (100).

Like Coverdale, much of Lily’s desire is also interwoven with power. At Bellomont when
she is planning to capture Gryce, she thinks of “old scores she could pay off as well as old
benefits she could return. She had no doubts as to the extent of her power” (65). She
experiences “self intoxication” at the Brys, and when she sees Selden after her tableau
performance—her “culminating moment of triumph”—she reads in his eyes that “no
philosophy was proof against her power” (143). Bringing to mind Steele’s observations
regarding the changing ideals of feminine beauty, Lily’s concern with her own “personal
magnetism” is pervasive; caring for her beauty is a kind of “religion” for Lily—it gives her
life meaning and purpose as well as power: “Her beauty in itself was not the mere
ephemeral possession it might have been in the hands of inexperience: her skill in enhancing
it, the care she took of it, the use she made of it seemed to give it a kind of permanence. She
felt she could trust it to carry her though to the end” (65). In the end however, Lily’s beauty
does not guarantee power, but leaves her more vulnerable to the powers of others as it just
encourages her alienation, her self-commodification.
It is only when Lily lives on the margins of consumer culture that she begins to see herself differently. As she experiences material deprivation, she discovers she needs more than material comfort:

It was no longer however, from the vision of material poverty that she turned with the greatest shrinking. She had a sense of deeper impoverishment—of an inner destitution compared to which outward conditions dwindled into insignificance. It was indeed miserable to be poor—to look forward to a shabby anxious middle age, leading by dreary degrees of economy and self denial to gradual absorption in the dingy communal existence of the boarding house. But there was something more miserable still—it was the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years.

Unlike Coverdale, Lily does not —indeed cannot—retreat back into a comfortable insulated domesticity; like Basil March she experiences a sense of homelessness, a profound discomfort which transforms her vision. In Nettie Struther’s kitchen, she experiences a “vision of the solidarity of life,” and comes to realize that “there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life”(296). Unlike Basil March who merely recognizes the plight of the working classes, and the “economic chance world we live in,” Lily experiences that plight as well as the terrible consequences of living in this “economic chance world” when your luck is down (Howells 380). Like Hurstwood, Lily’s tragic change of fortunes has her traversing spaces she once dare not before—factory workrooms, city streets of dubious neighborhoods, deserted parks and boarding houses. Weak, vulnerable and on the brink of destitution, Lily is an “endangered” woman, and her fallen reputation, her ambiguous status have also made her a “dangerous woman.” Now that her reputation is tarnished, and she has no money, she is a social outcast; no one of her “old set” wants to take the chance to be seen with her. Caught in the dualism used by the nineteenth-century urban cartographer, Lily, in a sense, has nowhere to go, but back to the nineteenth century. Though a woman always eager to assert her own individuality, Lily cannot make it on her own. She ends up a sentimental heroine. The city becomes not a space of liberation but a trial, a testing ground.
for character. It is a place characterized by the “penetrating dampness which struck up from the wet asphalt,” and “the shriek of the elevated and the tumult of trams and wagons contending hideously” in one’s ears (289, 270).

Like the flaneur, Lily can only delight in looking, in being a spectator when she is in a position of power, when she is protected in a domestic interior or a pastoral refuge. Lily’s time on the streets then is more reminiscent of King Lear’s time in the storm. Cast aside into harsh unforgivable elements, she too becomes someone to pity as well as someone transformed. After leaving the millinery workroom, Wharton writes that Lily “spends her days in the streets” (281). Like Hurstwood, she has became an inconspicuous observer, but in the theatrical public world she has lived in, this is to cease to exist, to die. And there is an atmosphere of death pervading these scenes. Though she leaves Mme. Regina’s in May, Wharton has Lily wandering under “a cold grey sky which threatened rain” as the “high wind drives dust in wild spirals” (282). She “hoped to find a sheltered nook” and after “wandering under the tossing boughs she . . . took refuge in a little restaurant” (282). “Shut out in a circle of silence,” Lily looks at everything from a great distance. Her situation more and more begins to resemble Hurstwood’s; shrinking from observation, she too loses her will to live. After moving away from the warmth of Selden’s fire for the last time, Lily sits on an empty bench in a deserted park in “the glare of an electric lamp” reinforcing the harshness and perhaps the modernity of her experience. Her old life is gone, and yet she is not able to recreate a new one.

At this point, Wharton brings in Nettie Struther, not Lawrence Selden to rescue Lily. It is in Nettie’s kitchen that Lily eludes the brands of “endangered” and “dangerous.” In its simplicity and sparseness, Nettie’s kitchen contrasts sharply with most of the other domestic spaces of this novel. It is a kitchen “extraordinarily small and almost miraculously clean”
with a fire which "shone through the polished flanks of the iron stove" (292). Bringing her into the heart of the house, Nettie invites Lily to sit in the rocking chair near the stove. There is no pretension or theater here; Nettie insists that they not use the parlor (though she is proud to have one) because it's warmer in the kitchen. Though Nettie can never really understand Lily's plight—"working girls aren't looked after the way you are," she tells Lily,—Lily nevertheless feels grateful for Nettie's concern. Moreover, it is her meeting with Nettie that gets Lily to reflect on the meaning of home, the meaning of her life.

Some critics are disturbed by these final scenes in Nettie's tenement, by what they see as a lapse into sentimentality.37 Lori Merish, for example, reads Wharton's sentimental depiction of Nettie's domestic space as an "ironic solution to the commodification of women within the consumer public sphere" since Wharton "(re)confines them within the heterosexual economy of nineteenth-century domesticity" (Merish 339). While Merish may see this move as "confining" to women, I do not believe Wharton sees it this way, nor would Nettie Struther. It is important to attend to the particulars of Wharton's description of Nettie's home:

The poor little working girl who had found strength to gather up the fragments of her life and build herself a shelter with them, seemed to Lily to have reached the central truth of existence. It was a meager enough life, on the grim edge of poverty with scant margin for possibilities of sickness or mischance, but it had the frail audacious permanence of a bird's nest built on the edge of a cliff—a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss. Yes—but it had taken two to build the nest; the man's faith as well as the woman's courage. (297)

37 Robin Beaty argues that Lily becomes an "increasingly sentimental heroine" as the novel progresses—"a much less complex being than the vain, charming, undependable woman with a horror of dinginess who inhabits most of the novel" (267). Jeanne Boydston observes that Wharton's conclusion seems "false" since "we have seen all too vividly the power of the public world to manifest itself in the private" (35). The conclusion of The House of Mirth is "credible only if we accept it on terms which exist outside of the world of the novel and in our own beliefs: that there is redemption and truth in the bond of mother and child" (35). Cynthia Griffen, however, sees this scene as satirical. Even at this sentimental moment, she points out, Lily cannot "conceive of herself in any other way than as the object of aesthetic attention," for she looks up to see Nettie's eyes "resting on her with tenderness and exultation."
As she creates a classic sentimental image of the home here, Wharton also emphasizes that Nettie is an actor. She is the one who gathers the “fragments of her life” and builds herself a shelter. And this is what makes an impression on Lily, along with the fact that it had “taken two to build the nest.” Nettie is not an embodiment of someone’s wealth; she is not loved for her aesthetic value. Nettie exudes competence and strength; she is not sheltered in a protected domestic space, but shares the work, the difficulties of life with her husband. Her ties to George—ties of respect, forgiveness, and understanding—are ties we just do not see in Lily’s “set.” While Wharton is clearly romanticizing the working class in order to highlight the oppressiveness of women’s role in the leisure class, she nevertheless imagines what a new domestic space might look like in Old New York. In Wharton’s version of the sentimental home, propriety does not come before love, and the fallen woman is not punished. Men and women work together. In order to escape a realm where women figured predominantly as commodified spectacles, Wharton perhaps could only turn to a realm where they embodied sentimental domestic ideals, but even when she makes this move, she still reveals her ambivalence towards that tradition. In the end, we could say that Wharton imagines not woman being confined in the home but a more egalitarian, companionate marriage within that home. This is an ideal, however, too far in the future to house a homeless Lily Bart.
CHAPTER 6

'GO, MAKE YOURSELF FOR A PERSON':
URBANITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS
OF ABRAHAM CAHAN AND ANZIA YEZIERSKA

Recalling his early days in New York, Abraham Cahan declared that he "felt strongly
drawn to the life of the city." "My heart," he wrote, "beat to its rhythm" (Marovitz 17). Anzia
Yezierska also remembers New York's Lower East Side at the turn of the century with
affection in her autobiographical novel, Bread Givers. When her heroine Sarah Smolinsky is
away from Hester Street, she longs for "the crowds sweeping you on like waves of a beating
sea. The drive and thrill of doing things faster and faster" (129). For both of these Jewish
immigrant writers, the spectacle of New York City embodies hope, liberation and vitality,
yet as they explore the immigrant's exhilarating and exasperating adaption to urban life in
America, they highlight the keen sense of loss on becoming American, on becoming
"modern." Indeed in their vivid depictions of late nineteenth-century New York life, both
Cahan's The Rise of David Levinsky (1917) and Yezierska's Bread Givers (1925) detail in an
especially dramatic fashion a story that had not been explored before in America's urban
novel: the immigrant's adaption to an urban consumer culture.

As historians have concurred, the late nineteenth century was a particularly volatile
period, for not only was the United State changing into a more multicultural society, but the
rise of a consumer mass culture was transforming American life as well. Fueled by advances
in technology and factory production, the new consumer-oriented economy eventually
would make an unprecedented amount of material goods the defining feature of American
life. Indeed Andrew Heinze reminds us that the last decades of the nineteenth century "marked a turning point in American history in regard to both immigration and consumption":

For the first time, the bulk of newcomers to the United States came from the most impoverished regions of Europe, and they settled overwhelmingly in cities, rather than dispersing to the countryside, as many immigrants had done during the early and mid-nineteenth century. Standing in stark contrast to the economic scarcity of the European homelands, the material conditions of urban America had improved to the extent that the average city person enjoyed a range of comforts and conveniences still unavailable to the mass of people in the most industrialized areas of Europe. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States also attained a state of being in which an abundance of products for the consumer rather than shortages became the chronic feature of daily life. (22)

As Cahan and Yezierska explore the effect of this new consumer culture on Eastern European Jewish identity, they are able to vividly dramatize—perhaps even more so than the previous American urban novels before them—the impact on consciousness as we shift from a culture of scarcity to a more theatrical culture of abundance. Indeed these novels are specifically about cultural adaption and the impact cultural transformation has on consciousness.

For the immigrant in particular, adapting to urban life in America would require enormous energy and resilience; indeed the long journey of crossing the ocean and being cut off from so much that was familiar makes the notion of "fashioning the self amid a world of strangers" take on another level of meaning. Not only were so many of these recent arrivals

from Russian shtetls or villages living a life far removed from the rhythms of small town life, they would also have to revise and reimagine ethnic traditions in a new cultural landscape. Preserving these traditions—familiar foods, native languages, religious rituals—would depend to a great extent on maintaining the home as a separate sphere. The rising consumer-driven economy, with its new products and images, its new heterosocial public spaces, would exert tremendous pressure on the home, heightening the discrepancy between public and private life, and between “American” and ethnic identities.

As many scholars have shown, life in the new industrialized cities reinforced a more distinct split between the public and private self, between the home and the marketplace. In the urban world of strangers, not only was fashioning a public self in order to create the right impression key to survival, but the ability to skillfully read the spectacle of city life was also essential. This, however, would be more difficult for the immigrant newcomer who had limited access to both the written and the spoken word of the dominant culture. Visual cues, therefore—so important in the urban environment anyway—become especially critical for the new immigrant. The rising fashion industry, the silent movie, the new advertisements—


indeed all the fantastic imagery which began to saturate late nineteenth-century American culture would be the primary means by which the immigrant would learn about America.40

Emphasizing this predominance of the visual in urban life, Elizabeth Wilson in her history of fashion refers to Georg Simmel, a German sociologist in the late nineteenth century, who “drew out the relationship between city life, individualism and the rapid development of fashion” (Wilson 138). Simmel believed that “a heightened sense of individual personality and ego developed when men and women moved in wider social circles” (Wilson 138). “The constant friction of self with a barrage of sensations and with other personalities generated,” according to Simmel, “a more intense awareness of one’s own subjectivity than the old uniform and unwavering rhythm of rural and provincial life. In the city, the individual constantly interacts with others who are strangers and survives by the manipulation of self. Fashion is one adjunct to this self presentation and manipulation.” (Wilson 138) Stuart Ewen has also examined the impact of late nineteenth-century urbanization on the self, elaborating, in his work, on this “intense awareness of one’s own subjectivity”:

Social life itself was being transformed from something known, set and transmitted by custom into something increasingly anonymous... In the shadow of this dislocation, people's customary conception of self was challenged. First, life became an experience of repeated and regular encounters with the unknown. As one navigated this vast new world of strangers, one quickly learned that to the eyes of countless others, one becomes a “stranger” oneself. Anonymity was not only the characteristic of others; it was also becoming a component of subjectivity, part of the way one came to understand oneself. Part of surviving this strange new world was the ability to make quick judgments based largely on immediate visual evidence.

The city was a place where surfaces took on a new power of expression. The very terms of everyday experience required as part of the rules of survival and exchange, a sense of self as alien, as an object of scrutiny and judgment. From this vantage point, immigrants learned that matters of dress and personal appearance were essential for success in the public world. (Ewen CI 72)

Through her settlement house work among immigrants, Jane Addams came to understand this overwhelming importance of “matters of dress and personal appearance”:

The working girl whose family lives in a tenement . . . knows full well how much habit and style of dress has to do with her position. Her income goes into her clothing out of all proportion to the amount which she spends upon other things. But if social advancement is her aim, it is the most sensible thing she can do. She is judged largely by her clothes. Her house furnishing with its pitiful little decorations, her scanty supply of books, are never seen by the people whose social opinions she most values. Her clothes are her background, and from them she is largely judged. (as quoted by Ewen 73)

Indeed soon after his arrival in America, David Levinksy quickly learns that “to be stylishly dressed was a good investment” (105). As Heinze points out, “As common laborers, newcomers often gained little prestige in America, but as consumers they could lay claim to a type of nobility” (Heinze 93).

In his discussion of fashion and democracy, Ewen asserts that at the end of the nineteenth century, “clothing emerged as a vehicle for self realization for an increasingly large purchasing public,” and “as early as the 1900s, poverty and finery no longer inhabited entirely separate worlds” (132 Channels). Enabling this transformation was the rapid rise of the ready-to-wear clothing industry. During the period from 1890 to 1910, this industry “really took off,” providing both work and consumer goods for aspiring Americans (Wilson 76). Indeed the combination of cheap immigrant labor and the newest machinery sent factory production soaring, and “over a span of three decades, the clothing industry reshaped the city’s social economy” (Rischkin 62). In 1880 . . . nearly 10 percent of New York’s factories engaged in clothing; three decades later over 47 percent were engaged (Rischin 67). The industry had particular appeal for Eastern European Jews. Garment shops
were often located near East Side streets; many employers themselves were Jews, and were willing to let religious Jews keep the Sabbath (Howe 82). As Moses Rischkin points out, "Jewish immigrants . . . found a place in the clothing industry where the initial shock of contact with a bewildering world was tempered by a familiar milieu. Work, however arduous, did not forbid the performance of religious duties, the honoring of the Sabbath and the celebration of religious festivals. Laboring in small units, immigrants could preserve the integrity of their families" (Rischin 61).

This intensive involvement in New York's garment business reinforced the Eastern European Jews' interest in clothing, however, according to Heinze, "their unusual interest in American dress signaled a keen awareness that items of consumption were important building block of American identity" (4). This, he argues "stemmed from their willingness to seek a new identity . . . " (Heinze 220). Eastern European Jews had an "intense desire to fit quickly into American society," for they were fleeing persecution; unlike other immigrants, they could not go "home" (Heinze 4). Moreover, because of their marginality in their native lands, some scholars maintain that Jews, in particular, were better able to adapt to American life. As Irving Howe remarks, "The Jews were able to skip the whole period of accustoming themselves to minority status which demanded so much energy from other immigrant groups" (71). In addition, the domestic nature of Eastern European Jewish life, as well as "the Jewish tendency to infuse material objects with symbolic meaning," also facilitated their adaption to America's consumer culture. As Heinze explains:

In the common culture of the shtetls and ghettos of Poland, Russia, Galicia, and Rumania, the Sabbath and festive holidays had been reinforced by the selective use of luxuries. By virtue of the environment of material scarcity in which Jews lived, these special items of food, clothing and housewares contrasted starkly with their day to day counterparts, and they, therefore, gave a rich physical dimension to the splendor that was to fill the holy days . . . in shifting their cultural identity from Eastern European to American, Jews shifted their attitude toward the role of luxuries. Whereas
before, these objects had elevated the dignity of the ordinary Jew as a partner in the divine covenant, afterward, they raised the dignity of the ordinary Jew as an American consumer. (220)

Yet while Jews may have found a responsive chord in American culture regarding the symbolic significance of luxurious objects, the distinctions between the holy and the mundane—so important in Jewish tradition—would collapse in American cities:

In a society that continually turned luxuries into necessities, the vivid contrast between regular and special products disappeared, leaving the spiritual distinction between the holy and the mundane without a complement in the material world. Marketed throughout the year, holiday treats, for example, lost the almost mystical aura recalled by immigrants of Eastern Europe... Juxtaposed with everyday silver plated tableware that looked like the genuine item, holiday utensils no longer stood out as a reflection of divinity. The banality of luxury in America was inescapable. (Heinze 64)

As Heinze summarizes it, “The traditional spiritual meaning of luxury ended in the secular environment of urban America, but Jews relied on their awareness of the symbolic potential of special products as they searched for a tangible American identity” (Heinze 223).

Not only would the separate spheres of the holy and the mundane collapse in America, but the separate realms of male and female would also give way:

Whereas an earlier generation had tended to seclude women from the leisure of the streets... in the 1890s and early 1900s, respectable dance halls and amusement parks emerged as an important site for heterosocial activity, and the moving picture theater arose to compete with the vaudeville stage by attracting entire families. After 1911, the modern nightclub appeared, offering respectable men and women a new kind of informal social life... These new forms of commercial leisure were quickly incorporated into the urban American standard of living... In 1915 a municipal report on living standards in New York City emphasized that these amusements were necessary for a “normally happy and self respecting existence” (Heinze 117).

Indeed “the commercialization of leisure held out new options for immigrants as billboards, movie posters, and chromos of all varieties created beguiling images of social life (Ewen Elizabeth 24). And most importantly this new social life—vaudeville, movies, and dance...
halls—posed a stark contrast to the customary recreations of the Old World by allowing men and women to socialize together in public (Heinze 116).

Both Cahan’s and Yezierska’s novels dramatize the impact of this new heterosocial public, in particular they explore the intersections between consumer culture and desire as woman’s more visible public role in the new urban economy often relegates her to function as a spectacular commodity. For David Levinksy, women and “modern” culture are inextricably intertwined—women and the new urban life he discovers in America continually evoke in him a dual response of fascination and repulsion. Sara Smolinsky, meanwhile, must somehow navigate through that tangle of liberation and oppression which the new urban culture provides for women specifically. While Sara must break away from her traditional Eastern European patriarchal home, she learns that the new American culture’s freedom from the past and ethnic tradition does not necessarily result in an unproblematic feminine identity.

Both novels also explore the impact of mass-produced goods on immigrant lives—the importance of clothing and other consumer products in sending visual messages, in constructing a “modern,” middle-class identity—and both wrestle with the shifting values and meanings inherent in domestic space. As immigrant families strive to maintain a separate ethnic identity, the boundaries between the public and private realms of life, in some sense, become more pronounced, and yet these boundaries also seem more permeable as a rising mass culture becomes a more influential and ubiquitous presence in private life. Indeed both novels dramatically depict the tensions and contradictions evident in early twentieth-century America after a more communal culture of scarcity gave way to anre individually-oriented consumer culture of material abundance.
The Rise of David Levinsey

"Ever Conscious of My Modern Garb"

In 1882, Abraham Cahan was officially admitted into the United States and "during the decade after his arrival, William Dean Howells was producing his most important social novels, including Hazard of New Fortunes" (Kirk 27). "Cahan was drawn to these novels which discuss the conflict between labor and capital in the 1880s because he himself was an unskilled laborer in a factory in New York" (Kirk 28). As "an interpreter of American culture to the immigrants with whom he worked," he found himself drawn to the new movement in literature and art, called "realism," and to Howells, its figurehead (Kirk 28). Indeed Howells’s influence on Cahan would be profound. After reading one of Cahan’s short stories, Howells told Cahan, "it is your duty to write," and after Cahan met Howells, Cahan declared, "it was as if my ideal had stooped to shake hands with me" (Kirk 30). Arriving at Howell’s home back in 1892, Cahan remembered feeling "young and old, humble and proud, an American sense of having arrived" (Kirk 30). When Howells reviewed Yekl in 1896 for the New York World, the headline across the top of the page read, "the great novelist greets Abraham Cahan, the author of Yekl as a new star of realism . . . he and Stephen Crane show the true picture of life on the East Side" (Kirk 37). Although Howells did not praise Cahan’s later masterpiece The Rise of David Levinsey as he had praised Yekl—Levinsky seemed “too sensual”—Howells’s own work was probably a model for Cahan’s, for the title Cahan chose for his novel echoes that of Howell’s classic, The Rise of Silas Lapham, and Cahan himself called Silas Lapham an “American allrightnik” (Kirk 42). Like Howells in Hazard of New Fortunes, Cahan presents us with a city deeply divided by ethnicity and class; however,

---

41 The “allrightnik,” the stereotype of the economically successful and rapidly assimilated Jew was often criticized in the Yiddish press (Heinze 142). Heinze defines the allrightnik as “the successful immigrant who adopted American habits, particularly habits of consumption, so thoroughly as to blend into the group of cosmopolitan Jews who had attained a high degree of cultural assimilation” (42).
as we move from the detached view of Howells’s middle-class observer to Cahan’s immigrant narrator, immigrants are no longer merely spectacles and colorful sights, but the central characters and forces in American urban life.

Because Cahan takes us inside an immigrant’s mind, *The Rise of David Levinsky* is perhaps unsurpassed in its depiction of the immigrant experience in American Literature. Once seen as a minor work, as a fine example of regionalism, Cahan’s fiction has gained more serious critical appraisal in recent years. John Higham declares that *The Rise of David Levinsky* “is the unrivaled record of a great historical experience” (v). Sam Girgus describes the novel as “a classic study of immigration and success,” and Donald Weber calls it “the master narrative of early immigrant fiction” (66, 732). Above all else, Weber writes, “*The Rise* charts the growth of shame, repression, self hatred and denial in the immigrant psyche” (Weber 734). Along similar lines, David Fine asserts: “While all the immigrant novelists of the period described the disparity between the expectations and the actualities of America, only Cahan among them pursued the psychological implications of that disparity, its permanent cost to the psyche” (138). A few other critics, however, have pointed out that Cahan’s work—while a brilliant portrayal of immigrant psychology and experience—is also much more. Cushing Strout says *The Rise of David Levinsky* “transcends its local particularity by anticipating the general American literary theme about the failure of economic success to satisfy inner needs” (62). Jules Chametzky sees the book as intertwined with other American texts such as *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, *Sister Carrie* and *The Great Gatsby* in its depiction of “spiritual
malaise" in an "affluent existence" (143). For Chametzky, Levinsky is "haunting, suggestive," and finally, a "prophetic book" (143). Building on this idea, such critics as Bonnie Lyons and David Engels look to Levinsky as a quintessential modern man. Though professing realism, Cahan, they argue, was writing within the context of an incipient modernism. According to Lyons, "the various strands" of the novel "are united and subsumed in a more universal theme: modern man as spiritual orphan in search of his parents, of legitimate authority" (85). Comparing Levinsky to Stephen Dedalus wandering through Dublin in search of his father, Lyons argues, "[M]ore than a dusty rambling period piece interesting only in terms of literary history or nostalgia, David Levinsky is a surprisingly modern parable" (Lyons 86). And finally, David Engel argues that "Cahan contributes as few other American writers have to our understanding of that constellation of decisive historical turnings—secularization, urbanization, proletarization which has enacted the transformation of traditional into modern society" (39). Engel believes that "we may gain a more accurate appreciation of Cahan's achievement in David Levinsky by coming to see it as a novel absorbed with the issue of what it means to be modern" (38). "The essential subject of all Cahan's fiction is the impact of historical change on culture," he writes (39). "And it is Cahan's imagination of history, as the individual experiences it, which . . . makes Levinsky a novel of modernity" (40). While these critics have noted the richness of the novel, and its "modernity," they do not necessarily discuss in great detail how Cahan's work is intertwined with an American

---

42 See for example, Allen Guttman's The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity New York: Oxford University Press 1971, and Jules Chametzky's Our Decentralized Literature: Cultural Mediations in Selected Jewish and Southern Writers. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986. Guttman asserts that “Abraham Cahan’s contributions to American literature have been undervalued, especially in the era of the hegemony of the New Critics, who esteemed a subtly poetic prose quite unlike the frequently awkward language of Cahan’s fiction” (33). Chametzky notes that Cahan, Charles Chesnutt, and Kate Chopin, were “accepted” as regional or local color writers of considerable achievement, but also “misunderstood, misrepresented, or totally denied in what we may now see as their significant concerns” (22).
tradition or more specifically with other American novels about the urban experience, yet Cahan looks to Hawthorne as well as Howells for his inspiration.

In his autobiography, Cahan describes how his imagination was "fired" when he read the novels of Hawthorne, Howells and James (Richards v). Indeed while Howells's influence on Cahan is well documented, there are elements in Cahan's work which seem more akin to Hawthorne. As Sanford Marovitz notes, "Jewish American realism has features and qualities that make it unique, however closely related it may be to the critical dicta which Howells set forth in Criticism and Fiction" (Romance 102). He sees "the sense of alienation and the poignancy of suffering common in Hawthorne's fiction in much of the writing done by the Jewish American realists" (105). "With its sentimental nostalgia, its emotionally laden pictures of suffering in poverty, its emphasis on hope and dream, and its more-than-occasional celebration of social ideology, Jewish American realism often corresponds with romantic aims no less than realistic ones" (123). Indeed the vivid realistic scenes of Lower East Side life in Levinksy are always intertwined with a "sentimental nostalgia." Moreover, I would add, in Cahan's creation of Levinsky, we experience once again Coverdale's dilemma: should one live in a communal culture of relative scarcity or in a more individually-oriented consumer culture offering abundance and new luxuries? Again as we see in Blithedale, an uncertain narrator alternates back and forth between these oppositions, and domestic space becomes an idealized space, perhaps of even more heightened sentimentality as home becomes a repository for ethnic traditions. Cahan's novel also recalls the later novels of Dreiser, Dunbar and Wharton in its theme and tone. Much like the story of Sister Carrie, Levinsky's rise is fantastic, a Horatio Alger success story; and like Carrie, Levinsky remains an outsider, detached from the very life he has struggled to achieve. And like the Hamilton family, Levinsky must also negotiate a cultural divide when moving to New York; he must assimilate into a culture that perceives him as Other. Again and again, Levinsky mentions
how his Russian accent and appearance do not help him, and he continually strives to erase his Otherness. As a result, he comes to feel like Lily Bart, “something rootless and ephemeral, mere spin-drift on the whirling surface of existence . . . ”(Wharton 296). Indeed in dramatizing the urban stage and the fashioning of the self, in exploring the paradoxical relationship between public image and private feeling, Cahan’s work brings together so many of the concerns of America’s major urban novels. Moreover, his work dramatizes the paradoxical experience of the Jewish American immigrant; at the same time that Eastern European Jewish culture presented enormous obstacles to American acculturation, it also facilitated adaptation to the material abundance of urban life in America.

Levinsky’s life in Russia is characterized by deprivation, violence and hardship, yet his life in America is characterized by luck, ambition, and material abundance. While poverty may be emphasized in Crane’s Maggie, for example, Cahan’s novel of New York highlights a rising class concerned with image, position and power. This emphasis reflects the changing conditions of East Side life. As Irving Howe reminds us, “from 1898 to 1904, there was a drive back to prosperity after the 1893 depression when hunger stalked the streets” (119). “Communal affairs of the East Side grew more various: an outpouring of social activities, political factions, collective programs. Even a light sprinkle of hedonism refreshed the surface of immigrant life. A middle class still fragile, but increasing in numbers and confidence, started to make its appearance . . . ”(Howe 120). Henry James’s observations of the East Side in the early 1900s also report these changes. Although James speculates that there were “grosser elements of the sordid and squalid” that he “doubtless never saw,” the predominant impression the Lower East Side gives him is that of a grand marketplace which seemed to demonstrate as he puts it, “a new style of poverty” (136). “What struck me in the flaring streets,” James writes, “was the blaze of shops addressed to the New Jerusalem, the wants and the splendor with which these were taken for granted”(135-6). It is the
development of this middle class that Cahan's novel depicts so vividly. Indeed we spend little time in poverty-stricken tenements; instead we enter the dance halls, the Yiddish theater, the Pullman railway car, the Catskill resort, the middle-class homes of rabbis and scholars.

Even in the early 1880s, when Levinksy first arrives in America, there is an emphasis on abundance and material wealth. Comparing America's consumer culture with the culture of scarcity he has left behind, he is astounded by New York's well-dressed crowds. "With his coat of blue cloth, starched linen collar and white gloves," the policeman looks like a "nobleman"(90). And "the well dressed trim-looking crowds of lower Broadway" impress Levinksy as "a multitude of counts, barons, princes"(90). "The great thing" was "these people were better dressed than the inhabitants of my town," he remarks (93). "The poorest looking man wore a hat (instead of a cap), a stiff collar and a necktie, and the poorest woman wore a hat or a bonnet"(93). Eventually Levinksy does find "signs of poverty" in the New York ghetto when he comes across a poor family who "had been dispossessed for nonpayment of rent"; however, the "pile of furniture and other household goods on the sidewalk puzzled" him. "In my birth place, chairs and a couch like those I now saw on the sidewalk would be a sign of prosperity"(95). Because signs of prosperity are more democratic, more readily available, Levinksy finds the American city a difficult text to decipher, a city where "anything was to be expected" since the "poorest devil wore a hat and a starched collar"(95).

Although the number of poor people in urban America rose, Levinsky's observations reinforce for us that their material standards rose as well. This comparative affluence stemmed from the great decline in cost of food which freed more income for the purchase of luxuries (Heinze 22-23). Moreover, the widespread use of credit for the acquisition of
luxuries reflected the perspective of abundance that urged urban Americans to raise their material aspirations above their incomes" (Heinze 28). All of these changes, Heinze argues, contributed to the development of the Lower East Side as an "emporium" (45):

Notorious for its crowded housing, the Lower East Side did have residents who lived in a deplorable condition, nonetheless the rapid flowering of retail commerce in the district would have been impossible without a population that upheld standards of consumption . . . . By the late 1880s . . . the saloons and rundown shops that had marked the Lower East Side as a slum gave way steadily to groceries, cafes and restaurants and to clothing, jewelry and furniture stores. Particularly after the depression of 1893-1897 had ended, the signs of material sophistication came clearly to the surface of the community . . . Visitors to the Lower East Side frequently commented on the quality of the food sold on the streets, as well as in groceries and butcher shops, on the fine appearance of Jewish children, and on Jewish standards of domestic furnishing. (Heinze 45)

Indeed as Cahan's novel illustrates, for many aspiring immigrants, some elements of an American middle-class lifestyle were now within reach—stylish clothing, a piano, a furnished parlor, and for the Jewish immigrant, in particular, even a vacation.

While Cahan stresses the importance of clothing and other consumer products in constructing an American identity, he also makes clear that the pressure to construct a "modern" identity had already impinged on traditional Jewish culture before emigration to America. The forces of urbanization and secularization had already "modernized" many Jewish families in Russia, and between the death of his mother and the pogroms encouraged by the Russian government, Levinsky, in a sense, had already lost the environment and circumstances which supported his orthodox Judaism. After his mother dies, his "thirst for the Talmud is gone," and the "word of America" catches his "Fancy" (59). Moreover, Matilda Minsker "readies" him for America by emphasizing the importance of appearance, the importance of seeming "modern," indeed the importance of erasing his "ethnicity."

Though the Minskers who take Levinsky in are well established in Russia, and see "America as a land of dollars," it is their influence, and more specifically their money that
enables Levinsky to go to America. Moreover, living with them, introduces Levinsky to a more secular, as well as a more luxurious lifestyle, thereby preparing him in a sense for what lies ahead. Shiprah Minsker, for example, wears her hair “Gentile fashion,” and her husband is “a worldly man with only a smattering of Talmud” (58). To Levinsky, their “vast sitting room” is “so crowded with new furniture that it had the appearance of a furniture store” (66). The superabundance of things in the Minsker home is “due to Shiphrah’s passion for bargains,” and “several of her wardrobes and bureaus were packed full of all sorts of things for which she had no earthly use” (67). Upon first meeting their daughter Matilda, Levinsky declares, “There were centuries of difference between her and myself, not to speak of the economic chasm that separated us. To me, she was an aristocrat, while I was a poor wretched day eater, a cross between a beggar and a recluse” (69). It is here that Levinsky feels his poverty more acutely; his sheltered scholarly life loses stature and prestige, for rather than conveying his closeness to God, it just confirms his ignorance. A traditional religious education is viewed as absurd; instead of evoking respect, Levinsky’s sidelocks, according to Matilda, make him appear “rigged out like a savage” (74). She tells him he should be “ashamed” (71). “Look at the way you are dressed, the way you live generally. Besides the idea of a young man like you not being able to speak a word of Russian!” she exclaims (71). Smoothing down his sidelocks, she brings a handglass, and as Levinsky puts it, “made me look at myself” (74). “When you are in America you’ll dress like a Gentile and even shave,” she tells him. “Then you won’t look so ridiculous. Good clothes would make another man of you” (75).

Soon after Levinsky’s arrival in America, Matilda’s words seem to ring true. Recalling Carrie’s transformation under the knowing eye of Drouet, Levinsky is taken under the wing of Mr. Even, who spends a “considerable sum” on him (101). After taking Levinsky to “store after store” where he buys him “a suit of clothes, a hat, some underclothes, handkerchiefs,
collars, shoes and a necktie," Even takes him to a barber shop to have his sidelocks cut off (101). Again, Levinksy is taken in front of a looking glass, but this time he does not just blush with self consciousness, he experiences a sense of profound alienation. Looking into the mirror, Levinksy is "bewildered" because, as he put it, "I scarcely recognized myself" (101). Highlighting his self division, and the theatrical role he must now play, he tells us "I was mentally parading my modern makeup before Matilda"(101 my emphasis). And while a "momentary" "pang of yearning clutched" his heart, "for the rest," he was "all in a flutter" with a "novel relish of existence"(101). "It was as though the haircut and the American clothes had changed my identity," he observes (101). Highlighting the effect of material objects on spirituality, on consciousness, he continues, "The very clothes I wore and the very food I ate had a fatal effect on my religious habits. A whole book could be written on the influence of a starched collar and a necktie on a man who was brought up as I was"(110).

Not only does the clothing Levinksy can now purchase heighten his self consciousness and cause internal division, the urban environment itself heightens his self awareness. Stuart Ewen, who has written at length about how urban life created a new form of subjectivity, explains how the city's physical environment causes a psychological split whereby one sees oneself as a stranger, a commodity in the marketplace: "The urban stage," he writes, "not only offered a continual spectacle, it also generated continual opportunities for people to see themselves as part of the cityscape. As the metropolis took on its modern dimensions, it became a collection of glass and mirrored surfaces, unavoidable occasions for seeing oneself as a sight"(Channels 141). Indeed one of the dramatic experiences that occurs in the American city is this "seeing oneself as a sight." Throwing "glances at store windows, trying to catch a reflection" of himself, Levinksy is "ever conscious of his modern garb"(106). And when Gitelson takes Levinksy to a "dazzlingly lighted and mirrored"candy store, Levinksy is forced to contrast his appearance with Gitelson's: "The contrast between his flashy clothes
and my frowzy, wretched appearance as I saw ourselves in the mirrors on either side of me, made me sorely ill at ease. The brilliancy of the gaslight chafed my nerves. It was as though it had been turned on for the express purpose of illuminating my disgrace" (149). Later when he successfully receives credit to start his business, he looks to the mirrored surfaces of the city again; surprised that he was able to pull off the business deal, he views himself as a stranger almost, searching the reflections in store windows, "scanning his credit face" (210).

Perhaps this is the central drama of the novel: Levinsy studying his reflection, his image, analyzing his performance, searching for the "effects" he produces. Whether he is watching American smokers to see if there were "a special American manner of smoking," or making an effort to speak with his hands in his pocket because his "Talmud gesticulations" are so "distressingly un-American," Levinsky struggles and strives incessantly to construct a middle-class American identity (326-27). As the novel progresses and he becomes more and more successful, this struggle only intensifies, for he needs to secure a middle-class identity to "comport well" with his new financial status.

According to Heinze, Jewish immigrants were quick to identify several components of the new urban lifestyle to help them secure a middle-class American identity (Heinze 4). Besides fashionable clothing, the parlor and the piano, certain modes of urban leisure such as dancing and vacationing were especially important. Indeed when Levinsky explains why the audience at the American synagogue is "far more critical and exacting" toward the imported cantor from Antomir, he reinforces for us a sense of rising expectations as well as the central role of music in Jewish immigrant life:

For one thing, many of the sons of Antomir and others who came to their synagogue to hear the new singer, people who had mostly lived in poverty and ignorance at home, now had a piano or a violin in the house with a son or daughter to play it, and had become frequenters of the Metropolitan Opera House or the Carnegie Music Hall; for another, the New York Ghetto was full of good concerts, and all other sorts of musical entertainments so
much so that good music had become all but part of the daily life of the Jewish tenement population. (391)

Indeed, "Jews quickly apprehended the importance of the piano to the American home" (Heinze 139):

Although the basic musical instrument of the shetl was probably the fiddle . . . the piano became the pride and joy of Jewish homes in America . . . In 1886 when Joseph Spector founded what would be a thriving piano business on the corner of Grand and Orchard Streets, virtually no stores in the area sold high quality, brand name pianos. Yet within a few years, Jewish consumers came to be familiar with the names of Steinway, Chickering . . . and other leading manufacturers whose instruments were sold . . . at reasonable prices on the installment plan . . . With cute aphorisms such as "One can dance only as well as the music is played," and "What is a Home without a Piano," Yiddish advertisements for the many retailers of pianos in New York City embraced the popular enthusiasm of Jewish newcomers for the grand product. (Heinze 140)

Not surprisingly, "the large body of Jewish sheet music arranged for the piano articulated the central themes of Jewish acculturation in urban America . . . As a result the piano figured in the cultural assimilation of Jews, not only by being the crowning piece of the American Style parlor but also by making the home as well as the theater and the music hall, a forum for reconciling new and old attitudes"(Heinze 141-2). It became, as Heinze eloquently summarizes, "a private stage for the articulation of American Jewish identity"(Heinze 142). Indeed "the overwhelming presence of Jewish composers on Tin Pan Alley and the powerful response of Jewish newcomers to their creations, suggested that Jewish adaption to America was facilitated through production and consumption of popular music," and "the rise of these stars on the American horizon inspired countless young Jews to see the piano as a key to success"(Heinze 141).

As with constructing a modern appearance, Cahan’s novel emphasizes, however, the significance of the piano even before Levinksy arrives in America. It is a class marker for the Minskers, evoking awe and wonder from Levinksy, the poor Talmud student who tells us he "stood at the piano—the first I had ever laid eyes on—timidly sounding some of the
keys”(70). Later when he is watching Mrs. Tevkin play the piano, he tells us that “it was to
the eye rather than the ear that Mrs. Tevkin’s playing appealed to”(472). “A white-haired
Jewish woman at a piano was something which, in Antomir, had been associated in my
mind with the life of the highest aristocracy exclusively”(472). Indeed as much as American
notions of gentility and success, it is the Old World imagery and associations which make
the piano so valuable to the Russian Jew.

Piano playing therefore came to be seen as a “staple” for the upbringing of Jewish
children, particularly girls “since one of the purposes of building a refined home was to
impart a taste for culture to the young” (Heinze 142). “Alert to the prospects of improving
their daughter’s social position through marriage, the multitude of immigrants turned the
piano into a fountain of American-style yikhes, the appearance of gentility that had become
so important a social factor in the American city” (Heinze 142). The piano plays just such a
role in the Nodelman gathering which serves as a “matchmaking” agency for Levinksy and
Miss Kalmonovitch. Although her “double chin” and her “fat and damp” hand nearly make
Levinksy “shudder,” it is her piano playing that dramatizes her crassness, her unsuitability
for the aspiring Levinksy (365). Alert to the piano’s ability to improve marital prospects, the
Nodelmans encourage Miss Kalmonovitch to play: “oblige us with some music,” “show
them what you can do,” they urge her (366). Levinksy tells us that Miss Kalmonovitch is
“too” self possessed; before playing she throws “gay glances around the room,” and “with
some more smiles at the girls, she cold-bloodedly attacked the keyboard”(366). “Miss
Kalmonovitch was banging away,” Levinksy observes, “with an effect of showing how
quickly she could get through the nocturne”(366). Though Levinksy admits he is not
musical, he knows enough to realize that his “would be fiancee was playing execrably”(366).
The enthusiasm of the company, however, convinces Levinksy that “there was nothing for it
but to simulate admiration”(366). He is then “obliged” to listen to other piano solos, for
“[t]he mothers of the performers had simply seized the opportunity to display the talents of their offspring before an audience” (367). With the exception of one boy, all of this playing, Levinsky remarks, “grated on my nerves” (367). Listening to the “boastful chatter of mothers,” Levinsky’s “ordeal” vividly illustrates the role of piano playing in social climbing and urban theatricality. While attending to “[t]he mother of the curly-headed pianist, the illiterate wife of a baker” who “first wore out” his patience, Levinsky realizes, however, that the piano has become a means of Americanization, a vehicle for immigrant aspirations. This mother, who has her “heart set upon making the greatest pianist in the world of Bennie,” eventually enlists his interest by “a torrent of musical terminology which she apparently picked up from talks with her boy’s piano teacher” (368). Levinsky decides that “in a certain sense this unlettered woman was being educated by her little boy in the same manner as Dora had been and still was perhaps by Lucy” (368).

This scene also reinforces for us the particular importance of domestic space for the Jewish immigrant, its role in both maintaining a Jewish identity and assimilating into an American one. “Unlike other European immigrants, Jews were culturally biased against excessive drinking and they developed no saloon culture to vie with the home as haven from the world of work” (Heinze 140). According to Heinze, in the secular environment of America, domestic space took on even more significance, more value. He calls the Jewish parlor “a secular sanctuary” which “held out the promise of family unity amid the strains of immigrant life” (Heinze 143). “Much as the traditional Sabbath had done, the piano and the parlor liberated the home from the pervasive presence of work. Within a more refined domestic atmosphere, the individual was dignified. Thus in a secular way, these elements of the American standard of living expressed the traditional Jewish perception of luxury as a sanctifying force” (Heinze 144).
As he loses his religious ties in America, the securing of a Home becomes something like an obsession for Levinsky, for domestic space is sanctifying space, and when boarding with a family he feels part of, he is at his most content. His room in the home of Max and Dora Margolis appealed to him as a “compartment in the nest of a family of which I was a member” (251). “It was by far the brightest, airiest, best furnished and neatest room that I had ever had all to myself” (251). Dora’s “physical and spiritual tidiness” inspired “reverence,” and “living in that atmosphere seemed to make a better man of me,” he declares (255). After he falls in love with Dora and she insists that he move out, he realizes, “what I missed almost as much as I did Dora was her home. There was no other to take its place. There was not a single family in New York or in any other American town who would invite me to its nest and make me feel at home there” (325). Levinsky tries to “make amends for his agonies” by moving into a good spacious room even if he had to pay “three or four times as much as he had been paying at the Margolises” (304). His “double room with its great arm chair, carpets, bookcase, imposing lace curtains and the genteel silence of the street outside,” however, is a “prison” to him (305). Eventually the “the wish to settle down grew into a passion” (376). At his fortieth birthday “nothing seemed to matter unless it was sanctified by marriage and marriage now mattered far more than love” (377):

It was my new homesickness which inclined me to an American form of the kind of marriage of which I used to dream in the days of my Talmudic studies. Another motive lay in my new ideas of respectability as a necessary accompaniment to success. Marrying into a well-to-do orthodox family meant respectability and solidity. It implied law and order, the antithesis of anarchism, socialism, trade unionism, strikes... my business life had fostered the conviction in me that outside of the family, the human world was as brutally selfish as the jungle... (379-380, my emphasis)

Indeed later in the novel, Levinsky’s attitude to his upcoming marriage to Fanny Kaplan shows us that he believes domestic life will have a sanctifying effect on him: “The vision of working for my wife and children somehow induced a yearning for altruism in a broader
sense... I was tingling with a religious ecstasy that was based on a sense of public duty" (399). Levinsky's "sense of public duty," however, will prove to be not as strong as his private ambition, for he eventually concludes that he "is entitled to a better girl than Fanny" (399).

Levinsky's central dilemma is that he rejects the middle class ideal he yearns for. He wants a home purified, sanctified, set apart, and yet when he enters the religious home of the Kaplans, he becomes critical of the home and the family he is hoping to join. There is something about this home that is deeply familiar to Levinsky—the traditions, the devoutness, but this home cannot be separated from the new modern culture he now finds himself in. He is attracted to the Kaplans because they are from Antomir, yet like the Antomir synagogue in America, he is reminded that Antomir cannot be recreated on these American shores. When he goes to the American synagogue he finds a "brilliantly illuminated interior" (388). "The woodwork of the stand, and the bible platform, the velvet and gold curtains of the Holy ark, and the fresco paintings on the walls and ceiling were screamingly new and gaudy" (388). "The glaring electric lights and the glittering decorations struck me as something unholy," he declares (388). But then he asserts that he "gradually became reconciled to the place as a house of God" (389). Demonstrating similar judgment and confusion in his response to Fanny Kaplan, he tells us he is "reconciled" to her, but cannot fully embrace her: "[T]here seemed to be no reason why she should not be decidedly pretty but she was not. Perhaps it was because of that self-satisfied air of one whom nothing in the world could startle or stir. Temperamentally she reminded me somewhat of Miss Kalmonovitch, but she was the better looking of the two. I was not in love with her, but she certainly was not repulsive to me" (393). The Kaplan parlor, however, elicits more than this hesitant condemnation:
It was drearily too large for the habits of the East Side of my time, depressingly out of keeping with its sense of home. It had lanky pink- and-gold furniture and a heavy bright carpet, all of which had a forbidding effect. It was as though the chairs and the sofa had been placed there, not for use, but for storage. Nor was there enough furniture to give the room an air of being inhabited; the six pink and gold pieces and the marble topped center-table losing themselves in spaces full of gaudy desolation.

Donald Weber also discusses Levinsky's rejection of a middle-class Jewish lifestyle; he observes that Levinsky's "American," tastes are "offended here by the gaudy parvenu style of the Kaplans," but he also argues that it is primarily the Kaplan's ethnicity which so disturbs Levinsky:

The problem with the Kaplans is that they remind him, in smell and behavior of the world he has labored to forget... When the seder chicken is served, David catches Fanny... eating 'voraciously,' biting lustily and chewing with gusto... As if Fanny's raw table manners weren't enough... David is forced to watch the Kaplans' son Rubie "gesticulate and sway backward and forward as I used to, displaying (at his father's request) his knowledge of the Talmud... In the end the encounter with the Kaplans highlights Levinsky's conflicted self and cultural predicament: his compulsion to shake off Old-World ways, and his longing—however forced or fabricated and compelled by the void generated by the dominant culture—for the recuperation of the imagined place that was Antomir. (Weber 737)

Though his impending marriage into the Kaplan family suggests he wants to get back to his ethnic roots as well as secure a middle-class identity, both of these goals will remain conflict-ridden and incompatible for Levinsky.

Indeed as the novel progresses, and Levinsky searches for something to distance himself from America's materialistic bourgeoisie, he also searches for something to connect him to the Russian culture he has lost. It is Anna Tevkin with her romantic associations, and her intellectual aspirations who becomes his ideal. Although he places her above the materialistic middle-class society he is striving to fit into, Anna is ultimately just another status symbol he must acquire. Ironically, it is because of his respect for Mr. Kaplan that he chooses not to travel on a Saturday and stops at the Hotel Rigi Kulm where he meets Anna, and decides he must have her for his wife. While Levinsky's desire for Anna at this point in
the novel seems to suggest he wishes to distance himself from America's consumer culture, his desire for her actually shows us just how deeply immersed he is in the new consumer economy. Indeed the role of "desire" here is remarkably similar to the role of desire in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*.

In his work *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, Walter Benn Michaels argues that Carrie's desire for Ames near the end of the novel is not, as many critics would have it, evidence of Dreiser's critique of a capitalistic consumer culture. Observing that critics have "managed to convince themselves of Dreiser's fundamental hostility to the burgeoning consumer economy he depicts" because they take Ames's critical remarks for Dreiser's own, Michaels insists that Ames serves another function in the novel (41-2):

While Carrie's career progresses, Ames is said to represent an "ideal", what Julian Markels calls "Carrie final attainment, the knowledge that if she lives only to satisfy herself she will lose herself." But it is worthwhile noting that this vision of salvation through an end to desire is not what Carrie herself sees in Ames. In fact, she sees just the opposite. She had first been attracted to him, Dreiser says, "Because at that time he had represented something which she did not have." Meeting him a second time, she is rather surprised to find herself a little bored, not because Ames has changed but because she has; she now has the career that Ames at their first meeting had helped her to want. But Ames succeeds very quickly in making himself interesting again, urging her to get out of musical comedy and go in for tragedy instead, putting an end to her self satisfaction by creating for her a new desire. "If I were you, Ames tells Carrie, "I'd change". . . . What you are is what you want, in other words, what you aren't. The ideal that Ames represents to Carrie is thus an ideal of dissatisfaction, of perpetual desire. (42)

Just as Carrie moves from desiring the bourgeois businessman Hurstwood to the more refined and idealistic Ames, Levinsky moves from desiring the domestic, hard-working Dora and the self-satisfied Fanny, to desiring the intellectual Anna Tevkin, who with her artistic interests and her political beliefs, seems a more superior "commodity." Indeed just like Ames in *Sister Carrie*, Anna, who "looked refined from head to foot," functions in Cahan's novel not to criticize Levinsky's bourgeois aspirations, but rather to become
emblematic of them (409). Like Dreiser's Ames, her character exists primarily to convey "perpetual desire."

Philip Fisher's observations on the role of desire in *Sister Carrie* are also helpful in understanding the character of David Levinsky. In *Hard Facts*, he describes a new kind of "self" created by the new consumer economy as a "state of the self in motion that we might call the self in anticipation" (157) "The anticipatory world has as its consequence a state of self preoccupied with what it is not" (Fisher 159). "Carrie lives with the Hansons while longing for the life represented by Drouet, only to get Drouet and long for the life represented by Hurstwood, and in turn to get Hurstwood only to long for the life represented by Ames." (Fisher 159). "The anticipatory self has as its emotional substance hope, desire, yearning . . . " (Fisher 159). Just like Carrie, Levinsky wants what he does not have; what he does not have takes on enormous value, simply because he does not have it, and never-ending desire is the energy, the lifeforce that runs through his very being, that "something" that shapes his identity so profoundly. Even in his boyhood Russian home, Levinsky's character is marked by this yearning, but it is only when he comes to live in New York that his desires are unleashed, so to speak. In America, Levinsky's tendency to yearn for more, to desire more only expands so that eventually there is nothing else left at the core of his being but perpetual dissatisfaction and yearning.

Indeed Levinsky's adaption to American culture shapes his identity at the psychological as well as the economical level, for his sexuality becomes inflected by the economic structures he is now immersed in. This becomes especially clear at the Rigi Kulm which functions as a sexual theater and marketplace for New York's Jewish immigrants. Watching the arrival of the "husband train" to this Catskill Resort, he observes "the large number of handsome well groomed women in expensive dresses and diamonds, some of
them being kissed by puny successful-looking men"(418). Levinsky's singleness here, his
inability to show off his wealth through a beautiful wife, leaves his success less dramatic,
less showy, less theatrical. Alternating between disdaining these showy wives and coveting
them, he assures himself that he too could and should have a beautiful woman. Within the
competitive atmosphere of Rigi Kulm, he decides that "he is a good looking chap and not as
ignorant as most other fellows who have succeeded. I am entitled to a better girl than Fanny
too" (418). Women in particular become the most valuable commodities he might acquire as
well as the most interchangeable, for women in the novel are consistently fluctuating in
value. Indeed Levinksy's attitude towards women grows more callous as the novel
progresses. Perhaps Fisher's observation regarding consumer culture and desire may help us
better understand Levinksy's growing detachment and calculating attitude. "Within the
city," Fisher explains, "all things become commodities—all objects, all other persons. . .They
are commodities not so much because they are desired and sold, but because our relation to
them has shifted from that of caring for the things one has (whether given or bought) to
buying the things one hasn't"(133). Drawing on the theoretical work of Georg Simmel,
Michael Smith also elaborates on how the money economy of a consumer capitalist society
transforms social relationships into exchange relationships. "Calculation and computation
come to dominate other human traits as more and more time is spent in relations entailing
the precise measure of value for value"(102). Indeed we do see Levinksy grow more
calculating, more concerned with "exchange value"—especially in his relations with women.
No longer just visiting prostitutes in order to fulfill forbidden physical desires, Levinksy, by
the end of the novel, now sees women as providing a more abstract and intangible value.
With his new wealth he calculates the kind of wife he should be able to acquire, and though
he continually separates himself from the marketplace environment of the Rigi Kulm, he is
actually right at home there. Indeed the most vivid scenarios of competitive consumption are
played out among the Rigi Kulm's flamboyant vacationing crowds.

According to Heinze, Jews were alone among immigrants in adopting the full-fledged
vacation. In the summer of 1903, a reporter for the American Israelite interviewed people on
the Lower East Side for an article that focused on the striking popularity of vacationing
among Jews of modest means. “One would never think of an Italian laborer or an Irishman
working on a street railroad sending his wife and children [on vacation] for the summer,”
the journalist stated. “Jewish sweatshop workers, on the other hand, did so “year after
year”(Heinze 127). “The seasonality of the garment trades encouraged Jews to embrace the
concept of the annual vacation, which meshed with slack periods of work,” and the summer
resort also became an important arena for matchmaking (Heinze 128-29). At a time when
most wage earners and clerks contented themselves with a day trip to Coney Island,” the
Jews, Heinze points out were “pioneers,” envisioning “the summer resort as an appropriate
destination for people of average means” (Heinze 125):

Immigrants from Europe inaugurated a style of vacationing that had little to
do with therapy and that broke with tradition by including people from
almost all areas and levels of society. Secular Jews and religious Jews,
business men as well as wage earners, patronized the farmhouses, boarding
houses, cottages, and hotels that had converted the loose network of towns
like Tannersville and Hunter in the Catskill Mountains of New York into a
bustling resort area. In 1883, approximately 70,000 people, mostly affluent
Americans enjoyed a summer vacation in the Catskills. By 1906, the number
of vacationers had jumped to 400,000, an increase that owed much to the
rapid acceptance of this custom by Jewish immigrants from New York City.
(Heinze 126)

At the Rigi Kulm, we see people from “all areas and levels of society.” There are families
there for the whole season: “families of cloak manufacturers, cigar manufacturers, furriers,
jewelers, leather goods men, real estate men, physicians, dentists, lawyers, in most cases,
people who had blossomed out into nabobs in the course of the last few years”(404). In
addition to these boarders, there were the "two weekers," a considerable number of single young people of both sexes—salesmen, stenographers, bookkeepers, librarians"—for the Rigi Kulm is also the place where "playing tennis is one way of fishing for fellows" (409).

What Cahan stresses most of all in these scenes is that the Catskill vacation is not a break away from the competitive marketplace. Indeed Levinsky's description of the hotel crowd is especially revealing: "The crowd was ablaze with diamonds, painted cheeks, and bright colored silks. It was a Babel of blatant self consciousness, a miniature of the parvenu smugness that had spread like wild fire over the country after a period of need and low spirits"(404). Highlighting the grasping habits of the rising bourgeoisie, their conspicuous consumption, especially the competitiveness of the female sphere, Levinsky describes dinner as a "gown contest"(421). The women are "tripping before their audience like chorus girls" (421). So intent and determined are these women to out do each other, that many will "owe the grocer and butcher" in order to go to the country with "big trunks full of duds" (421). Cahan's details reinforce an aggressive rapaciousness here. Indeed more greed and competition is depicted here than in any of the business scenes where Levinsky is usually leisurely chatting over dinner with a client. At Rigi Kulum, however, Levinsky watches the "silent race for the best portions" of roast chicken, and the noise in the dining room is "unendurable" (423). "[T]he better to take in the effect of the turmoil," he tells us, "I shut my eyes for a moment whereupon the noise reminded me of the Stock Exchange"(423). Surrounded by overbearing mothers bragging about their daughters, Levinsky, who is seen as a "desirable match," flees "as soon as he could"(426).

Always the detached spectator, he remains alone, alienated, as he puts it "listening to the gossip of women who bored me and keeping track of a girl who shunned me"(439). While Levinsky seems disgusted by all of this competitive consumption—the overdressing, the
performance, the self absorption—this hotel world is the world he has aspired to. Indeed like Levinsky, the hotel seems divided against itself, attempting to adhere to both Jewish custom and American culture. Reinforcing the collapse of the oppositions of the sacred and the mundane, the hotel has a little room which is used both as a synagogue and a gambling room" (435). Suggesting the decline of tradition and a firmer commitment to American values, there are no young people in the synagogue and the hours designated for the room's sacred rituals are limited: "In the mornings, before breakfast, it was filled with old men in praying shawls and phylacteries while the rest of the day, until late at night, it was in the possession of card players" (436).

Not only do the boundaries between the sacred and the mundane give way in America, the boundaries between male and female spheres also come undone. Indeed perhaps the most profound change Levinsky faces in America is this unraveling of separate gender spheres. Because of his orthodox Jewish upbringing, the changing relations between the sexes, and the changing position of women, in particular, generates great anxiety and confusion for him. Explaining the paradoxical effects of his upbringing which taught him that "looking at girls" was "yielding to Satan" Levinsky remarks (39):

The great barrier that religion, law, and convention have placed between the sexes adds to the joys and poetry of love, but it is also responsible for much of the suffering, degradation and crime that spring from it. In my case, this barrier was of special magnitude. Dancing with a girl or even taking one out for a walk was out of the question. Nor was the injunction confined to men who devoted themselves to the study of holy books. It was the rule of ordinary decency for any Jew except one who lived "like a Gentile," that is like a person of modern culture. (42)

Indeed this "great barrier" never lifts. It is what Levinsky seems to hold on to, in order to preserve some remnant of his Jewish identity, some remnant of that poor Talmud student, the image of himself which he never ceases to sentimentalize. The new heterosocial amusements of urban life, therefore, will be especially problematic for him.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Levinsky’s attitude toward dancing, for example, illustrates that his desire to hold on to that image of the shy Talmud student is as strong as his desire to become “American.” Refusing to dance himself, he nevertheless cannot help but watch the coming together of men and women in the public dance halls. Indeed there are many instances in the novel, where we find Levinsky watching from afar, the detached flaneur looking at life from a safe distance; in the security of this distance, he sees a “modern” dance for the first time, and it produces a “bewitching” effect on him (140):

Here were highly respectable young women who would let men encircle their waists, each resting her arm on her partner’s shoulder, and then go spinning and hopping with him, with a frank relish of the physical excitement in which they were joined. As I watched one of these girls, I seemed to see her surrender much of her womanly reserve. I knew that the dance—an ordinary waltz—was considered highly proper, yet her pose and his struck me as a public confession of unseemly mutual interest. I almost blushed for her. And for the moment I was in love with her. As this young woman went round and round, her face bore a faint smile of embarrassed satisfaction. I knew that it was a sex smile. Another woman danced with grave mien, and I knew that it was the gravity of sex. To watch dancing couples became a passion with me.(140)

While Levinsky may have stood on the sidelines, many immigrants found the new freedom dancing provided irresistible. As scholars and journalists of the period observed, dancing was immensely popular, especially in the Lower East Side. Jacob Riis tell us in How the Other Half Lives that there are “numerous dancing schools that are scattered among the synagogues,” and the “young people in Jewtown are inordinately fond of dancing, and after their day’s hard work will flock to these schools for a night’s recreation”(90). “There were by 1907, thirty one dance halls in a ninety block district between Houston and Grand streets, east of Broadway”(Howe 210). “The town is dance mad,” wrote social worker and journalist Belle Lindner Israels of New York City in the summer of 1909. “Down on the East Side dancing is cheap. Twenty five cents a couple is all it costs, and ten cents for the girls” (Ewen E. 209). Dancing signaled a new attitude towards public space and behavior, and was crucial
in the Americanization process. In her discussion of young immigrant women, Elizabeth Ewen argues that contact with American culture led to a "rejection of the constriction of family bonds" (208). "Ready made clothes, makeup, dance halls, movie theaters, amusement parks, all were part of a cultural environment that assumed greater individual freedom and a less formal relationship with the opposite sex" (Ewen 208). Moreover, David Nasaw points out that at the turn of the century, "traditional courting rituals were breaking down with nothing to take their place" (113). "It would not be until the mid-1920s that the institution of dating would begin to structure the relationships of unmarried young people... (Nasaw 113). In the meantime, he argues, "dance halls were popular because there were few spaces in the city where young working men and women could spend time together":

Going out for dinner or to see a show with a member of the opposite sex with whom you were not engaged was still something of a rarity... The amusement park was a great place to meet boys or girls, but it was a trolley ride away and closed nine or ten months a year. The dance hall alone was within walking distance and open all year long. And it offered opportunities available nowhere else to spend time with the opposite sex. For women especially there was safety in the anonymity of the dance floor. They could flirt, hug, even hold hands if they chose, without parents, teachers, employers or family friends looking over their shoulders. (Nasaw 111)

"In going dancing," Nasaw concludes, "well to do and poor, the smart set and working folk entered a third sphere of everyday life, separated intentionally and irrevocably from the worlds of home and family, work and workplace" (Nasaw 119).

Though he does not actually dance himself, Levinksy's descriptions of dancing reinforce this "separation," for this new sphere—a private, intimate space within the public realm—holds enormous fascination. Standing on Grand Street, he watches the "big open windows of the dance hall": "Only the busts of the dancers could be seen. This and the distance that divided me from the hall enveloped the scene in mystery. As the couples floated by as
though borne along on waves of the music, the girls clinging to the men, their fantastic figures held me spellbound" (147). Later at the Rigi Kulm, dancing still seems unreal and dream-like: "The windows of the dancing pavilion beyond the level part of the lawn gleamed like so many sheets of yellow fire. Presently its door flew open, sending a slanting shaft of light over the grass" (426). While watching from the verandah, Levinksy is distracted by the "sound of scampering feet accompanied by merry shrieks" (427). "A young girl burst from the vestibule door closely followed by three young men" (427). His description of the scene is telling, for he highlights its transgressive nature. There is an emphasis here on nakedness, on flesh, a lascivious obsessive quality to his language:

She was about eighteen years old, well fed, of a ravishing strawberries and cream complexion, her low cut evening gown leaving her plump arms and a good deal of her bust exposed . . . Two of her captors gripped her bare arms while the third clutched her by the neck. Thus they stood, the men stroking and kneading her luscious flesh, and she beaming and giggling rapturously. (428)

Finally they release her and walk across the lawn in the direction of the dancing pavilion, eliciting commentary from the crowd gathered on the verandah. One man remarks, "Shame." "Decent young people wouldn't behave like that in Russia, would they?" (428). Responding to his comment, one woman asserts, "Well, it is only a joke" (428). There is a loose familiarity between the sexes here, a marked cultural difference that stirs debate between those on the verandah who witness the scene: "Would you want American born young people to be a lot of greenhorns? This is not Russia. They are Americans and they are young, so they want to have some fun. They are just as respectable as the boys and the girls in the old country. Only there is some life to them. That's all" (428). Significantly, Levinsky does not contribute to the debate—so divided and confused is he regarding this familiarity between the sexes that he can only watch in silence from a great distance, attracted and yet terrified. Indeed his contradictory feelings towards women are intertwined with his
contradictory feelings towards American culture, and these irreconcilable emotions of fear and loathing, fascination and desire are especially evident in his description of the dance pavilion:

Young people were moving along the flagged walk or crossing the lawn from various directions all converging toward the pavilion. They walked singly, in twos, in threes and in larger groups, some trudging along leisurely, others proceeding at a hurried pace. Some came from our hotel, others from other places, the strangers mostly in flocks. I watched them as they sauntered or scurried along, as they receded through the thickening gloom, as they emerged from it into the slanting shaft of light that fell from the pavilion, and as they vanished in its blazing doorway. I gazed at the spectacle until it fascinated me as something weird. The pavilion with its brightly illuminated windows was an immense magic lamp and the young people flocking to it so many huge moths of a supernatural species. As I saw them disappear in the glare of the doorway, I pictured them as being burned up. I was tempted to join the unearthly procession, and to be “burned” like the others. Then, discarding the image, I envisioned men and women of ordinary flesh and blood dancing, and I was seized with a desire to see the sexes in mutual embrace. But I exorted myself that I was soon to be a married man, and that it was as well to keep out of temptation’s way. (428)

Evoking the atmosphere of a holy pilgrimage, the figures, at first, seem united in a mystical unity as they make their way towards the light. These “unearthly” creatures emerging from the thickening gloom, enter the shaft of light, and then vanish into the blazing doorway as if they were transfigured, redeemed. The pavilion's magic lamp and the moths that flock there are a “supernatural species.” There is something fantastic and spiritually compelling in this image, but then the blazing light becomes a “glare” that burns. Disappearing into the pavilion, one is “burned up”; one descends into hell and damnation. Here the image moves away from spiritual mysticism to the lure of the flesh and potential sin. Levinsky imagines not higher supernatural beings flocking to the light, but “ordinary flesh and blood,” men and women dancing, and he is “seized with a desire to see the sexes in mutual embrace” (428). As in the old country when he was a boy, Levinsky's sin is just looking. As he tells us, “I was seized with a desire to see” (428, my emphasis).
And as he watches the crowd, he alternates between puritanical criticism of its pervasive theatricality and sheer delight in its aesthetic splendor:

The chaotic throng of dancers was a welter of color and outline so superb, I thought, that it seemed as though every face and figure in it were the consummation of youthful beauty. However as I contemplated the individual couples in quest of the girl who filled my thoughts, I met with disillusion after disillusion...Then after recovering from a sense of watching a parade of uncomeliness, I began to discover figures or faces or both that were decidedly charming... As I scanned the crowd... many of the girls or matrons were dressed far more daringly than they would have been a year or two before. Almost all of them were powdered and painted. Prosperity was rapidly breaking the chains of American Puritanism, rapidly "Frenchifying" the country, and the East Side was quick to fall into line. (429)

As usual Levinsky refuses to dance, telling Miss Lazar "impatiently" that he "never cared to learn it"(431). Instead he points out the revealing nature of women's fashions, explaining to Miss Lazar he "loves" being a wallflower (432). Significantly, there is a constant reference to flesh here: the dancing women who look "half naked," Miss Lazar in her "semi-nudity" (430). He even describes himself as arriving at the dance "in the flesh"(429). Playing the detached flaneur, he points out to Miss. Lazar a man who "was staring at the bare bust of a fat woman"(432). After the dance, he tells us, "a tall woman of thirty, of excellent figure, and, all but naked, passed along like a flame, the men frankly gloating over her flesh"(433). "In another spot I saw a young man in evening dress chaffing a bare-shouldered girl who looked no more than fifteen"(433). As his observations repeatedly turn to exposed bodies and sexual tension, he emphasizes the matchmaking atmosphere of the resort, how the "air was redolent of grass, flowers, ozone and sex"(432).

Anna Tevkin, however, is somehow lifted above this atmosphere; when she dances, she "looked solemnly absorbed as though dancing were a sacred function"(430). Once again, Levinsky falls in love with a woman who is out of his reach. So appealing in her coolness, her distance, Anna Tevkin makes Levinsky feel the gap of education and class; he feels his
inferiority around her. Significantly, Anna also seems to be the epitome of modernity: a “blue stocking,” a reader of Ibsen, a socialist, a player of tennis, a stenographer (414). In short: an independent woman. So overwhelmed is he by the superiority he perceives in Miss Tevkin, specifically her distance from the bourgeois culture of competitive consumption, that he breaks his engagement with Fanny Kaplan, failing to see how really unsuitable he is for Anna. Although Anna has no romantic interest in him, Levinsky insists on wooing her indirectly by befriending her father.

In the end, her rejection only spurs on his business activities; indeed it seems to heighten his lust for power and prestige. As he becomes absorbed in his work, he describes how he makes “money breed money” (523). He tells us he loves to watch the business life of the nation grow, “the growth of American cities, the shifting of their shopping centers, the decline of some houses, the rise of others” (523). Caught up in the success of his present American life, he nevertheless yearns for his Antomir past. Indeed so insistent is the past that as Engel writes “during the last third of the novel nearly every figure from his early days reappears, but each reunion instead of restoring the past deprives Levinsky of the satisfaction of memory and mocks his nostalgia” (Engel 52). His meeting with Gitelson is particularly poignant as it highlights his irrevocable separation from the past, for in taking Gitelson to the Waldorf, he only realizes that the chasm between him and his ship brother was “too wide” yet he insists that he too is uncomfortable in such luxurious surroundings (515).

Indeed more so than Coverdale, Levinsky is uncomfortable with his comfortable life: “I don’t seem to be able to get accustomed to my luxurious life,” he declares. “I am always more or less conscious of my good clothes, of the high quality of my office furniture, of the power I wield over the men in my pay. As I have said in another connection, I still have a
lurking fear of restaurant waiters" (530). And in his nostalgic frame of mind, Levinsky sentimentalizes home and family all the more. Though he disregarded several opportunities to marry, he still insists that he is not "reconciled" to his bachelorhood: "Amid the pandemonium of my six hundred sewing machines and the jingle of gold which they pour into my lap, I feel the deadly silence of solitude" (526). Levinsky, however, needs this "solitude"; it is the basis of his identity—as the immigrant outsider, he must remain a kind of "flaneur," a detached observer, in order to preserve a strong sense of his ethnic difference.

Levinsky can only watch women from a distance, idealizing them and fearing them at the same time. As he explains at the end of the novel: "There are periods when I can scarcely pass a woman in the street without scanning her face and figure. When I see the crowds returning from work in the cloak and waist district I often pause to watch the groups of girls as they walk apart from the men. Their keeping together as if they formed a separate world full of its own interests and secrets makes a peculiar appeal to me." (527) Levinsky must continue to erect that barrier when "looking" at a girl was a sin, forbidden, for it is so important in maintaining the atmosphere of the past. This insistence on "looking" and this perpetual desire also, however, mark his new American identity, his immersion into the new urban consumer economy. As Weber puts it, Levinsky remains driven by both a need to "preserve the hunger because it shapes his identity, and a desire to hunger no more" (740). To be sure, Levinsky can never let go of his nostalgia. To the end, he insists on romanticizing a life he wanted to escape from. Interestingly, Marovitz's final summation of Levinsky's character could very well be used to describe Miles Coverdale, indeed the resonance is uncanny: "Levinsky is doomed to incessant frustration, for although his basic dedication is to vanity, self indulgence, and domination of the world around him, he tries to convince himself as well as his readers that he yearns for the mundane comforts of love and domesticity" (Secular 32).
Bread Givers

“My Beautiful Aloneness”

Unlike Cahan whose career in journalism kept him rooted to the Lower East Side where he tirelessly worked as the editor of The Jewish Daily Forward, Anzia Yezierska’s fame and success was more short lived and more fantastic. Known as the “sweatshop Cinderella,” Yezierska was brought to the attention of mainstream America when her stories were sold to Hollywood, made into films, and tales of her success appeared in magazines such as Harpers, The Nation, Cosmopolitan and Good Housekeeping (Henriksen 128). In a sense, Yezierska’s real life story is that of Levinsky’s: a fantastic, more glamorous and more lonely “rise,” while Cahan’s real life story is more like Yezierka’s heroine’s; Cahan, like Sara Smolinksy, remains in the Lower East Side working to uplift his fellow immigrants. Indeed the books mirror as much as they diverge from each other. Both works explore the consequences of assimilating into a culture which values the individual over the family, and material wealth over spirituality, and both narrators, haunted by the past, are alienated from their present lives. Indeed becoming “American” elicits feelings of shame as well as pride for these immigrant characters.

Written from a female perspective Bread Givers, however, focuses on the particularities of the Jewish woman’s struggle. In a sense, Sara must adapt to two alien worlds. Assimilating into American life means redefining her gender as well as her ethnicity, for she must also adapt to the rational, “masculine” professional world in order to achieve her education and become a “teacherin.” Yezierska’s work is also radically different from Cahan’s in another sense. Her spare, informal and emotional style is a move away from the densely detailed novel of nineteenth-century realism. “Her skill,” as Carol Schoen puts it, “in capturing a scene and creating a personality in a few vivid strokes” makes her style seem more modern

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Her work looks forward, embodies a new literary taste. While Cahan looked to Howells for literary authority, Yezierska looked to Mary Austin, to Amy Lowell.\(^3\) And it is not just her style, but her book’s feminist message that perhaps resonated so deeply with readers then, and perhaps resonates even more so with readers now. Indeed in a recent article Laura Wexler writes, “Yezierska’s ambition and Yezierska herself... were more momentous than the sentimental category of working class immigrant women writers within which her readers have regularly sought to restrain her... It is time to be surprised by the scope of her vision.” (156-7).

In her biography of her mother, Yezierska’s daughter Louise Henriksen reminds us of the startling power of Yezierska’s style when she refers to some of the contemporary responses to Bread Givers. “One does not seem to read,” said William Lyon Phelps of International Book Review, “one is too completely inside. I feel as if I am looking not at the picture of life, but at life itself” (Henriksen 217). Meanwhile, the New York Times observes, “the Smolinksy family and the flat in which they live is almost painfully actual” (217). And Samson Raphaelson of the New York Tribune writes: “It has a raw uncontrollable poetry. Miss Yezierska has accomplished for the Yiddish what John Synge has done for the Gaelic...” (Henriksen 217). Henriksen herself declares that with Bread Givers, Yezierska had reached “maturity as an artist” (218). “In Bread Givers,” she writes, “Anzia had written out her anger at her father and the guilt he forced on her. The writing freed her. She had come to understand and sympathize with him as a zealot like herself, alone in a world of compromisers. She was ready to make peace with him... Perhaps she wanted forgiveness” (218).

\(^3\) While negotiating her work with Houghton Mifflin, Yezierska met Mary Austin who, as she put it, “volunteered to be my literary advisor”(134). Henriksen notes that Yezierska saw Austin as being at “the...
Compared to *Levinsky*, *Bread Givers* is more autobiographical, more personal. Adopting the mask of the successful capitalist for his novel, Cahan, the socialist activist, does not draw on his personal life so specifically. While both Cahan and Yezierska depict the anguish of adapting to American life, and the sense of homelessness which overshadows their characters' success, it is Yezierska's work which reverberates with more raw emotion. Perhaps we can attribute some of this to her use of language. Cahan's immigrant narrator and characters speak proper English; there is very little evidence of dialect in this ethnic novel. Yezierska, on the other hand, has her immigrant characters speak in quirky phrases; her English is inflected with a melodious Yiddish lilt. Her prose, therefore, embodies a fuller development of "realism." Indeed while Yezierska saw herself primarily as a writer, Cahan also saw himself as an editor, an educator, a political organizer. Indeed when asked by *McClures* magazine to write the articles that would become *The Rise of David Levinsky*, "He wanted to neither refuse nor to devote much time to the project because this kind of work no longer had priority with him" (Marovitz AC 30). Yezierska, however, as Wexler reminds us, struggled incessantly with form and often lost; moreover she reveled in these struggles, identified herself by them. As Yezierska herself put it, "I gather these fragments, words, phrases, sentences, and I paste them together with my blood" (Wexler 158). Perhaps it was the anguish she experienced in struggling to not only write so well in her nonnative language but to also preserve the atmosphere and tone of her native Yiddish within the English—her desire to get the words just right—perhaps it is this that gives this book its immediacy, its power.

In Cahan's work, the Russian shtetl is the arena of degradation, poverty and oppression; Yezierska, however, focuses on the poverty and oppression of life on the Lower East Side. 

*summit* she wanted to reach and was "flattered by this important writer's interest" (147). According to Henriksen, Yezierska also communicated with Amy Lowell with whom she felt a "spiritual closeness" (134).
Sara Smolinsky's story, therefore, is harsher, more bitter though she seems to "rise" the way David Levinsky hoped he would—through education, through intellectual challenges. Part of the bitterness of the book also stems from the inability to resolve the paradoxical position of the female Jewish immigrant. Brought up to "work," to be a "bread giver," the Jewish immigrant woman would see the value and the meaning of both her public and private roles become increasingly muddled and confused in America.

According to a 1909 article by George Turner in McClures entitled "The Daughters of the Poor," Jewish American girls were among the nation's most vulnerable, most oppressed and most exploited:

The odds in life are from birth strongly against the young Jewish American girl. The chief ambition of the new Jewish family in America is to educate its sons. To do this, the girls must go to work at the earliest possible date, and from the population of 350,000 Jews, East of the Bowery, tens of thousands of young girls go out into the shops... The exploitation of young women as money earning machines has reached a development on the East Side of New York probably not equaled anywhere else in the world. (as quoted by Feldstein 246)

This tendency to send women off to work so that men would have the leisure to study seemed alien to Americans, but it was an integral part of Eastern European Jewish culture. As Carol Schoen reminds us, "When there were difficulties earning a living, it was assumed that the wife would assist her husband, and should a woman be married to a scholar, the entire economic responsibility often fell on her shoulders. So although the woman was under Jewish law a second class citizen, in day to day existence she was frequently the wage earner upon whose strength the family's welfare depended"(9). This tradition reinforced women's lower status, but the Jewish woman's role as "bread giver" would become inflected with new meanings in America. As Irving Howe puts it, "... the Jewish tradition enforced a combination of social inferiority and business activity. Transported to America, this could not long survive"(Howe 265). Indeed in America, the scholarly religious man would lose
more status than the female “bread giver.” Elaborating on the implications of this for domestic life, Howe writes:

In the turmoil of the American city, traditional family patterns could not long survive. The dispossession and shame of many immigrant fathers has been a major subject . . . For the Jewish wife, the transition seems to have been a little easier. Having sold herring in the market place of her shtetl she could sell herrings on Orchard Street and then, if a little more ambitious, open a grocery or dry goods store. Never having regarded herself as part of a spiritual elite, she did not suffer so wrenching a drop in status and self regard as her husband. (Howe 173)

Indeed we see the shame and bitterness of the father in Bread Givers, his inability to adapt. Reb Smolinksy is swindled by confidence men; he is helpless when his wife dies, and must find another woman to take care of him, to support him. Indeed Smolinksy ends up on the streets peddling chewing gum –his health and dignity nearly gone. Sara, on the other hand, comes to a new understanding of herself and her place in the world once in America. Although Jewish wives were better able to adapt to America than their husbands, it is their daughters—the youngest Jewish females—who had the least resistance to new American ideas. Indeed the new urban mass culture would make its most dramatic impact on this particular group: “Even Jewish girls who had come from Europe as children . . . found themselves inspired—or made restless—by American ideas. They came to value pleasure in the immediate moment; some were even drawn to the revolutionary thought that they had a right to an autonomous selfhood. Carving out a niche of privacy within the cluttered family apartment, they responded to the allure of style, the delicacies of manners, the promise of culture” (Howe 266).

Yezierska’s work highlights the “allure” of America’s “style,” its “promise of culture,” but while America liberates Sara, its visual culture of style and glitter generates other problems and conflicts for her. Indeed both Cahan and Yezierska wrestle with the meaning of modernity, the liberatory and oppressive qualities of urbanization and consumerism.
And, in particular, we see how the home becomes the arena where past sentimental associations and present consumer desires and aspirations must play themselves out. Though Cahan's narrative ultimately questions Levinsky's naïve and sentimental longings, home never seems to lose its sentimental glow in his novel, for Levinsky continually looks to domestic space as sacred space that would redeem him. Yezierska, on the other hand, more forcefully dramatizes the contradictions inherent in domestic space as one must carve out a new American identity. Home, with all its sentimental association, its collective memory, becomes a stumbling block for the immigrant trying to succeed, especially the female immigrant. Yezierska's heroine, therefore, never sentimentalizes for too long. Surveyed from a woman's perspective, domestic space is a more highly charged and contentious space—the sphere of woman's power as well as her oppression. Indeed for men and women, domestic life meant very different things. For the Jewish woman, it meant very often being the "bread giver," catering to the needs of others round the clock, and if one's husband was a scholar, keeping him protected from all of life's daily material cares. For the Jewish man in particular, home was a protected sphere where sacred rituals could be performed. While the outside world might be harsh, and work humiliating, once at home, a man's dignity was always honored and recognized.

From the very opening pages of Bread Givers, we see domestic life primarily through the eyes of the Smolinsky women. Trapped in a claustrophobic tenement, their home life is anything but ideal, and as America's urban consumer culture makes its impact upon the Smolinskys, we see the values of public life continually clash with those of private life. More specifically, we see a culture of individualism, privacy, and ownership clash with a more communal culture of scarcity. When we are introduced to Mashah, the "painted lady" of the Smolinsky family, it is clear that newer American ideals will override ideals of family, tradition and ethnicity. Enthusiastically embracing the new consumer culture of
individualism she finds in America, Mashah, in particular, is a devotee of the "cult of beauty" Valerie Steele has argued emerges at this time period. Reinforcing Ewen's point that "poverty and finery no longer inhabit separate worlds," Sara describes how Mashah, a resident of a Lower East Side tenement, can also dress in style and win approval from the city crowds:

With excited fingers she pinned pink paper roses, under the brim. Then putting on her hat again, she stood herself before the cracked fly-stained mirror, and turned her head first on this side and then on the other side, laughing to herself with the pleasure of how grand her hat was. "Like a lady from Fifth Avenue I look, and for only ten cents, from a pushcart on Hester Street." (2)

Because she comes back with "pink roses" for her "doll face" rather than bread or money, Mashah is considered a "heartless thing" (3). But Mashah is "undisturbed" by "the bitter words" of her family: "I'm going to hear the free music in the park tonight, she laughed to herself with the pleasure before her, and these pink roses on my hat to match out my pink calico will make me look just like the picture on the magazine cover" (3). The new diversions in public space, the pressure to look like the magazine cover—all pull her away from her family and her family's values. "She was no more one of us than the painted lady looking down from the calendar on the wall," declares Sara (4).

Beauty is Mashah's religion and the sacredness of her clothing, her grooming rituals are repeatedly compared to the sacred routines of her father. "[T]he minute she got home she was always busy with her beauty, either retrimming her hat, pressing her white collar or washing and brushing her golden hair. She lived in the pleasure she got from her beautiful

44 See Valerie Steele's *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age*, New York: Oxford University Press 1985. Steele shows us that the new culture of individualism was also reflected in the changing ideals of feminine beauty at the turn-of-the-century. "Rather than the inner spiritual beauty that so many Victorian writers had praised, fashion and beauty writers increasingly stressed the erotic elements of feminine beauty by emphasizing the importance of personal magnitism, fascination, and charm" (213). "Some writers," Steele points out, "went so far as to argue that devotion to personal appearance constituted a new religion for women (214)."
face as Father lived in his Holy Torah"(4). Mashah’s dedication to her own beauty and
pleasure places her individual needs above those of her family. Moreover, her possessions
are to be kept away from her family whom she now perceives as unclean; indeed Mashah
obsessively strives to keep pure all of the American things she has purchased:

Mashah kept part of her clothes in a soapbox under the bed. Everything in it
was wrapped around with newspapers to keep the dirt out... High up with
a hanger on a nail nearly to the ceiling so that nobody’s dirty hands should
touch it, hung Mashah’s white starched petticoat, and over it her pink calico
and all around them, an old sheet was tacked about with safety pins so she
could tell if anybody touched it. It was like a law in the house that nobody
dared touch Mashah’s things, no more than they dared touch Father’s
Hebrew books... (5)

As she tries to carve out some separate space for her new objects or for her new
American identity, Mashah’s behavior seems extreme. Somehow the touch of her family
would soil her pure white American garment; her rejection of them seems cruel, unnatural.
Indeed Sara continually points out Mashah’s difference from the rest of the family:
“Although she lived in the same dirt and trouble with us, nothing ever bothered her.
Everywhere Mashah went, men followed her with melting looks. And these melting looks in
men’s eyes were like something to eat and something to drink to her. So that she could go
without her lunch money to buy pretty things for herself, and not starve like the rest of
us”(4). Bringing to mind Carrie Meeber, Mashah desires to be the object of everyone’s gaze.
Indeed as Sara’s comment reinforces here, this is what she lives for, and as The Rise of David
Levinksy and many of the other urban novels before this have emphasized, women’s role in
the new urban consumer culture is often that of spectacular commodity. More mobile, more
free and more visible, she is, however, more often objectified, commodified. Indeed the
commodification of the self which according to Ewen, is a phenomenon of urban consumer
culture is perhaps more exaggerated and more problematic for women. And this is what

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Sara must wrestle with throughout the novel as she finds American notions of womanhood oppressive as well as liberating.

Intertwined with this commodification of the self is an individualism that seems strange to traditional Jewish culture. Such individualism could not be sustained in a culture of scarcity. Mashah comes home with stories that “in rich people’s homes, they had silver knives and forks separate for each person” (5). Each time Mashah works for a family, “she came home with another new rich idea” (6). Most of these new rich ideas privilege privacy, autonomy, the individual. “She told us,” Sara says, “that by those Americans everybody in the family had a toothbrush and separate towel for himself, not like by us where we use one torn piece of a shirt for the whole family, wiping the dirt from one face to another” (6). Continuing to defy her family by not contributing on the day the wages are paid, Mashah buys ‘not only a toothbrush and a separate towel for herself, but even a separate piece of soap” (6). “And from that day the sight of her toothbrush on the shelf, and her white, fancy towel by itself on the wall was like a sign to us all,” Sara recalls, “that Mashah had no heart, no feelings, that millionaire things willed themselves in her empty head while the rest of us were wearing out our brains for only a bite in the mouth” (6)

As she places her own individual needs above those of her family, the worldly Mashah is ironically much like her devoutly religious father. Both Mashah and her father have “millionaire” ideas. Just as Mashah needs a special place for her clothing, and beauty accessories, Reb Smolinksy insists “I must have a room for my books” (3). These too are accessories to his sense of self. When his wife tells him they must take in boarders in order to pay the rent, he responds, “but where will I have quiet for my studies in this crowded kitchen? I have to be alone in a room to think with God?” (13). Unsympathetic and immensely practical, his wife responds, “Only millionaires can be alone in America” (13).
Although Mrs. Smolinksy is maddened by her husband’s unreasonable demands, she nonetheless idealizes him—he himself is something sacred in a profane materialistic culture. In the Jewish tradition, supporting such a man is an honorable and enviable vocation, for he sanctifies her life. Indeed as she listens to her husband chanting his prayers, she whispers to her neighbor with a mixture of awe and pride: “Is there any music on earth like this” (16)?

Mrs. Smolinksy nevertheless does feel the need to become somewhat Americanized; the burden to make a living and negotiate with the landlord, the street cart peddlers, falls on her shoulders and that of her daughters. It is because of her insistence that the Smolinkys take in boarders, and with the arrival of boarders, Sara declares, “things began to get better with us.” (28). With more money to spend, the Smolinkys are able to purchase those products so important in securing an American identity:

Mother began to fix up the house like other people. The installment man trusted us now. We got a new table with four feet that was solid, it didn’t spill the soup all over the place. Mashah got a new looking glass from the second hand man. It had a crack in the middle but it was so big she could see herself from head to the feet. Mother even bought regular towels. Every time we wiped our faces on them it seemed so much behind us the time we had only old rags for towels. We bought a new soup pot and enough plates and spoons and forks and knives so we could all sit down by the table at the same time and eat like people. It soon became natural as if we were used from always to eat with separate knives and forks instead of from the pot to the hand as we once did . . . But the more people get, the more they want. We no sooner got used to regular towels than we began to want toothbrushes, each for himself like Mashah. We got the toothbrushes and we began wanting toothpowder to brush our teeth with, instead of ashes. And more and more we wanted more things, and really needed more things the more we got them. (28-9)

Like Sister Carrie and The Rise of David Levinsky, this novel also illustrates the essential role of desire in the new consumer culture; as in Dreiser’s and Cahan’s novels, desire can never be fulfilled; attaining objects of desire does not necessarily lead to satisfaction, or in this case, Americanization. Unlike her sister, Sara is uncomfortable “painting” herself and wearing the latest styles. She feels guilt when putting her needs ahead of others, and though
she has a sense of individualism and self reliance, she cannot feel fully comfortable cutting communal ties. In many ways, Sara is alienated from the urban mass culture that so enchants Mashah. Frugal, far from extravagant, she seeks intellectual rewards and pleasures; at work, for example, Sara never understands what all the giggling girls are talking about and when she tries to be like them by dressing up, and wearing cosmetics, she feels so awkward that she is ridiculed all the more.

Indeed while the novel celebrates American freedom and individualism, there is much about American values it questions. Particularly disturbing to the Jewish immigrant is the loss of the sacred, those distinctions between the sacred and the profane so important to orthodox Jewish culture. Though it alienates him from America, Reb Smolinksy holds on to these distinctions his entire life. He says he "doesn't trust American men" because "One day is the same to them as another. Ask them the difference between a plain Monday and the Sabbath and they'll gape at you" (293). The Sabbath loses its special status in America as do many things; as Heinze reminds us the "banality of luxury" was an inescapable fact of American life. Indeed when Mrs. Smolinsky remembers the old country, she emphasizes the luxurious things she would use for sacred rituals, the value and beauty of handicraft as opposed to mass produced goods:

My curtains took me a whole year to knit on sticks two yards long. But the most beautiful thing of my whole dowry was my hand crocheted tablecloth. It was made up of little knitted rings of all colours: red, blue, yellow, green, and purple. All the colours of the rainbow were in that tablecloth. It was like dancing sunshine lighting up the room when it was spread on the table for the Sabbath. There ain't in America such beautiful things like we had home. "Nonsense, Mama," Mashah broke in, "if you only had the money to go on Fifth Avenue you'd see the grand things you could buy." "Yes buy, repeated mother, In America rich people can only buy, and buy things made by machines. Even Rockefeller's daughter got only store bought, ready made things for her dowry. There was a feeling in my tablecloth . . . (33)
With mass production in America, objects lose their “specialness,” their sacredness, and what were once luxuries become everyday objects. When Mashah tries to impress a young man, she feels compelled to take down the cups from the Passover set, and soon this becomes a habit for the whole family. “No longer were the cracked penny cups used for evening’s tea, but whole cups with handles were taken down from the Passover set and used for every day” (55) As these distinctions between the sacred and the everyday are lost, a culture loses its foundation, its material reality.

What Yezierska emphasizes most of all is the importance of family relationships in maintaining this material reality; however, in order to truly become “American,” in order to become a self-reliant individual, Sara must break away from these familial and cultural ties. One of the things that is stressed in this book, therefore, is Sara’s loneliness. Like Levinksy, she is cut off from her roots and therefore can never be content even when she has achieved success; Sara’s isolation, however, is different from Levinksy’s. Sara seeks solitude. Indeed the significance of solitude and the luxury of privacy is a recurring theme in her story. While Levinksy seems to yearn for another mother figure, someone to take care of him, Sara on the other hand, has never known this position; she has been a “bread giver,” taking care of her father and helping her family all her life. Being with other people invariably means having demands being made upon her; it means subservience. When Sara finally does leave home, she sits in the stillness of the morning realizing, “I had yet never been alone since I was born. This was the first time I ate by myself with silence and stillness for company . . . . I alone with myself was enjoying myself for the first time as with grandest company” (156-157). It is perhaps this yearning for “a room of one’s own,” this rejection of traditional domestic family life as opposed to the idealization and yearning for it, that separates these similar novels so dramatically.
Domestic life is chaotic, oftentimes hellish in Bread Givers, not at all the quiet peace imagined by Levinksy: “the vague portrait of woman in the abstract coupled with . . . a similarly vague image of a window and a table set for dinner” (376). What is interesting here is Cahan’s language: the word “abstract,” the repetition of “vague.” There is no dirt, no chaos, no work to be done; the table is already set. Mealtime in Bread Givers, however, was “when mother let out her bitter heart of worry and Father hammered out his preaching like a wound up phonograph” (156). There is no idealization of domestic or family life here. Indeed Sara watches her sisters get married off and eventually become worn out by domestic labor and childcare. Even Mashah’s beauty fades. Significantly Sara observes that all of Mashah’s beauty has gone into her house: “Beauty was in that house. But it had come out of Mashah’s face. The sunny colour of her walls had taken the colour out of her cheeks. The shine of her pots and pans had taken the lustre out of her hair. And the soda with which she had scrubbed the floor so clean, and laundered her rags to white had burned in and eaten the beauty of her hands” (147). Convinced that she must recreate domestic space; Sara decides she must have “a room of her own,” for having a room with a shut door “was life” (159). “It was air” (159). “The bottom starting point of becoming a person” (159).

As she depicts tenement life in graphic, unsentimental detail, Yezierska shows us that it will be a long difficult journey to attain this room. While Levinksy is soon on his way to achieving an American identity in a new suit of clothes from a benefactor when he is practically just off the boat, it will be a long time before Sara gets to wear her new clothes, and those clothes will not necessarily be read as a mark of success. Levinksy, it seems, is helped along the way at every turn: Mr. Even, “Maximum” Max, his night school teacher Mr. Bender, Gitelson who advises him to get into the garment business. There is always some benefactor to help, someone to tide him over. Sara, on the other hand, struggles alone. There is no one who buys her a new suit of clothes, and five nights a week, she too struggles.
to go to night school, but, as she puts it, "in a crowded class of fifty, with a teacher so busy with her class that she had no time to notice me" (162). Even at the restaurant for working girls she is humiliated and made to go hungry. What we see in Yezierska's story is not a fantastic "rise," nor the pivotal role of chance or coincidence, but a dogged persistent toil amid a grim and unwelcoming environment: the physical realities of tenement life, the physical details of dirt and stuffiness, the time, energy and money necessary to stay clean. Even when Sara does get a room of her own, there is a continual need to "shut one's eyes to the dirt" (163). When she sticks her head out the window, "potato peelings fall" on her, "a shower of ashes blinded" her (163). Sara's environment is constantly at odds with her, but she is able to overcome it, she says "by the whole force of my will..." (165).

In order to achieve her goals, Sara must also separate herself from the culture of the "working girl," and because she lives alone, she is already the subject of gossip and speculation. "Leaves a father and mother for God knows why," the other girls say of her. "I ask you only, why does a girl go to live alone," they snicker. (179). Sara's desire for solitude is not understood and not approved of: "All the girls were together at the laundry giggling and laughing and enjoying themselves as they ate their lunch. Only I was alone in the corner, cramming my grammar," Sara tells us (179). Sara is "shut out like a greenhorn who didn't talk their language. When they gossiped beaux or dances or the latest styles, their mouths snapped tight when I got near" (180). Looking at herself in the mirror she compares herself to these girls and sees, "a gray face, a stone face... everything about me was gray, drab, dead. I was only twenty three and I dressed myself like an old lady in mourning" (180). Unlike her sister Mashah, Sara puts no energy into her appearance; she constructs an American identity the hard way—through language acquisition, through study. Part of Sara's alienation stems from her inability or refusal to participate in the new consumer-oriented society where "accumulation and display" are the "foundations upon which the
changing way of American life is built" (Bronner 30). The two sisters therefore embody competing notions of individualism. Ewen’s description of the cultural shift that takes place as we move from a society based on production to one based on consumption clarifies the sisters’ different approaches to self realization: “By investing purchaseable commodities with connotations of action, having vies with doing in the available lexicon of self realization. Acting upon the world gives way to the possession of objects/images that suggest the qualities of active personhood” (CI 106). Mashah seeks self realization in acquiring things while Sara seeks it in working, in acting upon the world. There is, however, an instance in the book when Sara’s isolation is so unbearable that she reaches for cosmetics and accessories, deciding to “put on color” so she can be like the rest. She takes her little penny savings to the department store and buys “lipstick, rouge and powder,” “a lace collar,” “even red roses” for her hat (182). “[L]ate into the night” she fixes herself up, wanting to “make up for the pale colorless years”:

I looked in the glass at the new self I had made. Now I was exactly like the others. Red lips, red cheeks even red roses under the brim of my hat. Blackened lashes, darkened eyebrows, Soft, white lace at my neck... a young girl in the height of her bloom! ... But my excited happiness soon sank down. I felt funny and queer. Something was wrong as if my painted face didn’t hang together with the rest of me. On the outside I looked like the other girls. But the easy gladness that sparkled from their eyes was not in mine. They were a bunch of light hearted savages who looked gay because they felt gay. I was like a dolled up dummy fixed for a part on the stage.(183)

Even more so than Levinksy, Sara is uncomfortable with her new modern look. She recognizes she is not like the others, and therefore she should not look like them. Trying to fit in only makes her “panicky with self consciousness” (183). She feels ashamed and confused with her “false face” (183). “It was as though the rouge had turned into a mask and I could not breathe through the cover” (183). At odds with this theatrical urban culture, Sara turns even more fervently to “the educated world where only the thoughts you give out count and not how you look” (183).
Indeed her flirtation with Max Goldstein dramatizes how her values ultimately clash with America’s culture of amusement and consumerism. At first Max admires Sara’s self-reliance, aligning himself with her: “Your sister was making excuses for you the way you live. I think more of you for standing on your own feet... you and I are so much alike because I too wanted to make my own way into the world...”(188) Soon however, it becomes clear that Max and Sara’s values diverge dramatically. Max, who tells her that her hands “should be playing piano and not ironing clothes,” is especially keen to signs of status and social climbing. (191) He knows the latest trends and styles, and introduces Sara to the new heterosocial world of public amusements when he takes her out dancing, sweeping her off her feet momentarily. Unlike Levinksy, who watches from the sidelines, Sarah throws herself into dancing: “The brass band lifted me fiercely out of myself and shook me to the roots. Crowds, what crowds of couples. Women’s white shoulders against men’s black coats. Women and men letting go toward each other, drunk with the fiery rhythm of jazz... Just to dance. To lose myself in the mad joy of the crowd. Whirl away, wild and free from all worry and care. This was life...”(193) Sara finds this new urban life seductive, particularly the freer relations it encourages between the sexes. Indeed dancing, in particular, according to contemporary accounts, was especially attractive to young women. As David Nasaw points out:

While it might be somewhat of a stretch to characterize the “dance craze” of the early twentieth century as entirely female-driven, there was no doubt among contemporary observers that the “girls” were the carriers of the madness. When Michael Davis undertook his massive amusement survey of New York City in 1911, he found a surprising discrepancy between the boys and girls he interviewed on the question of dancing. While only one third of the boys admitted to knowing how to dance, 88 percent of the girls said they knew how to dance and 96 percent said they enjoyed it. Ruth True, the social worker and author of *The Neglected Girl* reported that on Manhattan’s West Side, young working girls were spending “several nights a week at dance halls where they stayed until one or two o’clock even though they had to get up early for work six days a week.”(106)
Indeed for awhile Sara is “too much on fire to come down to the cold facts of lessons,” and Max’s attention has an intoxicating effect, for a “fierce desire for life was let loose” in her (195). Eventually, however, Max reveals himself to be shallow and self absorbed; his values are those of the market, for “he went on praising himself, as if he were goods for sale,” Sara tells us (199). Sarah must therefore disengage herself from him as well as this culture of amusement to achieve her goals, for her old-fashioned work ethic seems at odds with this new emphasis on fun, display and consumerism. Laughing at her academic aspirations, Max shoves Sara’s books aside, insisting that “it’s money that makes the wheels go round” (199). Realizing that to him, “a wife would only be another piece of property,” Sara rejects his proposal, but this only maddens her father who is unable to understand her resisting a marriage that was not based on “real love” (199) “So this is what it cost, daring to follow the urge in me,” Sara decides. “No lover. No family. No friend. I must go on and on. And I must go alone” (208).

Sara’s journey for knowledge therefore will take her out of the cosmopolitan city with its emphasis on fun and theatrical display, to a small college town where she feels she has found the “real” America. The contrast she experiences fascinates and delights her, but she also discovers a coolness and a distance to this charmed life: “Before this, New York was all of America to me. But now I came to a town of quiet streets shaded with green trees. No crowds, no tenements. No hurrying noise to beat the race of the hours. Only a leisured quietness whispered in the air: Peace. Be still. Eternal time is all before you” (210). The language here is soothing, restful, evoking spiritual peace, but it also hints at the authoritarian nature and atmosphere of this new world. It is as if the voice of God speaks out of this “Leisured quietness” and in this rarefied realm, Sara experiences a heightened sense of Otherness:
Each house had its own green grass in front, its own free space all around and it faced the street with the calm security of being owned for generations and not rented by the month from a landlord. In the early twilight it was like a picture out of fairyland to see people sitting on their porches lazily swinging in their hammocks or watering their own growing flowers... So these are the real Americans I thought. (210)

The college buildings too are like a "picture out of fairyland." They were "beautiful palaces and this was the beauty," she decides, "for which I had always longed" (211). Sara feels that if she loses herself in the "serenity of this new world, the hunger and turmoil of the ghetto would drop away" from her (211). But here her difference is only accentuated. Unlike Sara, these people are "ironed out smooth and even," in "their spotless, creaseless clothes, as if the dirty battle of life had never been on them" (213)

Eventually Sara gains the admiration of some professors who appreciate her "pioneer" status, and she comes back to New York four years later, diploma in hand, proud and full of high hopes. Significantly she entitles her coming home chapter to New York as "My Honeymoon with Myself" (237). On the Pullman train, she feels "changed into a person," and her new identity is reinforced by her choice of food: "No more herring and pickle over dry bread. I ordered chops and spinach and salad." (237,38). Finally Sara goes through the most important of Americanization rituals—she buys a new suit of clothing, and for the first time in her life she walks down Fifth Avenue "devouring" with her eyes "the wonderful shop windows" (238). "For the first time in my life," she declares, "I asked for the best," and the people in the department stores cater to her sense of her new found importance: "There seemed no pains too great to please me" (239). But back at Hester Street, her new identity as a "teacherin" generates ambiguity, and in some cases outright hostility.

Indeed when Sara returns to the Lower East Side, the careful maintenance of her own private space will be crucial in maintaining her new identity:
In the morning, in the evening, when I sat down to meals, I enjoyed myself as with grandest company. I loved the bright dishes from which I ate. I loved the shining pots and pans in which I cooked with my food. I loved the broom with which I swept the floor, the scrubbing brush, the scrubbing rag, the dust cloth. The routine with which I kept clean my precious privacy, my beautiful aloneness, was all sacred to me. I had achieved that marvellous thing, “a place for everything and everything in its place’ which the teachers preached to me so hopelessly while a child in Hester Street.” (241)

Reminiscent of Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “A New England Nun,” Sara’s meticulous organization, her love of housekeeping resonates with joy and satisfaction; domestic order, it seems, can bring order to the soul. Again and again, Sara stresses the “beautiful clean emptiness” she has created (242). “When I thought of the crowded dirt from where I came, this simplicity was rich and fragrant with unutterable beauty” (241). Sara’s taking care of her things and her self, moreover her desire to separate herself from the culture she has come from, however, bring to mind Mashah’s efforts at the novel’s beginning, efforts that Sara herself was critical of. Indeed the community of Hester Street will see Sara as her family once saw Mashah: cold and heartless.

Soon after Sara comes home, her mother dies, and her refusal to tear her new suit of clothing according to the Biblical law and the ages of tradition brings condemnation upon her. “Look at her the Americanerin,” the family and neighbors cry in horror (255). “Her face is washed. Her hair is combed. Did we care how we looked when our mothers died?” they exclaim (256). Sara’s polished appearance—what she has strived to attain throughout the novel—only works against her. And as Sara refuses to join her father and sister in the tearing of her garments, she seems to stand outside this event, becoming a spectator rather than a participant at her own mother’s funeral. In a curiously detached manner which reinforces her outsider status, she details how others mourn and grieve: “Four shabby looking frail, ill-fed poor men lifted the coffin on their shoulders. People pushed back on both sides to make room for the men to pass. Louder shrieks burst the air again as the coffin was borne out of
the house, through the crowded hall and down the crowded stoop. Passerbys joined the hysterical shrieks. They didn’t know who died, but were drawn in by the common grief of death" (256).

Like Levinsky, Sara does rise and the price she pays is high. But unlike Levinsky, who feels he took the wrong route, that he was really an intellectual man, Sara stayed on the path she believed was right for her, and became the teacher she used to idolize as a child. Still, she is unsure of her success because like Levinsky she is alone, and her culture privileges the family and not the individual, and because moreover, she is a woman, and this privileging of the self is therefore even more problematic. Her conflicted feelings concerning her gender identity and career can never be resolved it seems, for while Sara had it ingrained in her by her father—this “exalted reverence for the teacher”—her father nevertheless feels she is a failure, unnatural, because she is unmarried. And the language Sara uses to express her anguished feelings concerning her career suggest that she too sees her vocation should really be that of motherhood: “My job was to teach—to feed hungry children. How could I give them milk when my own breasts were empty. Maybe after all my puffing myself up that I was smarter, more self sufficient than the rest of the world—wasn’t Father right” (270)? Sara’s hard won career seems anticlimactic, her satisfaction out of reach. Like Cahan’s Levinsky, Yezierska’s Sara seems in many ways unchanged; once again the past is insistent and cannot be denied: “The windows of my classroom faced the same crowded street where seventeen years ago I started out my career selling herring. The same tenements with fire escapes full of pillows and feather beds. The same weazened, tawny-faced organ grinder mechanically turning out songs that were all the music I knew of in my childhood” (269, my emphasis). Later walking along the streets of the Lower East Side, her description reinforces how this world still keeps her in a subordinate position:
Poor people of Hester Street. With new pity I looked at them. I hurried on, but the verve of my winged walk was dulled by the thick shuffling tread of those who walked beside me. My own shoulders that I always held so straight, sagged because of the bowed backs that hemmed me in. . . . I leaned out of the open window and saw the city as it lay below me, sharp and black and grimy. The smoke of those houses kept rising sullenly, until I couldn't help but breathe the soot of that far reaching tragedy below. (282)

Although Sara is overwhelmed with pity and guilt in coming back to the Lower East Side, it is here that she finds "real love"—a kindred spirit in Hugo Seelig, the principal of her school. As the diverse interpretations of the novel's ending suggest, this relationship is laden with ambiguity and compromise. On the positive side, Susan Hersh Sach believes that Yezierska's novels of parent-child conflicts end with some form of reconciliation, and that the final chapter of Bread Givers is "particularly idyllic" (65). At the other extreme, Carol Schoen writes, "Sara's love affair and marriage to Hugo Seelig . . . are the most jarring elements in the book. It is difficult to accept the fact that having strived for so long to achieve independence, Sara would so easily relinquish it or that she would so quickly find a man so perfectly suitable in all ways" (72). Laura Wexler, meanwhile, celebrates Hugo with some reservations: "When Hugo recalls his past to her . . . he gives her a chance to reclaim her own non-American experience and recode her own previously forbidden pre-American truths. With Hugo for the first time, Sara begins to emerge from the black night that is her historical amnesia and to face the future from the foundation of her authentic heritage" (173). "Yet," Wexler later adds, "as Hugo offers a welcome alternative to the humiliating denial of self and historical memory demanded by mainstream American culture, he does not resolve the problem of Sara's position in the present" (177).

Hugo Seelig is gentle, and Wexler's point about his bringing her in touch with her past is certainly right, but there is something nevertheless perplexing about this man and the novel's final scenes. The classroom scene where we first meet Seelig is especially disturbing. When Sara is drilling her students in pronunciation, she hears in the middle of the chorus, a
"little chuckle," and sees "Mr. Seelig himself" (272). As she asks her student to try again, "the birds sing—gg." Yezierska writes, "sing, corrected, Mr. Seelig, softly" (272). Even though he may do this "softly," he nonetheless subverts her authority in her own classroom. Instead of pulling Sara aside after class is over, he watches her "blunder on," and "the next moment," she tells us, "he was close beside me, the tips of his cool fingers on my throat" (272). "Keep those muscles still until you have stopped. Now say it again, he commanded and I turned pupil myself and pronounced the word correctly" (272). Seelig's "gentleness" is stressed again and again as well as his kindness, but "his cool fingers" on Sara's throat seem more like an assertion of male authority than erotic tenderness. As she turns "pupil" under his "command," we are left to wonder what will happen when she makes her home with Seelig, especially when they decide to open their home to Sara's father. Though Sara invites her father to come live with them, she tells Seelig, "If he lives with us, we'll lose our home" (296). Seelig, however, assures her "Not at all. Our home will be richer if your father comes with us" (296).

As we look back to earlier scenes, this conclusion may seem even more ominous, for Yezierska highlights that Seelig is a problematic figure from the beginning. When he first arrives at Sara's home, Yezierska emphasizes that Seelig recognizes the value of what Sara has achieved; when he looks slowly around her apartment, he exclaims "How beautiful and how empty" (277). This is exactly how Sara sees her apartment. Indeed Sara sees his appreciation of her clean, empty space as a sign of their kinship, an understanding, but Yezierska significantly ends this chapter with a telling image: "In the early morning when I swept my broom, I halted at Hugo Seelig's muddy footprint. He leaped up at me out of the spot on the floor" (280). Hugo Seelig, the one who appreciates her "beautiful and empty" apartment, is nevertheless the one who leaves his "muddy footprint." And the final image of the novel only reinforces his curious ambiguity. After listening to her father's chant, Sara

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
and Hugo turn to go, and Sara states: "Then Hugo's grip tightened on my arm and we walked on. But I felt the shadow still there. It wasn't just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me"(297). It is Hugo's grip and weight she feels here, not "just" her father's. Indeed the generations who "made" her father also include the younger generation—Seelig himself. The respect and the obedience of the younger generation also "make" the authority of the patriarchal fathers. Sara, at the end of the novel, therefore, feels the weight of both her husband and her father. Unlike Levinsky who keeps on "desiring," who still looks with longing at the factory girls, Sara seems to stop "desiring" by the novel's end. Indeed as she turns away from America's contemporary consumer society and all the freedom and pitfalls it offers for women, she is left with nowhere to go, and must therefore move back to the patriarchal home and tradition.

Although I have not come across any specific mention of Yezierska reading Henry James, there is nevertheless a disturbing echo here to that final ambiguous scene in *The Bostonians* when Verena gives up her public life with Olive for a more traditional home with Ransom. Ransom's grip also tightens around Verena as the novel ends, and he quickly ushers her out of the music hall: "[W]ith his muscular force, he hadrenched Verena away"(418). "Ah now I am glad, said Verena, when they had reached the street," James writes, "But though she was glad, he presently discovered that, beneath her hood, she was in tears"(James 418-19). Sara, we suspect will also be "destined to shed" some tears, for she too is about to enter a union, "so far from brilliant"(James 419).
CONCLUSION

My general aim in writing this dissertation was to reexamine the tradition of the urban novel in America. The idea for the dissertation began with my reading of Hawthorne’s *Blithedale Romance* and my interest in the issues his novel specifically examines: the white middle-class habits of vision as well as the white middle-class ideals of domesticity emerging out of urban life. Hawthorne’s attention to these topics seemed particularly compelling to me because these are the very issues I see inhabiting America’s urban novels later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most of the works that I have chosen to analyze alongside Hawthorne, therefore, are from the 1880s-1900s, novels which have traditionally been grouped together under the umbrella of “realism.” My dissertation then sought to expand the borders of realism, to illustrate how “realism’s” project may have begun a bit earlier, and since I end with Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers*, an urban novel of the 1920s which looks back to the turn of the century, I also wished to show how realism’s project continues into the experimental period we know as Modernism.45 Hawthorne’s antebellum urban novel provided me with a new way of reading America’s later urban novels. His work helped me to see how two competing versions of domesticity inhabited nineteenth-century urban culture: one marked by a strict separation of public and private

45 While “realism” is a slippery term, it is a useful category for helping us see what common aims and concerns may have united a diverse group of writers ranging from Hawthorne to Cahan. To borrow from Eric Sundquist, the “realist project” I examine here is a “series of responses to the transformation of land into capital, of raw materials into products, of agrarian values into urban values, and of private experience into public property . . .” (501). Paul Lauter’s description of realism is also helpful in highlighting how realism is a response to sweeping cultural change. “Realism,” Lauter writes, “was the response of writers to . . . the recognized need to capture, report, and interpret the world of the developing cities and the declining rural regions. In order to convey the nature of an urban world . . . or the speech patterns, habits and manners of the nation’s rural areas, such conventions of romance fiction as its often leisurely narrative pace, its use of allegory and symbolism and its frequent focus on the exceptional individual no longer seemed appropriate” (11).
space where home functioned as a “haven,” the other marked by “visual delight” and self expression, aligning the home with the public performance city life increasingly demanded. Domesticity, while often the focus of our reading of nineteenth-century women’s writing, has often been neglected when discussing men’s writing or urban realism. As Janet Wolff has pointed out, much of the scholarship on the “urban” tends to focus on the public sphere (44). In order to further complicate our notion of the urban then—to illuminate the intersections between public and private realms of experience—this dissertation brings together a discussion of domesticity with a discussion of the urban novel. Indeed emphasizing how domestic space is a crucial urban issue enabled me to forge new readings of America’s urban novels and to illuminate how the earlier urban domestic ideal of the antebellum period is challenged, interrogated, transformed and revisited in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Beginning with Hawthorne, all of these writers, I argue, examine how the home becomes a part of the theatricality of urban life rather than a haven from it, and, in so doing, they highlight how the boundaries between public and private become more fluid and permeable with the rise of a new consumer culture. As these writers explore this interrelationship over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they are united by one of realism’s major projects—documenting and interpreting the new urban milieu. Moreover, each writer seems to build upon his or her predecessors, fleshing out the details, and expanding the “panorama.”

The Novels’ Vision and the Project of Realism

Hawthorne’s “romance,” I would suggest, has more elements akin to “realism.” Based on the actual Brook Farm experiment, this is not only a novel of social criticism, but also a novel that is most grounded in the urban reality which Hawthorne himself inhabited. And it is here that we find some of the most “realistic” elements of Hawthorne’s style—his detailed
urban sketches and, in Miles Coverdale, his most fully realized and psychologically complex character. James, it seems, sensed the relevance of Hawthorne’s work for “realism.” He was especially drawn to this novel; he wanted to improve upon it, sketch in the background he saw as “vague”—make it in other words, more “realistic” (M. Bell 129). Fleshing out what is suggested in Hawthorne then, James makes class and gender roles more explicit in his vision of Boston. City scenes are more detailed, and the “romance” with urban life is tempered by a narrative voice that can see the decay, the disorder that a flaneur like Coverdale prefers not to read. Still, James’s narrator continually reminds us that the characters can never really see things right; for them the city remains a backdrop, a pretty picture; it is kept at a comfortable distance. In other words, the sensibility of the flaneur predominates, and James’s novel extends Hawthorne’s only so far.

In Howells’s work, however, we see the flaneur’s sense of confidence and ease falter a bit as his urban spectator is rushed into far more bewildering scenes, into a new metropolis which is harder to interpret, which even seems to resist interpretation. Howells expands realism’s project by turning to the complexity of New York—the nation’s new cultural capital and metropolis. Moreover, his city moves beyond a passive backdrop of pleasant scenes that can easily be “ordered” and “consumed” to a powerful presence that overwhelms the urban spectator’s attempts to control it. Dreiser will also create a vast panoramic vision that at times seems unreadable, but his city is not only far more powerful in shaping the response of the urban spectator, it is a city that elicits a new sensibility. With a greater emphasis on “visual delight” and individualism as well as an increasingly permeable boundary between domestic and public spaces, Dreiser’s city vividly dramatizes the demise of traditional Victorian culture and the dominance of the new consumer culture which had been evolving and exerting its pressure since the antebellum years. Wharton, Dunbar, Cahan and Yezierska, will each examine this new mass consumer culture, highlighting how its
heterosocial public spaces and more “publicly-minded” private spaces overturn Victorian mores and tradition.

In these later works, the flaneur sensibility also seems to shift. There is less confidence, and more anxiety and confusion in watching the urban spectacle; some of these urban spectators seem to turn inward, often analyzing their own performance rather than focusing on the performance of others. Again, what is emphasized here is the power of the city to shape the spectator and not vice versa. Also, since these authors are writing from a marginalized ethnic, racial or gendered position, they perhaps do not have the privilege to “consume” the spectacle with the ease and confidence of the flaneur. More often than not, especially in the works of Wharton and Yezierska, these urban spectators are also trying to resist the gaze that would “consume” them. Focusing on the effect of the new consumer culture on those who are marginalized, these writers will make its gendered, racial and ethnic implications far more explicit.

I chose this particular group of writers then, not only for the realist project which unites them, but also because of the varied cultural positions they themselves bring to bear on this project. This is why I did not include some of the period’s other major urban novels: Stephen Crane’s Maggie or Frank Norris’s McTeague, for example. After my chapter on Dreiser, I wished to expand our view of the urban novel by considering works written by gendered, racial and ethnic Others. And while Crane writes of the brutality of immigrant life in New York’s Bowery, Crane himself was not an immigrant, and though poor, he nevertheless came from a genteel middle-class background. Norris, who chose to write on the ruthlessness of working class urban life in McTeague, also came from a middle-class background. The novelists I have selected each focus on an aspect of urban experience particular to the gender, race, ethnicity or class position which they themselves inhabit. I am not suggesting
that these novels are autobiographical, but that these writers perhaps use the novel to speculate on their own cultural positions. Both Hawthorne and James focus on the middle-class and upper-class urban spectator, and Howells's protagonist, a middle-class writer transplanted to New York, recalls Howells's own circumstances. Like Carrie, Dreiser, the son of German immigrants, will also find success in America's big city. 46 Dunbar's paradoxical position as a black writer catering to a white audience, meanwhile, evokes the situation of the Hamilton family who also find themselves trapped in an urban culture determined by white middle-class values. Wharton, on the other hand, examines her ambivalence towards the consumer economy through Lily, a rebellious woman of the leisure class, and Cahan and Yezierska explore what it means for Eastern European Jewish immigrants to adapt to America's consumer culture. While Crane's and Norris's works expand realism's boundaries by focusing on "how the other half lives," I wanted to do more than bring in any representation of the experience of those who are marginalized. I wanted their voices to be heard here as well. This is one reason why my project takes us all the way to the 1920s. The first full-length novel (not autobiography) about turn-of-the-century urban America by an immigrant woman finally makes its appearance then. In order to dramatize both the varied implications of the new urban middle-class culture and its evolution over time, I needed to look beyond and before realism's dominance on the literary landscape.

Interpreting the New Urban Landscape and Interrogating the New Middle-Class Urbanity

Beginning with Hawthorne then, I highlight how middle-class urbanity—in particular its habits of vision and ideals of domesticity—is interrogated. By aligning Miles Coverdale with

the figure of the flaneur, I show the cultural significance of Coverdale's character, how he embodies the middle class's adjustment to an increasingly urbanized world. Drawing on sociologist George Simmel, I also point out how Coverdale reflects the 'modern' urbanite who adjusts to urban life by cultivating an extremely private subjectivity (48). And while Hawthorne's character suggests an adaptation to urban theatricality, his character at the same time shows a resistance, an unease, an anxiety towards cosmopolitan life. Hawthorne's flanuer-style sketches reveal Coverdale's sentimentality; again and again, he turns to the image of the sentimental family to create some sense of order, some sense of epistemological control. Unable to embrace the cosmopolitan diversity he lives in, Coverdale yearns for a home which will provide a haven from the theatricality of public life. Hawthorne suggests, however, that the boundaries between the "sentimental home" and the "public theater" are already beginning to give way. Even while Coverdale hopes to "get back to nature"—to experience a more communal domesticity and shed the artifice of urban life—he nevertheless embodies a more consumer-oriented and theatrical domesticity of heightened individualism and display.

Hawthorne also hints that part of Coverdale's inadequate way of seeing is his insistence on viewing gendered and working-class Others as romantic "types"—his preference for the "fancywork" with which he "decks" them out (94). As James and Howells continue to explore the themes Hawthorne sets in motion here, they will make the gender and class implications of white, middle-class urbanity more explicit. James, for example, sets his novel within the context of America's evolving women's movement. As he puts it, the most "salient and peculiar point in our social life" is "the situation of women...the agitation on their behalf" (Lurie xi). Howells, on the other hand, suggests that it is the divide between capital and labor which is the defining feature of urban life. The cities imagined by James and Howells are also more visually compelling, and the domestic spaces imagined in these
novels are shaped by the urban marketplace in more obvious ways. As I highlighted in chapter two, the tendencies we find in antebellum urban culture—its inclination to theatricality, its emphasis on the visual, its mystification of the public sphere—not only continue with the growth of technology and the market economy, they are dramatically intensified, taken to new heights and new extremes. Public life is far more sensational after the Civil War, for as the machinery of a growing mass media expands, there is more spectacular entertainment available as well as more imagery inundating American lives. It is a city more theatrical, more pleasure-oriented, and its emphasis on “visual delight” and individualism inevitably transforms the meaning of home. By the 1870s and 1880s, America was in the midst of a “hypercommercial aesthetic craze,” and the sentimental home became a more aesthetic ideal as a result (Freedman 105). The ideal home was now a place of “visual delight,” a place for self-expression, a realm more informed and shaped by the new commercialism (Clark 78). While James’s characters Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom seem to uphold the older antebellum ideal of home with its strict separation of private and public life, James suggests this ideal cannot be maintained in a world dominated by “publicity.”

Although the new public realm makes its impact on the private by reshaping the culture’s “ideal” home, the middle, upper-class home remains, in James’s work, strictly separated from other aspects of ‘the public.’ It will be left up to Howells and the other urban novelists to flesh out the urban details that in James’s and Hawthorne’s work can only be viewed from a great distance. The urban blight from Olive’s Back Bay residence which is rendered into “agreeable effects” will then be examined more closely, and realism’s project will again be expanded (James 163). Shifting the setting of his novel to New York, Howells will build upon James’s urban vision by bringing in the presence of an ethnic underclass as well as the transforming power of technology. While home is still central to Howell’s urban
vision, there is more unease regarding middle-class domesticity, in particular its extreme privacy and its sense of entitlement. Embodying this unease, Basil March keeps shifting between espousing a sentimental ideal of home which supports “family consciousness,” and a more aesthetic ideal of home which focuses on material effects, and the expression of personality. His uncertainty regarding the ideal home reflects a cultural unease as the nation examined its domestic ideals more closely during this time. As Clifford Edward Clark points out, by 1890 the aesthetic ideals of the 1870s and 1880s were seen as “overly ornate” and the older Victorian family ideal “seemed artificial and awkward” (99).

In addition, Howells’s novel also questions the stronger thread of competitive individualism running through American life. Unlike the characters in the novels of James and Hawthorne, Howells’s characters, in the end, cannot reduce the urban blight to a pretty picture. Howells wants his middle-class readers to question their values, to combine private life with a more ‘public’ awareness. Basil March, therefore, does not remain a detached spectator. Moving away from the position of the flaneur, he confronts the confusion and complexity of the city and wrestles with its moral ambiguities. In Howells’s urban vision then, the private realm is transformed and shaped by the public in not just an aesthetic or material sense, but in a moral sense. It is not the new consumer culture’s beguiling images or heightened sense of individualism which affect the Marches most deeply, but the city’s urban blight and injustice. These urban spectators come to realize how public and private realms intersect, and the extremely private domesticity coveted in The Bostonians and Blithedale is now abandoned.

In Dreiser’s work, the boundaries of public and private become even more permeable. The longing for a sentimental home far removed from urban theatricality lingers on, but only in the voice of the narrator. As in Howells’s work, public life is more compelling, more
insistent and the extremely private, well-insulated domain of the Victorian home is once again replaced by a more "public-minded" life. But what characterizes this life is not a heightened awareness of economic inequities. The competitive individualism which so disturbed Howells has expanded enormously by the time we arrive in Drieser's city. Although an extremely private life may have disappeared, what has taken its place is not a more socially conscious life that balances public and private duty, but a public life that celebrates individualism and pushes class conflict and inequities—quite literally—to the margins of the text. Class divisions which shaped the cities of Hawthorne, James and Howells are now much more sharply accented. In effect, we have a tale of two cites, two cities that never seem to meet. Moreover, who ends up in either of these two cities is random, impossible to predict. In Howells's work, the middle-class urban spectator, Basil March seemed immune from the devastating consequences of the "economic chance world" he was forced to confront, but George Hurstwood displays no invulnerability and neither will Lily Bart. The "chance" in the "economic chance world" of Howells's novel is fully realized in D reiser's. Not only do class divisions seem more dramatic and extreme, class itself seems irrelevant. In D reiser's "topsy-turvy" world, fortunes are made and lost in a day, and new identities are continually formed. Class is not only often irrelevant in determining one's place in the city, but also in shaping one's consciousness, one's habits of perception. Carrie's working class origins do not determine her loyalties or her way of seeing the world, for she subscribes to the bourgeois values of materialism and competitive individualism from the very beginning, even when those values exploit and marginalize her.

Dunbar's work will also look at how the disenfranchised of the city subscribe to the values of those in power. While Carrie is rewarded for adhering to white, middle-class values, Dunbar makes it clear that consumer culture's materialism and competitive individualism have little to offer the African American since the heart of this new mass
culture is as racist as the older, more paternal version of the sentimental home or plantation. As Dunbar interrogates and probes the varied spaces of the turn-of-the-century city—its coon shows, its theaters, its ragtime bars—he shows us the tension not only between traditional white, middle-class, Victorian culture and the new urban mass culture, but the tensions and conflicts which erupt when African Americans confront this new culture, a culture which celebrates and ridicules them, a phenomenon Eric Lott has termed "love and theft."

For the most part, the white, middle-class urban novelists do not examine the implications of race nor question how race "constructs" the cities they imagine. Basil Ransom, for example, may be from the plantation world Dunbar depicts, yet this fact remains in the background and is never explored. Like Webb and Delany before him, Dunbar will have to remind us how the "color line" divides and maps urban space. Moreover, Dunbar highlights how the new urban spectacles are inextricably intertwined with race, and he suggests that the growth of mass culture would have devastating effects on African Americans, even as it might "free" them or provide them with new opportunities. His novel captures the especially racist atmosphere of the turn of the century—the time remembered as the 'racial nadir.' This period would see the minstrel show evolve into the insidious coon show, and the improvements in mass production would only ensure that the entertainment industry's portrayal of blacks would become more wide reaching. Indeed in the 1890s, America was in the midst of a "coon song craze."

As we see the Hamiltons reject their fellow African Americans down South, and later embrace the urban coon show when they arrive north, Dunbar makes it painfully clear that they have no other cultural frame of reference within which to imagine themselves. Indeed their fate seems hopelessly "overdetermined" by the dominant white culture. They cannot
move beyond that southern patriarchal "plantation" even when they encounter the freer environment of the more liberal north. What they leave behind in the South—a theater of deception where blacks must play the parts assigned to them by whites—is exactly what they find in New York. Moreover, the "individualistic" orientation of city life would have especially dire consequences for the Hamiltons. As John Blassingame and Frances Berry point out, African American families were traditionally more communal, characterized by a more flexible and extended family. Such a family structure would enable African Americans to "adapt" to a world of "systematic brutalization," as well as "minimize the pain involved" (85). Modeling themselves on the model of the white, middle-class family ideal, the Hamiltons, in a sense, have already left "family" well behind even before their arrival in New York, and once in the city, divisions within the Hamilton family are only exacerbated. Like Carrie, Joe and Kitty are seduced by the theater; they eagerly consume the spectacles which make their mother so uneasy. And as Thomas oversteps Mrs. Hamilton's authority by introducing Joe to drinking and ragtime at their boarding house, the line between public and private realms blurs in disturbing ways. Public life again becomes more compelling, more insistent and eventually individualism prevails, and the family splinters apart. The Banner Club will become Joe's home and like Carrie, Joe and Kitty will not hesitate to leave family behind in order to realize their own dreams. But without a family, Dunbar suggests they are doomed, for the new mass culture destroys them. While recognizing the sense of freedom and energy urban life could provide, Dunbar, in the end, condemns its commodification of African American culture as well as its individualistic orientation, for both would wreak havoc on African American communities and family ties.

Wharton too creates a city echoing that of Dreiser and Dunbar—a fantastic city of spectacle where desire continues to expand, resulting only in a tragic reversal of fortunes. Here again identities are reformed, family is nonexistent, and the city's consumer economy
overwhelms the urban spectator. Certainly Lily’s final image of herself as “being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years” reinforces for us that Wharton’s city is every bit as deterministic as that of Dunbar’s and Dreiser’s (296). Indeed in this “topsy-turvy” city, Lily, a women who once hobnobbed with the richest of society, dies like Hurstwood, impoverished and alone. Wharton’s work, however, focuses more profoundly on woman’s role in the new consumer culture. Indeed her work is a penetrating and scathing criticism of the urban consumer economy’s impact on women’s lives. While freeing women from older forms of authority, the new consumer economy may nevertheless imprison her in another sense, for it encourages her to strive above all else, to be a commodity, to be an empty glamorous bearer of men’s power and money.

Most of the urban novels in this project, to some extent, have attended to women’s increasingly public role in the new urban culture. Through the characters of Priscilla, Zenobia, Verena, Carrie, and Kitty, we see how the anxiety surrounding women’s role in urban culture persists as antebellum domestic ideals are challenged and transformed over the course of the century. While Priscilla’s, Zenobia’s and Verena’s “public” lives are short-lived or temporary, radical moments, Carrie and Kitty have careers, are actually able to lead public lives. But their weary successes still suggest not only an ambivalence towards the new mass culture, but also a continuing concern with what this new mass culture might offer to women in particular. Wharton will examine this dilemma in a particularly profound way, exploring Lily’s psychology as well as her material and economic position.

Wharton’s work comes at a time when woman’s domestic role was being earnestly challenged as well as zealously defended. Women were entering the workplace in unprecedented numbers and yet “traditionalists defended the ideology of the hearth ever more vigorously” (Hapke 6). Meanwhile, women’s image began to saturate the culture in a
new insistent way. By 1900, the "pretty girl picture" was a pervasive presence in advertising and the image of woman was increasingly being used to sell, to influence (Merish 321). But these images of women were also, as Martha Banta shows us, increasingly contradictory—embodying innocence and purity as well as aggression and sexuality (481). Lily, I argue, dramatizes this sense of contradiction, for she embodies the ambiguous and uncertain role of women in the new urban landscape. A curious combination of power and powerlessness, Lily seems to embody a new freedom as she smokes her cigarettes and performs her risqué tableau, yet Wharton shows us she is only more commodified, more divided against herself with each public performance. As I demonstrated in chapter five, Lily as well as the varied interior domestic spaces she inhabits illustrate the conflicting tensions of the time as a Victorian past comes into contact with the present atmosphere of turn-of-the-century New York, a time when "the restraints surrounding individual pleasure were being loosened" (Erenberg 43). More dramatically and insistently than the cities imagined in other urban novels, Wharton’s city is a city of interiors. But these interiors are perhaps the ultimate urban phenomenon—domestic theaters made possible by the new urban economy, the activity on Wall Street by men such as Gus Trenor.

Reflecting not only Wharton’s own interests, the novel’s emphasis on interiors reflects the interests of the culture at large, for a new approach to interior decoration was taking off at the turn of the century, emphasizing the power of the house to "express the personality of its occupants" (Halttunen, Parlor 180). As Lily moves through the various domestic spaces of the novel, we see the power tradition wields in her life as well as the influence of a new urban culture; this is the period of the "cozy corner," the period that saw the Victorian parlor evolve into the "living room." Mrs. Peniston’s formal Victorian home with its "impenetrable" domesticity brings to mind the impenetrable domesticity of Coverdale and Olive Chancellor as well as the Boston home of Basil and Isabel March (Wharton 55). It is a
home of the past. Its formalities, its strict divisions between public and private space, and its emphasis on woman’s private domestic nature are no longer appealing. Lily prefers the more contemporary informality of Selden’s apartment or the spectacular theatricality of a home like Bellomont where she might display her beauty most effectively. The wholly public hotel life, however, led by Norma Hatch (reminiscent of Carrie’s life at the Waldorf) is undesirable as well. This lifestyle—dictated by trends, whims, and fashion—seems as strange and unreal as Mrs Peniston’s sheltered domesticity.

Wharton, like Lily, felt caught between the oppressiveness of tradition and the new mass culture’s disregard of it. Her criticism of the values of the new leisure class—its more insistent consumerist approach to life—may have led her to lapse from “realism” into “sentimentalism.” In setting up an alternative locus of value, in creating an ideal and perhaps an “unreal” domestic space, Lily ends up romanticizing a working-class tenement. Divorced from any of the theatrical posturings of the middle and upper-class home, Nettie Struther’s home seems to exist in an ideal and pure realm. While it seems that Wharton’s criticism of consumer culture’s commodification of women leads her to idealize antebellum domesticity, Wharton actually revises the sentimental home. Her version is not insistent on ‘separate spheres,’ for men and women work together; woman is a partner, not a commodity in this egalitarian space which is defined above all by a companionate marriage.

Cahan and Yezierska will also continue to interrogate the meaning of home and woman’s place when they explore the impact of American middle-class urbanity upon the lives of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Their work especially highlights how, by the turn of the century, America’s consumer economy had made the trappings of an American identity within reach for many aspiring immigrants. As the piano scenes in Levinksy poignantly show us, home could now be a stage for performing and displaying American
identities. The proliferation of mass entertainment in the public realm—dance halls, movies, and vaudeville—would also teach the immigrant how to become “American.” Indeed the boundaries between America and the Old World, between public and private realms would merge and conflict incessantly, making it especially difficult for the immigrant to retain some sense of his or her cultural heritage. And the pressure not to appear as a “greenhorn” would only drive the immigrant to a frantic kind of assimilation that resulted in much loss and pain.

Perhaps the most problematic path to “Americanization” for the Eastern European Jew was entering a public realm that was now heterosocial, and encouraged men and women to mingle. This posed a stark contrast to the Old World as well as traditional Victorian culture, and both of the novels dramatize how the new public realm generates ambiguity, desire and confusion. For Levinsky, women and modernity are inextricably interconnected. As a young Talmud student, Levinsky was forbidden even to look at a woman, but now in America Levinsky must not only look, he must pursue women relentlessly. Women are his means of Americanization, the most valuable commodities he might acquire. Indeed Levinsky refuses to marry a young Jewish woman who would enable him to retain his ethnic heritage, for this would challenge his new American status. Yet at the end of the novel, we learn Levinsky refuses to marry the American Gentile widow whose company he so enjoys because she is not of his “race.” Though not “reconciled” to it, Levinsky remains a bachelor. Watching women from a distance, he continues to yearn, and it is this—his insistence on “looking,” his perpetual desire—I argue, that ultimately signals his new American identity, his immersion into the new urban consumer economy.

Through Levinsky then we encounter a more extreme version of Coverdale. Though he seems to idealize and yearn for a sentimental home, Levinsky ends up living a life
dominated by individualism, acquisition and isolation. His alienation, while recalling Miles Coverdale’s, seems to be more exaggerated because of his ethnicity, but also because of the growth and dominance of a consumer-oriented economy. Drawing on Stuart Ewen’s work on urban life and subjectivity, I argue that Levinsky becomes a “stranger to himself.” As Ewen writes, “the very terms of everyday experience required as part of the rules of survival and exchange a sense of self as alien, as an object of scrutiny and judgement” (Consum 72). In urban consumer culture, one sees oneself as a commodity, looks upon oneself as a stranger, and the physical dimensions of the modern city only reinforce this kind of awareness. “As the metropolis took on its modern dimensions,” Ewen observes, “it became a collection of glass and mirrored surfaces, unavoidable occasions for seeing oneself as a sight” (Channels 141). While Coverdale is fascinated with watching others, Levinsky more often than not is fascinated with watching himself. He exhibits far more self-scrutiny, suggesting a kind of shift in habits of spectatorship. This urban spectator begins to turn inward, to study and analyze his own performance. Part of this is no doubt due to Levinsky’s marginal status in American culture; he cannot have the confidence and security which ultimately defines the flaneur, yet it may also signal to other cultural shifts as well—the expansion of the consumer economy at the dawn of the twentieth century as well as the radical reshaping of the self compelled by the work of Freud. Indeed a self forever split and divided would be the hallmark of the emerging Modernist literature.

Yezierska is another pivotal writer whose work looks back and yet points ahead to Modernism. Not only is her protagonist dramatically divided against herself, Yezierska was a writer who struggled incessantly with form, and her efficient, imagistic, spare novel is more “modern” than the dense, detail-packed novels of Howells, Cahan or Dreiser. Yezierska, however, is still perhaps in better company with these earlier writers than with her contemporaries in the 1920s, for much of her contemporaries’ work was marked by far
more radical experimentation as well as a darker kind of alienation. Yezierska was still intent on documenting the texture of urban life, evoking the atmosphere of a particular family living at a particular time. Indeed the accuracy of her dialogue which brings to life the unique tone and phrases of the Yiddish speaker of English expands the project of realism in a most profound way.

Like the urban novels before her, Yezierksa’s work also highlights the attraction of the city’s theatrical public life, but this visual culture of style and glitter generates more conflict for Sara Smolinsky than it does for David Levinsky. Sara’s sister Mashah may aspire to look like the ladies in the magazines, but Sara is more profoundly shaped by a sense of frugality, a disciplined work ethic. The alienation she experiences in America is, in part, a result of her refusal to participate in a new consumer-oriented society which emphasizes accumulation, display and individual pleasure. While Levinsky participates in this new culture and feels “ever conscious in his modern garb,” Sara refuses to participate; she cannot even play the part. The self-fashioning required for successful Americanization is more problematic for an ambitious woman. “Serious” intellectual work and feminine identity are at odds in both the new American culture as well as the Eastern European Jewish culture. For Sara to achieve her intellectual goals then, she must disengage herself from the new consumer culture which encourages young women to only desire to be desired—to dress up, make up, and catch a man.

Sara’s alienation from her ethnic roots also seems more profound than Levinsky’s. Her “beautiful aloneness,” her wish for a “room of her own” stand in stark contrast to the old ways and mark her for an American in the eyes of more traditionally-minded Eastern European Jews. Her refusal to tear her new clothes at her mother’s funeral dramatizes this seemingly insurmountable gulf between Sara and her ethnic heritage. Still the past is
insistent, and despite all the anger and tears, and the resolve to escape the oppression of family ties, these ties cannot be discarded, even when a new identity has been successfully achieved. As in Dunbar, there is a sense of nowhere to go at the end of this novel; we must move back to the past—even though that past is oppressive.

Indeed Sara seems, in the end, less “American,” and less “modern” than Levinksy. While her movement away from contemporary American life is overshadowed with a sense of loss, her marriage to Seelig and her movement back to her father might also be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile the old and the new. The domestic ideal she ultimately decides to uphold is also not one devoted to individualism, privacy or material effects. Indeed Sara’s defeat may hold within it a kind of resistance to the white, middle-class consumer-oriented culture which had dominated most of the characters we find in Dreiser, Wharton, Dunbar and Cahan.

Speculations

The expanse of seventy-five years I have chosen to examine is shaped by overwhelming technological, industrial and cultural change, changes which both create the city and then perhaps lessen its power and importance. The period of years I have focused on seems governed by a key theme. Within this period one could argue, we have the rise of the idea of “The City.” The city’s moment of power, its compelling impact on the imagination of America’s white middle-class begins in the antebellum period, and ends perhaps in the 1920s. Hawthorne’s work not only marks the beginning of the middle class’s adjustment to and celebration of urban life, but also the technological and cultural changes which show the passing away of a “rural” ideal. In one scene in *Blithedale*, Coverdale describes the new “rich and varied series of exhibitions” which come to the Lyceum halls of every village (180). Here all the audience looks “rather suburban than rural”(182). “In these days,” Coverdale
declares, “there is absolutely no rusticity” (182). The literature in the decades which followed only reinforced Coverdale’s observation again and again.

Urban life transformed ideals of home and the sensibility of the nation. With its new spaces, the city transformed the eye and consciousness of the observer—the arcade, the department store, the El train, the grand hotel, the pastoral city park, the skyscraper, the theater. The fascination which these new spaces evoked—indeed the physical reality of the city itself—is something I believe characterizes the novel of this seventy-five-year period. Indeed this fascination manifests itself in not only the novels I have chosen here, but also the period’s culture movements and moments: The White City of the Chicago World’s Fair, The Settlement House Movement and the City Beautiful Movement. Frederick Jackson Turner’s pronouncement in 1893 that the frontier had closed dramatized for the nation, that, in effect, “the city” had spread throughout the continent, creating a new ‘American type.’ But in the wake of urbanization and development, native peoples as well as regional folk traditions would begin to disappear. The proliferation of regional writing at the end of the nineteenth century also attests to the city’s dominance of the nation’s imagination. Coverdale’s observation that “there is no rusticity anymore” is exactly what compels this other branch of realism. Writers like Jewett and Freeman, for example, would focus on capturing a rural past that was quickly disappearing or had already disappeared. And Native American writers like Zitkala Sa would also nostalgically point to a past long gone as they criticized America’s “civilizing machine.”

By the time we get to the 1920s, for the first time in the nation’s history, most of the population is urban rather than rural, and there is perhaps another dramatic shift in American culture: the technological and industrial changes that had earlier led to the dominance of the city begin to foreshadow its decline. By the time Yezierska is writing, I
wonder if we are moving from an "urban" to a "suburban" state of mind. Yezierska focuses on the centrality of the city in her work and the texture of city life, and in her powerful evocation of place, she seems more aligned with the turn-of-the-century realists, for many of her contemporaries were writing in a far different vein about urban life. Many of the urban novels of the 1920s and 30s—The Great Gatsby, Cane, Manhattan Transfer, and Miss Lonelyhearts, for example—are characterized by a sense of dispersal, fragmentation, a sense that not only was the American city no longer the center, but that the city itself had no center. 47 As Gatsby reminds us, the automobile had already begun to reshape urban spaces and urban literature, decentering and fragmenting urban lives and this would only intensify as the century continued. As the characters in Gatsby move restlessly between the city and the suburbs, between the valley of the ashes and the mansions of West Egg, we see the beginnings of a suburban no-man's land. And Dos Passos 's novel with its dissociated images, its "collage" style has neither a center nor a central character. Toomer's startling sketches of urban life in Cane—a work seen by many as inaugurating the Harlem Renaissance—are unreal and dream-like, irrational and absurd. Nathanael West, the son of Jewish immigrants, would create an even more fantastic and violent cityscape in his New York novel of 1933, Miss Lonelyhearts.

We often find in this period a city more shapeless, more amorphous, and more surreal. Part of this is due no doubt to Modernism's dominance of the literary and artistic scene and its emphasis on rendering an interior, psychological reality. The accurate recording of exterior, material details so important to the earlier realists, would nevertheless remain compelling for other novelists, African Americans and Jewish Americans in particular. The decade of the 1920s and 30s would also see the publication of works like Quicksand, Passing,

47 For a more recent reading of the 1920s and Modernism, see Ann Douglas's Terrible Honesty: Mongrel
Plum Bum, Home to Harlem, Call it Sleep, Jews without Money and, in the 1940s, The Street and Native Son. In a sense, even in the midst of the immigrant restrictions of 1924, the dominance of the “White City” began to give way to a proliferation of urban writing by racial and ethnic Others. The city perhaps becomes more of a “contested” site rather than an “overdetermined” site of mass consumerism or white middle-class culture. Certainly the writers of the Harlem Renaissance would look to the city as a source of creativity and solidarity. Writing from a very different position than that of Dunbar during the racial nadir or Webb during the antebellum years, African American writers begin in the 1920s to forge a new identity and a new literature for themselves. Perhaps as some scholars have suggested, the crisis of confidence experienced by Europeans and Americans allowed for this emergence of African American self-confidence. Many of the urban novels of this period focus on the tragic nature of “passing.” Their work shows us a conflicted yet vibrant city as well as the vitality of the rural South, the “folk”—the very culture the Hamiltons had mistakenly abandoned. Indeed the fact of race, difference, and cultural tradition is no longer denied, and that is something that Yezierska—even in the ambivalence of her novel’s ending—insists upon. What we see beginning in the 1920s then is a new kind of confluence as various streams remake and revisit the urban terrain, finding within it a sense of meaninglessness and loss as well as inspiration, and consolidation—a place to call home.


48 See Douglas’s Terrible Honesty for a recent look at the Harlem Renaissance. Douglas also notes how Jewish Americans and African Americans worked together in New York, especially in the fields of music and dance.


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.


