Dangerous Territory: Marriage and Mobility in the New York Novels of Stephen Crane and Edith Wharton

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I. Introduction

For a while, I watch the water, scouring the smooth horizon for dolphin fins. The soft grey waves undulate back and forth as tiny foam maws nip the taupe slicked sand. I want to stand up, walk to the water’s edge, and sink my toes in the surf, but I don’t. I am too comfortably reclined on my beach towel, and I have ten more minutes to bake my front side before I roll to my stomach and tan my back, calves, and shoulders. Looking down, I notice the sparkle of sand granules that have stuck to my oiled skin. I don’t bother to brush them off. My mom and dad are seated under a large navy umbrella, both reading crime thrillers. Whenever we vacation in Hilton Head, I have to bring my own books. Two years ago, when I was fifteen, I circulated my own selections in the family share of spring break titles: David Baldacci, John Grisham, Michael Connelly, Henry James. My mom read perhaps the first fifteen pages of James’s *Portrait of a Lady* before I was told that from that point forward, I was responsible for bringing my own books. I shrugged and agreed that her suggestion was probably for the best.

The air smells like the brine of the salt water dried in my hair, like Banana Boat dark bronzing oil, like escape. I have pushed Edith Wharton’s *Age of Innocence* to the corner of my beach towel—it is too hard to read while lying half-upright under the full glare of afternoon sun. Ten minutes until I can flip. Five minutes. Two. One. I peel my sticky skin from the terrycloth of my pink floral towel, adjust its corners, and push sand into the indentations previously formed by my elbows and rear. I set my phone timer for another forty-five minutes and lie back down, book in hand. There is a dried smear of lotion on the back cover of my paperback; I add another
greasy thumbprint to the ones already there. I settle into the wide quiet of the beach and begin reading:

Here was the truth, here was reality, here was the life that belonged to him; and he, who fancied himself so scornful of arbitrary restraints, had been afraid to break away from his desk because of what people might think of his stealing a holiday! (Age 88).

Newland Archer has stolen a holiday in St. Augustine and found the life he thinks he deserves. I have been granted a similar holiday with my parents in Hilton Head, South Carolina and have found a reality made of perfectly lazy afternoons and summer heat. Soon, I am lost in the graceful magic of Wharton’s tones, her characters’ conspicuous consumption of fine art, summerhouses, and high society gossip, her anthropological interest in the cultural artifacts of an era long passed, and the geography of a foreign world. I don’t quite cotton on to the underlying bitterness of the text, nor the sexual repression which colors the relationship between Newland Archer and his cousin-in-law, the Countess Ellen Olenska. Instead, I imagine fairytale townhouses with grand ballrooms, their horse drawn carriages waiting outside. I imagine what Old New York must have been like, how beautiful it must have been before modernity constructed cold gray skyscrapers and littered the city streets with garbage.

My interest in Wharton, the reason I had picked up Age of Innocence, had stemmed from a high school English class, albeit one that treated Wharton with little respect, and certainly no praise. In my sophomore year at a public South Carolina high school, Mrs. Wallace asked our English class to read Ethan Frome (even now, I cringe that the screwball novella of Wharton’s prolific writing career is the work circulated nationwide amongst high school literature classes).
Oddly, the day we talked about *Frome* was one of the only times Mrs. Wallace asked us to make a circle. We pulled our creaky desks into a misshapen oblong, books in hand. Mrs. Wallace asked our class if we thought the characters deserved their fates. Nobody knew what to say. Nobody liked Ethan Frome. Or Mattie. Or Zeena. No one else seemed to sympathize with Ethan’s unrealized desires, nor did they understand his attempted suicide. They bitched. They whined. They complained. Mrs. Wallace encouraged their dislike of the novel, asked us all to poke holes in the text, to have an opinion. Eventually, I spoke up in defense of Wharton. I pointed to the lovely albeit severe rendering of Starkfield’s winter and the incredibly human longing Ethan experiences for a woman who is not his wife. Mrs. Wallace did not acknowledge my comment, just nodded her head and moved on. I never liked her anyway.

But I did like Wharton. I bought *Age of Innocence*, then *House of Mirth*. I read the first over my senior year spring break, the second over several consecutive July weekends spent lounging by the pool before I went to college. I didn’t know much about Wharton. Or James, whose *Portrait of a Lady* I had read two summers prior. Even so, I knew I liked the writers’ emphasis on New York as a place from which all societal constraints and conditions sprung, the city a kind of microcosm of nineteenth century life in America. Although I often failed to understand the finer subtlety of James and Wharton’s prose, I knew enough to recognize the tensions of eroticism, power, and rebellion that swirled beneath the veneer of their novels, and I liked the “scandals and mysteries that had smoldered under the unruffled surface of New York society within the last fifty years” (*Age* 28). I liked the things half said by characters whose sense of propriety and social decorum seemed to parallel the various Cotillion instructions I had received growing up in Columbia, South Carolina, still touted by local folks as the city Sherman
burned. And I liked the distinctive style of their writing, words like *crepuscular*, *vicissitude*, *efflorescence*, and, most importantly, *Taste* with a capital *T*, “that far off divinity of whom ‘Form’ was the mere visible representative and vicegerent” (*Age* 10-11). Something in their writing resonated with my own growing knowledge of how to conduct my behavior in different social circles of varying class and taste. In Gilded Era New York, social waters had to be carefully navigated, their currents recognized, and the travelers’ moral compasses adjusted accordingly. This was a practice at which I was quickly becoming adept.

At Washington and Lee, a small, preppy liberal arts college in Lexington, Virginia, in which hierarchical social tiers are delineated by one’s Greek affiliation, I refined my ability to “harmonize [myself] with [my] surroundings” and to “adroitly manage” the inhabitants of my new environment (*Mirth* 201). As I began to recognize the “hand of inherited order” in my own life, my thoughts every now and again circled back to the James and Wharton novels I had read in high school (155). I filled my college schedule with English Literature classes, but, to my disappointment, Wharton never made her way onto any of my class syllabi. Neither did James. And so, when the opportunity to propose an honors thesis arose in the third year of my college education, I knew that I wanted to work with Edith Wharton, possibly comparing her to Henry James. Wharton would have turned 150 on January 24, 2012, just twenty-one days before my thesis proposal was due, and reminders of her world and its heiresses seemed to be all over campus. I thought it a perfect time to revisit *Age of Innocence* and *House of Mirth*, to again lose myself in fantasies of a bygone era.

It was in following my thesis advisor Professor Smout’s advice that I found James and Wharton’s antithetical counterpart in Stephen Crane’s *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*. Here was the
direct, unflinching American prose that I was familiar with, both a precursor to Hemingway’s hard-boiled sentences and a scathing bookend to Lily Bart’s heartbreakingly lovely fall from grace in *House of Mirth*. And yet, in Crane’s naturalistic, experimental novella, I saw a continuation of the themes I hoped to explore. Struggling to accept the consequences of her foolish decision to receive monetary support from a married man, Lily wails to her friend, social activist Gerty Farish, “There are bad girls in your slums. Tell me—do they ever pick themselves up? Ever forget, feel as they did before?” (*Mirth* 174). Crane’s Maggie is one such product of the slums, a pretty young girl like Lily, “not without a trace of her [Lily’s] finer sensibilities. She [Lily] pictured herself leading such a life ... a life in which achievement seemed as squalid as failure—and the vision made her shudder” (117). Helpless against the vulgarity and opportunism of the city’s false social values, both Lily and Maggie fall prey to their vulturous peers. Despite their wildly different circumstances and social class, Lily and Maggie’s lives follow the same tragic orbit: uncommonly gorgeous women, their delicacy of taste and moral sensibilities render Maggie and Lily unfit for survival in Manhattan—*Maggie* and *House of Mirth* conclude with their heroines’ deaths.

Reading *Maggie* and *House of Mirth* alongside one another, I began to draw comparisons between the plot devices and tropes utilized in the two novels. Cursory biographical research led me to realize that Crane and Wharton shared another thing in common: Henry James. It was James who, in a letter dated August 17, 1902, told Wharton, “*Do New York!*” (quoted in Gale 716). Upon the serialized publication of *House of Mirth*, James wrote to Wharton on February 8, 1905, to praise the novel for its “compact fulness, vivid picture and ‘sustained interest,’” and he
appreciated Wharton’s display of “artistic economy” instead of saturation (quoted in Gale 716). In Wharton’s style there are echoes of James’s writings, especially with respect to her ventriloquistic point of view, formal symmetry, and ironic, insightful treatment of high society. Although the differences in style and content in the works of Stephen Crane and Henry James are far more apparent than the similarities, according to Stanley Wertheim, both writers were “modernist in their concern with fiction as an art and as an impression of life ... and shifting psychological states” (Encyclopedia 179). Unlike the well-documented friendship of James and Wharton, “the contemporary record for the friendship between Crane and James is meager, and the sources for much of what was written about their personal and literary relationship ... are extremely unreliable” (178). What is obvious, however, is James’s professional admiration of Crane’s budding talent. Two days after Crane’s death, James sent his condolences to Crane’s wife, Cora, writing, “What a brutal, needless extinction—what an unmitigated, unredeemed catastrophe! I think of him with such a sense of possibilities and powers” (179). In some way, James is the river from which his literary proteges, Wharton and Crane, diverge, and both young authors thought highly of James’s genius.

Although Wharton and Crane shared a powerful mentor, I failed to find direct evidence that Crane had ever read Wharton or that Wharton had read Crane. To no avail, I searched countless indexes of correspondence for some mention of Maggie in Wharton’s letters or some review of Wharton’s writing in Crane’s exchanges with James. However, according to Judith Saunders, “that Wharton was familiar with Crane’s work is virtually indisputable” (“Borrowing” 1). An omnivorous reader, Wharton’s “familiarity with the writings of American contemporaries such as Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, Eugene O’Neill, Upton Sinclair, and F. Scott
Fitzgerald is well documented,” and “it is impossible to imagine her having overlooked the radically experimental, notorious Maggie—a book brought out in 1896 by D. Appleton and Company, who were for many years Wharton’s own publishers” (4). Furthermore, Maggie was favorably reviewed by “Hamlin Garland (in 1893) and by William Dean Howells (in 1896), giants in the landscape of American letters who reviewed Wharton’s own fiction and with whom she established increasingly friendly relations over the years” (4). Thus, it is hardly unfathomable that Howells, Garland, or James would have recommended Maggie to Wharton or that she might have been inspired by the novella to write House of Mirth, her own tale of a young woman’s misfortune and ruin by the hands of the people meant to support her.

Following James’s advice, I also decided to “do New York.” After my thesis proposal had been approved by the English Department, I applied for and received a grant from the Dean of the College’s office to spend my summer conducting independent research on Wharton, Crane, and, by extension, Henry James. In order to better entrench myself in the Old New York of the novels I intended to study, I spent a couple months in Virginia before I traveled to Manhattan for two and a half weeks. Upon arriving at my hostel on 340 Bowery Street, New York, New York, the first thing I noticed was the fire escape. Dusted powdery orange with rust, mottled light and dark like saffron pollen on skin, the stairs look almost decorative, a kind of fuzzy latticework set against what Lily Bart would call a decidedly “dingy” building. I wondered how they would hold up in the event of a fire. And then there was the front entrance, two slim blue doors, paint peeling to reveal the weather-soaked grey wood underneath, hinges bolted cockeyed into the infrastructure of the modern-day tenement house. Despite my better instincts, or, at least, my more delicate ones, I put down my cash only deposit, and headed to my room on the second
floor. White walls, white bedding, white closet, white towel. If I lay flat on the bed, arms
stretched above my head, I could touch both the front and back walls. I unpacked, a process that
consisted of stowing my suitcase under my bed and hanging my jacket on the single white wall
hook. Praying that the lock to my room actually worked, I set out to discover the New York
Crane and Wharton once knew.

First, I walked to Edith Wharton’s birthplace, 14 West 23rd Street, only to find her first
place of residence is now a Starbucks. A tiny red plaque fastened to the exterior facade is the
single indication that the building was ever home to the woman to whom I dedicated my summer
research endeavors. A strong twinge of disappointment caused my eyes to well with tears, and I
wondered how I was supposed to find Old New York in a sea of commercialized sameness. I
blinked, hard, embarrassed by my emotional response to such a silly thing as a Starbucks. After
all, I like Starbucks. And at least there’s a plaque. Optimistic, I meandered my way to the former
Trinity Chapel, now the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral of St. Sava, at 15 West 25th Street.
Wharton, a longstanding congregant at Trinity, was married here in 1885. A street vendor sells
vintage prints in front of the left gate; his tableau, combined with horizontal metal bars
supporting the construction above my head, seemed out of place next to the cathedral’s English
Gothic Revival architecture. I continued wandering until I ended up somewhere past 6th Avenue.
Perhaps Lily’s boarding room would have been somewhere in this district. As I moved through
the city, no one smiled at me or, heaven forbid, said hello. Instead, men and women passed
soundlessly, their footsteps and the rustle of their clothing drowned out by the noise of
automobiles and far off construction. Strangers occasionally brush shoulders on a crowded street,
but no one speaks. Giant garbage bags, punctured and pulled apart, spill onto the ashy street,
filmy and loose like deflated black lungs. This is not the New York I had imagined while
daydreaming on the beach years ago. I don’t think it’s Wharton’s New York either. I don’t even
think it’s Crane’s.

But, there’s a cute garden bar three blocks over and I haven’t eaten since noon and the
house red by the glass is (relatively) inexpensive. After I ordered, I read the first twenty pages of
Wharton’s “The Dilettante” on my iPhone. Watched the other restaurant patrons laugh, eat, talk,
scowl, smirk—life somehow more interesting than my black and white iBooks screen. I wanted
to interact with the others, but I was not quite sure how to make conversation with people who
supposedly prefer black to pastels, people who would rather be provocative and aloof than
vulnerable. Instead, I thought of home, of the syrupy humidity and glittery bleached cheerleaders
who always made me feel like the nerdy girl in a bad 80s film, the dime-a-dozen Family
Christian stores that sold twenty versions of the Bible and not one practical thing, and of the
open-hearted hospitality I left behind. Everything happens on the surface here. And isn’t it
fascinating?

In the next two weeks, I traipsed through the Lower East Side and the Village, followed
walking maps of Wharton and James’s New York, toured the Battery where Maggie drowned,
took the subway to Columbia University’s Rare Books and Manuscripts Library to read Stephen
Crane’s original manuscripts, and visited the Wharton exhibition at the New York Society
Library. I toured the Metropolitan Museum and the City of the New York Museum and the
Tenement Museum. I tried to day-trip to the Stephen Crane House in Asbury Park, New Jersey,
but the curator never emailed me back to schedule a private tour (the house is not regularly open
to the public), and the phone number had been disconnected. I drank no less than twenty
Starbucks grande soy lattes in that two weeks, and fell in love with New York again, just like I
did the summer before. In *Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer tells Ellen, “Each time you happen
to me all over again.” And each time I’m there, New York happens to me, my body another
roiling atom in “the huge kaleidoscope where all social atoms spun around on the same
plane” (212). I never understood Newland’s dislike of the New York landscape, its “uniform
hue” sneeringly compared to “a cold chocolate sauce” (71). After all, I like chocolate, regardless
of its temperature.

During my time in New York City, I flitted between the different, disparate worlds of
Edith Wharton and Stephen Crane. Ten blocks to the north of my hostel on Bowery Street, there
was the Washington Square Arch, the geographic point through which all of Wharton’s social
telescopes were focused. Ten blocks south, there was the East River and the site of Maggie’s
possible suicide. Wandering down and up and back downtown, I felt the same “something in the
air that carried one along, and a sense of vastness and variety, of the infinite possibilities of a
great city” that Verena Tarrant, one of the central characters in James’s *The Bostonians*, keenly
experienced. This magical atmosphere functioned for me as a kind of beacon, its hazy beam a
signpost leading to the heart of the material I had read and loved in the course of researching my
honors thesis. As I delved into the works of Crane of Wharton, I began to question how the same
305 square miles of Manhattan real estate could influence two writers whose style bears little
similarity but whose works trace the ability of women to navigate the treacherous social waters
of New York City. Indeed, the physical landscape of Manhattan seemed to bear a kind of
symbolic relation to women’s level of supposed freedom and independence from the Victorian,
patriarchal order of the late 1800s. Tracking the link between marriage and mobility, both social
and geographic, the question both Crane and Wharton seem to be asking is, Who has more mobility, the single girl or the married woman? Where can she go? What can she get away with, and what will she be condemned for?

In the nineteenth century, gender relations were rooted in social dogma that promoted separate spheres: the public, male sphere, and the domestic, female sphere. This project explores the redefinition of gender relations at the turn of the century, and whether or not a woman of the Gilded Age could truly succeed in the public, economic sphere. In the works I have studied, the city seems to erects economic and class-based barriers to entry that prevent their central female characters from fully reaching their potential as regular actors in the public sphere. In myriad, complicated ways, the geographic mobility of these characters connotes their social progress or regression. Ultimately, the geographic thresholds and boundaries set in place by Crane and Wharton both liberate and imprison their female characters in various ways; these women thus embody the endangered and dangerous role of women in the urban landscape of New York in a remarkably dynamic way.

This dynamism in large part stems from the way in which these female characters must negotiate the psychic and cultural shifts of their time. In the late 1800s, urban life in New York particularly challenged the existing patriarchal, Victorian system. Women were no longer confined to “see what was happening on the street” from the “impenetrable domesticity” of their homes’ upper windows, to sequester themselves away in a fortress of heavy drapes and stately furniture as does Lily’s aunt, the ancient Mrs. Peniston, in House of Mirth (Mirth 55). As historian Mary Ryan notes, “the city streets offered [women] new attractions, new freedoms and
a veil of anonymity under which to pursue them” (63). These new freedoms included the ability of women to seek work in the urban marketplace, to dine and shop in the city, and to walk its streets without male companionship. Post-Industrialization, Manhattan became “a marketplace circulating goods, services, and people in a dense physical environment,” and women soon became the city’s most conspicuous consumers (61). This increased visibility led to a palpable tension between what Nancy Von Rosk calls Old New York’s “Victorian past—with its more rigid formalities and hierarchies,” its clearly delineated public spaces for men and private spaces for women—and the “present atmosphere” of the age of automobiles, suburbs, and electronic technology (323).

Indeed, the “anxiety regarding women’s presence in public (as well as the anxiety regarding the increasingly heterogeneous mixture of urban life) would lead to [the creation of] a more ‘feminine’ public space” (Von Rosk 325). Department stores catered to female clientele, as hoteliers and restaurant owners began to open ladies’ dining rooms, ice cream parlors, and other designated “feminine spaces” (326). According to Ryan, this intermingling of the lady with the public market led to the assignation by male “city dwellers of the last century” of “distinct social groups and economic functions” to “distinctly separate territories” (61). Thus, these male inhabitants of New York City found it necessary “to devise methods of imposing order on the urban maelstrom,” they drew “exact and dualistic gender boundaries” (61). “Relations with women, clearly the ‘Other,’” Ryan argues, “provided male writers with metaphors that neatly encapsulated the central problem of urban social space: 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,”
and writers conceptualized a dualistic classification of womanhood, the “endangered” upperclass woman and her “dangerous,” often impoverished counterpart (74-75; 86). Kristina Brooks believes these men’s alarm concerning “dangerous” women stemmed from the distressing reality that “19 percent of urban wage-earning women lived alone in boarding houses or furnished rooms” (105). Thus, they saw this “female subculture” as a “sign of moral decay” and feared “women without the anchor of a family would starve or drift into prostitution” (Brooks 105). Thus, states Ryan, “whenever women did make forays into public space,” they were subject to “intense male scrutiny,” branded as “either endangered or dangerous, emblems of propriety and vulnerability, or object lessons in social differences and sexual danger” (Ryan 86).

Although their backgrounds are vastly different, both Edith Wharton and Stephen Crane’s female heroines suffer from a naiveté that renders them both endangered and dangerous. Nancy Van Rosk observes, “Lily is ‘endangered’ through much of the novel because she not only transverses the ‘dangerous’ spaces of the city bachelor apartments, working-class tenements, factory workrooms, boarding houses, the tableau stage—she also has no domestic space of her own” (325). Lily’s lack of domestic space makes her dangerous to other women; because she is not firmly anchored to a man, her attention to other women’s husbands is colored with a kind of sexual energy she does not intend to generate. Lily represents to the women around her a moral risk not presented by men in that she subconsciously “convert[s] public space into an erotic marketplace” (Ryan 73). Conversely, Crane’s Maggie latches onto a man in hopes that he will save her from the destitution of her current domestic space, a home in which her mother and brother are often drunk, belligerent, and violent. After Maggie leaves home and moves in with her supposed savior, Pete, he abandons her instead of proposing marriage. She then becomes a
“women without the anchor of a family” and “drift[s] into prostitution” in order to generate enough income to survive (Brooks 105). Much like Lily Bart, Maggie is unable to reconcile her gentle nature with the depravity of her new circumstances; and she too eventually commits suicide.

*Age of Innocence*’s May Welland and Ellen Olenska are perhaps the most successful at negotiating these new boundaries of any of the women represented in any of the four novels I have read. However, even Ellen, protected by her high society bloodline and a slew of family members bent on keeping her out of mischief, projects a dangerous sexuality to the women around her, especially her cousin, May. May and the others regard her as foreign and exotic; her scandalous divorce from Count Olenski leads her to drift into the same questionable moral territory suffered by the single Lily and deflowered Maggie. Conversely, May Welland, the seemingly pure foil to Ellen, Maggie and Lily’s dangerous beauty, is victorious by the novel’s end. May is happily married, well-kept by her husband’s and her own finances, and sheltered from the horrors of the rapidly changing world by her husband and children. She is the embodiment of the leisure-class woman, useless and expensive, yet perfect by the day’s societal standards—she leads the life Lily and Maggie alike seem to be seeking. And although it seems Wharton dislikes May, she devotes a significant portion of *Age of Innocence* to the woman separating her male protagonist from the intelligent, modern Ellen. Where Crane’s Maggie seems to end on the idea that New York is a city impossible for a woman to navigate, Wharton seems to espouse that the city is indeed navigable, if only the woman in question is able to turn her head from all her own desires. Thus, the trap. Is the single woman endangered or dangerous? Where does she go, and, more importantly, where does she belong in a society ruthlessly governed by its
patriarchal ideals? In the course of the next to chapters, I intend to explore these questions and chart the events of Maggie, Lily, May, and Ellen’s lives overtop a map of the dangerous territory which they must successfully traverse in order to realize their own desires and find happiness.
II. Social Class and the Geographic Descent of the Fallen Woman

in Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: Girl of the Streets* and Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth*

The topography of New York is beautifully, albeit rather sadly, illustrated in Edith Wharton’s 1905 novel *House of Mirth*. In *Mirth*, the city functions as a kind of a social and architectural heart that pulses with the pace of the plot. In charting the central characters’ movement through the Big Apple alongside the development of their respective personalities, the spatial dimension of the novel functions as an expression of Wharton’s supreme awareness of subtle distinctions in social class, as well as a kind of roadmap for the way Wharton believes a woman can or cannot navigate those delineations of space and social status.

Published twelve years prior, naturalist writer Stephen Crane’s *Maggie, Girl of the Streets*, does much the same thing, but with an aggressive edge that reflects both the no-frills nature of Crane’s style, as well as the greater destitution and hard-knock hopelessness of his characters. In *Maggie*, Manhattan acts as a kind of gothic monster-cum-matriarch that devours the city’s poor. The very houses in which the Bowery’s cast of characters inhabit is a “dark region” where “a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter” (5). From the opening pages, the city “adopts” its Bowery low-lifes from the tenements—a transferal of a kind of matriarchal power that is all the more “gruesome” for its lack of human interaction. Crane’s characters are born into the broken infrastructure of the city, only to be given up to an even crueler, more defiled geography.
Ultimately, both Wharton’s *House of Mirth* and Crane’s *Maggie: Girl of the Streets* build upon the existing geography of the city in order to embed its streets and landmarks with a social significance that comments upon the larger position a woman can hold in the public, economic sphere of the Gilded Era.

Growing up, Maggie’s “mud puddle” world is characterized by the abject poverty and senseless violence in which all of its denizens participate. This chaos and disorder is practically written into the city streets. Physically, the Lower East Side bears little in common with the regularity of the rest of the Manhattan grid, which run in straight lines heading north-south and east-west. Below East Houston Street, diagonal lines complicate the sameness of the city’s measured blocks. Farther down, between the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges, the city’s streets become a maze of short, knotted lanes with no apparent pattern. An 1873 colored map of Manhattan and the Bronx, published by the Interstate Map Company, effectively illustrates the entangled network of this urban region. According to modern critic Alan Trachtenberg, “by the end of the century, spatial barriers appeared threatening and intolerable, and in the rhetoric of reformers the idea of *mystery* was the veil that hid the sight of the lower orders and their quarters from the ‘public,’ the readers of newspapers and the payers of taxes for whom the slums were par excellence an ‘elsewhere’ shrouded in awe and fear” (140). Titles like New York Sun reporter Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, then, “confirmed the by-then conventional trope of a fragmented urban landscape” in which moral regions are incommunicable, the city “what Robert Park in the twentieth century described as a ‘mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate’” (140).
Indeed, in the first paragraph of Jacob Riis’s 1890 muckraking book, *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis calls attention to the way the city is physically bisected not only by the lack of constructed order in its lowermost avenues and streets, but also by the upper and lower classes of Manhattan society:

> It is ten years and over, now, since that line divided New York’s population evenly. To-day three-fourths of its people live in the tenements, and the nineteenth century drift of the population to the cities is sending ever-increasing multitudes to crowd them ... We know that there is no way out; that the “system” that was the evil offspring of public neglect and private greed has come to stay, a storm-centre forever of our civilization ... in the tenements, all the influences make for evil.

(76)

In the first line of the book’s introduction, Riis’s idea of a “dividing line” functions on two levels. First, the line geographically divides the city, for the tenement houses of the late 1800s were all located on the East Side of Manhattan. Second, the line socially divides the “three-fourths” of New York’s population who live in the tenements from those upper-class members of society who can afford housing in the kind of neighborhoods that Wharton describes in her high society novels, i.e. those above the Washington Square Arch, the geographic point through which all Wharton’s social telescopes focus. According to Riis, the “system” of tenement housing has not only been produced by the “public neglect and private greed” of wealthy New Yorkers, but he also suggests that the same wealthy New Yorkers have physically pushed these sordid structures downtown in order to keep the “multitudes” away from their own dwellings farther uptown. In order to sensationalize his writing, Riis “excavated place names like Mulberry Bend,
Bottle Alley, and Bandit’s Roost. These names joined the ‘Bowery’ as signals of forbidding and exotic territory” (Trachtenberg 143). What separates Crane’s intentions in Maggie from those of popular works like How the Other Half Lives, is Crane’s rejection of the “moral posture” of the reformer in favor of a real attempt “to convey physical landscapes equivalent to his perception of the subjective lives of his characters” (144).

Even so, Riis’s assertion that “all the influences” in the tenement neighborhoods “make for evil” certainly rings true in Maggie. In the opening chapter of the novel, Maggie’s older brother, Jimmie, fights against the neighborhood boys for the “honor of Rum Alley;” his coat “torn to shreds in a scuffle,” he had “bruises on twenty parts of his body, and blood was dripping from a cut in his head. His wan features wore the look of a tiny, insane demon” (Crane 3). On the other boys’ “small, convulsed faces there shone the grins of true assassins,” as they howled with “renewed wrath” in “barbaric trebles” (3). This melodramatic language—“insane demon,” “true assassins,” “wrath,” “barbaric trebles”—creates a sense of the nightmare reality in which Jimmie and Maggie exist. Although Crane’s depiction of the scene is sensationalistic and perhaps overwrought, the boys’ vividly rendered dialogue and seemingly genuine bloodlust imbue the scene with a horrific kind of underlying truth: the children are so deeply entrenched in the misery of their circumstances that they fail to even recognize their misery. The boys fight for the “honor of Rum Alley;” however, given the violence and destruction that alcohol, specifically, rum, frequently occasions in the novella, there can obviously be no honor in such a place.

It is in this “mud puddle” world that Maggie mysteriously blossoms and grows “to be a most rare and wonderful production of the tenement district, a pretty girl” (16). Maggie is hardly reared by her mother, nor does Manhattan offer her any maternal compassion. However, the city
claims her beauty as “a wonderful production of the tenement district,” as though the district in which she lives is both genetically and paternally responsible for her pretty—and by association, innocent—appearance. Even as a child, she seems to stand apart from her vicious, violent older brother. When Jimmie comes home from fighting, Maggie’s “reproachful cries” that Jimmie ought not to fight out of respect for their mother’s temper reverberate with a kind of Victorian respect for the domestic ideology of the late 1800s, an ideology which endorsed the idea that a woman’s place, especially a wife and mother’s place, was to maintain the order and happiness of the private sphere, i.e. the home. As historian Mary Ryan’s *Women in Public* illustrates, the urbanization of city life created a perceived domestic necessity for families to draw “exact and dualistic gender boundaries” in which women stayed home away from the potentials dangers of urban city life (74). Although Maggie seems to uphold this notion and does indeed stay home, she has no means of sheltering herself from the horrors of urban living, nor does the central male figure in her life, her older brother, protect her from the violence of her circumstances.

Instead, Jimmie rebukes the girl for her lamentations concerning his behavior: “‘Ah, what de hell!’ cried Jimmie. ‘Shut up er I’ll smack yer mout’. See?” (Crane 7). When Jimmie carries out his threat and strikes Maggie; she reels before “recovering herself, burst into tears and quaveringly cursed him” (7). In this instance, Maggie is not only defenseless against her brother’s superior physical strength, but also of too delicate a constitution to verbally retaliate effectively against the young man. Her attempts to match her brother’s verbal vulgarity are feeble and “quaver;” Crane’s word choice subtly suggests that Maggie was never meant for the environment in which she is forced to mature. Her very existence is rendered pathetic when the young Maggie attempts to inject a modicum of beauty in her grimy life:
The babe, Tommie [Maggie and Jimmie’s infant brother], died. He went away in a white, insignificant coffin, his small waxen hand clutching a flower that the girl, Maggie, had stolen from an Italian.

She and Jimmie lived. (13)

Although every education of proper behavior has been denied Maggie (especially by her hard-nosed mother, a woman for whom no standard of decorum or proper etiquette can possibly exist), she exhibits a natural inclination toward the aesthetically pleasing. To some extent, her criminal behavior, stealing from the Italian, is justified in her desire to adorn her younger brother’s body with some small token of Victorian custom, a small wish for the beautiful to mark his death. Crane seems to imply that the forces of nature that act upon Maggie, even as a young girl, are so miserable and destructive that death would be more desirable for the children than its alternative, i.e. to go on living. Thus, Maggie is a victim of her environment.

As Maggie matures, “the philosophizers upstairs, downstairs, and on the same floor” puzzle over her beauty, for, “none of the dirt of Rum Alley seemed to be in her veins (16). When Jimmie notices the attention, especially the male attention, that Maggie’s blossoming beauty is beginning to attract, he leaves her with two options: “‘Mag, I’ll tell yeh dis! See? Yeh’ve edder got teh go teh hell or go teh work!’ Whereupon she went to work, having the feminine aversion of going to hell” (16). In Crane’s 1896 revision of Maggie, this quotation becomes even more explicit, and Jimmie tells Maggie that she “‘edder got teh go on d’ toif or go teh work’” (16). To “go to hell” or “go on the turf” are both euphemisms for walking the street as a prostitute, a fate the Victorian Maggie naturally shudders from. However, a poor young woman without independent means, Maggie must earn a living. She by chance receives a position in a factory
which makes collars and cuffs, but she vaguely longs for escape from the misery of her dismal life and work.

This escape manifests itself in Maggie’s vision of Pete the bartender, a friend of Jimmie’s who occasionally stops by the Johnson household. As Maggie observes the stranger from the shadows, “her eyes [dwell] wonderingly and rather wistfully upon Pete’s face” (18). Maggie thinks Pete “very elegant and graceful,” and she worries that his “aristocratic person” might soil in the filth of the Johnson apartment (18-19). Certainly, Pete bears a stark contrast to her ruddy-faced, street-wise older brother who looks at home amongst the “broken furniture, grimy and general dirt and disorder of her home” (18). As Maggie watches the two men converse, she “perceives that here was the beau ideal of a man. Her dim thoughts were often searching for far away lands where, as God says, the little hills sing together in the morning. Under the trees of her dream-gardens there had always walked a lover” (19). Maggie’s version of Eden includes a savior-cum-lover who can rescue her from the “dirt and disorder” of her squalid life. Pete too, takes note of Maggie. He grins affably at her, “‘Say Mag, I’m stuck on your shape. It’s outa sight’” (19). While Pete is aroused only by the curves of Maggie’s figure, she marvels at him in return, trying “to calculate the altitude of the pinnacle from which he looked down on her” (19). Standing next to Pete, Maggie assumes her own inferiority, and she reevaluates the “dark, dust-stained walls” and crude furniture of her home. In the wake of Pete’s departure, the broken clock becomes “an abomination,” the flowers in the carpet pattern “newly hideous,” and her own faint attempts to freshen the dingy curtains with ribbon a “piteous” effort (20). She even reflects upon her job at the collar and cuff factory, which begins to “appear to her mind as a dreary place of endless grinding” (20). At the plays Pete takes Maggie to later in the novella, Maggie wonders if
“the culture and refinement she had seen imitated, perhaps grotesquely, by the heroine on the stage, could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirt factory” (28).

Maggie fantasizes that Pete “must live in an eternal blare of pleasure. He had friends, and people who were afraid of him” (21). Maggie has neither. Unlike her brother Jimmie, Maggie never once appears in the streets of Rum Alley with other girls her age. “Anxious for a friend to whom she could talk about ... [Pete’s] admirable mannerisms,” Maggie has no female companion to whom she can turn for guidance, no one to warn her against the false glitter of the “golden sun” that Pete appears to be. A meaningful relationship with her mother or brother are also impossible. When Maggie tries to gain a foothold in the family dynamic, she is told she had better shut up or get smacked in the mouth. Thus, her desire for something better manifests itself in the life she imagines Pete must lead. Pete offers to take Maggie “‘teh deh show’” on Friday. Her mother destroys the house in a drunken rage on Friday afternoon. When Pete arrives, Maggie greets him “in the midst of a floor strewn with wreckage. The curtain at the window had been pulled by a heavy hand and hung by one tack ... the knots of blue ribbon appeared like violated flowers. The fire in the stove had gone out. The displaced lids and open doors showed heaps of sullen grey ashes” (21).

The one speck of beauty Maggie had once hoped to inject in her miserable living space now appears like “violated flowers,” strongly suggesting that Maggie’s own violation by Pete is impending. According to Katherine Simoneaux, the displaced stove lids “find correspondence in Maggie who is later displaced by society and whose escape, her ‘open doors,’ with Pete from her unhappiness turns to despair, ‘sullen gray ashes’” (224).
Pete takes her first to a “great green-hued hall,” a relatively staid and elegant place with a full orchestra where patrons might accompany “their wives and two or three children” to listen to the music being played. In such a beautiful place, Maggie’s heart warms at the condescension she feels Pete has bestowed upon her: “Maggie perceived that Pete brought forth all his elegance and all his knowledge of high class customs for her benefit” (23). She draws “deep breaths of pleasure” as the orchestra plays, and her eyes glisten with excitement, fixated on the stage before her (24). Pete, however, pays little attention to the spectacle: “He was drinking beer and watching Maggie” (24). Pete’s cold calculation of Maggie’s enjoyment of the date he has arranged leads him to feel entitled to demands upon her physical person, and he propositions her in front of her “gruesome doorway,” asking for “‘a kiss for takin’ yeh teh deh show’” (24). Confused and startled, Maggie laughs and draws back, to which Pete urges, “‘Ah, what deh hell?’” (25). Here, Maggie is endangered by Pete’s advances, and she retreats nervously before darting into the hall and up the stairs. Maggie’s fear of Pete’s physical advancements contrasts with her pleasure in receiving his attentions at the great hall. Ergo, Maggie’s first date with Pete is the first of her mistakes. In accepting hiscompanionship and supposed good turn, Maggie does not realize that she is expected to reciprocate the favor of Pete’s attention with the favor of her physical affections.

According to Stanley Wertheim, as Pete’s intentions with Maggie become increasingly clear, the “drinking establishments that Pete and Maggie frequent decline as their relationship deteriorates” (“Topography” 6). Instead of the Bowery’s respectable up-town theaters, which give to “the Bowery public the phantasies of the aristocratic theatre-going public, at reduced rates,” Maggie and Pete go to entertainments venues that better resemble the seedy “concert
saloons of the Tenderloin, the blocks between 23rd and 57th Streets and between Sixth and Tenth Avenues,” than they resemble the beer halls of the Bowery (Crane 23, “Topography” 6). The saloons of the Tenderloin, an area “called Satan’s Circus by some of the clerical reformers of the day,” flourished amidst “a profusion and variety of enterprises devoted to the sex trade (6).

Crane, who in 1896 was “a resident of, and an investigator in, the Tenderloin” conflates the Tenderloin with the Bowery in order to lend the setting of Maggie and Pete’s exchanges a gritty authenticity, if not a perfect geographic reality (6). It is fitting that, in Crane’s revision of New York’s actual geography, Maggie travels downtown, not uptown, with Pete. In Maggie, the “open mouth” of the saloons in the Tenderloin and Bowery “call[s] seductively to passengers to enter and annihilate sorrow or create rage,” blatantly sexualizing the escape such venues are meant to afford (Crane 33). Thus, Maggie’s descent into less respectable entertainment establishments is the next false step in her disastrous relationship with Pete.

Maggie’s outings with Pete enrage her drunken mother, who glowers, “‘Yeh’ve gone teh deh devil, Mag Johnson ... Go teh hell wid him, damn yeh, an’ a good riddance. Go teh hell an’ see how yeh likes it’” (31). Mrs. Johnson kicks her daughter out of the house as Pete approaches the apartment’s front door. With no friends and no one else to turn to, Maggie falls directly into Pete’s waiting arms, and the ruin of her innocence is complete. After her mother’s disownment and her move to Pete’s home, Maggie’s physical appearance in “a hall of irregular shape” betrays the turmoil of her inner emotions:

Maggie was pale. From her eyes had been plucked all look of self-reliance. She leaned with a dependent air toward her companion. She was timid, as if fearing his anger or displeasure. She seemed to beseech tenderness of him ... At times
Maggie told Pete long confidential tales of her former home life, dwelling upon the escapades of the other members of the family and the difficulties she had to combat in order to obtain a degree of comfort. He responded in tones of philanthropy. He pressed her arm with an air of reassuring proprietorship. (38)

Pete presses Maggie’s arm with “an air of reassuring proprietorship,” sealing her fate not as a sentient human being but as a commodity to be traded at the will of its owner. Although Pete seems to feel some degree of compassion for her former home life, he does so in order to better claim full possession of her person. Indeed, Maggie’s body language signals her total dependence on Pete to provide for her. Although she does not “feel like a bad woman,” for, “to her knowledge she had never seen any better,” Maggie lifeless eyes and increased timidity of character indicate that the consequences of her “ruin” (namely, her total dependence on a man given to inconsistent affections toward herself) have already begun to fatigue her beaten spirit (39).

Even so, under the spell of the music at the saloon, Maggie’s thoughts turn to “her former Rum Alley environment,” and she begins to dream, imagining a “future, rose-tinted, because of its distance from all that she had previously experienced” (39). Of the roughly one hundred color words used throughout the novel, Katherine Simoneaux notes that “rose” appears “only once ... the color rose connotes happiness” (225). However, happiness is unattainable for Maggie, and there is “no future” for her; “the rose-tinted dream contrasts sharply with her present drab life” and “exists only in Maggie’s mind” (225). As the weeks pass, “the air of spaniel-like dependence” around Maggie magnifies and shows its “direct effect in the peculiar off-handedness and ease of Pete’s ways toward her” (43). The more dependent Maggie becomes on
Pete’s goodwill, the less interested he becomes in her. At another saloon, Pete begins to animatedly converse with a painted woman named Nell, leaving Maggie alone with a “mere boy” who mistakes her for a prostitute (45). Faced with the choice between the wide-eyed, simple Maggie and the experienced Nell, Pete leaves Maggie and completes her ruination.

Unsure of what to do, Maggie returns home, only to be scorned by her mother and the crowd that gathers to hear Mrs. Johnson’s jeers. She is again denied entrance to her home, leaving her to return to Pete. Meeting him where he works, Pete shuns her, yelling, “‘An’ now I’m done! See? I’m done,’” to which Maggie weakly replies, “‘But where kin I go?’” (50). Exasperated by Maggie’s “direct attempt to give him some responsibility in a matter that did not concern him,” Pete cries, “‘Oh, go teh hell!’” (50). It is unclear whether Pete means to tell Maggie to “go teh hell” in the figurative sense, or if his angry advice for the young woman is to become a prostitute now that her virgin innocence is gone. What is clear is Pete’s refusal to implicate himself in Maggie’s ruin, as do Maggie’s brother and mother. No one wants to take responsibility for Maggie’s “knowledge that she had never seen any better” woman than herself, that no example of what constitutes a “good” woman had ever been available for her to follow (39). Rejected by her family and lover, Maggie wanders the streets alone, but soon discovers “that if she walked with such apparent aimlessness, some men looked at her with calculating eyes. She quickened her step, frightened. As a protection, she adopted a demeanor of intentness as if going somewhere” (51). Maggie’s reaction to the “calculating eyes” of the men around her betrays her unsuitableness for the sordid profession to which she eventually succumbs. Unlike Nell, who exhibits no signs of shame or remorse when men look at her, Maggie’s first instinct is to increase her pace and attempt to protect herself from the predators who would solicit her
attention. As Laura Hapke notes, Nell “can fleece a customer and exit laughing. She survives, distrusting men and earning a good living from them” (54). Maggie’s fault is that she implicitly trusts Pete with dog-like faithfulness, and he fails her utterly. Several months after Maggie is rejected by Pete, it appears she is incapable of reconciling herself to the same means of survival that comes to Nell so easily.

In the penultimate chapter of the novella, “a girl,” presumably Maggie, “of the painted cohorts of the city went along the street. She threw changing glances at men who passed her, giving smiling invitations to men of rural or untaught pattern and usually seeming sedately unconscious of the men with a metropolitan seal upon their faces” (Crane 52). Her dreams of the “the beau ideal of a man” sufficiently dashed, Maggie cares not what type of man she attracts, only that she attract a man willing to pay for her services (19). Unsuccessful in this endeavor, she continues to cross “glittering avenues” that pierce farther and father into the bowels of the Lower East Side (52). Even now, months adjusted to her new profession, Maggie hurries “forward through the crowd as if intent upon reaching a distant home,” recalling her frightened, “quickened step” after she leaves Pete for the last time (52, 51). Although Maggie hurries onward, she has in actuality no “distant home” where she can hurry. A woman of the streets, it is unclear where she might sleep, if not with a paying customer. Her isolation in a dark world from which society turns its head is evident as she traverses “darker blocks than those where the crowd travelled ... The girl went into gloomy districts near the river, where the tall black factories shut in the street and only occasional broad beams of light fell across the pavements from saloons” (52). As the avenues falsely glitter against the darkness of night, “the black factories shut in the street.” According to Simoneaux, this image is a prophetic one—the factories “shut in
the street” as the “events of Maggie’s past ‘shut’ her in the hopeless environment and ‘shut’ out of a future” (225).

As she descends the final block toward the East River, the blackness of her newfound environment consumes her:

She went into the blackness of the final block. The shutters of the tall buildings were closed like grim lips. The structures seemed to have eyes that looked over them, beyond them, at other things. Afar off the lights of the avenues glittered as if from an impossible distance ... At the feet of the tall buildings appeared the deathly black hue of the river. Some hidden factory sent up a yellow glare, that lit for a moment the waters lapping oilily against timbers. The varied sounds of life, made joyous by distance and seeming unapproachableness, came faintly and died away to a silence. (52)

The city comes alive, its “eyes” seemingly looking past Maggie as though she is invisible in the darkness. The shutters are closed “like grim lips,” and their closure seems symbolic of the unsympathetic judgement the Bowery’s women pass on Maggie’s doomed fate. The shutters are all closed, a none too subtle reminder that any and all domestic space is forbidden to the ruined Maggie. Darkness overwhelms the space she descends, the glittering light of the avenues she has passed now an “impossible distance” away. The “varied sounds of life” are unapproachable now, and death is Maggie’s only option. Whether Maggie is pushed into the East River by the dark figure looming nearby or commits suicide has been contested by critics (see Robert Dowling and Donald Pizer’s excellent article, “A Cold Case File Reopened: Was Crane’s Maggie Murdered or a Suicide?” for more on this subject), is inconsequential. Either way, the girl is dead, and her
sordid life has finally ended. Sacrificed to the harsh societal structures of the Bowery, structures which forgive Maggie’s perpetually drunk mother but condemn her to ruin, Maggie is ultimately unable to approximate “the culture and refinement she had seen imitated, perhaps grotesquely, by the heroine[s]” of the performances to which Pete brings her at the start of her romance (28). She blossoms in a “mud-puddle world,” only to have the “rose-tinted” flower of her youthful dreams for the future sullied and broken and trampled back into circumstances even worse than “all that she had previously experienced” (39). As an audience, we immediately sympathize with Maggie, one of the many beleaguered tenants of Rum Alley, because she alone possesses a propensity toward better things, even if her aspirations never come to fruition. Unable to find her way, the endangered Maggie travels too far into the heart of New York’s dangerous territory and becomes part of its desperate landscape. By the novel’s end, Maggie is a dangerous woman who, when all is said and done, goes nowhere.

Maggie’s “rose-tinted dream” of an existence, however crude, bears resemblance to Lily Bart’s preoccupation with beauty and aesthetic good taste. However, Lily’s ultimate desire to achieve a marriage of love, not economic support, renders her incapable of ever finding happiness within the fashionable sphere where she moves. When Lily tells Laurence Selden that if she “could do over [her] aunt’s drawing-room” that she should “be a better woman,” she characterizes herself as a woman whose own happiness is bound to the aesthetic loveliness of the private, of home and hearth. In fact, Maggie’s low-brow wishes mimic the desires of the high-born Lily. What the two women seem to have in common is a separateness from their peers, denoted not only by their physical beauty but also by their moral sensibilities and delicacies of
tastes. Maggie and Lily’s frailty renders them unable to survive in the world. Both women are helpless to protect themselves from the vulgarity and greed that characterizes their interactions with the men who are intended to save them from their dire circumstances. Ultimately, both novels depict women who cannot find their place in the dangerous territory in which they live.

Much like Maggie, Lily appears distinctly different from the women around her, despite their similar high-society upbringings. When Laurence Selden observes Lily as he leads her away from Grand Central Station and through the throng of “returning holiday-makers” that make up New York society, he remarks to himself that “the dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly specialized she was ... Everything about her was at once vigorous and exquisite, at once strong and fine” (3). Selden’s observation that Lily is not only “exquisite” but also “strong” and “vigorous” differentiates the two women in at least giving Lily the appearance of a kind of force of spirit that Maggie lacks. Maggie, fearful of her mother’s viciousness when the older woman falls into a drunken rage, is portrayed as a “small pursued tigress;” throughout the novel, Maggie is unable to assert herself in the way that Lily so often seems capable of doing (Crane 9). While Maggie vaguely begins to understand the power of her beauty and “to see the bloom in her cheeks as valuable,” she is unable to use her beauty to her own advantage (Crane 25). Lily, though, is fully aware of the exquisiteness of her features, and often feels she may use “her beauty, her power, and her general fitness to attract a brilliant destiny” (Mirth 91). However, even Lily’s strong-willed, carefully studied manners and striking loveliness are not enough to save her from the infamy and subsequent ruin of rumored affairs with Gus Trenor and George Dorset, and she descends the geographic and social strata of New York until her position in life nearly meets the place where Maggie’s descent begins.
Wharton sets the majority of *House of Mirth*’s New York City scenes along or near Fifth Avenue and Madison Avenue, generally north of Grand Central Station. This concentration of uptown scenes indicates the wealth of Lily’s compatriots. Book I begins, “Selden paused in surprise. In the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station his eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart” (1). Selden’s surprise stems from Lily’s seeming disregard for fashionable custom. In the heat of the summer, Lily’s “desultory air” is perplexing to Selden, for he cannot imagine why Lily seems to have paused in the “act of transition between one and another country houses which disputed her presence after the close of the Newport season” (1). Wharton’s choice of Grand Central Station as the starting point of Lily’s introduction is significant: Lily’s aimlessness in a sea of wandering, bustling people sets her apart from the crowd at the train station. Her existence in a transient space, that of travelers constantly coming and going, symbolizes the potential for mobility in her own life, the chance to either take the train to higher or lower social ground. In this instance, finding herself equal to her surroundings, Lily has no need to fear the “calculating eyes” that follow her figure, nor does she adopt “a demeanor of intentness” to protect herself from the stares of surrounding passerby (Crane 51). Instead, Lily stands apart from the masses. In a world of elite New Yorkers who constantly scrutinize the tiniest details of one another’s manners and appearance to make character judgements, even Lily’s most inconsequential actions, such as standing alone at the train station, seem “the result of far reaching intentions” (*Mirth* 1). Where Maggie elicits the kind of stock sympathy Donald Gibson believes we could have for “any helpless person or animal overwhelmed by devastating forces,” particularly a simple and innocent idea of a girl “at the mercy of predatory beasts,” Lily elicits a nuanced, visceral response from readers who feel both
the emotional pull of Lily’s thwarted fairytale and the reality of her many foolishly missed opportunities.

At twenty-nine years of age, opportunities to achieve Lily’s two main intentions, to marry and to become wealthy, are quickly slipping away from her grasp. Although her social and family connections keep her name circulating through the society papers, Lily does not possess the fortune of her affluent friends. Her parents, long dead, left her entirely without money, and the monthly allowance of her aunt, Mrs. Peniston, is insufficient to cover both Lily’s gambling debts and the expenses necessary to create the illusion of wealth. In order to secure her place in society and protect herself from the descent into what her mother referred to as “dinginess,” Lily sees the increasing necessity of seducing a man to the altar. Although she comes to realize that she loves Laurence Selden, both she and Selden understand that his station in life would render him an unsuitable match for Lily, a woman “whose whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only air she could breathe in” (23). Even so, the thought of Selden often incapacitates her to make a financially suitable yet loveless match to Percy Gryce or Simon Rosedale (or even George Dorset, after his marriage to Bertha dissolves).

In the opinion of Mrs. Fisher, a fringe member of Lily’s upperclass circle, the reason Lily can never seem to reconcile the necessity of marriage to a rich man with her expensive tastes is because, “‘at heart, she despises the things she’s trying for. And it’s the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study’” (198). Ultimately, Lily’s indecision, coupled with her romantic frailty and “fatalistic sense of being drawn from one wrong turning to another without ever perceiving the right road till it was too late to take it” renders her ill-fit to navigate the complex inroads of the world which she inhabits (134).
At Gus and Judy Trenor’s house, Lily sees the solution to her monetary woes in the form of Gus Trenor, whom she asks to invest a small sum of money on her behalf. Anxious to impress Lily, Trenor readily assents to her request. Although Lily understands nothing of the stock market, she is comforted by her naive understanding that “her modest investments were to be mysteriously multiplied without risk to herself; and the assurance that this miracle would take place in a short time ... relieved her” (82). When Lily’s Wall Street investments turn a profit, she spends the money lavishly and without forethought. Later, to Lily’s dismay, Trenor lures Lily to his townhouse on the premise that his wife is in town and desires Lily to pay a visit to the house. There, Trenor attempts to proposition Lily, owning that he has not been investing her money but has gifted her a sum of his own profits. Much like the scene following Maggie and Pete’s first date, after which Pete demands a kiss from Maggie for his expense and trouble, and she nervously turns away from his demands, Lily is expected to pay Trenor back with her body, or, at least, the pleasure of her company. According to Joan Lidoff, Trenor’s “attempt to use his financial and physical power to coerce her [Lily] to sexual relations makes explicit the real social connections between money, power, and sex that Lily has purposefully kept from her awareness” (248). When Trenor attempts to touch her, Lily instinctively draws back “with a desperate assumption of scorn” (Mirth 154). This reaction prompts Trenor’s face to “darken to rage; her recoil of abhorrence had called out the primitive man” (154). Alone in the presence of a volatile man, Lily’s confusions in regards to both Trenor’s sexual expectations and the real nature of her financial transaction with him endanger her physically. And yet, despite the truth of the situation, whispers begin to circulate amongst Lily’s friends, particularly the wealthy females who dominate her social sect, that Lily and Trenor have already consummated an affair; thus,
Lily becomes a dangerous single woman. Although the rumors are quickly shoved under the rug, Ned Van Alstyne remarks in regards to Lily’s increasingly scandalous reputation, “‘When a girl’s as good-looking as that she’d better marry; then no questions are asked. In our imperfectly organized society there is no provision as yet for the young woman who claims the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations’” (166).

Her reputation tarnished, Lily desires distance from New York so that her circle might forget the quiet rumors of her indiscretion. She quickly agrees to Bertha Dorset’s request that Lily accompany Bertha Dorset, her husband, George, and the young Ned Silverton on a vacation to the Mediterranean. Once abroad, Lily realizes Bertha’s intended purpose in inviting her along the *Sabrina* is to distract George from Bertha and Silverton’s affair. When Lily begins to ascend the social ladder abroad, frequently lunching with the Duchess and other vacationing royalty, Bertha’s jealousy spurs her to publicly dismiss Lily. Bertha then starts a vicious rumor that Lily and George have engaged in an affair in order to cover up her own adulterous relations with Ned Silverton; this rumor leads to Lily’s expulsion from society, disinheritance by her aunt, Mrs. Peniston, and her descent from the lavishness of Madison Avenue to the impoverished streets lining Sixth Avenue.

Lily is ruthlessly cast out by her “old set.” Although Lily is universally better liked than the pinched and shrill Bertha, Bertha has something to offer her friends that Lily does not: money and social clout. When Lily returns to New York in order to pay respects to the recently deceased Mrs. Peniston, she discovers that her aunt had rewritten the family will three weeks prior. Disgusted by news from Europe of Lily’s supposed affair with George Dorset, Mrs. Peniston leaves her property to Lily’s cousin, Grace Stepney, instead of herself, Mrs. Peniston’s legal heir.
Lily’s own family shuns her, and she has nowhere to go. On the brink of destitution, Lily is endangered, but her ambiguous social status has rendered her dangerous to the “old set” who wish to avoid association with her fallen reputation. According to Nancy Von Rosk, Lily is “caught in the dualism used by the nineteenth-century urban cartographer ... The city becomes not a space of liberation but a testing ground for character. It is a harsh and unforgiving space, characterized by the ‘penetrating dampness which struck up from the wet asphalt’ and ‘the shriek of the elevated’” (345). Lily attempts to regroup and takes up jobs as a social secretary and a milliner; however, the city streets are hostile and she fails at both endeavors. A highly specialized product of the environment in which she was raised, Lily has no useful trade, and she suffers as “an organism helpless out of its narrow range as a sea anemone torn from the rock” (Mirth 319).

Perceived as wholly dangerous to the women around her—a budding friendship with Mattie Gormer, an aspiring socialite, is terminated by Mattie’s increasingly intimate friendship with Bertha Dorset—Lily is both ruined and homeless, reduced to renting a cheap boardinghouse room far west of fashionable New York. Returning to the “solitude of a hall bedroom in a house where she could come and go unremarked,” Lily realizes the full horror of her circumstances:

For a while she had been sustained by this desire for privacy and independence; but now, perhaps from increasing physical weariness, the lassitude brought about by hours of unwonted confinement, she was beginning to feel acutely the ugliness and discomfort of her surroundings. The day’s task done, she dreaded to return to her narrow room, with its blotched wallpaper and shabby paint; and she hated every step of the walk thither, through the degradation of a New York street in the
last stages of decline from fashion to commerce. But what she dreaded most of all
was having to pass the chemist's at the corner of Sixth Avenue. (304)

The ugliness of Lily’s surroundings contrasts sharply with the luxury to which she has been
accustomed, and she finds herself unable to adapt to her reduced situation. She hates every step
of the walk to the shabby room because every step distances her a little farther away from the
world which she believes she was always meant to rule, and her new life finds her traversing
spaces she once avoided. Her geographic descent from the Upper West Side to the poverty-
stricken neighborhood where she boards offends her delicate sensibilities. At the start of the
novel, she exclaims to Laurence Selden, “How delicious to have a place like this [Selden’s
comfortable albeit shabby apartment on 50th Street] all to one’s self! What a miserable thing it is
to be a woman” (5). This exclamation becomes all the more poignant in light of her confinement
in “a narrow room” entirely unequal to accommodating Lily’s desire for freedom from the
societal shackles which effectively disable her from ever regaining her position in society. Lily’s
death frees her from the nightmares and anxieties which plague her sleep, but her death also cuts
her off from any hope of again climbing the social ladder. Had she lived a day longer, Selden
would have proposed marriage, and her luck might have finally changed.

Both Maggie and Lily ultimately suffer from and act out what Lidoff terms a “cultural
dilemma: when society provides no female adult role of active responsibility and initiative,
women are confined to passive and childlike states” from which they cannot escape (254). Just as
Maggie yearns for a friend to whom she can confide about her relationship with Pete, Lily yearns
for a mother’s “unerring vigilance and foresight to land her ... safely in the arms of wealth and
suitability” (Mirth 95). Although Lily is a much more carefully drawn character than the roughly
sketched Maggie, both women are rendered endangered by the men and women who prey upon their naïveté, as well as by the social conventions that do not allow for an unmarried woman to “claims the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations” (166). Women like Maggie and Lily are dangerous only because society willfully chooses to ignore their cries for help. Without a domestic space to call their own or a husband to protect them, Maggie and Lily “aimlessly” wander the streets, unable to successfully navigate the dangerous territory of Manhattan. This inability to negotiate the city ultimately causes their deaths.
III. The Women of Edith Wharton’s *Age of Innocence*

In a 1909 letter to her admirer John Hugh Smith, Edith Wharton wrote of marriage, “I wonder, among all the tangles of this mortal coil, which one contains tighter knots to undo, & consequently suggests more tugging, & pain, & diversified elements of misery, than the marriage tie” (quoted in Lewis and Lewis 175). Wharton’s description of the marriage tie as a thing tangled, knotted, and uniquely miserable reflects an attitude also exhibited in her 1920 novel, *Age of Innocence*. After protagonist Newland Archer proposes to May Welland, an innocent “darling” who cannot “even guess what it’s all about,” he meets May’s cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska (*Age* 5). In his fiancee’s dark opposite, Archer finds a “mysterious faculty of suggesting tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience” which fascinates and terrifies him by turns (73). Despite Archer’s impending nuptials and Olenska’s scandalous marriage to and separation from the Count Olenski, the pair’s tentative friendship becomes increasingly intimate, and the unwritten laws of Manhattan’s prescribed moral code further ensnare a love-relationship already fraught with complications. As Newland becomes increasingly disillusioned with “the elaborate futility of his life,” he begins to question his naive acceptance of the established social order (79). And yet, in the face of the obstacles that prevent the consummation of his affair with Ellen, Newland at last succumbs to the societal pressure of this “age of innocence” (an age only innocent in its refusal to acknowledge the corruption threatening to corrode its gilded edges). He marries May, and entangles himself, like “many of the young men who had dreamed his dream,” in the “placid and luxurious routine of [his]
elders” (80). In the twilight of his old age, Archer reflects, “Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life,” and so he becomes, like Lily Bart, another tragic figure in Wharton’s pantheon of protagonists who, in their unwillingness to break free of the dominant social order, render themselves completely unable to act upon their desires (208). Wharton’s protagonists cannot escape the dangerous territory of New York, its dividing lines of social class and gender; thus, they never realize happiness, nor do they attain freedom from the city’s social order.

Although Age of Innocence is written through the lens of Archer’s masculine consciousness, the novel showcases Wharton’s tremendous ability to recognize and represent the condition of women grappling with the limitations imposed upon them by a restrictive New York society, a society in which any upper-crust Manhattanite’s foremost moral obligation was to preserve the solidarity of her tightly knit blood and marital relationships. This commitment to the “the Family, as an institution” is evidenced in Wharton’s portrayal of May Welland, as well as in minor characters Mrs. and Miss Archer, Mrs. van der Luyden, and May’s mother, Mrs. Welland (Age 166). Wharton’s highly nuanced understanding of women’s choices juxtaposes her sometimes circumscribed, reductive presentation of her female characters; it is this presentation which has in some way reinforced the old criticism of her prudish conservatism and perceived status in the American literary canon as “the woman who hated women” (Malcolm). Nevertheless, the richness of Age of Innocence stems from its illustration of “members of both sexes desperately attempting to come to terms with the ideas about gender that have been imposed upon them by the culture in which they have come to maturity” and its elegiac, surgical accuracy in depicting both a tribute to and an analysis of Old New York (Wittenberg 104). In Wharton’s deft hands, the culture in which Newland Archer and his compatriots have come to
maturity is one characterized by its mendacity, an “hieroglyphic world where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs” (Age 38). Indeed, these “arbitrary signs” are written into the very landscape of New York. As in Wharton’s earlier novel, House of Mirth, a woman’s taste in fashion and furniture bears significant relationship to its possessor, and her navigation of the physical city—its numbered streets, its public attractions, and its architecture—symbolizes her level of supposed freedom and independence from the dominant patriarchal order. An exceptional social historian, Wharton reveals in riveting, subtle prose the extent to which New York’s mores and codes entrapped or empowered the high-society woman of the late nineteenth century, the “age of innocence,” and she leads her female characters through the dangerous territory of social and gender roles.

In some respects, Newland Archer’s role as protagonist and his longing for a marriage of equal intelligence and sympathy makes it tempting to read Wharton one of two ways, either as an early feminist, or as Janet Malcolm puts it, “a woman who hated women.” In her “Introduction” to the novel, Candace Waid endorses Archer, “who reads the new treatises on ‘Primitive Man,’ ... [as] the most sophisticated critic of the rituals concerning female purity and the brutal acts of purification that insist on the exclusion of foreign contaminants and the sacrifice of women” (xvii). Given the opportunity to witness the effects of such “foreign contaminants” on the person of Ellen Olenska, Archer’s former contentment with “all the conventions on which his life was moulded” gives way to his exasperated exclamation, “I am sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her [Ellen’s] age if her husband prefers to live with harlots,” followed by “Women ought to be free—as free as we are” (Age 4, 27). While Archer’s disgust
with the hypocrisy of New York has as much to do with his wish to shock his mother and sister into submissive silence as it does his genuine loathing of Old New York’s repression of female independence, he empathizes with his female peers. He also understands the negative impact of a “patriarchal society with rigid conceptions of women’s essential nature and of what constitutes appropriate behavior in a female” on the free-spirited Olenska, a woman whose very attractiveness “constitutes a threat to the sanctity of the tribe” and suggests “female sexual experience itself is tainted with foreignness” (Wittenberg 104, Waid xvii).

Although Olenska’s “foreignness” makes “Archer’s heart [beat] insubordinately,” he struggles throughout the novel to reconcile her insubordinate influence with his views, shaped by those of the ruling order, of proper behavior in a female. Often unable to process the effect of Ellen’s nonconformism and empirical, hard-won romantic wisdom on his own desire, he reverts back to all his “old inherited ideas about marriage” after he and May honeymoon in Europe:

> It was less trouble to conform with the tradition and treat May exactly as all his friends treated their wives than to try to put into practice the theories with which his untrammeled bachelorhood had dallied. There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free, and he had long since discovered that May’s only use of the liberty she supposed herself to possess would be to lay it on the altar of her wifely adoration. (Age 119)

Here, Archer sees his wife as an instrument solely of his own design, and he dismisses her as an equal who “ought to be free—be as free as we are” (27). To Archer, May is not only blissfully unaware of her own subjugation to the status quo, but incapable of ever breaking free of its bonds; after all, even if she did feel herself to possess a degree of liberty, she would only employ
that liberty in order to “lay it on the altar of her wifely adoration” (119). The effect of May’s “uncomplicated and incurious” ideas about marriage on Archer is his reductive idealization of her being: “since the lines of her character, though so few, were of the same fine mould as her face she became the tutelary divinity of all his old traditions and reverences” (119). Archer places May on a pedestal, but to do so requires that he step to a higher plane from which he can condescend her unthinking embrace of patriarchal prescriptions. In Newland’s opinions of May and Ellen, Wharton sometimes depicts the operations of such thinking in ways that reveal a certain sympathy with these women, although where her authorial sympathies truly lie is in constant question.

May Welland’s psychological complexity certainly relates to Wharton’s overarching conception of women’s choice, but how it accomplishes this end remains one of the most contentious points of contemporary Wharton criticism. Wharton employs free indirect discourse as her narrative mode of choice throughout the novel, mingling Archer’s perspective of society with a more omniscient narration that often serves to ironically undercut her protagonist’s stereotypical ways of thinking. In Archer’s eyes, May’s unlined, finely sculpted features are a physical expression of an inner rectitude guided by her sense of societal propriety and appropriateness; because the novel is largely written from Archer’s limited perspective, Wharton grants her reader little access to May’s unique female subjectivity and sensitivity. Even so, there are many indicators that Archer fails to recognize his wife’s emotional depth, as well as her astute ability to assess a situation and adjust her reaction to its potential unsavoriness accordingly. In Janet Malcolm’s derisive review of a 1986 publication of Wharton’s collected works, she scathingly asserts that “the callousness and heartlessness by which Wharton’s
universe is ruled is the callousness and heartlessness of women,” and that “in Newland's case, the castrating female [May] comes in the guise of the conventional ‘nice’ young woman of good society, who traps him into loveless marriage.” In Malcolm’s reading of Wharton, May’s character is emblematic of Wharton’s hatred of her fellow woman, as well as the American society in which she was reared. However, to read May as a villain, the “castrating female” who severs Newland from love and a well-lived life, is to be just as dismissive of her intelligence and intentions as Newland Archer himself. An analysis of Wharton’s characterization of May reveals an inner complexity which Malcolm pointedly ignores.

On the opening pages of *Age of Innocence*, Archer turns his eyes from a passionate operatic performance to scan the opposite side of the house’s audience. There he regards “a young girl in white with eyes ecstatically fixed on the stage-lovers. As Madame Nilsson’s ‘M’ama!’ thrilled out above the silent house ... a warm pink mounted to the girl’s cheek ... and suffused the young slope of her breast to the line where it met a modest tulle tucker fastened with a single gardenia” (5). As Archer’s glance flits back to her, he thinks to himself, “The darling!” ... She doesn’t even guess what it’s all about” (5). Neither, apparently, does he. Archer’s perception of May’s virginal innocence manifests in his attention to the heightened color of her cheek and the pure white of the gardenia fastened to her tulle tucker, a yoke of fabric designed as a concession to modesty to cover the chest laid bare by a low-cut bodice. However, he fails to realize that the tucker is a concession to modesty, not necessarily a reflection of the modesty of its wearer, nor does he seem to equate the heightened color of May’s breast with womanly arousal, but, instead, a vague girlish passion. And yet, the figure-flattering cut of May’s dress and
the sheerness of its yoke makes the flush of her skin discernible underneath the tulle, drawing Archer’s eye to the “young slope of her breast” before his gaze travels down her lithe form to the bouquet of lilies in her lap. In the recline of May’s body and the selection of her deceptively seductive neckline, Wharton betrays a kind of female intelligence to which May is clearly privy. In the knowledge of the appearance she means to present to the world, she effectively manipulates Archer’s impression of her innocence, even if that innocence is only a contrived illusion.

This appearance, according to Barbara Welter’s analysis of antebellum literature, should have four attributes: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (quoted in Von Rosk 347). May succeeds by this account. Much like her carefully selected dress, May selects the face she wishes to present to her audience, in this case, that of a blushing, young woman available to receive a wealthy young man’s attentions. The young man in question, Newland Archer, desires a wife who is not only beautiful, although beauty “in the eyes of New York, justified every success, and excused a certain number of failings,” but also capable of wittingly engaging in the “recognized custom[s]” of the society in which he moves (10, 6). Indeed, he believes he can mould May into the perfect shape of a wife:

He did not in the least wish the future Mrs. Newland Archer to be a simpleton. He meant her (thanks to his enlightening companionship) to develop a social tact and readiness of wit enabling her to hold her own with the most popular of married women of the “younger set,” in which it was the recognized custom to attract masculine homage while playfully discouraging it. If he had probed to the bottom of his vanity (as he sometimes nearly did) he would have found there the wish
that his wife should be as worldly-wise and as eager to please as the married lady whose charms had held his fancy through two mildly agitated years; without, of course, any hint of the frailty which had so nearly marred that unhappy being’s life, and had disarranged his own plans for a whole winter. (6)

Newland wishes for May to entertain and entice the men with whom he socializes. In this way, he wants her to act as a “dangerous woman” might without violating her marriage vows. According to Judith Saunders, Newland expects that the married May “begin to think and feel in hitherto forbidden ways” (“Becoming the Mask” 405). However, “the trouble with such a dichotomized ‘before’ and ‘after’ is that it demands an impossible transition. Archer admits to himself that ‘the young girl who knew nothing’ with ‘no past to conceal,’ cannot transform herself suddenly into a woman with ‘the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgement, which she had been carefully trained not to possess’” (405). Nor does Newland truly want her to possess such world wisdom. Even though he has engaged in an affair with a charming married lady, he does not see fit that May possess the same “frailty” as the woman who once “held his fancy for two mildly agitated years.” That Archer means “to develop” May is perhaps an indication of her successful portrayal of the ideal woman. She is a kind of mannequin whom Newland can hang various costumes on, be it that of the faithful wife or the playfully flirtatious ingenue. He does not consider that May already possesses the “social tact” and “readiness of wit” he seeks to find in a wife; rather, he assumes that she is innocent and sweet, and therefore, incapable of expressing such gifts of conversation. In Archer’s eyes, May is “a type rather than a person,” ready to be bent to his will (Age 115).
Wharton’s narrative parenthetical asides in this passage not only expose Archer’s misogynistic view of his wife-to-be, but his remarks also indicate the amount of sympathy Wharton is inclined to grant toward her protagonist. Self-congratulatory in tone, Archer notes that “thanks to his enlightening companionship,” May will improve as a spouse. Thus, Archer exerts a kind of repressive, patriarchal force upon May so that she might better meet his vision of the ideal wife. Wharton’s ventriloquist narrator then delves into the reasons behind Archer’s desire for a wife both “worldly-wise and eager to please,” asserting that, “If [Archer] had probed to the bottom of his vanity (as he sometimes nearly did),” he would find that he wishes for a wife as able to engage his sexual desires, romantic desires, and his mind, as his former mistress. However, the narrator’s subtle dig at Archer’s ability to “probe to the bottom of his vanity (as he sometimes nearly did)” reveals Wharton’s true opinion of Archer. Unlike May, whose true feelings are never revealed to the reader, Archer is a man incapable of ever probing the full depth of his emotions. This narrative comment upon the unwillingness to Archer to realize the truth of his wants and needs contrasts with the vagueness of May’s descriptions. May is not the “castrating female” who severs Newland Archer from his desires as Malcolm suggests, but rather, a character who cannot be ridiculed on the sole basis of her supposed innocence.

Although May suffers from the cultural forces which have decreed innocence “to be the preponderant fact defining an unmarried young woman” and has grown up “with an extremely narrow, artificially restricted view of the world” (“Becoming the Mask” 404), her socially-imposed ignorance often gives way to a shrewd evaluation of the world which registers in the expression of her “too-clear eyes” (Age 91). When Newland arrives at the Wellands’ vacation home in St. Augustine, intent on hurrying along the date of his impending nuptials, May reminds
him, “‘You mustn’t think that a girl knows as little as her parents imagine. One hears and one
notices—one has feelings and ideas” (93). May’s innocence, like the deceptively seductive cut of
her dress’s tulle tucker in the opera scene, is a kind of veil for her deeper understanding of the
sexual currents that swirl beneath the calm waters of New York society. May’s “womanly
eminence” takes on a sinister cast at the climax of the novel’s action when she successfully exiles
her rival, Ellen, from the New York tribe (94). Completely aware of her husband’s forbidden
feelings for her cousin, she maintains a “facade of naiveté while quietly arranging matters to suit
her own ends” (“Becoming the Mask” 407). Newland is stunned when he realizes that his
“pure” young bride not only guesses his feelings for Ellen but assumes, like the rest of New
York, that Ellen and Newland are “lovers, lovers in the extreme sense peculiar to ‘foreign’
vocabularies” (Age 200). May chooses not to confront Newland or Ellen (this would be against
her upbringing). Instead, she privately calls on Ellen and prematurely announces that she is
pregnant, “invoking the idea of family to induce Ellen voluntarily to give up her affair with
Archer” (“Becoming the Mask 406). This successful and sophisticated maneuver proves to
Archer that May conceals more awareness and instinctive guile than Newland’s perception of
May’s simplicity would suggest.

Two weeks after she has lied to Ellen about her pregnancy, May finds herself actually
pregnant. Ellen, now an ocean away from New York, is no longer a threat to May’s inherited
notion of “the Family, as an institution” (166). Thus, May feels safe in announcing to Newland
what she has done: “‘No; I wasn’t sure then—but I told her I was. And you see I was right!’” she
exclaimed, her blue eyes wet with victory” (206). May’s perspicacious view of her husband’s
desires outside of tradition allows her to successfully manage her household by whatever means
necessary. Although May is earnest in her concession that she would release Newland to another woman before their impending nuptials, the established social rules of her world prevent her from allowing him the same freedoms once they have married. Ellen and May, united in their love of Newland and limited by the cultural machinations of the high society world in which they live, are differentiated ultimately by May’s ability to shed her naive perceptions of the world in order to get what she wants, i.e. a marriage considered to be successful by the members of their elite social club.

In contrast to May’s acceptance of Old New York’s traditional values, Ellen does not obey New York’s established social codes. Her eccentric tastes, exotic interests, and world-weariness greatly distinguish her from the innocent ingenue, May. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Ellen is the only character in Age of Innocence who “can stand apart from the customs of her country and appraise them objectively.” In a way, “like the women of France, her adopted country, she [Ellen] has become from Wharton’s point of view a ‘grown up’ who can no longer find a home in the happy valley of a childishly mercantile leisure class” (Gilbert and Gubar 409). Ellen shares with Lily Bart an inability to find her place in “America’s established order of things” (409). She too, is dismissed by capitalized New York in the “old New York way of taking life ‘without effusion of blood’” (Age 201). The primary difference between Lily and Ellen is that Ellen has enough money after her exorcism to live comfortably outside the decorous society of “old New York.” A quarter of a century after Ellen and Newland’s last goodbyes, Newland visits Paris with his son, Dallas. He stand below Ellen’s window and meditates upon the life Ellen has enjoyed abroad:
For nearly thirty years, her [Ellen’s] life—of which he knew so strangely little—had been spent in this rich atmosphere that he already felt to be too dense and yet too stimulating for his lungs. He thought of the theaters she must have been to, the pictures she must have looked at, the sober and splendid old houses she must have frequented ... More than half a lifetime divided them, and she had spent the long interval among people he did not know, in a society he but faintly guessed at, in conditions he would never wholly understand. (215-216)

In this passage, Newland “recognizes that he himself has been only an episode in the intricate narrative of this cosmopolitan exile’s life” (Gilbert and Gubar 410). With this realization comes the knowledge that, if Ellen remembered their relationship as “something apart,” she would only have kept the memory of him “like a relic in a small dim chapel, where there was not time to pray every day” (Age 216). Because Ellen has geographically moved beyond the dangerous territory of New York’s physical dividing lines, she is no longer constricted by its rules and mores. Ellen is no longer subject to move in the pre-ordained ways of New York. Ellen has finally been granted the freedom which Newland once thought all women should be able to exercise. And yet, now, miles and miles away from the dividing gender and social roles of New York, “he can neither understand nor analyze the larger architecture that dwarfs him” (Gilbert and Gubar 410). In relocating from New York to Paris, Ellen finally finds a space, a “rich atmosphere,” in which she can comfortably breathe.

Ellen only survives the dangers of New York because she can afford escape to another country, an option denied the penniless heroines of Maggie and House of Mirth. Indeed, New York society constructs invisible boundaries everywhere; to unsuccessfully navigate these
boundaries is the fate of any single woman who desires meaningful companionship “‘among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend’” (Age 50). For women whose horizons are bound “by the Battery and Central Park,” the dividing lines of social class and gender roles forbid them from ever moving freely in Manhattan (86). May Welland, a woman capable of feigning innocence in order to get what she wants (namely, the married life Old New York prescribes to its inhabitants as a single woman’s ultimate end-goal), is the only woman in the three novels I have studied who gets married. Not coincidentally, she is the only woman who dies peacefully, “thinking the world a good place, full of loving and harmonious households like her own, and resigned to leave it because she was convinced that, whatever happened,” her husband would continue to inculcate “the same principles and prejudices” in her children which had governed her own life” (208). And yet, May’s happiness is an illusion protected by her husband and children who conceal any an all ugly truths from May’s view. In devastating prose, both Wharton and Crane reveal the powerlessness of single women to transcend the patriarchal dichotomies of Old New York. Branded “either endangered or dangerous, emblems of propriety and vulnerability, or object lessons in social differences and sexual danger,” neither Maggie, Lily, Ellen, nor May are ever able to successfully navigate New York City as freely as they men with whom they interact (Ryan 86).
IV. Works Cited


Wertheim, Stanley. “The New York City Topography of *Maggie* and *George’s Mother*.”


