

THE GENDERED SUBJECT OF TURN-OF-THE CENTURY AMERICAN FICTION

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English in the Department of English in the School of Arts and Science

Chapel Hill

2016

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ABSTRACT

Jittima Pruttipurk: The Gendered Subject of Turn-of-the-Century American Fiction
(Under the direction of Jane Thrailkill)

Focusing on late nineteenth-century American narrative fiction from 1892-1915, “The Gendered Subject of Turn-of-the Century American Fiction” examines the significance of female protagonists as a literary tool and experimental subject to imagine an American national identity. This dissertation argues that narrative fiction by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton and Henry James continue the tradition of exploring women’s interiority, first established in the captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson’s *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682). Each writer presents a model of the subject that updates that posited by Rowlandson. I argue that they share a skepticism of the notion of the subject based on exclusionary difference as a viable paradigm of American national identity and suggest a model of the subject that enables not only the ability to circulate, but one that privileges and guarantees all its members political freedom.

DEDICATION

To Dr. Jane Thraikill, whose mentoring makes a huge difference;

To Dr. Nancy Armstrong, who had a clear vision of my potential;

To my parents, who nurture dreams of success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I review the paragraphs that together form this dissertation, I am reminded of the contributions from people at different moments and places that made its successful completion possible.

First and foremost, I am immeasurably indebted to my dissertation director, Dr. Jane Thrailkill for making nineteenth-century American literature and critical theory an interest that found its fullest expression in this dissertation. Several Chapel Hill venues like Greenlaw 411, the HHIVE office and local coffee shops witnessed countless hours of discussion, the most fruitful of which led to a series of revisions, alterations and adaptations that eventually became this dissertation. Getting your timely, thoughtful and sagacious comments was energizing and, indeed, one of the highlights of my graduate career. You patiently guided me along every step as I attempted to turn a number of depressingly pedestrian drafts into more acceptable writing. I have grown personally and academically beyond my own expectations as your advisee. Our work together has been a truly rewarding experience and stands as a signpost to what I hope to achieve with my own students. My sincere gratitude to you for making such a difference to me with your teaching and mentoring.

I have been fortunate and privileged to work with Dr. Nancy Armstrong. As a mentor, you offered a transformative intellectual and personal experience in the truest sense. It was in your contemporary novel class that I was introduced to critics that informed my research and analysis in this dissertation. Your tireless assistance on several drafts of my first conference paper was invaluable as was your continuing guidance. I am especially grateful to have worked

with you in the Independent Study course from which this project emerged. I deeply appreciate the insight that helped spearhead this dissertation and your encouragement to see this project through to completion. Throughout my six years, your understanding, patience, and transfusions of energy helped me thrive as a foreign fish both in and out of water. The opportunity to know and learn from you encouraged me to hold myself to the highest and most meaningful standard of scholarship that you represent.

My navigation as an international student through the waters of US academia might have ended up a shipwreck without the sustained support and guidance of Dr. Megan Matchinske during my first two years. Many thanks are due for being my go-to mentor and friend. I am also delighted that you eventually became part of this project as well as grateful for the many hours you spent working with my writing in your office. While my relationship with Dr. Joy Kasson started as virtual mentoring, our work together continued in real life. You introduced me to American scholars central to my project as well as texts that I could later use in my teaching career. I deeply appreciate your support during my graduate experience, especially for taking the time to discuss this project and its direction. I am also grateful to Dr. Robert Cantwell for asking crucial questions as well as suggesting the needed changes for improvement. I would also like to thank Drs. Eliza Richard and Jessica Wolfe for enriching my life as a graduate student.

During my early years in the program, I had the advantage of a small circle of friends in the department. Harry Thomas provided great advice before and after I set foot in the U.S. If there were an award for English Department cultural ambassador, I would vote for you. Kelly Bezio was my academic “sister.” You helped in more ways than imaginable. Lynne Feeley provided unstinting support at the beginning of my graduate career. Ashley Reed was also a stalwart friend. Your wisdom and cheering words during exams meant a lot. Kwangtaek Han’s

kind benevolence and unstinting support prepared me for study in the US during my initial transition. Without you, I would have taken many wrong turns as I waded through the maze of graduate school.

I was honored to know five extraordinary people who helped steer what seemed to be an imminent academic disaster into a successful PhD endeavor. My first thanks goes to Marc Cohen whose thoughtfulness, friendship and cheerful spirit added positive energy to my graduate journey. Thank you for being there for me from the first day of my exam prep till the day we celebrated my successful defense. Emily Brewer became the voice of reason and an inspiring mentor-friend. Our first conversation together will be a treasured memory in the months and years to come. Cindy Current's significant contribution was instrumental in turning what seemed impossible into a goal within reach. Your unwavering support and generous advice helped build my confidence as an international student in the department. If I could have had a sixth committee member, it would be you. Tommy Nixon was a remarkable resource wizard who located many hidden gems for me at the Davis library. Thanks are also due to professor Thomas Catucci who offered tremendous help beginning with my first paper as a graduate student. Your suggested revisions to subsequent work improved drafts destined for deletion to work ready for submission.

My thanks also go to other fellow graduate students in the department. Included in this august group are Jennifer McDanel, Heath Sledge, Michael Cawallader, Kelly Bezio, Nicholas Gaskill, and Ashley Reed for invaluable input that encouraged me to make the most important decision of my graduate career. I also cherish as friends Leslie McAbee, Josh Doty, Erin Lodeesen, Susan Thananopavarn, and Kym Weed-Buzinski, and Ainehi Egoro.

I am grateful to The Royal Thai Government and Chulalongkorn University for providing fellowships that made this work possible. I would also like to compliment for their outstanding work: the ILB staff who demonstrated that the UNC Davis library is, indeed, of world-class stature; the administrative staff at the English Department, especially Sharon Brinson who kept me ahead of all target dates; the Point to Point staff, for countless necessary rides to the libraries; to the staff of the OEADC, especially Ms. Piyarat Navaratana, Mr. Wichai Pakayanont, and Ms. Supranee O'dell, all of whom helped spare me from logistical worries that might have distracted me from my academic focus.

I am happy to have made the acquaintances of a number of American friends outside my academic circle. As a group, they formed a welcoming community away from home: Dr. Elizabeth Anton became my rock. Her invaluable advice showed me how to get back in the saddle and kick-start my life. Diana Levy's supporting cards turned the check of routine into the possibility of something special. All the fun meetings you arranged also helped re-energize an exhausted brain; Dr. Connie Eble and the congenial circle of Literary Ladies helped to make memorable the day I passed my exams; Marc, Pam, Asher and Olivia Cohen warmly welcomed me into their homes, lively conversations and congenial gatherings; and Jim Allred supported and believed in me even during moments of dark self-doubt.

Additionally, Chapel Hill was a special home away from home because of a small but closely-knit Thai community. I encountered in this group three extraordinary individuals: Joyce Chandarajoti, Ampai Soros and Mrs. Viravan Maixner. Each of you has redefined the meaning of friendship and generosity in your own unique ways. My thanks also go to Supawadee Naorungroj, Chotibhak Jotikastira, Suranya Rojwattana, Teerawut Sripinit, Natnaree Aimyong, Nopphol Witworapong, Songphan Choemprayong, Chidsanuphong Chart-asa whose friendship

and counsel helped me through many crucial moments. It was my good luck that, when so many of my friends had graduated, Weruka Rattanawaraha returned to Chapel Hill for further study in time to provide much-needed support during my dissertation defense. Thanks are also due to other members of the Thai-UNC association whose paths I crossed.

My deepest appreciation is also due to professors at my undergraduate alma mater: Professor Rongrat Dusdeesurapot, for making my first literature class such an exciting discovery that I wanted to pursue the subject to the Ph.D level; Professor Nattama Pongpairoj for your warm friendship and for making possible this graduate studies adventure by informing me of the Royal Thai Government scholarship; and Professor Sudaporn Luksaneeyanawin for your invaluable counsel and wisdom through the scholarship application process. To faculty and friends who helped make my graduate school application a success: Professors Boonrat Lohwongwatana, Eddie Vichaidith, Carina Chotirawe, Darin Pradittatsanee, Simon J.P. Wright, Patama Attanatho, Sunij Sutantavibul, Brett Farmer and Michael Crabtree. Without all of you, I wouldn't have been able to accomplish my academic goal in the US.

To friends and colleagues at Chulalongkorn University who are too numerous to name individually: thank you all very much for your kind and encouraging email messages during my studies. Reading them reminds me that even as I shouldered my academic burden in a foreign land, I had a home-country group rooting for me. Although the task of dissertation revisions travelled back with me, the same cheering troupe gave me the strength and support to make possible the last, final push to completion. My special thanks to Professors Puckpan Tipayamontri, Jiranthara Srioutai, Darin Pradittatsanee, Nida Tiranawasdi, Subenja Phaolaungthong, Tapanat Khunpakdi, Michael Crabtree, Patama Attanatho, Raksangob

Wijitsopon, Kris Iamharit, Somjit Jirananthiporn, Prima Mallikamas, Kuakarun Krusong, Kanokwan Laohaburanakit Katagiri.

Though we are separated by distance, four friends also provided strong encouragement. Natalie Chan's countless energy-boosting emails and snail mail were always a treat to receive during my PhD studies and proved that such distances between Thailand, Hong Kong, and the US are not impossible to overcome. Sudthida Pavavijarn taught me about resilience and perseverance as we exchange stories of our Ph.D ordeals in the UK and US. Budsakorn Rueangaram sent constant positive vibes from Orlando, Florida. Long distance calls with Veeya Chotiros gave a renewed sense of energy and excitement on otherwise exhausting days.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, especially my parents, for supporting me in every possible way. The idea of earning a Ph.D in English Literature in the U.S. has a wondrous quality even beyond the dreams of an international student. However, looking back at all you have done for me since my childhood, it is not surprising that that this seemingly remote aspiration has become a reality.

I am responsible for any errors in this dissertation.

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Introduction

This dissertation investigates exemplary works of narrative fiction published between 1892 and 1915 to examine the significance of the female protagonist as a literary tool and experimental subject to imagine an American national identity.¹ I suggest that in addition to Henry James, who would fit F.O. Matthiessen's criteria for inclusion in the *American Renaissance's* masculine canon, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Edith Wharton entered into a significant debate over a suitable form of an explicitly gendered American national subject and identity—a debate that dates back as far as the formative period of American national identity and that is reflected in captivity narratives.² To comprehend the model of subject that these writers posit, I argue that they need to be read in light of their sentimental prototype in the captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson. I suggest that the works of Gilman, James and Wharton appropriate the Lockean model of rational individual exemplified by Rowlandson only to cast doubt on the model itself as a viable paradigm for American national identity.

¹ This importance of women to national identity dates back to the time of the establishment of the English Colony. Karen Kupperman highlights the idea that the single most significant element to ensure the long term success of the English colony was the presence of women, which helped guarantee stability and the prospect of social reproduction (158).

² Matthiessen has in fact published a full book-length study of James's major works entitled *Henry James: The Major Phase* (1944) three years after *The American Renaissance* (1941)

To understand this significant yet largely unacknowledged relationship between the captivity narrative and late nineteenth-century American fiction that I will be exploring, I take as my starting point the contention of Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse in *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life* (1994) that the rise of the modern English novel is inextricably linked to British America. They argue that Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), often held as the prototype of both the epistolary British domestic novel and the American (sentimental) novel, is actually derived from and influenced by Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative of her abduction by Native Americans who held her for eleven weeks before she was ransomed.³ According to Armstrong and Tennenhouse, Rowlandson's account of her captivity in the New World features "the first appearance of the author who is an entire world of consciousness and an authentic source of language"; it is a narrative that affirms how an upstanding housewife fighting to maintain her English identity in the wilderness "can be used to imagine how a new basis of nationality comes into being" (215).

Armstrong's and Tennenhouse's revisionist account of the origin of the American novel underscores the significance of the use of female protagonists in imagining American national identity. More importantly, it argues for the genesis of a more continuous and comprehensive American literary tradition—a tradition that, I would argue, also helps explain in what way the work of Gilman and Wharton, in addition to James, may connect to F.R. Leavis's "great tradition" of writers of domestic fiction that continues from Austen to Elliot to James. In this sense, the argument of the two critics allows me to explain what is uniquely American about

³ Kathryn Zabelle Deronian mentions in "The Publication, Promotion, and Distribution of Mary Rowlandson's Indian Captivity Narrative in the Seventeenth Century" (1988) that Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative was one of the most popular. In 1682, it was published in four editions; the first three in Massachusetts and the fourth in London. Although research on the work has been done in the field of history, genre studies, typology and bibliography, Deronian points out the paucity of research on other aspects of the narrative (239).

narrative fiction featuring female characters in the late nineteenth century—the period that Richard Chase in *The American Novel and its Tradition* (1978) takes as an anomaly (3).⁴ Armstrong and Tennenhouse thus help to lay the groundwork for my project; they do not, however, explore how the tradition of Rowlandson’s captivity narrative persists and is revised in the late nineteenth century. Nor do they explain how American novels of the Gilded Age appropriate the colonial paradigm to imagine a suitable form of American national identity or the kind of modification that the rational model of the subject underwent in the women-centered narratives of the late nineteenth century.

This dissertation thus proposes a genealogical study that will elucidate the way the model of subjectivity exemplified by Mary Rowlandson in her captivity narrative has been challenged and updated by the late nineteenth-century fictional narrative. It will explore how works by Gilman, Wharton and James are central to the debate over what forms a suitable basis for the American national identity, an identity mediated through women and through the kind of homes and relational structures they establish. In this sense, I consider the works discussed in this dissertation as performing a similar task to that which critics have traditionally ascribed to male-centered literary works—one devoted to the questions of nation-making, national identity and “the possibility of democracy” with which F.O. Matthiessen characterizes the work of his “American Renaissance” masculine canon (ix). This debate takes on particular urgency in the American novels of the late nineteenth century—a period markedly distinguished from earlier in the century by the preoccupation with questions of selfhood and democratic values in an increasingly market-oriented and consumeristic society. During this time, American underwent

⁴ Chase’s remark is a contrary to Armstrong and Tennenhouse’s account: “the American novel is obviously a development from the English tradition. At least it was, down to 1880 or 1890. For at that time our novelists began to turn to French and Russian models and the English influence has decreased steadily ever since” (3).

significant and unprecedented changes in industrialization, economic growth and immigration which resulted in business, political and social reforms that would work to define and redefine a suitable model of national identity.

The prototype

To understand how late nineteenth century American writers in this dissertation employ their protagonists to imagine a model of the subject and by extension, American national identity, I will first briefly examine the form of subjectivity in Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682) whose eponymous protagonist embodies the British model of the Lockean rational individual. Doing so, I can later show how James E. Seaver's *A Narrative Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* (1824) and subsequent protagonists in fictional work by Gilman, Wharton, and James update this earlier prototype as a basis for the model of the subject suitable to America.

Rowlandson's captivity narrative presents a protagonist with a devotion to God and earthly humanity that she has to maintain in the wilderness among pagan savages if she wants to return to her English community. As a captive, she testifies to her absolute fidelity to English Puritan beliefs, even at the risk of suffering greater physical privation. In this way, the story of her captivity establishes an absolute difference between her interior thoughts and beliefs and the external cultural world hostile to it. This difference between subject and object bears important resemblance to the Enlightenment model of the individual presented in John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and his *The Second Treatise of Government* (1690). In this model, the empty mind accumulates sensation from the object world and builds an archive

of thoughts that constitutes the subject's mind or intellectual property that contains and controls the body. The mind maintains its viability by hermetically sealing itself against external influences over its judgment, intent on forming ideas on the basis of inferences that the mind makes on the basis of external evidence (*Essay* II.i.2). As shown in her several removes during captivity, Rowlandson preserves internal consistency across time and space, and she tenaciously adheres to God's authority by persistently invalidating and resisting the influence of the Indians she deems alien to her Puritan Englishness.

While critics such as Tara Fitzpatrick and Christopher Castiglia argue that the captivity narrative has subversive or rebellious undertones, I contend that Rowlandson's narration reinscribes domestic ideology based on the contractual model, which, as Wendy Brown explains, is patriarchal in its organization (152).⁵ When the protagonist is reinstated in her position as a mother and wife in the English household from where she was initially removed, the narrative attaches the individual to a fixed system of kinship and gendered hierarchy that would seem to restrict her to geographical place or blood relation—one that has resonance in Freud's model of psychoanalysis of his case histories and Louis Althusser's notion of family ideology.⁶ This model thus locates the individual in the nexus between self and the household and by extension, society. As Nancy Armstrong explains, "The exclusive nature of the patriarchal prerogative"

⁵ For example, Fitzpatrick comments that "the women captives became the authors of their own histories, defying if never escaping the traditionally masculine authority and authorship central to the puritan order" (5). In a similar vein, Castiglia contends that "the captivity narrative allowed women authors to create a symbolic economy through which to express dissatisfaction with the roles traditionally offered white women in America, and to reimagine those roles and the narratives that normalize them, giving rise ultimately to a new female subject and to the female audience on which she relies" (4). Although I agree with Castiglia's claim that captivity narrative presents a new female subject, my thinking differs from that of Castiglia in that the subject's position changes from the non-individuated being under the paternal household to an individuated individual after her rescue from her captivity rather than from a passive subject to a more subversive subject. As Armstrong and Tennenhouse explain, Rowlandson's separation from her community "defines what and who she is even after her return to friends and family" and that her return "transforms that community into one in which the individual counts" (212).

⁶ Freud and Althusser's models will be discussed at full length in subsequent chapters.

allows Englishness to pass from the father to the daughter and therefore, through her as she forms a family with another Englishman (*Why Daughters Die* 10). This permits the Englishness of the colonial community to remain intact and preserved. Armstrong concludes that European daughters assume a special position that Annette Weiner calls “an inalienable possession” in that she is integral to the community identity and cannot be “taken nor traded away without threatening that group’s identity” (*Why Daughters Die* 11). In Rowlandson’s remark that she prefers death rather than having her blood mixed with the Indians thus seeks to affirm her position as a self-enclosed, autonomous subject subsumed under the paternal household—a position that in turn reinforces Locke’s model of the rational individual.

While Rowlandson’s narrative, which proves her steadfast adherence to her Puritan Englishness and longing to return home, presents her as the prototype of the traditional sentimental heroine, Jemison’s narrative revises this prototype by presenting a frontier heroine of British descent who intermarries with the Native Americans and establishes a family outside the English household. In contrast to Rowlandson, Jemison represents an entirely different kind of protagonist who survives by her willingness to adapt to Indian culture and abide by its law—a protagonist that updates the model Rowlandson embodies. Her survival instinct in time of crisis and her collective contribution to the Seneca community through the labor of her body renders Jemison a valued member of the Indian community.

While the Rowlandson model is based on the continuity of one’s consciousness through time and space and the exclusion of contending forms of subjectivity, Jemison’s model of consciousness and subjectivity casts doubt on such continuous identity and exposes how this continuity is only made possible by what David Hume terms “habit” or “custom” that occurs through association and is, therefore, mutable (*Enquiries* 43). Thus, the Jemison model

anticipates William James' notions of consciousness and selfhood, as well as Catharine Malabou's concept of plasticity, both of which I discuss in subsequent chapters. As revealed in the narrative, Jemison gradually undergoes transculturation as a member of the Indian community. In Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of the rhizome, whose offshoots branches out to the limit of space and become connecting points of the larger network, I argue that in the Indian community, Jemison becomes a part of the multiple social organism—a replenishable heterogeneous body—rather than an individual among an aggregate of individuals with a fixed point of origin and hierarchy as defined by the Enlightenment model of individual subjectivity.

This dissertation argues that these two models of the subject, as exemplified by the captivity narratives of Rowlandson and Jemison, are part of the debate over a suitable model of subject and appropriate basis for the American national identity, one that is waged through female protagonists and the kind of homes they establish. Rowlandson's model, which is based strictly on resisting any competing form of alien influence on her habits, taste, or judgment, figures a subjective form of American national identity based on the production of exclusionary difference. In contrast, Jemison's model of transculturation and assimilation based on certain rules laid out by the Indian chiefs posits a national community based on incorporation and tolerance of cultural differences. Thus, for Rowlandson, settlement strictly means marital alliance with a man of pure English blood and forming a patrilineal household—a household that both bolsters and contains the Lockean model of individual. Such a home maintains the purity of its Englishness and its continuity by having English descendants of its occupants marry only the same members of the group. However, as Jemison does not privilege such purity, she reproduces a hybridized English culture by forming a household with a male of a different diasporic group.

The result of doing so makes it possible new modes of female subjectivity: Jemison is able to function as the head of the household while her daughters are not constricted by the obligation to marry members of the same group. Thus, while each model defines settlement within a fixed home as freedom, I argue that the Jemison model is more open and mobile in that it does not prevent the woman from marrying outside the cultural unit (exogamy), according to her own preferences.

I argue that Jemison's narrative, in which a frontier heroine has to adopt almost all of the Indian culture based on a rhizomatic community, suggests the positive side of the stripping away of an identity based on the production of difference. Her changed position from a rational individual to one of non-individuated multiplicity among the Indians permits her to work outside the home and acquire qualities that enable her to survive and fend for her children during a time of crisis. Thus, Jemison's narrative and the model of the subject it posits achieves what Rowlandson's could not by providing grounds to imagine a two-fold freedom: 1) the ability to circulate between what is culturally defined as the domestic sphere and the public domain exclusive to their male counterparts, and 2) a form of government that cares for the overall well-being of its members and that enables precisely such circulation.

I contend that while the Jemison captivity narrative reveals how cultural identity, such as the one embraced by Rowlandson, is alterable, Jemison's adherence to her racial identity as a white woman despite her acculturation underscores how racial identity in these figurations of subjectivity is structured as a defining and immutable quality. Although Jemison's cultural identity—her habits and customs—is predicated on the influence of the environment in which she lives, her racial identity as a white woman—as demonstrated by her familial sentiment and her sentimental afflictions caused by the conflict among her Indian sons—cannot be taken away.

In this sense, I suggest that Jemison reveals that despite being a captive, the qualities that renders her a white woman cannot be compromised.

Keeping in mind this conceptual framework—comprised of these different models of the subject and the structure of American national identity each affirms—I examine in the following chapters how Gilman, Wharton, and James use female protagonists to both figure and update the models of the subject in Rowlandson’s and Jemison’s narratives. I suggest that by doing so, each writer shares a skepticism of the model of the rational, autonomous, singular individual as a viable paradigm of American national identity and argues for a model of the subject that enables the ability to circulate and extend themselves wherever they make contact.

Theorist novelists

The novelists that this study examines reconfigure the Lockean model of the rational individual that maintains its dominance by producing differences that reject those who cannot meet its criteria. Gilman, Wharton and James expose the limits of this model and reimagine alternatives that move toward a model that is potentially fluid, mutable, heterogeneous and boundless—one that anticipates and embodies a collective model of humanity that defines what Deleuze and Felix Guattari call multiplicity/rhizome (3-25). As each writer explores similar questions that engage theorists, one can argue that Gilman, Wharton and James are what I would term “theorist novelists” in their own right, operating in the same philosophical universe as their theorist counterparts.

Gilman’s thinking echoes that of Giorgio Agamben and Deleuze and Guattari. Gilman and Agamben examine the form of identity that renders an individual susceptible to a state of non-identity or “bare life.” In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” she locates what Agamben later terms

“the sovereign” and “the state of exception”— the political relation in which the sovereign replaces the existing law with a martial law— in the husband doctor John and the rational household he regulates (*Homo Sacer* 15, 9).⁷ Gilman further envisions a model of collective humanity which resists the fixed and stable identities seen in the “Yellow Wallpaper” and *Herland*, one that embodies Deleuze and Guatarri’s concepts of multiplicity/ rhizome. In her short story, Gilman brings to the fore a problem inherent in the sexuo-economic relationship in which women are subordinate to men, a structure that produces an artificially singular selfhood, with the autonomous subject being the man who “covers” the woman: i.e. the *femme couvert*. In the novel *Herland*, however, Gilman inadvertently reproduces a sovereign state of all women that contains within it the potential for excluded people. In both works, Gilman appears to unintentionally reveal how heterogeneity is central to multiplicity. Without such quality, her model cannot be realized.

Edith Wharton’s novelistic experiment with a protagonist who refuses to submit to a gender category also significantly serves as an illuminating dramatization of what Malabou later terms plasticity—the ability of a particular subject to “annihilate the very form it is able to receive or create” (5). While both novelist and theorist see conformity as a means of survival, they advocate a breaking away from the societal constraints that impose such conformity on the self. Yet Wharton’s novelistic treatment of her protagonist Lily Bart, when read in conjunction with Malabou’s work, reveals the limits of plasticity unaddressed in Malabou.

At the same time, Henry James’s novelistic treatment of his protagonist theorizes the operation of consciousness in a way that illustrates the model of selfhood and epistemology

⁷ Agamben himself argues that in the modern world, we can see the sovereign expand to “the doctor, the scientist, the expert, and the priest” (*Homo Sacer* 122). Gilman also reveals such point through the protagonist’s husband doctor.

delineated by David Hume and William James. Henry James's novelistic treatment of these same concerns, however, goes further than either philosopher to address the subtlety of consciousness and to develop a form of theory of mind. Each novelist thus takes up philosophical questions that are at the core of the theorists' work I draw upon. Together, these novelists call into question a model of identity that excludes certain individuals and by extension, the suitability of such model for America.

While the fictional works that this dissertation explores speak their own language of theory novelistically and examine the same questions as theorists do in their respective works, the argument that my dissertation pursues would not be in its present form without the help of the theoretical work of Agamben, Deleuze, Malabou, David Hume and William James.⁸ Chapter One, centered on the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, employs Agamben's notions of the sovereign, the state of exception, and bare life to explain how the act of taking away the protagonist's social stimuli and environment by her doctor husband turns the room with the yellow wallpaper into a space of exception. Agamben's theoretical vocabulary describes how the protagonist's life in a rational household under John's bio-political regime of the rest cure is so similar to a bare biological life that wifely status seems indistinguishable from bare life. More importantly, Agamben's theoretical notion offers an in-depth elucidation of the protagonist's final repudiation of her identity, in that it helps clarify how the new state of being she chooses rejects the Lockean model of the rational individual. That is, the protagonist invalidates the division that underlies a model that depends on the differences between man and animals, mind

⁸ I would like to credit Avak Harastian for the explanation of theorists in "the Death of Difference: in American Modernism: Faulkner, Barnes, West" which helped me better understand the differences that separate Agamben and Deleuze. Harastian's work also provided a format that I borrowed.

and body, and thus the rational and the irrational. Such distinctions make the biologically regulated protagonist her husband's "blessed little goose" because of her "fancies" and her possession of a vision of reality that deviates from his ("Y" 33). In a similar vein, Agamben's notion of "a sovereign" state points to how the seemingly collective community of Herland contains within it potential groups of excluded people and can possibly become a totalitarian state (*Homo Sacer* 15). Thus, Agamben's theoretical notions allow a reading that serves as a corrective to the critical tendency not only to trivialize the significance of the protagonist's act of defiance, but also to pathologize her as insane. At the same time, Agamben's theoretical framework reveals a gap in Gilman's proposed solution in Herland which repeats the problems of exclusionary difference at work in "The Yellow Wallpaper."

While Agamben's notion of "bare life" helps explain Gilman's project in "the Yellow Wallpaper," Deleuze and Guattari's notion of multiplicity/rhizome allows me to reveal Gilman's further reimagination of an alternative model that transcends such difference. Employing their theoretical concepts, I point out how the protagonist conceives a model of individual defined by boundlessness, unpredictability, mutability and heterogeneity—a state that emulates what Deleuze and Guattari term "becoming" (10).⁹ To borrow Todd May's words, Gilman argues for a "fundamental non-ground of specific identities" which "opens onto other ways of seeing, thinking and acting in the world" (149). This notion of multiplicity/rhizome, often exemplified by animal imagery, also helps highlight the significance of Gilman's recurring use of collective metaphors to refer to Herlanders, implying her attempt to do away with gender difference. At the same time, Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic principles reveal the crucial characteristic missing

⁹ Todd May succinctly explains "becoming" as "a concept by means of which one jettisons traditional philosophy's search for stable identities" (148), I would argue, which subject certain groups of people to a form of containment.

in Herlanders—heterogeneity—that would realize Herland’s potential as an alternative to the rational household in the “Yellow Wallpaper.”

Chapter Two considers Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*. Malabou’s theoretical notion of plasticity makes it possible to argue that Lily’s refusal to submit to a gender category is not an inability to adjust, but instead a prospective form of power and liberation (9). Commenting on the capacity of plasticity, Malabou asks “[w]hat should we do with all this potential within us? We should do with this genetically free field?” (7). Freud’s psychoanalytical model, which gains significant ground during the time the novel is written, assumes that a healthy female who can adapt to gender category is part of the normative, reproductive rational household. Malabou’s concept of plasticity, by contrast, offers a non-psychoanalytical model that does not position the family as the normal position for women, argues instead for “the possibility of a social and political non-determinism” (13). Plasticity allows me to explain how, to borrow Paul Gilmore’s words, “individual’s brains in the same time and place, as well as across time and space, might have been organized similarly and *differently* due to genetic and experiential continuity and variation” (335 emphasis added). Malabou’s theoretical notion thus enables a reading that surpasses the narrow scope of economic determinism and sexualized naturalism that relies on a psychoanalytic model.

In Chapter Three, focused on Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, David Hume and William James’s theories of self and consciousness allow me to challenge the governess’s diagnosis of madness by Freudian critics rooted in the Lockean model of rational individual. Hume’s principles of association and William James’s notion of selective attention, both of which work together in the operation of consciousness, offers a vocabulary and rationale to expose the limitations of the Lockean assumption of how we make sense of the physical world of

things and people. Two core Humian and Jamesian explanations— that our consciousness is always contextualized and thus personal, and that reality is not strictly a shared experience— enable me to argue that Henry James theorizes the way the motions and commotion of consciousness works. With Hume and William James theories of consciousness, I am able to demonstrate that the novella argues for a suitable model of individual for the United States as a nation of diverse cultures rather than being a misleading story of a neurotic and repressed woman.

Identity Politics in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Herland*

On the last page of "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), Charlotte Perkins Gilman has her protagonist creep on all fours when her doctor-husband exclaims "For God's sake, what are you doing!" It is an act that not only perplexes her husband, but also perhaps the protagonist's imagined audience in whom she confides her increasing suffering during her rest cure ("Y" 42).¹⁰ In fact, because of such bizarre activity from a human being—performing an action associated with animals—critics tend to see the story's baffling end as an invitation to assign an identity to the protagonist—to define her in the terms of belonging to a particular group. Indeed, many critics rely on *exclusionary difference*—a term I use to describe the action of situating a specific group as dominant and assigning those who fall beyond the pale of such group as the Other, in an attempt to decode the protagonist's movements. In Catherine Golden's thinking, one can be either rational or, to borrow the term from an anonymous Boston reviewer, "a raving luna[tic]," that is, Other. She leaves no doubt into which category the protagonist should be placed (qtd. in Golden, "One Hundred" 4). As she remarks, "[t]he muted text of her [the protagonist's] writing comes to reflect her growing self-awareness as she moves beyond the prescription of healthy eating, moderate exercise, and abundant rest and chooses literal madness over John's prescription for sanity" (Golden, "The Writing" 304).

¹⁰ Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wallpaper." *The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on the Yellow Wallpaper*. Ed. Catherine Golden. New York: The Feminist Press, 1992. 24-42. Print. All further citations are to this edition.

However, I will later argue that rather than choosing an identity of either madness or sanity as Golden suggests, the protagonist in fact rejects any form of identity/ identification .The flaw in Golden's analysis is also seen in the comments of critics who read "The Yellow Wallpaper" along the same lines, despite the fact that the protagonist, as I explain further, denies such identification. Golden's interpretation is rooted in her privileging of a rational consciousness that binds one to an identity as unique to human beings and is therefore dominant as well as separate from our body. As a result, she uses the protagonist's creeping— which rejects such identity and insists on the biological nature that human beings and animals share—as a basis to relegate her to the category of the natural or irrational.

However, like recent feminist critics, I contend that the protagonist, rather than being mad, resists the conventional restrictions placed on her subjectivity. I will argue that Gilman draws upon the creeping protagonist who rejects her own identity as a wife to critique the Lockean model of rational consciousness which supports gender hierarchy and exclusionary difference. My position is that Gilman presents a more radical critique of this model of subjectivity than critics realize. To expose the paradox of how such a model can potentially turn someone with an identity— such as the protagonist (the wife)— into a non-identity, I contend that Gilman uses the room where the protagonist undergoes the rest cure to theorize the political logic that validates such stripping away of one's identity. To mount my argument that Gilman problematizes identity defined in terms of belonging, I will draw upon Giorgio Agamben's notions of the "state of exception" and "bare life," which provide the terms to explain the political logic (the state of exception) that Gilman critiques in her short story (as well as the later novel *Herland*) and the resulting sub-class that such logic produces (bare life) (*Homo Sacer* 9, 4). While Agamben's theoretical vocabulary enriches my reading of Gilman, I contend that by

locating such a space of exception within the gender configuration of the rational household rather than Agamben's "camp" as paradigm, Gilman also makes Agamben's theoretical concept resonate beyond his analysis which focuses on race and class to include that of gender.

In the first section, I draw upon Althusser's notion of interpellation and Agamben's notion of state of exception to argue that the very apparatus that gives one an identity can paradoxically turn one into a non-identity or sub-human being. I suggest that such a model of identity—one based on exclusionary difference and contractual relation— potentially contains within it the groups of people within the society who are excluded from its rights and protections: what Agamben terms "inclusive exclusion" (*Homo Sacer* 21) In the second section, I will further argue that Gilman, employing the lens of gender, critiques the model of rational individual that privileges gender hierarchy thus turning the protagonist into a non-wife within the household. In the third section, I arrive at the central crux of my argument. While Gilman presents an alternative model of community in *Herland*, a utopian fiction that seems to offer a solution to the exclusionary difference at work in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman, similar to the character of John, inadvertently reproduces a group of those in the state of "inclusive exclusion" within such utopian community.

Interpellation and the making of bare life

In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970), Louis Althusser sheds light on the way in which a subject's identity is brought into being. To explain how capitalist culture based on the reproduction of the divisions of labor perpetuates itself, Althusser argues that what positions the subjects in the cultural category of class is the mechanism of "hailing" or "interpellation" which plays the role of "the reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology"

(101). Once an individual is born, Althusser contends that s/he is “always already subject” (117). Discursive categories readily designate the subject as belonging to a particular social order and set the boundaries and limitations that the subject accepts and actively observes in order to be qualified as members (117). Rather than by force or repression, as Althusser points out,

every ‘subject’ endowed with a ‘consciousness’ and believing in the ‘ideas’ that his ‘consciousness’ inspires in him and freely accepts, must *act* according to his ideas, must therefore inscribe his own ideas as a free subject in the actions of his material practice. (113)

Althusser argues that ideological interpellation works by giving us the illusion of being “free subjects” who are the authors of our own thoughts and actions (123). However, such freedom is only possible when the subject willingly submits to particular social categories naturalized by means of institutions such as church, school, or family. Thus, Althusser reveals how the subject is willingly complicit in his or her own domination. In leading us to believe in ourselves as “free subjects,” ideological interpellation affirms our submission to categories of existence that sustain the modern ruling class structure (113).

While Althusser’s analysis focuses on how the reproduction of the divisions of labor that privilege the ruling class perpetuates itself, interpellation also places the individual into the category of gender. As Wendy Brown points out such categorization renders the father the leader of the household and thereby naturalizes gender hierarchy (152). Similar to the ruling class, which requires the working class to affirm its position, the husband depends on a submissively feminine wife to confirm his privileged position within the family. Gilman, writing almost a century before Brown, brings together questions of gender and class interpellation. In *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relations between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898), Gilman contends that the real coercive force of such voluntary

submission and subordination is specifically the sexuo-economic relationship. She argues that human beings are the only species to rely on the male for survival, a condition which renders sexual relations as an economic equation. The female's economic status is based entirely on the opposite sex; the male supports a woman's economic environment and her exchange of sex for food, which is the heart of a traditional marriage (*WE* 3).¹¹ Consequently, a woman's economic subordination is woven into the act of marriage and everyday domestic arrangements are geared toward the satisfaction of the husband.

This model of the household in which the wife is subordinated to the husband is rooted in the Lockean model of rational individual in which reason—the foundation for political rights—is a capacity exclusive to men.¹² By making reason a basis for self-government and political authority, Locke enables men to exercise power over his dependents within the household, i.e., immature children who have yet to develop rationality, and women, who, by Locke's definition, lack this capacity. Such logic of paternal authority contains women's identity within a family setting. Brown argues that women, denied the faculty essential to "liberal personhood—legal, economic, or civil personality" that allows them to rule themselves, instead submit to an identity situated inside the family and are thereby "derivative of their households and husbands" (182).

¹¹ Gilman hints at this economic subordination in "The Yellow Wallpaper," when the protagonist, despite her unwillingness, can do nothing but validates John's choice of the "atrocious" room as providing a place as "comfortable as any one *need* wish" when John mentions the cost of the three-month rental fee he has to pay if he is to fulfill the request of the protagonist to return to their home early ("Y" 27, 28, emphasis added). The protagonist's use of the auxiliary "need" underscores the economic relationship that enforces her sense of obligation.

¹² In the second book of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke explains how empiricism becomes the basis of rational consciousness and how a rational individual comes into being. The subject begins with a blank slate and gains information about the world strictly through sensations. The faculty of reflection then arranges and classifies such information and turns it into archives of thoughts that serve as the subject's knowledge of the world. This knowledge constitutes the mind or intellectual property that belongs to the subject. The subject gains personal property in a manner similar to the way he gains intellectual property: the subject invests his labor in the land and, by doing so, creates his own property. To Locke, these intellectual and personal properties become the basis of political rights and self-government (II.i.2).

Within this structure, as Brown suggests, women belong under the protection of men. Thus, while the father and his child have a relationship resembling a social contract in which the child performs duties and is obedient in exchange for his guardian's protection and wisdom, a married woman enters a sexual contract with a man in which the latter offers protection and a position within the household in exchange for the wife's voluntary submission to the husband's legal and emotional authority (152-154). By this logic, women are "inherently constrained in their prospects for recognition as persons." (182). As Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse contend, by giving reason "absolute power over the pre-rational (male child) and irrational state of mind (women)," Locke awards the husband the position of "a benevolent dictatorship" within the household (172). Reduced to a contingent role as part of the family, the wife is under the rule of her husband and susceptible to a state of non-identity.

For Althusser, identity appears freely chosen but is not; for Agamben, identity comes solely from the state and thus can be withheld altogether. Althusser sees interpellation as a mechanism that constitutes subject identity and existence in which the subject submits to the ruling class. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Agamben, by contrast, describes a susceptibility to non-identity that lies hidden within certain identities. He argues that the political relation he terms "a ban" or a "state of exception" casts doubt on an identity derived from contractual relationships and political communities that define any form of identity in terms of "belonging" (181). Agamben's analysis implicitly reveals the paradox in which the category of interpellation which gives one an identity, what he terms "the condition of being" in a particular group, and the rights attached to such identity, could actually take identity away (*The Coming Community* 86). This paradox will later help me analyze Gilman's critique of the model of the biopolitics of paternal power as formulated by Locke. Modern bio-politics rests in the

rationalization of the political double bind – in which an individual “binds himself to his consciousness, identity” (the “voluntary servitude of the individual”) and in which the state takes care of the biological life of the individual as its central mission (the “objective power”) in the state of exception (*Homo Sacer* 5). Such state of exception, according to Agamben, occurs when the sovereign— be it an individual or a nation state that individuals submit to in exchange for protection— replaces the existing laws and authority of the previous governing body with martial law. The implication of doing so is that a life interpellated into an identity (for instance, a citizen or “bios”) can be potentially stripped of identity and reduced to mere biological life or what Agamben terms “bare life” (*Homo Sacer* 9).¹³

Agamben explains the unique function of spaces that enable the state to cast certain kinds of person into a nether zone of non-identity; “modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a *legal civil war* that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system” (*State of Exception* 2, emphasis added). The “bare life” of those stripped of citizenship is exemplified by those incarcerated in concentration camps, homosexuals, refugees or the mentally ill. Notably he does not mention the household as such a space; this, as I discuss below, is where Gilman comes in. In *The Open: Man and Animal* (2003), Agamben further explains that such production of bare life is made possible by what he terms “the anthropological machine” which defines human beings as distinct

¹³ In explaining the term “bare life,” Agamben makes a distinction between two words connoting life: *zōē*, a simple fact of a biological life, and *bios*, the politically qualified life, or a life which is incorporated within a socio-political group (*Homo Sacer* 1). While the former refers to the reproductive, instinctual biological life that both human beings and animals share, the latter is used exclusively for the politically inflected and institutionalized life of human being as individuals ideologically bound to their identities. To Agamben, bare life is the middle ground between these two terms. It refers to the remnant or residue of the politically qualified life stripped of what defines it as individual, and, thus its political significance.

from animals that are consequently seen as instinctual biological bodies devoid of higher consciousness –the basis for the faculty of rationality (37). Such distinction serves as the rationale to position certain beings in proximity to the animal category, which allows them to be animalized and stripped of identity.¹⁴ Once the state of exception or the ban is in place, a particular group of human beings can be stripped of their citizenship, incarcerated, and reduced to a bare life. While still within the human community, they are deprived, because of their new status, of the rights and protection given to those who have rights. They become what Agamben calls an “inclusive exclusion” (*Homo Sacer* 21).¹⁵

Armed with an understanding of the processes by which human beings are stripped of civic identity, we can return to Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Agamben’s notion of bare life provides an explanation of the rest cure, which—like Agamben’s camp—deprives the protagonist of her relation to the people and things that constitute her identity, thus why the character, in turn, repudiates the category of human beings in which she is identified as John’s wife. As Agamben himself argues, in modern times the sovereign is not confined to politics, but also “enter[s] into an ever more intimate symbiosis not only with the jurist but also with the doctor, the scientist, the expert and the priest” (*Homo Sacer* 122). John’s dual position, as both the head of the family and a physician who defines his wife’s experience, cements his sovereignty within the household. Given his doubled power, when John takes the protagonist to an isolated mansion and prescribes a rest cure, her situation approximates the state of exception. Gilman’s protagonist is temporarily deprived of the “congenial work, with excitement and

¹⁴ It is thus no accident that in the “Yellow Wallpaper,” John reinforces the protagonist’s non-being as a woman by calling her; “little girl” and “goose,” belittling epithets which place her in the category of a child or domestic animal (“Y” 33).

¹⁵ In *The Open: Man and Animal* (2003), Agamben uses the example of “the slave, the barbarian and the foreigner” (37).

change” as well as “society and stimulus”—the very means by which she defines herself as a woman and an individual (“Y” 25). By gradually and systematically taking away her immediate relationship with her material surroundings and normal stimuli, her husband—and by extension, the domestic milieu itself—participates in animalizing her. The rest cure, in having this effect, reduces the protagonist to a life that is neither human nor animal, but that of a human stripped of humanity. Agamben takes the prison camp as his paradigm. It is a place which dispossesses certain citizens of social identity so that they can be subjected to violence and death (*Homo Sacer* 170). Gilman sees the gendered configuration of the modern household as doing something quite similar.

From a wife to a creeping woman

At the beginning of the story, Gilman presents the protagonist as a wife whose identity is subsumed under the household ruled by John. Her status as a derivative of her husband is underscored by the protagonist’s use of John’s name with the reflexive pronoun— “John and myself”— rather than the subject pronoun “I,” to refer to herself (“Y”24). Indeed, in what would appear an instance of Althusserian interpellation, Gilman’s protagonist willingly submits to her husband and his definition of a good wife—one who always obeys and validates John’s words and his presumed rationality. Gilman stresses this point by showing that the protagonist always qualifies her thinking to suit John’s framework at the beginning of the story despite her own disagreement with him.¹⁶ When she is “angry” with John, for example, she uses the adverb “unreasonably” to condition her feeling, placing the blame for this emotion solely on herself (“Y” 25). Her awareness that her social existence depends on fitting into the group of nineteenth-

¹⁶ Gilman reiterates John’s influence on the protagonist’s mental framework later in the story by showing that John also reads to the protagonist, an act which implies his selection and approval of the appropriate literature and, therefore, a material basis for her thoughts.

century middle class women is reflected in her resigned comment, “John laughs at me, *of course*, *one* expects that in a marriage” (“Y” 24, emphasis added). Not only does the strong affirmation “of course” reveal the protagonist’s validation of John’s derision of her opinion, her repeated use of the impersonal and indefinite pronoun “one” implies an awareness on her part of her status as a near non-individual (“Y” 24). Moreover, the fact that the protagonist only feels comfortable expressing her opinion on “dead paper” and experiences “a great relief” in her mind after writing her opinion down implies that she rarely, if not at all, ventures to establish a voice in the presence of John (“Y” 24). Arguably, in addition to writing, she does violate John’s prescription—“I was to have perfect rest” and “proper self-control” by feigning sleep or giving way to her fancies (“Y” 26, 25).¹⁷ However, the fact that she constantly experiences conflict between the impulses of individuality and the category of goodwife points to the effectiveness of interpellation. The triumph of social categorization becomes only too clear when we learn that the protagonist has a key to her room and is at liberty to access all parts of the house despite the semblance of physical detention. Her psychological confinement is more powerful. Heather Kirk Thomas calls the fact that the protagonist has the key “a terminating plot twist,” but I urge it is simply the manifestation of what has been true all along: the process of interpellation makes the protagonist her own jailor (202). In other words, the protagonist’s willing subjection to John’s legal and emotional authority as well as her effort to align her thoughts with his marks her as an interpellated subject who belongs to the category of a good wife.

¹⁷ Conrad Shumaker contends that the protagonist’s remarks “reveal that her relationship with her husband is filled with deception on her part, not so much because she wants to hide things from him, but because it is impossible to tell him things he does not want to acknowledge” (69). I would add to Shumaker’s comment that it is also because she is aware that her writing and thoughts are considered improper in light of her role as a good wife in John’s terms. This is emphasized by the fact that Jennie, John’s sister, works as John’s assistant to ensure that his instruction, which has the agreement of the protagonist’s relatives, is followed. Such instruction implicitly defines the protagonist’s actions—be it writing or fantasizing an escape from her identity—as aberrant.

To understand exactly how the rest cure transforms protagonist the wife into something approximating bare life, we must examine her husband John's diagnostic method and epistemology, which does the work of Agamben's "anthropological machine" by producing a difference based on a true/ false distinction that supports rationality/irrationality (*The Open* 37). In keeping with the model of the rational individual (always a male in Locke's model), John presents himself as scientific and factual. He uses an interpretive code supposedly based on empirical experience. On this basis, he "has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" ("Y" 24). His model of reason assumes the existence of universal truth based on objective perception and a clear line separating the world of consciousness from that of material things and people. Thus, implicit in John's epistemology of the household is intolerance of any diversity of opinion.

Gilman, through the depiction of husband-wife dialogue, has the protagonist expose a flaw in his thinking, instead revealing the limits of objectivity and the gender bias that allows him to universalize what is a limited male perspective.

Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?"

I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you."

"I don't weigh a bit more," said I, "nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening when you are here, but it is worse in the morning when you are away!"

"Bless her little heart! Said he with a big hug, "she shall be as sick as she pleases!" ("Y" 33).

Although John suggests that he is drawing upon physical evidence, his diagnosis of his wife's mental state is in fact colored by his own paternal feelings, even as he pretends to care strictly for

her physical health for which he claims to find physical evidence. He ignores the protagonist's experiential account of her own condition, and instead uses the tangible evidence of the weight and appetite as a counterargument. But when at a loss as to how to respond to the protagonist, he seals the conversation with the belittling phrase "bless her little heart" to dismiss her protests ("Y" 33). Such an exchange reveals that his diagnosis is designed to confirm power rather than deal with the actual knowledge at hand.

To maintain the autonomy of a model of rational individual, John must at all cost dismiss any possibility that reflection might be independent of worldly experience. His epistemology therefore depends very much on maintaining the distinction between subject and object by casting experience outside empirical reasoning as dangerous, flawed or irrational. In the passage above, which takes place while the protagonist is still communicative, he already construes her as primarily a body to be regulated. Thus, when the protagonist claims that she is sick, John completely denies the validity of her experience by regarding her complaint as imaginary—hence the protagonist's allusion to herself as having the quality of "ghostliness" ("Y" 25). In labelling the protagonist's illness "a false and foolish fancy" and determining that there is no "reason" for her suffering, the husband not only interprets the protagonist's claim of sickness as pure performance and thus makes no effort to inquire about the causes or show his concern about her feeling, but also views her as an inferior intelligence ("Y" 34). In pointing up the complexity of his power play and showing his own disavowal of other motives, Gilman reveals that the model of rational individual John assumes is a pose that is both restrictive and exclusive. His sympathy is reserved for those who think in similar terms rather than extended to the protagonist, whose opinion is different; he would obliterate her reality and subjective experience to preserve his own.

Gilman withholds the specific name and etiology of the protagonist's sickness, for to do so would be to capitulate to the pseudo-objective medical perspective of the husband. The story makes it clear, however, that the protagonist's problem lies in assuming the role of a wife under the model of rational consciousness. Gilman says as much by having the protagonist confide to the reader: "John is *a physician*, and perhaps (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)—perhaps that is *one reason I do not get well faster*" ("Y" 24, emphasis added). The protagonist clearly has difficulty, conforming to John's definition of a good wife despite the fact that she does so. Such struggle marks her as different from John's sister, Jenny, who thinks in the same terms as John, strictly follows his instructions, and is "a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper" who "hopes for no better profession" ("Y" 30). In addition, the protagonist's self-interrupted remark at the very beginning of the story implies that a wife with a different opinion from her husband's has no one to confide in, as everyone she mentions implicitly defers to John's decisions "if a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one" [...]. My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing" ("Y" 25). How does John, as a rational individual, deal with a member of the household whose definition of a woman is so different from his own?

Medical diagnosis is John's way of containing and defining his wife's experience. John diagnoses the protagonist's symptom as "a slight hysterical tendency" ("Y" 25)—a term that doctors in the late nineteenth century applied to those women who appeared to "attempt incursion in the male intellectual and public world" or who displayed "indifference to marriage and motherhood" (Vertinsky 211). Exposing that fact that sex roles are constructed rather than natural, Gilman asserts that the home, its chores and upkeep, "we have called "womanly; and

everything else in life manly; wherefore if a woman manifested any power, ambition, interest, outside the home, that was unwomanly and most cost her her position as such” (*Home* 280). From this point of view, his diagnosis is a refusal to acknowledge her psychological need. But more importantly, for my argument, it is also, the manifestation of an otherwise hidden mechanism of social control. As a physician, John is in a position to “hail” his wife as an invalid, as sick. The terms S. Weir Mitchell and Oliver Wendell Holmes use for hysterical women—“the pests of many households” and “vampire[s] who suck the blood of the healthy people”—speaks powerfully about how medical men of that time regarded such women (qtd. in Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly* 207). To such doctors, these women are objects to be physically managed and corrected through a radical change in lifestyle that re-socializes them for purpose of returning to their traditional sphere and conforming to familial obligations. In this sense, John’s diagnosis that the protagonist has a slight hysterical tendency goes very much beyond a refusal to accept her discrepant opinion to a display of his power to exclude her as a “difference” that cannot be incorporated within the rational household.

The rest cure itself, in which the normal everyday life of women is suspended and replaced by a radical change of the lifestyle of the “patient,” shares some characteristics with Agamben’s state of exception. Indeed, the process not only strips the patients of the stimuli and activities essential to their beings but, more significantly, puts them under the totalitarian control of the medical apparatus that could potentially turn them from interpellated wives into near non-beings. (This trajectory, in fact, describes the plot of “The Yellow Wallpaper”). The rest cure begins with forcibly persuading the female patient to relinquish total control to her doctor who redefines her as a body that has lost the rational means to govern itself. In the words of Mitchell, the doctor would insist “on entire rest and shut out friends, relatives, books and letters” (148).

Laura Otis, commenting on Mitchell's rest cure practice, remarks that "to restore order in the patient's body and mind, it was essential that she be cut off from all that was familiar and, above all, from anyone who might confirm her own perceptions of her body and the world around her. She must talk only to the doctor or paid nurses who upheld his [Mitchell's] views so as to hear only his version of her life, her body, and her illness" (60-61). The rest cure goes beyond interpellation and instead provides a camp-like regiment for bodily discipline: a patient is explicitly taught to display order, control and self-restraint over her emotions. Eventually, she is expected to become a more passive, feminine woman rather than overactive and dissatisfied with her traditional role. The cure thus renders her more obsessional and supposedly better able "[to] perform her female role in a structured manner with dutiful attention to rules and detail" (Vertinsky 213). Domesticity is thus leveraged, transformed from being the cause of a woman's problem to being cure, so that they can be "returned to [their] menfolk's management, recycled and taught to make the will of the male her own" (Vertinsky 213). In short, this rigorous process of reprogramming virtually criminalizes patients, who are subjected to physical and mental confinement though without being put in an actual prison.

Gilman positions the protagonist as a representation of rest cure patients whose condition gradually deteriorates to the extent that they cannot be said to own much less govern themselves. To do so, Gilman has John remove her protagonist from a city to a virtually isolated countryside. There, he confines her against her will to an attic nursery with barred windows and a nailed bedstead at the top of a colonial mansion in a state of semi-isolation with only very superficial human contact. John is absent most of the time and when with the protagonist, he disregards her own account of her experience as imaginary while Jenny, John's sister, functions only as a nurse following John's prescription and serves as his extension by monitoring his wife. John turns this

attic room with yellow wallpaper into a radically dehumanized space by stripping away any stimuli and human interaction that allows the protagonist to define herself as other than a prisoner.¹⁸ The protagonist is instructed to remain in bed and not to “fancy” or to write—activities that might allow her own experience and perhaps an alternative (“Y” 29). Nor is she allowed to do “congenial work, with excitement and change” or see “stimulating people” (“Y” 25). The story, in sum, portrays the experience of someone reduced to bare life, but does so from the individual’s point of view. The protagonist suffers what Agamben calls an “inclusive exclusion” within the home—while she is literally embedded in a human community, the lack of significant interaction between the protagonist and these two people marks the fact that she is cut off from and yet subject to them rather than open to the stimuli of the normal household. In other words, Gilman reveals that the rest cure strips her of all the stimuli that define her as a woman. Such state causes acute suffering.

The protagonist is reconfigured within a contradiction by such rest cure. On the one hand, she is fully conscious of the need to follow the role expected of middle-class women as it defines her existence and sense of belonging. Her remark during the rest cure that she “feel[s] basely ungrateful not to value” John’s concern for her suggests a moment of interpellation: her conscious submission to his definition of women (“Y” 26). But she is also strongly opposed to John’s prescription because, as with someone subjected to a state of exception, compliance

¹⁸ Gilman reveals the power relation between the protagonist and John through her lack of control over her living space. While the protagonist prefers to stay downstairs in the room with the feminine flowery chintz wallpaper, she was given the horrid room with an ugly yellow wall covering. The fact that the protagonist, who “know[s] a little of the principle of design,” comments that the paper is “committing every artistic sin” reveals its debased and tasteless state (“Y” 26). As Gilman points out in her discussion of arts in “The Man-Made World,” such ugliness implies women’s lack of opportunity to develop “civilized arts sense” and their limited role as passive consumers while men take the controlling position as decorators (73). At the same time, Gilman’s description of the controlled setting which frames the protagonist as if she were hermetically sealed in the kernel of a nesting doll also echoes her physical and psychological enclosure.

intensifies deterioration of her physical and mental health. Due to this tension arising from the conflict between her desire to conform to her social role (explicable in Althusser's terms) and her strong need to also maintain her health and life (explicable on Agamben's), she has to follow her husband's prescription outwardly but violate it when she is alone.¹⁹ We see that she regards her breach of John's prohibition of her writing as a violation of the rule of submission to her husband, when the protagonist explains furtively: "There comes John, and I must put this away-- he hates to have me write a word" or "I must not let her [Jenny] find me writing" or "there is sister on the stair" ("Y" 26, 30). As she is writing to relieve her mind of the thoughts she is never allowed to express openly, this act requires a great deal of vigilance. Thus Gilman's story establishes a state caught between interpellation and the state of exception.

We can draw on William James' notion of consciousness to shed light on the consequent split within the protagonist between herself as subject and the self as object. In "The Stream of Consciousness" (1892), James argues that consciousness is in constant flux, "[w]e take no heed, as a rule, of the different way in which the same things look and sound and smell at different distances and under different circumstance" (70). As to our perceptions, "we feel things differently accordingly as we are sleepy or awake, hungry or full, fresh or tired; different at night and in the morning" (71). Our wavering perception of objects reflects our feelings and moods at a particular moment. For lack of appropriate stimuli, the protagonist has to resort to the yellow wallpaper as her main focus and increasingly obsessive preoccupation.²⁰ Her lack of stimulation

¹⁹ In this sense, while the rest cure or the state of exception is in place, the protagonist is not completely turned into a bare biological life form under John's totalitarian control until towards the end where she can no longer find relief in writing or thinking in her own terms.

²⁰ Gilman comments that the "lady of the house," who is from the middle class, is "not worn out by overwork, but weakened by idleness. She is not starved and stunted by the hopeless lack of expression, but is, on the contrary, distorted by a senseless profusion of expression. There is pathos even to tears in the perforated cardboard fly-traps

heightens her attention until, she confesses, she has never seen “so much expression in an inanimate thing before” (“Y” 29). The protagonist’s animation of the wallpaper illustrates the underworked condition of the housewife.²¹ It also intensifies her difficulty in occupying the category of a wife within John’s definition of the wife as subject to her husband’s empirical reason. Her activity is unrecognizable in the cultural terms provided.

She begins to give voice to the inexplicable and inexpressible terms of her increasing non-identity. Her description of the wallpaper becomes progressively fraught with human attributes which reveal the variations in the protagonist’s thought processes brought on by her confinement.²² After John insists that she stay in a room of his choice rather than one that she prefers, she describes “[t]he lame uncertain curves” of the pattern in the wallpaper “commit[ing] suicide, plung[ing] off at outrageous angles and destroy[ing] themselves in unheard of contradiction” (“Y” 26). Later, when John asks her not to give way to her imaginings of people and refuses her wish to see Cousins Henry and Julia, the “uncertain curves” in the pattern

dangling from the gaudy hanging lamp in the farmhouse parlor; the little weazened, withered blossom of beauty thrust forth from the smothered life below” (*Home* 220).

²¹ In an article entitled “The Providence Ladies Gymnasium,” published in the *Provincial Daily Journal* ‘For Ladies,’ Gilman advertised the merits of a woman’s gymnasium that she persuaded Dr. John Brook, later the director of the Providence Gymnasium, to open—“it may be said that the laws of health cover both sexes and that there can be little beauty without harmonious physical development... Women who are weak and ailing can regain strength and for young girls... there is a room for hearty enjoyment and acquisition of health and strength that lasts far into the future” (2). I read “The Yellow Wallpaper,” in which the protagonist is prescribed minimal activities, and later *Herland*, in which a gymnasium plays an important role in the lives of Herlanders, as part of Gilman’s support of physical culture during the 1890s to the 1910s. As Melanie V. Dawson remarks, during that time, images of physically robust and active “New Women abound” as seen in contemporary popular culture and advertising practices (98).

²² The tension is also revealed in the language and syntax which produces an alternative story that undermines what she says to validate John. When she compliments him in her diary, for example, her thoughts question the validity of her positive words. A case in point is when she comments, “[i]t is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so” (“Y” 33) or her remark that John is “very careful and loving, and hardly lets [her] stir without special direction” (“Y” 26). Despite the emphasis on John’s love, the fact that John does not listen to her feelings and ignores her requests diminishes his seeming care and attention to her while his detailed instructions also hint at the power relation between John and the protagonist.

become “a recurrent spot” where “the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes star[ing]” upside down (“Y” 29).²³ The two initial descriptions not only suggest the death and disfigurement that she feels she is subjected to, but also, more importantly as the image of “a recurrent spot” within the “everlasting” wallpaper implies, her own tenacious battle and disfigurement of the pattern of the wallpaper (“Y” 29). Such image suggests her aggressive rejection of her confinement as a scene from gothic fiction. This sense of repudiation is further underscored in her perception of the emergence of an irritating sub-pattern which reveals a formless sort of figure “skulk[ing]” about behind the design (“Y” 30). The fact that the protagonist decides to find “some sort of a conclusion” in the “everlasting” and repetitive wallpaper indicates her determination to redefine in her own terms her confinement and her identity as a wife (“Y” 31). Thus we find her negative perception of the room as “atrocious” giving way to an increasing attraction to the wallpapered space—from where she sees her escape (“Y” 27). Gilman, here, is attempting to imagine a “way out” from the impasse of subjectivity described by Althusser and Agamben.

The protagonist’s resistance to her confinement becomes more pronounced in what she sees as the changing wallpaper, marking the increasing difficulty of her attempts to follow John’s prescription. After John arranges a visit of the protagonist’s mother, Nellie, and her children—a group that symbolically reinforces domesticity, the protagonist’s condition remains the same. This lack of improvement indicates that what she needs is another form of social interaction.²⁴ In

²³ Later in the story, the protagonist’s perception of the wallpaper pattern as one that “strangles” the woman within also reveals that these early images of “broken neck” and “two bulbous eyes” are evidence of suffocation from her attempt to be a good wife in John’s terms (“Y” 29). In her reformist writing, Gilman herself also calls the home which does not provide enough fresh air as one that causes “deformity” (*Home* 210).

²⁴ It is important that John only allows the protagonist’s Mother, Nellie, and children to visit her rather than letting her leave the house to visit her cousins; the former approach allows John to fix the protagonist’s movements, while the latter gives her freedom of circulation.

fact, Gilman reveals that the protagonist's condition starts its downward spiral with John's threat to send her to S. Weir Mitchell who is "like John and my brother only more," an act which implies the possibility of a more rigid form of confinement ("Y" 30). Not only is she "dreadfully fretful and querulous," but she also "cr[ies] at nothing, and cr[ies] most of the time" ("Y" 30). As Gilman argues, naturalized performativity— in the protagonist's case, constantly submitting to John and following his prescription of doing almost nothing during the rest cure— can have a significant effect on human biology (*WE* 23). Indeed, the signs mark her intensifying deterioration and reveal that she is actually becoming the irrational infant that John considers her to be ("Y" 30). She is active in her own destruction; she narrates her reduction to bare life, in Agamben's terms. Her perception of the wallpaper's curves and flourishes as a kind of "debased Romanesque" with "delirium tremens" and its outlines "running off in great slanting waves of optic horror" reveals her critical condition and desire for escape ("Y" 30). Her description of "the interminable grotesque"— a kind of decorative painting, consisting of representations of portions of human and animal forms fantastically combined and interwoven with foliage and flowers— also establishes this as the form of self-conception she will eventually use to repudiate John ("Y" 31).

Althusser and Agamben present theories of subject formation that are not psychological or concerned with questions of gender; in this regard, Gilman's story provides an answer, proleptically, to questions that remain unposed by these thinkers. In addition to variations of the thought processes reflected in her intensifying mental and physical deterioration, the narrator's writing similarly records a breakdown. Rather than an intellectual process in which she constructs a narrative of herself, it becomes a biological response with a minimal level of consciousness and ability to communicate. In a sense, we might say it authors a non-self:

I don't know why I should write this
I don't want to
I don't feel able. And I know John would think it absurd. But I must say
what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief (“Y” 31-32).

By making writing automatic, the physical action resulting from impulse rather than conscious self-reflection, Gilman shows that her protagonist's writing is stripped down to biological impulse such that she can no longer use it as a measure of rational consciousness and a means of social interaction in the absence of human company. From one perspective, this experience constitutes bare life. To submit to John's prescription means that the protagonist cannot express herself in a diary. It is no accident that immediately after this remark, she restates her wish to actually set eyes on the people she perceives as her stimulus— her cousins Henry and Julia— as she can no longer find relief by writing and confiding to an imaginary audience in her diary.

In her current identity as John's wife, to borrow Gilman's phrase, she is “not human as he is human” (*Home* 27). Gilman reveals that despite the protagonist's desperate attempt to have “a real earnest reasonable talk” with John about the possible benefit of leaving the rented house to see her cousin, she was strongly denied (“Y” 33). In fact, in addition to her inability to author a self through writing, her increasing difficulty in “think[ing] straight” strongly underscores her gradual loss of individuality as she continues to submit to John (“Y” 33). At the same time, John's instruction for her to use her “will and self-control and not let any silly fancies” run away with her paradoxically suggests that to be a wife in his terms means to suppress her own actions and thoughts and become an object (“Y” 32). The story narrates an impossible choice, by pointing to the simultaneous triumph and failure of interpellation into the role of wife.

Her understanding of the deleterious effects of her role as woman becomes apparent in the increasingly clear perception of a woman-like image in the wallpaper “stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern” (“Y” 32-33). Such an image—being neither fully animal nor fully human— occupies what Agamben terms “a zone of irreducible indistinction” (*Homo Sacer* 9). Gilman animalizes her protagonist to reveal that a woman so dehumanized by her role as a wife must evacuate the category of the human in order to escape her imprisonment. She imagines herself a different species from the one subsumed under the model of rational individual that supports gender hierarchy. More importantly, the image of the creeping woman which is not only singular but “is always the same shape, only very numerous” represents a clear alternative to the model of rational individual into which she is subsumed as woman (“Y” 32). Here Gilman outstrips either Althusser or Agamben as she seeks to imagine a form of existence outside interpellation or the state of exception.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of rhizome suggests that the protagonist’s thinking goes well beyond breaking away from gender difference. To imagine a non-hierarchical, interpersonal relation which resists the production of exclusionary differences, Deleuze and Guattari ask us to think of a rhizome that spreads out it shoots in all directions. Unlike the structure of the tree defined by its roots as the beginning and its crown as the end, each different rhizome shoot is connected to another, forming a network in which every point can function as a center and spread in every direction. In this network, its center can always be broken, rerouted and regenerated in its old or new lines and form new pathways. In this sense, rather than being contained, the rhizome is always “in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo” (25). It is thus anti-genealogical and works as a “map” which is “open and connectable in all of its dimensions” (12).

In “1914: One or Several Wolves?,” Deleuze and Guattari use the concept of a wolf pack as an example of how rhizome works, in much the same terms as Gilman does with the pack of creeping women, arguing that Freud’s analysis of his patient’s dream of several wolves reduces all the possibilities of becoming someone to the father’s position in the Oedipal triangle (27). Rather than acknowledging that the wolves are fundamentally a pack, affirming multiple possibilities, Freud interprets each wolf as a partial father figure. Deleuze and Guattari counter this reading of the dream by pointing out that wolves always remain a pack. That is the work of Freud’s analysis. To Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome exemplified by the wolf pack is in constant motion and by definition boundless. As each wolf positions itself in relation to the pack, the boundary between itself and others become permeable. There is no outside or inside, belonging or not belonging resulting from exclusionary difference as the pack is in a constant process of formation and deformation that defies hierarchical order (29).

In the form of an endless chain of creeping woman, the protagonist imagines herself in terms of an ongoing process of identity that appears to be rhizomatic. It resists the fixed and stable identity within the gender hierarchy. While the protagonist’s vision of the chain of creeping women does bear some resemblance to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of rhizome as exemplified by the wolf pack, the fact that such vision is contingent upon homogeneity, consisting of the same rather than different women also underscores the limits of the protagonist’s imagination. As with the wolf pack, so the numerous shapes of the creeping women nevertheless indicate the wish to resist exclusionary division and hierarchical order. The fact that the women are creeping suggests that the pack is itinerant in contrast to that of the fixed state of the protagonist who is prescribed to lie on the “nailed” and “immovable” bed and confined within the colonial, hereditary mansion. (“Y” 31). But, unlike Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of

rhizome, the pack as envisioned by the protagonist has the “same shape” (“Y” 32). Any alternative is, as Freud determined, another version of the same. In that the collective model is strictly ideal, without economic or social support, the narrator’s alternative to a model of rational individual turns out to be a form of “bare life”—a life reduced to a biological one without material support.²⁵

It is, thus, not surprising that after the protagonist begins to see the shapes of several creeping women with increasing clarity, she declares that she does not like them a bit and wishes that John would take her away. Had she wanted to pursue the fantasy of destroying her identity as a wife, she would simply have continued following the pattern in which she set out to find “some sort of conclusion” as earlier determined rather than aborting the plan abruptly (“Y” 31). Add to this the fact that, with John’s absence, her appetite worsen and her depression deepens and we see that she clings to her role of wife as her only claim to the category of the human. All these suggest that the only alternative available Gilman is able to imagine for a woman in the nineteenth century is in fact a non-option in that the protagonist sees on the wallpaper a faint figure “shak[ing] the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out,” suggests that this image is another form of confinement and self-abnegation. (“Y” 33).

By denying her request to leave the colonial mansion and labeling her temperament as “so dangerous and so fascinating,” John seems to conspire with the wallpaper and the protagonist “said no more on that score,” implying that her submission is complete (“Y” 34). Her growing sense of captivity is revealed in a drastic change in her response to the pattern. She imagines it has become distinct in its aggression: “you think you have mastered it, but just as you get well

²⁵ I will later show that the protagonist’s vision of the chain of creeping women as a failed alternative to the model of community repeats itself in Gilman’s own vision of Herland.

underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down and tramples upon you” (“Y” 34). The pattern acquires bars behind which she sees a woman who keeps “still” and “quiet” (“Y” 34). This vision of incarceration reinforces the fact that John “hardly let the protagonist stir without instruction” (“Y” 26). Thus as she grows delusional, she also grows acutely conscious of her confinement to the category of women.

Because of such awareness, she no longer defines herself in relation to John. Nor does she naturalize her position as a body without subjectivity. While at the beginning of the story, for example, John’s mocking laugh is accepted with a spontaneous and validating “of course, one expects that in marriage,” she now takes issue with his making fun of her (“Y” 24). In fact, she turned his laugh off with her own. Her reaction of increasing self-assertiveness and nonchalance stands in stark contrast to her continuing attempt to think within John’s framework. At the same time, the protagonist’s changing perception of time marks her gradual self-extrication from her identity as John’s wife and results in an improvement to her health. Initially the story lacks a specific temporal marker, except for the mention of the passing of the first two weeks and the Fourth of July. The protagonist’s time, as organized by John, is generally static and circular, as marked by John’s control: “There comes John, I must put this away” or John’s plan to send her to Weir Mitchell “in the fall” if she does not recover (“Y” 26, 30). Towards the end of the story, she appears to take possession of time, so that John’s timetable no longer organizes her day. Her remarks that “Life is much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch” and that she “really do[es] eat better” announce her increasing interest in life (“Y” 35). The prevalence of the time markers—such as “a week more, “two more days,” “tomorrow,” or “last day”—also implies that her time now is not his. Are we

to think that after the protagonist decides to distance herself from John, she gains a sense of individuality?

We might think so were it not for the fact that Gilman draws upon the ubiquitous smell of the yellow wallpaper to emphasize the protagonist's captivity by the wallpaper has intensified her imprisonment in John's house.²⁶

I noticed it the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog and rain, and whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here.

It *creeps* all over the house.

I find it hovering in the dining-room, *skulking* in the parlor, *hiding* in the hall, *lying* in wait for me on the stairs.

It gets into my hair

Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it—there is that smell!

Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it to find what it smelled like.

It is not bad-at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met.

In this damp weather it is awful, I wake up in the night and find it hanging over me.

It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house—to reach the smell.

²⁶ In *Raising the Dust: The Literary Housekeeping of Mary Ward, Sarah Grand, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, Beth Sutton-Ramspeck points out that at the turn of the nineteenth century, many writers cautioned homeowners that “wallpaper could be toxic.” She notes that “doctors and designers warned that flocked papers act as a ‘dust trap’ that will ‘contaminate’ a room air” and that the wallpaper should generally be changed “every two years” to avoid a “deleterious atmosphere.” She also points out that “[o]ld paper had to be removed before new paper was applied because each covering of paper only adds to the absorbent nature of the walls and helps to increase therefore the unhealthiness and stuffiness of the room” (122-123). The fact that doctors cautioned homeowners concerning the hazards of wallpaper, not to mention the faded and torn covering on the walls of the protagonist's assigned room points to John's interest in the economic issue of not spending on new wallpaper rather than consideration for the protagonist's well-being, especially when the rented home was said to have been “empty for years (“Y” 25).

But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the color of the paper! A yellow smell. (“Y” 37, emphasis added)

As the protagonist reveals, the enduring smell penetrates everywhere both inside and outside the house wherever the protagonist goes. This inseparability of the protagonist and the smell of her captivity is underscored by the convergence of the creeping woman with the creeping smell of wallpaper. At the same time, while she finds the smell “awful,” she develops a strong attraction to it after spending “hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like” (“Y” 37). The simultaneous attraction and rejection of the smell suggest that while the protagonist wants to escape her captivity, she has inhaled it. We might say that she is not only inside the attic room but the room itself is now inside her even when she is outside. It organizes her subjective life as well as does the attic room.

The fact that the protagonist refuses to escape her confinement through suicide underscores her strong intention to repudiate her identity as a wife subsumed under the model of rational individual. If she is to commit suicide, her death would still attach her to her identity and her place in the paternal household she finds restrictive. More importantly, it would mark her as self-destructive by reason of her lack of rationality and would not be taken as an assertion of self. Thus, while actual death would liberate her from confinement, it would not displace the gender classification that privileges John. She instead turns to a form of social death by becoming the non-individuated being that she sees in the wallpaper. Her decision not to look out of the window where she might see many creeping women outside implies full knowledge of captivity: “for outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow. But here I can creep smoothly on the floor.” (“Y” 41). Her repudiation of her role allows her to remain inside the house and at the same time outside the human community.

Critics tend to focus on the last image of the protagonist tying herself to the bed and creeping on all fours as a symptom of her developing madness. I would argue that Gilman exposes that, as a wife, the protagonist is subject to treatment not much different from the practice of restraining madwomen. Such an act is a fictionalized version of Gilman's argument seen in her reformist writings that, despite the progress that accompanied successive social changes, a confining home life remains virtually unaltered. As Gilman elaborates in *The Home: Its Works and Influence* (1903).

[c]hurch and State might change as they would—as they must; science changed, art changed, business changed, all human functions changed and grew save those of the home. Every man's home was his castle, and there he maintained as far as possible the facts and fancies of the place, unaltered from century to century (37).

By specifically tying herself to the nailed bed—the site for sexual reproduction that perpetuates gender difference and hierarchy, the protagonist makes visible the fact that although she is seemingly free to move around in the colonial home, as one lacking liberal personhood, she is confined to a form of living death.

By animalizing her protagonist, Gilman exposes the fact that gender defines her in terms of exclusionary difference that places her under John's totalitarian control. By living as neither human nor animal, but simultaneously as both, the protagonist occupies what Agamben terms “a zone of indistinction” (*Homo Sacer* 4) This new state of being belongs to no category and is therefore unintelligible and unidentifiable. It resists and unsettles the categorical difference between human and animal that supports the model of rational consciousness as well as the difference on which gender hierarchy depends. In this sense, it suspends the work of the anthropological machine and doing so, Gilman addresses a problem that Agmben did not find an answer to. This uncodability of the protagonist's position becomes apparent in John's question:

“What’s the matter?” and “For God’s sake, what are you doing?” (“Y”42). Rather than succumbing to a state of nature or madness, defined in terms of exclusionary opposition, she demonstrates resistance through the act of creeping to the categorical difference that subjects her to a life approaching living death.

As demonstrated by her referring to herself as “Jane,” rather than the first person I, the protagonist dissociates herself from her position in the rational household. Similarly, the term she uses to address John, “that man,” emphasizes her refusal to recognize the social relation in which John is the universal term, a sort of everyman-norm (“Y” 42). By saying that she “got out” at last and that she could creep as “she pleases,” Gilman’s protagonist shows us that one must think her way outside the very category of individual that binds her to gender in order to paradoxically attain a sense of freedom (“Y” 42). Gilman in “The Yellow Wallpaper” thus challenges the form of identity and, by extension, the model of household and community, that subjects some individuals to exclusionary difference. By rendering the protagonist as a creeping woman who repudiates her identity, Gilman implicitly calls for an alternative model in which the protagonist would no longer be defined by gender difference and the asymmetry of contractual relations.

Gilman’s vision and the (re)production of bare life

In the utopian novel *Herland* (1915), Gilman attempts to re-imagine an alternative model of community that allows its female inhabitants to become, to borrow the protagonist’s words, “people; people of all sorts, doing every kind of work” (135).²⁷ To understand how Gilman

²⁷ Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper, Herland, and Selected Writings*. Ed. Denise K. Knight. New York: Penguin Books, 2009. 1-146. Print. All further citations refer to this edition.

makes possible the notion of women as people or human beings, I will first turn to the structure of the community existing prior to Herland in order to understand how the latter came about. Gilman reveals that the older society was based on both constituent exclusion as well as inclusive exclusion.²⁸ Living in a sovereign state inhabited by a bi-sexual race of people who were “of Aryan stock” and ruled by a king, this society engaged in war to defend the country from invading enemies—the constituent exclusion that they had to constantly keep at bay (55). At the same time, the state was also dependent upon slaves who provided labor to the community. These male slaves were taken as an object body—a “bare life” or “inclusive exclusion” in Agamben’s terms within the society. After a catastrophic volcanic eruption, the slaves killed the few surviving men and many, but not all, of the women, attempting to reverse the power dynamic between the ruling class and the sub-class by conquering the remaining young women and establishing sovereignty. Thus, the slaves’ initial position as an inclusive exclusion had become a constituent exclusion when the surviving virgins of the ruling class fought against them.²⁹ By refusing to give in to the slaves and by extension reproduce exogamously, Herlander’s earlier ancestors revealed Gilman’s preference for racial purity at all costs over becoming a polluted body. To give these virgins sovereignty, Gilman kills off the two boys who were later born to them. By doing so as well as allowing the women to reproduce through parthenogenesis, or virgin birth, Gilman is able to solve the problem of sexual difference

²⁸ I use the term “constituent exclusion” to refer to the form of exclusion in which a particular society repels an outside force, such as enemies from an invading society by means of war. The first war between the British and the Boers in South Africa is an example. This constituent exclusion differs from what Agamben terms “exclusive inclusion” in that the latter includes those within society who occupy the position of a sub-class. Although they remain in society, they are excluded from the rights and protection that the ruling class enjoys. An example from American history is the labor supplied by slaves on a plantation owned by a white family.

²⁹ An exception here is that the older slave women remained “exclusive inclusion” by serving the ruling virgins.

as well as hierarchy brought about by the same sexual reproduction that, in the case of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” gives John a privileged position over the protagonist.

In *Herland*, Gilman imagines women who are neither defined as the absence of masculine authority, nor confined to the household. Without sexual reproduction, which supports and naturalizes gendered hierarchy, Herlanders do not develop excessive sexual traits that injuriously misrepresent them as “feminine.” As Van Dyke Jennings remarks, “these ultra-women, inheriting only from women, had eliminated not only certain masculine characteristics...but so much of what we had always thought essentially feminine” (59). For lack of men whom they need to please to maintain a sexuo-economic relationship,³⁰ Herlanders do not demonstrate “a dull submissive monotony” and instead show “social inventiveness” as well as “mechanical and scientific development”—a trait or ability traditionally associated with men of the public sphere (82).³¹ Further, Parthenogenesis allows Gilman to solve the problem of sexual difference³² while also eliminating the problem of racial difference as Herlanders all descend from the same mother and thus are of the same racial group. As many critics have argued, Herland is seen as “a place the reader can visit to gain a vantage point outside the prevailing culture” (Peyser 79). Using fiction to reimagine the biology of the reproductive process allows Gilman to expose what Thomas Peyser succinctly called “the antinomies and

³⁰ The Herlanders’ sense of economic independence is highlighted by their androgynous clothes that have pockets “in surprising number and variety” (39). Although Herlanders do not use money, Bridget Bennett contends that reclaiming the pockets was “a significant political concern” for Gilman. The presence of a pocket suggests the ability to possess and fill it as well as have “constant access to it.” (40).

³¹ Although Herlanders do not display such submission to men, they voluntarily submit to the state.

³² In “As to Parthenogenesis and Humanity,” Gilman emphasizes that parthenogenesis is not a “desirable” means of reproduction. As Gilman remarks, fertilization is “a higher process; a superior process; the highest types in nature do not revert to lower ones” (83).

irrationality of everyday patriarchal life” that define the system of gender difference made possible by sexual reproduction (79).

A number of critics have seen in *Herland* Gilman’s advocacy of socialism. Described in terms such as “crowd,” “multitude,” “pack,” “ants” and “bees” the collectivism with which Gilman characterizes this land is less about political reform than about ideological transformation. Gilman in *Herland* tries to solve the problem of figuring collective identity, which she first attempted in “The Yellow Wallpaper” motif of the creeping woman. In *Herland*, Gilman anticipates the vitalism that we see in Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome. Indeed, Gilman sets out to imagine a better world that promises to depart from the exclusionary difference at work in “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Despite these intentions, I contend that *Herland*—in which the state’s biological policy blends seamlessly with the inhabitant’s lives—nevertheless reproduces the very problem Gilman attempts to solve. Thus, my reading goes against the grain of critics who, like the protagonist, Van, have “quite easily com[e] to accept the *Herland* life as normal, because it was normal” (134). As I see it, rather than creating a rhizomatic community, Gilman in fact imagines a utopian world only to inadvertently recreate a form of government that resembles what Agamben terms a sovereign state, which contains within it the potential groups of excluded people.

To understand how such sovereign state is created in a seemingly benign and democratic community in which its members appear to be content, it is helpful to first learn what constitutes the identity of *Herlanders* and thus their world view. Once *Herlanders* are born, they are already placed and thus interpellated into the category of citizens whose membership is defined collectively—one in which all members are “moved by precisely the same feelings, to the same end” (24). *Herlanders* as citizens bear a contractual relation to the state by submitting to its

prescribed rules and limitations in exchange for rights and protection. To be identified as a Herlander, a member must embrace an identity that is paradoxically a non-self or at least non-autonomous. A “self” in Herland means being similar to other Herlanders. Put another way, deviation from the norm could potentially relegate one to a subclass. Thus, although *Herland* does eliminate the gender hierarchy at work in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” it has the same effect.

Ironically, the unanimity that defines Herland stands in contrast to Gilman’s own critique of the patriarchal practice that reduces women to a nearly uniform type despite racial and cultural distinctions. For example, drawing upon the “Handbook of Proverbs of All Nations” as a reflection of such practice, Gilman remarks that the proverbs concerning women “almost invariably apply to them in general—to the sex.” It is “always and only ‘a woman’ meaning simply a female, and recognizing no personal distinction.” For example, “As much pity to see a woman weep as to see a goose go barefoot.” In contrast, those concerning men “qualify, limit, describe, specialize” and thus highlight their individuality (*WE* 26). While Gilman argues against the patriarchal definition of women as having no personal distinctions, her creation of Herlanders as a conforming and homogeneous “multitude actuated by a common impulse” similarly presents Herlanders as a generic type (44). They simply replace men as the universal type. Such unanimity indicates that law (“the objective power”) and the life of the people (“the “voluntary servitude of the individual”) are blended together so that each defines the other interchangeably.³³ This would make Herland potentially a sovereign state, to use Agamben’s terminology.

³³ I see the structure of Herland as similar to that of Christian monasticism in Agamben’s analysis. In *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (2013), Agamben contends that while a secular law’s objective is to designate boundaries of life by enforcing rules and punishments, monastic rules aim to positively regulate the life of the monks. As Agamben points out, while the monks have to follow the precepts of behavior which “contain a detailed list of penalties,” they “urge the monks not to consider the rules as a legal apparatus. ““The Lord grant,”

Herland's system of education is naturalized and normalized to achieve its own end of creating a homogeneous population, in which an individual functions as a synecdoche for the whole rather than an independent entity. Instead of empowering Herland's children to become independent and critical thinkers, Herland's education instills in every child a subtle form of passivity in which an individual is socialized as part of the collective. Differences of opinion are disallowed in the name of racial progress. Such a model of community in Herland is thus similar to John's rational household in "The Yellow Wallpaper," which does not tolerate dissention of opinion. At the same time, such instruction also leaves open the question of what constitutes the best education. In describing *Herland*, Susan Gubar argues that it is a place where "culture...is no longer opposed to nature" and that *Herland* problematizes the single definition of women as the opposite of men. Such a utopian vision, Gubar concludes, is liberating (139). I would argue, to the contrary, that in naturalizing its system of education to the extent that children "did not seem" cultivated at all, Herland reproduces the system of interpellation that blends seamlessly with totalitarian control of the state and the individual (73). Children grow up, for example, "as naturally as young trees; learning through every sense; taught continuously but *unconsciously*—*never knowing* they were being educated or, feeling "the pressure of that '*forcible* feeding' of the mind" (96, emphasis added). In addition, while "special knowledge" is "open to all, as they desire it," the so-called "common knowledge" is compulsory and "*fe[d]* into the minds of [their] little ones with no waste of time or strength" (106, emphasis added). An education that naturalizes common knowledge elicits a normative performance from young Herlanders.

Similarly, the fact that children in Herland are taught, "as rapidly as feasible, to use and control

reads the conclusion of the rule of Augustine, 'that you observe all these things with *joy...not as slaves* under the law, but *as those who have been set free* by grace' (29, emphasis added). In this sense, the boundary between rule and life in Herland is, similar to that of Christian monastic life in Agamben analysis, blurred to the extent that they become indistinguishable.

their own bodies” echoes John’s constant prescription for his wife in “the Yellow Wallpaper” (108). Herland’s educational method indirectly prescribes desires and ensures that each member acts within the constraints of citizenship. Knowledge masquerades as truth for the purpose of control. Herland education ensures the uniformity of its members’ thoughts, thereby preventing any dissent that would disrupt its internal harmony.

Moreover, although this form of education may be, as Van criticizes, “a too intensive system of culture,” it is veiled behind the distorted concept of play, which thus gives an appearance of liberation from authority (108). This has significant implications for the possibility of Herland’s exercise of sovereignty. As Agamben argues, modern democracy can potentially turn into totalitarian rule, when the sovereign declares a state of exception. It “wants to put the freedom and happiness of men into play in the very place—‘bare life’—that marked their subjection” (*Homo Sacer* 9-10). Thus, what the “physical merriment,” “hilarious experiment” and “games” as part of Herland’s mechanism of socialization do is firmly bind its members to their identity, which subjects them to state authority without seeming to do so (108). The “choices, simple choices, with very obvious causes and consequences” in such games also expose how such education, which seemingly enables children to be authors of their own actions, is for the purpose of facilitating their goal of a socially-oriented indoctrination (107). While seeming to allow the children freedom of choice and the pleasure of education, Herland’s system mobilizes its members through a form of totalitarian control. As new members of Herland mature, they are well-prepared to become full-fledged citizens who are in charge of the state and agree to be subject to its rules.

Similar to the protagonist of “the Yellow Wallpaper” at the beginning of the story, Herlanders willingly validate the state’s policy. Somel, a Herlander, stresses that in times of limited resources the biological needs of an individual give way to social needs.

You see, before a child comes to one of us there is a period of *utter exaltation*—the whole being is *uplifted and filled with a concentrated desire* for that child. We *learned* to look forward to that period with the greatest caution. Often our young women, those to whom motherhood had not yet come, would *voluntarily defer* it. When that *deep inner demand* for a child began to be felt she would *deliberately engage* in the most active work, physical and mental; and even more important, would *solace her longing* by the direct care and service of the babies we already had (71, emphasis added).

Here, the most basic right, that of biological reproduction, is implicitly controlled through the mechanism of interpellation and socialization. While Somel’s description is fraught with words and phrases reflecting strong individual biological urges, such needs are subsumed under those of society. Although Herlanders deeply cherish and exalt motherhood, they willingly make what Van considers “an appalling sacrifice” by foregoing an opportunity to be a mother during the time of limited resources— “the hardest thing” for them to do— to accommodate their community (70). During times of plenitude, they also voluntarily limit themselves to the satisfaction of motherhood only once so as to prevent overpopulation. The fact that Somel as a representation of Herlanders sees such strict birth control policy in a positive light and refutes Van’s labelling her country as “a whole nation of starving mothers,” clearly shows how Herlanders are interpellated as good citizens (72).

Although Gilman imagines a society that does away with sexual reproduction, thus seeking to remedy the exclusionary difference that attends the distinction in male and female sex roles, she inadvertently causes such difference by resorting to the maintenance of racial purity through negative eugenics. As Agamben contends, such biological management is one of

“discriminating [within the natural life] a so-to-speak authentic life and a life lacking every political value” which provides a context for Nazi racism (*Homo Sacer* 132). Rather than incorporating the differences and doing away with hierarchical domination, Herlanders as “Conscious Makers of People” resort to the “business to train out, to breed out, the lowest types” by prohibiting women who display morbid or criminal traits from having children” (69, 83). At the same time, as the character Somel explains, “[i]f the girl showing the bad qualities had still the power to appreciate social duty, we appealed to her, by that, to renounce motherhood” (83). Such subtle persuasion and manipulation, in which those who deviate from Herland’s genetic criteria of membership are not allowed to give birth, is a veiled form of inclusive exclusion. Similar to the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” who is put in an attic room when she appears to diverge from her wifely role, Herlanders with potentially undesirable traits are excluded from the rights of reproduction that other Herlanders are entitled to. At the same time, the fact that the state never allows mothers with “disproportionate egotism” to give birth also raises the question of what constitutes and defines such “egotism.” This ambiguous criterion makes possible the production of “inclusive exclusion” through the state of exception (83). These lowest types thus reveal traces of the exclusive inclusion we see in the noncompliant wife in “The Yellow Wallpaper.”³⁴

³⁴ This discourse of subtle exclusion and potential elimination can be found in the casual conversation between the Herlander Somel and Jeff regarding the animals they select to live in Herland.

“Have you no cattle-sheep-horses?” I drew some rough outlines of these beasts and showed them her. “We had, in the very old days, these,” said Somel, and sketched with swift sure touches a sort of sheep or Llama, “and these”—dogs of two or three kinds, “and that”—pointing to my absurd but recognizable horse. “What became of them?” asked Jeff. “We do not want them anymore. They took up too much room—we need all our land to feed our people. It is such a little country, you know.” (49).

Although seemingly a sensible way of ensuring the survival of the population, the euphemistic answer that Herlanders “do not want them [the animals] anymore” marks the hidden but inevitable brutality involved in the

For Herlanders, nature is to be totally managed and modified to suit the needs of the group. This mode of biological manipulation is thematized in a discussion of Herlander's successful selective breeding program, focused—tellingly—on domestic cats. As Van remarks, “by the most prolonged and careful selection and exclusion they had developed a race of cats that did not sing” (51). At the same time, the cats “had ceased to kill birds” and were “rigorously bred to destroy mice and moles and all such enemies of the food supply” (51). While the cats are “healthy and happy and friendly,” such narrative implies that along the process of such intervention and breeding, some cats which display undesirable traits—meowing, killing birds or not eliminating rodents— are implicitly treated as aberrant and to be managed as exclusive inclusion. At the same time, the narrative conceals the nature of the so-called training process and the accompanying violence involved to produce the desired breed of cats (i.e., those considered “exclusive inclusion” are “rigorously” taught to “destroy” other animals) (51). Also left unaddressed is the question of what constitutes an appropriate method of breeding. Thus, just as the cats are bred and trained to be silent, Herlanders are interpellated into complacent conformists.

In addition to the business of training out and breeding out, Herland also reveals the control of the population's biological activities. If a member of one of the “lowest types,” for example, insists on giving birth, Gilman stresses that she is not “allowed” to participate in the socialization of the child (83). Thus, in Herland, the right to raise a child is also strictly given to those who display the desired traits, and not those considered “exclusive inclusion.” It is no exaggeration that Herland is described as “a land in a state of perfect cultivation” with many

process of choosing suitable animals (49). Although not discussed in the novel, such elimination has a significant implication for those Herlanders considered “the lowest type” (83).

“closely cultivated gardens,” while its children are, as Van remarks, “most perfectly cultivated, richly developed roses” in comparison to non-Herlanders who are “tumbleweeds” (73). The metaphor points to how the “weeds” –any children with aberrant tendencies— are bred out, underscoring the fact that Herland imagines itself as a self-regulating social body working against all forms of contamination or contagion. As Thomas Peyser points out, the likening of Herlanders to gardeners marks the nature of a totalitarian state which naturalizes the process of “segregat[ing], contain[ing] and prevent[ing]” such “human weeds” from spreading (*Utopia* 89).

Thus, while *Herland* promises to do away with the exclusionary difference based on sexual distinction, so effectively portrayed in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman’s identity politics exposes the fissures within her social vision. Although she is successful in realizing an alternate world in which women are not defined by an oppositional femininity, her insistence on defending the community of women of “Aryan Stock” against the differences of others to protect it against inferior women reinstates what Agamben terms “condition of belonging” (*The Coming Community* 2). Thus, even in her feminist utopia the problem of hierarchy reappears, where the women fit to be citizens (presumably the equals of men) define themselves in opposition to women who for one reason or another do not. What *Herland* inadvertently exposes is that while the captive woman trapped in the yellow wallpaper in her reincarnation as a Herlander has been set “free” and becomes part of the dominant culture, her identity is still dependent on an “outside” or an objectification of “the other” even within the same community consisting solely of women to maintain its autonomy. Rather than valuing heterogeneity, Herlander is just another a culture on defense against the threat of devaluation that would occur were they to incorporate “the other.” In this sense, Gilman’s solution to the problem she poses earlier in “The Yellow

Wallpaper” replicates the Rowlandson model, which can only incorporate others on the basis of similarity.

Both “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *Herland*, a novel Gilman published 23 years after her most famous story, try to imagine a model of the individual and, by extension, an American identity, which offers a solution to the problems that arise because of the restrictive categories of gender. In this respect, the protagonists in both works suggest Gilman’s move towards something like a model of the rhizome, which Deleuze and Guatarri formulated a good 75 years later: a mobile and a mutable subject that exists in a state of becoming rather than being. But the freedom that arises from collective being also comes with restrictions and exclusions. *Herland*, an attempted utopia, nonetheless imposes the oppositional definition of the individual at the level of the state, which simultaneously excludes men and includes excluded women who are not allowed to breed. This replication of the very problem of exclusion that Gilman set out to overcome, attempts to create a world immune to history—one that withstands the forces of globalization through the totalitarian regulation of all activities. As Peyser explains, Gilman “attempt[s] to forestall the incursion of the global upon the local” and imagines a world “in which northern Europeans stoically endure the ascendancy of darker races” (2). While *Herland* undermines Gilman’s attempt to imagine community beyond gender hierarchies, the novel inadvertently insists on the need to incorporate difference in order to create a truly democratic community.

Plasticity and The Limits of Gender Categories in *The House of Mirth*

At the end of Book One of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), a *nouveau riche* Jewish outsider, Simon Rosedale, approaches protagonist Lily Bart and reveals to her his plan for turning their primary assets into success.³⁵ Together, he argues, Rosedale and Lily hold the solution to their respective social dilemmas. Having "money more than [he] know[s] how to invest," Rosedale is in search of "the right woman" to convert it into elite cultural forms that would give him social distinction (139).³⁶ Already endowed with aesthetic sensibility and a "jewel-like rareness," Lily is in need of an affluent husband to sustain the aesthetic style that defines her daily existence (72). Yet, early in the novel, while Rosedale and other suitors are more than ready to enter into what seems to be a socially or financially brilliant marital arrangement, Lily demurs.

Some critics have homed in on this moment as a critical turning point in the novel. Carol J. Wershoven calls such hesitation "a gesture close to social suicide" ("*The Awakening*" 29). A *History of Matrimonial Institutions*, published the year before the novel, states that, for many

³⁵ According to Cadence Waid, Wharton began to write *The House of Mirth* in 1904. The novel began running in monthly installments in *Scribner's* magazine in January through November 1905 and reached bookstores in October 1905 (161-162). Richard H. Lawson also points out the novel is the first book published by Scribner's that sold 140,000 copies in print in three months (29).

³⁶ Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990. All further citations are to this edition.

women, marriage tends to become “a form of purchase-contract in which the woman bartersex-capital to the man in exchange for life-support” (Howard 249). In this chapter, however, I argue that Wharton’s novel reveals that such a marriage formula does not pertain to Lily. Rather than sex-capital, Lily must trade strictly on her cultural capital to support herself.³⁷ Sex – even the intimation thereof – diminishes her value as a prospective wife.³⁸ Thus, her decision not to marry and instead to be a socialite sponging off rich benefactors will supply her with the money she needs to exist as a part of elite society, even as her indebted status will destroy the cultural capital she possesses by virtue of being unpurchased.

Lily’s story, which moves from an act close to social suicide to one isolated from her old social sphere, has offered fodder for a vast amount of scholarly comment. One critical tendency is to see Lily as the victim of her family and her own narcissism, handicaps that ultimately prevent her from marrying. This approach establishes a relationship between Wharton’s life and art and draws upon psychoanalytical framework to pathologize Lily – and Wharton herself – for creating such a compelling, yet deeply imperfect, heroine.³⁹ Another critical camp sees Lily as a

³⁷ Wharton’s view of marriage as strictly an exchange of cultural capital, rather than sex capital echoes, to a certain extent, Carol Smith-Rosenberg’s explication of courtship based on sexual purity in Jacksonian America: “Courtship should be prolonged and chaste, a period planned and supervised by parents, a period spent within the confines of family and kin. Virtuous young men and women, guided by their parents, would not seek spouses who would stimulate their sexual urges but rather brothers and sisters with whom they could reconstruct their parents’ home” (“Sex” 241). Although in the setting of the novel, courtship moves beyond the confines of family and kin and Lily has no parental oversight, Wharton hints that Lily seeks not merely an affluent husband but also one who values her cultural rather than sexual capital.

³⁸ Wharton portrays the potential male suitors for Lily as predatory, hinting that the type of marriage Lily will end up with would be equivalent to such bartering of sexual capital. As Judith Fetterley points out, *The House of Mirth* is “pervaded by a sense of male flesh as repulsive and by a vision of men as gross dull beasts” (204). For example, Rosedale is described as being “kind [to Lily] in his gross, unscrupulous rapacious way, the way of the predatory creature with his mate” (195). When with Lily, Percy Gryce felt “the confused titillation with which the lower organisms welcome the gratification of their needs” (19).

³⁹ For a sampling of critics who adopt such approaches, see Holbrook, Raphael, and Wershoven.

victim of men, and of what Thorstein Veblen terms “conspicuous consumption.”⁴⁰ Bonnie Lynn Gerard, for example, argues that Lily Bart’s “pursuit of social status as an empowered consumer presents her with a paradox: in order to become a consumer she must first present herself as an item to be consumed” (410). Gerard further contends that the “rituals of material consumption force Lily to display herself as a socially valuable, and therefore socially vulnerable object” which results in “her becom[ing] obsessed with aesthetics – that is, with the outward appearance of a situation rather than its true substance.” By tracing “patterns of alimentary consumption – literal, figurative, and implied,” Gerard argues that in Wharton’s novel “New York society devours [Lily]” (413). Both critical perspectives see her as a victim of a society where social success is predicated on money and parents train daughters to use their beauty to lure the capital they need to sustain it.

Both the psychoanalytic and the more economic approaches, however, ignore the unassailable, non-fungible value that Lily embodies and maintains to the end. Wharton’s novel affirms that such cultural capital – the quality of being unpurchasable in terms of physical relations or aesthetics – prevails even without the support of financial capital. This chapter argues that what both approaches implicitly take as disadvantages – the lack of desire to marry and the lack of money – is actually the source of Lily’s power.⁴¹ Rather than reading the novel as reflecting both notions of “lack,” my analysis draws upon the work of contemporary theorist

⁴⁰ Walter Benn Michael sees Lily as a victim of the market. Reading the novel as displaying “Wharton’s extraordinary market psychology,” Michael argues that when Lily most appears to oppose the market, particularly when she refuses to blackmail Bertha and marry Rosedale, she is in fact fascinated by risk and speculation. Her actions suggest her “expression for the market” (228-9, 230).

⁴¹ I am drawing upon Nancy Armstrong’s argument in her article “What feminism did to novel studies” in which she states that women’s “lack in political terms was their cultural gain” (105). Armstrong suggests that *The House of Mirth* might be “regarded as narratives that dialectically perform the ascendancy of culture over traditionally masculine forms of authority” (110). I seek to expand on this point. See Armstrong, 107-110.

Catherine Malabou, in particular her notion of plasticity, to articulate Lily's subject position as a positive alternative to a supposed lack. Plasticity is a term that I use to describe Lily's refusal to submit to a gender category that subjects her to men with money. This concept, which Malabou appropriates from neuroscientific discourse, allows my analysis to move away from a reliance on sexuality as the sole frame of reference for understanding the protagonist's actions, as well as the accompanying assumption that a place within a family or kinship structure is the biologically and psychologically positive object of desire. Thinking in terms of plasticity allows me to read the novel outside the narrow frameworks of sexualized naturalism and economic determinism that force one to view Lily as a victim of her environment.

Despite the ways in which Malabou's terminology seems to overlap with an evolutionary (and deterministic) set of concepts, this chapter argues that Lily demonstrates a form of plasticity that is not equivalent to adaptability: critics are correct in noting her inability to "adapt" to social norms when they point out she never "clinches the deal" on marriage. Through Lily's predicament as a single woman in a society that guarantees economic protection only to a married woman with a secure position in the masculine household and gender category, Wharton exposes the limitation of the model of the individual in which those outside circumscribed set of options are doomed to a form of living death. As earlier argued in chapter one, such a model of individual selfhood is based on Lockean model of rational consciousness, which supports gender hierarchy and exclusionary difference and can thus potentially render one with an identity into a form of non-identity. At the same time, Wharton's commitment to sustaining Lily's singular status shows that being inside such household run by men with money suggests the possibility of being, to borrow Malabou's words, "always and everywhere 'in chains'" (11). By endorsing Lily's plasticity over what I am terming *adaptability-as-conformity* – a mode of acquiescence

that would surely allow her to survive – Wharton calls for an update of such model of the individual. She advocates a subject position open to circulation and transformation, rather than one that entails being anchored to a particular place and fixed in a role determined by gender ideology.

Yet the arrow of critique points in both directions. While Malabou's notion of plasticity allows me to expose Wharton's polemical stance, the novel in turn questions Malabou's theoretical position by pointing up the difficulty of synthesizing plasticity with class and gender in light of the determining force of capitalism. In this way, Wharton speaks across a divide that is historical as well as conceptual: *The House of Mirth*, by emplotting different modes of selfhood and survival, brings to the fore a philosophical problem that lies within plasticity and is unaddressed in Malabou.

The analysis in this chapter will proceed in four sections. In the first section, in order to establish the key terms of the argument about Wharton's novel, I show how Malabou's concept of *plasticity* goes beyond *flexibility* (the ability to receive form) by including the notion of "plastique" (the ability to annihilate the form). I contend that, paradoxically, Lily's flexibility renders her a desirable member of the elite class to which she does not appropriately belong, while her status as her own aesthetic creation gives her distinction as a rare and coveted object. In the second section, I examine how the very flexibility that enables Lily to use cultural capital to adapt to the economic demands of the society she would inhabit also allows her to repudiate the gender category that supports her life by attracting money to sustain it. Over the course of the novel, the character's oscillation between these two dimensions of plasticity puts her in a double bind where she cannot adapt to economic circumstances (i.e. marry) without destroying her cultural capital; but, neither can she retain her aesthetic value (i.e. stay single) and stay alive.

Here, I wish to highlight plasticity's capacity to break from the flexibility that, in Malabou's terms, enslaves one to capital.

In the third section, I argue that the idea of *form* is what provides the conceptual link between the aesthetics of Wharton's character and Malabou's understanding of plasticity. Like any aesthetic object, Lily is all about form. To create herself as a figure of distinction, as in the tableaux vivants, she must break with the roles of female companion and social plaything, both modes of being that exploited her flexibility. I contend that while Wharton and Malabou reveal plasticity's potential for liberation, the novelist in her work of fiction also underscores its limits. By breaking free from capital as exemplified in her tableaux vivants performance in which she uses her body as a medium of expression, Lily risks being viewed through the lens of commodification. From this perspective, Lily's downward spiral from the leisure class to indigent poverty reveals that the only way to survive as a woman is by becoming flexible and exchanging aesthetic value for economic value. In other words, rootless Lily ends up having only a single "option" for survival: to move from the category of biological being stripped of gender by her lack of capital to that of a gendered individual who occupies a feminine position within a masculine household ruled by men with money. In the final section, I conclude that Lily's refusal to participate in the system of exchange and her repudiation of financial security perversely maintain her distinction as a formal state of being without the support of capital. But this distinction depends on the final repudiation of her biological being – which is to say, her death.

Two dimensions of plasticity

In *What Should We Do With Our Brain ?* (2008), Catherine Malabou draws upon plasticity, the dominant concept of neuroscience in the twenty-first century, to argue for the potential freedom that lies within our identity, a potential that, I would argue, Wharton herself formulates in terms of class and gender in *The House of Mirth* (1905). Malabou argues that from the nineteenth century onward, brain science has spoken the language of determinism. Neuroscience discourses that describe brain structures as “entirely genetically determined” ignore, she maintains, the “possibility of a social and political non-determinism” (4, 13). While accepting the brain’s capacity for alteration, neuroscientists such as Antonio Damasio and Joseph E. LeDoux diverge from Malabou; they fail to recognize the potential freedom and creativity that lies within it. As a result, argues Malabou, these thinkers reduce plasticity to a principle of flexibility that enables merely *biological* adaptation and survival: “we tend constantly to substitute for [plasticity] its mistaken cognate, *flexibility*” (12, emphasis original).

It is no accident, Malabou contends, that the concept of the plastic brain as merely flexible mirrors the neo-liberal world of global capitalism and consequently produces what she terms a “naturalization effect” that promotes the ideas of networking, decentralization, docility and flexibility (9). Malabou would be among the first to say that these contemporary neoliberal ideas have their roots in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, they are explicitly figured in *The House of Mirth*, a novel published in the very time when the energy and resources of the new capitalist class reimagined the United States as the industrial and financial capital of the world – or, to use Wharton’s words, when “America is pouring out her annual millions over the old world” (“The Great American Novel” 156).

To put conceptual flesh to the question of the potential of plasticity, I will first turn to Malabou's explanation of these two related yet significantly different terms, flexibility and plasticity (79). Malabou's two theoretical terms allow me to articulate Wharton's thought experiment with plasticity in relation to gender and class, as well as the critique of the model of the individual – promulgated by critics of the novel – that does not allow her protagonist to operate outside the forces of market capitalism. According to Malabou, flexibility refers to one's ability "to receive a form or impression, to be able to fold oneself, to take the fold, not to give it" (12). A flexible person knows "how to bow [his or her] head with a smile" (79), behavior that observes "a pure and simple logic of imitation and performance" and which she considers "reproductive and normative" (72). In Malabou's sense of the term, a flexible individual displays a readiness for self-modification – and thus conformity. The environment can shape that individual to its demands until he or she is "foreign to [him/herself]," a malleable state of being that is paradoxically a form of imprisonment and a state of being "always and everywhere in chains" (3, 11). In short, to equate the brain only with an ability to receive form is to consider it "purely and simply a machine" at the expense of its potential for improvisation and freedom (9).⁴²

Although flexibility and plasticity share the ability to receive form, plasticity has another attribute that distinguishes it sharply from flexibility. To conceive of the brain's plasticity as merely acquiescent to external molding, according to Malabou, is to grasp "only one of the semantic registers of plasticity." Flexibility, as she points out, is "plasticity minus its *genius*" – a

⁴² Interestingly, Wharton herself also alludes to machine-like people in the novel when she describes the Wetheralls as people who always went to church: "they belonged to the vast group of human *automata* who go through life without neglecting to perform a single one of the gestures executed by the surrounding *puppets*" (43 emphasis added). This anecdote implies that Wharton, like Malabou, thinks of plasticity as the very antithesis of machine-like flexibility.

term that Wharton scholars will recognize as a key attribute of Lily Bart (12). The study of neuronal plasticity and cerebral functioning has taught us that while “the majority of adult stem cells generate cells similar to those of the tissue they come from,” some of them “can transform themselves into different types of cells” (16). In addition simply to being “formable” and “formative,” qualities that define flexibility as well, plasticity can, crucially, “*annihilate the very form it is able to receive or create*” (5, emphasis added).⁴³ Plasticity implies “an agency of disobedience to every constituted form, a refusal to submit to a model” (6). Where flexibility endlessly molds itself to suit the demands of the environment, plasticity, on occasion, resists adaptations and instead changes the individual’s relation to a given milieu. An individual with a “plastic quality” will at some point refuse the demands of her situation in order to enjoy the freedom of shaping her environment to better suit her needs and desires.

In *The House of Mirth*, Malabou’s notion of plasticity is dramatized in the protagonist Lily Bart, a “dryad”-like character whose nature is one of “sylvan freedom” and endowed with “plastic possibilities” (12, 186).⁴⁴ Like wood, the strong but pliant organic material invoked in these mythic metaphors, Lily is somewhat flexible.⁴⁵ However, just as wood can fracture if too much pressure is applied, Lily can destroy the form she receives and reinvent herself. Malabou’s argument openly endorses the refusal to be merely “flexible individuals who combine a permanent control of the self with a capacity to self-modify at the whim of fluxes, transfers and exchanges, for fear of explosion” (78). Wharton’s experiment with the same plastic potential –

⁴³ For a detailed explanation of “many plasticities of cerebral functioning,” see Malabou 15-31.

⁴⁴ Janet Beer, Pamela Knights and Elizabeth Nolan point out that at the turn of the century, “to view a woman as a dryad (a fragile, elusive creature) was a fashionable male fantasy.” While Beer, Knights and Nolan argue that Selden’s poeticizing of Lily is “a cliché and Lily’s ‘sylvan’ self is as artificial as any other stylist drawing-room feature,” I suggest that read through the lens of Malabou’s concept of plasticity, Lily’s dryad-like quality lends her distinction (26).

⁴⁵ The term “flexible” in my analysis of the novel is used as an aspect of plasticity for clarity.

through the figure of the unmarried Lily Bart – suggests that such freedom may well come at the expense of individual physical integrity, or survival. As a woman who falls from her social class, Wharton's protagonist depends on her flexibility; plasticity – the capacity to “annihilate” the forms pressed on the self – precipitates her downfall (Malabou 5).

Lily's need for flexibility for survival is underscored by the fact that she, as a “highly specialized” being, was born into and raised within the exclusive world of gentility (6). Her world is similar to that of Wharton: Lily, like the young Edith Jones, was “educated to a world where leisure ruled.” She was taught “[never to] talk about money” and “think about it as little as possible” (Kazin 74).⁴⁶ We observe this mindset at the beginning of *The House of Mirth*, when Lily wants to replace yesterday's “fading flowers” on her family luncheon table. As one with leisure class training, Lily “knew very little of the value of money” and only that she “hate[d] to see faded flowers,” a sight that “disturbs her sense of fitness” (27). She thinks nothing of the small fortune necessary to buy lilies-of-the-valley for her aesthetic harmony, as it is of prime importance to her.⁴⁷ Lily's assumption that money is akin to an indefatigable resource for aesthetic appreciation marks her lifestyle as highly exclusive.

Where the “amphibious” character Lawrence Selden is able to exist both inside and outside elite circles, Lily – who is “endlessly variable” in her milieu – is as helpless as a “sea anemone” attached to a submerged rock. Her comfort range and social terrain are limited: she “could not figure herself as anywhere but in a drawing-room, diffusing elegance as a flower

⁴⁶ Wharton herself emphasizes that “the circle [she] described in [*The House of Mirth*] was that in which [she] had lived since [her] eleventh year, and which, in all essentials, had remained unchanged in the interval between [her] childhood and the writing of the book” (“Introduction” 31).

⁴⁷ The current monetary equivalent of the cost of the flowers is approximately \$300. For a helpful discussion of the relative power of spending among different social groups during the late nineteenth century, see Beer, Knights and Nolan 30-33, 52-53.

sheds perfume” (56, 79, 235).⁴⁸ Wharton makes use of these metaphors from the natural world to make it clear that Lily’s flexibility is much more limited than that of a man similarly positioned. As Wharton stresses, Lily’s whole being “dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in” (23). Lily is “incapable of living without it and “has never been able to find her way” in another environment (211). The metaphors indeed suggest that Lily’s very life depends on her connection to the world of luxury from which she is financially excluded.

Thus, as the novel opens, Wharton raises the question of how a woman who displays cultural capital can maintain a position in an economic class to which she does not by right belong. With such a luxurious lifestyle implicitly dependent on the power of healthy finances, Wharton’s protagonist apparently has to submit to the whims of capital if she wants to survive (7). Yet by giving Lily the ability to overthrow the identity that renders her perpetually in “bondage to other people’s pleasure” and places her in “manacles” of servitude, Wharton argues for plasticity over flexibility (8, 24).

To explain how the dynamic between flexibility and plasticity plays out in the novel, it is helpful to recall Lily’s upbringing as it affects her relationships with men. It is in these terms that Wharton brings to the fore the character’s dilemma. Because of her family’s financial ruin and her lack of a parental safety net, Lily has technically fallen out of the propertied class. She lives with her wealthy Aunt Peniston, though the promise of an inheritance is tenuous, predicated on Lily sustaining her social status through an appropriate marriage.⁴⁹ At the same time, her

⁴⁸ Wharton’s choice of narrative voice is a third person perspective mostly filtered through the mind of Selden. It creates an omniscient appearance and underscores his privileged position as a man, who, rather than Lily, can tell the story.

⁴⁹ I would like to credit Leslie Shimotakahara’s chapter “Capital and Its Discontents: Edith Wharton’s New York” in “Regional Modernism: the Vanishing Landscape in American Literature 1996-1952,” which significantly influences

upbringing has exposed her to the elegance and exclusivity of Old New York society whose structure is supported by inherited money. She has been habituated to the presence of “French and English maids,” “an equally changing dynasty of nurses and footmen,” and a good cook regardless of the cost, not to mention Mrs. Bart’s exquisite wardrobe throughout Lily’s childhood (25, 26). Lily was trained to perform what Veblen terms “conspicuous leisure” (28). Her role in life, to use Veblen’s words, is to produce value in the forms of “[r]efined tastes, manners and habits of life.” These accomplishments attest to her possession of the limitless resources of “time, application, and expense” that those performing other forms of labor cannot imagine (36). Thus trained to display discriminating taste and aesthetic sensibility, Lily is “a rare flower grown for exhibition” (246-247).

Indeed, Lily is exactly the highly specialized woman of discerning aesthetic sensibility who not only produces what Pierre Bourdieu terms “cultural capital,” but also constitutes such capital in and of herself. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), Bourdieu argues that the distinguishing mark of class lies in

...the aptitude for taking a specifically aesthetic point of view on objects already constituted aesthetically – and therefore put forward for the admiration of those who have learned to recognize the signs of the admirable – and the even rarer capacity to constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or even ‘common’ (because they are appropriated, aesthetically or otherwise, by the ‘common people’) or to apply the principles of a ‘pure’ aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life in cooking, dress or decoration, for example (40).

Bourdieu emphasizes that class distinction as a form of capital – which is as potent a treasure as money in the bank – allows one to appreciate not only the aesthetic in the already aestheticized,

this chapter, especially pages 77-78, 80, 83-85, 89, and helped me better understand the protagonist’s characterization.

but also to see aesthetic value in what is common. Such individuals display this distinction, this capacity to discern and thus to embody value, in the conduct of their daily lives. Bourdieu's explanation of distinction also underscores that being "aesthetic" is not merely decorative or attractive but entails a deeper and discriminating appreciation of beauty.

Lily thus proves to be the living epitome of two crucial qualities: Bourdieu's concept of distinction as manifested in cultural capital, and Malabou's notion of genius as embodied in the quality of plasticity. In a rarely discussed scene at the wedding of Jack Stepney and Miss Van Osburgh, Lily and her friend Gerty Farish – whose "indiscriminate and uncritical perception" is so "irritating to [Lily]'s finer perception" – observe the bridal jewels (104).⁵⁰ Here, Lily displays an ability to appreciate the aesthetic quality of the gems, while the same object completely eludes her friend who, Wharton tells us, "typified the mediocre and the ineffectual" (70). While Wharton has Gerty express what Bourdieu terms a "'naïve reaction' – horror at the horrible, desire for the desirable, pious reverence for the sacred," – the narrator carefully notes Lily's internal response to each element that goes into the ensemble of the jewels (*Distinction* 54, *HM* 72):

... Lily's heart gave an envious throb as she caught the refraction of light from their surfaces--the milky gleam of perfectly matched pearls, the flash of rubies relieved against contrasting velvet, the intense blue rays of sapphires kindled into light by surrounding diamonds: all these precious tints enhanced and deepened by the varied art of their setting. The glow of the stones warmed Lily's veins like wine. More completely than any other expression of wealth they symbolized the life she longed to lead, the life of fastidious aloofness and refinement in which

⁵⁰ Patrick Mullen also discusses this scene in some detail. However, his point being to use Lily's appreciation of the artistry and the labor that went into the jewelry as a rebuttal to those critics who read "Lily's relationship to the world of things as a form of her commodification or as the transmission or absorption of the fetish power of the commodity" (48). My stance, though similarly interested in aesthetic value, uses Lily's attraction to the jewels to point out her cultural capital. Linda Wagner-Martin briefly analyzes the scene. However, she only suggests that Lily and Gerty respond "much more positively" to the "exquisite white sapphire" than to the "diamond pendant" rather than showing the distinction between both characters' responses to the jewels on display (79).

every detail should have the finish of a jewel, and the whole form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness (71-72).⁵¹

Lily is delighted by the complex artistry and skills that blend each small element into a refined, harmonious composition. Wharton uses free indirect discourse to focalize Lily's thought process, in contrast to the novelistic treatment of Gerty, whose outburst is inspired by the sheer size of the jewelry. By juxtaposing prolonged contemplation over startled reaction, the formal structure of the novel itself takes an aesthetic position, affirming that such an object requires contemplation before one can fully appreciate it. In Bourdieu's terms, appreciative contemplation reveals Lily's mind as one "constituted within an experience of the world freed from urgency and through the practice of activities which are an end in themselves" (54).

Nowhere else in the story does Lily so perfectly display what Bourdieu identified as "the principle of pure aesthetic in the most everyday choice of everyday life" as in the novel's opening scene featuring the chance encounter between Lawrence Selden and Lily (40). To display rare quality that differentiates Lily from other women of modest means, Wharton juxtaposes her with the afternoon crowd of Grand Central Station. Despite the churning sea of commuters, Lily "stood apart" and drew the attention of not only Selden, who was returning from "a hurried dip into the country," but also the "suburban traveler rushing to his last train" (5). In contrast to the "dull tints of crowd" of "sallow-faced girls in preposterous hats," and "flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans," Selden finds the sight of Lily

⁵¹ It is no accident that Wharton expends a good deal of prose in depicting this scene, as it encapsulates Lily's existence as one "brought up to be ornamental" and to radiate artistic harmony in the manner of the jewelry she appreciates (232). Mary Gordon elaborates that the comparison of Lily to a jewel sheds light on how the influence of civilization is seen in her role as an upper-class woman; "[t]here are no jewels in nature; there are only stones which must be polished, cut, and set." Civilization thus performs the task of curbing instinct, that is, Lily "should be able to bestow pleasure without being interested in experiencing it herself" (xii introduction). While I agree with Gordon's explication of the comparison, such analysis reads jewel-like Lily as the victim of society and pays no attention to her cultural capital and agency.

both “a luxurious pleasure” and a “refreshing” surprise; he sees her anew and savors the experience even though he already knows her. Lily inspires “surmis[ing], “inferring,” “curiosity” and “perplexity” despite the fact that “there is nothing new” about her.” Even her “simplest acts” seem “the result of far reaching intentions” (5). Implicit in this description is the aesthetic appeal of Lily’s self-displays, which makes her at once a rare jewel and an “object” to be looked at (36).

Despite her appearance as a rare jewel, Lily lacks permanent financial support and is “still Miss Bart” at the age of twenty-nine, making her social position even more precarious than her mother’s was (33). As critic Adam Jubbur remarks, Lily is an “aging socialite,” and as a no-longer-young woman from an elite background, she can easily slip into the category of persons in a marginal state (268).⁵² Such people are, according to Mary Douglas, “left out in the patterning of society, [and] are placeless. They may be doing nothing morally wrong, but their status is undefinable,” a position that is regarded as “both vulnerable and dangerous” (95).⁵³ One can hear in Douglas’s astute observation an echo of Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of the “state of exception,” and his essential insight that a model of personhood defined in terms of belonging can potentially render one vulnerable to being a non-identity. In this sense, being without a position in a masculine household, Lily’s status can slide from that of “a woman” into one stripped of gender by her lack of capital and rendered, potentially, to mere biological life (what Agamben terms *zoe*). In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton underscores this vulnerability by showing that even married women of the moneyed class like Bertha Dorset don’t “dare lose [their] hold

⁵² Pamela Knights points out that the median age for first-time brides during Wharton’s time was approximately twenty-two. By the age of twenty-nine, “nearly three-quarters of all women could expect to be, or have been, married (“The Marriage Market” 224). Lorraine DiCicco also stresses the significance of Lily’s expiring age in the marriage market. To make her point, she refers to a character in *Bachelor Girl* who speaks of what she calls “the Pass-Over Ceremony”: “In your twenties, you’re a free bird. You are an unmarried person who has options she hasn’t yet exercised. After the pass over...it’s metamorphosis... You are viewed, and you know it, as a different woman. An unmarried, as opposed to a merely single, person” (96).

⁵³ This reference to Mary Douglas is first used by Lorraine DiCicco 87.

on [their husbands] on account of the money and so when he isn't jealous, she pretends to be" (37). Critic William E. Modellmog points out that in addition to "facilitating access to [her] husband's bank accounts," marriage would also "shield Lily from the uncertainties of reputation," providing a "safe haven" from gossip and the "vicissitudes of chance" (346). Gary H. Linberg also notes that marriage is, for women, "primarily a means of securing social power" (62). I would add that marriage would make Lily appear as less of a threat to the married women with affluent husbands who associate with Lily; her fluid movement between different social spaces and into various households leads key female power brokers to see her as morally wrong for remaining single.⁵⁴ What Mehaff Mercy terms "masculine capitalist economic support" seems imperative to maintaining Lily's status as a beautiful object in the high culture where she feels at home (51).⁵⁵

Lily's flexibility

Lily herself is quite aware of the desperate need for a woman of her age to cross the social threshold of marriage. That "people are getting tired of [her]" and that she "has attended too many brides to the altar" speaks volumes about the unwritten law against someone staying in the ambiguous position of being single through the age of twenty-nine (10, 69).⁵⁶ At the same

⁵⁴ Carry Fisher is an example of how the status of a married woman offers a shield from being viewed as morally wrong when she borrows money from Gus. In the novel, Wharton underscores the importance of such status: "[i]t all turned on the tiresome distinction between what a married woman might, and a girl might not, do. Of course, it was shocking for a married woman to borrow money—and Lily was expertly aware of the implication involved—but still, it was the mere *malum prohibitum* which the world decries but condones, and which, though it may be punished by private vengeance, does not provoke the collective disapprobation of the society" (63).

⁵⁵ Wharton reiterates the necessity for Lily to secure a husband, first through Ned Van Alstyne's comment "when a girl is as good looking as that, she'd better marry, then no questions asked" and then through Carrie's more urgent statement, "you must marry as soon as you can" (124, 187).

⁵⁶ Lily Bart's age is also the age Edna Pontellier turns in *The Awakening*.

time, her lack of permanent economic support, as well as her status as an unmarried woman from the elite class, should in theory put Lily at a disadvantage in the natural selection of mates. Gus Trenor's initial response to Lily's situation also reflects her very limited choices: "a girl with extravagant tastes and no money had better marry the first rich man she could get" (67). Thus, Lily must compete for the most monetarily eligible men, an imperative that causes her to exclude Selden whom she actually finds "more agreeable than most men" and whose "fastidious element" agrees with her own taste (44, 53). In selecting a mate, Lily herself seems committed to sacrificing aesthetics for cash. Finding herself in this position, Lily has to be more active in courtship, "devis[ing] some means of approach that should not appear to be an advance," all the while displaying "delicate" care in the presence of a male (17-18).

By "delicate" care, I take Wharton to mean that Lily must aggressively yet surreptitiously promote herself as a woman who can perform what Veblen terms "conspicuous consumption," a practice that expresses a wife's "vicarious leisure" and announces the affluence and distinction of the (bankrolling) husband to the social elite (43, 49). To distinguish themselves, men of the elite require wives capable of converting a quantity of capital, the medium of exchange, into cultural capital, the quality of sensibility and taste. Responsibility for converting the one into the other was arrogated to a woman who could display not only her husband's pecuniary strength but, more importantly, the discerning taste that would increase his social distinction. More so than money, Wharton argues, leisure is the highest manifestation of affluence: "Leisure, itself the creation of wealth, is incessantly engaged in transmuting wealth into beauty by secreting the surplus energy which flowers in great architecture, great painting, and great literature" ("The Great American Novel" 156).⁵⁷ Similar to an alchemist, a wife who could translate the dross of

⁵⁷ Rosedale's remark to Lily succinctly captures the significance of this special task of converting financial capital into cultural capital: "I generally have got what I wanted in life, Miss Bart. I wanted money, and I've got more than I

financial resources into the gold of cultural capital was a felt necessity rather than a merely decorative addition (49). In the novel, Wharton leaves no doubt as to the kind of person best able to convert a sheer quantity of money into high cultural forms. Derived from her early refinement of artistic sensibility and its social application, Lily possesses the flexibility that identifies one as a member of the new leisure class. Thus, despite her lack of money, she can remain within the elite circle, but at a cost: she must accept “bondage to other people’s pleasure” in exchange for the new wardrobe, a suitable place to stay or monetary tips (24).

Lily’s initial encounter and interaction with a potential husband serves as a striking example of such compromised adaptability – what Malabou terms flexibility. To display her apparently boundless ability to conform to a situation, Wharton presents Lily with a challenging male target: Percy Gryce, the “shy” “timid”, “embarrassed,” and “reserved” heir of an affluent family (17). Undaunted by this character whom “some girls would not have known how to manage,” Lily proves to be “a skillful operator” who can turn her plan to capture him into an elaborate art form (18). To describe this plan, Wharton uses an extended hunting metaphor that both emphasizes the hunter’s determination to attract the prey and displays her discerning attention to all pertinent details that would appeal to Gryce, as when she “tranquilly stud[ies] her prey,” “organizes a method of attack,” “devises” a subtle means of approach, and gives him “a fugitive touch” (17). Such a meticulous plan points to Lily’s ability to mold herself in a way that satisfies Gryce’s wishes and desires: she knows his motivations better than he does himself.

With grace that obscures the extent of her contortions, Lily successfully corners her “hunting” target. In addition to her selection of “Americana” as the topic of their conversation,

know how to invest; and now the money doesn’t seem to be of any account unless I can spend it on the right woman” (139). By spending it on an exemplar Lily, Rosedale would be able to create the surplus energy that his financial resources cannot provide.

she questions Gryce “intelligently,” listens to him “submissively,” and reacts “receptively” to his satisfaction (19). She also takes into account Gryce’s strong aversion to gambling and smoking as well as his religious background. She translates this knowledge into practice, when she tells a friend that she will have to refrain from playing bridge and informs another that she “never smokes.” Her plan of temporary metamorphosis into a lady in a “grey dress” with a “borrowed prayer book” suggests that she has the flexibility it takes to meet the challenge of Gryce’s search for a wife (47). At the same time, Lily’s decision to make tea on the train also appeals to Gryce. The display of her “miraculously fine and slender” hands inspires “wonder,” “silent fascination” and “a delicious sense of exhilaration” as they “perform with such careless ease the difficult task of making tea in public in a lurching train” (18). The malleability that makes her intuit his notion of what constitutes an attractive wife is precisely what makes her attractive in the eyes of Gryce.⁵⁸

The same (apparent) tractability characterizes Lily’s dealings with women of the elite class, making her a desirable companion despite her reduced economic status. Rather than being “headstrong, critical and foreign” or “following abundant energy of her own” when she is under the care of her aunt, Mrs. Peniston, Lily is keen to appear “supple,” “plia[ble]” as well as adaptable (31, 32). She exercises her skill at household decoration and makes herself available to her aunt as a courier and household manager. In relation to her friend and hostess, Judy Trenor, the wife of the affluent Gus Trenor, Lily performs the “tiresome” tasks of letter writing or driving to pick up her husband (33). She “recognized the obligation without a murmur,” despite

⁵⁸ Similarly, Lily’s flexibility allows her to appeal to Rosedale. She “charmed” him by proposing that they have a private conversation together (77). When Rosedale’s insensitive remarks offend Lily, she hides her anger and employs “a tone of perfect lightness,” relaxes “the tension of her attitude and admits him, by imperceptible gradations of glance and manner, a step farther toward intimacy.” Her display of flexibility thus persuades Rosedale that Lily has “come into line” (90).

the fact that it involves “social drudgery,” “servitude,” and “long hours of subjection” (33, 62).

Lily allows herself to be shaped by the needs of the elite class. The flexibility required to become what they desire in turn makes her a coveted, rare and ultimately useful participant in a social set to which she no longer belongs.

Lily’s plasticity

The flexibility that enables Lily to adapt to men with capital proves to be a disguise for what Malabou terms “plasticity,” a capacity that allows her to destroy rather than submit to the gender category that subjects her to men with money. For example, despite Lily’s investment of energy and elaborate effort in attracting Percy Gryce, a quest that triumphantly culminates in a planned Sunday walk to church with this very reserved male prospect, Wharton reveals that “no sooner were her preparations made than they roused a smothered sense of resistance.” Being in “woodlands,” Lily, the dryad, who wears a “rustic and summerlike dress” was in her element and misses “[t]hat walk she did not mean to miss” (47). As Wharton points out, “she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she over-sleeps herself or goes off on a picnic” (147-148). While Sarah Bird Wright names Lily’s oscillation between two aspects of plasticity “a curious inertia,” she does not attempt to explain why Lily, to use Malabou’s term, annihilates the very form that she has been maintaining to attract Gryce as well as other possible suitors, especially when the opportunity to establish a marital alliance is clearly in sight (115). Instead, I am arguing that in these moments, what may appear like lapses or mistakes are actually instances where Lily actively creates her own form, thus marking apparent conformity as potentially explosive plasticity.

To understand Lily's plasticity, it is important to remember that while she urgently needs to secure a husband with ample capital, unlike her mother who sees her daughter's beauty as a secret weapon to secure a marriage of purchase contract like her own, Lily has no "crude passion for money" (30). She requires a marriage in which her value as a prospective wife is based on her cultural capital. As a beautiful object endowed with artistic sensibility, Lily also wants a union that allows her to maintain her aesthetic life of high culture – the wellspring of her happiness. This is reflected in her rarely discussed yet revealing remark, "If I could only do over my aunt's drawing-room I know I should be a better woman" (8). Here Lily makes a rather dry joke of critiquing the cultural constraint that defines a good woman as one simply excelling in domestic management. But, more significantly, she also implies that the quality of her existence as a woman depends on the quality of her aesthetic life. As Wharton underlines, without the capacity for exercising her genius for cultivating such a life, Lily would be deprived of both an environment in which to flourish and a channel for her aesthetic expression and her autonomy. In fact, in the later novella *New Year's Day* (1924), Wharton reiterates how the drawing room as a symbol of aesthetic vision gives an impression of the character's inner life: "The most perilous coquetry may not be in a woman's way of arranging her dress but in her way of arranging her drawing-room" (139). It is no wonder that Lily's first attempt at securing a prospective groom, Dilworth, fails totally as his mother asks him to promise that his prospective bride "wouldn't do over the drawing-room" – ironically the very thing that, according to Selden, Lily "is marrying for" (10).⁵⁹ Thus, at the beginning of the novel, Wharton provides readers with clues to indicate the importance of aesthetic life to the quality of Lily's existence as a beautiful object by drawing

⁵⁹ Wharton also hints that Lily's aesthetic life is compromised by living with her aunt. Lily finds Mrs. Peniston's drawing room lacking in taste, and when inside its walls, felt "as though she were buried alive in the stifling limits of Mrs. Peniston's existence" (79).

upon the specific interior of the house. Lily's capacity for vision in the context of the mundane is what Bourdieu cites as a sign of distinction – and what Malabou terms genius.

Wharton underscores Gryce's aesthetic incompatibility with Lily. While a girl who marries Gryce would, as Miss Van Osburgh remarks, "always have enough to be comfortable," Gryce, being "a simple machinery," is not a desirable match in Lily's perception (18, 63). With her aesthetic appreciation of the bridal jewels on display, Lily is discerning and appreciates the finer gradation of things. Her aesthetic skill is akin to that of a knowledgeable collector – one who fits Wharton's own criteria of being able to distinguish between "old and new Saxe...and old Italian and modern French bronze, or Chinese peach-bloom porcelain of the Khang-hi period and the Japanese imitations" (*Decoration* 187). Unlike Lily who can note the difference between Selden's caravan tea and railway brew, Gryce, a self-proclaimed collector, could not even fathom the crude and simple distinction between "railway tea and nectar" (18).⁶⁰ The rich young man only practices the "art" of accumulation for the sake of acquiring without any taste of his own.

More importantly, Wharton shows that even Gryce's pleasure in Lily's company is that of a very crude kind – one that potentially reduces Lily to a sexual partner. While Selden, who could distinguish between "a coarse texture" and a "high finish," was "conscious of taking a luxurious pleasure" in Lily's presence, Gryce merely "felt the *confused titillation* with which the *lower* organisms welcome the gratification of their needs, and all his senses *floundered* in a

⁶⁰ Wharton on several occasions also shows that Rosedale is without refined manners or tastes. His drawing room manner "lacked perspective" and "made Lily class him with Trenor and other dull men she knew" (90). To Lily, it is "no use being rude to him, because he doesn't see the difference" (105). While Wharton remarks that although Rosedale was "sensitive to shades of difference," Lily would "never have credited him with perceiving, because he had no corresponding variations of manner" (96). As a sense of discernment is implicitly a major criterion for Lily's prospective husband, Rosedale and Trenor, like Gryce, are impossible matches.

vague well-being, through which Miss Bart's personality was *dimly* but pleasantly perceptible" (7, 19 emphasis added). In Bourdieu's terms, Gryce's arousal in Lily's presence might be categorized as even worse than the "naïve reaction" of the kind, childlike appreciation of Gerty, who admires the jewelry because of its size and splendor rather than its subtle shadings and aesthetic appeal (70). Wharton clearly portrays Gryce as an example of Lily's male suitors, who possess financial resources but lack the aesthetic genius that would allow them to appreciate Lily beyond the level of a desirable sexual partner.

In addition, Gryce also lacks a related quality of aesthetic discrimination: imagination (18). Within the short duration of a train ride to Bellomont, Wharton shows that he has dampened the refreshing aesthetic vibrancy we saw in Lily when she was by herself in Grand Central Station. Because of Gryce's limitation, and despite Lily's efforts, conversation "flagged" (18). By showing Gryce's inability to sustain an animated conversation with Lily, Wharton emphasizes his lack of finesse, which Kazin describes as "fundamental" to the world of gentility that defines Wharton and Lily's existence (74). Lily's resorting to "other arts" rather than merely referring to the collection of Americana – one of her "extreme measures" employed in cultivating the stolid suitor– implies that she prefers a mental challenge over more simplistic means of attracting Gryce's attention (19). In fact, Wharton hints that Lily was obviously bored when she felt "*so completely* in command of the situation after launching the topic of Americana" (21 emphasis added). For Lily, true aesthetics entails intricacies, and a deftness of handling, that escape Gryce. Ironically, when Lily envisions a future with him, she sees no

prospect for herself. The short afternoon train ride with Gryce as her “companion” gives her a clear view of all her future afternoons as Mrs. Gryce.⁶¹

She had been *bored* all the afternoon by Percy Gryce – the mere thought seemed to waken an echo of *his droning voice* – but she could not ignore him on the morrow, she must follow up her success, must submit to *more boredom*, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honour of *boring her for life* (23 emphasis added).

As his wife, Lily could no longer maintain her status as a rare and beautiful object, but instead would be degraded into part of “the vast group of human automata” and “puppets” tied to all the mechanical conventions she despises (43). Thus, Wharton shows that a relationship with such a prospective husband would compromise Lily’s aesthetic life, with its constitutive elements of difficulty, complexity, uncertainty and risk.⁶² As the image of Gryce’s “appalling house, all brown stone without and black walnut within” connotes, living as his wife – an existence of daily ease, certainty, stability and security – would be no different from a living death to Lily (20). Through the presentation of Lily’s time with Gryce, Wharton appears to agree with Malabou that flexibility projects a form of static selfhood that amounts to existence “in chains” (11). In Gryce’s company, Lily is not so different from a woman held captive in a different culture.

⁶¹ I take Gryce as the embodiment of what Wharton in her letters to historian William Roscoe Thayer calls “the group of idle & dull people—that exists in any big & wealthy social body.” This whole social organization is, according to Wharton, “so much smaller & less elaborate—and if, as I believe, it is more harmful in its influence, it is because fewer responsibilities attach to money with us than in other societies” (*The Letters of Edith Wharton* 96-7).

⁶² Wharton also stresses that the men with whom Lily associates violate either her sense of good taste and manners by describing them as “brute” (22, 116), “savage” (101), “Caliban” (107), or “beast” (122). For a discussion of the unpleasantness of the male options available to Lily, see Fetterley 204-205; Wagner-Martin 58-65.

Self-possession and plasticity at risk

Plasticity, as Malabou articulates it, entails the potential for liberation and self-possession. Nowhere does Wharton reveal its essential elements – while simultaneously bringing to the fore the limits of plasticity – than in the scene of the *tableaux vivants*. To illuminate Lily's aesthetic capacities Wharton draws upon this popular form of *fin-de-siècle* entertainment, in which female socialites participated in a live display of classic artwork by themselves assuming the positions of the figures in the paintings they represented. As Maureen Montgomery points out, beyond the purpose of entertainment, this sort of cultural performance was significant in “securing one's society identity” (68).⁶³ At the Wellington Bry's *tableaux vivants* performance, Wharton juxtaposes performers who embody a merely flexible quality, defining themselves in relation to the “normative and reproducible,” in Malabou's terms, with Lily, whose plasticity allows her – in rare and fleeting moments – to break free from the material world of market relations that compromises her aesthetic life (74).

To fully understand Lily's decision to embody Sir Joshua Reynolds' “Mrs. Lloyd,” I first turn to the other tableaux preceding Lily's, portrayals that underscore the restrictions inherent in the mimetic model of flexibility.⁶⁴ To perform these living pictures, each socialite before Lily

⁶³ As Karen Halttunen explains, while sentimental culture in the 1830s and 1840s aspires to the sincere social forms and rituals, in the 1850s, middle class Americans embrace “more avowedly theatrical cultural forms.” The parlor theatricals of the late 1850s and 1860s “proved to be a highly self-conscious emblem of middle-class culture, with its new acceptance of the social arts of disguise, masking, and theatrical ritual, and its new willingness to admit their function in a culture centered on the promise of upward social mobility” (196). Naturally enough, theatrical forms, such as the tableaux vivants, which deal with the idea of disguise, became popular during the time the novel was written, when the nouveau riche made significant inroads and came to be part of the dominant culture. Halttunen aptly remarks that middle-class Americans were willing to adopt these social forms, for it was by adhering to them that they defined their genteel social status, both individually and collectively as a class (196).

⁶⁴ According to Emily J. Orlando, the painting is entitled “Portrait of Joanna Lloyd of Maryland” (c. 1775-6) (EWVA 65). In the novel, Wharton only refers to the painting as “Mrs. Lloyd.”

presents the appearance of the “dead beauty” of the figure she assumes (106). These socialites, to borrow Malabou’s words, “take the fold” rather than “give it”; as such, the suppleness of their bodies is pressed into service, contorted into a static portrait that is akin to a living death – what Walter Benjamin calls “self-alienation” (*The Work of Art* 242). Just as Lily initially molds herself to satisfy Gryce’s wishes and desires at the expense of her own aesthetic vibrancy, the socialites “had been cleverly fitted” with characters corresponding to their types while “the fugitive curves” of their living flesh is “subdued” (105, 106).⁶⁵ For example, Miss. Smedden’s body is shaped in such a way as to reflect “the sumptuous curves of Titian’s Daughter” (105). As Wharton emphasizes, these women strictly imitate and conform to their “types” at the expense of their individuality, producing a “copy” – that, tellingly, Lily’s chosen artist Sir Joshua Reynolds himself labeled as “plagiarism” and therefore “discountenanced” (23, 101). For example, Mrs. Carry Fisher adopts “the typical” Goya character, while Mrs. Van Alstyne assumes “the frailer Dutch type, with high a blue-veined forehead and pale eyes and lashes, made a characteristic van Dyck” (105).⁶⁶ By presenting themselves as figures lifted from classical paintings, the matrons of New York society allow the audience to readily associate them with the identifiable style of each painter. These society women represent a flexible quality that is explicitly normative and reproducible, in Malabou’s terms (72).

⁶⁵ As Mary Cowling points out, “type” is a staple of Victorian vocabulary. It indicates the way in which the general can be “extrapolated” from the specific (184).

⁶⁶ Pamela Knight, Janet Beer and Elizabeth Nolan point out that the discussion of “types” was central to the period. The term emerges “from the nineteenth-century interest in classification and taxonomic systems—in every sphere from insects to racial groups or intellectual tendencies” (40). However, rather than fixing her characters into the discourse of “types” during her time, Wharton’s inquiry delves further. The three critics note that as the novel progresses Wharton extends Lily’s and the reader’s horizons through their experience with each developing character (40). A case in point is Rosedale, “a plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type” who is portrayed as unacceptable at the beginning of the novel, but who later shows respect and concern for Lily (13).

Their flexible quality is further affirmed by the fact the performers' identities are defined by aspects of their milieu, that is, decorative accessories. As with the "jeweled shoulders" of the audience, those on stage are dressed in "*obedience to the decorative instinct which calls for fine clothes in fine surroundings*," relying on purchased ornaments as marks of aristocratic status (104 emphasis added).⁶⁷ As Elizabeth Ammons remarks, the paintings of Francesco de Goya y Lucientes frequently portrayed the nobility "in exaggerated...poses that often displayed their prosperity." (*HM*, notes 105). Van Dyck's work, similarly, is known for his reliance on ornaments of dress and conventional poses to underscore the elite status of his subjects. The ornamentation is echoed in the Kauffmann nymphs, who show "a pearl woven head," while Titian's Daughter lifts a "gold salver laden with grapes above the harmonizing gold of rippled hair and rich brocade" (105). Wharton subtly highlights the confining, restrictive nature of these models, through her description of women heavily laden with baubles and embellishments: the "oppressive bridal finery" worn by Mrs. Stepney, which harken back to Lily's bracelet from the novel's outset, whose links resemble "manacles chaining her to her fate" (125, 8).

The evening of the *tableaux vivants* marks a turning point for Lily. Rather than following her flexible peers in adopting the classic mode of bejeweled female icon, Lily's choice of the Reynolds painting allows her to declare her beauty free of market-driven symbols of exchange (xiii). As Robert R. Wark notes, Reynold's painting represents a shift from "a decorative and predominantly gay type of art to one generally more emotional, from an art of striking uniformity in style and intention to one of great individuality and variety" (xiii). Lily's choice to represent Mrs. Lloyd, a figure who wears a diaphanous and unornamented piece of plain white cloth,

⁶⁷ Wharton's use of synecdoche highlights how upper-class women are commoditized, especially when such synecdoche is blended naturally with the "festooned and gilded wall, and the flushed splendors of the Venetian ceiling" (104).

enables her to present an ingenious aesthetic display of not merely the painting subject matter but also herself (105, 106). With the Reynolds painting as a living occasion for aesthetic expression rather than a static template, Lily “simply” and “undisguisedly” depicts herself (106).⁶⁸ Unlike the other socialites who mechanically embrace “dead beauty,” Lily’s choice of subject allows her to eclipse the painting’s figure with “the beam of her living grace” and her own “flesh and blood loveliness” (106). Her plasticity dispels the illusion that she presents the “lines” and “curves” of a classical figure and enables her to reveal her own form (106). Again, the choice of artist is shrewdly apt. Reynolds himself instructed students and members of the Royal Academy not “[to] tread on [an artist’s] footstep” but to “outstrip him” in their own creations (101).⁶⁹ By doing away with a regal disguise and ornamental accessories, Lily affirms that she needs only her poise and incandescent beauty, making an exuberant statement of self-possession (106). In other words, she redefines the terms of beauty as independent of tokens of status and symbols of market exchange.

Lily’s choice – a textbook alliance with Reynolds’ principle of artistic representation – initially implies an ideal sense of agency as Malabou argues.⁷⁰ Critics have noted that Lily’s depiction diverges from the society matrons who surround her. As Orlando points out, Lily’s “free-flowing dress, ample bosom, and natural surroundings” are “the picture of health, poise, and liberation” (184 “Visual Arts”). The choice of simple cloth and sandals stand in stark

⁶⁸ The white color of Lily’s dress invites caution. In a manual for tableaux vivants, it is taken as the color that “should be most judiciously used in costuming, and should be supplied by either a glossy fabric like cambric, or a thin, semi-transparent material such as tulle, book-muslin or lace” (410).

⁶⁹ Reynold instructs his readers to “consider [the artist’s work] as models which you are to imitate, and at the same time as rivals with whom you are to contend” (113).

⁷⁰ Lily’s artistic representation of Mrs. Lloyd is, in a sense, similar to that of Reynold’s principle of representation in that although, as Wark states, it is “less effective decoratively,” it conveys “the greater emotional range and variety” that the artist would like to communicate (xxxii).

contrast to the elaborate and constraining clothing of the elite, such as stiff crinoline or corset. At the same time, by choosing to display her body on her own terms, Lily practices a form of self-authoring. This sense of self-narrative is also highlighted by the fact that in the original painting the figure of Mrs. Lloyd is carving the name of her husband on a tree. Wharton omits this action, implying that Lily, unencumbered by the formal designation “Mrs.,” belongs only to herself. At the same time, the year that Reynolds completed the painting, 1776, also emphasizes the sense of liberation and radical uncertainty that comes with Lily’s choice. Lily’s plastic display of self thus underscores her symbolic break from economic determinism that defines other women artists.

Yet Wharton, far from a revolutionary or idealist, does not stray into the genre of fairy tale. Whereas Malabou sees no problems in plasticity’s potential for liberation, Wharton reveals how Lily’s status as an indebted, unmarried woman ultimately undermines her iconoclastic potential and compromises her aesthetic status. When Lily’s body refuses mimetic representation by eschewing the form of Mrs. Lloyd and instead creating her own, Wharton reveals that it also becomes (dangerously) subject to interpretation. The artist is only one part of the aesthetic equation; the crucial addition, as Wharton was well aware, is the contribution of the viewer or spectator.

To fully understand the implication of Lily’s plasticity as it pertains to the audience at the *tableaux vivants*, it is helpful to consider Wharton’s earlier work, “The Vice of Reading” (1903). Barbara Hochman contends that this essay is apt as a supplementary piece to *The House of Mirth* as it deals with “discourses on aesthetic and literary matters” (149). I would add that the text is particularly relevant because in *The House of Mirth* Lily compares herself to a book, suggesting

that she is, in a sense, a text to be read.⁷¹ For its meaning to be fully realized, a text depends on the activity of interpretation. In “The Vice of Reading,” Wharton makes the distinction between the mechanical and the creative reader. For Wharton, the former views “all books from the outside and [has]...no point of contact with the author’s mind.” The mechanical reader is, to borrow Malabou’s words, “chained” to interpretive conventions and rules rather than freed by intuition. As Wharton describes, he is the “slave of his bookmark,” and “never skip[s] a word” (101).⁷² As Hochman puts it, the mechanical reader defines a book as “an inanimate object, quantifiable and finite” (152). Wharton describes how this sort of audience reads as a matter of social status, construing books as something to be consumed and then traded upon in social circumstances: “The mechanical reader considers it his duty to read every book that is talked about; a duty rendered less onerous by the fact that he can *judge beforehand*, from the material dimensions of each book, how much space it will take up in his head; there is *no need to allow for expansion*” (102 emphasis added). Wharton here harkens back to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s statement in “The American Scholar” (1837) that books are “for nothing but to inspire” (373). The creative reader is aware of the book’s capacity for expansion and thus regards it as “the keynote of unpremeditated harmonies, as the gateway into some *paysage choisi* of the spirit” (102).⁷³ Such texts offer a receptive audience “spontaneous entry into another realm that results from the extemporaneous interaction between text and reader” (Hochman 152). I would argue that, while the mechanical reader is chained to the “normative” as Malabou suggests, the creative

⁷¹ Lily remarks that “she is determined to be to [Gryce] what his Americana had hitherto been” (41).

⁷² My use of masculine pronoun is in accordance with Wharton’s original.

⁷³ For a discussion about the connection between Selden’s “republic of the spirit” and “the *paysage choisi* of the spirit,” see Hochman 153-4.

reader represents plastic potential, mirroring the activity of the artist by deriving her own reading through interaction with the text.

To return to the *tableaux vivants* scene: Wharton underscores the limit of Lily's plasticity by stressing that the performances of the socialites depend very much on the viewer or "reader." The manual entitled *Masquerades, Tableaux and Drills* (1906) points out that *tableaux vivants* have certain advantages over drama "in appealing directly to the sensibilities of the audience, awakening curiosity, fostering the imagination and cultivating the taste" (409). Yet, what is striking is that while *tableaux vivants* are, in general, open to the two types of readers Wharton describes – the mechanical and the creative – the ones at Bry's actually produce a form of atypical tableaux. With the exception of Lily's "Mrs. Lloyd," the socialites' presentations turn the audience – in a sense "the readers" – into only the former type. Mrs. Bry "wanted none of the qualities which go to the production of such illusions" and Paul Morpeth, the stage manager of the *tableaux vivants*, translates this wish into a series of *tableaux* that "succeeded each other with the rhythmic march of some splendid frieze" (105). At the same time, as Wharton repeatedly emphasizes, members of the elite class – with the exception of Selden – are mostly "dull people" who lack imagination (35). Such arrangement dictates a mechanical performance and heightens the effect of Lily's artistic choice, which refuses to be fixed and which (at least attempts to) catalyze the infrequently stimulated imaginations of high society denizens. By announcing how the Bry *tableaux* may be recuperated into a conventional classical frieze, Wharton hints at the problematic and risky nature of Lily's artistic re-creation, given the nature of this particular audience.

Indeed, the limit of Lily's plasticity – as highlighted by her artistic statement of self-possession – is underscored by the fact that her performance is subject to the interpretation of

both mechanical and creative readers. On the one hand, Selden who shares Lily's artistic sensibility could appreciate Lily's artistic distinction. For him, Lily's representation reveals "the touch of poetry in her beauty" free of material considerations. "The noble buoyancy of her attitude" and "soaring grace" are thus apparent to his appreciative gaze (106). His imagination fits Wharton's definition of a creative reader, whose mind expands the content beyond its surface. Selden sees Lily's artistic expression as sublime, transcending all the "types" with her own specificity and rendering herself beyond "the trivialities of her little world" (105, 106). On the other hand, what the plodding mechanical readers see is completely different. By foregoing the façade of jewels that "cover up [the] figures" and proving that she needs only her beauty, Lily's artistic self-creation unsettles the audience (109). Her representation jars viewers into potentially non-mechanical ways of reading, which contrasts the subject with the normative, as opposed to the creative reader. As Robert Shulman remarks, while Lily sees herself as "a rare work of art in a pure, timeless realm far removed from the tainting pressures of money and sex," the men in the audience cannot but see her plastic performance through the lens of a "possessive market society" and sexuality (13). I would add that such attempts to place Lily with the realm of the (sex) market suggests that Lily's performance poses a threat by re-defining beauty and distinction as free from a mere market exchange – the very mechanism by which the upper class defines its status. To counter such threat, the men thus deflect the threat away from themselves back onto her as an object who can be debased. This view is best reflected in Ned Van Alstyne's remark, "Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but, gad, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it" (106). Such remark might remind readers of Percy Gryce's "titillation of lower organisms when with Lily," a reference underscoring that both men appreciate her physical attributes for their "use value" – to employ a

Marxist term – rather than their aesthetic value (19). Lily’s undisguised beauty during her plastic performance, strictly intended as proof of her artistic creation and self-possession, is recuperated by being seen through the vulgar lens of sexuality.

Many critics focus on Lily’s partially exposed body as the reason for the perception of her appearance as scandalous. For example, Judith Fryer contends that “what is different in this tableau is the frank presentation of Lily’s body, an acknowledgement of an erotic nature that is never mentioned in her society, though its currents run deep beneath the surface” (77). At the same time, Orlando suggests that “the simplicity of Lily’s tableau affords her male spectators ‘an exceptional opportunity for the study of the female outline,’ thus making hers the most provocative living picture in Wharton’s gallery of human art” (*EWVA* 70). While it is true that Lily’s costume, without the burden of jewelry, is much more revealing than that of the other model artists, I would argue that the problem posed has less to do with content (Lily’s exposed body which defies mimetic representation) than with form (Lily’s status as an unmarried woman).⁷⁴ In fact, Orlando herself points out that the painting Lily chooses for her performance “would not reveal as much flesh as the Botticelli or Kauffmann tableaux” that are also presented in the performance; but it is the arguably more chaste Reynolds *tableau* that “attracts the most notice” (70). Such remarks indicate that the choice of painting is not, by itself, the most revealing of the entire performance. However, Orlando points out – incorrectly, I argue – that the “notice” Lily gains from the audience can be attributed solely to the raciness of her presentation (*EWVA* 70).

⁷⁴ Allen F. Stein also argues very briefly that the “ugly criticism” directed at Lily for her performance would be “muted were she married” (232-3). My work seeks to expand this argument.

It is Lily's status as an unmarried woman, rather than the issue of the exposure of her body, that renders her highly vulnerable to scandals. Had Lily been a married woman – to borrow Remy Saisselin's words, officially "bought" and, "out of the market" – Van Alstyne's salacious interpretation would be mooted (67). With the status of married woman or "femme couverte," Lily's body would be consolidated into and thus "covered" by that of a husband and her identity (and beauty) is implicitly defined by the market.⁷⁵ Such union status is in fact indicated by Wharton's use of the husband's name and surname ("Mrs. George Dorset" or "Mrs. Hudson Bart") when referring to Bertha and Lily's mother. As Wharton hints in the novel, "[t]he code of Lily's world decreed that a woman's husband should be the only judge of her conduct: she was technically above suspicion while she had the shelter of his approval, or even of his indifference" (82). At worst, as a married woman, Lily would run the risk of being seen as pathetic rather than scandalous; it would be acceptable for Lily – metaphorically similar to an aesthetic creation – to present herself as an art form as her reputation would be protected by her nuptial status.⁷⁶

At the same time, were Lily a married woman, her body would also be seen as a means of reproduction, rather than one of exchange, regardless of her reliance on strategically placed jewelry. Arguably, the painted figure of Mrs. Lloyd may be seen in a non-sexual light despite her exposed skin because she is married, a status that limits a reading of wanton display. However,

⁷⁵ The principle of coverture was explained in William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* in the late 18th century; "[b]y marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything; and is therefore called in our law-French a feme-covert: is said to be cover-baron, or under the protection and influence of her husband, her baron, or lord; and her condition during her marriage is called her coverture" (Ch. 15, book 1, spelling original).

⁷⁶ An instance of this social sanction is in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Due to her married status, the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, has an intimate relationship with Robert Lebrun away from prying eyes of society.

without the cover of jewelry on her body, Miss Bart – an unmarried woman or “femme seule” with the right to own property and make contracts in her own name – is seen as vulnerable by an uncouth “Caliban”-like male audience. To these spectators, Lily is putting her body – her property and her own “jewel” – on display and into a system of exchange. Thus, Lily’s unmarried status marks her plastic performance as overstepping the boundaries set for respectable women, despite Lily’s artistic intentions. In this way, Wharton sets up the logic of a double bind, which in turn implicitly critiques the restrictive model of individual selfhood where rights and protections are given only to women subsumed in the masculine household.

Critics who argue that Lily sexualizes or commodifies herself miss Wharton’s critique. Orlando, for instance, argues that Lily “objectifies herself and seems to understand that her aim is not so much to embody art as it is to use this occasion to sell herself as a marriageable commodity” (*EWVA* 70). However, I would argue that while the men in the audience interpret her performance as announcing her availability, Lily wants to display her body strictly in artistic terms rather than purposely exploit it to attract men in sexual-economic terms, to borrow Gilman’s expression. In fact at the beginning of the scene, Wharton emphasizes that Lily was “in her element,” that her “dramatic instinct” was roused, and that her “imagination” was stirred. She finds “eager expression” in the ensemble of the performance decoration (103). Lily is “exhilarated” by the idea of “displaying her own beauty under a new aspect: of showing that her loveliness was no mere fixed quality, but an element shaping all emotions to fresh forms of grace” (103). In fact, Lily’s longing for appreciation of her performance rests on the audience’s “precise nod of approval” (107). As someone whose training is to convert a quantity of capital into the qualities of sensibility and taste, Lily for the first time cares “less for the quality of the admiration received than for its quantity” and loses her defining “natural fastidiousness” (108).

Her discerning taste uncharacteristically turns into the antithesis of her appreciation of things that the “crowd will pass and the few pause,” proof that suggests Lily is temporarily more focused on the “crowd” rather than a discriminating audience of potential suitors (126). In fact, as Montgomery states, Lily performs “for all men, resisting the possession of any particular man. But in doing so, she risks being classified as promiscuous, forfeiting her respectability” (132). Thus, while Lily appears to be a woman in circulation, Wharton provides clues that she does not in any way think of her performance beyond artistic terms.

Risk, so crucial to plasticity, redounds back onto Lily – to her danger, thus marking the limit of her plasticity. In the eyes of the elite class, Lily loses her value as a rare and beautiful object and appears as a common commodity. Such a decline in Lily’s value is announced by the fact that the day after the *tableaux vivants*, Gus Trenor feels at liberty to deceive her into calling at his house on the pretext of his wife’s Judy’s invitation. As someone who has been paying for Lily’s expenses, he feels entitled to a more intimate experience with her as he knows that Lily has already tossed caution to the wind by visiting Selden’s apartment unchaperoned. As Lily’s unofficial financial supporter, Gus becomes frustrated when other men in the audience at Bry’s *tableaux* are able to enjoy conversation with Lily, his unofficial “femme couverte.” He resents their having as much visual access to the display of her body while Gus himself, as he puts it, has “hardly laid eyes on Lily for a month” (73). His linguistic usage when addressing Lily, such as “there’s a good girl,” “there’s a dear,” and “my dear,” conveys the impression that he sees Lily as a possession (112, 113).⁷⁷ To him, Lily is already his mistress – in a sense a woman “already bought.”

⁷⁷ In *Womanwords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Patriarchal Society* (1989), Jane Mills explains that the word “girl” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries denotes “a mistress which, although a step down from sweetheart, was less pejorative than prostitute” (104).

This attitude towards Lily as “purchasable” takes root when she starts to appeal to Gus as her confidant, seeking his financial help and applying some of the same techniques of attraction that she used with the potential suitor, Percy Gryce. The fact that she is economically indebted to the married Trenor and continually accepts his money leads Gus to misunderstand their relationship as intimate. His desire to show off his ownership of Lily in their elite circle is noticeable through his repeated attempts to make their presence together conspicuous. In the Bellomont dining room, Gus gives Lily “a familiar touch,” “calls her by her Christian name,” mentions the check he prepared for her in a loud voice, and uses a voice of “conjugal familiarity with her in front of members of the elite” (72, 73, 75). To borrow Veblen’s words, Gus takes Lily as his “trophy of successes scored in the game of ownership carried on between the members of the group” (23). Naturally enough, when Lily reminds him of the need for propriety when she sees the potential of rape, Gus, who earlier labels Lily’s performance at Bly as “[d]amned bad taste,” readily retorts that she has already visited a man’s apartment “fast enough in broad daylight” (109, 114). This intimate relationship culminates in a palpably intense encounter at Gus’ home. He insinuates that Lily is involved in a virtual sexual-purchase contract with him – a hint that leads to the feeling that her aesthetic purity has been sullied as highlighted by her remark that she had experienced “a disfigurement” and a “hideous change” (131). Gus’s response to Lily after the *tableaux vivant* underscores that when Lily stops exercising her artistry on the decoration of drawing rooms, the arrangement of flowers, and the rituals of courtship, and instead focuses on herself and her own body, she goes too far and underestimates how commodification “wins” over aesthetics when her actual flesh is involved as the medium of expression.

It is the interpretation of the audience, then, rather than the expressive possibilities of the aesthetic presentation, that points to the limits of Lily's plasticity. It is the action of Rosedale, the outsider so attentive to the fluctuating rules of the social game, that illuminates for Lily herself the transformation of her value. After she appears as "a girl standing there as if she was up at auction," Rosedale boldly approaches her to propose a marriage as if negotiating a business transaction (124). For the first time in the story, the person whom the upper echelon calls "the brute" and pronounces "impossible," feels qualified to openly propose a marriage at Lily's house, the inner sanctum of her privacy (16, 125). In contrast to the first chance meeting at the Benedick apartment, where his view of Lily is based on "interest and approval" of her as a rare object, seeing Lily now more as a purchasable commodity, Rosedale addresses her not only with unprecedented self-assurance, but also in transparently commercial terms (13).

"[I]f I want *a thing* I'm willing to pay. I don't go up to the counter, and then wonder if the article's worth the price. I wouldn't be satisfied to entertain like the Welly Brys; I'd want *something that would look more easy and natural*, more as if I took it in my stride. And it takes just *two things* to do that, Miss Bart: money, and the right woman to spend it" (139 emphasis added).

This remark calls attention to the repercussions of Lily's plastic performance as an unmarried woman. In fact, Rosedale also makes an indirect remark to Lily as someone appearing in need of financial resources: "when I looked at you the other night at the Brys' in that plain white dress, looking as if you had a crown on, I said to myself: 'By gad, if she had one she'd wear it as if it grew on her'" (140). With his knowledge of Lily's socially compromising experiences with men – the financial support she accepts from Gus and himself, as well as her visit to Selden's apartment – Rosedale encodes Lily as one readily available and in need to be bought or "covered." Although presented as vulgar, never had Rosedale talked to Lily in such crude and blunt economic terms ("I've got the money" and "what I want is the woman – and I mean to have

her too”) until after her Bry performance (139). There, appearing to an audience that could not understand aesthetic value without reducing it to monetary or sexual equivalents, Lily appeared to be courting money (139). In Rosedale’s proposed transaction, Wharton indirectly hints at the depreciation of Lily’s social value and underscores the limits of her plasticity.

Wharton further underlines the limit of Lily’s plasticity within her own family circle, where the circulating stories that suggest Lily has serial intimate relationships with men undermine her status as a rare jewel. Although the relationship between Gus and Lily is, to use Grace Stepney’s words, “a flirtation – nothing more,” Mrs. Peniston was appalled by “the idea that any scandal could attach to a young girl’s name, above all that it could be lightly coupled with that of a married man” (98).⁷⁸ To Mrs. Peniston, “however unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made” (100).⁷⁹ In Mrs. Peniston’s view, Lily’s misconduct not only violates good taste and manners, but also severely erodes her family name. Bourdieu explains that in matters of taste “all determination is negation” and tastes “are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others.” The strongest barrier between the classes is, according to Bourdieu, “[a]version to different life-styles” (56). Thus, when Lily taints her name by associating with married men – a

⁷⁸ Martha Banta explains that Mrs. Peniston represents “that earlier stage in time when a woman’s name appears ritualistically only three times in print: at birth, at marriage, at death” (xxix). Thus, the appearance of Lily’s name in the pages of “Town Talk” marks her as trespassing the code of conduct during the time.

⁷⁹ Ironically, Mrs. Peniston’s reaction isn’t based on a moral viewpoint. As Mrs. Peniston’s “only religion” is “the care and worship of her possessions,” Lillian S. Robinson points out that “similar to other household inventories subject to Mrs. Peniston’s ritual of seasonal scrubbing,” she regards female chastity as a form of property which shares “the essential stability of other forms of property” (343, 344).⁷⁹ As a member of the fading Old New York society whose wealth is derived from the preservation of their financial capital which is “unassailable” and “so securely invested that living comfortably on the interest became an object of faith,” Mrs. Peniston regards Lily’s behavior as compromising such stability (Robinson 344). Her offense is thus “equivalent to the principle of untouched principal” (Robinson 344). Unsurprisingly, Lily’s changing status from that of a timeless object of beauty to an object of speculation, provokes “horror” in Mrs. Peniston’s view (*HM* 97).

disgraceful act regardless of a person's station – the upper-class Mrs. Peniston is shocked. Lily's plasticity, rather than allowing her to expand beyond the conventional bounds of flexibility, marks her as damaged goods and a soiled woman whose actions compromise the purity of what Mrs. Peniston perceives to represent her Old New York lineage.⁸⁰ Wharton's description of Mrs. Peniston's feeling, "as if there had been a contagious illness in the house, and she was doomed to sit shivering among her contaminated furniture," vividly underscores her strong antipathy to Lily's "horror" story (97, 100).⁸¹ Mrs. Peniston's subsequent virtual "disinheritance" of Lily exposes the risk involved in Lily's plasticity.

Wharton reveals that the change brought about through Lily's oscillations between two modes of societal adaptation – conformist flexibility and more radical plasticity – is irreversible. A case in point is the incident at the Sabrina, in which Bertha Dorset accuses Lily of inappropriate involvement with her husband: this move serves as a smoke screen, in order to conceal Bertha's own illicit relationship with Ned Silverton. Had Lily's name been cleared of the flurry of "town talk" about her relationship with Selden, George, Gus and Rosedale, Bertha's insinuation might not hold as much water (124).⁸² The irreversible nature of Lily's decline in

⁸⁰ As Irving Howe points out, we "barely see any representatives of the faded [Old New York] aristocracy; what we do see in the first half of the book are several of its distant offshoots and descendants, most of them already tainted by the vulgarity of the new bourgeoisie yet, for no good reasons, still contemptuous of it. The standards of those characters who have any claim to the old aristocracy are not so much guides to their own conduct as strategies for the exclusion of outsiders" (122).

⁸¹ Mary Ellis Gibson remarks that "Wharton's understanding of social symbolism reveals its consistency and its inherent ambivalences in light of Mary Douglas' analysis of natural symbols and of pollution and taboo" (58). I would suggest that the above description of Mrs. Peniston's feeling as if she had sat on a piece of "contaminated furniture" after hearing Lily's horror stories reveals such ambivalence (*HM* 100).

⁸² I would say that the society to which Lily belongs functions in a manner similar to Michel Foucault's notion of panopticon. As Diana Trilling remarks, Lily's society is "very much a small town where everyone knows everyone else and where the boundaries even upon one's physical movements are rigidly prescribed." Because of such social setting, Lily can "seem to take no step that is not witnessed by the persons who will put it to worst use" (115). Although unacknowledged by Trilling, I would contend that such surveillance is at the highest level on Lily because of her unmarried status.

value is further reinforced by Judy's estrangement from Lily after she learns Lily has taken her husband's money. When Lily wonders quietly, "if Judy knew when Mrs. Fisher borrowed money from her husband, was she likely to ignore the same transaction on Lily's part?," Wharton makes clear to the reader that the answer is in the negative because of Lily's unmarried status (179). With a "married" status, as Allen F. Stein aptly remarks, Lily could "with impunity do those things that lead ultimately to her destruction when she does them as a single woman" (232).

Lily's depreciating social value is reiterated by Rosedale's significantly shifting attitude towards her. Initially, to be seen "in the company of Miss Lily Bart" amounted to "money in his pocket" (15). Rosedale perceived Lily as "the rare and the unattainable" whose distinction would add a refined touch to his rather coarse reputation and financial prowess (89). In his opinion, Lily's cultural capital makes her the kind of woman who "costs more than all the rest of 'em put together" and would offer him "complementary qualities to round off his social personality" (96, 140). Despite the plastic performance at Bry that presented her in a shocking light, Rosedale still feels that Lily is useful to him, due to the genteel qualities he lacks. However, after Lily's reputation is further tarnished by Bertha and her shunning by Judy, Lily becomes an obvious "encumbrance" for Rosedale's plan of cementing his social ascent (200). Rather than being "the right woman" to spend his money, Lily is now part of "the wrong ones" whose company Rosedale actively avoids (139, 200).⁸³ This indirect allusion to the language of pollution underscores Lily's loss of social value. The fact that Rosedale, originally an outsider himself, can

⁸³ In this sense, I disagree with Sarah Bird Wright who claims that Rosedale rejects Lily because "his pride is hurt" (115). In fact, Rosedale always deals with people in a business-like manner and his focus on social advancement thus takes precedence over his pride.

no longer marry Lily despite his knowledge that the scandals surrounding her are false, emphasizes her change of image to social undesirable and an impediment to higher status.

Lily's distinction

Although Lily's fortunes spiral downward, she maintains the value of her cultural capital by refusing to participate in the system of exchange and by remaining unpurchased – that is, unmarried and unbetrothed – from the beginning to the end. It is no accident that Wharton places Lily in a crisis similar to that of Mrs. Haffen, the cleaning lady at Selden's apartment building who mistakes Lily for Bertha, the writer of the incriminating letters. Both Lily and Mrs. Haffen have, "no other way of raising money" (83).⁸⁴ The two are, therefore, in desperate need to secure financial means for survival by putting Selden's letters into a system of exchange: Mrs. Haffen for a financial windfall and Lily for her social rehabilitation by getting "squared" with Bertha and later trading her sexual-capital as a purchase-contract marriage with George or Rosedale (83). However, unlike the cleaning lady who considers compromising another person's privacy by treating private correspondence as a means to satisfy her own ends, Lily refuses to further barter the letters, and by implication herself.⁸⁵ To Lily, letters are a form of personal exchange, an exchange of sentiment without any commercial value. Her removal is driven by her love and care for Selden and her desire to protect a friend regardless of the possible detriment to her

⁸⁴ Mrs. Haffen's husband is out of work and her family is struggling to get by. At the same time, Lily has no practical labor skill that would allow her to fend for herself as a classless woman.

⁸⁵ Wharton marks Lily's moral stance by going to great lengths to show that it is with substantial difficulty that Lily engages in the transaction with Mrs. Haffen. Lily's "strongest" feeling was "one of personal contamination" (82). The idea of bargaining is "intolerable to her" (84). Such reaction not only underlines Lily's feeling that she may compromise an important intrinsic quality, but also that she finds the very act of capitalizing on another's privacy morally problematic. As Wharton notes, Lily "was aware only of feeling that Selden would wish the letters rescued, and that therefore she must obtain possession of them" (105). Beyond the purpose of safeguarding Selden's privacy, Wharton makes it clear that "[Lily's] mind did not travel" (83).

personal situation. At the same time, by not giving in to a form of sexual-contract marriage with either George or Rosedale, a move that would diminish her value as a prospective wife, Lily's action maintains her cultural capital by virtue of remaining unpurchased. Doing so, I would argue that while Bourdieu as a twentieth-century critic thinks of aesthetic sensibility as reflecting distinction and cultural capital, Wharton, as a *fin-de-siècle* writer and social critic, defines sexual purity as aesthetic attributes and is thus included in cultural capital.⁸⁶ In this sense, it is natural that Lily's decision to remove the letters from the system of exchange is, as with Bourdieu's definition of aesthetic practice, also "an end in [itself]" (54).

By putting the letters at Lily's disposal with all the desperate pressures she faces, only to show that she refuses to capitalize on them as well as compromise her cultural capital for her future security, I would argue that Wharton emphasizes Lily's act as that of self-possession. To borrow anthropologist Annette Weiner's words, she is "an inalienable possession" – one with "a subjective value" which places her above all "exchange value" (6). As Wai Chee Dimock succinctly remarks, the different forms of "quid pro quo" business transactions "attest to the reduction of human experiences to abstract equivalents for exchange" that permeates the novel (784). Lily's defiance of such system of exchange by treating the letters and herself as beyond commercial consideration confirms her status as "subjectively unique" and demonstrates "difference rather than equivalence" (Weiner 10). While Walter Benn Michael interprets Lily's resistance to "freedom from risk" (*HM* 203) as a mark of her fascination by such risk and thus "her expression for the market" (Michael 230), I would contend that Lily has no such

⁸⁶ The issue of morality is Wharton's major concern. She remarks, "[n]o novel worth anything can be anything but a novel 'with a purpose,' & if anyone who cared for the moral issue did not see in my work that I care for it, I should have no one to blame but myself—or at least my inadequate means of rendering my effects" (*The Letters of Edith Wharton*, 98-9).

preoccupation. Rather, her interest in such “risk” is an embrace of agency and plasticity – a refusal to submit to the financial model of capitalism and to the role of women within the sexuo-economics of marital relations (Michael 230). In fact, Wharton subtly provides a clue for this reading in the *tableaux vivants* scene. During her performance, Lily associates her plastic display, an act of self-possession, with the idea of “risking too much” (107). Thus, had she participated in bartering with Rosedale for financial security, Lily would be another flexible “performer” at the expense of her own will. By refusing freedom from risk, Lily disengages herself from the gender category and its ideological supposition while maintaining her distinction by virtue of being unpurchased.

To drive home this crucial point, Wharton reveals that Lily triumphantly gains distinction in Rosedale’s eyes despite her precarious social status. Initially, after Lily is perceived as an object of circulation by her elite group, Rosedale intends to avoid her at all cost to maintain his newly attained social acceptance. However, he reveals a strong admiration for her refusal to trade herself in sexual-contract terms. As a man of Wall Street who is “too much preoccupied with his own advancement,” the fact that he comes to see Lily a third time at the boarding house for “unprofitable asides” underscores his high regard for her (232). As Wharton emphasizes, Lily’s “unexplained scruples and resistances” in the face of immediate destitution and social disgrace have given her “an external rarity, an air of being impossible to match” (234). In Rosedale’s view, Lily bears that form of distinction which seems to give her, to borrow Selden’s words, a “fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness” despite her diminished social standing (7). Lily thus tears beauty free of the power of capital. As Wershoven suggests, Lily represents “a picture of beauty that has nothing to do with wealth in her beauty” (*The Female Intruder* 53).

Shari Benstock argues that the end of the story is “so surprising and shocking” because Wharton withholds the information indicating whether Lily’s death is the result of suicide or an accident (233). I would contend, however, that Wharton renders Lily’s death ambiguous precisely to critique the restrictive model of the individual in which the right and protection of women is subsumed under men of property, and where those who refuse to submit to such gender categories – defined in terms of what Agamben calls “condition of belonging” – are excluded (*the Coming Community* 2).⁸⁷ Wharton implies that when Lily defies the economic determinism and the support owed a gendered body, her reality does not amount to an existence at all. We might say that her existence is stripped of identity and akin to a mere biological life, or bare life, to use Agamben’s term. Thus, by not pinpointing the nature of Lily’s death, Wharton implies that Lily’s existence “ends” long before her physical death. Such a living death exposes how the model of the individual in which women’s rights and protection are subsumed under the masculine household is restrictive as it excludes those outside the gender binary.⁸⁸

Wharton reveals that the sedative chloral, regardless of its intended purpose, is Lily’s solution. It is “the only spot of light in the dark prospect” (242). Rather than characterizing Lily’s increasing use of chloral as another of her careless compromises, the novel’s logic affirms that this act is deliberate and, in fact, logical as a paradoxical form of self-preservation. To make this point, Wharton again informs readers of Lily’s strong need for rest towards the end of the story. She tries “to shut out consciousness” by pressing her hands against her eyes. Lacking sleep for two consecutive nights, Lily felt “so profoundly tired that she thought she *must* fall asleep at

⁸⁷ Tracing through a series of subtle modifications in Wharton’s manuscripts, Cadence Waid contends that such ambiguity is “consciously constructed.” For a detailed discussion, see Waid 180-181.

⁸⁸ Ironically, such a living death is similar to Lily’s feelings toward living with Gryce or under the roof of Mrs. Peniston.

once.” Because of her inability to rest, she “*must* shut them [her eyes] out for a few hours; she *must* take a brief bath of oblivion” (250, emphasis added). This necessity shows that Lily is not only overpowered by her mental fatigue from an aesthetically impoverished existence, but also by an extremely profound physical fatigue. She is in dire need of rest; whether or not her death by chloral is intentional is, thus, not the question that the ending seems to beg. Instead, what it underscores is that Lily’s existence has become so repulsive to her that any means of discontinuing the consciousness of such existence would be a soothing welcome to satisfy an urgent necessity. By blurring the line between suicide and chloral overdose through the use of the euphemism “sleep,” Wharton implies that for Lily’s predicament as one stripped of identity, a physical death is even more desirable than the living death she faces (251). Rather than reinforcing economic determinism, the condition Lily experiences from the moment she refuses to be purchased not only underscores the restrictive model of individual defined through the gender binary but also that she maintains her cultural capital at all costs.

While critiquing the limitations of gender categories, Wharton shows that Lily does not succumb to the forces of economic determinism by compromising herself. Wharton ominously foreshadows Lily’s end at the beginning of the story by describing her as a “highly specialized” product (6). Similar to a delicate flower, Lily’s needs go beyond the mere capital nourishment that a purchase-contract marriage can easily secure for her. Instead, she requires a marriage that does not compromise her value as a prospective wife and her cultural capital. As indicated by the prevalent use of the passive structure in her association with her Bry performance dress, Lily’s training as a woman of the leisure class seems to influence every attempt to turn her into a victim of society where cultural capital is predicated on money.

An association lurked in every fold; each fall of lace and gleam of embroidery was like a letter in the record of her past. She was startled to find how the atmosphere of her old life enveloped her. But, after all, it was the life she *had been made* for; every dawning tendency in her *had been carefully directed* toward it, all her interests and activities *had been taught* to centre around it. She was like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud *had been nipped* except the crowning blossom of her beauty (246-7 emphasis added).

Yet, I would argue that Lily refuses to succumb to the type of marriage that would diminish her aesthetic value. In this sense, she self-authors her own fate. It is not by chance that in her last moments, Lily grasps her dress, as this action speaks to the moment she can “disown her fate” and proves that her beauty does not need capital to sustain it (247).

By ending the story with a protagonist who descends into non-identity and exists in a state of living death that culminates in an actual death, Wharton critiques the restrictive model of individual and gender categories that exclude those outside the pale, such as the “homeless” Lily who refuses to compromise her cultural capital by securing a position in a masculine household with a wealthy man.⁸⁹ As with “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *Herland*, which move towards a more mobile and mutable model of the rhizome, Wharton is in support of plasticity over flexibility and its potential for becoming. *The House of Mirth* highlights how the highly specialized Lily is subject to what Gilman terms “excessive sexual distinction” that atrophies her ability to survive by herself: Lily’s delicate hands are trained only for refined tasks such as preparing tea for a prospective husband, rather than performing the menial work of a milliner.

⁸⁹ Patrick Mullen remarks that Lily reveals the “the dilemma of reproduction” in highly gendered terms. She dies “both before marriage (a structure of social reproduction) and childless (and is thus left out of the structures of biological reproduction),” underscoring Wharton’s view that the aesthetic Lily represents is not reproducible. Lily is “singular and finite” (59). I would add that being outside the masculine household, Lily dies as a biological being, a bare life, rather than a gendered being.

Once outside “the great gilt cage” and the economic protection of her father’s household, Lily, the dryad, slips from the category of “a woman” to potentially mere life at the mercy of others (45). Survival is predicated on her securing a position as a gendered being within a masculine household – a place where Lily is forced to adapt and live like “a sea anemone” attached to a rock (235). The model Wharton implicitly advocates is thus one that gives Lily “points of contact outside” and allows her to be “amphibious” rather than tied to the stifling conventions and oppressive confines of the drawing room (56).

Although Wharton does not offer a solution to the problem that the character Lily poses, the novel implies that it is only after Lily – who is endowed with “the art of giving self-confidence to the embarrassed” but was “not equally sure of being able to embarrass the self-confident” – turns herself into another ruthless, vicious Bertha who represents the system and its structure that she might survive (17).⁹⁰ As Richard H. Lawson remarks, in this society, honesty and departure from the tribal rule of exchange are regarded as “weakness” (34). Using Lily as a vehicle, Wharton critiques the upper reach, supposedly the forefront of society and a driving force of America’s future. R.W.B. Lewis points out that Wharton’s final choice of title *The House of Mirth* (a reference taken from Ecclesiastes that she applied to the stock market of the day) rather than her earlier titles focusing on Lily – *A Moment’s Ornament* and *The Year of the Rose* – “transfers attention from the heroine to the world – or one of the worlds in which she seeks her fortune” (x).⁹¹ While upper-class Old New York during Wharton’s childhood

⁹⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar remark that Bertha “may be [...] most representative, if only because she is most exaggeratedly villainous.” Other commodified wives in the novel as represented by Judy Trenor, Mrs. Peniston, Mrs. Welly Bry and Norma Hatch are “all shadows of the type of which Bertha constitutes.” Both critics see them as “ultimately shown to live by the code that consistently motivates Bertha’s behavior—*Destroy or be destroyed*” (145 emphasis original).

⁹¹ For a detailed discussion of the significance and origin of the titles of the novel, see Waid 172-178.

represents not only inherited wealth, but also lays claim to “the moral wealth of [the] country” through its “long-established standards of honor and conduct, of education and manners,” such a rich blend of material ease and integrity is lacking in the world of the novel: a “frivolous society” peopled by “irresponsible pleasure-seekers” (*Backward* 207). While Lily’s prototype, Mary Rowlandson, will preserve her place in the Christian community if she resists the Indians even at the cost of death, Wharton suggests that Lily has no place in such a secular world if she does not succumb to the lure of capital.

By resisting the system of exchange that governs most, if not all, the relationships in the novel, Lily, like the Rowlandson prototype, remains true to the ideals of polite society. Wharton shows that while Lily is perceived by others as property or a sexual object, she proves at the end that she is an “inalienable possession” – one that only belongs to herself (Weiner 6). Rather than depending on cultural capital, Lily gains distinction despite her classless station at the end by her refusal to be part of the system of exchange. As with her performance at the gathering of *tableaux vivants*, in which Lily declares her self-possession, she ultimately proves that her power of beauty and distinction is free of capital. Doing so, Wharton not only simultaneously “critique[s] and preserve[s] the authority of the late-nineteenth-century elite class” as Nancy Bentley contends, but also, I would argue, transcends the horizons of her privileged upbringing⁹² by arguing that sexual and moral purity are also aesthetic attributes and thus marks of distinction regardless of class (49).⁹³

⁹² For a critic who contends that Wharton’s novel is limited by Wharton’s inability to transcend her class, see John Curtis Underwood, 360-1, 390.

⁹³ Marilyn Jones Lyde also remarks that “at some imperceptible point there has been a strange merger between art and moral belief; we are dealing with a theory of technique but also with something mystic and imponderable” (158). However, I would argue that such merger underscores Wharton’s definition of true distinction.

Imagining the American Mind in “The Turn of the Screw”

At the second interview with her prospective master, the poor inexperienced country parson's daughter, who applies for work as a governess at Bly, “engaged” (28).⁹⁴ In one deliberately chosen word, Henry James succinctly and subtly encapsulates the two major story lines of “The Turn of the Screw” (1898) which have become the subject of heated, relentless critical debate. As Robert Andrew Wilson explains, the expression “she engages” embodies “an ambiguity between love and lucre as, by the eighteenth century, *engaged* had developed both the sense of a servant's entering into an agreement for employment and the sense of betrothal” (55). Tucked into James's prologue, where readers briefly learn about the background of the governess, are the seeds of two mutually exclusive readings of the novella that arise from the question of whether or not the ghost is real. If the answer is in the positive (the ghosts exist), the governess is just a vulnerable young woman doing the job she was hired for and the novella is an “an amazingly fine creepy, scary, soul-shuddering ghost story”; but if the answer is the opposite (the ghosts don't exist), the governess is an impressionable young woman in love with her employer and the story is “an amazingly fine psychological case study of a neurotic young woman” (Beidler 189). In line with what Allon Whites calls “that momentous shift when certain deep, discursive regularities (clarity, coherence, sincerity, objective representation) began to crack and slide in the 1870s and 1880s,” James seemingly invites readers to impose an answer as

⁹⁴ James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw*. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2004. All further citations refer to this edition.

to whether or not the governess is mad but offers none himself (1-2). The novella has given rise to Freudian readings, which take a diagnostic approach and emphasize the romantic meaning of “engaged”; these urge that the governess is a hysterical woman. Edmund Wilson is the first critic to locate the governess within a psychoanalytic framework, identifying her as a patient from the pages of Freud’s case histories. In Wilson’s influential argument, the governess’s epistemological navigation and negotiation of her new milieu is a manifestation of her repressed love for her unattainable master. Wilson affirms that the “self-deceived” governess is “a neurotic case of sex repression, and that the ghosts are not real but a hallucination of the governess” (125, 88). To support this case, he argues that it is only the governess who sees the ghosts and such fact points to her repression and fantasy for the master, thus her inability to admit a sexual impulse. He calls attention to scenes that, he maintains, include phallic imagery: “Observe,” Wilson remarks on her hallucination and repression, “from the Freudian point of view, the significance of the governess’ interest in the little girl’s pieces of wood and of the fact that the male apparition first takes shape on a tower and the female apparition on a lake” (90). To Wilson, the governess supplies her own meaning that forms a neurotic interpretation and reveals sexual repression as she attempts to understand occurrences at Bly.

However, I would argue that Freudian critics assume that all individuals observe the Lockean model of the self-enclosed, rational subject. This model posits that the empirical subject acquires knowledge from sensation derived from the material, object world. Sensation is then classified by the faculty of reflection into an archive of thoughts as ideas about the world that gradually become more extensive. This process of classification is made possible by judgment

developed through reflection that matures over time.⁹⁵ Implicit in this model, which the Freudian critics take for granted, is the assumption that sensations always precede the processes of ideation and reflection as well as that the knowledge of the world the empirical subject has accurately mirrors that world. Essentially, Freudian critics do not account for the possibility that reflection can operate independently of worldly experience, that is, when ideas are formed from the subject's own ideas rather than on the basis of one's sensations from the world.

This sensation-classification-reflection sequence that Locke puts forward and that Freudian critics have, for the most part, adopted, presupposes a world of objects where representation is stable. This view supposes that each individual makes sense of the world in a similar manner and that we all observe the same physical world of things and people. Each one sees and shares the same reality. Any discrepancies in what we perceive results from the way we see rather than from what is actually there to be seen. Thus, within this model, those who discern a different reality are measured against the norm and taken as irrational. As with Locke, Freudian critics of the novella assume that a clear line separates the world of consciousness from that of the material things and people with which and with whom we interact. On this basis, they presented the mad governess theory.

Rather than engaging in the question of the reality of the ghost that preoccupies Freudian critics, this chapter supports critics such as Christine Brooke-Rose, Shlomith Rimmon and Shoshana Felman who refuse to ask "either-or" questions regarding the apparition and instead highlights the mutually exclusive nature of the novella's interpretive possibilities (Beidler 197-8). However, I further the work of these foundational critics by arguing that Henry James

⁹⁵ As Siân Silyn Roberts points out Locke's model of rational individual betrays its inherent contradiction. While the rational individual begins as a blank slate, the model presupposes the existence of the capacity for reflection, without which the classification of sensation is not possible (21-22).

employs his novella and capitalizes on the figure of the governess—a character who “belongs to a world different from that in which she moves” (Lecaros 40)— as a way of theorizing the operation of human consciousness to better understand the way in which it makes sense of the environment that constitutes its experience.

Thus, rather than the reality of the ghost, the central question that James’s well-engineered novella asks, I argue, is in what sense the ghosts are real for the governess. By delving into this crucial question, the reader can account for the different ways of seeing the world as a product of distinct interpretive strategies and cultural logic. More importantly, we can sidestep the trap of privileging one’s own system of classification in the manner of Freudian critics as a “normal” way of making sense of the world at the expense of other views. To put forward my argument, I will draw upon David Hume’s model of self and William James’s pragmatist model of consciousness. Both theorists’ models, which account for individually contextualized realities and mediation between subject and object, allow the argument, I suggest, that the governess’s interpretation of her perceptions is the product of the cognitive equipment she brings to bear as she attempts to make sense of an alien environment unintelligible to her. To frame this point in terms of “engagement,” the term with which I began: the governess neither engages in the sexual sense, nor engages in merely the contractual sense, but engages in a richly experiential, cognitive sense with a complex social milieu. The story, finally, is less a story about ghosts than a story about consciousness.

This chapter will proceed in five sections. First, in contrast to Locke’s model of the rational individual with a secure sense of self-identity, I explain how Hume and William James share the same notion of mutable identity and consciousness. Drawing upon the two theorists, I suggest that we connect objects and make sense of our experience through what Hume terms

“habit and custom” based on the principle of association and what William James terms “selective attention” (Hume 43, James, “Stream” 84) I argue that Henry James employs the novella as a way of theorizing the operation of consciousness in a similar manner as Hume and William James by capitalizing on the figure of the governess as a stranger. The second section argues that the intensity of the governess’s experience in an alien environment as well as her reliance on her limited cognitive tools informs her self-image as a heroine. The third and fourth sections explain how the governess’s epistemological navigation of Bly’s mystery through association and selective attention based on her appetite for heroism constitutes a sensory experience that yields a different reality than that experienced by Bly inhabitants. The fifth section argues that without novelistic grounding, as with the governess, James’ readers face the same epistemological puzzle and thus have no superior access to knowledge. I conclude that Henry James borrows from his brother’s model of consciousness to create a way of making sense of a strange and surprising world that, despite the novella’s setting in England, is more appropriate to the American cultural milieu.

Consciousness and epistemology in theory

In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740), Hume questions Locke’s assumption that people and objects are immutable across time and space:

There are some philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF...I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement (149).

Of perception, Hume further elaborates that “[a]ll the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS” and that the former has greater “force and violence” in comparison to ideas, the “less lively perceptions” that

operate when we reflect on our original sense-impressions (qtd. in Watt 257). In contrast to Locke's notion of a rational and stable self made possible by the accumulation of sensory information that forms an archive of knowledge and the property of reflection, Hume argues that the model of self and our sense of identity is always in flux and thus without origin.⁹⁶ To Hume, this illusion of our identity is only attainable by the principle of custom or habit—a set of recurring patterns which allow us to make inferences of how one object is associated with another (*Enquiries* 43). As he points out, we can know that heat and flame are related and that one produces the other only after we observe “the constant conjunction of two objects” over time (*Enquiries* 43). Hume elaborates that the principle of association includes three parts: “resemblance, contiguity and causation” (*Enquiries* 50). He thus theorizes that we understand our experience and subsequently our sense of identity through inferences made possible by custom and habit based on the principle of association (*Enquiries* 43).

Hume's model of mutable identity finds resonance in William James' work on the stream of consciousness. As discussed earlier in chapter one, James argues that consciousness is constantly changing. Our perception of things and sense of reality at different times is contextualized.⁹⁷ He notes:

Often we are ourselves struck at the strange differences in our successive views of the same thing. We wonder how we ever could have opined as we did last month about a certain matter. We have outgrown the possibility of that state of mind, we know not how. From one year to another we see things in new lights. What was unreal has grown real, and what was exciting is insipid. The friends we used to

⁹⁶ For Locke, this origin depends on the presupposition of the existence of the faculty of reflection that makes possible the process of classification.

⁹⁷ Jonathan Crary pointed out that, early in the nineteenth century, optical science and Romantic aesthetics viewed sense as departing from Locke's conceptualization in which senses are impervious to influences. Rather than seeing what is there to be seen approximately in the same way from one individual to another, sense is contextualized within an individuated physical body and thus the way things are seen differs from one individual to another (137-138).

care the world for are shrunken to shadows; the women once so divine, the stars, the woods, and the waters, how now so dull and common!—the young girls that brought an aura of infinity, at present hardly distinguishable existences the pictures so empty; and as for the books, what was there to find so mysteriously significant in Goethe, or in John Mill so full of weight? (“Stream” 72).

The same object appears differently according to many factors not limited to emotion, age, distance, circumstance and various vantage points that influence our consciousness at particular moments. Thus, as with Hume, William James implicitly reveals how our ideas about objects and the material world are not necessarily or strictly formed on the basis of sensory information.

At the same time, James’s notion of consciousness further supplements Hume’s principle of association by revealing how it is significantly informed by selective attention.⁹⁸ As James observes “in the pages of such writers as Locke, Hume, Hartley, the Mills, and Spencer the word [attention] hardly occurs, or if it does so, it is parenthetically and as if by inadvertence” (*Principles* 402). James explains that “consciousness is always interested more in one part of its object than in another, and welcomes and rejects, or chooses, all the while it thinks” (“Stream” 85). He mentions that “each of us chooses by his way of attending to things, what sort of a universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit” (*Principles* 424). To make this point, he prompts:

Let four men make a tour in Europe. One will bring home only a picturesque *impression*—costumes and colors, parks and views and works of architecture, pictures and statues. To another all this will be non-existent; and distances and prices populations and drainage—arrangements, door and window—fastenings and other useful statistics will take their place. A third will give a rich account of the theatres, restaurants, and public halls, and naught besides; whilst the fourth will perhaps have been so wrapped in his own subjective broodings as to be able to tell little more than a few names of places through which he passed (“stream” 86 emphasis added).

⁹⁸ The notion of attention is so central to consciousness that Steven Meyer takes one as a substitution for the other (258).

James's example vividly reveals how each person's experience and reality is very much based on the selective attention each brings to define his or her universe at a particular place and point in time.⁹⁹ Drawing upon Hermann Von Helmholtz's law, James points out that "we leave all impressions unnoticed which are valueless to us as signs by which to discriminate things" (*Principles* 456). James noted that if we ask "how the mind proceeds rationally to connect" the combination of objects, we "find selection again to be omnipotent" and that "depending on the ability of our mind to break up the totality of the phenomenon reasoned about, into parts, and to pick out from among these the particular one which, in the given emergency, may lead to the proper conclusion" ("Stream" 86). The model of consciousness and self that Hume and James underline is thus one in which "reality" is contextualized by the subject who registers them and subsequently an individual's associative inference is not always accurate. I would argue that both Hume and James implicitly account for the susceptibility to what Collin Meissner called the "hermeneutic circle" (79). That is, rather than seeing things as they are, essentially what an individual sees is influenced by what that individual selects and anticipates seeing. The associative assumption (or inference) of one object's relation to another is further based on the same dynamic.¹⁰⁰ I will later show that Henry James draws upon the figure of the governess as a

⁹⁹ In fact, James notes that in an experiment which examines the correspondence between how pre-perception as part of selective attention affects our reaction to stimulus, when the impression is fully anticipated, the reaction "may be discharged before the stimulus has already occurred." Underlying this experiment is the fact that anticipation resulting from our selective attention "accelerates" perception prior to the act of seeing (*Principles* 429).

¹⁰⁰ The dynamic of James' notion of selective attention and the related concept of pre-perception works in a similar manner to what Armstrong theorizes about the relationship between photography and photographer. Just as the photographer sees and pre-selects a scene prior to the action of taking a photo, we see what we expect to see rather than what is actually there to be seen. This effect is most vividly portrayed by the action of "young men and women pausing before the camera to memorialize the moment they are about to become suicide bombers" (*Realism* 100). While the act of destruction has not taken place, arguably, in the mind of the bomber, he, to employ James' words, "selects" and therefore pre-perceives, who he wants to be.

stranger with different interpretive tools to theorize consciousness in a way that illustrates Hume and William James's theories.

A Stranger

Arriving at Bly from a rural vicarage, with little experience and few interpretive tools, the governess falls back on modes of thought drawn Gothic Romance and her Christian education, which allow her to envision of herself as a heroine. Through the depth of the experience that the governess is facing, James underscores that she is at odds with the new milieu. If, to borrow Jonathan Bates's words, for Jane Austen's characters, "a journey to the nearest town is an event, a trip to London an adventure" (2), the governess's journey to London to see the master and her subsequent move to Bly to oversee the children is even more intense. Not only is she a poor clergyman's daughter who might have never ventured beyond the modest neighborhood of a Hampshire vicarage, she is also "the youngest of several daughters" and thus occupies the bottom rung in the hierarchy of authority within her family (26). While the young woman's home life is described as "scant," "small," and "smothered" (38), at Bly the residence and its surroundings are "large," "great" and "impressive" (30). She thus experiences an unprecedented sense of expansion and independence and, as governess, assumes the position of the highest authority among the servants. In fact, she even admits that the freedom she is granted at Bly is "a trap—not designed but deep—to [her] imagination, to [her] delicacy, perhaps to [her] vanity; to whatever in [her] was most excitable" (38). This new social environment thus affects the way the governess makes sense of it. As she notes, Bly has "an extent and mass for which [she] had not been prepared" (32). Even at the meeting with the master where she learns about the estate, her remark that she received "a narrower notion of the place" shows how Bly defies her expectations

(30). James reveals the sharp discrepancy between the governess's home life at the vicarage and that of Bly, highlighting that the governess is out of place in her new environment.

Indeed, James takes pains to highlight how the new and unfamiliar environment challenges the autonomy of the governess's individuated consciousness—one that characterizes Locke's model— by erasing the boundary between herself as a subject and the objects around her. Time and again, James shows that the governess experiences moments in which Bly exerts influence on her. Arguably, such moments are inexplicable by Freudian notions of repression as the influence strictly comes from outside rather than within. While unacknowledged by most, if not all, critics, James subtly varies the structure of the locution "I found myself" doing x or y to highlight the governess's discovery of her sense of self-estrangement within an unfamiliar setting.¹⁰¹ Such locution, which recurs as many as three times within the first chapter (and ten times within the first ten chapters), points to how the governess's behavior eludes the control of her supervisory self who discovers such action when it has begun.¹⁰² Early in the story, James hints at how the alien milieu at Bly challenges the governess's autonomy. The fact that this particular locution often precedes her action of interpretation also underscores how the strange environment forces her to make sense of its occurrence.

¹⁰¹ For example, "I found myself, to meet my friend the better, offering it, on the spot, sarcastically "To his poor little innocent mates" (34); "I somehow measured the importance of what I had seen by my thus finding myself hesitate to mention it" (41); "I from one moment to another found myself forming as to what I should see straight before me and across the lake as a consequence of raising my eyes" (54).

¹⁰² In his essay on the "Uncanny," Freud attempts to explain the moment of self-estrangement he experienced as he strolled along the streets of an Italian town. He attributes the fact that he returned time after time to the red light district against his will employing the locution "I found myself..." to his infantile thoughts while questioning the presence of town women who were curious to see his presence (237). His attribution of such involuntary action as emerging from within rather than an exterior source underscores how Freud fails to consider the possibility that a foreign setting can potentially turn one into something other than oneself. Doing so, he rhetorically preserves the autonomy of individuated consciousness. However, Freud's self-estrangement differs from that of the governess. While he narrates his experience as if he were outside and seeing himself as a psychoanalytic subject whose view of the town is distorted and paranoid, the governess takes such external influence as one beyond her comprehension.

In this new situation, James makes the readers aware that the governess misrecognizes the position she has assumed. As with the prologue's fireside audience who "anticipates" that Douglas' account will reveal the cause of Miss Jessel's death (28), the governess selects and predefines the way Bly would function in her universe through the lens of Gothic Romance. She sees herself as more than being just another governess, one, to borrow Cecilia Wadso Lecaros's words, "of whom little, or even nothing was known" (34). Instead, as an unnamed woman from a vicarage, she fancies herself "a remarkable young woman" who "*needed* to be remarkable to offer a front to the remarkable things that presently gave their first sign" (39 emphasis added). Yet, her desire for public notice is at odds with her actual situation at Bly, which is virtually cut off from the outside world. Thus, the governess contextualizes her own way of seeing, one that deviates from the actual material object. In fact, not only does she see herself a heroine of Bly for the events yet to come, she also envisions being in a "ship" with "a handful of passengers" already "drifting" and "lost," and in desperate need of her rescue (33). The governess, I would argue, tries to function, in a sense, like an artist whose interpretation is a form of art work that allows her to be a larger-than-life heroine when real life possibilities are frustrated by her economic and social circumstances. Just as an artist, to borrow William James' words, "notoriously selects his items, rejecting all tones, colors, shapes, which do not harmonize with each other and with the main purpose of his work" ("Stream" 87), the governess's unusual state of mind and vision of herself as a heroine inform what she does – and does not – attend to. This

selective attention precipitates the elimination¹⁰³ of any incongruous elements that would challenge her heroic vision and the uptake of those associations that make possible her vision.¹⁰⁴

At the same time, James's positioning of the governess as a traveler significantly underscores the state of heightened sensibility and sensory awareness that significantly departs from her every day state of mind. Psychologist Alison Gopnik explains that the consciousness of a traveler who visits a completely new place with very different customs works in a similar manner to that of a baby or a child. Rather than a spotlight consciousness that enables adults to focus on a particular task, travelers have "lantern consciousness"—one that presents a vivid, keen and intense awareness that enables young children and travelers alike to experience a panoramic, expansive vision of a new environment as a tool to help them comprehend and navigate its meanings and influences (125). Gopnik describes how, unlike adults whose spotlight attention allows them to focus on plans and goals, children and travelers are attracted by the interesting and unexpected events they see. James's inexperienced young governess, with her sense of herself as a "remarkable" young woman, is just such a traveler. Hers is a blend of a traveler's lantern consciousness—one that allows her to have an expansive view of her environment—and something akin to a spotlight consciousness, with a strong focus on elements possessing the slightest possibility of adventure that can help turn her into a heroine.

¹⁰³ William James notes, "The greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths" (38 *Pragmatism*).

¹⁰⁴ Kimberly C. Reed also makes a similar point that the governess attempts to "flush out and destroy anything and anyone that would keep her from achieving it—or who would reveal her own less-than-respectable desires." However, Reed attributes the governess's reason for doing so to her attempt to maintain her "respectability." I would argue that beyond simple respectability, the governess's strong need to be a Gothic heroine informs her selection and elimination of elements in the story (106).

James reveals how the governess's vision of herself as a heroine is at work in her first interaction with Mrs. Grose. Here, James further illuminates the work of his brother William James by showing that selective attention affects the governess's selective consciousness: the way she sees people and objects. The narrative focuses on her theory of mind—what Lisa Zunshine described as “our ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires” (6). Far from an unusual process of understanding, Zunshine notes that attributing states of mind is “the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment, incorrect though our attributions frequently are”—a method that is similar to Humian association, particularly in the use of cause and effect, I would argue (6). At issue is the question of inaccuracy: how one explains mistaken understandings of cause and effect, a concern at the center of *The Turn of the Screw*, as the governess spends a good deal of time interpreting the minds around her, especially the children's but also the housekeeper's, Mrs. Grose. Zunshine indicates that inaccuracies in applying theory of mind tend to be the result of ambiguous or misleading acts; she gives the example of somebody who apparently departs to fetch a glass of water, but who is in fact going out to make a phone call (7). James, by contrast, attributes such inaccuracies to the governess's selective attention and to her perception of herself as a heroine in an environment beyond the normal everyday experience that Zunshine posits. James reinforces this point through the governess's repeated emphasis on Mrs. Grose's admiration of her—a mark confirming her vanity as she herself admitted earlier. Initially, she thinks that Mrs. Grose is “so inordinately glad” to see her (30). She notes Mrs. Grose “was so glad—stout simple plain clean wholesome woman—as to be positively on the guard against showing it too much. [She] wondered even then a little why [Mrs. Grose] should wish not to show it, and that, with reflexion, with suspicion, might of course have made me uneasy” (30). Later she insists, “[o]h

she was glad I was there” (32). Her impression of Mrs. Grose’s vision of her is contextualized within her vision of herself as a heroine and her association and theory of mind is based on such perception.

Just as William James notes that from one year to another “women once so divine” can become dull and common to the once admiring perceiver (72), Henry James shows that in the governess’s unusual state of mind, common privileged children become a marvel to her. As the governess is unable to convert them into her usual everyday experience, her perception of the objects’ status (in this instance, her wards) transfers the unassimilable into an idealized or ethereal category. This is evidenced in the way she places them under the non-human category of angel and sprite. Flora with her “hair of gold and her frock of blue” bears the “beatific” and “radiant” image of “angelic beauty” (32, 30). She is “one of Raphael’s holy infants” (31). In a similar vein, Miles possesses “something divine that [she] ha[s] never found to the same degree in any child” (37). Totally immersed in Gothic Romance, the governess also finds young Flora, who introduces her to “empty chambers and dull corridors, on crooked staircases” in possession of “confidence and courage” – never considering that the child might simply be comfortable and familiar with her everyday environment (32). William James, reflecting on variations in one’s perceptions of others, explains that “the difference of the sensibility is shown best by the difference of our emotion about the things from one age to another, or when we are in different organic moods” (“Steam” 71). Henry James reiterates this point by making the governess, in her capacity as narrator of her past experience, acknowledge the discrepancy between Bly in its material actuality and her *experience* of Bly and its people during her stay. She admits that “[she] ha[s] not seen Bly since the day [she] left it, and [she] dare[s] say that to [her] present older and more informed eyes it would show a very reduced importance” (32). This differential between

actuality and perception is not merely a factor of time and distance, however; even at the time she lived at Bly, the governess states that she “perfectly knew” she was “under the spell” but gave herself into it nonetheless (43). James underscores that it is the effect of being a young impressionable woman in an alien milieu, together with the governess’s selective attention, that influences the working of her consciousness and her capacity to interpret the behavior of the residents at Bly.

Ambiguity

As a newcomer tasked with the care of two children, the governess has no authorized source to appeal to for reliable information as a grounding to interpret other characters. Normal sources of stability and information are explicitly absent from the story structure. First of all, the parents who are supposed to oversee the children have passed away in India, thus erasing key details of the young children’s past experience. The man of the house—the children’s uncle, a member of the privileged, ruling class—is absent, having stipulated that the governess never contact him for any reason – “[n]ot a word” (33). As Terry Heller points out, “in most areas of Victorian life a young woman would accept and conform to male authority in interpreting. The absence of male authority at Bly makes the governess’s situation unique” (133). The oddness of being a young woman overseeing a household without an adult male presence, I would suggest, explains why the governess sees herself as being “*strangely* at the helm” (33, emphasis added). At the same time, though having lived at Bly the longest and theoretically knowing the most about its affairs and governess, the simple, illiterate Mrs. Grose, who is the governess’s prime reference, is “below stairs” (27). This class differential would explain the housekeeper’s reticence about referring to the master in response to the governess’s questions about her

employer. Thus, from the start, the governess lacks authoritative sources of information that could reliably serve as her grounding.

Zunshine points out that certain acts or linguistic formulations may be intrinsically ambiguous, leading to potential inaccuracies in theory of mind interpretation. This is true of James's novella. When information about characters is provided to the governess, the words are definitionally ambiguous. A case in point is Mrs. Grose's opaque remark that "Quint was much too free" (51).¹⁰⁵ It is impossible to know whether the term "free" refers to something psychological (that the man was sexually promiscuous), economic (that he violated other people's property rights) or social (that the servant trespassed class boundaries) (Armstrong, "Characters" 332). The valence of the remark is unexplained and thus unfixed. Using the example of Quint further, as the concept of being "free" is definitionally unclear, when Mrs. Grose refers to him in relation to other characters, it is impossible to know which system of meaning is in place. Questions surrounding the character abound. What, for instance, is meant by the fact that Quint is the master's "own man, his valet" and that "Quint was alone" when the master went? (49). What was the nature of the servant's relationship, to Miles if, when "they had been about together," it had been "quite as if Quint were his tutor—and a very grand one"? (62). To what does Mrs. Grose refer when she remarks of Quint and Miss Jessel, "they were both infamous"? (58). To use mathematical terms, the governess is left with an abundance of sample space in terms of characters as well as their associations with other characters to create her own probable notions of their relationships. Thus, when key bits of information about the

¹⁰⁵ William James's suggestion to Henry that he should "say a thing in one sentence as straight and explicit as it can be made and then drop it forever" highlights James's use of notorious ambiguity in his novelistic design (277 *Letters*).

characters—Miles, Flora, Quint and Miss Jessel—are missing, the text provides no ethnographical signpost that allows the governess to sketch out the characters in question.

This interpretive difficulty at the character level also leads to the challenge of her knowing what is transpiring over the course of her time at Bly. Unable to quite fathom the figures who populate her world, the governess is left to adjudicate the significance of the incidents and events that transpire. As James notes in “The Art of Fiction” (1884), “[w]hat is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” (16). Because the links between characters and incidents are indeterminate, both are equally puzzling to the uninitiated governess. Arguably, we could say the phrase “Quint was much too free” resonates through the whole story. What the governess thinks about the story of Bly depends on her interpretation of this line. At the same time, the available information about happenings further obscures rather than clarifies her understanding of what is transpiring around her. For example, the governess indicates that she learns about Miles’ expulsion through the letter the school sent to the master. Yet, because the letter provides no explanation for the action, it is impossible for the governess to know with any certainty about Miles’ past. While the letter itself, as Homer Brown notes, generally “stands in the novel for what is connected with the past origin, genealogical source, and parent” (590), it functions differently in James’s novella as it withholds such key connection. At the same time, while the fact that Quint and Miss Jessel are dead is provided, the cause is also withheld. Thus, when Mrs. Grose notes that Miss Jessel “paid for it,” the phrase becomes hollow (59). To borrow Robert Schleifer’s words, the available information of past happenings is “a revelation of absence, of nothing” (33). It is thus natural that Michelle E. Moore notes, “[a]lmost every element of the novella that may be called a plot point or moment of character development erases itself as soon as the narrator reveals it” (128,125).

Because she is frequently presented with events but not with causes, the dialectic between character and action is rendered uncertain.

Thus, when information about characters—Miles, Flora, Quint and Miss Jessel— and their relationships is missing, there is no grounding that allows the governess as “reader” to decode the relationships and establish past happenings. As James wrote to the story’s publisher, Sir John Mackenzie: “So long as the events are veiled the imagination will run riot” (qtd. in Edel 307). Thus, the governess is confronted with the impossibility of sketching the characters in question accurately or knowing with certainty which system of meaning applies. The plot line, as a result, becomes essentially what the governess chooses it to be and the kind of reading that the governess selects over another reveals that her ideology and values lean toward a particular system of meaning.

Freud’s Case Study

Sigmund Freud’s analysis of his patient “Dora,” which presupposes the distinction between subject and object, actually shares a fundamentally similar interpretive method with that of the governess. While many critics (beginning with Edmund Wilson) have applied a psychoanalytic framework to *The Turn of the Screw*, my point in invoking Freud’s case study is different. Rather than using Freud to explain James’s tale (by diagnosing its central character), I examine how Freud as an interpreter makes cognitive leaps that are analogous to those the governess makes in the story. Freud relies on selective attention and association to construct his diagnosis of Dora, precisely in the way that the governess relies on the same notions to construct her reality of the apparition. Yet, the governess’s perception that constitutes her reality is discounted on the basis of her class and gender –the very basis that validates Freud’s

interpretation of Dora as mentally ill. Although Henry James's nameless governess and Freud both fill in the blanks to establish a coherent narrative weaving together characters and incidents, the psychoanalyst with his authority as a medical man and "a gynecologist"—one who is presumed to understand the health of a woman's reproductive system and her desires better than Dora herself— automatically assumes the role of one who tells objective truth (9). This is the very role that Freudian critics use to discount the governess. With a claim to medical authority, Freud implicitly relies on exclusionary difference by rendering any account contradictory to his as false and therefore to be disregarded. His recurring use of the language of certainty in phrases or sentences like "there could be no doubt" and "I was quite sure" subtly reflects his invocation of authority (Freud, *Hysteria* 20). Thus, readers of James's novella may observe how both narrators – Freud on the one hand, and the governess on the other – speak from distinctly different positions and note how each position affects the perceived validity of their interpretations.

Similar to the way Hume and William James theorize about consciousness, Freud's interpretive method is bookended by his sexual prejudice against women and his psychoanalytic interest. Similar to how the governess sees herself reflected in Gothic Romance, imagining herself "a remarkable young woman" and "read[ing] into the fact" every element that reinforces such self-image (39, 52), Freud readily evaluates Dora through his own analytical framework: not Gothic romance, but rather the lens of his patriarchal attitudes. The language in Freud's remarks reflects the doctor's acceptance of male domination and female submission: he blithely describes how Dora's father "handed her over" to Freud for psychotherapeutic treatment, and he "does not hesitate to make them [patients] submit to uncovering every possible part of their

body” (*Hysteria* 34, 65).¹⁰⁶ His low opinion of women is also shown in the way he dismisses female domestic authority and instead frames it as pathology. Reflecting upon Dora’s mother based on the account of Dora’s father and Dora herself, Freud remarks that he “was led to imagine her as an uncultivated woman and above all...a foolish one, who had concentrated all her interest upon domestic affairs” (*Hysteria* 20). The role of governess, in fact, makes an appearance in the case of Dora. While Freud recognized that Dora’s last instructress was “well-read and of advanced views,” Freud hints that she is no less pathological than Dora’s mother (*Hysteria* 36). His reading of her reflects a stereotypical image of the governess, taking her as having a desire for Dora’s father when she “drew Dora’s attention to all the obvious features” of her father’s relationship with Frau K. Freud’s views notwithstanding, the governess in the case study sees this illicit relationship as “incompatible with her dignity” (*Hysteria* 36). At the same time, while Freud reads the governess as a figure who corrupts Dora by giving her sexual information, he validates his own psychoanalytical practices which involve explicit discussions of a sexual nature with his patient.

There is never any danger of corrupting an inexperienced girl. For where there is no knowledge of sexual processes even in the unconscious, no hysterical symptom will arise; and where hysteria is found there can no longer be any question of “innocence of mind” in this sense in which parents and educators use the phrase (*Hysteria* 49).

This claim readily puts all the blame on Dora’s governess who, according to Freud’s version, had already corrupted Dora. At the same time, Freud strictly adheres to what Paula Marantz Cohen terms “a basic tenet of psychoanalytic theory,” i.e., the notion that “there is no such thing as an unconscious ‘No’” (74). Freud’s patriarchal attitude and intense psychoanalytic approach, I will

¹⁰⁶ This language resembles that of Dora who explains that she “had been handed over” to Herr K to appease him for her father’s relationship with his wife, highlighting how Dora perceives herself as an object because of the exchange her father made out of her (34).

show, inform his selective attention and thus permeate his analysis of Dora which attempts to make her fit the diagnosis he already has of her. Ironically, we can hear in these actions the very processes of the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* – and (in another ironic turn of the screw) in the interpretive conclusions of psychoanalytic critics who have subsequently diagnosed the Jamesian character as sexually repressed.

In the case of Freud, his selective attention also seems to derive from his desire to be an interpretive hero, as well as a sense of the romance of the entire situation. The influence of these two factors is revealed in the way Freud connects different elements of information in Dora's account. As he states, the situation in which Herr K "clasped the girl to him and pressed a kiss upon her lips" was "*surely* just the situation to call up a distinct feeling of sexual excitement in a girl of fourteen who had never before been approached" (*Hysteria* 28, emphasis added). He further argues that a "healthy" girl in Dora's situation would "*certainly*" have felt a genital sensation (*Hysteria* 29 emphasis added) in receiving the attention from a man of Herr K's age and status. By employing the language of medical discourse, with the invocation of Dora's stage of (expected) sexual development according to what he considered to be "healthy," Freud readily eliminates other possible reactions, aside from the physical sensation, as normal. As he notes:

[T]he behavior of this child of fourteen was already entirely and completely hysterical, I should without question consider a person hysterical in whom an occasion for sexual excitement elicited feelings that were preponderantly or exclusively unpleasurable; and I should do so whether or not the person were capable of producing somatic symptoms (*Hysteria* 28).

Rather than considering Dora's fleeing as evidence of her strong rejection and the instinctive attempt of a young girl to protect herself against an impending sexual threat from a much older man, Freud posits a cause-effect association by taking Dora's reaction of fleeing as concealing and confirming her desire for Herr K, her potential seducer. Characteristic of this analysis is the

way it readily dismisses a possible contending reason, such as her exercise of female authority—the authority that we see in Mary Rowlandson and Lily Bart, who refuse a form of sexual exchange without consent even at the expense of their own survival. As Armstrong points out, what Freud takes as a symptom of pathology is “the very same feature denoting qualities of depth and domestic value in woman” (*Desire* 232). In this sense, we could say that this interpretation of Dora is one-centered and strictly based on what he himself establishes as the norm: an instance of selective attention and association rather than psychoanalytic wisdom.

Once Freud pathologizes Dora and confirms his diagnosis of hysteria, the framework that he applies produces confirmation bias: he can rely on the unconscious as a way to maintain the coherence of his diagnosis. Freud’s elastic interpretive capacity renders Dora’s words or actions—be they her denials or statements—as evidence that serves to confirm his diagnosis while suppressing other possible meanings. He perceives Dora’s “silent acquiescence” about her father’s relations with Frau K and her preoccupation with Herr K’s children to be further evidence of her sexual repression, then points to this presumed repression as “a cloak for something else that Dora was anxious to hide from herself and from other people” (*Hysteria* 37). Any skepticism Dora exhibits is taken as admission or confirmation of his diagnosis. When Dora remarks “I knew you would say that” after Freud interprets her dream of a jewel-box as signifying female genitalia, Freud readily takes Dora’s statement (about the predictability and rigidity of his interpretations) as an admission that she agrees with him. In so doing, he maintains the language of an evidentiary claim of hysteria despite the fact that he is also putting forth a personal inference that is resisted by Dora. Freud’s analysis reveals that he himself puts coherence to Dora’s words by filling in the blanks and eliminating contending or discrepant accounts—in the same manner as the governess at Bly, as I will later discuss. Freud appears

strikingly oblivious to his own transference. By forcefully imposing his own narrative, he could himself be fairly categorized as “hysterical,” if his diagnosis is read through the lens that Edmund Wilson applies to the governess. Unlike Freud, however, the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* actually acknowledges her act of imposing an interpretation on her compatriots at Bly because of the influence of its alien environment.

Consciousness and epistemology in the novella

Before discussing how the governess comes to know about the ghosts, I will first explore the way she interprets the mystery of Miles’ expulsion and his identity prior to her encounter with the apparitions. I contend that her interpretation of Miles as a contamination to his mates influences the way the governess later establishes the identity of Quint and Jessel. Before the governess learns about Miles’s expulsion, it is important to remember that she has already defined Bly, her world, through the lens of Gothic Romance. Bly’s inhabitants are, as she perceives, “lost” in a “drifting” ship waiting for her rescue (33). Based on the governess’s view of herself as a heroine, her consciousness is bookended by her interest. Thus, she sees what she expects to see. At the same time, she incessantly selects and associates things that allow her to impose a novelistic framework on Bly, while ignoring that which is irrelevant.

Henry James reveals this process at work in the governess’s interpretation of Miles’s expulsion. Initially, she makes a cause-and-effect assumption regarding Miles, based on his expulsion from school. This punitive act on the part of school authorities, she assumes, suggest that he is “really bad,” as her question to Mrs. Grose indicates (34). After positing this presumption as knowledge, she goes further: “to put the thing with some coherence and with the mere aid of [Mrs. Grose’s] presence to [her] own mind,” she is warranted in concluding that

Miles “is an injury to the others” (34). While arguably, the causes of expulsion range from damage to school property, defiance of authority, or an obscene act involving inappropriate behavior, Henry James reveals how the governess’s selective attention is based on her interest and state of mind during that time by having her assert that the expulsion has “but one meaning” (34). At the same time, as her consciousness undergoes change, she finds the idea of Miles as a source of injury to be an absurd proposition (34). James shows that the alien environment seems to redirect the flux of her consciousness as the governess “found [her]self, to meet [her] friend the better, offering it, on the spot, sarcastically:”. “To his poor little innocent mates!” (34).¹⁰⁷ By mentioning that Miles’s friends are “innocent,” she hints that the nature of Miles’s misconduct is related to sexual morality and sin.¹⁰⁸ Once Mrs. Grose confirms, in response to the governess’s question, that Miles possesses “the spirit to be naughty,” the governess links the idea that Miles is “an injury” and a “naughty” boy with the idea of “contamination” and “corruption” (35). This interpretation is significant as it hints at the possibility that Miles, if he corrupted other children, might himself have been corrupted by an adult.¹⁰⁹

Similarly, the governess’s way of knowing the apparition which Mrs. Grose later identifies as Peter Quint is a result of her cognitive processing informed by selective attention and association. It is no accident that the governess who anticipates an experience “as charming

¹⁰⁷ Throughout the novella, James highlights that the governess’s interpretation results from a new environment that undermines her autonomous self. For example, when talking with Mrs. Grose, she acknowledges that she “hastened to reply” (36).

¹⁰⁸ James reinforces this influence of Christian morality coloring background, through the way the governess kisses Flor with “a sob of atonement” (35).

¹⁰⁹ This view seems to be hinted at by the fact that the next day the governess asked Mrs. Grose about the woman who was the last governess. The governess’s questioning of Mrs. Grose might indicate her suspicion that Miles had already been corrupted.

as a charming story to suddenly meet someone” actually has an exciting encounter with a man right after making such a wish (43, 39). However, due to her awareness of class difference, she instead sees the opposite of the master, someone (in ungentelemanly fashion) without a hat, a stranger (40). The note of self-praise that she had mentally processed the possible identity of the stranger “with extraordinary quickness” also reminds the reader of the governess’s desire to be “remarkable, to offer a front to the remarkable things that presently gave their first sign” (40, 39). Her appetite for heroism and adventure is also underscored by the fact that she later likens the experience of seeing the “stranger” to that of a gothic heroine in Anne Radcliff’s *Mysteries of Udolpho* and Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (41). At the same time, when the figure she thinks of as the “stranger” disappears, she notes that it is a “good thing” that they would no longer see the unknown individual – only to quickly change her mind and conclude instead, “it was not so good a thing” (43). For the character of the governess, throwing herself into trouble means throwing herself out of trouble by protecting the children (42). In essence, James shows in her encounter with the stranger that the governess’s anticipation and desire to be a heroine constitute her reality.

At the same time, it is no accident that Henry James underscores the sighting of the stranger, who turns out to be an apparition, by providing readers with the time of the sighting as light and darkness also play a significant role in the way we perceive things.¹¹⁰ William James elaborates on this idea:

What appeals to our attention far more than the absolute quality of an impression is its ratio to whatever other impressions we may have at the same time. When everything is dark a some what less dark sensation makes us see an object as white. Helmholtz calculates that the white marble painted in a picture representing

¹¹⁰ In this novel, where James disrupts the readers’ sense of temporality, he reminds the reader of the time of the sighting of the apparitions. This underscores how light also contributes to the process of seeing in addition to the influence of the protagonist’s emotions.

an architectural view by moonlight is, when seen by daylight, from ten to twenty thousand times brighter than the real moonlit marble would be (“Stream” 70-71).

By playing with the light and tying the governess’s emotions to her self-image as heroine, Henry James merges the roles of novelist and psychologist, underscoring the visual subjectivity of the young woman’s impressions and her subjective perception.

While the governess sees the stranger after she anticipates that it would be charming to meet someone, it is not long after she expresses her regret for the missed opportunity for heroism that she again sees the stranger. With her desire fulfilled, she experiences “the most extraordinary effect” and “a sudden vibration of duty and courage” (45). This excitement is further highlighted by the fact that she now labels what she initially assumed to be “an unknown man” (40), “an object of fear” (40) and an “unscrupulous traveler who intrudes” (42) with the possessive and euphemistic term, “my visitor” (45). At the same time, James reveals her selective attention at work as the governess assigns to the stranger’s motive with “the added shock of a certitude” that he was coming for someone else based on his stare (44). Arguably, had the stranger been coming for her, she would not have been able to live up to her heroic self-image. This interpretive option is therefore discounted. By revealing how her consciousness is influenced by her vision of herself as a heroine, James hints that she is predisposed to see what others familiar with Bly might not.

In her conversation with Mrs. Grose, in which both attempt to establish the identity of the “stranger,” governess’s cognitive tools rooted in Gothic Romance and her Christian upbringing inform her selective attention and association. The fact that upon being asked, she magnifies the “stranger” (46) into “an extraordinary man” (46) rather than the more neutral phrase “an

unknown man,” underscores how her consciousness continues to be bookended by her notion of herself as a remarkable woman (40).

She [Mrs. Grose] thought a minute, “was he a gentleman?”
I found I had no need to think. “No.” She gazed in deeper wonder. “No”
“Then nobody about the place? Nobody from the village?”
“Nobody—nobody. I didn’t tell you, but I made sure.”
She breathed a vague relief: this was, oddly, so much to the good. It only
went indeed little way. “But if he isn’t a gentleman...”
“What is he? He’s a horror.”
“A horror.”
“He’s—God help me if I know what he is!” (47)

The governess identifies the apparition through the lack of a hat—an item commonly worn by members of all social classes, including those of the lowest status, in the nineteenth century (Crane 82)—hence her finding that she “had no need to think” that he was not a gentleman (46). Based on metonymic contiguity of the apparition as not only a non-gentleman, but also one who deviates from the social norm by his uncovered head, she classifies the unidentifiable stranger into a “horror” (47). Without a metonymic form of identity that would allow the governess to know “what he is,” the stranger is taken as a ghastly and possibly threatening nobody as there is nothing to compare him to.

The fact that she “added stroke to stroke” to Mrs. Grose’s “picture” also underscores how the concept of horror and the unidentifiable further settles into an image resembling a devil (48).¹¹¹ When Mrs. Grose asked if he were handsome, the governess also “saw the way to help her” by saying “remarkably” (48). In this way, both Mrs. Grose and the governess help each

¹¹¹ Darrel Mansell in “The Ghost of Language in *The Turn of the Screw*” observes that the governess “seems to conceive herself not so much as writing up the reality of her ghostly presences as painting them into existence” (56 article print out). I would add that the governess’s conception of Bly as a painting that gradually emerges results from the fact that it is based on her impression of Bly filtered through the lens of Christian morality and Gothic Romance.

other bring the ghostly presence into being. Further, the governess draws the conclusion that the apparition is an actor and in somebody else's clothes as he is not wearing a hat. At the same time, once Mrs. Grose identifies the apparition as Quint, she then corroborates the information with the governess, "piecing it all together," by pointing out that Quint never wore his hat, but he did wear a master's waistcoat (49).

Naturally enough, once Mrs. Grose identifies the apparition as Quint, the governess can connect the motive of his coming in a way parallel to the novelistic framework she imposes on herself. She notes:

"He was looking for little Miles." A portentous clearness now possesses me.

"That's whom he was looking for."

"But how do you know?"

"I know, I know, I know." (50)

Based on her initial thought that Miles corrupts other "innocent mates" and is likely to have been corrupted himself by an adult, it makes sense to the governess, immersed in her thoughts of heroism, that the apparition of Quint has come for Miles—her responsibility (34). In fact, it is not surprising that she "knows" with a "portentous clearness" (50) and employs what Rohald Schleifer terms "repeated assertion of knowledge" rather than actual knowledge as evidence (27). As she has predefined herself as a heroine who would "serve as an expiatory victim and guard the tranquility of the rest of the household" (51), she ignores other possible motives for its ghostly appearance unrelated to her responsibilities. As she establishes Quint's intention, when Mrs. Grose comments that "Quint was much too free"—to everyone, rather than just Miles, the governess thus has the backing to support the idea that Quint is a "sinister figure" who has an effect on "innocent little precious lives" (52). With this interpretation of Quint as an "evil" figure, the governess "read into the facts ...almost all the meaning they were to receive from

subsequent and more cruel occurrences” (52). James thus reveals how her interpretation secures the determination of character which in turn leads to an anticipation of further events.

The way the governess later identifies the apparition of Miss Jessel also reinforces how the flux of consciousness is contextualized by her desire for heroism. As with her remark prior to her encounter with Quint, no sooner had she mentioned that her time was taken with “being a remarkable person or thing that the game of the moment required” than she became aware of “an interested spectator” (54). This realization vividly reveals the operation of consciousness as construed by both Hume and William James, especially in James’ explanation of how anticipation resulting from selective attention can accelerate perception prior to the act of seeing. Henry James emphasizes that the governess is conscious of the presence of the apparition “without direct vision” or direct sensory encounters with the world (54). In fact, the governess “from one moment to another found [her]self forming as to what [she] *should* see straight before [her] and across the lake as a consequence of raising [her] eyes” (54, emphasis added). This way of “seeing” opposes the Lockean assumption of how we perceive the world and draw inference from it. As the use of the italicized modal indicates, her pre-defined interpretation of what is there to be seen influences the way she sees the actual (im)material object in front of her. Essentially, her reflection operates almost independently of experience following her desire for valor.

Henry James also reveals that once pre-perception resulting from selective attention is in place, it takes precedence over other factors that are subsequently ignored. The governess notes:

I recollect counting over perfectly the possibilities, reminding myself that *nothing was more natural* for instance than the appearance of one of the men about the place, or even of a messenger, a postman or a tradesman’s boy from the village. That reminder had a little effect on my practical

certitude as I was conscious—still even without looking—of its having upon the character and attitude of our visitor. *Nothing was more natural* than that these things should be the other things they absolutely were not (55 emphasis added).

Here, James reveals the governess's initial hesitation about the identification of the apparition only to quash it. Arguably, as the repetition of "nothing was more natural" implies, selective attention which gives her "a practical certitude" can "naturally" overshadow any contending meanings (55). Thus, as with the way she interprets Miles's expulsion as "hav[ing] but one meaning" as well as the appearance of the "stranger" as suggesting "but one sane inference" (42), she emphasizes "[t]here was no ambiguity in anything" about what she sees without the benefit of direct vision, eliminating all other meanings or inferences (54). As her reality is based on selective attention—the image that she predisposes herself to see—it is not surprising that she repeatedly emphasizes her certainty about each conclusion she makes. In other words, once the governess fixes an idea about what she wants to see in front of her, that object, especially one that depends less on sharp outlines and more on chiaroscuro shades of lightness and darkness, becomes aligned with her vision.

Her selective attention allows her to further confirm the existence of an apparition through Flora. Initially, James shows that while the governess looks for reaction from Flora, in order to determine whether or not she could see the apparition, the young woman had already anticipated positive confirmation of her sighting. This is indicated by the one-sided set of expected responses such as "a cry from her" and "some sudden innocent sign either of interest or of alarm" that Flora, however, does not provide (55). Her regret is also implied as she says "I waited, but nothing came" and takes Flora's lack of response as confirmation. At the same time, James underscores that the governess's perception of Flora results from her subjective interpretation of reality as opposed to direct sensory perception. The governess "determined by a

sense” that “all spontaneous sounds” from Flora had stopped and that she turned her back towards water (55). When Flora attempts to push a wood fragment into another piece of wood as if it were a mast to make a boat, the governess at that moment selects the action as one with sexual implications as highlighted by her “apprehension” (55). It is important that based on this scene, the governess’s first reaction to Mrs. Grose is that “they [Miles and Flora] know” rather than what she later says (“Flora saw”) (55). This association from Flora to Miles is linked by Flora’s silence and manipulation of the wood pieces to (as Edmund Wilson pointed out) a sexually suggestive connotation. The governess takes this as confirmation of Flora being corrupted, which further allows her to associate knowledge of Flora with that of Miles on the basis of resemblance. With the knowledge of children being corrupted, she “made it out perhaps only now with full coherency” that Flora was aware of the ghostly presence (55).

At the same time, the governess’s description of the apparition also hints at the fact that her epistemology is influenced by her previous interpretation of Quint and the information she receives and interprets from Mrs. Grose. As with Quint, whom she describes as a “horror” (47) and later “the sinister figure of the living man” who spends “evil time” at Bly before his mysterious death (52-53), the governess also characterizes the figure later identified as Jessel as a “horror and evil, a woman in black, pale and dreadful” (56). She adds “stroke by stroke” that the person was “in mourning—rather poor almost shabby,” but “with extraordinary beauty” (58). The governess pronounces the figure in question to be “infamous,” based on the metonymic contiguity of the black dress and later her lack of hat (56). Calling attention to Anne Hollander’s comment that the color black points to either “the blackness of the devil” or “the blackness of godly renunciation,” Heath Sledge contends that Miss Jessel’s black dress could “imply either the respectable moral condition of proper mourning or a kind of flaunting eroticism” (219). I

would suggest that, with her belief that the children know about the ghost and are corrupted, the governess eliminates the reading that presents the apparition in a positive light. With the appearance of the apparition resembling what Mrs. Grose had previously told her, she identifies it as Jessel, a woman who is no longer alive.

Readers' epistemologies

While planting the governess in the midst of a (fictional) system of relationships without grounding, James takes measures to place readers on the exact same uncertain epistemological terrain as the character in the novella. In addition to withholding characters' social data, James confronts readers with different layers of frames and mediation that refuse to coincide with the governess's original account. This ranges from the governess's verbal account of her story to Douglas, to her written account that she later gives Douglas, to Douglas's reading of the governess's manuscript and the narrator's copied version of the manuscript Douglas gives him. These multiple transmissions of information prior to the moment the reader actually reads the text is subject to a regress of transformations. Even at the individual level, the governess's own recollection of her impressions also subjects the story to changes.¹¹² Not only is the narrative further mediated by a long time gap¹¹³ and other circumstances, but also by the act of writing (Meissner 77). As John Frow points out "the frame holds literary discourse in a kind of suspension such that the framed word is, in Mikhail Bakhtin's terminology, a 'represented word': the word represented itself, cites itself as a fictive word, a word which cannot be accepted

¹¹² Even during her time as the governess at Bly, she was also a compulsive editor as observed in the way she shifted Miles's status from being innocent at the beginning to being corrupted or a fraud as the novella develops and then back to the possibility of him being innocent towards the end.

¹¹³ It was ten years after Miles' death before she tells the story to Douglas and another twenty years before she gives Douglas the written copy

directly” (334). The frame and mediation thus beg the question of what has been left out and the possible changes that have already been made by each character-editor.

One effect of this mediation is highlighted by the numerical discrepancy between the account of Douglas (as recounted by the unnamed narrator) and that of the governess. As T.J. Lustig observes, according to Douglas’s remark in the frame narrative, “the master informs the governess that Bly is staffed by a cook, a housemaid, a dairywoman, a pony, a groom and a gardener” (105). However, in the governess’s narrative, the sole housemaid is substituted by “a pair of maids” and later the two maids are referred to as “a couple of the maids” hinting at the possibility of having more than two (Lustig 105). At the same time, while the governess mentions a pony, the animal belonged at the vicarage where she grew up rather than at Bly. Further, the dairywoman, groom and gardener make no appearance in the main narrative (Lustig 105). In the frame, Douglas refers to the governess only as “the youngest of several daughters,” which seems to hint that she has no brothers (26). Yet, the governess mentions her brothers twice. This disparity between one version of the narrative and another underscores the likely possibility that certain information has been compromised or lost during the transmission. Such flawed transmission significantly undermines the origin where readers at the end of this chain of multiple tellings and retellings can firmly place themselves.

In addition to mediation, James withholds the closure of the frame at the end of his novella.¹¹⁴ Unlike novels with framed narratives such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, in which readers are able to return to the end frame where questions raised over the course of the narrative are addressed, the frame in James’ novella expands outward without closure. This aesthetic

¹¹⁴ This lack of closure is characteristic of the impressionist novel.

choice leaves the readers in no better epistemological position than the protagonist and further serves as James's argument at the level of form for the impossibility of finding an objective truth. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith notes, generally, the novelist is "likely to end his work at a point when either nothing could follow (as when the hero dies) or everything that could follow is predictable (as when the hero and heroine get married)" (35-36). This closure allows the reader "to be satisfied by the failure of continuation, or, put another way, it creates in the reader the expectation of nothing" (34). Thus, James's formal design of withholding the end frame further frustrates the readers' attempt to find grounding and places them on the same footing as the protagonist, whose story serves as their entertainment.

Like the governess who has "no counsel to take" except with the illiterate Mrs. Grose, James leaves his readers without the bourgeois gentleman storyteller who speaks for the community and gives readers a reliable information (33). As Walter Benjamin notes in "The Storyteller," this traditional type of authority figure is "a man who has counsel for his readers" and provides "the epic side of truth, wisdom" (364). Without such a traditional storyteller, readers can only resort to the accounts or pieces of such accounts that each character who replaces an authorial position provides—fragments that inevitably subject the content to re-contextualization. Further, while Douglas as a storyteller can be identified as a member of the gentlemen class, his admiration for the governess is likely to compromise his account of her. As with the governess, to whom James has given a great deal of authority, readers are forced to supply their own rules of interpretation. Each thus employs language and cognitive tools specific to his or her class and culture to close the gap between selective attention and the world of object through association. In this sense, James implies that "reality" is subject to mediation by ideological assumptions and bias through different systems of representation.

The revelation that “reality” is a system of representation – as opposed to a “reality” that, to borrow James Nagel’s words, is “a consistent reliability of both interpretation and perception” – implies a new grouping within the audience and a new way of reading (22). While the traditional storyteller shares wisdom with a homogeneous group of assenting audience members, the lack of such a controlling figure, as Armstrong points out, produces an audience with different interpretations of the same content using different cognitive tools (“Character” 333-334). While not giving direct instruction, James subtly employs the prologue as a reading guide for his audience for this new way of reading. The hermeneutic key is generated through Douglas’s response to the prologue audience’s question: who was the governess in love with?¹¹⁵ The prologue reveals two types of audience readers—the one-centered literal-minded audience who relies on his or her own interpretive code and assumes the right version and those who refuse to impose their own code at the expense of any other possible interpretations (Armstrong 335). This first group is represented by the narrator, who readily fixes the master into a type, expecting that “the story will tell,” and has in mind the title of the text before listening to the story (*TS* 25). This one-centered reader stands in contrast to Douglas, who acknowledges that the story “won’t tell” in “any literal vulgar way” and refuses to entitle the text or heed the narrator’s remark about the title he has in mind (*TS* 25). Through Douglas, James calls for a new audience and way of reading that can accommodate different interpretations based on different cultural tools.

¹¹⁵ As Erving Goffman notes, “it is reasonable to assume that the beginning bracket not only will establish an episode but also will establish a slot for signals which will inform and define what sort of transformation is to be made of the materials within the episode” (255-256).

To make his argument about the way of reading that accommodates a diversity of interpretations, James aptly employs the figure of the governess familiar to readers since the 1840s—the time in which the novel is set—to his own ends.¹¹⁶ James is aware of the general assumption of the governess's position as one outside the normative definition of woman as wife, mother, or mere servant. She is “the Other” or to use Agamben's words, an “inclusive exclusion” within the household.¹¹⁷ This marginal position is also reinforced by the tendency to associate the governess, according to Mary Poovey, with the figure of a “lunatic” or “fallen women” because of the belief that her work and self-restraint causes her sexual repression (129-130). At the same time, Millicent Bell notes that the governess “reflects a typology” of a “depressed woman who might break down” under the conditions of her narrow career life as if placed in solitary confinement (92). As with the initially unnamed protagonist in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” James's use of the generic term “the governess” rather than a specific name seems to hint that he capitalizes on his contemporary reader's possible social assumptions and prejudice against the governess. He plays with the tendency to regard her, the poor country clergyman's daughter, as limited because of the way she sees the world, her Christian values and belief in

¹¹⁶ The emergence of the genre of the governess novel in the 1840s coincides with a period of economic insecurity due to a great number of bank failures and bankruptcies in the period 1830-1840. Lecaros points out that economic necessity inevitably forced parents to send their children to work as governesses and, subsequently, novelists “caught on to the fictional potentialities of the governess figure, which grew out of the social instability” (19, 50). The interest in this literary genre featuring the governess as protagonist diminished after the turn the century with the decrease in governess employment as other occupational avenues opened for women, making way for other kinds of working women as literary figures (34).

¹¹⁷ Millicent Bell points out that the governess in general suffered from “status incongruity” as she had to be “a lady to carry out her role but was surely not ladylike in working or her living and no social equal of leisured ladies. Paid at best no more than a housekeeper or butler, she was often also resented by the servants who worked beside her for holding herself above them” (94). Kimberly C. Reed emphasizes that the effects of liminality are more pronounced when the governess is the daughter of poor clergy as opposed to an impoverished middle-class father. Reed points out that the former faces the question of how to be a respectable lady yet live in near-destitution. In society's view, a clergyman “was *de facto* a gentlemen; however, treating parsons as both clergymen and gentlemen invited confusion, for their income tended to match that of lowly farmers while their education matched that of the comfortable gentry” (107-108). The same situation applies to the governess.

ghosts – but only to later challenge that very assumption.¹¹⁸ As Bell argues, such tendency to see the “lean, limited governess” as “an unhappy woman or a neurotic one” might lead critics such as Edmund Wilson to see her in a sexual light (98). By capitalizing on the protagonist whose way of knowing departs from the Lockean model, James makes use of a common literary figure of the time and the assumption of her repression only to challenge such notion.

It is no accident that James selects members of the leisure class—the elite who presumably live in a world without ghosts—as the audience of Douglass’s story of the governess. This group, I would argue, conceptually construed as homogeneous, prosperous landowners in Locke’s formulation, represents the class that supposedly lays claim to reason and thus authority, a class that does not represent the selfhood women, children or anyone external to the class. In contrast to the governess, members of this group have the privilege of holidaying in the great brown hall enjoying the comfort of the fireside in a country estate and entertaining stories about the governess. As Jeff William notes, they are a “tableau of high society”—characters who “have had governesses and the education to appreciate and purvey literature and literary refinement (“the turns of the screw”), and who have the leisure and resources to indulge in such consumption” (51). By giving the reader the prologue with what William terms “explicit classing of narrative affect” (51), James initially identify readers with the position of the fireside audience. Doing so, as Andrew Wilson underscores, “conditions its readers to understand the governess’s narrative from the socially privileged point of view of her hiring family” (53). Yet, by refusing to give an authorial interpretation and grounding, James shows that the reading class does not have a superior way to process knowledge in relation to the governess.

¹¹⁸ Lecaros explains that governesses came from two different backgrounds; the daughters of clergymen or suddenly impoverished gentlemen of the upper class (49).

Thus, rather than hallucination or madness as Freudian critics argue, I would contend that James reveals through the operation of the governess's consciousness that her sighting of the apparitions is a product of different cognitive tools and a personal system of meaning. The open-ended and intricately crafted literary puzzle which refuses to yield an authorial comment validates what constitutes the governess's reality, although such reality might not necessarily be intelligible to others from different backgrounds. In this sense, James's work does exactly what Ford Maddox Ford argues is part of the "business of impressionism": it allows readers to draw towards themselves "the master-string of that seeming confusion, and the whole pattern of the carpet, the whole design of the net-work will be apparent" (282). Without supplying a reliable storyteller as a guide, James shows that the reader has no superior way of knowing compared to that of the governess.

In a broader sense, the novel's refusal to yield an authoritative interpretation challenges the model of the rational individual which assumes that everyone observes the same world of things and people and instead argues for a mutable model of cognitive processing more appropriate to an America comprised of heterogeneous cosmopolitan communities. By capitalizing on England's different geographical locations as settings and plucking the governess from a small Hampshire vicarage as a stranger who attempts to make sense of happenings at Bly, James affirms that people from different backgrounds with their own sets of cultural practices and interpretive strategies do not necessarily see the world in the same way. He further suggests that the interpretive model based on one's own privileged classification system that informs Freudian critics inevitably involves the elimination of other possible meanings that are, as both Henry and William James emphasize, always very much in play.

James implicitly urges readers to employ an interpretive strategy that tolerates pluralistic readings and accommodates cultural logic from different backgrounds. His novella suggests that one's cultural way of seeing the world with a particular established idea and cultural classification cannot account for the variety of ways in which other people arrange their patterns of thought. In this sense, he advocates what Ford called "peasant intelligence" or "virgin openness of mind." That is, a mental processing that acknowledges "this is such a queer world that anything may be possible" and despite finding certain thoughts strange, individuals "will have [all] in [their] mind, not classified under any heading of social reformers, or generalized so as to fulfill any fancied moral law" (286). James's vision of such openness of mind is echoed in his musing in "Occasional Paris" (1877): "There comes a time when one set of customs, wherever it may be found, grows to seem to you about as provincial as another; and then I suppose it may be said of you that you have become a cosmopolite" (*Collected Travel Writing* 721). I would argue that the narrative in which James removes his authority is created to accomplish the very task of turning the audience into such "cosmopolite" readers.¹¹⁹ James's novella, in which the protagonist sees a different reality mediated by her Christian upbringing and Gothic Romance, demonstrates that "common sense" in a country comprised of people from different cultures is an unrealistic notion. Thus, the model of consciousness and the way to make sense of the world that is appropriate to the United States as a nation of diverse cultures is one that is mutable and cannot be confined to any one system of classification and values.

¹¹⁹ Although Kenneth B. Warren's analysis of James's work argues that James's contribution to the discourse of race in America is "at best ambivalent" and that James himself expresses condescending attitudes towards his fellow citizens despite the fact that they are of the same race: "The New travelers [James] saw were an unknown and ominous quantity in an unintelligible world. To his eye they were incomprehensible and void of comprehension themselves, without any taste or standards to judge what they were viewing," I would contend that in "the Turn of the Screw," James reveals a strong inclination towards cosmopolitanism (399).

Coda: *The Golden Bowl*

“The Yellow Wallpaper,” *The House of Mirth*, and “The Turn of the Screw” all expose the limitations of the model of the rational individual as exemplified by Rowlandson. Most importantly, these works hint at the potential for an understanding of subjectivity that moves towards a more collective model of humanity. In ways I have described in the prior chapters, however, each literary work ultimately falls short of fully articulating what this collectivity might look like. *The Golden Bowl*, however, goes a step further than these literary works. James’s last novel, published at the beginning of the twentieth century, comes the closest to realizing Deleuze and Guattari’s model of multiplicity. In it, the central figure of Maggie Verver, the heiress of an affluent American collector, effects an act of familial restoration—a return of her husband to his proper role, and a repair of her father’s own faltering marriage—that updates the seventeenth-century “Restoration of Mary Rowlandson.” James’s adept protagonist not only restores but reforms her troubled marriage, which was overshadowed by the past relationship between her husband, the aptly named Italian Prince Amerigo, and his former lover Charlotte, who is now the wife of Maggie’s father. By hinting at the possibility of her success in establishing a family away from American soil with a (newly faithful) Italian husband, James defines American national identity as one that embraces cultural diversity and incorporation.

The Golden Bowl problematizes and exposes the limitation of the Rowlandson model by setting up an unusual relationship between Maggie and her father. The two have inadvertently married two people, Prince Amerigo and Charlotte Stant, who have their own romantic

history. Maggie remains the daughter of her father despite her exogamous marriage with the Prince whom both regard more as a collectible object than a life partner —only to show that such model based on race, class and gender differences would not sustain an American household. To underscore the limitation of the Rowlandson model, James reveals that Maggie is trapped by the manipulations of Prince Amerigo and Charlotte Stant as she refuses to acknowledge the status of Amerigo as her husband while paradoxically assuming the role of a passive wife. Maggie's transformation towards the end of the novel— in which she is no longer restricted by the categorical difference that she used to define the Prince as well as herself—allows her the ability to circulate with more freedom. This is evidenced in James' depiction of Maggie as assuming, to quote the narrator, an “*improvised ‘post’—a post of the kind spoken of as *advanced*”* in which she is related to “*a settler or a trader in a new country; in the likeness even of some *Indian squaw with a papoose on her*”* (563 emphasis added).¹²⁰ By using such metaphors, James is describing a form of subjectivity that Maggie will come to embrace later in the novel. This Jamesian self is itinerant and spontaneous, rather than geopolitically anchored; constitutive of a more heterogeneous and cosmopolitan social body and inclusive, extending of the self to other people rather than adhering to the more restrictive and withholding Rowlandson model. James thus suggests that the more mobile model that Maggie embraces will be progressive. While Joseph Firebaugh interprets the ending of *The Golden Bowl* as another form of entrapment for Amerigo and proof that Maggie is a self-righteous absolutist manipulating her husband and Charlotte for her own Machiavellian purposes, I argue that the fact that both Maggie and

¹²⁰ Mary Jemison herself carried her child during the long-distance journey she undertook with her brother from Yiskahwana to her Indian home.

Amerigo start to see each other beyond the markers of their respective identities—be it origin or birth—underscores the potential of the model of the subject that Maggie represents (404).

In conclusion: literary evidence from “The Yellow Wallpaper,” *The House of Mirth*, “The Turn of the Screw” and *The Golden Bowl* reveals that late nineteenth-century American novelists participated in imagining American identity through their portrayals of their female protagonists’ inner lives and the households they establish or envision. These novels continue the tradition of exploring women’s interiority, first established in captivity narrative, in order to examine, as Gillian Brown suggests, “the problematics of consent” that lie in the Lockean model—the model upon which Rowlandson’s narrative is based (13). Rather than drawing directly from the Rowlandson model, I suggest that these late nineteenth-century American works renegotiate such a model of subject based on kinship and the production of difference. These writers demonstrate, through the production of interiority in fictional female protagonists, that as culture bearers of America—a nation composed of heterogeneous, culturally diverse people, rather than land-owning, self-enclosed individuals organized hierarchically—these figures throw into question the Lockean model of rational individual and the paternal household as a paradigm for the American nation. In this sense, while the literary works treated in this dissertation all appropriate the Lockean model in Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, each reconfigures and revises it to suit America as a nation of cosmopolitan culture and diverse communities. Taken together, they present a new model of female subject not defined by the “passive virtue” and gender difference of the sentimental heroine, along the lines of Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of the American Culture*. These turn-of-the-century writers, who verge upon and hint at the potential of the model of collective humanity, see their literature as questioning the iconic Rowlandson model; with

their novels, they envision a model of American nationhood as one not restricted by categorical difference, but one that privileges and, indeed, guarantees all its members political freedom.

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