

NOTE TO USERS

This reproduction is the best copy available.

UMI[®]

A

**TRANSHISTORICAL EMERSON:
"REPUBLIC OF THE SPIRIT"
IN
TWAIN, JAMES, WHARTON, AND CATHER**

by

DIANA HOPE POLLEY

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York**

2005

UMI Number: 3169965

Copyright 2005 by
Polley, Diana Hope

All rights reserved.

INFORMATION TO USERS

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

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

UMI[®]

UMI Microform 3169965

Copyright 2005 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

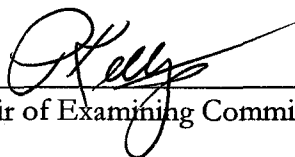
© 2005

DIANA HOPE POLLEY

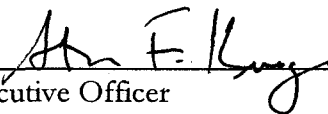
All Rights Reserved

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

4/20/05
Date


Chair of Examining Committee

4/20/05
Date


Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Provost William P. Kelly
Distinguished Professor Morris Dickstein
Distinguished Professor David Reynolds

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

Transhistorical Emerson:
“Republic of the Spirit”
in
Twain, James, Wharton, and Cather

by

Diana Hope Polley

Adviser: Provost William P. Kelly

This dissertation responds to the most widely accepted definitions of American Realism. While critics often read American Realism as a disavowal of earlier American romantic philosophy and as a commitment to recognizing the stark realities of a new postbellum order, this dissertation complicates these fundamental assumptions by examining how American Realism speaks directly to the ideas, often “idealisms,” of America’s greatest romantic philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson. The project focuses on Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, and Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* and examines how these texts reread Emerson’s “republic of the spirit” philosophy, in light of postbellum history and modern intrusions of capitalism. Rather than accept clear boundaries between romance and realism, this dissertation argues that American Realists struggled between celebrating Emerson’s core philosophies of individual possibility and acknowledging the “realities” of American social and historical life. In short, this study recognizes within Realism a divided loyalty between two historical trends and explores how these seemingly contradictory notions—Emerson’s romantic philosophy and historical reality—exist, simultaneously, within the literature of the period.

Acknowledgments

Anyone who has attempted to complete the long and arduous path toward a Ph.D. understands how demanding and unnerving the process can be. There is simply no way to overestimate the importance of academic and emotional—not to mention financial—support. With this in mind, there are a number of people and one special canine that I must thank.

First and foremost, I owe an enormous amount of gratitude to my dissertation adviser, William P. Kelly. I approached him with the task of directing the dissertation shortly after he became Provost at the Graduate Center, and I did this knowing that he was dealing with his own monumental tasks. I also knew, however, that his brilliance, insight, and forthright demeanor would make him the *sine qua non* of advisers. He not only agreed to “take on” my project but has been, quite literally, indispensable since. In particular, I want to thank him for being brutally honest, even when it gave me nightmares, and pushing me to become a better scholar and writer. He has been the perfect mentor, always motivating me to achieve that one highly elusive yet sought-after word of approval—“Bingo”—which may very well, in his honor, be the name of my next dog.

I also want to thank Morris Dickstein and David Reynolds, both of whom made vital contributions to the dissertation. Their own work has served as prime models of scholarship, and their input on my dissertation has proved invaluable. They were highly supportive dissertation readers, always accessible and ready to provide feedback. Morris Dickstein, in particular, helped me to map out my overarching critical approaches and define my work in relation to other literary scholarship. David Reynolds, among a

number of thematic and stylistic pointers, specifically helped me to temper my use of the pesky, capricious, and, apparently, overused comma.

The Graduate Center is filled with talented, brilliant, and, most importantly, caring faculty who dedicate their time to mentoring students and turning them into better scholars and teachers. Among many, there are three, in particular, that I need to thank: Scott Westrem, Anne Humpherys, and George Otte. Scott Westrem and Anne Humpherys both taught me, by example, what it means to be an effective and engaging professor. Even after I decided not to become a Medievalist or Victorianist (only because I couldn't pronounce "droughte" and became frightened by 800-page novels), they continued to faithfully advise me. George Otte gave me my first teaching job at Baruch College, when I wasn't even sure what "pedagogy" meant. He took another chance on me when he hired me as a Writing Fellow at Baruch, a job that provided me with crucial experience in writing administration, not to mention two years of much-needed financial support.

Before I began graduate school, I was warned about the potential for fierce competition and ill will among fellow students. My experience at the Graduate Center has been quite the opposite; I have never met a nicer bunch of gracious, intelligent, and hard-working colleagues. Among a number of individuals who helped me through the process, I need to thank, in particular, those friends who were always ready to parley, give honest feedback, share their own work, and offer words of encouragement: Andrea Knutson, Tanya Radford, Kim Engber, Sam Cohen, Richard Santana, David Humphries, Jean Murley, Tom Cerasulo, Greg Erickson, Melissa Bloom, Vince Bissonette, Robert Kaplan, Carolyn Lengel, and Jennifer Bernstein. Space precludes my thanking each colleague individually, but together they transformed my graduate school experience.

In addition to my friends, I would like to thank my ever-growing family for their support. My father, David Polley, ingrained in me my love of American history; his continued insistence on showing me Civil War battlefields (ie. open, grassy fields) and verbally reenacting Grant's and Lee's military strategies apparently stuck. As much as he may have preferred that I study Jane Austen—or any other novelist who avoids stories of tragic milkmaids, feisty orphans, and ineffectual husbands—our disagreements over American Realism and my insistence on defending the “open ending” helped to spur me on. I want to thank my mother, Nancy Aibel, who felt my pain—quite literally—over the past years. Even though I know she was always thinking “are we there yet?” she tried to hide her concern with smiles and put my needs above her own; words fail to document her generosity and open-hearted acceptance of my often eccentric decisions. I also need to thank my stepfather, Benjamin Aibel, who emotionally supported my mother's supporting of me (he knows what I mean). He also passed on his love of Vermont and, along with my mother, provided me (and many of my graduate school friends) with a quiet, pastoral retreat to read, think, and write. The majority of this dissertation was completed in that old house, once known as the “Three Penny Lodge.”

Finally, even though he can't read (yet), I have to acknowledge my beloved canine companion, Bailey, who adopted me right before I started graduate school and has been faithful ever since. He has followed me back and forth to Vermont and, whenever I put pen to paper, he has been there, standing, sitting, or lying by my side. He has proved a wonderful listener, waiting patiently as I've read through conference papers, and he has never once complained, even when I forgot to play with him or walk him or feed him. He has been my true “north star.”

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1-13
Transhistorical Emerson	
 Chapter One	 14-52
Mark Twain: <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>	
 Chapter Two	 53-114
Henry James: <i>The Portrait of a Lady</i>	
 Chapter Three.....	 115-166
Edith Wharton: <i>The House of Mirth</i>	
 Chapter Four.....	 167-204
Willa Cather: <i>My Antonia</i>	
 Works Cited	 205-217

Introduction Transhistorical Emerson

[O]ne may say that the Civil War marks an era in the history of the American mind. It introduced into the national consciousness a certain sense of proportion and relation, of the world being a more complicated place than it had hitherto seemed, the future more treacherous, success more difficult. At the rate at which things are going, it is obvious that good Americans will be more numerous than ever; but the good American, in days to come, will be a more critical person than his complacent and confident grandfather. He has eaten of the tree of knowledge. He will not, I think, be a sceptic, and still less, of course, a cynic; but he will be, without discredit to his well-known capacity for action, an observer. ... The good American of which Hawthorne was so admirable a specimen was not critical, and it was perhaps for this reason that Franklin Pierce seemed to him a very proper President.

Henry James, *Hawthorne*

On September 12, 2001, news agencies around the world were quick to label September 11, 2001 “the day the world changed” (“The Day,” *The Economist* 13). 9/11 became a major pinnacle, a new epoch in national, international, and even “civilizational” history (Hertzberg 27). The September 12th *New York Times* editorial read: “[The day] was, in fact, one of those moments in which history splits, and we define the world as ‘before’ and ‘after.’ ... We look back at sunrise yesterday through pillars of smoke and dust, down streets snowed under the atomized debris of the skyline, and we understand that everything has changed” (“The War” A26). In *Newsweek*, Fareed Zakaria proclaimed: “We are struck silent by honest-to-goodness history. Or History. This is surely the End of the End of History” (70). This tragic event was no longer simply about “history,” those narratives read by school children in textbooks; this was about “History,” long dormant, waiting for its next apocryphal moment.

There is little question why these writers saw 9/11 as a watershed moment. The sheer number of casualties was beyond measure, the highest, we were told, in America since the Battle of Antietam. Moreover, visual representations of death and destruction surpassed any before witnessed by mass Americans. Eight million New Yorkers saw the smoke and felt the ashes for weeks after the attacks. For those who did not witness the events firsthand, images were forever seared into memory by live feed, endless media montages, slow-motion replays, and minutely detailed timelines; normal television programming paused for over four days so that those two tragic hours could be continually replayed and reprocessed. Perhaps most shocking of all, however, was that the unexpected had happened. The possibility of 9/11, of a foreign attack on national soil, had been seemingly absent from the national consciousness. A formidable, long-held myth of American security—both physical and economic—suddenly collapsed.

Critical fallout predicted a restructuring of the American psyche, one not unlike Henry James's vision in *Hawthorne* regarding the Civil War; the feeling was that the world had, yet again, become "a more complicated place than it had hitherto seemed." There existed a similar sense that the post-9/11 American had "eaten of the tree of knowledge," that "in days to come, [he would] be a more critical person than his complacent and confident grandfather." Thus, Roger Smith of *US News and World Report* declared that "in just one chilling hour, America joined the ranks of the lost innocents" (16). Roger Rosenblatt of *Time* told us that the tragic events "could spell the end of the age of irony"; Americans would now cease to think that "nothing is real" (79).

Post-9/11 narratives constructed by these writers were, in a sense, fictions. History had never ended, America was no less innocent, and irony was alive and well. The terrorists had been planning these attacks for years; September 10th was as "real" as

September 12th, and the world was certainly no more dangerous than it had previously been. Rather, the news analysts and critics confirmed Frank Kermode's theory of narrative, of man's need for "sense-making" through crisis, his need to give meaning to lives by constructing concrete beginnings and ends (3). Kermode tells us in "The End" that "we thrive on epochs" (7), and it is precisely this "need to live by the pattern rather than the fact" that seemed to drive so many readings of 9/11 (11). Instead of a force continuously active, continuously in motion, these narratives constructed history as fragments, bound by critical moments of time into the decisive "before"s and "after"s.

Such a consideration of contemporary events is useful when attempting to grasp how nineteenth-century Americans, such as Henry James, envisioned the seemingly radical shift in America after the Civil War. While the particulars of 9/11 and the Civil War may seem disparate—not only in terms of the events themselves but also in terms of their geopolitical ramifications—what remains analogous surrounds this perception of historical magnitude and its concomitant effects on national consciousness.¹ In both historical moments, Americans experienced a type of sublime connection to traumatic events, where the relationship between the subject and objective world collapsed, and transcendental detachment seemed to become impossible. This relationship is most evident during the Civil War in the early battle of Bull Run, where, on July 21, 1861, civilians from all over the Washington area gathered to picnic and watch the much

¹ The connection between the two events was noted almost immediately after 9/11. In addition to the writers and politicians who continuously compared the number of deaths to Antietam (and often got these figures wrong), Governor George Pataki chose to read Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" during the one-year commemoration of 9/11. The importance and relevance of Lincoln's words were announced not only in terms of eulogy but nationalism. Thus, William Safire, in his September 9, 2002 *New York Times* editorial entitled "A Spirit Reborn," told readers why Pataki would repeat Lincoln's famous words: "What makes this particular speech so relevant for repetition on this first anniversary of the worst bloodbath on our territory since Antietam Creek's waters ran red is this: Now, as then, a national spirit rose from the ashes of destruction" (A23). Again, one notes in his language that desire to make sense of tragedy by creating epochs and writing into history finite moments of, what Safire calls, "conception, birth, death and rebirth" (A23).

anticipated battle unfold; convinced of a quick and bloodless Northern victory, these naïve citizens instead encountered frightened, fleeing soldiers, gory injuries, and mass fatalities. This breakdown of consciousness, this disruption of the romantic vision, would continue throughout the War as soldiers returned with missing limbs and Mathew Brady published his famous photographs of mutilated corpses on battlefields. As with 9/11, the publicized events of the Civil War exceeded imaginative possibility, dispelled myths of American stability, and invoked ideas of a new historical moment in which “everything had changed.”²

Time will tell how American culture responds to the events of 9/11, what new trends and movements arise as a result. The shift in American culture after the Civil War, however, is evident. In literary history, 1865—the year the Civil War ended—marks the unofficial start of American Realism, that cultural movement founded upon a growing distrust of romance. Of course, the Civil War was not its only historical influence. In 1859, for example, Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, a text that would forever reconfigure notions of the individual and his relationship to environment. New evolutionary theories were compounded by revolutionary technologies and inventions; among them, the transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869, stands out as the most major historical development. This technological progress, along with the War and its economic fallout, resulted in rapid industrial growth and territorial expansion; in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner told America that the frontier had officially closed. These historical components converged to create the impression of a new era, one that Mark Twain would famously name the “Gilded Age.” American

² For an extended discussion of the consequences of the Civil War, see Louis Menand’s *The Metaphysical Club*. In the book, he details the magnitude of the War and its interconnection to major economic, political, and philosophic shifts.

Realism, as so many critics contend, emerged from the notion that it was time to “face facts.”

David E. Shi tells us that “Realists of all sorts—scientists, philosophers, writers, artists, architects, and tastemakers—muscle their way onto center stage of American culture and brusquely pushed aside the genteel timidities, romantic excesses, and transcendental idealism then governing affairs of the mind” (*Facing Facts* 3). Critics such as Shi understand literary Realism as a disavowal of earlier American romantic philosophy and commitment to recognizing a new postbellum ideology. Thus, William Dean Howells, who helped define Realism, argued that the writer’s “soul is exalted, not by vain shows and shadows and ideals, but by realities, in which alone the truth works” (*Criticism* 16). In *On Native Grounds*, Alfred Kazin explains that after the Civil War romantic writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson “seemed to speak from another world” (18).

While this dissertation focuses on the importance of history in reading literature, it proceeds from a general distrust of such clear, definable historical markers. When one reads through Henry James’s adamant assertions in *Hawthorne*, against the illusions and complacency of an earlier generation of romantic writers, one recognizes an almost forced insistence on difference, on establishing a fundamental break with the American past. As much as Realism may have overtly made these claims, however, its philosophy does not easily account for the literature of the period. One notes, instead, an alternative voice in the texts, another layer of historical consciousness that denies those adamant assertions of difference. Thus, while representative Realist texts—such as Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, Edith Wharton’s *The*

House of Mirth, and Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*—clearly reflect that emerging desire to “face facts,” there is a competing discourse within them that struggles to be heard.³

Raymond Williams is one theorist who, in his discussion of residual, dominant, and emergent cultures, helps to explain these inconsistencies.⁴ In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams notes that “[t]he complexity of a culture is to be found not only in its variable processes and their social definitions—traditions, institutions, and formations—but also in the dynamic interrelations, at every point in the process, of historically varied and variable elements” (121). He explains these “dynamic interrelations” in terms of dominant cultural movements, their residual antecedents, and emergent hegemonic structures. Of that residual culture, Williams states:

The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus, certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation.

(122)

³ One might easily include in this list many other Realist texts, such as Louisa May Alcott's *Work*, Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, Hamlin Garland's *Main Travelled Roads*, Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Henry James's *The Ambassadors* and *The Bostonians*, and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.

⁴ Williams's cultural analysis is primarily in terms of Marxist theory and, thus, may seem misplaced in my discussion of American Realism. While my argument is not grounded in Marxist theory, my focus *is* on the relationship between history and culture, and my understanding of history is largely based on economic shifts in the mid-nineteenth century, specifically the development of capitalist economy from an agrarian to largely industrial model. As a result, his theories are apt and have made a great impact on this project.

His definition of residual culture, as a force that is still “active in the [dominant] cultural process,” accounts for competing discourses in Realist texts. His argument implies that, despite our overt declarations regarding major historical shifts and our persevering “need to live by...pattern,” any given period is, in fact, much more “dynamic” than our absolute readings of history and insistence on finite endings suggest. The “before”s, Williams tells us, are continually active within the “after”s.

M.M. Bakhtin’s theories of heteroglossia, specifically those outlined in *The Dialogic Imagination*, complement Williams’s discussion and suggest how these divergent cultures get expressed within the literature itself. Bakhtin’s argument is based on the premise that language incorporates the immense diversity of social, political, and cultural experience. Verbal discourse, he tells us, “is a social phenomenon,” and, as a result, language and experience, text and context, are inherently blurred (259). According to Bakhtin, the novel is the literary form that best reflects this heteroglossia: “the novel must represent all the social and ideological voices of its era, that is, all the era’s languages that have any claim to being significant; the novel must be a microcosm of heteroglossia. ... Every language in the novel is a point of view, a socio-ideological conceptual system of real social groups and their embodied representatives” (411). Just as Williams locates within *history* those residual, dominant, and emergent cultures, so Bakhtin locates within the *novel* those “varied and variable” cultural discourses. Language, culture, and history, these theorists tell us, are neither unilateral nor monologic.

In this dissertation, I employ the theories of Williams and Bakhtin in order to explain the dynamic relationship between residual, dominant, and emergent cultures within the Realist novel. I argue that, even as these texts write against an earlier

discourse of “genteel timidities, romantic excesses, and transcendental idealism,” they also embrace the ideas, and often “idealisms,” of that residual romantic tradition. This “double-voiced discourse” specifically gets articulated through a dialogue between postbellum history and the antebellum transcendental philosophies of Ralph Waldo Emerson. While these Realist writers make concessions to realism, to facing facts and acknowledging history, they maintain a stubborn allegiance to Emerson’s romantic ideas of nature, self-reliance and spiritual individualism.⁵ Emerson becomes that “significant” residual “social and ideological voice” in late-nineteenth-century American culture, and it is through his language that we discover the major source of heteroglossia in the Realist novel.

Despite Emerson’s prominence as a romantic writer, his connection to the Realists makes sense; Emerson was the most eminent and admired philosopher of nineteenth-century America. He was, as Charles E. Mitchell tells us, a “glorified cultural icon,” and one might argue that he has remained one of the most influential writers in American history (13). There is certainly vast evidence that, among other Realist writers, Mark Twain, Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather all read and greatly admired his work. In this dissertation, however, I am less concerned with issues of direct *influence* than with the idea of literary *inheritance*. I argue that Emerson figured as an “objective correlative” for a specific brand of nineteenth-century American ideology. His writing came to represent an entire constellation of romantic ideas surrounding the importance

⁵ Here and throughout the dissertation, I use the terms “Realism”/“realism” and “Romance”/“romance” quite deliberately. When I refer to a specific, often conscious cultural movement (such as Realism or Transcendentalism), I use the capital letter to reflect its position as a proper noun. When the words are used primarily as common nouns or adjectives (such as “romantic language” or “realist aesthetics” or “transcendental spirit”), I use the lower-case letter. My use of these words becomes important, as I argue that Realism incorporates both realist and romantic elements in its literature. Distinguishing between the proper and common uses of the word at times gets confusing, but I have made every effort to remain as consistent as possible.

of spiritual individualism. In this way, he offered writers such as Twain, James, Wharton, and Cather a critical language through which to express their conflicted allegiance to both self and society.

Because these Realist writers associated Emerson with a particular epistemology of romance, one located in the first half of the nineteenth century, this dissertation focuses primarily on those ideas found in Emerson's earlier works, such as *Nature*, "The American Scholar," "The Divinity School Address," and "Self-Reliance." There is no doubt that Emerson's philosophy changed throughout his life, and his later works begin to reflect this change; Emerson was as much subject to shifting critical traditions as his literary successors. James himself acknowledged this shift; he tells us in *Hawthorne*, for example, how the Civil War affected the writer and his literary circle: "their illusions were rudely dispelled, and they saw the best of all possible republics given over to fratricidal carnage. This affair had no place in their scheme, and nothing was left for them but to hang their heads and close their eyes" (114). James recognized that by the mid-1860s romantic writers such as Emerson were, themselves, already giving way to a new emergent culture. Thus, in examining how Emerson's voice figures in the Realist novel, I refer specifically to those earlier texts, which best reflect antebellum romantic ideology.

Bakhtin tells us that these multiple socio-ideological voices "enter the novel" through a number of factors, such as "[a]uthorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, [and] the speech of characters" (263). This dissertation locates that major source of dialogic discourse in the relationship between plot and character.⁶ As discussed, American Realism was built on the premise that postbellum America needed to address the importance of historical truth. The Realist novel articulates this need by

⁶ While plot and character are not necessarily speech types, they get expressed through various textual voices, such as those of characters and narrators, and act, in this way, as a form of discourse.

placing contemporary experience at the forefront of its texts. Our heroes and heroines are caught up in postbellum worlds of Gilded Age materialism and corruption; their plots become the driving force of the novels. And yet, the heroes and heroines themselves are undeniably romantic and thoroughly Emersonian; against the power of history, these characters question social conformity and desperately cling to the possibility of spiritual individualism. In spite of their plots, they maintain a fierce allegiance to Emerson's "republic of the spirit" philosophy.⁷

The relationship between these Emersonian characters and their historical plots is best described through the language of Georg Lukács. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács argues that the novel is an expression of "transcendental homelessness," characterized by an "inadequate relation between soul and reality" (112). While I do not find his theory to be entirely sufficient as a grand narrative of the novel genre, his discussion of transcendental homelessness is a useful expression to explain that lack of totality in the Realist novel between character and plot. He describes one type of transcendental homelessness as "the inadequacy that is due to the soul's being wider and larger than the destinies which life has to offer it"; in this scenario, a character whose "purely interior reality...is full of content and more or less complete in itself enters into competition with the reality of the outside world..." (112). This type of competition between dual realities is precisely what we find in the Realist novel. In each of the texts I discuss—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The House of Mirth*, and *My Antonia*—we encounter an Emersonian hero(ine) who confronts "the reality of the outside world," and we watch as this character searches for individuation in a modern

⁷ "Republic of the spirit" is a term formulated by Edith Wharton's Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth* and a term I borrow to describe Emerson's notion of personal freedom or, to quote Henry James, of "living by one's own personal light" (*Hawthorne* 67).

world that can seemingly no longer contain that “wide” and “large” non-conventional spirit.⁸

Most critics who recognize Emerson’s presence in these texts argue that the novels employ his romantic language precisely to undermine it, to “show...us the weakness of Emerson’s idealism” (Millicent Bell 90). I argue, however, against these assumptions and propose an alternate reading, one that accepts the conflicting mandates in Realist literature. In the final words of *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald suggests a critical paradox regarding the relationship between individual desire and historical forces:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (189)

Fitzgerald tells us that we row against a tide that will, perhaps, get us nowhere but that we “beat on” anyway; the quest is still celebrated despite the fact that history may have rendered our ideals inaccessible. These words from *The Great Gatsby* act as a poignant metaphor for the Realist novel, where character heroically “beat[s] on” against the historical forces of plot. Although these novels recognize that postbellum breach between character and plot, they do not condemn the Emersonian character; the most important facet of the hero(ine)’s quest is that it does not simply culminate in a

⁸ I recognize that, in claiming that Huck Finn, Isabel Archer, Lily Bart, and Jim Burden all have analogous plots, I open myself up to feminist criticism that argues that men and women, in fact, have distinct plots. While I will argue that the heroines in these texts, in particular Isabel Archer and Lily Bart, must deal with fundamental social issues and plot limitations in ways that Huck Finn and Jim Burden do not, I also seek to reinscribe Isabel and Lily into *historical* discourse and examine how, in addition to reflecting concerns of gender, these heroines reflect concerns of nation.

disillusionment with or disavowal of Emersonian individualism, nor does it naïvely idealize those values. The texts portray their characters' transcendental homelessness but still fully "believe in the green light"; they acknowledge objective reality but don't yield to it. Thus, Emerson is not easily dismissed as an irresponsible visionary; instead, both voices of romance and realism exist together as a paradox that cannot be resolved. This paradox ultimately accounts for what readers often complain of as the "open endings" of these texts. The novels never finalize this struggle between the Emersonian character and his plot, between philosophical and historical truth; until the end, that conflict between those residual and dominant cultures remains.⁹

My goal in this dissertation is to present these texts as a continuing dialogue between Realism and Emersonian romance; therefore, I place my readings in chronological order according to dates of publication.¹⁰ I begin, however, with Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—published in 1885, four years before *The Portrait of a Lady*—for one primary reason. While Twain published *Huckleberry Finn* in 1885, he sets the text in the 1840s, before the Civil War. As a result, the text provides a unique glimpse at the dual voices of antebellum and postbellum America and, thus, proves an ideal starting point. My chapters on Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and Edith

⁹ In *The English Novel: From Dickens to Lawrence*, Raymond Williams makes a similar argument about the Victorian novel; specifically, he tells us that those Victorian writers who responded to "their disturbed and unprecedented time...had no unified form, no unity of tone and language, no controlling conventions, that really answered their purposes" (85).

¹⁰ One final question remains, specifically why I don't include a discussion of a William Dean Howells novel as a representative Realist text; he was, after all, perhaps the most important spokesperson of the movement. My decision not to include a chapter on Howells reflects my vision of him as primarily a literary critic. While I appreciate his three canonical novels—*A Modern Instance*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*—I would argue that these texts work so hard to represent the philosophies of American Realism (thus, "a modern instance") that they consciously prohibit that residual voice and, as a result, feel less organic than the other novels I discuss. It may be, in fact, this reason that writers such as Frank Norris and Willa Cather spoke disparagingly about his literature, specifically complaining of what they saw as his stilted and limiting plots. Therefore, while I employ Howells as an essential voice of his era, I reference his criticism rather than his fiction.

Wharton's *The House of Mirth* illustrate the heart of the period's literary culture and reflect two representative perspectives: psychological and social realism. Finally, I conclude with a chapter on Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, which I categorize as an example of late Realism. Cather published *My Ántonia* in 1918; yet, like Twain, she sets her narrative during an earlier historical period in 1885, that same year *Huckleberry Finn* was published. I argue that, while this novel is inscribed within the Realist tradition, it simultaneously responds to that tradition and begins to reflect a new emergent culture. Thus, this dissertation is first and foremost about American Realism; however, it also speaks more broadly to the ongoing relationship between history and culture. Historical narratives provide us with those critical markers of "before" and "after," but these four Realist novels illustrate how and why such narratives mask the cultural conflict that exists in every historical moment.

Chapter One
Mark Twain: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

I

On December 17, 1877, Mark Twain spoke at an *Atlantic Monthly* dinner celebration, which commemorated both the seventieth birthday of John Greenleaf Whittier and the twentieth anniversary of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Among the sixty guests were three leading American literary figures: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. The short speech given by Twain and directed at these three eminent figures would become infamous as a major literary disaster.

William Dean Howells introduced his speaker as "a humorist who never makes you blush to have enjoyed his joke..." (qtd. in Henry Nash Smith 151). Twain began. He told a fictional tale about his encounter, in 1862, with a miner in Nevada. Having recently acquired national recognition as an author, Twain is "resolved to try to the virtue of [his] *nom de plume*" (qtd. in Fatout 111). Thus, he knocks on the door of a local miner and introduces himself as "Mark Twain." Rather than the warm reception he expects, the miner looks dejected and explains: "You're the fourth...littery man that's been here in twenty-four hours—I'm a-going to move" (111). The miner reports that three rough and drunken "littery" men by the names of Mr. Emerson, Mr. Longfellow and Mr. Holmes dropped by the evening before, ate his food, drank his liquor, gambled, and stole his boots.

The miner tells Mr. Twain, this fourth “littery” visitor, about the poets’ abuse and their “queer talk” (111). According to the miner, Mr. Holmes insulted his home: “Mr. Holmes inspected the cabin, then he took me by the buttonhole, and says he:

‘Through the deep caves of thought

I hear a voice that sings:

Build thee more stately mansions,

O my Soul!’

Says I, ‘I can’t afford it, Mr. Holmes, and moreover I don’t want to’” (111). Mr.

Emerson demanded food: “Mr. Emerson takes me aside by the buttonhole and says:

‘Give me agates for my meat;

Give me cantharides to eat;

From air and ocean bring me foods,

From all zones and latitudes.’

Says I, ‘Mr. Emerson, if you’ll excuse me, this ain’t no hotel’” (112). Mr. Longfellow

stole his boots: “When I woke at seven, they were leaving, thank goodness, and Mr.

Longfellow had my only boots on, and his own under his arm. Says I, ‘Hold on there,

Evangeline, what you going to do with *them*?’ He says: ‘Going to make tracks with ‘em,

because

Lives of great men all remind us

We can make our lives sublime;

And departing, leave behind us

Footprints on the sands of Time.’

As I said, Mr. Twain, you are the fourth in twenty-four hours—and I’m a-going to move

—I ain’t suited to a littery atmosphere” (114). When Mr. Twain suggests that, perhaps,

these men were imposters, the miner replies: “Ah,—imposters, were they?—are *you*?” (114).

Despite the comic brilliance of his speech, Twain contradicted Howells’s claim; the joke made many in the audience blush. In fact, Twain later recalled that the faces of those in the audience not only blushed but “turned a sort of black frost” (qtd in Henry Nash Smith 145). Henry Nash Smith summarizes the responses of the honorees:

“Emerson paid little attention to it. Whittier, Longfellow, and Holmes seemed politely amused, but were slightly baffled and uncomfortable” (155). Accounts, both by those who attended the dinner and by newspapers, differed as to the extent of the damage, but most agreed that the joke had failed. Perhaps more than anyone else, Twain knew that he had erred, and, for the next thirty years, he would waver on whether this “hideous mistake” had been the cause of bad delivery, poor taste, or an unappreciative audience (145).

Few critics examine the importance of this speech and its reception. Yet, this *Atlantic Monthly* dinner and the Twain speech that accompanied it represent an essential moment of transition between American Realism and its romantic literary predecessor. Twain’s joke brilliantly reveals, both within the tale itself and within the realm of its delivery and reception, the juncture between this burgeoning young author and these three aging literary sages. Just as the miner is unable to understand the romantic metaphors, the “queer talk,” of his rude “littery” guests, so Emerson, Longfellow, and Holmes, in their “baffled” response to the joke, can’t seem to make sense of Twain’s own “queer talk.”¹¹ By 1877, the American literary sensibility was shifting. Twain’s joke reflects this emerging interpretive gap.

¹¹ Arguably, it is unclear whether Emerson’s reaction was the cause of confusion or, simply, senility.

In many ways, the miner represents the new philosophy of American Realism. First, he symbolizes Howells's idea of the aesthetic of the common. Far from the genteel masses of New England, the miner offers a picture of American life not often viewed in earlier romantic literature; he is that more photographic image of contemporary life, which Realism attempted to portray. Second, the miner does not understand romantic metaphors, only literal truths. He is tricked precisely because he is incapable of fully understanding the poets' abstruse language; in a sense, they have succeeded in using romantic poetry to manipulate the miner or, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to "trope a dope" (63). Richard S. Lowry notes that Twain inverts "the vernacular paradigm, in which literary texts commonly highlight the rich strangeness of colloquial speech. Instead, it is poetry that intrudes as fragments of an inscrutable and ultimately irrelevant world..." (34). In ways quite similar to his realistic use of vernacular in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain uses the miner's language as the linguistic norm, against which the romantic adages of Emerson, Longfellow, and Holmes appear foreign and alienating. Finally, the miner's central concerns in this tale are those ordinary needs the Realists viewed as primary, specifically those of mundane daily concerns. The miner cares little for "stately mansions" or "footprints on the sands of Time" but rather for the food on his plate, the whiskey in his glass, and the boots on his feet.

Inherent in this linguistic conflict is a clear stab at Emerson and his romantic associates, a stab not only at their language but also at their values. Despite the seeming light humor of the joke, it reveals a deep-seated mockery of the poets' pomposity and distance from the "real" issues of their fellow countrymen. Ultimately, this joke represents a radical response to the work of these literary giants. Henry Nash Smith tells us that "[t]hese men were regarded as belonging to an ideal realm far above the level of

commonplace or sordid reality. Rebecca Harding Davis said that when she first visited New England...she considered Emerson ‘the first of living men,’ ‘the modern Moses who had talked with God apart and could interpret Him to us’” (172). Twain was ridiculing men seen by genteel society, according to Davis’s account, as divine mediators. His joke implies that these godly writers had forgotten the common man and that their message no longer resonated with many Americans. Although Twain may not have intended it, his joke spoke for a new generation of writers, who criticized the romantic bombasts of their literary predecessors and suggested a willingness to create a new language, a new literature.

To stop here, however, is to miss the struggle embodied in this literary shift. Twain may have acted as a saboteur that evening, but his actions were conflicted and reluctant at best. One obvious conflict involves Twain’s own self-mockery. After all, his jab is not only directed at the three romantic poets but also at the miner and at “Mr. Twain” himself. The poets trick the miner with their romantic language, and, as such, the miner is presented as simple and naïve. Yet, the miner gets the last laugh by suggesting that “Mr. Twain” may be as much an imposter as his three “littery” visitors. The final line of this joke can be read in several ways, but, most importantly, the miner’s last words implicate Twain in the offenses of the earlier intruders; the miner places Twain in that same subject position and denies him the literary position that he assumes. Given that Twain and Howells were dining that evening with those so-called “imposters,” in mutual celebration, the miner’s rhetorical question seems particularly apt. Although Realists sought to repudiate romantic forms by embracing the aesthetic of the common, the joke’s ending ironically asks exactly how distinct these two “littery” trends really were.

The irony seeps beyond the level of the story and the outer frame of its reception to the dinner as a whole. Twain's job that night was to celebrate the accomplishments both of Whittier and of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Inherent in that celebration are dual acknowledgments; the event honored both antebellum American romance and the literary accomplishments of the *Atlantic Monthly*, the magazine that, with the introduction of Howells in 1871 as editor, had fostered and would continue to project American Realism as a dominant literary movement. Twain was celebrating both residual and emerging trends, and, while he poked fun at those earlier American literary giants, he also revered them.

In fact, the most extreme reactions to the tale came from Howells—who called it “the ghastliest funeral since the Crucifixion”—and from Twain himself, two central representatives of this nascent literary trend (qtd. in Everett Emerson 110). Despite even the most cruel newspaper accounts of the event, such as those by the *Republican*, Twain's response to his speech seems a bit melodramatic; he wrote Howells later that year:

My sense of disgrace does not abate. It grows. I see that it is going to add itself to my list of permanencies—a list of humiliations that extends back to when I was seven years old.... I must have been insane when I wrote that speech & saw no harm in it, no disrespect toward those men whom I revered so much. And what shame I brought upon you, after what you said in introducing me! It burns me like fire to think of it. (qtd in Bush 58)

Twain looked back at the *Atlantic Monthly* dinner as a low point in his literary career. And Howells, even as late as 1910 when he wrote *My Mark Twain*, still called this

moment “the amazing mistake, the bewildering blunder, the cruel catastrophe” (51). Clearly, Howells and Twain viewed these romantic poets and New England sages—whom Howells referred to as “the sum of greatness”—as untouchable, beyond the grasp of such biting humor (qtd in Bush 58).

It is difficult to fathom the dialogic extremes involved in this joke and its aftermath. How can one attempt to make sense of the crisp humor of Twain’s joke and the elaborate self-abuse that followed? Such a question seems poised for deconstruction, but this conflict stops short of aporia. Instead, the binaries of critique and worship, and, on a larger scale, romance and realism, are best characterized by M.M. Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia. The *Atlantic Monthly* dinner also fits well into the categories developed by Raymond Williams, who argues that residual, dominant, and emergent cultures persist together as simultaneous, layered voices; the multiple voices coexist yet still manage to maintain their opposing positions. Thus, we find that these residual and emergent trends do not deconstruct but come together to form a dominant culture defined by, in the words of Bakhtin, a “double-voiced discourse” (324). As with Twain’s celebratory speech at this dinner, the American Realists insist on addressing the reality of a changing America but do so almost reluctantly, not quite willing to let go of the values of an older, more romantic tradition.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is an extension of this duality; in particular, the novel represents a troubling late nineteenth-century conflict between American philosophy and American experience. With the introduction of Mathew Brady’s photographs of battlefield casualties, Darwin’s new scientific proposals, and industrialism’s growing claim on Americans’ daily lives, it became more and more difficult for literature to avoid the truths that Americans witnessed. Howells’s

philosophy of American Realism emanated from these facts; he argued that it was time for writers to record life not simply according to their ideals but as they saw it: “what is unpretentious and what is true is always beautiful and good, and nothing else is so” (*Criticism* 3). In many ways, Twain’s masterpiece offers a solid example of Howells’s philosophy. And yet, while the text supports Howells’s claims, it does not repudiate but, in many ways, embraces Emerson’s earlier nineteenth-century transcendental philosophy. Both historical-literary models exist simultaneously. Twain offers us a fascinating narrative experiment: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* becomes the story of an Emersonian character who sets out to confront the empirical world. Huck Finn is Emerson’s self-reliant “little boy” who now struggles to find a home where, “in the midst of the crowd” (Emerson 261), he can keep “with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (263). Huck comes to embody Georg Lukács’s notion of “transcendental homelessness,” defined as the “inadequacy that is due to the soul’s being wider and larger than the destinies which life has to offer it” (112).

II

In *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain fiercely criticizes Sir Walter Scott; he condemns his brand of “girly-girly romance” as “in great measure responsible for” the Civil War (303-04). How does he justify this radical claim? He argues that Scott’s literature negatively affected antebellum Southern culture:

Then comes Sir Walter Scott with his enchantments, and by his single might checks this wave of progress, and even turns it back; sets the world in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms of religion; with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham

chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society. He did measureless harm; more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote. (303-04)

In this passage, Twain berates Scott's literary sentimentality, which he claims irresponsibly avoids reality in order to construct "fantastic heroes and their grotesque 'chivalry' doings" (270). According to Twain, he dangerously filled the minds of antebellum Southerners with false ideas and abandoned empirical fact for the sake of fantasy. Most of all, Twain reinforces the responsibility of writers to tell the truth.

His quips on Scott are complemented by his criticism of James Fenimore Cooper. In 1894, Twain published an essay entitled "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," in which he claims that Cooper violates, in his novel *The Deerslayer*, eighteen "rules governing literary art."¹² Among these "rules" are the necessity to "say what he [the author] is proposing to say, not merely come close to it," to "use the right word, not its second cousin," and to "employ a simple and straightforward style" (671). In addition to his harsh analysis of Cooper's style, Twain incorporates a severe attack on Cooper's treatment of Nature:

If Cooper had any real knowledge of Nature's ways of doing things, he had a most delicate art in concealing the fact. For instance: one of his acute Indian experts, Chingachgook (pronounced Chicago, I think), has lost the trail of a person he is tracking through the forest. Apparently that trail is hopelessly lost. Neither you nor I could ever have guessed the way to find it. It was very different with Chicago. Chicago was not stumped for long. He turned a running stream out of its course, and

¹² Although Twain published this essay after the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*, the ideas espoused here match earlier sentiments and help to solidify his position on romanticism and literary culture in general.

there, in the slush in its old bed, were that person's moccasin tracks. The current did not wash them away, as it would have done in all other like cases—no, even the eternal laws of Nature have to vacate when Cooper wants to put up a delicate job of woodcraft on the reader. (672)

Although a brilliant jest on an unnatural scenario, Twain's tone is clearly disparaging; he seems to take personal offense at Cooper's violation of these "eternal laws."

What is at stake in Twain's anger? What specific aspects of Scott's and Cooper's romantic writing so severely disturbed Twain? After all, Twain's own literature shares certain commonalities with Cooper's "Leatherstocking Tales"; in many ways, both *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* reproduce Cooper's nostalgic celebration of youth and nature. The answer to these questions seems embedded in Twain's hyperbolic statements, particularly those regarding Walter Scott and the Civil War. A fundamental element of Realism was its commitment to forging new connections between history and literature. When Twain implicates Scott—a British writer with no direct ties to America—in the Civil War, he does so figuratively, expressing the general irresponsibility of romance and its distance from history. In examining Scott's place in literary history, Twain treats the power of literature as more than simply a reflection of and reaction to history; he suggests that literature has the power to *shape* history, to dictate social politics, and to affect America's future. His anger reveals his frustration with those romantic writers who ignore their literary responsibility and avoid basic truths to accommodate fantasy. Thus, Twain does not facilely reject romance. In many ways, his literature actually reflects a deep desire to hold onto romantic tradition, perhaps not the chivalric romance of Scott but certainly the romantic vision of American Transcendentalism. His dedication, however, to the ideas behind

Realism dictated that he would have to negotiate historical truths that writers such as Scott and Cooper seemed to overlook.

The complex psychology of Twain's reaction to Scott and Cooper is clearly expressed in his first book about Mississippi river life. *Life on the Mississippi*, published two years before *Huckleberry Finn*, is Twain's account of his experience as a cub pilot on the Mississippi River. As a pilot, Twain's adherence to reality becomes a physical necessity. Mr. Bixby tells the young cub:

“My boy, you’ve got to know the *shape* of the river perfectly. It is all there is left to steer by on a very dark night. Everything else is blotted and gone. ... [Y]ou only learn *the* shape of the river; and you learn it with such absolute certainty that you can always steer by the shape that’s *in your head*, and never mind the one that’s before your eyes” (53-54).

Mr. Bixby suggests the absolute importance of empirical fact, where even the pilot's senses, specifically his vision, can belie the true shape of the river. He teaches young Clemens the importance of science and experience in ascertaining truth.

Inherent in this rigid empiricism, however, is Twain's sad realization of all that is lost in such an undertaking. Twain reflects on his new river expertise:

No, the romance and the beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat. Since those days, I have pitied doctors from my heart. What does the lovely flush in a beauty's cheek mean to a doctor but a 'break' that ripples above some deadly disease? Are not all her visible charms sown thick with what

are to him the signs and symbols of hidden decay? Does he ever see her beauty at all, or doesn't he simply view her professionally, and comment upon her unwholesome condition all to himself? And doesn't he sometimes wonder whether he has gained most or lost most by learning his trade? (66)

Here, Twain expresses the spiritual sacrifice offered in exchange for his commitment to realism. While Twain mocks Cooper and denounces Scott, both easy, exaggerated targets for Twain's attack on romance, this passage reveals a certain psychological awareness that reflects his split consciousness and accounts for his frustration.

This conflict correlates with central literary elements of *Huckleberry Finn*. For the most part, Twain's masterpiece radically departs from earlier romantic literature in both content and style. Where Howells tells us that the writer's "soul is exalted not by vain shows and shadows and ideals, but by realities, in which alone the truth works," Twain translates this idea into the realistic and even gritty tale of an orphan boy and a runaway slave (*Criticism* 16). Unlike Harriett Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, to which the text has often been compared, Twain's novel is not set in the mode of melodramatic propaganda, with its "vain shows and shadows and ideals," but is, ironically, more threatening in its *lack* of sentimentality and idealization. Thus, Justin Kaplan notes that "many early readers found Mark Twain's great novel objectionable because it violated genteel standards of literary and social decorum. Instead of refined language, an exemplary hero, and an elevating moral they encountered a narrative written in the idiom of a shiftless, unlettered boy from the lowest class of Southern white society" (354). Our narrator's youth, innocence, and naïve simplicity prevent him from

exploring those safer “shadows and ideals,” those “genteel standards of literary and social decorum” found in earlier romantic novels.

Twain presents us with a new type of narrator and a new type of language, a vernacular that Ralph Ellison would later credit as “a medium of uniquely American literary expression,” which allowed future black and white authors “to capture that which is essentially American in our folkways and manners” (140). Twain introduces this new vernacular in a pre-narrative “explanatory” note: “In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit.... The shadings have not been done in a hap-hazard fashion, or by guess-work; but pains-takingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.” Through his note, Twain seeks to eradicate any sense of contrivance and make this as much Huck’s story as possible. Rather than cover up Huck’s reality with romantic sentiment or falsified dialect, Twain refuses to mediate, and thereby detract from, the experience of his hero.¹³

Twain plays with this idea as early as the first page, where we are introduced to his untutored narrator: “You don’t know about me, without you have read a book by the name of ‘The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,’ but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth” (13). Here, Twain pushes realism to its ironic extreme by attempting to position the fictional narrator as more “real” than his creator. As Joseph Sawicki explains, “in effect, Huck takes the authority for the narrative that follows away from Twain...” (694). Although Twain’s name may appear on the cover page, throughout the novel he remains more of an observer than a participant. Huck

¹³ Of course, Huck’s story contains many elements of the unbelievable. However, these disruptive moments, such as the ending where realism is invaded by the improbable, draw the most criticism from readers.

not only speaks but also remains the central eye, the focalizer, throughout the novel's entirety; we know only what Huck the character knows, no more and no less.

Most importantly, our narrator is himself a realist, a pragmatic observer and processor of facts. He is precisely the kind of narrator that Howells endorsed. In *Criticism and Fiction*, for example, Howells uses the analogy of a grasshopper to discuss appropriate, realistic literary description. He mocks the romantics who prefer the idealized "wire and card-board" grasshopper "prettily painted in a conventional tint" and celebrates those who refer to the real grasshopper "found in the grass," the "simple, honest, and natural grasshopper" (10-13). Huck's own narrative techniques embody this literary method; his descriptions forego the symbolic landscape of romance for the more practical world of literal representation. Thus, early in their adventures, when Huck and Jim come across a frame house floating in the river, Huck describes his experience with an amazing level of precision that goes beyond narrative necessity:

There were heaps of old greasy cards scattered around over the floor, and old whisky bottles, and a couple of masks made out of black cloth; and all over the walls was the ignorantest kind of words and pictures, made with charcoal. There was two old dirty calico dresses, and a sun-bonnet, and some women's under-clothes, hanging against the wall, and some men's clothing, too. We put the lot into the canoe; it might come good. There was a boy's old speckled straw hat on the floor; I took that too. And there was a bottle that had had milk in it; and it had a rag stopper for a baby to suck. We would a took the bottle, but it was broke. There was a seedy old chest, and an old hair trunk with the hinges broke. They stood open, but there warn't nothing left in them that was any account.

The way things was scattered about, we reckoned the people left in a hurry and warn't fixed so as to carry off most of their stuff. (62)

Huck doesn't stop there; he continues, for another half of a page, to describe exactly what other treasures they found and collected. Huck's ability to take stock of the empirical world around him would have made Mr. Bixby proud.

Huck rejects the very different narrative strategies of his romantic contrast, Tom Sawyer. While Huck is playful, his form of play exists in the tangible world around him; he simply doesn't comprehend that Scott-esque world of adventure that extends beyond one's empirical grasp. Thus, when Tom tells Huck that "he had got secret news by his spies that next day a whole parcel of Spanish merchants and rich A-rabs was a going to camp in Cave Hollow with two hundred elephants, and six hundred camels, and over a thousand 'sumter' mules,' all loaded down with di'monds..." Huck, who wants to "see the camels and elephants," goes along. He is, however, disappointed to find—in the place of Spaniards, A-rabs, camels, and elephants—only "a Sunday-school picnic":

I didn't see no di'monds, and I told Tom Sawyer so. He said there was loads of them there, anyway; and he said there was A-rabs there, too, and elephants and things. I said, why couldn't we see them, then? He said if I warn't so ignorant, but had read a book called "Don Quixote," I would know without asking. He said it was all done by enchantment. He said there was hundreds of soldiers there, and elephants and treasure, and so on, but we had enemies which he called magicians, and they had turned the whole thing into an infant Sunday school, just out of spite. I said, all right, then the thing for us to do was to go for the magicians. Tom Sawyer said I was a numskull. (24-25)

The ironic distance between Tom's romantic imagination and Huck's realistic vision accounts for the scene's humor and establishes the opposing natures of these two characters. While Huck represents Twain's own sense of literary realism, Tom represents that problematic romanticism against which Twain rebelled.

Even while *Huckleberry Finn* helped secure Twain's position as an American Realist, however, the text also incorporates fundamental elements of earlier American writing. Critics consistently describe the novel in romantic terms, as a mythic vision of America. Bernard DeVoto, for example, celebrates the text as a romantic homage to America: "It is a passage through the structure of the nation. ... It is the restlessness of the young democracy borne southward on the river—the energy, the lawlessness, the groping ardor of the flux perfectly comprehended in a fragment of lumber raft drifting on the June flood. In a worn phrase—it is God's plenty" (10). Like DeVoto, Richard Chase, in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, ties *Huckleberry Finn* to a national romantic sensibility: "That life on the raft is idyllic and that *Huckleberry Finn* is a pastoral fiction that looks back nostalgically to an earlier and simpler America—this does not need arguing" (148). Both critics associate the novel with principal American literary tropes: the connection between man and nature, the glory of the American pioneer, and the freedom of uncharted territory. William Lyon Phelps sums up this romantic reading: "*Huckleberry Finn* is not only the great American novel. It is America" (qtd. in Graff 25).

Although the content and form of *Huckleberry Finn* clearly tie this novel to American Realism, the text's romantic elements are prominent and, as these critics contend, should be incorporated into any discussion of the text. Rather than focus, however, on *Huckleberry Finn*'s mythic, *ahistorical* association with the American Adam, as so many critics have done, I want to place the text in direct conversation with a

specific residual romantic tradition. Despite Huck's realistic narrative vision, his character is best defined by Emersonian romance. Huck becomes the living embodiment of Emerson's early philosophies of nature, self-reliance, and spiritual transcendence. In the most general sense, Huck's narrative is about one boy's quest to free himself from the grip of society (what he calls "sivilization"), to live independently in both the physical and spiritual sense. What makes Huck particularly Emersonian is that he does all of this unconsciously, innately. He is neither a philosopher nor a proselytizer. He is, instead, Emerson's "boy" who gives an "independent, genuine verdict." He is the "formidable" youth "who can thus avoid all pledges and having observed, observe again from the same unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, unaffrighted innocence" (Emerson 261).

While Huck is romantic, he is not romantic in the sense of Tom Sawyer. He doesn't replace reality with fantasy. Tom Sawyer can enjoy the comforts of society because he creates a fantastical world that obscures its banalities; he covers up mundane truth with camels and elephants. He forsakes reality for illusion, and this is exactly the type of failure that Twain condemned in the figures of Walter Scott and Fenimore Cooper. By contrast, Huck's romance emanates from his experience. While Tom *romanticizes* experience, Huck *experiences* romance. Although Huck is imaginative, he does not transform a Sunday-school picnic into a "whole parcel of Spanish merchants and rich A-rabs" (24). Instead, his romantic imagination is seen in his interaction with nature. In chapter 1, for example, Huck describes the view from his bedroom window:

The stars was shining, and the leaves who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I

couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood, and so can't rest easy in its grave and has to go about that way every night grieving. (16)

Huck experiences nature as a romantic metaphor for reality. Thus, romance and reality, in this sense, don't deconstruct; they exist simultaneously, as multiple layers of Huck's character.

One particular element of Huck's Emersonian nature is his relationship to the past. In his introduction to *Nature*, Emerson tells us not to "grope among the dry bones of the past" but to embrace the present, to acknowledge that "the sun shines to-day also" (7). Huck exists, in this way, living primarily in the present. He flees his past by running away from the widow Douglas, Miss Watson and Pap. The money Judge Thatcher holds for him represents both his past and his potential future and, thus, he sees it only as a burden. And, in what amounts to a symbolic gesture of rebirth, Huck fakes his own death, effectively killing himself off and separating himself from "the dry bones of the past" in order to enjoy that "original relation to the universe" on the river with Jim (Emerson 7). Huck rarely focuses on what has been or may be.¹⁴ Instead, he allows the river, and therefore nature, to dictate his narrative.

Most importantly, however, Huck's most prominent Emersonian feature is his moral and spiritual self-reliance. This trait does not come easily to our hero and,

¹⁴ This quality has been acknowledged and often critiqued by others who consider Huck's nonchalance after they pass Cairo to be illustrative of his selfish irresponsibility to Jim. While I don't deny this problematic moral element, I contend that it, nonetheless, does reflect Huck's Emersonian relationship to the present.

throughout the text, we see him struggle with his attachment to social customs and religion. Yet, during two central moments when Huck wrestles with whether or not to turn in Jim, he ultimately favors “the integrity of [his] own mind” over his socially-constructed consciousness (Emerson 263); he tears up the letter to Miss Watson and chooses to “go to hell” rather than defy his internal moral sense (*Huckleberry Finn* 223). His loyalty to his spirit, his ability to embrace nature over society, and his religion of the self all make him one of the most Emersonian characters in American literature.

Of course, I am not alone in linking Huck Finn to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Richard Poirier, in *A World Elsewhere*, is one critic among several who develops this argument.¹⁵ Poirier, however, qualifies the Emerson connection by reinforcing Huck’s dislike of solitude and loneliness, both seemingly un-Emersonian traits. Poirier says, for example, that “any Emersonian detachment from society for the companionship of the ‘stars’ would never satisfy Huck...for very long” (184). Upon a close reading of Emerson, however, it seems shortsighted to dismiss Huck’s occasional loneliness or desire for companionship as incompatible with Emerson’s philosophy. It is true that Emerson felt that solitude was the *safest*, the most secure way to guarantee self-reliance. Emerson, however, also claims that it is the “great man” who can locate the “independence of solitude” in the “*midst* of the crowd” (my italics 263). Although he acknowledges the difficulty, Emerson celebrates the attempt and desire to accommodate love and friendship into one’s personal philosophy of self-reliance. His essay on “Friendship” amounts to an almost romantic homage to friendship, which, he explains, like the “immortality of the soul, is too good to be believed” (343). He qualifies his belief in solitude with the comment: “I chide society, I embrace solitude, and yet I am

¹⁵ Specifically, Poirier connects Huck to Emerson in order to contrast Twain’s critique of society with Jane Austen’s acceptance of it.

not so ungrateful as not to see the wise, the lovely, and the noble-minded, as from time to time they pass my gate” (342). Like Emerson, Huck may reveal feelings of loneliness and temporarily enjoy the company of those who “pass [his] gate,” but he always seems relieved to return to that “lonesome” but magical river. As Huck says, “[W]e said there warn’t no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don’t. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft” (134). While one might say that Emerson’s philosophy exists in the hypothetical, Huck becomes a fictional embodiment of Emersonian possibility.

III

Huck Finn’s narrative, however, immediately and continually suggests that such Emersonian possibility is highly precarious. While elements of realism and romance coexist in Huck’s character, the balance is unstable. Twain must have wondered, when he started writing the novel in 1871, how to produce a believable character like Huckleberry Finn, how to maintain a sense of realism while celebrating Huck’s romantic spirit. How does one create a realistic narrative and conceive of an environment that allows for a hero to float down the Mississippi River in a raft with a runaway slave in a quest for physical and spiritual freedom? What conditions allow for such a quest? How does one accomplish this task in the tradition of Realism without sinking into the melodrama of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*?

In *The Problem of Reality*, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg argue that a text such as *Huckleberry Finn* maintains its connection to realism by “convey[ing] a total and convincing impression of the real world” (373) and adhering to “historical, psychological, or sociological truth” (376). Feminist critics such as Nina Baym and Nancy Walker have argued that Huck’s gender is the central “sociological truth” that

allows for his “dream of escape to freedom” (Walker 487). The fact that Huck is male is obviously pivotal in his ability to “light out.” Gender, however, is certainly not the only factor that keeps Huck’s story “real.”¹⁶ In order to understand how Huck’s story avoids artifice, we have to go further than gender and explore all of the ways in which Twain qualifies Huck’s social position. Huck’s physical and spiritual adventure is made possible by a number of additional environmental factors that loosen his parasitic relationship to society and connect his quest more closely to “historical, psychological, or sociological truth.”

The single most important condition that helps loosen these ties is his role as a young orphan.¹⁷ When the text opens, Huck suggests that both of his parents are dead and tells us that he is under the care of the maternal widow Douglas and her bible-toting, slave-holding sister, Miss Watson. Although we learn that “the widow Douglas...took [Huck] for her son,” we sense little allegiance between the two characters, either legal or emotional (13). Huck has only recently come under the widow’s care, and the widow and her sister are described primarily as two-dimensional characters who repress Huck’s true nature. Given these facts, Huck is allowed a type of narrative freedom not readily available to young adolescent characters, male or female, who, we assume, belong with their families.

¹⁶ In fact, in considering the probability of Huck’s quest, the role of gender should not be overemphasized. Indeed, while we may not find other heroines in American Realism who float down the river in a raft, we do find several American heroines who, in this mythic sense, embody a similar “dream of escape to freedom,” a dream that emanates from an Emersonian tradition of self-reliance and individualism. Among them are the three heroines that will be discussed in this study: Isabel Archer, Lily Bart, and *Ántonia Shimerda*. *Edna Pontellier*, is, of course, another essential heroine in this category.

¹⁷ It is not a coincidence that the other Emersonian hero(ine)s I discuss—Isabel Archer, Lily Bart, and Jim Burden—are also orphans. In these texts, family continually proves a major opposition to the possibility of spiritual individualism.

When Pap actually returns, not dead after all, we learn just how imprisoning family can be. Pap impedes Huck's narrative quest, literally incarcerating him in a cabin, across the Mississippi river in Illinois. In these early chapters, he proves to be a degenerate drunk (incapable of fulfilling his promises to Judge Thatcher to sober up), a thief (regularly taking money from Huck), a kidnapper, a child beater, and a bigot (as we discover through his racist tirade against the government). Even for those more pious or conservative readers who consider the widow to be a suitable caretaker, Huck's confinement and physical danger, in effect, give him both sociological and psychological cause to "light out" on his river quest to freedom.

The difficulty, however, of presenting Huck's river plot as realistic—as synonymous with historical, psychological, and sociological truth—continues. In order to secure his safety from Pap and his independence from the widow, Huck must, in an act of self-defense, perform his own death; he explains that this is the only way that Pap and the widow "won't bother no more about [him]" (46). After an elaborate scheme, we find him at last safe in his canoe "a-spinning down stream soft but quick in the shade of the bank" (47). The suggestion is that, in effect, Huck must die to live, that he must enact death to ensure self-reliance. And, thus, even before Huck's adventures begin, the text illustrates how difficult it is to be free and self-reliant in Emerson's terms. In order to align the fictional tale with "reality," in order to create an element of psychological and sociological truth, Twain must effectively kill off his narrator. It is not enough that Huck simply be male or orphaned. From Twain's perspective of 1880s America, death becomes the central plot prerequisite for Huck's quest, the only way for Huck to escape the dangers of social conformity.

Of course, once he reaches Jackson Island, Huck's plot takes a new turn. His subsequent flight down river with Jim puts his anonymity at risk; even if the townspeople stop searching for him, they will certainly continue to look for a runaway slave. This element might seem to negate the effects of Huck's fictional death and endanger his search for independence. What it adds to Huck's quest, however, is moral justification and ethical responsibility. By the time Twain published the novel in 1885, slavery, the Civil War, and the failure of Reconstruction had become a stain on American history; even if racial equality was far from realized, the North had won the war and Lincoln had become the great martyr of emancipation. In addition to the historical perspective offered by twenty years, Twain emphasizes the evils of slavery by clearly associating the slaveholders in this text with the hypocritical Miss Watson, who speaks of religious virtue but treats Jim "pooty rough" and makes a deal to sell her slave "down to Orleans" despite her promises to the contrary (55). Against this background, Huck Finn represents that sound heart, the character capable of standing outside the realm of the morally culpable. As such, the addition of Jim on his quest adds a level of nobility to his character and to the celebration of his romantic spirit. Alone, Huck may turn into a potential wayward tramp; with Jim, he aligns his own spiritual expansion with a visionary political quest. His desire for self-reliance is now more closely connected to Emerson's complementary notion of moral responsibility.

Regardless of this moral justification, Huck and Jim achieve freedom only by virtue of their continual transience. As so many critics have noted, the river in this novel acts as an essential spiritual metaphor for freedom, but, on a literal level, it also allows them movement and anonymity. The river represents one of the last spaces, even in Huck's fictional 1840s America, where society won't catch up with the two drifters,

where they can maintain an unfettered relation to nature and their own spirits. Of course, Huck and Jim cannot live on the river indefinitely; and, the textual history of the novel reflects Twain's own difficulty conceiving of a plot that would allow for the perpetuation of this freedom. As will be discussed, Huck's and Jim's river adventure is marred by a series of events that impede their Emersonian narrative; society continually constrains them. In addition, as Walter Blair has established in his book *Mark Twain and Huck Finn*, such narrative hindrances are mirrored by Twain's own textual quest. In short, Twain wrote the novel in fits and starts over a period of fourteen years. He continually ran into narrative snags, suggesting the same level of narrative frustration we find in the text itself. It is as if the Emersonian vision, so pronounced and celebrated within Huck's character, is repeatedly halted by historical truth.

This historical truth is accentuated by the gap in time between author and plot, between the "forty to fifty years" that Twain wrote the book and the time that Huck lived it. History suggests that this novel could not realistically have been placed in Twain's own contemporary world. In addition to the obvious fact that the text tells the story of a runaway slave, Huck's voyage would have been radically altered by the "forty to fifty years" that separate the internal and external narrative contexts. For example, the railroad—a symbol of industrialism and ensuing technology—represents the most self-evident change. Even Henry David Thoreau's mid-1840s experience at Walden Pond was "penetrate[d]" by the "whistle of the locomotive...sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard..." (190-91). After 1862, when Lincoln signed the Pacific Railway Act authorizing the construction of the first transcontinental railroad, Huck would literally have heard the whistle of technology's beckoning calls. In effect, the railroad symbolically deadened the vision of romantic, edenic river travel.

In *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain recounts his 1882 return to the river of his youth:

The towboat and the railroad had done their work, and done it well and completely. The mighty bridge, stretching along over our heads, had done its share in the slaughter and spoliation. Remains of former steamboatmen told me, with wan satisfaction, that the bridge doesn't pay. Still, it can be no sufficient compensation to a corpse, to know that the dynamite that laid him out was not of as good quality as it had been supposed to be. (159)

Although Twain is referring here to the violent death of Mississippi steamboating, the historical connection to Huck's river raft experience still applies. By 1885, the railroad had completely altered the landscape and man's relationship to nature. Travel became encapsulated in enclosed cars, where glass constantly separated man from his environment. In addition, the man-made rails virtually controlled the machine's course; gone were the days when cub pilots had to contend with nature's changing channels. Thus, Twain's historical placement of Huck's plot in 1840s America allows him to bridge the gap between romance and realism; his Emersonian vision can be sustained without the intrusion of postbellum reality.

What we find, therefore, is the extremely tenuous nature of Huck's narrative. To locate "historical, psychological [and]...sociological truth," Twain had to negotiate a multitude of environmental factors to keep the romance real. Huck Finn's character must be male; he must be young; he must be orphaned and even presumed dead; he must be free of responsibility and yet morally responsible; he must perpetuate a constant state of travel and never settle; and he must go back in time, to an antebellum pre-industrial America. It is only with these factors that Huck's self-reliance and spiritual

quest for freedom can be deemed realistic, can uphold a connection between the fictional and real worlds. Each of these preconditions allows Huck the plot potential to put into practice Emerson's central philosophical ideals and to experience an "original relationship to the universe" (Emerson 7).

IV

Inherent in Emerson's idea of an "original relationship to the universe" is the notion that one can and should try to escape tradition and history.¹⁸ Emerson addresses this issue in both his famous introduction to *Nature* and in "Self-Reliance": "history is an impertinence and an injury, if it be any thing more than a cheerful apologue or parable of my being and becoming" (270). Huck's escape from family, from society, and even from "forty to fifty" years of American history reflects this Emersonian vision; our hero must abandon his past to "be" and "become." The problem, of course, is that history continually impedes Huck's narrative; history becomes a force that cannot be suppressed, even by the power of Huck's romantic vision.

History specifically filters into the novel through a dialogic system of textual voices. In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin tells us that

the living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (276)

¹⁸ It can and has been argued that Emerson's perspective on history shifts throughout his life; as my reading of the text, however, focuses on the relationship between Twain and a residual, antebellum romantic tradition, I refer primarily to his earlier works that speak to the fundamental tenets (often ahistorical) of Transcendentalism.

The “dialogic threads” in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are expressed on a number of different levels. Primarily, two historical voices occur in every moment of the text; each utterance exists within the dual contexts of Twain’s own postbellum America and Huck Finn’s antebellum world.¹⁹ The utterance is spoken at one “particular historical moment” and in one “socially specific environment,” but it is *located* in a different historical and social moment.

The way in which this dialogism manifests itself most clearly is through the conflicting characters themselves. Huck and Jim’s voyage down river is defined by several troubling encounters with a variety of antagonists, among them the Grangerfords, Colonel Sherburn and Boggs, the Duke and King, the Wilks, the Phelps, and Tom Sawyer himself. While each personality carries its own satirical socio-historical critique, the characters symbolically fall into two historical categories: those who represent a slave-holding, Walter Scott-reading Southern world, and those who embody the dangerous traits of postbellum industrial America. While few characters emerge in the text without some form of self-mockery, the characters who symbolize postbellum America ultimately become more pernicious to the survival of the text itself. Those who represent the antebellum world tend to *self-destruct*: the Grangerfords kill themselves off and the Wilks ensure their own ruin. Huck Finn becomes a voyeur in these scenes of self-destruction; they may bother him ethically or psychologically, but they never impair his Emersonian quest. Those, however, who represent that postbellum historical voice, specifically the Duke and King and Tom Sawyer, *do* impede Huck’s plot. Their danger

¹⁹ A third voice occurs as well, emanating from the unknown context of the narrator, Huck, retelling his story. Because this context is unknown and that the connection between narrator and character seems almost seamless, this third voice is primarily silent and, thus, less important.

lies in their ability to ensnare Huck into their *own* plots, into Gilded Age plots of personal gain and self-interest.

In their first adventure after leaving Jackson Island, Huck and Jim encounter “a steamboat that had killed herself on a rock” (76). In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the steamboat occupies an interesting role as a linchpin between the pre-modern and modern worlds. In one sense, the steamboat is associated with an earlier conception of Southern culture. Historically, the Civil War destroyed the central importance of the steamboat in national industry; the War halted river commerce, and, as Twain explains in *Life on the Mississippi*, the tugboat and railroad would later replace the steamboat. In keeping with this notion, Huck’s observation of three thieves—Bill, Jake, and the tied-up Tom—aboard the dilapidated, sinking ship suggests a symbolic reference to antebellum American culture. That this steamboat, as Huck later discovers, has been named the “Walter Scott” is particularly suggestive. The association, here, of “Walter Scott” with the thieves’ lawlessness and with a sinking ship indicates the archaic nature of this antebellum Southern world; like the collapsed steamboat that has “killed herself,” the South has destroyed itself through its inability to move beyond medieval concepts of fantasy and chivalry.

In keeping with the dialogic nature of the text, however, the steamboat represents a symbol of Southern self-destruction *and*, at the same time, offers a prescient image of the dangers of ensuing industrialism. When Huck climbs aboard the “Walter Scott,” he acts as a voyeur; he watches the thieves and steals their boat but manages to escape before the steamboat sinks and the men can discover or harm him. In other sections of the text, however, the steamboat represents a symbolic threat to Huck’s river quest. Even before Huck sees the “Walter Scott,” he observes “up-bound steamboats

fight[ing] the big river in the middle” (74). The suggestion, here, is that the steamboat works against a vision of nature that the boy and the river represent. While Huck and Jim will later be carried through a dark fog and forced to give into nature, the steamboat tries to battle these forces, to contend with and against nature.²⁰

Shortly after their experience in the fog, the steamboat literally ruptures Huck and Jim’s raft, the symbolic representation of their quest. Huck describes the destruction of the raft:

It got to be very late and still, and then along comes a steamboat up the river.... She aimed right for us.... [A]ll of a sudden she bulged out, big and scary, with a long row of wide-open furnace doors shining like red-hot teeth, and her monstrous bows and guards hanging right over us. ... [A]s Jim went overboard on one side and I on the other, she come smashing straight through the raft. (115)

Huck personifies the steamboat as a wild, destructive animal, its blazing mouth ready to swallow Huck and Jim’s raft. This symbol of technology consumes our hero and halts his travels. Huck’s forced eviction from the river is mirrored by Twain’s own literary struggles; shortly after writing this scene, in 1876, Twain put aside the manuscript for three years. The steamboat acts as a narrative impediment on two different levels, on both the level of author and character, of creator and actor. The Emersonian vision is momentarily jarred. The steamboat now forces Huck to land and thrusts him back into society.

²⁰ It might be considered by some that, in this fog scene, nature counters Huck’s quest. I would argue, however, that while it certainly mars Jim’s troubled search for freedom (and, thus, Huck’s original plans), the fog actually perpetuates Huck’s romantic adventures by keeping him on the Mississippi. Thus, the fog hinders Jim’s narrative but not Huck’s.

Huck is cast ashore on the property of the Grangerfords, a family that will come to embody all that is most menacing about the antebellum South. On the most superficial level, the Grangerfords are mocked for their ornamental house, sentimental women, and chivalric men. Huck, himself, appreciates the décor, calling it a “mighty nice house” (120); the humor in this scene, however, arises from the distance between narrator and author. Huck describes the house in terms that *actually* suggest extreme garishness:

Well, there was a big outlandish parrot on each side of the clock, made out of something like chalk, and painted up gaudy. By one of the parrots was a cat made of crockery, and a crockery dog by the other; and when you pressed down on them they squeaked, but didn't open their mouths nor look different nor interested. ... On a table in the middle of the room was a kind of a lovely crockery basket that had apples and oranges and peaches and grapes piled up in it which was much redder and yellower and prettier than real ones is, but they warn't real because you could see where pieces had got chipped off and showed the white chalk or whatever it was, underneath. (120)

This description of the house and its “sham grandeurs” (*Life* 304) smacks of all Twain criticized about Walter Scott, in particular the notion of “materials all ungentle within and without, pretending to be what they are not” (*Life* 271). Each object in the Grangerford house is purely decorative and lacks use value: the chalk parrots cannot speak, the fake cats and dogs squeak with disinterest, and the chipped fruit is inedible.

These types of “windy humbuggeries” say much about the type of people that live in the house (*Life* 270). The memory of their deceased daughter seems embodied in a sentimental picture Huck sees on the wall, of

a woman in a slim black dress, belted small under the arm-pits, with bulges like a cabbage in the middle of the sleeves, and a large black scoop-shovel bonnet with a black veil, and white slim ankles crossed about with black tape, and very wee black slippers, like a chisel, and she was leaning pensive on a tombstone on her right elbow, under a weeping willow and her other hand hanging down her side holding a white handkerchief and a reticule, and underneath the picture it said “Shall I Never See Thee More Alas.” (121)

The fact that this dark picture—“blacker, mostly, than is common”—is actually a self-portrait, made by the dying daughter herself, accentuates the humor of this melodramatic image (121). The benign humor of this moment becomes darker, however, when it involves the other daughter, “sweet Miss Sophia.” As part of her sentimental plot to run away with a son of the rival family, the Shepherdsons, Miss Sophia asks Huck to retrieve her bible from church. Unbeknownst to Huck, the bible contains a note from her forbidden lover. In this scene, “sweet Miss Sophia” not only exposes her hypocritical relationship to religion but also plays upon Huck’s naïve goodness by forcing him to act the role of accomplice. Her behavior reveals the danger and selfishness inherent in seemingly mundane melodrama.

Of course, the Grangerfords’ feud with the Shepherdsons represents the family’s greatest evil. When we first meet the Grangerfords, we witness a scene of paranoia; the Colonel has set his dogs on Huck, three “big men” point guns at him, and thirteen-year-

old Buck arrives downstairs, half-awake, “dragging a gun along” as he would a teddy bear or blanket (119). Young Buck’s innocence accentuates the meaninglessness of the feud. When Huck asks him what a feud is, Buck responds: “a feud is this way. A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then that other man’s brother kills him; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the cousins chip in—and by and by everybody’s killed off, and there ain’t no more feud” (128). Buck’s nonchalance reflects Twain’s affinity for dark humor; the innocent child unknowingly becomes the victim of his meretricious family. That Buck cannot respond to any of Huck’s further questions about what or who started the feud emphasizes this evil. The dénouement of this feud—the slaughter of Buck and his entire family—ultimately becomes the most nightmarish scene in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where humor quickly halts in the face of tragedy.

While the horror of Buck’s death cannot be underestimated, it is important to note that Huck never actually gets caught in any crossfire or ensnared in the feud itself.²¹ Once the family discovers that Huck is not a Shepherdson, they welcome him into their home, offer him a bed, and feed him well. It is one of the Grangerfords’ slaves, Jack, who, in fact, leads him back to Jim, the restored raft, and, thus, his river pilgrimage. On the day of the final battle, when Huck complains that Buck has left to face the Shepherdsons without waking him up, Jack tells him: “Dey warn’t gwyne to mix you up in it” (132). Huck watches the final battle from a tree and is never in immediate danger. Obviously, what he witnesses greatly affects him, so much that he has difficulty, even in retrospect, “talk[ing] much about the next day” and admits to later having bad dreams (132). The event, however, has the effect of pushing him back to Jim, the raft, and the

²¹ As mentioned earlier, Miss Sophia does get him to pick up her bible with a note in it from church. This action, however, never actually puts him in any danger.

river for solace. Thus, Huck remains a voyeur in this section. He witnesses this thoughtless, medieval clan through the eyes of a young critic. The feud itself does not depend upon Huck for its existence. Huck's role is simply to watch, to report, and to illustrate the ironies of antebellum Southern aristocratic culture without getting caught up in its depravity.

The same is not the case with Huck and Jim's next river adventure. Shortly after returning to the "free and easy and comfortable" raft, they meet the Duke and King (134). From the start, these men prove to be tricksters entrenched in Gilded Age corruption. As Walter Blair notes in *Mark Twain and Huck Finn*: "The pair...were products of the life which their creator was living when he wrote of them. The author's picturing of them was shaped by experiences in the world of business which increasingly absorbed his attention and his energies" (259). Thus, with the introduction of the Duke and King, Twain's own historical moment permeates the text, and he incorporates figures who represent the most debased form of 1880s capitalism. The King, for example, describes his profession as follows: "I've done considerable in the doctoring way in my time. Layin' on o' hands is my best holt—for cancer, and paralysis, and sich things; and I k'n tell a fortune pretty good, when I've got somebody along to find out the facts for me. Preachin's my line, too; and workin' camp-meetin's; and missionaryin' around" (139). The King reveals much about himself in these lines, primarily his role as an itinerant quack who preys upon others' weaknesses. His schemes are matched by the Duke's who proclaims that he does "most anything that comes handy, so it ain't work" (139). It is telling that the Duke does not associate making money with work. The Duke and King are anachronistic representations of postbellum speculators, of get-rich-quick schemers who seek to gain capital without labor.

Their greed is matched by their desire for power, another Gilded Age trait. They are imposters whose lack of a consistent identity allows them to maintain their power over others. The Duke creates his own royal past, and the King misappropriates history to assume a superior rank as “the late Dauphin” (141). The titles that they claim for themselves are employed primarily as a means of control, over each other and over Huck and Jim. Huck explains the demands that the King sets for them: “He said it often made him feel easier and better for a while if people treated him according to his rights, and got down on one knee to speak to him, and always called him ‘Your Majesty,’ and waited him first at meals, and didn’t set down in his presence till he asked them” (141-42). Soon, Huck and Jim are not only obliging their whims but are manipulated into giving up their beds and, ultimately, control of the raft. In a sense, the Duke and King stand in direct contrast to the Grangerfords. They enact an aristocratic position but not out of any antebellum sense of pride or chivalry; they have no strong sense of historical identity and, in fact, no identity at all. Rather, they occupy chameleon roles as a means to acquire power and capital.

Without any ties to other people or to their environment, they enter into an itinerant course of exploitation, acting and cheating their way through various Southern towns. In a sense, they mirror the postbellum westward expansion that treated the land and its people as nothing more than capitalist opportunities. They pervert Huck and Jim’s river raft trip, turning it from a voyage of spiritual freedom to one of lawless marauding. Through their antics, Twain succeeds in critiquing *both* antebellum Southern society *and* the postbellum society of the Duke and King. While the Duke and King represent the emotional detachment and immorality of 1880s capitalism, those Southerners who become their dupes prove themselves guilty of either bad judgment or

sheer stupidity. The most obvious culpable party becomes the Wilks sisters, whose limited vision allows them to welcome the frauds into their home as family.²² Here, the Duke and King literally become gold diggers, descending into their basement to round up and count Mr. Wilks's coins. Their actions become especially virulent when they put the house up for auction and sell the slaves. Their utter inability to feel compassion sets them apart from the Wilks sisters; while the latter are criticized for their excessive sentimentality, the former are morally sterile.

Most importantly, the Duke and King manage to ensnare Huck and Jim into their own mischievous plots. In every other episode thus far—on the sinking “Walter Scott,” at the Grangerfords, at the Royal Nonesuch, during the Sherburn and Boggs affair—Huck has been able to remain a voyeur. In the Wilks episode, however, the Duke and the King involve Huck in their scam and force him to act as their accomplice. Furthermore, their related treatment of Jim is appalling. The issue of racism has been paramount in critical discussions of this text. It is primarily the Duke and King and Tom, however, precisely those characters who resonate more with Gilded Age culture than with antebellum Southern culture, who display the most virulent racism.²³ For example, the Duke and King are the characters who suggest keeping Jim chained to the raft all day and who then concoct the childlike, degrading disguise of the “sick Arab.” The most horrific example of their callous disregard for others is, of course, when they

²² Although the Sherburn and Boggs episode does not strictly involve the Duke and King, it offers a good example of the problematic dual binaries of Southern culture; it offers us Sherburn, a well-dressed aristocrat who becomes nothing more than a murderer, and a cowardly mob who cries “revenge” but is incapable of action. Thus, in this scene, Twain presents us with, what he reads as, both sides of Southern culture: the dangerous and the pathetic.

²³ This is not to say, of course, that racism is not apparent, as well, in Southern culture; most of the Southerners that Huck and Jim meet own slaves. It is ironic, however, that those characters who symbolize postbellum Northern capitalism ultimately treat Jim the worst.

sell Jim for forty dollars. Through an act of utter disregard for human life, these Gilded Age villains re-enslave Jim and destroy Huck's spiritual journey.

In the final episode of the text—often referred to as “the evasion”—Tom Sawyer, like the Duke and King, characterizes the more corrupt aspects of 1880s America. In many ways, Tom represents the antithesis of Huck Finn. As has been explained, unlike Huck, he does not experience romance, but rather romanticizes experience. He *enacts* romance and, as such, requires an audience to verify and validate his importance. His actions necessitate the presence of society, and it is for this reason that, early in the novel, Tom only allows Huck to be in his band of robbers if he will “go back the to the widow and be respectable” (14). Tom relies on society as much as Huck tries to escape from it. It can be argued that Tom's sense of romance establishes him more as a figure of Walter Scott chivalry than of Gilded Age capitalism. Yet, Tom remains particularly distinct from such antebellum representatives as the Grangerfords. The latter don't appreciate their actions as romantic and are dangerous particularly because they are blinded by their own ideology. Tom, on the other hand, is fully conscious of his romantic games and their literary roots; for Tom, romanticism offers a relief from the boredom of society. As Brander Matthews notes, Tom's philosophy emanates from the idea that “if you want to get fun out of this life, you must never hesitate to make believe very hard” (331). Tom's need to relieve the boredom of his conventional, middle-class life is a product of a post-industrial age. John S. Whitley tells us that “Tom is the hero of Twain's Gilded Age, an era which Twain had already described as false and possessing an almost Jonsonian capacity for corrupting the truth” (163). In short, Tom's romanticism is what James M. Cox calls “bourgeois romanticism,” a pernicious reaction to modernity (145).

Jim becomes Tom's main victim in his search for romantic entertainment. In a symbolic sense, Tom attempts to escape the ennui of postbellum America by erasing history and rewinding time; he re-enslaves Jim as the final and most pernicious outlet for his restlessness. Despite his claims to the contrary, Tom's desire is not to set Jim free but to put that off for as long as possible; as he tells Huck "there ain't no hurry" (243). Thus, when Huck comes up with a direct, expedient plan of freeing Jim, Tom complains that "it's too blame' simple": "What the good of a plan that ain't no more trouble than that?" (242). In his fear of facing reality, Tom works to satisfy his own needs and, like the Duke and King, has little regard for anyone other than himself. Again, while Huck and Jim become hesitant participants in Tom's game, it is Tom who precipitates most of the racism of this scene. Jim becomes nothing more than the melodramatic victim of Tom's romance novel; he subjects Jim to painful rock inscriptions, tear-inducing onions, rattlesnakes, rats and spiders, and, of course, the perpetual anxiety of captivity, all in order to accentuate his role as fictional romantic hero. Perhaps the most insulting blow is when, after Jim discovers that Miss Watson had freed him long ago in her will, Tom offers Jim forty dollars for his willing participation as prisoner; he pays for Jim's performance in his own slave narrative. Forty dollars, of course, is the same amount that the Duke and King have grossed from selling Jim. Here, Tom uses money as a "means of moral reparation," but at root of both episodes is the primary emphasis on the business transaction (McMahan 9). Thus, the "evasion" becomes Tom's "invasion," where the modern capitalist values of Twain's world collide with Huck's plot.

V

Other critics have, of course, discussed the multifaceted issues inherent in the "evasion" episode; paramount, however, in most of these discussions is the question of

artistic failure, the question of whether the ending marks, as Leo Marx contends, Twain's "failure of nerve" ("Mr. Eliot" 305). Critical history of the text offers little disagreement with Hemingway's famous claim that "if you read... [*Huckleberry Finn*] you must stop where the nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. This is the real end. The rest is cheating." (22). This is the moment in the novel, at least, where we would *like* the text to end, where Huck's quest would achieve a greater unity. But, despite our desires, the text goes on and introduces us to those characters who lead Huck and Jim to an alternative plot. It is easier, therefore, to examine the ending as a formal failure because such a reading allows us to justify and negotiate the unsettling contradictions in the text. It is more difficult to acknowledge the ending as a reflection of *historical* contradictions, of the competing forces of antebellum and postbellum America, which occur not simply at the end but throughout the text. Like Lukács's spiritually homeless figure who suffers from a "rift between 'inside' and 'outside,'...between the self and the world," Huck Finn's quest becomes the attempt to find a home for his Emersonian spirit (29). His search is continually halted by permutations of the Gilded Age, who, in the form of the Duke and King and Tom, emerge as representatives of the dominant historical modes of the 1880s. The subjective, romantic spirit of Huckleberry is, thus, constantly threatened by objective reality; the former is celebrated, but the latter cannot be avoided. While Huck's vision remains, transcendental homelessness sets in.

In the final lines of the text, Tom Sawyer proposes that they "get an outfit" and "go for howling adventures amongst the Injuns, over in the Territory, for a couple of weeks or two" (295). Once again, Tom hopes to use the land and its people for temporary sport; his proposal is portentous and evokes the ensuing evils of westward expansion. In Huck's most famous lines, he tells us that he's "got to light out for the

Territory ahead of the rest” (296). Beneath the calm humor of the young boy lies a sense of fear, a suggestion that he will always have to stay one step ahead of society in order to hold onto that “same unaffected, unbiased, unbribeable, unaffrighted innocence” (Emerson 261). Of course, by 1885, readers would know that the Territory had already been occupied, that Huck’s plot could only become smaller and smaller; the “midst of the crowd” had become almost impossible to avoid (Emerson 263).

From his “notice”—where he states that “persons attempting to find a plot...will be shot”—Twain would have us believe that the text is more of a picaresque, an episodic narrative without a beginning or end. The suggestion here is that one can live without plot and, thus, above the telic forces of history. Emerson, himself, offers a similar idea in his essay on “Self-Reliance”: “He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, *above* time. This should be plain enough” (my italics 270).

Although *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* becomes the celebration of one boy’s attempt to live outside of plot—“with nature in the present, above time”—the text, ultimately, illustrates the inevitability of plot. Just as Twain, at the *Atlantic Monthly* dinner, may have played the role of “reluctant saboteur” in his stab at Emerson, he now seems reluctant to carry Huck toward this opposing end, this ambiguous but clearly less propitious ending. But he does. Because the realistic ending may be the more disturbing ending, but it is also the more honest ending. And Twain’s disapproval of Sir Walter Scott suggests that this is exactly the type of ending that he would refuse to avoid. When we close the book, we do feel somewhat cheated, unsure of where we have been left and where we are going; we sense both possibility *and* defeat, manifested as a backward glance at Emerson’s romantic philosophy and a forward nod to historical reality. The two seemingly contradictory notions exist, simultaneously and intact.

Chapter Two
Henry James: *The Portrait of a Lady*

Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own
 mind.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

I

In 1879, the same year he began writing *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James published *Hawthorne*. Although often overlooked by Jamesian scholars and out of print for many years, James's biography is a crucial document of American Realism and acts as a telling preface to *Portrait*. The text not only presents us with James's vision of Nathaniel Hawthorne but also reveals his perspective on nineteenth-century American culture and, more broadly, on literature, history, and nation. What emanates most clearly from *Hawthorne* is ultimately a sense of contradiction and conflict, between James's overt and often patronizing attempt to distinguish his own literary perspectives from those of his predecessor and, alternately, his deep-seated attraction to antebellum, romantic literary culture. *Hawthorne* uncovers James's struggle to negotiate the binaries of romance and realism, a struggle that will inform *Portrait*.

On the surface, James's biography is an insulting, hyperbolic dismissal, what Richard Brodhead refers to as a "systematic reduction," of the American romantic tradition (135). For this reason, the book was not well received with the American public. As Dan McCall notes in his foreword to the text, American readers asked: "Who was this traitor to his native land, this expatriate snob who had 'gone British' and thumbed his London nose at his predecessor's achievements?" (viii). Even William Dean Howells recognized in the text a note of "high treason" ("Review" 1). Not unlike Mark Twain's infamous speech two years earlier at the *Atlantic Monthly* dinner, James's

discussion of Hawthorne seemed a great affront to the writer and to America's entire literary heritage.

This affront comes through first and foremost in James's consideration of Hawthorne's literary style. He begins the text, for example, not by noting what Hawthorne embodied but rather what he lacked:

He was *not* a man with a literary theory; he was guiltless of a system, and I am *not* sure that he had ever heard of Realism, this remarkable compound having (although it was invented some time earlier) come into general use only since his death. He had certainly *not* proposed to himself to give an account of the social idiosyncrasies of his fellow-citizens, for his touch on such points is always light and vague, he has *none* of the apparatus of an historian, and his shadowy style of portraiture *never* suggests a rigid standard of accuracy. (my italics 3-4)

Using an abundance of negatives, James defines Hawthorne, and romance in general, in terms of absence, and he suggests that where these writers were "exquisite," they redeemed themselves by being "intensely and vividly local," by focusing on that small "crevice" of New England with which they were familiar (3). The problem with romance, for James, is ultimately a problem of deficiency, of a "general vacancy in the field of vision" (35).

Almost immediately, James ties this vacancy to a national and cultural condition. He complains that "the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, that it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature, that it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion" (2). While many critics, including James's contemporaries, have felt that James was blatantly dismissing his mother country,

“thumb[ing] his London nose” at America, his reading seems primarily focused on a specific moment in American history. James does, in fact, compare America with Britain, describing America in terms of what it lacks:

No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, no ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot! (34)

This famous quotation draws up, as James himself says, the “absent things in American life” (35). Many overlook, however, that James quickly qualifies this hyperbolic statement by specifying its connection to “the American life of forty years ago” (35). The affront on American life, in general, remains, but it belies James’s larger intent in this text. As Richard Brodhead suggests, “James’s historiography cordons Hawthorne off in an epoch that is now extinct, bearing no discernable relation to James’s own” (138). Despite his move to Europe, Henry James was still an American writer and—not unlike Twain, Howells, and other up-and-coming Realists—he wanted to carve a new literary space for himself. His dismissal of nineteenth-century American culture, in particular his association with its absence, worked toward this end.

For this reason, James spends less time analyzing Hawthorne’s specific works and more time reading his work in context of the larger nineteenth-century literary romantic movement. Thus, he spends one chapter entirely devoted to “Brook Farm and Concord.” Here, James finds the opportunity to mock both the Brook Farm project and

Transcendentalism in general; he condescendingly calls Brook Farm “an amusement of the Transcendentalists—a harmful effusion of Radicalism,” which he argues was ultimately “unusual, unfashionable, unsuccessful” (61). And although they were not directly involved with Brook Farm, James includes an extended commentary on Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thoreau is quickly dismissed as “worse than provincial—he was parochial” (76). While Emerson is given more respect—described as “admirable and exquisite,” as “the Transcendentalist *par excellence*”—James’s depiction of the entire period as a “little epoch of fermentation” seems to qualify even his highest praise (66-67). This qualification is evident in one of James’s more generous moments when he notes: “one envies, even, *I will not say* the illusions, of that keenly sentient period, but the convictions and interests—the moral passion” (my italics 68). In one brilliant rhetorical phrase, James both admires that “moral passion” of the romantic tradition and, at the same time, says what he “will not say,” that such passion was based purely on “illusions.” As McCall tells us, “what James so graciously gave with one hand he swiftly took away with the other” (viii).

For James, the crucial historical moment in America, the moment that separated the illusory from the real, was the Civil War. He tells us that the “Civil War marks an era in the history of the American mind” and that the postbellum American will be “a more critical person than his complacent and confident grandfather. He has eaten of the tree of knowledge” (114). He argues that, in their later years, his romantic literary predecessors felt this great shift; with the outbreak of civil war, “their illusions were rudely dispelled, and they saw the best of all possible republics given over to fratricidal carnage. This affair had no place in their scheme, and nothing was left for them but to hang their heads and close their eyes” (114). James proposes a full stop here, a “period”

in the syntax of American history. This stop presents the American writer with a place to begin anew, and, in this way, he succeeds in carving out that space for the American Realist who, unlike his “complacent and confident grandfather,” now knows better.

Hawthorne, Brodhead tells us, “is the work of a recently emerged author bent on putting the tutors of his youth behind him” (138). Thus, while he quietly applauds Hawthorne’s talents, he turns the tutor into the naïve student, whose “creative fancy” endowed the author with, in his concluding words, “I may *almost* say, an importance” (my italics 145).

James’s patronizing comments of Hawthorne and of his entire literary period are all so vivid, so compromising, at times even humorous, that it is easy to miss how his insulting appraisal conceals a more subtle tone in the text, a tone that contradicts such brazen criticism. There is much to suggest that James venerates American romanticism even as he criticizes it. The most obvious evidence of this conflict is that, regardless of his equivocations, he reveals a deep respect for Hawthorne. First and foremost, the text itself acts as its own celebration of Hawthorne’s life. James honors Hawthorne as a man “of genius” and “eminence”; he was, he tells us, a “master of expression” (1-2). Even where he notes what Hawthorne lacked, he adds that the author “offers the most vivid reflection of New England life that has found its way into literature” (4). Hawthorne becomes James’s representative American, emblematic of the nation’s literary promise; he claims that Hawthorne “has the importance of being the most beautiful and most eminent representative of a literature” (2), emphasizes his July 4th birth, and associates him with “the clearest Puritan strain” (4-5). Before *Hawthorne*, few texts had been written about American authors and, as such, James was selling, or at least advertising, a new national literature.

In addition to his praise of Hawthorne, one is particularly struck by James's admiration, almost veneration, of Emerson. As discussed, James incorporates an entire chapter on Brook Farm and Concord into his text. While the section on Brook Farm relates directly to Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* and is therefore apt, his section on Concord seems somewhat extraneous. One might argue that James includes commentary on Concord simply in order to dismiss the entire Transcendental movement. Yet, while he rudely dispenses with Thoreau, his section on "the admirable and exquisite Emerson" not only flatters but honors the romantic philosopher:

He was the Transcendentalist *par excellence*. Emerson expressed...the value and importance of the individual, the duty of making the most of one's self, of living by one's own personal light, and carrying out one's own disposition. He reflected with beautiful irony upon the exquisite impudence of those institutions which claim to have appropriated the truth and to dole it out, in proportionate morsels, in exchange for a subscription. He talked about the beauty and dignity of life, and about every one who is born into the world being born to the whole, having an interest and stake in the whole. ... He insisted upon sincerity and independence and spontaneity, upon acting in harmony with one's nature, and not conforming and compromising for the sake of being more comfortable. He urged that a man should await his call, his finding the thing to do which he should really believe in doing, and not be urged by the world's opinion to simply do the world's work. (67)

James goes on for another page to extol Emerson before he concludes by saying: "There were faulty parts in the Emersonian philosophy; but the general tone was magnificent;

and I can easily believe that, coming when it did and where it did, it should have been drunk in by a great many fine moral appetites with a sense of intoxication” (68). What James tries to mask here, by qualifying and historicizing Emerson’s success, is his *own* intoxication with that “exquisite” figure. His use of stylistic repetition—“he reflected,” “he talked,” “he insisted,” “he urged”—emphasizes Emerson’s brilliance and reveals a personal fascination with the philosopher’s own rhetoric. His section on Emerson represents a major tonal shift in the text and becomes a stunning eulogy; it illustrates a moment where James sheds his aloof air and, instead, embraces this romantic figure. As much as James may have been trying to cordon off these figures and relegate them to an extinct past, Emerson seems to escape James here and proves a persistent presence in the young Realist’s life.

Another factor contributes to this reading. While critics, starting with Howells’s review in 1880, always focus on James’s superfluous use of the word “provincial” in the text, none consider another frequently used word: “natural.”²⁴ While “provincial” finds its way into the text around a dozen times, we find that “natural” appears almost four times that often. His use of the word “natural” is particularly revealing because the term suggests an alternate vision of romanticism. “Provincial”—defined as “limited in perspective, narrow, and self-centered”—is rarely viewed as a complimentary adjective and, when it is, only in its association with “quaint.” “Natural,” on the other hand,

²⁴ For example, in his “Review of *Hawthorne*,” Howells tells us:

For ourselves, we will be content with saying that the *provinciality* strikes us as somewhat over-insisted upon, and that, speaking from the point of not being at all *provincial* ourselves, we think the epithet is sometimes mistaken. If it is not *provincial* for an Englishman to be English, or a Frenchman French, then it is not so for an American to be American; and if Hawthorne was “exquisitely *provincial*,” one had better take one’s chance of universality with him than with almost any Londoner or Parisian of his time. *Provinciality*, we understand it, is a thing of the mind or the soul; but if it is a thing of the experiences, then that is another matter, and there is no quarrel.” (my italics 1)

Howells’s own repetition of the word “provincial” clearly aims to mock James’s excessive use of the term.

offers a rival interpretation of the same subject, where what may seem provincial now becomes redefined as free from affectation, inherent, organic. And, it is exactly in this light that James so frequently describes Hawthorne and the Transcendentalists. In speaking of Hawthorne's character, for example, he refers to his "natural shyness and reserve" (21), his "easy and natural feeling about all his unconventional fellow-mortals" (37), and his "beautiful, natural, original genius" (144). His writing is described as "charming and natural" (32), as having "purity and spontaneity and naturalness of fancy" (45), and as offering "a sort of straightness and naturalness of execution" (95). In his discussion of Thoreau, in an otherwise unflattering description, James's one kind word is his admission of the philosopher's "extreme natural charm" (76). Finally, James ties the genius of these writers to their "natural" surroundings, noting the "magnificently natural character" (14) of Salem in 1818 (the year of Hawthorne's birth) and the overall "state of things" in New England as "extremely natural" (23). Against this façade of provincialism, James paints a very different picture of these writers; they possessed, he suggests, a pristine, spontaneous relationship with their environment, the type of relationship that Emerson very clearly promotes in his own writing.

The frequency with which James employs the word "natural" calls attention to the text's deep-seated conflict between nature and history, a binary often associated with those terms "romance" and "realism." James evokes this contrast when he says, quite early in the text, that "History, as yet, has left in the United States but so thin and impalpable a deposit that we very soon touch the hard substratum of nature" (10). The result of this "thin and impalpable" deposit is, in part, what James attributes to "the importance of the individual in the American world." It is precisely this lack of deeply

entrenched history that allows for “the newness and youthfulness of society, and...the absence of keen competition” (40). He tells us:

The individual counts for more, as it were, and, thanks to the absence of a variety of social types and of settled heads under which he may be easily and conveniently pigeon-holed, he is to a certain extent a wonder and a mystery. An Englishman, a Frenchman...judges quickly, easily, from his own social standpoint and makes an end of it. He has not that rather chilly and isolated sense of moral responsibility which is apt to visit a New Englander in such processes; and he has the advantage that his standards are fixed by the general consent of the society in which he lives. (40)

While James appreciates the history of Europe—the sovereign, the court, the aristocracy, the clergy, the country gentlemen, the palaces, the castles, Oxford and Eton, all that America lacks—his appreciation of European history is just as easily undercut when he describes what they sacrifice for that “high civilisation” (34); in place of the individual, we find there a set of fixed standards and simple “pigeon-holes” that prevent individual choice. Thus, although James still finds the occasion to undercut America by labeling European history an “advantage,” in this passage he communicates an undeniable desire for that “wonder” and “mystery” of the American individual.

As discussed, James uses the Civil War as America’s major historical marker. For James, it is the moment that not only alters the “national consciousness” but also allows the American writer to escape the “provincial” and become a more critical, rational, and sophisticated thinker. As much as James welcomes this historical shift, however, there is also a subtle sense of longing, a sense that such history has replaced that natural “state of

things” with something far less organic. Toward the end of the biography, James examines, once again, the figure of the antebellum American:

Our hero was an American of the earlier and simpler type—the type of which it is doubtless premature to say that it has wholly passed away, but of which it may at least be said that the circumstances that produced it have been greatly modified. The generation to which he belonged, that generation which grew up with the century, witnessed during a period of fifty years the immense, uninterrupted material development of the young Republic; and when one thinks of the scale on which it took place, of the prosperity that walked in its train and waited on its course, of the hopes it fostered and the blessings it conferred, of the broad morning sunshine, in a word, in which it all went forward, there seems to be little room for surprise that it should have implanted a kind of superstitious faith in the grandeur of the country, its duration, its immunity from the usual troubles of earthly empires. This faith was a simple and uncritical one, enlivened with an element of genial optimism, in the light of which it appeared that the great American state was not as other human institutions are, that a special Providence watched over it, that it would go on joyously for ever, and that a country whose vast and blooming bosom offered a refuge to the strugglers and seekers of all the rest of the world, must come off easily, in the battle of the ages. From this conception of the American future the sense of its having problems to solve was blissfully absent; there were no difficulties in the programme, no looming complications, no rocks ahead. (112)

James pegs the innocent nature of “our hero” as somewhat tragic, as a figure who would soon fold under the weight of “fratricidal carnage.” In critiquing Hawthorne’s naïve vision of history, however, James also struggles with the downside of history, its “problems,” “difficulties,” and “complications.” To the end, James appears to relish his authoritative tone, his ability to “put his predecessor in his place” (Brodhead 134). Yet, in the process he continually slips, and that “anxiety of influence” gives way to open admiration, even yearning, for an earlier literary period when that thin deposit of history lay over the “hard substratum of nature,” and the writer could embrace the illusory as the real.

II

This conflict between romance and realism, those residual and dominant cultures, is evident in James’s own life. When Richard Brodhead says that James was “bent on putting the tutors of his youth behind him,” he is not simply speaking figuratively. From birth, Henry James, Jr. was immersed in the culture of Transcendentalism. James’s father was a Transcendentalist, had an intellectual fascination with Charles Fourier, and believed in the theorist’s adage that evil was “the constraints which civilization put upon the individual” (Edel 8-9). Most importantly, Henry James, Sr. was a close personal friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson came to see his friend’s newborn son in 1843 and called Henry, Jr. “another fine little boy” (Edel 11); during his trips to New York, Emerson often stayed with the James family and acted as an important fatherly presence (12). When Henry was six, after moving his family to Europe, his father consulted Emerson regarding his education (38) and, partially under Emerson’s influence, sent Henry to a Fourierist school in Paris (43).

James grew up both physically and mentally entrenched in Emersonian romantic ideology.

As much as James was entrenched in this tradition, however, he was just as insistent upon distancing himself from it, not only in his literature but in his life. Thus, we find James, even as a young man, attempting to distinguish himself by openly professing a distinct literary identity. In the mid-1860s, shortly after the end of the Civil War, James made the acquaintance of another up-and-coming Realist, William Dean Howells, and began to associate himself with a younger generation of new writers (Fred Kaplan 72). After touring the Louvre with Emerson in 1872, we find him writing a letter home, in which he complains of the romantic philosopher's "perception of art" as not "naturally keen"; he condescendingly reports to his family that "Concord can't have done much to quicken it" (Edel 135-36). When we reconsider *Hawthorne* in light of these details, it is as if the biography finally gave James the chance to announce publicly that distance he was adamant on professing in his personal and professional life; the text allowed him to rebel against his romantic heritage and proclaim his position both as an important literary critic and as a prominent, successful American Realist.

Critics most commonly read James's shift from America to Europe—both physically and culturally—as part of this rebellion, more specifically as his attempt to move away from American romance toward a land more ripe for realism; we tend to take James at his word when he argues in *Hawthorne* that "art blooms only where the soil is deep" (2). Thus, Fred Kaplan argues that James left America because he felt "his ambitions as a writer could be furthered better by more exposure to Europe than by staying at home" (80). He suggests that, in addition to his "anxiety of influence," James left America because he felt that he needed a more "complex social machinery to set a

writer in motion” (*Hawthorne* 2). In order to become an American Realist, James, ironically, had to leave America.

While this argument is in many ways valid, it simplifies James’s highly complex relationship to those embattled, divergent cultures. One might argue that James’s move was not simply an attempt to escape from his romantic heritage. On the contrary, one might claim that, despite James’s own contention, American history had not left “too thin and impalpable a deposit” but had recently become too rich, too “real,” too overwhelming for James; to continue his own metaphor, the soil had become *too* deep. In other words, there was a side of James that felt quite strongly the fallout of that “fratricidal carnage” of the Civil War, that moment when American history became palpable. In this reading, James’s move to Europe did not act as an embrace of but rather an escape from reality.

Much has been said of James’s own involvement in the Civil War. James was eighteen years old when the War began and although his two younger brothers enlisted, he chose not to participate. Most critics and biographers like to point to the writer’s own justification for avoiding service, that “obscure hurt” he suffered from a Newport fire in 1861. This mysterious injury, however, seems far less important than the fact that James was simply, as Leon Edel says, “temperamentally unsuited for soldiering, unable to endure violence,” and “had long ago substituted close observation of life for active participation” (56-57). Although James often justified and even rejoiced in this alternative temperament as ripe for an intellectual writer, there is a fair amount of evidence to suggest that the War, and his lack of participation in it, greatly affected him, even enough to cause certain vague psychosomatic symptoms (Edel 58). James openly

embraced the real over the illusory, but his life reveals a much deeper conflict and, in particular, a certain hesitancy regarding the objective, external world.

This argument relates, in part, to one presented by Michael Davitt Bell in *The Problem of American Realism*. He suggests that in postbellum industrial America “active participation” was seen as the masculine realm, whereas that “close observation of life” was associated with the feminine. While men were out on the battlefield, conquering the masculine world of business or, like James’s brother Wilky, moving westward in search of experience and fortune, James was left in Boston, enmeshed in the more feminine world of culture. Bell’s argument, that Realism was a literary movement that allowed writers such as James or Howells to “suppress worries about one’s sexuality and sexual status and to proclaim oneself a man” (37), seems apt here, although he may overemphasize such worries as the *cause* of Realism. The point is primarily that the event that, James claims, made the American “a more critical person than his complacent grandfather” also made the life of the romantic Brahmin figure more difficult not only to attain but to take pride in or even to justify; in postbellum America, the visionary had given way to the practical.

It would be difficult to argue that James’s move to Europe was simply a response to this shift; yet, it is as difficult to ignore the complex dynamics of James’s conflict between the two countries. As one reads through biographies of James, one is continually struck by the fact that, while James attributed his move to the “thinness” of American culture, he was also escaping a place where the individual, through increasing layers of recent history, had lost some of that desirable “wonder” and “mystery” (*Hawthorne* 40). Leon Edel hints at this reading when he notes that James’s turn away from American culture was a turn away from, what James himself calls, “the hard reality

of things” (qtd. in Edel 130). Edel tells us that “he would stay abroad as long as he could to show whether his pen could accomplish in Europe what it had failed to do in America—give him freedom and independence” (130). For James, that distinction between romance and realism was not as straightforward as so many claim. Beneath his easy mockery of the “provincialism” of Hawthorne’s America, James was conflicted about American culture, more specifically between his criticism of American romance and his ambivalence toward the changing reality of nineteenth-century America.

Above all, what we find in James’s life is a sense of physical and spiritual homelessness, a continual search through “the romance of travel” for that “freedom and independence” that he could not locate in Cambridge (qtd in Edel 131). As Earl Rovit says in his essay “James and Emerson: The Lesson of the Master,” “James’s life was a long methodical search for his own place...” (436). In every biography of James, we witness the incredible restlessness of a man who “liked to move about” and never felt comfortable or at home in any one place (Edel 594). Even when he gave up his American passport and became a British subject, an act read by his contemporaries and future critics as a great snub at America, James was not attempting to make a political statement but once again wanted to “move about”; the War simply made it more difficult to do so without British nationality (Edel 703). In 1915, near death, James was often incoherent and seemed to forget where he was; he told his secretary: “This place in which I find myself is the strangest mixture of Edinburgh and Dublin and New York and some other place that I don’t know” (qtd in Edel 708). Edel explains that he was “[s]huttling in his confused memory between the cities of his pilgrimages—the Ireland of his father and grandfather, the London, Rome, Edinburgh, of his own experience—he had a sense of being in two places at once” (709). In his travels through Europe, James

was not simply trying to create an alternate plot, one that would replace American provincialism with experience. In a sense, his homelessness reveals his attempt to avoid “active participation” in life and plot altogether, to escape those “problems,” “difficulties,” and “looming complications” of American history that James described in *Hawthorne*. His life suggests that, as much as he was a “new Realist” bent on embracing objective truth and leaving the illusions of his predecessors behind, he also maintained a highly complex and often contradictory relationship to American romance and to, what he saw as, the “blissfully” naïve world of Hawthorne (*Hawthorne* 112).

III

This conflict between realism and romance dominates James’s 1880 masterpiece, *The Portrait of a Lady*.²⁵ As *Hawthorne* made its way into bookstalls, James sat down to compose the tale of his most romantic Emersonian figure, Isabel Archer, “affronting her destiny” (“Preface” 8). James claims in his Preface that he started writing the novel “not at all in any conceit of a ‘plot,’” but “altogether in the sense of a single character...to which all the usual elements of a subject, certainly of a setting, were to need to be super-added” (4). James suggests that he started with character and allowed plot to follow. In this way, one might read Isabel’s plot as analogous to Huck’s; like Mark Twain in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, James uses Isabel’s plot as a narrative experiment to see what happens when an Emersonian character comes into contact with those “difficulties in the programme” and those “looming complications” that he earlier envisioned in *Hawthorne* as “the American future” (112). *The Portrait of a Lady* becomes the story of an antebellum, romantic subject who leaves her library of books and novels in search of postbellum history, in search of what James calls in his Preface “the complications of

²⁵ In this reading, I will be using James’s 1908 New York Edition, the edition most widely published, read, and discussed by critics.

existence” (5). Ralph Touchett’s own query becomes the central question of the text: “She was intelligent and generous; it was a fine free nature; but what was she going to do with herself?” (64). What does the plot of an Emersonian character “affronting her destiny” look like? What possibilities lie in store for this romantic figure who attempts to live out her ideals? What happens to the illusory when it comes in contact with the real?

That Isabel is, in fact, an Emersonian character is not only undebated but has become a somewhat hackneyed claim in literary criticism. Whether she is labeled “a daughter of the transcendental afterglow” (Matthiessen 584), a “young lady of an Emersonian cast of mind” (Rahv 141), or “authentically Emersonian” (Poirier, *Comic Sense* 219), descriptions of her character inevitably return to Emerson, to such an extent that Isabel becomes almost allegorical. The more contested issue often involves what happens to her character throughout the narrative and what her story ultimately tells us about James’s own position on Emerson and, more largely, Transcendentalism. The most common reading is that *Portrait* depicts Emerson’s romantic vision not only as problematic but also potentially tragic. Repeatedly, we hear Jamesian scholars proclaiming the dangerous nature of Isabel’s transcendental quest. Thus, Leon Edel tells us that the text is a “critique of self-reliance” (259); Richard Poirier argues that Isabel’s “dilemma is a comment on the efficiency of...Emersonianism” (*Comic Sense* 235); Millicent Bell contends that Isabel’s “search for expression of her boundless self is doomed” and that James “shows us the weakness of Emerson’s idealism” (90); Annette Niemtzw holds that the novel “mocks...transcendental innocence” (377); and M. Giulia Fabi suggests that Isabel is “[d]efeated as an Emersonian free agent” (6). Rarely do critics even qualify their reading of Isabel’s disillusionment; instead, her story

becomes the failure of Transcendentalism, its absolute incompatibility with reality, and its potentially self-destructive nature. These critics tend to argue, in essence, that James employs those values of Emersonian Transcendentalism only in order to undermine them. Thus, Edwin Cady argues that “in *The Portrait of a Lady* [James] was...engaged in the realist’s joyous game of shooting down romantic balloons, piercing them through to let the gassy hot air out and drop them back to earth” (58).

What these readings underestimate, however, is the extremely complex relationship in this text between the competing forces of romance and realism; far from simply denouncing Transcendentalism, *Portrait* reveals an intense struggle between those opposing forces, a struggle that is acknowledged and yet left primarily unresolved. At the end of the novel, Isabel Archer is not simply a doomed and disillusioned woman, beaten down by the power of history. Despite her plot, she retains fundamental elements of Emersonian Transcendentalism, in particular a proud insistence on self-reliance and the knowledge that “nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind” (Emerson 263). Through her experience, she has become conscious of history and the pitfalls of plot, but she is also determined not to submit to them. In fact, the novel’s decidedly open ending suggests that Isabel leaves us with the potential for a new plot, one that is unwritten and uncertain but leaves open the possibility for a synthesis of romance and realism. At the very least, James leaves us as he started, by insisting that character—in this case the romantic character—is primary and that the rest, though necessary, is “super-added,” even incidental.

One significant element of *The Portrait of a Lady* remains uncontested: the novel is a masterpiece of American Realism. James is not only one of the most eminent figures

of this cultural movement, but this novel is generally considered its representative. John Crowley summarizes the “rudiments of realism as James and Howells would define it”:

Realism eschews the devices of romance, especially reliance on melodrama and exotic backgrounds. Realism seeks subtly to raise the taste of an unrefined audience while appealing to “initiated” readers capable of detecting artfulness, however “lurking.” Realism depends on character rather than story for its effects. Realism values the particularity of ordinary life. Realism is ultimately a matter of seeing the world accurately. (120)

In *Portrait*, James closely follows these “rudiments of realism,” beginning his novel by telling us that, far from melodrama, his tale is “a simple history” (17). He employs additional devices of realism, attempting to avoid all traces of “artfulness,” skipping scenes for which “no report has remained” (38), promising to present “documents” in their “entire” (93), and labeling himself not an author or even a narrator but “our heroine’s biographer” (101). Additionally, his novel not only “depends on character rather than story for its effects” but openly insists that plot is entirely secondary. Finally, James makes realism his central subject when he paints the portrait of a lady seeped in romance, who—according to most critics—learns to face reality and see “the world accurately.” One could write an entire book dedicated to James’s use of realism; such books have, in fact, been written.²⁶ This reading openly accepts the novel’s place in literary history. *Portrait* is a crucial part of the literary movement known as American Realism. This argument shifts, however, in that it recognizes, within this movement, two

²⁶ One such book is Collin Meissner’s *Henry James and the Language of Experience*. In the text, Meissner reads James’s literature in terms of two central questions in Realist studies: how does the Realist writer articulate human experience and how does he seek to represent reality?

voices—the voice of realism and the voice of romance—and it contends that this voice of romance not only maintains an important presence but struggles to be recognized as *equally* important.

As discussed, the romantic element of *Portrait* can be located in Isabel Archer's vision, which is most accurately linked to Emerson's philosophy of Transcendentalism. Isabel is first described to us, through a telegram by her aunt Lydia Touchett, in two words: "quite independent" (24). When her aunt meets Isabel, she is sitting in the office of her house in Albany "trudging over the sandy plains of a history of German Thought" (34). In his reference to romantic German philosophy, James makes a clear connection between Isabel and Emerson, whose philosophy was founded on that same "German Thought." The connection, however, only begins there; her appreciation of "solitude," her "love of knowledge," and her "strong" imagination (31) all remind us of Emerson who tells us: "I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me" (Emerson 9). In her "original" character (*Portrait* 38), her interest in "the free exploration of life" (101), and her "desire to leave the past behind her" and "begin afresh" (39), we sense a woman who seeks to maintain that Emersonian "original relation to the universe" (Emerson 9). Most of all, we find the image of a woman who "believed, always, in seeing for one's self" (*Portrait* 35), who, in Emersonian terms, trusts "the integrity of [her] own mind" (Emerson 261).

Isabel acknowledges her own philosophic leanings. Early on, the narrator gives us just enough access to her consciousness to reveal her self-prescribed spiritual sensibilities:

Her nature had, *in her conceit*, a certain garden-like quality, a suggestion of perfume and murmuring boughs, of shady bowers and lengthening vistas,

which made her feel that introspection was, after all, an exercise in the open air, and that a visit to the recesses of one's spirit was harmless when one returned from it with a lapful of roses. (my italics 56)

Isabel is clearly proud not only of her "garden-like" nature and exercise of "introspection" but of her spiritual independence, which we learn "she never called... the state of solitude, much less of singleness; she thought such descriptions weak" (55). Instead, she celebrates her independence, telling Casper Goodwood: "I try to judge things for myself; to judge wrong, I think, is more honourable than not to judge at all. I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me" (143). Isabel, an educated woman, is cognizant, and even boastful, of her Emersonian qualities; in this way, she is an Emersonian character but not quite in the same mold as a Huck Finn; rather than an unread child of nature, she becomes a self-proclaimed, self-reliant individual, eager to affirm her transcendental ideals.

What Isabel does not see, however, is the potential conflict between her transcendental introspection and her deep interest in the world around her. We learn early in the text that, despite her desire "to feel the continuity between the movements of her own soul and the agitations of the world," Isabel avoids any facets of reality that contradict her spiritual leanings (41); as the narrator tells us: "she had a natural shrinking from raising curtains and looking into unlighted corners. The love of knowledge coexisted in her mind with the finest capacity for ignorance" (173). This "capacity for ignorance" comes from her contradictory predilections, to observe the world and yet to avoid actual participation in that world. As she tells Ralph, "I don't wish to touch the cup of experience. It's a poisoned drink! I only want to see for myself" (134). Isabel's

problem is that, while she prides herself in aligning “her own soul” with the “agitations of the world” (41), her romantic sensibility remains entirely theoretic, and her sense of reality lies entirely in her imagination.

The text makes it clear that her ignorance of reality and “ridiculously active imagination” come from her upbringing (39):

She had had the best of everything, and in a world in which the circumstances of so many people made them unenviable it was an advantage never to have known anything particularly unpleasant. It appeared to Isabel that the unpleasant had been even too absent from her knowledge, for she had gathered from her acquaintance with literature that it was often a source of interest and even of instruction. Her father had kept it away from her—her handsome, much-loved father, who always had such an aversion to it. (39)

Isabel’s library of books provides our heroine with a warped and distant vision of reality, one that seems almost romantic in its elusive quality. Thus, when the Civil War comes, the moment James acknowledged as so critical in American history, we find a young Isabel “in a state of almost passionate excitement, in which she felt herself at times (to her extreme confusion) stirred almost indiscriminately by the valour of either army” (41). In short, we learn that Isabel’s “thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgment of people speaking with authority. In matters of opinion she had had her own way, and it had led her into a thousand ridiculous zigzags” (53). She is depicted as deliciously quaint but also woefully naïve.

It is exactly this problematic combination that motivates so many critics to read the text as James’s personal “critique of self-reliance,” mockery of “transcendental

innocence,” and open ridicule of Emerson. What these critics miss, however, is the one important distinction between Isabel and Transcendentalism. James’s criticism, in *Hawthorne*, of American Transcendentalism is that it failed to incorporate history into its vision; it proposed romance at the expense of reality. James’s analysis does not necessarily assume, however, that Emerson was entirely *ignorant* of history, only that he mistakenly thought it could be circumvented. Emerson’s philosophy centered on the principle that civilization was a powerful social construction that could and should be avoided; “history,” Emerson tells us, “is an impertinence and an injury, if it be any thing more than a cheerful apologue or parable of my being and becoming” (270).²⁷

Emerson’s metaphor of the “transcendental eye-ball” reinforces this notion that one must actively avoid the “joint-stock company” called society and, instead, become “part and particle” of a larger, ahistorical “Universal Being” (Emerson 10). The Brook Farm experiment and even Thoreau’s experience at Walden Pond assumed that one could bypass history and construct an alternate reality; these Transcendentalists understood the potential danger of social experience.

The important difference, therefore, between Isabel and Emerson is that Isabel has no interest in evading history. While she senses its danger and understands experience as a “poisoned drink,” she also wants to charge into history blindly. As she tells Henrietta Stackpole, her idea of happiness is “a swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can’t see” (146). Emerson understood the dangers of that road and knew that if one wanted to merge one’s soul with the outside world, one would literally have to transcend it; he understood that “[i]t is easy in the

²⁷ As mentioned in chapter one, many contend that these writings on history only reflect Emerson’s early perspective, one that he revised as he got older; this early perspective, however, is the one that critics consider when discussing James’s critique of Transcendentalism and, thus, is appropriate for this reading.

world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (263). Isabel doesn't understand this distinction. In her eager "determination to see, to try, to know," she maintains a naïve vulnerability that Emerson sidesteps (*Portrait* 54). Isabel becomes an anachronistic figure, a young woman with an antebellum, spiritual connection to Transcendentalism and, yet, with a postbellum interest in history and a desire to "eat...of th[at] tree of knowledge" that James tied to a post-Civil War sensibility.

The narrator emphasizes the danger of this union, in particular Isabel's "combination of the delicate, desultory flame-like spirit and the eager and personal creature of conditions: she would be an easy victim of scientific criticism if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant" (54). While the reader may feel both that "tender" and "expectant" reaction to Isabel, she does not remain free from "scientific criticism." As discussed, the text itself takes on Isabel's story as its own "scientific criticism," as an experiment to discover what happens to a "desultory flame-like spirit" when it comes into contact with those "complications of existence" lying outside her Albany home ("Preface" 5).

IV

Against Isabel's romantic character, James offers us a series of other characters, most of whom are realists with more faith in the objective world than in the spirit, all of whom seek to plot against Isabel and slip her that "poisoned drink." James implies their role in his Preface when he discusses his cast of characters as the "definite array of contributions to Isabel Archer's history" and as the "concrete terms of [his] 'plot.'" These characters would help to answer James's primary question: "Well, what will she

do? Their answer seemed to be that if I could trust them they would show me.... They were like the group of attendants and entertainers who come down by train when people in the country give a party; they represented the contract for carrying the party on" (12). Lydia Touchett becomes this first entertainer; she initiates Isabel's plot when she enters her niece's Albany house, unannounced. She narrates the specific circumstances to her son, Ralph:

"I found her in an old house in Albany, sitting in a dreary room on a rainy day, reading a heavy book and boring herself to death. She didn't know she was bored, but when I left her no doubt of it she seemed very grateful for the service. You may say I shouldn't have enlightened her—I should have let her alone. There's a good deal in that, but I acted conscientiously; I thought she was meant for something better. It occurred to me that it would be a kindness to take her about and introduce her to the world. She thinks she knows a great deal of it—like most American girls; but like most American girls she's ridiculously mistaken." (47)

Mrs. Touchett's comment is telling, as it reveals a certain smug satisfaction and even cruel delight in interrupting Isabel's seclusion and "enlightening" her; not unlike the Realist movement itself, she hopes to expose the naïve perspective of the insular romantic. In a sense, Lydia Touchett acts as Isabel's harbinger of reality; as our heroine later notes: "if her Aunt Lydia had not come that day in just that way and found her alone, everything might have been different" (472).

Of course, in removing Isabel from her family home, Lydia Touchett leaves her niece homeless, figuratively and literally. We learn, for example, that Isabel's childhood

home is not only for sale, but, as her aunt tells her, “they’ll probably pull it down and make a row of shops” (35). In her book *Dwelling in the Text*, Margaret Chandler tells us that the most common “notion of the house” in American culture is “as an extension or shell of the self that ‘grows up’ around the inhabitant and participates in his or her attributes” (92). As Isabel is not only separated from her house but can expect its permanent destruction, she has been forced to shed that protective shell. In Lukáćian terms, we see a subject whose “purely interior reality...[now] enters into competition with the outside world” (112). As someone who has been exceedingly sheltered and shielded from that “outside world,” Isabel becomes particularly vulnerable to those, like her aunt, who wish to “introduce her to the world,” to enlighten her, and to test her ideals.

Lord Warburton’s and Casper Goodwood’s immediate marriage proposals reveal Isabel’s new vulnerable position; it is her cousin Ralph Touchett, however, who proves most interested in testing the resolution of her character. We sense Ralph’s interest in Isabel quite early on when he asks himself:

She was intelligent and generous; it was a fine free nature; but what was she going to do with herself? This question was irregular, for with most women one had no occasion to ask it. Most women did with themselves nothing at all; they waited, in attitudes more or less gracefully passive, for a man to come that way and furnish them with a destiny. Isabel’s originality was that she gave one an impression of having intentions of her own. “Whenever she executes them,” said Ralph “may I be there to see!” (64)

Ralph's curiosity is the curiosity of the reader, who wonders what will happen next, but his impetus is the impetus of the author, who initiates plot. Ralph is the central schemer in the text because, in convincing his dying father to leave Isabel a fortune, he gives her the means to live out her ideals. Importantly, however, while Ralph initiates plot, he does not attempt, like so many others in the text, to shape Isabel's plot. Rather, his interest is primarily in terms of his subject, in seeing how this "portrait of a lady" will evolve. Like James, the "germ of [his] idea" does not begin in any specific "conceit of a 'plot,'...but altogether in the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman" ("Preface" 4).

Donald Stone, in his book *Novelists in a Changing World*, makes a critical comment regarding the relationship between Ralph Touchett and Henry James: "In a real sense, Ralph Touchett is the greatest 'villain' of *The Portrait*, because he is the least aware of Isabel's limitations and because he is the most Jamesian figure in the book" (222-23). While labeling Ralph a "villain" may be overstated, the comment seems apt: as an author-figure who initiates a narrative in order to highlight the brilliance of his "engaging" subject, Ralph reminds us of James himself. The connection, however, also provides us with a certain level of irony. If, as Stone contends, Ralph "bears the closest resemblance to James" (223), his ignorance of Isabel's "limitations" begs the question: how can the author, himself, misjudge his own character? To what extent can the author ignore the potential weight of plot? Yet, it is exactly this type of conflict that I argue is inherent in the text. Ralph, or James for that matter, is not simply a romantic idealist, ignorant of Isabel's "limitations." Ralph is a sick man, fully aware of those real-life "complications of existence," but he is also a romantic philosopher, working with the hope that Isabel may still find a home for her transcendental spirit. In short, Ralph

embodies that struggle between romance and realism; he wants to believe that history can still accommodate the self-reliant individual, but, even if unconsciously, he questions the outcome. His project, his simultaneous interest in offering her the means and his curiosity to see the end result, reveals this uncertainty.

In contrast to both Isabel, our romantic subject, and Ralph, our curious author, we encounter a number of other plotters, who are all stark, often spiritless, American realists.²⁸ Few critics spend much time analyzing either Casper Goodwood or Henrietta Stackpole, but their roles in the text are significant. While Isabel and Ralph represent the more spiritual, visionary side of America, Goodwood and Henrietta are fiercely practical. Thus, while Henrietta criticizes Isabel for having “too many graceful illusions,” she and Goodwood, by contrast, reveal a certain gross hardness and inability to see or feel beneath the surface of human nature (188). The most apt description of Henrietta has been put forth by Laura Hinton in *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy*, in which she describes Henrietta as “a figure for the colonialist doctrine of Manifest Destiny” (128); Casper Goodwood should be included in this description. Both characters are extreme nationalists who plot to re-appropriate Isabel, strip her of those “graceful illusions,” and replace her romanticism with what Henrietta refers to as “grim reality” (188).

According to James, Henrietta’s main role in the text is of a “light *ficelle*, not of the true agent” (“Preface” 13); despite her secondary status, however, she is persistent and ubiquitous, a forceful presence whom James even describes as a “superabundance,” a reflection of his “tendency to *overtreat*” (“Preface” 15). Her superabundance, however,

²⁸ I label these realists “American” because I want to emphasize how much this text speaks, specifically, to nation. Many critics read this text in terms of the conflict between America and Europe, a theme common in James’s literature. I argue that this theme is not central to this text. Our only two British characters in the novel—Lord Warburton and Mr. Bantling—act purely as foils to our American characters and accentuate that contrast that sets the Americans apart. My discussion of Henrietta Stackpole, Casper Goodwood, Madame Merle, and Gilbert Osmond will illustrate how the text specifically connects to postbellum American history and culture.

comes through not in the depths of her own character but rather in her often vulgar insistence on prodding others, in her determination, as she tells Lord Warburton, “to get some satisfaction out of” them (121). She is a journalist who often pursues her story with belligerence. When she considers writing a story about Ralph Touchett, for example, she refers to him as “the alienated American,” a subject she hopes to “handle...severely”; while Isabel complains that Ralph would have “died” from the publicity, Henrietta retorts: “I should have liked to kill him a little” (82). Later, when Ralph’s father is on his deathbed, she unthinkingly tells Ralph that she “should like to commemorate the closing scene” (148). In these moments, Henrietta reveals a side of her character that is both heartless and cruel. Unlike Ralph, and James himself, Henrietta is interested in story at the *expense* of character.

Not only is Henrietta aggressive, but she often gets her story wrong. She claims that she comes to Europe “to see as much as possible of the inner life” (78); yet, far from getting at the spiritual underbelly of her subjects, she judges purely on appearance (78). When Henrietta first visits Gardencourt, for example, she interrupts Isabel and Lord Warburton during their discussion of marriage. It has been an intense scene, one in which Isabel reveals to him her romantic ideals and visions; rather than perceiving the true depths of their conversation, however, Henrietta completely misreads the scenario and assumes they have been talking about her: “Miss Archer has been warning you! ... Isn’t that why she came off alone with you here—to put you on your guard?” (121). The interchange is brief but revealing: Henrietta is a poor reader. She judges every subject she encounters, but her judgments are often wrong.

In many ways, Henrietta symbolizes a specific element of nineteenth-century American culture, specifically American expansionism and systematic conquest. Isabel

tells us that Henrietta is “a kind of emanation of the great democracy—of the continent, the country, the nation. I don’t say that she sums it all up, that would be too much to ask of her. But she suggests it; she vividly figures it” (87). She goes on to specify the connection: “I like the great country stretching away beyond the rivers and across the prairies, blooming and smiling and spreading till it stops at the green Pacific! A strong, sweet, fresh odour seems to rise from it, and Henrietta—pardon my simile—has something of that odour in her garments” (88). While Isabel’s sense of expansion is primarily spiritual, Henrietta’s is purely physical. She comes to Europe to spread the importance and power of American culture, to reclaim American subjects, and to analyze and often mock European culture as America’s inferior alternative. She reminds us of those early transcontinental railroad passengers who—shortly after the surge of nineteenth-century railroad travel—would get out in the middle of their journey to watch the natives “perform.”²⁹ In a similar sense, Henrietta—whose “open eyes...lighted like great glazed railway-stations” (406)—rides across Europe treating humans as spectacles and spreading her national agenda. There is a certain crass superficiality yet danger to Henrietta’s nationalism. In keeping with Isabel’s own simile, she speaks not simply as “the great country stretching away beyond the rivers and across the prairies” but, in particular, as the colonist who attempts to both conquer and acquire under the guise of frontier democracy.

Henrietta focuses her conquest on Isabel, whose presence in Europe she views as a national, and thus personal, affront; the journalist’s main priority in her trip abroad is to recall Isabel to America permanently. She tells Ralph of her intentions to bring

²⁹ For further discussion on this historical relationship between the railroad passenger and the American Indian, see T.C. McLuhan’s *Dream Tracks: The Railroad and the American Indian 1890-1930*. McLuhan specifically explores how images presented to tourists by the Sante Fe Railway portrayed tribes such as the Hopis and Navajos in terms of racial, mythic stereotypes.

Isabel back “[f]rom foreign parts and other unnatural places”: “It’s my belief that the sooner Isabel changes it back again the better. I know her well enough to know that she would never be truly happy over here, and I wish her to form some strong American tie that will act as a preservative” (111). Henrietta envisions this “strong American tie” as a marriage union between Isabel and Casper Goodwood, a “straight young man from Boston” (42). Goodwood’s background—his education at Harvard, his strong physique, his successful cotton-mills business in Massachusetts, and his aptitude for inventions and “the mystery of mechanics” (105)—all make him the perfect candidate for Henrietta’s “little plot” (149). If Henrietta represents a theoretical construction of aggressive American democracy, Goodwood represents a physical construction of American strength, that ingenuity, industry, and potency that Henrietta celebrates.

What makes Goodwood so strong and powerful also makes him dangerous to Isabel’s notion of personal freedom. Even in his physical description, we sense a type of hardness in his character that is overpowering:

He was tall, strong and somewhat stiff; he was also lean and brown. He was not romantically, he was much rather obscurely, handsome; but his physiognomy had an air of requesting your attention, which it rewarded according to the charm you found in blue eyes of remarkable fixedness, the eyes of a complexion other than his own, and a jaw of the somewhat angular mould which is supposed to bespeak resolution. (42)

Many critics have also read into this description—his stiffness, fixedness, resolution—a reflection of his aggressive sexuality, a sexuality that not only worries Isabel but that James also found particularly dangerous. While this sexual element is clearly present, Goodwood’s hard physique primarily bespeaks a certain political symbolism, what

Maxwell Geismar has called a “rude, aggressive symbol of ‘New World Vitality’” (46). As the narrator tells us, “there were intricate, bristling things he rejoiced in; he liked to organize, to contend, to administer; he could make people work his will, believe in him, march before him and justify him. This was the art, as they said, of managing men—which rested, in him, further, on a bold though brooding ambition” (106). Goodwood may remind us, in part, of the “founding fathers,” of their political zeal and their “bold though brooding ambition.” Goodwood, however, pushes his leadership role further; not a speculative, enlightened thinker, he acts more like a dictator who, rather than work for the people, has the people work for him.

While Isabel is attracted to his formidable presence, he also clearly frightens her. Early on, we learn that she associates him with bellicose images and sees him as “naturally plated and steeled, armed essentially for aggression”; in her attempt to “escape from him,” she wonders what would be her “best weapon” (137). Isabel fears Goodwood’s violent aggression primarily because, as she notes, “he seemed to deprive her of the sense of freedom” (105). And, while Goodwood insists that he wants to reinforce her individualism—as he says, “[i]t’s to make you independent that I want to marry you”—Isabel understands this as a “beautiful sophism” (142). She is fully aware that Goodwood represents the antithesis of her Emersonian spirit and that, despite his guise as the liberating suitor, he would suffocate her and suppress her search for spiritual independence.

Both Henrietta Stackpole and Casper Goodwood suggest the danger of blind realism. Their connection to realism, in part, comes from their insistence on eradicating, what Henrietta terms, Isabel’s “graceful illusions” and replacing them with Henrietta’s preferred alternative, “grim reality” (188). In this case, “grim reality” comes in the form

of a union with Goodwood, whom Isabel interestingly reads as “a kind of grim fate” (105). Henrietta’s connection to realism, however, is also tied to her role as a journalist and its concomitant emphasis on visual, objective truth; when Mr. Bantling offers to tell her about the royal family, for example, she insists that “all [she] want[s] is that he should give [her] the facts” (149). Goodwood also embodies this association with hard facts. Even Isabel notes that “there was something so literal about him” (412) and labels him “the stubbornest fact she knew” (105). Most importantly, these two characters represent the converse of Emersonianism, where an insistence on unadulterated rational thought suppresses the subjective spirit. In a sense, they symbolize the progressive American history that follows “her across the sea” (105), that threatens to catch up to and overrun our heroine. We get this rather frightening sense of Goodwood when the narrator tells us that “it was a matter of the spirit that sat in his clear-burning eyes like some tireless watcher at a window. She might like it or not, but he insisted, ever, with his whole weight and force: even in one’s usual contact with him one had to reckon with that” (105). In Henrietta and Goodwood, Isabel faces her first “reckoning” with the “whole weight and force” of American history itself; they represent that first major threat to American romance.

Despite this threat, Isabel is able to contend with these characters and avoid their plot because their openly aggressive nature makes them easy to locate and evade. Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, however, are two other characters whose plot is far more dangerous because it is also far more devious. Unlike Henrietta and Goodwood, who represent industry and physical vitality, Merle and Osmond are bourgeois Gilded Age realists who are concerned primarily with appearance and material possessions. They are not aggressive colonists with a nationalist agenda; instead, their interest in

Isabel is primarily economic, and their goal is to monopolize our heroine. Isabel ultimately falls prey to their plot because they mask their true identity under the cloak of self-reliant individualism. Rather than directly oppose her romantic sensibility, as Henrietta and Goodwood do, they exploit those “graceful illusions” in order to deceive her and, literally, incorporate her into their scheme.

When critics claim that Isabel later becomes disillusioned, they suggest that she matures into the figure of a Madame Merle. The narrator implies that Merle may once have been a romantic. Her background remains a mystery, but she hints at her youth to Isabel. For example, when Isabel explains her idea of success, “to see the dreams of one’s youth come true,” Merle responds: “Ah...that I’ve never seen! But my dreams were so great—so preposterous. Heaven forgive me, I’m dreaming now.” Through free indirect discourse, the narrator continues to present Merle’s thoughts: “The dreams of one’s youth, why they were enchanting, they were divine! Who had ever seen such things come to pass?” (174). While Merle’s dreams seem more traditionally romantic than spiritual, she is clearly a woman who has seen her own “graceful illusions” shattered. Merle’s intense life experience and suffering have made her replace the ideal with the real; no longer interested in romantic desire, Madame Merle focuses solely on visible truths and material gain.

In this way, she stands in opposition to Isabel’s Emersonian character, renouncing the spiritual for the social. Isabel notes in her a certain unnatural quality: “her nature had been too much overlaid by custom and her angles too much rubbed away. ... She was in a word too perfectly the social animal that man and woman are supposed to have intended to be; and she had rid herself of every remnant of that tonic wildness.... [S]he existed only in her relations...” (167). In a famous conversation

between Madame Merle and Isabel, the two characters establish their antithetical natures.

Merle tells Isabel:

“When you’ve lived as long as I you’ll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There’s no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we’re each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our ‘self’? Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I’ve a great respect for things!” (175)

Of course, Merle’s definition of the self horrifies Isabel because it represents the very antithesis of Transcendentalism; Isabel insists, on the contrary:

“I think just the other way. I don’t know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing belongs to me is any measure of me; everything’s on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don’t express me; and heaven forbid they should.” (175)

The contrast is clear. Isabel follows Emerson’s adage that “the world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature...” (70). Merle, on the other hand, is a materialist who is created out of and exists only in terms of her relations to that “world.” She not only has a shell but *is* that shell.

The question remains: if Isabel recognizes their differences, why is she still attracted to the older woman? Isabel is intrigued by Madame Merle primarily because

what makes Merle bitter also makes her interesting. Merle embodies the knowledge and wisdom that Isabel seeks, and, despite Merle's own contention that "after forty one *can't* really feel," she is convinced that Merle's suffering makes her feel more deeply: "Life had told upon her; she had felt it strongly, and it was part of the satisfaction to be taken in her society that when the girl talked of what she was pleased to call serious matters this lady understood her so easily and quickly" (164). Isabel embraces her new friend as a mentor who can offer her the experience she lacks. Isabel's weakness, however, is that, at this point in the narrative, she still romanticizes this experience; as David Lubin explains, Isabel's conception of reality is "Neoplatonic," in that she sees it as "static, fixed, untouched by history, eternally enduring" (107). And, it is exactly this ignorance of history and vision of the self as inviolable that allows her to misread Merle's unfeeling and spiritually bereft character as not only "charming, sympathetic, intelligent, cultivated" but as "rare, superior and preëminent" (163).

Perhaps the only characteristic that Isabel actually correctly acknowledges is Madame Merle's intelligence; her shrewdness comes through in her astute ability to manipulate Isabel for her own gain. Unlike Henrietta's plot, which is motivated by nationalism, Merle's plot is, like everything else in her life, materially and socially based. She has no interest in breaking down Isabel's romantic spirit. Instead, she seeks to take advantage of Isabel's "graceful illusions." Merle understands these illusions, specifically, in terms of the young heroine's idealistic belief that the spiritual subject can find a concordant home in the objective world. She uses this knowledge to manipulate Isabel and flatter her with images of resilience: "The freshness, the quickness have certainly gone. You'll keep them longer than most people; it will be a great satisfaction to me to see you some years hence. I want to see what life makes of you. One thing's certain—it

can't spoil you. It may pull you about horribly, but I defy it to break you up" (164). Merle implies that Isabel will not only find the experience she seeks but will, in effect, beat reality by uniting her inner spirit with the outer world. Isabel's mental reaction is telling: "Isabel received this assurance as a young soldier, still panting from a slight skirmish in which he has come off with honour, might receive a pat on the shoulder from his colonel" (164). Merle effectively speaks to Isabel's pride and dares her to succeed where she has failed. In this way, Merle ensnares Isabel into her plot.

Just as Henrietta's plot centers on Casper Goodwood, Madame Merle's plot centers around another male suitor, Gilbert Osmond. Osmond is Merle's male counterpart, a social dilettante who embodies superficial materialism. Although Osmond prefers to associate himself with European aristocracy, he is a fake whose identity comes closer to Ralph's conception of him as a "vague, unexplained American" (214). He is described as an effete man, almost feminine in his "light, lean, rather languid-looking figure," who "studied style" (197) and "never...tried to earn a penny" (296). Instead of producing, Osmond consumes; he embodies both conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption. His identity itself rests on presentation or, as we are told, "pose":

Osmond lived exclusively for the world. Far from being its master as he pretended to be, he was its very humble servant, and the degree of its attention was his only measure of success. ... Everything he did was *pose—pose* so subtly considered that if one were not on the lookout one mistook it for impulse. ... His ambition was not to please the world, but to please himself by exciting the world's curiosity, and then declining to satisfy it. (331)

Osmond, whose character literally ceases to exist without spectatorship, figures as the anti-Transcendentalist. We are told continuously by the people who know him best that he embodies a series of negatives; Merle tells us that he has “no career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything” (172), and his sister bluntly says, “there’s nothing, nothing, nothing” (233). These characters are not referring to an absence of social pretensions but rather to an absence of anything outside these pretensions; in Emersonian terms, Osmond has no “me,” *only* the “not me.”

Osmond is particularly offensive because he treats people, primarily women, as he treats objects. He is a misogynist who repeatedly and openly denies women’s spiritual individuality. He claims that he “prefer[s] women like books—very good and not too long” (198). His comment specifically refers to his daughter, Pansy, who has been raised as a work of art, as a passive representation of her father’s will; he complains, for example, when she looks, like an old book, “dusty and crumpled” (442). He expects this same type of service from his wife, whose social successes and failures will become, in his eyes, an extension of himself. Thus, rather than be jealous of Lord Warburton’s attentions to Isabel, Osmond views the association as positive: “now that he had seen Lord Warburton, whom he thought a very fine example of his race and order, he perceived a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by declining so noble a hand” (258). Far from celebrating their self-reliance, he seeks to mold women as dependent possessions and personal advertisements.

Osmond confesses many of these fundamental traits to Isabel, admitting, for example, that he is not simply “conventional” but “convention itself” (265). It is therefore difficult to fathom why Isabel ultimately succumbs and accepts his proposal.

No matter how many times one reads this text, the gap between Isabel's Emersonian ideals and her life choices seems incredible. Even the narrator, seemingly second-guessing the reader's confusion, admits: "The working of this young lady's spirit was strange, and I can only give it to you as I see it, not hoping to make it seem altogether natural" (265). The narrator attempts to justify this "strangeness" by explaining that "her imagination, as I say, now hung back: there was a last vague space it couldn't cross—a dusky, uncertain tract which looked ambiguous and even slightly treacherous, like a moorland seen in the winter twilight. But she was to cross it yet" (265). Of course, this "moorland" is history itself, that "uncertain tract" of experience that Isabel is eager to cross because her overly active imagination blinds her, and she believes, as Merle contends, that history won't "spoil" her.

That blind spot in her imagination makes her the perfect prey for Gilbert Osmond. Osmond's strength is his ability to manipulate his public persona. He caters to Isabel's Emersonian sensibility by attempting to rewrite his empty, absent character as enticing and even transcendental, spiritually pure in his simplicity and solitude. He describes himself to her as "sweetly provincial" (221) and, rather than reveal his ambitions, tells her what he lacks: "I could do nothing. I had no prospects, I was poor, and I was not a man of genius. I had no talents even; I took my measure early in life." In referring to his life in terms of negatives, he claims only a "studied,...wilful renunciation" (227). He paints a portrait of his life as a Thoreauvian retreat to Walden Pond, and, as a result, Isabel celebrates both his "superior enlightenment" (226) and "the success with which he had preserved his independence" (228). Thus, Isabel makes the following, unknowingly ironic and naïve remark: "That's a very pleasant life...to renounce everything but Correggio!" (228). Most of all, however, Isabel falls prey

because, as the narrator tells us, all the other individuals she knew “belonged to types already present to her mind. Her mind contained no class offering a natural place to Mr. Osmond—he was a specimen apart. ... [H]e was an original without being an eccentric” (224). Of course, Isabel misses the obvious, that he has no “type,” no “class,” no “natural place” because he is “nothing, nothing, nothing”; his absence does not denote a transcendental spirit but, rather, the complete lack of a spirit, an emptiness that precludes transcendence.

The final element that secures Osmond’s victory entails a critical one-year lapse, a “year [Isabel]...had spent in seeing the world” (270). We learn about her travels in flashbacks, in pictures of “landscapes” and “figure-pieces” (271). What we notice, most of all, is a sense of urgency in her travels: “Isabel traveled rapidly and recklessly; she was like a thirsty person draining cup after cup” (274). As much as descriptions of her voyage reveal Isabel’s excitement, they also suggest a level of restlessness, a sense that she has seen it all: “She flattered herself she had harvested wisdom and learned a great deal more of life than this light-minded creature had even suspected” (270). Isabel mistakes her travels for that “dusty uncertain tract” of history and believes that in seeing the world, she has experienced life. Symbolically, Isabel becomes the traveler who has reached the end of the world; she has completed her journey but is still spiritually homeless. After her year “seeing the world,” Isabel begins to sense that conflict Georg Lukács describes as “the inadequacy that is due to the soul’s being wider and larger than the destinies which life has to offer it.” (112). That continued gap in her imagination allows her to believe that Osmond will provide her with the proper destiny for her restless soul.

Despite all of these reasons for Isabel's acceptance of Osmond, her failure of judgment still feels so crucial and incomprehensible that scholars continually mark her misjudgment as James's monumental "critique of self-reliance" (Edel 259) and mockery of "transcendental innocence" (Niemtzow 377). Once again, however, Isabel's faulty imagination and ultimate decision to accept Osmond reflect her one true *divergence* from Emersonian Transcendentalism. Isabel's blind confidence in history is, in actuality, un-Emersonian. Transcendental philosophy—in particular its core experiments, Brook Farm and Walden Pond—incorporated a knowledge and distrust of history not found in Isabel's character. Emerson understood that it is only the "*great man*...who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (my italics, Emerson 263). Isabel's weakness certainly stems, in part, from her overall romantic sensibility, but her specific ignorance lies in her blind embrace of experience, in her belief that she alone is Emerson's "*great man*." Isabel's combination of romance and ego allows her to think that she can beat history, that she can shape it to accommodate her expansive spirit. As the narrator tells us, Isabel will, in marrying Osmond, "cross" that "dusky, uncertain tract," and she will learn the power of history. Importantly, however, Isabel will not easily be defeated, and the text will not easily dismiss Emersonian romance. In the final third of the text, Isabel will attempt to negotiate that difficult binary of romance and realism.

V

When we next meet Isabel, she has been married to Gilbert Osmond for three years. At this stage in the novel, neither the narrator nor Isabel reveals much about her relationship with Osmond. We sense, however, that she has both gained the experience she sought and been humbled by it. We learn, for example, that Isabel has lost a son in

infancy and has become estranged from her husband. The narrator reveals these facts but little else about Isabel or her state of mind. Instead, most of what we discover comes from the perspective of other characters. Thus, in a telling conversation with Lord Warburton, Isabel talks about her home but, in doing so, reveals much about her current state:

“You’ve got an awfully good house.”

“Yes, it’s very pleasant. But that’s not my merit—it’s my husband’s.”

“You mean he has arranged it?”

“Yes, it was nothing when we came.”

“He must be very clever.”

“He has a genius for upholstery,” said Isabel.

“There’s a great rage for that sort of thing now. But you must have a taste of your own.”

“I enjoy things when they’re done, but I’ve no ideas. I can never propose anything.”

“Do you mean you accept what others propose?”

“Very willingly, for the most part.” (324)

Isabel now recognizes that Osmond’s “superior enlightenment” is, in fact, his “clever” capacity for design and familiarity with material objects. Furthermore, when Isabel tells us that she has “no ideas,” she suggests that she has allowed her personality, usually so *full* of ideas, to be effaced by Osmond. Ralph’s perspective of Isabel perpetuates this reading: “The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. ... [S]he represented Gilbert Osmond” (331). This seeming breakdown of Isabel’s character tends to reinforce comments by

those critics, such as Millicent Bell, who argue that the text reveals “the weakness of Emersonian idealism” (90).

Regardless of her outward appearance, however, there is much to suggest that Isabel is not as easily defeated and disillusioned as critics argue. Instead, Isabel’s altered character remains far more ambiguous than most have claimed. What has changed about Isabel is not necessarily her spiritual makeup but rather a new split between her inner and outer character. Whereas Isabel was once happy to express her every thought and desire publicly, her experience has taught her to shield that inner spirit. Thus, in a brief moment of narrative revelation, we are told that “[t]he years had touched [Isabel] only to enrich her; the flower of her youth had not faded, it only hung more quietly on its stem. She had lost something of that quick eagerness to which her husband had privately taken exception—she had more the air of being able to wait” (310). There is little question that Isabel’s “graceful illusions” of reality have been altered. Yet, while Isabel has become aware of the force of history, she is still, we learn, “fertile in [her] resolutions” (340) and continues to “think quite differently” from her husband (303). Most importantly, we discover that her new life is miserable *precisely* because, contrary to what she tells Lord Warburton, she refuses to give up her ideas and become a reflection of her husband’s ego.

Before her marriage, Isabel’s life was more theoretical than actual; she had ideals that she desperately wanted to test. Most critics assert that, in her marriage to Osmond, her ideals fail and the “expression of her boundless self” becomes “doomed” (Millicent Bell 90). The narrator continually implies, however, that Isabel’s experiment is unfinished. Her ideals may be diminished, but they are not shattered, and we sense a recurrent note of possibility:

When Isabel was unhappy she always looked about her—partly from impulse and partly by theory—for some form of positive exertion. She could never rid herself of the sense that unhappiness was a state of disease—of suffering as opposed to doing. To “do”—it hardly mattered what—would therefore be an escape, perhaps in some degree a remedy. (348)

It is clear that Isabel’s marriage has made her unhappy, but in her drive “to ‘do’” and to counter her suffering, Isabel reveals strong remnants of her earlier determination and expansive spirit. It is as if her previously proud confidence in romance has given way to a new struggle between a growing awareness of realism and a refusal to succumb to it passively. Isabel acknowledges an unwritten future and asks: “what was coming—what was before them? That was her constant question. What would he do—what ought *she* to do?” (363). This new Isabel is a more reticent character, but she is certainly not “doomed.” As she later tells Henrietta: “I’m not at all helpless” (417).

One of the ways in which this new struggle is enacted is through Isabel’s relationship to Pansy and, more specifically, in her step-daughter’s triangle with Ned Rosier and Lord Warburton. The scenario plays a surprisingly large role in volume 2, particularly as it involves three minor, rather two-dimensional characters. Ultimately, this side plot says more about Isabel than it does about the other characters. Isabel’s wavering position between contradictory duties to her husband, herself, and Pansy reflects her conflict between a new commitment to realism and her older ideals of spiritual self-reliance. Thus, Isabel’s first response to the union between Rosier and Pansy suggests passivity; she says simply: “I can do nothing” (344). She quickly moves, however, to an opposing viewpoint:

[S]he wished to convince herself that she had done everything possible to content her husband.... It would please him greatly to see Pansy married to an English nobleman.... It seemed to Isabel that if she could make it her duty to bring about such an event she should play the part of a good wife. She wanted to be that; she wanted to be able to believe sincerely, and with proof of it, that she had been that. Then such an undertaking had other recommendations. It would occupy her, and she desired occupation. It would even amuse her, and if she could really amuse herself she perhaps might be saved. (348)

Here, her thoughts teeter between her desperate need for “occupation” and an almost disturbing, conventional Madame Merle-type sensibility, of “assisting her husband to be pleased” (350).

In the end, however, she surprises herself, her readers, and even her husband. In the next scene, she proves incapable of fulfilling that “undertaking”:

On the evening I speak of, while Lord Warburton sat there, she had been on the point of taking the great step of going out of the room and leaving her companions alone. I say the great step because it was in this light that Gilbert Osmond would have regarded it, and Isabel was trying as much as possible to take her husband’s view. She succeeded after a fashion, but she fell short of the point I mention. After all she couldn’t rise to it; something held her and made this impossible.... There was a vague doubt that interposed—a sense that she was not quite sure. So she remained in the drawing-room, and after a while Lord Warburton went on to his party.... (350)

Despite her conscious desire to “take her husband’s view,” Isabel is still guided by a spiritual force more powerful than Osmond’s will. In her inability to leave the room, Isabel prevents a union she recognizes as problematic. Her contradictory behavior becomes even more pronounced when, shortly thereafter, she actually suspends the marriage between Lord Warburton and Pansy. In an extended conversation with Warburton, she attempts to discourage his advances. Warburton tells Isabel: “You told me she would have no wish apart from her father’s, and as I’ve gathered that he would favor me—I!” Isabel responds: “Yes, I told you she has an immense wish to please her father, and that it would probably take her very far. ... But it hardly strikes me as the sort of feeling to which a man would wish to be indebted for a wife” (372). That her response seems spontaneous renders it all the more brilliant. Without ever telling Warburton outright to withdraw his courtship, she makes use of his pride and noble sensibility to dissuade him. Her interference obviously infuriates Osmond, who sees it as an act of open defiance. Yet, Isabel repeatedly makes it clear that she cares little for revenge. Rather, her behavior is motivated by an earlier Emersonian ideal to remain loyal to her personal convictions and protect, where possible, Pansy’s own freedom.

Isabel’s ability to retain her Emersonian spirit is seen less, however, in her deeds than in the growth of her inner consciousness. Much of Isabel’s suffering in her marriage comes from her frustrated curiosity, to know how or why or what “was the work of her marriage” (339). While she tries to convince herself that there “had been no plot, no snare” (340), she recognizes some unspoken truth that leaves her feeling benighted:

It was her deep distrust of her husband—this was what darkened the world. That is a sentiment easily indicated, but not so easily explained,

and so composite in its character that much time and still more suffering had been needed to bring it to its actual perfection. Suffering, with Isabel, was an active condition; it was not a chill, a stupor, a despair; it was a passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure. (356)

This “deep distrust” has fundamentally changed Isabel; rather than charge blindly “over roads that one can’t see,” she now engages in silent watchfulness and careful judgment: “Covert observation had become a habit with her; an instinct, of which it is not an exaggeration to say that it was allied to that of self-defense, had made it habitual” (350). It is this “covert observation” that characterizes Isabel’s experience in volume 2.

In the highly analyzed, all-important chapter 42, we find Isabel “sitting in the drawing-room, given up to her meditation.” Here, she achieves an “unexpected recognition” (354). It is curious to consider what, exactly, this “unexpected recognition” amounts to; after all, although she begins to sense a deeper connection between Osmond and Merle than she had hitherto thought, she does not fully comprehend their true relations. In this scene, what Isabel begins to understand are those “complications of existence” that James mentions in his Preface (5). If she does not see the entire truth, she begins to acknowledge the importance and value of realism, specifically of the obstacles that history can produce for the individual. At the same time, however, James does not use this opportunity to minimize an earlier romantic vision. On the contrary, he suggests that, instead of destroying Isabel’s earlier ideals, her new awareness will help her to foster spiritual transcendence:

For herself, she lingered in the soundless saloon long after the fire had gone out. There was no danger of her feeling the cold; she was in a

fever. She heard the small hours strike, and then the great ones, but her vigil took no heed of time. Her mind, assailed by vision, was in a state of extraordinary activity, and her visions might as well come to her there, where she sat up to meet them, as on her pillow, to make a mockery of rest. (364)

James denies us an overt epiphany here, and Isabel's "fever" does not easily alleviate her suffering; by the same token, this scene should not be read as James's denunciation of romance. While her enlightenment may not offer her immediate relief, it does present her with a clear sense of spiritual empowerment. After her marriage, Isabel seems reserved and almost sedated, wearing, what Ralph notes as, a "fixed and mechanical" expression. Yet, with this "unexpected recognition" Isabel recaptures an earlier spiritual fervor and begins, the narrator tells us, "to wake from a long pernicious dream" (429).

A scene in chapter 49—a brilliant, enlightening moment almost completely ignored by critics—symbolizes this delicate balance between Isabel's growing awareness of history and her renewed loyalty to spiritual transcendence. Our heroine, searching for quiet contemplation, visits the Roman ruins. The description of her experience is extensive but telling:

Isabel took a drive alone that afternoon; she wished to be far away, under the sky, where she could descend from her carriage and tread upon the daisies. She had long before this taken old Rome into her confidence, for in a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe. She rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright; she dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places, where its very modern quality detached itself

and grew objective, so that as she sat in a sun-warmed angle on a winter's day, or stood in a mouldy church to which no one came, she could almost smile at it and think of its smallness. Small it was, in the large Roman record, and her haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot easily carried her from the less to the greater. ... There was no gentler nor less consistent heretic than Isabel; the firmest of worshippers, gazing at dark altar-pictures or clustered candles, could not have felt more intimately the suggestiveness of these objects nor have been more liable at such moments to a spiritual visitation. ... The carriage, leaving the walls of Rome behind, rolled through narrow lanes where the wild honeysuckle had begun to tangle itself in the hedges, or waited for her in quiet places where the fields lay near, while she strolled further and further over the flower-freckled turf, or sat on a stone that had once had a use and gazed through the veil of her personal sadness at the splendid sadness of the scene—at the dense, warm light, the far gradations and soft confusions of colour, the motionless shepherds in lonely attitudes, the hills where the cloud-shadows had the lightness of a blush. (430-31)

The scene is presented here almost in its entirety not only because it is one of the most beautiful and profound passages in James's writings, but because it is critical in understanding Isabel's state of mind. It offers a brilliant contrast to that earlier scene where Isabel describes her idea of happiness as "[a] swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see" (146). In both a literal and figurative sense, Isabel now "descend[s] from her carriage" not only to "see" but to "tread upon the daisies."

One might say that this moment represents Isabel's most marked connection to realism, that she recognizes her position in history and now rejects her earlier naïve, Emersonian nature. As much as Isabel loses herself in history, however, she also merges her sense of history with a profound, new spiritual awareness. What we find in this passage are those binary voices of material history and spirituality, which don't deconstruct but act as simultaneous layers in Isabel's consciousness. Thus, old Rome is "crumbled" and yet still "upright"; it is old and lonely and yet still maintains a "modern quality"; the "mouldy church" is small and yet part of that large Roman record. All of these opposing elements are meant to reflect Isabel's own "dialogic imagination." Through the Roman ruins, Isabel both loses herself in history—allowing her "silent sadness" to become part of a larger past—and yet achieves her most intense spiritual visitation. Thus, while Isabel embraces that objective truth of history, we find her, particularly in the passage's final emphasis on light, engaged in a type of Emersonian awakening where "man...learn[s] to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within..." (259). The scene enacts Emerson's "transparent eye-ball," where "mean egotism vanishes" and Isabel becomes "part or particle" of something much greater than herself (Emerson 10). The difference here, however, is that James reconfigures the romance and realism binary by merging Emerson's idea of nature with the past itself. In this rendering, with those pastoral images of the "motionless shepherds in lonely attitudes," history becomes part of nature.

While the text seems almost to end here, in this quieting pastoral moment, James goes on and, in doing so, suggests that Emerson's vision of the "transparent eye-ball" is profound but needs to incorporate not just this one reality but all of historical truth. Isabel's vision is still somewhat skewed by those "soft confusions of colour," and her

“prayer to be enlightened,” her full consciousness of reality, has yet to be fulfilled (430). Her “prayer” is answered, ironically, by perhaps the most superficial character in the text, the Countess Gemini, who professes to be her “aid to innocent ignorance” and reveals the truth of Pansy’s true parentage (451). Isabel is obviously shocked and upset by the information but, once again, she does not allow this extreme dose of reality to supplant her romantic vision. Thus, the Countess is shocked, and even somewhat dismayed, to discover that Isabel’s reaction is not one of passionate revenge but, instead, quiet sympathy and compassion. Isabel uses the term “poor woman” several times, not only in reference to Osmond’s first wife but also to refer to Pansy’s mother, the “vile” Madame Merle herself (452). She is less concerned with regaining her social pride by destroying others than with her own personal liberation. This information, however painful, is ultimately important in terms of that Emersonian “gleam of light which flashes across...[the] mind from within.” Her enlightenment is not about what critics such as John Paul Eakin call James’s “critique of Emersonian individualism” (169). Instead, her growing consciousness becomes James’s symbolic struggle to relocate Emersonian individualism in the postbellum American subject. The question becomes: how does one maintain spiritual individualism in the face of history? How does one merge those dual truths of romance and realism?

While James does not offer an easy answer, he presents us with a changed Isabel who, if she lacks the answers to these questions, certainly begins a new quest to locate some possible synthesis. Isabel’s new information allows her to reconsider her personal moral obligations. Once concerned with playing “the part of the good wife” and doing “everything possible to content her husband” (348), she now makes a series of choices that illustrate her renewed insistence on self-reliance. Isabel’s first choice is to disobey

Osmond openly by returning to Gardencourt to see Ralph. While Isabel had been undecided regarding her voyage, the narrative transition to the next chapter immediately following her meeting with the Countess reinforces the insistence of her decision; chapter 52 begins: "There was a train for Turin and Paris that evening..." (456). Before she leaves, she chooses to visit Pansy at the convent. While in the past she has only quietly and hesitantly supported Pansy, she now offers even to liberate Pansy from the convent and take her away to England; and, although Pansy proves incapable of acting against her father, Isabel promises to come back, illustrating her new sense of purpose and her ability not only to think independently but to translate that thought into action. Finally, Isabel announces her spiritual independence when she meets, once again, Casper Goodwood, with whom she had earlier complained that "she wished to set herself right" (405). In her expanded consciousness, what we notice is a heroine who locates the courage to act for herself and fulfill her desire to "put her spiritual affairs in order" (405).

Many critics regard Isabel's final meeting with Goodwood, and the novel's ending in general, as evidence of her failure and, by extension, the ultimate failure of Transcendentalism. There are those, for example, who read Goodwood as a symbol of liberty, which Isabel turns down in favor of a constricted, conventional life. Thus, Oscar Cargill reads Goodwood's renewed proposal as "an offer of complete freedom and a restoration of independence to Isabel" (282); likewise, Carren Kaston tells us that he offers her the "Emersonian freedom of a self-designed life" (55). Judith Montgomery is more forthright when she claims that, in returning to Rome, Isabel "returns herself to a lifetime of servitude" and chooses "fulfillment of the image" over "fulfillment of the self" (896). These critics view Goodwood, like Millicent Bell, as "the most Emersonian of her wooers" (105) and suggest that, in rejecting him and returning to Rome, Isabel

submits both physically and spiritually to the text's least Emersonian wooer, Osmond.

In this reading, the novel ends with the final defeat of spiritual individualism.

It is easy to understand why so many readers interpret Isabel's final decision as a failure. In general, Goodwood is a highly attractive figure who seems to offer Isabel an easy solution to her confining marriage. We want to believe Goodwood when he tells Isabel:

You must save what you can of your life; you mustn't lose it all simply because you've lost a part. It would be an insult to you to assume that you care for the look of the thing, for what people will say, for the bottomless idiocy of the world. We've nothing to do with all that; we're quite out of it; we look at things as they are. ... We can do absolutely as we please; to whom under the sun do we owe anything? What is it that holds us, what is it that has the smallest right to interfere in such a question as this? (488-89)

Goodwood presents Isabel with a powerful, poetic speech, one that has been linked to the final words of Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "The world was all before them, where to choose/Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:/They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,/Through Eden took their solitary way" (12: 646-69).³⁰

Goodwood proclaims himself an innocent Adamic figure who offers his Eve a life renewed.

In this scene, Casper Goodwood's words also remind us of an earlier promise to Isabel: "it's to make you independent that I want to marry you." Yet, just as Isabel, then, understood these words as nothing more than a "beautiful sophism," so we, now, must

³⁰ Lyall H. Powers is one critic who, in *The Portrait of a Lady: Maiden, Woman, and Heroine*, has connected Goodwood's speech to *Paradise Lost*.

also recognize a note of pretense in Goodwood's rhetoric (142). His presence in this scene is not at all spiritual but entirely physical. He literally frightens Isabel with his forcefulness: "She had a new sensation; he had never produced it before; it was a feeling of danger. There was indeed something really formidable in his resolution" (486). Far from liberating her, Goodwood wants to possess her, and, in a moment of sheer passion, he underscores his true intentions:

His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession. So had she heard of those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink. But when darkness returned she was free. She never looked about her; she only darted from the spot. (489)

Goodwood's passion is intoxicating and powerful in a way that Osmond can never be, and it is for this reason that we want Isabel to submit to Goodwood's desires. Yet, Isabel runs away from him precisely because she realizes that his physical power also amounts to "possession" and "darkness"; he stands in direct opposition to that Emersonian "gleam of light which flashes across [one's] mind from within," and submitting to Goodwood would amount to the destruction of consciousness.

What disturbs Isabel, in addition to Goodwood's overall "intense identity," is her recognition that this "act of possession" is just another plot. Goodwood explains that it was Ralph who convinced him to approach her again:

“[T]o-day I know on good authority; everything’s clear to me to-day. It was a good thing when you made me come away with your cousin. He was a good man, a fine man, one of the best; he told me how the case stands for you. He explained everything; he guessed my sentiments. He was a member of your family and he left you—so long as you should be in England—to my care,” said Goodwood as if he were making a great point. “Do you know what he said to me the last time I saw him—as he lay there where he died? He said: ‘Do everything you can do for her; do everything she’ll let you.’”

Isabel’s reaction to this news is telling: “You had no business to talk about me!” (487). Her shock and frustration clearly stems from the fact that she has, yet again, been plotted against. Despite Ralph’s best intentions, his request ironically violates that element of her spiritual being that he wishes to preserve: her independence. In volume 2, Isabel has come to realize, first and foremost, that what she had always regarded as personal will was, in fact, primarily the product of external plotting. Through consciousness, Isabel has not only begun to recognize the power of plot but has attempted to integrate spiritual romance into her growing knowledge of historical reality. Now Goodwood disturbs her enlightened sensibility by offering her a proposal based on another deception. Her decision to return to Rome, therefore, may disturb many readers, but, as Richard Poirier contends, it is “absolutely within the logic of her Emersonian idealism” (*Comic Sense* 246); in fact, Isabel’s decision to return to Rome becomes a physical manifestation of her renewed ability to act independently.

It is difficult to view Isabel’s return to Rome as an easy or great victory; as Donald Stone aptly comments, “by the end of the novel, Isabel manages a curious sort

of success” (208). We can only speculate what will happen to Isabel, and, ultimately, we end by asking the same question that Isabel has asked earlier: “What was coming—what was before them?” (363). Many critics attempt to complete Isabel’s plot. Richard Poirier, thus, ends his discussion of the text by stating that “returning to Rome will, as Casper admonishes, cost [Isabel] her life” (*Comic Sense* 246); Richard Chase claims that, at the end of the text, Isabel “belongs to the sisterhood of Hester Prynne” (128).

Alternately, Anthony Mazzella argues that, through her return, Isabel will “counter [Osmond’s] intransigence and relieve Pansy’s plight” (611). In fact, however, James denies us both of these clear, alternative endings. Instead, Isabel’s return amounts to a denial of both extremes and a refusal either to romanticize reality *or* to dismiss romance. In returning to Rome, Isabel does not attempt to escape reality; she faces what, James believes, nineteenth-century Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau avoided. The text clearly suggests that the postbellum American subject cannot and should not attempt to create those alternate realities, to immerse oneself in a Walden Pond or Brook Farm; one must concede the truth of history. That said, the text also strongly affirms Emerson’s emphasis on the spiritual sanctity and “integrity of [one’s] own mind.” As we have seen, Rome is that site where Isabel attempts to synthesize these two visions. It is Rome that is both “crumbled” and “upright,” and, as such, Rome symbolizes Isabel’s own uncertain and yet conceivably hopeful future, a future that will incorporate both those “complications of existence” and, via consciousness, that possibility for spiritual integrity.

VI

While James leaves Isabel with an uncertain future, he constructs a more definitive future for the other characters. The text’s finale offers us a review of the

players, all of whose endings seem to reinforce a denial of either binary, romance or realism. As discussed, Ralph is the character who has dedicated the remainder of his life to watching Isabel renew the hope of Emersonian romance. While not naïve, he embodies that Jamesian optimism that spiritual individualism may still survive, unimpeded by history. Isabel's narrative, of course, proves him wrong. Most critics agree with Poirier when he contends that "[w]ith Ralph's death, Isabel ceases to live in the imagination of freedom, and he dies because her life no longer allows him to imagine the possibility that freedom and the life of the world are compatible" (*Comic Sense* 241). If Ralph is, in one sense, the author of Isabel's narrative, he dies when he realizes that plot cannot easily contain Isabel's Emersonian character. His death is the death of pure Emersonian romance.

If James offers us a bleak picture of unadulterated romance, however, his vision of stark realism is even harsher. The text's realist characters—Merle, Osmond, Goodwood, and Henrietta—are all either punished or, by the end, reformed. Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond, the material realists, are certainly not destroyed, but their plot has, in essence, proved unsuccessful. Merle quite blatantly admits her failure when she "vaguely wail[s]...": "Have I been so vile all for nothing?" (437). Her plot uncovered, her past revealed, Merle is left defeated; as she tells Isabel: "You're very unhappy, I know. But I'm more so. ... I shall go to America" (464). Elizabeth Jean Sabiston, in *The Prison of Womanhood*, makes the insightful comment that Merle's return to America reflects her need for "a refresher course in innocence" (137). If Isabel has had to learn the power of history, Merle must revisit the possibility for spiritual renewal; her faith in material realism proves entirely flawed.

Gilbert Osmond, we must feel, does not suffer nearly enough for his part in Isabel's unhappiness. There are several elements of his own plot, however, that satisfy our desires. First, Isabel defies Osmond, in particular his marriage plot for Pansy. While it is difficult to argue that Isabel leaves Gardencourt solely to save Pansy, it seems clear that her return serves, in part, to protect Pansy from her father. There is also the suggestion that even Isabel's money has provided Osmond with little beyond his trinkets and weekly salon. The Countess suggests that Isabel's inheritance is still her own, to give or to withhold from Pansy, and, thus, Isabel maintains a certain amount of control over her personal possessions. More than Isabel's money, though, Osmond has always sought to erase Isabel's spiritual identity, to obliterate her independence and her ideas. He ultimately fails. Rather than give up her ideas, in volume 2 Isabel actually reclaims her individual identity. Osmond hates her precisely because he cannot change her. Donald Stone tells us that Osmond's defeat lies even deeper: "After Isabel marries Osmond, she does worse than defy him; she sees through him" (221). While we never actually witness Osmond submit or admit his failure as Merle does, it is clear that he has gained little from his plot and that his cold, spiritless materialism has been largely ineffective.

Casper Goodwood changes little during the course of the narrative. At the beginning of the text, he is the aggressive postbellum American industrialist, a militaristic suitor who tirelessly pursues Isabel. His pursuit is as hopeless at the end as it is in the beginning. His final attempt to woo Isabel reveals his continued frustration: "She had had time only to rise when, with a motion that looked like violence, but felt like—she knew not what, he grasped her by the wrist and made her sink again into the seat. ... She had a new sensation; he had never produced it before; it was a feeling of danger. There

was indeed something really formidable in his resolution" (486). Despite his resolution, his strength, and his Miltonic speeches, he gets turned down yet again. At the end of the novel, we are left with one final pathetic image of him: Henrietta tells Goodwood that Isabel has left England and returned to Rome. He leaves dejected, Henrietta having given him little hope beyond "the key to patience" (490). Our sense is that Goodwood's future will be an endless series of rejections, a wasted life.

Henrietta offers us the most humorous finale. She is the only one of these four realists who proves somewhat three-dimensional and capable of change. This staunch supporter of American democracy and objective, often superficial notions of truth learns to relax and let go of her stubborn sensibility. While she seems the perfect wife for Goodwood—both are aggressive, highly rational rather than spiritual, and ultra nationalists—Henrietta ends up with Bob Bantling, a somewhat sensitive and patent British subject. Her announcement of the upcoming marriage comes with, as Isabel notes, her first disparaging statement "against [her] native land": "[Mr Bantling is]...not intellectual, but he appreciates intellect. On the other hand, he doesn't exaggerate its claims. I sometimes think we do in the United States" (470). Ironically, her comment specifically relates to, what she admits as, the rigidity of American subjects. Henrietta becomes, we realize, critical even of her own judgmental tendencies.

The text makes it clear that Henrietta's shift away from, what Isabel calls, her "disembodied voice" toward "personal susceptibilities" and "common passions" involves her growing friendship with Ralph Touchett (470). Henrietta once had little more interest in Ralph than "to show him up," but now the journalist has become both his caretaker and friend (83). This connection has been the key to Henrietta's development. Ralph's romantic nature acts as a counter to Henrietta's rigid character.

Their burgeoning friendship and its effect on Henrietta reveal the problem with unilateral thinking. Each of these characters—Ralph, Merle, Osmond, Goodwood, and Henrietta—stands in contrast to Isabel; she alone struggles to negotiate both binaries, romance and realism, within her character.

There is one more character we must look to in order to understand how these characters figure in the text. Daniel Touchett's early exit tends to remove him from critical interest, but he proves an important character who mirrors a central shift in nineteenth-century thought, a shift the younger characters must contend with. Ralph's father is a representative of Emerson's generation, the last remnant of true Transcendentalism. Touchett stands out from the rest of the characters; our first image of him is with "his cup in his hand": "it was an unusually large cup, of a different pattern from the rest of the set and painted in brilliant colours" (17). Importantly, Touchett is the only character in the text who understands history but actively tries to avoid it. He embodies that element of Transcendentalism that Isabel misses; like Emerson, he reads history as dangerous, as an "impertinence and injury" (Emerson 270). He warns his son and Lord Warburton, for example, that "there will be great changes; and not all for the better" (22).

Despite his recognition of these "social and political changes," however, he manages to live independently from such historical shifts (23). Thus, he is a native Vermonter who fully recognizes his position as an American despite his residence in England; he uses his native tongue to emphasize this distance: "I *ain't* a lord," he tells us (my italics 72). Yet, he lives comfortably in England, in his Gardencourt, an Eden separate from nationhood and history. Daniel Touchett manages a type of totality of self that Lukács discusses, where the subject is at ease in the objective world. For this

reason, he is not only the one American who seems at home in England, but he is the only character who does not plot against Isabel. He experiences a type of unification of self and world that the other characters do not. Of course, Daniel Touchett is, literally, a dying breed, a character who dies with the Civil War. In his last days, we locate within him that shift in “the history of the American mind,” which James describes in *Hawthorne*; we see him as those older romantics who, James says, after the Civil War “h[u]ng their heads and close[d] their eyes” (114).

Even more than Ralph, Isabel becomes Daniel Touchett’s transcendental child, the inheritor of his Emersonian values and the character who must negotiate those “social and political changes” that Touchett envisions. She is almost forcibly removed from her isolated, ahistorical home of books and transcendental teachings and brought out into the world, and she alone attempts to locate that synthesis between Emersonian romance and those “complications of existence.” Carrying with her an Emersonian spirit, but one devoid of that essential caution of history, she charges into experience “over roads that one can’t see.” After her marriage to Osmond, if Isabel becomes disillusioned at all, it is not, as critics contend, with Emersonian romance. Isabel eats “of the tree of knowledge” and awakens to the reality of history itself (*Hawthorne* 114). Through consciousness, she works toward reclaiming self-reliance in a new, postbellum world, one that James claims “is a more complicated place than it had hitherto seemed, the future more treacherous, success more difficult” (*Hawthorne* 114). Isabel’s ending is left open simply because success *is*, as James contends, now more difficult, and Isabel’s consciousness becomes a burgeoning idea not yet fulfilled. As she tells Henrietta, there are still “many things [she] mean[s] to do” (417). *The Portrait of a Lady* becomes James’s own attempt to work out that complex binary, that dynamic relationship between

Transcendentalism and Realism, which we find in both *Hawthorne* and James's own life.

Through Isabel, James attempts to synthesize that residual romantic trend with the dominant culture of Realism. Consciousness, he suggests, will become this new battleground, but an easy, finite solution is only imagined, not easily enacted.

Chapter Three
Edith Wharton: *The House of Mirth*

Every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house
 confines the spirit.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate"

I

Edith Wharton begins her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, with an early memory:

It was on a bright day of midwinter, in New York. The little girl who eventually became me, but as yet was neither me nor anybody else in particular, but merely a soft anonymous morsel of humanity—this little girl, who bore my name, was going for a walk with her father. The episode is literally the first thing I can remember about her, and therefore I date the birth of her identity from that day. ... It was always an event in the little girl's life to take a walk with her father, and more particularly so today, because she had on her new winter bonnet, which was so beautiful (and so becoming) that for the first time she woke to the importance of dress, and of herself as a subject for adornment—so that I may date from that hour the birth of the conscious and feminine *me* in the little girl's vague soul. (1-2)

In her description of this "little girl," Wharton reveals a deep-seated interest in questions of individual identity, a subject that would resonate in each of her novels. In using the third person, she casts herself as another character, a heroine attempting to develop a sense of self amidst surrounding material culture. Her rhetoric and focus—to consider that "vague soul" in relation to the social body—are clearly in the vein of Ralph Waldo

Emerson, whom she greatly admired as one of the three “best” American poets (in addition to Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe) and described as “some beautiful bit of pink crystal” (qtd in Lewis, *Edith Wharton* 236).

It would be erroneous to claim that Emerson was the central influence in Wharton’s literary career. While it is evident that Wharton read and highly respected his work, this argument deals less with direct influence and more with Emerson as a pivotal cultural emblem. Emerson impacted Wharton’s fiction not simply because she admired his work but because Emerson had become an intellectual focal point for her age. Julie Olin-Ammentorp and Ann Ryan explain that “[a]t the close of the nineteenth century, reading Emerson was a nostalgic gesture in a culture obsessively concerned not only with its own changing identity, but also with the consequent worth of American individualism and the possibility of American idealism” (1). Emerson had come to represent a set of ideas established in the antebellum period and now deeply entrenched in postbellum America.

Wharton, of course, went far beyond reading Emerson as a “nostalgic gesture” and did, indeed, understand that “beautiful bit of pink crystal” as something more powerful than merely a sampler or displaced quotation. Olin-Ammentorp and Ryan specify that Wharton “mocked a cheapened and commodified Emerson” and “admired what she saw as the authentic Emerson” (3). In personally identifying with his work, Wharton understood that, far from a cultural fad, Emerson’s theories were a rejection of popular convention. What Emerson specifically offered Wharton was a language and vision with which to structure her deepest concerns of spiritual transcendence. In her troubled relationship with her mother and her sterile marriage, in her fulfilling career as a writer, in her friendships with Henry James and Walter Berry, and in her passionate love

affair with Morton Fullerton, Wharton continually displayed a concern with her own “vague soul” and its relationship to the “divine spirit” (Emerson 269).

Her intellectual responses to Emerson are most pronounced in her 1905 novel about a “society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers,” *The House of Mirth* (Backward 207). Emerson’s central tenets, reconfigured in the text as “republic of the spirit,” form the central philosophical framework for the novel. The primary questions considered in *The House of Mirth* involve man’s relationship to society, his aptitude for self-reliance or—what Lawrence Selden labels—“personal freedom,” and his ability to sustain “those voices which we hear in solitude as we enter into the world” (Emerson 261). *The House of Mirth* acts as Wharton’s profound conversation not only with the “irresponsible” New York society of her youth but with larger questions of its transcendental alternative.

Despite these similarities between the text’s philosophy of Transcendentalism and the ideas posited by Emerson fifty years earlier, what separates Wharton’s vision from Emerson’s involves those fifty critical years of history. When Emerson wrote “Self-Reliance,” his ideas resonated with previously conceived democratic ideals; Transcendentalism was harmonious with American tropes of man in nature, Puritan ideas of individualism, and the divine self. Emerson brilliantly expressed a national ethos, a fundamental American desire to maintain a sense of the democratic individual above the trappings of society and government. While the changes in America after the Civil War were multifaceted, one important shift involves Emerson’s metaphor of the spirit and the house. To a large extent, before the Civil War, the American spirit had been busy constructing its house, specifically defining what it meant to be “American”; after the Civil War, the house, or America’s national identity, had begun to confine the

spirit.³¹ In postbellum America, while man-made institutions of business and technology began to explode, America's unexplored, natural resources were being mined, developed, and settled; the shift from agrarian to industrial economics became symbolic: the social machine had replaced the individual. American man had constructed a web of social structures that were seemingly ubiquitous and impenetrable.

By 1905, when *The House of Mirth* was published, even Walden Pond—the transcendental emblem of nature and self-reliance—had become a crowded tourist trap, beset by thousands in the summer, intruded upon by automobiles, and sought after by filmmakers (Maynard 218-19); the American landscape had become a social pecking ground. In *The House of Mirth*, Emerson's philosophy is re-enacted in this new historical moment. Like Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, this novel becomes Wharton's cultural litmus test: how do American philosophy and American history interact? What happens to the Emersonian hero in the Gilded Age? Can Emersonian romance hold up against new conceptions of American Realism? By the end of the text, Wharton proves Emerson's adage: "Every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit" (946).

II

Lawrence Selden is Wharton's initial spokesperson for the republic of the spirit. Selden is a charming, somewhat aloof bachelor who stands on the edge of New York's upper-class society; our heroine, Lily Bart, explains that his charm comes from his "social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at"

³¹ Evidence of this shift is seen early in *The House of Mirth*, where we find the most materialistic characters collecting "Americana." Wharton suggests that, at this point in American history, national identity had become a product to consume; rather than forging a national identity, American-ness was now something to be purchased and amassed.

(45). He posits his abstract and idealistic philosophy early in the novel, when he and Lily “ascend...the long slopes” to the heights of Bellomont, Gus and Judy Trenor’s fashionable country estate (51). As Lily mentions her definition of “success,” “to get as much as one can out of life,” Selden responds with a condescending “God forbid!” and expounds his own notion of success: “My idea of success...is personal freedom. ... [Freedom] from everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a republic of the spirit—that’s what I call success” (55). These lines reveal two important components of Selden’s philosophy. First, Selden belittles popular, capitalistic assumptions of material happiness or, what he calls, “material accidents”; in its place, he promotes more unconventional notions of spiritual satisfaction. Second, his philosophy focuses on the preeminence of self; his ideas of “personal freedom” link his republic to the individual rather than the group.

Selden’s theories echo Emerson’s nineteenth-century philosophy of spiritual self-reliance. His rhetoric resonates with Emerson’s disapproval of material culture and contention that “to stand for the private verdict against popular clamor is the office of the noble” (227); like Emerson, Selden laments that “so much human nature is used up” in social production (*House* 57). Notably, Selden sounds his philosophic yawp on a hilltop, in one of the text’s only natural settings. Lily describes the pastoral scene:

The afternoon was perfect. ... In the woody hollows of the park there was already a faint chill; but as the ground rose the air grew lighter, and ascending the long slopes beyond the high-road, Lily and her companion reached a zone of lingering summer. The path wound across a meadow with scattered trees; then it dipped into a lane plumed with asters and purpling sprays of bramble, whence, through the light quiver of ash-

leaves, the country unrolled itself in pastoral distances. ... Lily had no real intimacy with nature, but she had a passion for the appropriate and could be keenly sensitive to a scene which was the fitting background of her own sensations. The landscape outspread below her seemed an enlargement of her present mood, and she found something of herself in its calmness, its breadth, its long free reaches. (51)

While Selden and Lily never quite reach the spiritual heights of Emerson's "transcendental eye-ball"—never become "part or particle of God"—the scene is the closest we come to pastoral harmony between man and nature (Emerson 10); it is, therefore, the most apt location for Selden's Emersonian speech.

The other obvious reference in this scene is to "The Sermon on the Mount": "And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him. And he opened his mouth, and taught them..." (*Holy Bible*, Matthew 5:1-2). Not only does Lily describe the scene as an ascent up "the long slopes beyond the high-road," but the location of Selden's own sermon is called "Bellomont," the beautiful mount. In this connection, Selden becomes a Jesus figure lecturing to Lily, his eager disciple; he preaches on the depraved evils of society, on the "house of mirth," and proffers the alternate divine path: a form of Emersonian romanticism that points us toward Wharton's own vision of spirituality.

Selden's sermon ends, however, with the "remote sound, like the hum of a giant insect"; the car—a reminder of industrial modernity—interrupts their pastoral moment and, "their flight over," they descend both literally and figuratively (59). What we quickly learn, having returned from this ephemeral moment, is that we, too, must "[b]eware of false prophets" (Matthew 7:15). While Selden introduces us to Emersonian

romanticism, a closer look at his philosophy and his actions reveals fundamental problems, both with his theories and character. While Wharton applauds Selden's most basic message of spiritual fortitude, she suggests that he misreads Transcendentalism and, ultimately, represents the false Emersonian figure, a Gilded Age mutation of Emersonianism.

First, Selden claims divine knowledge and proclaims his sermon but is incapable of upholding his own commands. His plot proves that, despite his rhetoric, he "lacks infirmity of will" and is unable to exist outside of society (Emerson 276). As Lily says, "it seems to me...that you spend a good deal of your time in the element you disapprove of" (56). Selden, himself, admits that he is an "amphibious" creature but tries to maintain that, as a spectator, he can study his subject and remain a critic "on the fence" rather than a participant (56). Instead, however, he stands just far enough away to judge society and yet still enjoy all of its privileges. In fact, Selden proves worse than a participant; he becomes a social parasite who feeds off the society that he criticizes. Thus, he has an affair with Bertha Dorset; he plays off Gerty Farish's devotion to him; and he takes pleasure in his spiritual hold on Lily. And, as a spectator, Selden unknowingly becomes an irreplaceable part of the social wheel. Amy Kaplan, in *The Social Construction of American Realism*, describes the interdependent roles of social actor and audience; she tells us that in postbellum New York, the competition for class status played itself out in the form of "extravagant public spectacles" (92), in which the spectator could witness the performance and "serve as a mirror" for class power (95). In this way, Selden's pretenses of social detachment reveal both his arrogance and ignorance; while he views his role as a powerful voyeur, he actually provides a critical social function, serving to legitimate Gilded Age culture.

In addition, Selden's rhetoric reveals key diversions from Emersonian romanticism; most blatantly, Selden manipulates Emerson's philosophy to justify his own moral lassitude and avoidance of social responsibility. He openly patronizes Lily, belittling her values and lecturing her on the correct path to "personal freedom," but he fails to offer her the necessary support to translate those ideals into realities. Thus, when Lily complains that she never had anyone to "tell [her] about the republic of the spirit," Selden responds that the republic is "a country one has to find the way to one's self" (55). And, when Lily explains to Selden that she is a "*jeune fille à marier*," he retorts: "Ah, then I'm afraid we can't let you into the republic. ... There are not many married people in it" (56).

Lily immediately recognizes and attempts to point out the faultiness of Selden's logic. As critic Dale Bauer notes, in her book *Feminist Dialogics*, in this scene Lily uses her dialogue with Selden to "draw him out of his monologically closed world" (xi). Thus, she questions his seemingly undemocratic and exclusionary ideas: "Ah, you are as bad as the other sectarians.... Why do you call your republic a republic? It is a close corporation, and you create arbitrary objections in order to keep people out" (57). Selden blithely replies: "It is not *my* republic; if it were, I should have a *coup d'état* and seat you on the throne" (57); here, Selden reveals the clear contradictions in his philosophy, where what should be a communal republic amounts to a monarchy. When Selden comments that the republic is a "country one has to find the way to one's self...[and that] there are sign-posts," Lily insists: "But I should never have found my way there if you hadn't told me.... Whenever I see you, I find myself spelling out a letter of the sign—and yesterday—and last evening at dinner—I suddenly saw a little way into your republic" (55). The difference between the two characters is obvious: while Selden sees

his abstract spirituality as completely self-contained, Lily embraces a notion of spirituality that can be shared.

Selden's warped vision of self-reliance comes, in part, from his inability to acknowledge the difficulties of those who are disempowered, specifically financially dependent women and the lower classes. While not rich, Selden is, unlike Lily, a financially independent male bachelor who seems blind to basic issues of economic survival. His ignorance becomes particularly clear when he offers Ned Silverton as an example of society's frivolous waste of "good material" (57). Ironically, his notion of tragic material waste is embodied in the woman before him; as has been repeatedly noted by critics, Lily is the character in this novel whose struggle as a beautiful object proves a prime example of social waste.³² Yet, rather than recognize Lily's difficulties, Selden empathizes with another man, an idle male bachelor whose selfish relationship with Bertha Dorset will ultimately result in Lily's social downfall. Selden's comfortable social position allows him to speak glibly about what he calls "material accidents," and it blinds him to Lily's recognition, that, for an economically dependent single woman, financial stability is more than merely an "accident."

In examining Selden's relationship to Emerson, it is important to note that critics continually charge Emerson with similar faults; one may argue that, in this novel, Wharton is commenting on certain inherent problems with Emerson's romantic philosophy. For example, American Realists, reacting against their literary predecessors, criticized what they saw as Emerson's distance from historical reality, and they often questioned his presumptions of class, along with his status as self-declared Brahmin. Yet, while Selden and Emerson may share certain social privileges, they differ greatly in

³² Cynthia Griffin Woolf is one notable critic who, in her essay "Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death," makes this argument.

their visions of community. Although Emerson focused on the preservation of individualism, he did not—as many contend—disavow notions of community. Emerson’s own republic of the spirit included dedication to family, an emphasis on friendship, and emotional support of Henry David Thoreau and other Transcendentalists. He focused on ideas of “personal freedom,” but, unlike Selden, his version allowed for a *community* of individuals, dictated not by society but, instead, governed by higher laws than those created by mortal man; the binaries of community and self-reliance were not as clear-cut for Emerson as they are for Selden. Thus, in his lecture entitled “The Young American,” Emerson celebrates the socialist community; in “Friendship,” he argues that “[o]ur intellectual and active powers increase with our affection” (341); and, in “Love,” he envisions love as a “divine” sentiment that “unites [man] to his race” (327). Most importantly, in his essay “The Over-Soul,” Emerson complains that “[we] live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE” (386).

Lily complains that Selden “make[s] the things [she] has chosen seem hateful to [her]” but offers “nothing to give [her] instead” (58); Emerson, on the other hand, disapproved of society and traditional notions of success but was not simply a glib “critic...on the fence.” Selden’s republic is flawed because he rewrites ideas of Transcendentalism to justify his own moral lassitude. He neglects Emerson’s ideas of the “over-soul,” “the universal beauty,” “the eternal ONE.” Instead, his manipulation of transcendental philosophy allows him the presumption of spiritual authority but at the same time adapts itself to Gilded Age culture, where ideas of “personal freedom” simply validate self-interest and emotional detachment.

In place of Selden, Lily becomes our true Emersonian heroine; she eradicates the most problematic elements of Selden's republic and replaces emotional separatism with moral fortitude. Throughout the novel, she gains spiritual and moral growth, acquires a newfound ability for empathy, insight and respect, and becomes increasingly self-reliant and unconventional; this is the version of the republic of the spirit—which escapes the psychological trappings of the Gilded Age—that we are meant to accept as Wharton's own. In addition, rather than simply theorizing, Lily literally enacts this republic in real terms; she puts Selden's abstract theory to the test. In short, Lily's plot is the embodiment of a spiritual quest, an attempt to forge a moral and individual identity in a society that privileges materialism and conformity. Far from simply declaring a sermon on the mount, Lily becomes a full-fledged romantic figure in a very "real" world of social and material obstacles. And, as Lily attempts to locate Emersonian possibility in the Gilded Age, we discover the paradox of postbellum culture: while she achieves spiritual self-reliance, it is her moral strength that leaves her particularly vulnerable; survival outside of society, in Emerson's words, outside of "the midst of the crowd," no longer seems physically possible (263).

That Lily is the victim of a corrupt society is certainly not a new reading. Critics generally concede that this text follows Wharton's own contention that "a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys" (*Backward* 207). This quote, and the novel in general, has overwhelmingly been interpreted in feminist terms: Lily is the victim of a patriarchal society that privileges women for being ornamental objects rather than individual beings. Thus, Judith Fetterley claims that the novel is a "powerful denunciation of patriarchal culture," in which "the critical discussion" is not "carried on in terms of the 'universal' and the

‘human’” but, rather, in terms of female “social waste” (200); Linda Wagner-Martin argues that the novel is about “the turn-of-the-century New Woman” (“Novel of Admonition” 107); and Elaine Showalter states that, by the end of the text, Lily transforms herself into a “genuinely awakened woman, who fully recognizes her own position in the community of women workers” (369).

I do not wish to underestimate the importance of gender in this novel. Misogyny, gender stereotypes, and double standards all play a critical role in Lily’s struggles. I do, however, hope to emphasize that Wharton’s analysis is, first and foremost, an historical commentary; her focus is on the stifling effects of American society at the turn of the century, and her scope is far-reaching. To read this text simply as a “powerful denunciation of patriarchal culture” or to pair it with domestic fiction is to miss the mark of Wharton’s critique. In her own life, Wharton lacked feminist tendencies. She was very much of a humanitarian and was awarded the French Legion of Honor for her refugee rescue work during World War I. But, as Elizabeth Ammons acknowledges, Wharton was not an activist for women’s rights: “she held herself aloof on the question of the vote,” and “she certainly joined no women’s club” (*Edith Wharton’s Argument* 2). Her spiritual and literary mentors were almost exclusively male, and she proclaimed a dislike for the literature of her female “predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett” (Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 293). While biography should not limit our reading of Wharton’s fiction, her life suggests that her work extends beyond sole concerns of gender.

In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton examines issues of gender and class, but she does so to illustrate a larger historical and national concern; she uses Lily Bart’s plot to work through her own conflicting literary ideals of romance and realism. In *A Backward*

Glance, Wharton attempts to make sense of her oppressive youth by considering the conflict between the national romantic spirit and material history:

Looking back at that little world, and remembering the 'hoard of petty maxims' with which its elders preached down every sort of initiative, I have often wondered at such lassitude in the descendants of the men who cleared a place for themselves in a new world, and then fought for the right to be masters there. What had become of the spirit of the pioneers and the revolutionaries? Perhaps the very violence of their effort had caused it to exhaust itself in the next generation, or the too great prosperity succeeding on almost unexampled hardships had produced, if not inertia, at least indifference in all matters except business or family affairs. (55-56)

In this passage, Wharton contemplates this ideal of "clearing a place for one's self." And, in *The House of Mirth*, she questions how to live appropriately in the space one has cleared: can we transcend those "business and family affairs" and rediscover that "spirit of the pioneers and the revolutionaries," or has history rendered those ideals inaccessible? Wharton's biographical meditations reveal her interest not simply in society and gender but in society and nation.

Thus, in *The House of Mirth* we find that social waste is not simply female; it is ubiquitous. Although they may not necessarily share the same plots or suffer the same consequences, both men and women in this novel appear equally miserable. And, while Wharton sympathizes with the plight of the lower classes, she portrays tragedy and immorality at every class level of society. She shows us a system where the restrictions of society are purely democratic, spread across all ranks, from old to new money, from

working to middle class; from Gus Trenor, the depressed Wall Street banker, to Mrs. Haffen, the beaten-down charwoman, Wharton shows us a vision of America where man and even nature have become equally trapped by the same artificial, material confines. In this novel, those “business” and “family matters” have, in fact, squashed the “spirit of the pioneers and the revolutionaries.”

Importantly, in the midst of this national crisis, we are offered a female, a heroine rather than a hero, who attempts to locate a home for her self-reliant spirit. In her seminal 1981 essay “Melodramas of Beset Manhood,” Nina Baym argues that representations of the “American experience” are portrayed in American literature as “inherently male” (130); women play the roles of domesticators and men play the role of the “individual against society” (132). In *The House of Mirth*, however, it is Lily Bart who becomes the fully realized quest figure; far from a domesticator, Lily valiantly plays the role of “individual against society.”

Rather than address this seeming role reversal, critics tend to mitigate the power of Lily’s individual will and spiritual fortitude by reading the text in terms of Naturalism; in this reading, Lily becomes a victim of society, pulled by the forces of chance and fate.³³ These readings underestimate Lily’s character and the importance of her quest. While Lily may be shaped by her environment, her plot follows the vein of Realism rather than Naturalism. Not simply pulled by forces beyond her control, Lily makes critical moral choices regarding her own destiny and is the one character brave enough to enact Emerson’s vision of self-reliant individualism. It is Lily’s will, in fact, that causes her physical demise; her death becomes her sacrifice of the material body for the spirit.

³³ Among a host of critics who proffer this reading, there are three notable examples: Blake Nevius in *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*; Donald Pizer in “The Naturalism of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*”; and Carol Singley in *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*.

In *Lily Bart*, Wharton creates a postbellum, urban version of the more typically male Huck Finn figure; despite Baym's contention, her quest does, indeed, become symbolic of the "American experience," and we are asked to see Lily not simply as an oppressed woman but, on a higher plane, as a spiritual individual caught between transcendental desire and historical necessity. Thus, Lily is more than a female victim carried on by the weight of her gender; she is representative of her historical moment and of the Realist struggle to locate Emersonian romanticism in Gilded Age America.

III

The first person we see when the novel opens is Lily Bart; rather than getting an objective vision of her, however, we see her through Selden's eyes: "Selden paused in surprise. In the afternoon rush of the Grand Central Station his eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart" (5). In this opening scene, Selden becomes our subject, Lily our object, and we may assume that Selden will be our primary focalizer and our hero. Yet, we quickly realize that, rather than identify with him, we are meant to criticize his perspective. His shallow and materialistic description of Lily is particularly disturbing. He enjoys, for example, her physical features: "the modelling of her little ear, the crisp upward wave of her hair..., and the thick planting of her straight black lashes" (7). His discussion of her beauty, however, moves beyond appreciation toward misogyny:

He led her through the throng of returning holiday-makers, past swallow-faced girls in preposterous hats, and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans. Was it possible that she belonged to the same race? The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly specialized she was. ... He had a

confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her. He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. (6-7)

His comments reveal much about his perception of Lily and of women in general.³⁴

First, Selden sees Lily as an exception to the “average section of womanhood.” His vision of her is seemingly flattering, but only so much as he demeans and even dislikes women in general. Furthermore, Lily’s superiority is seen as “chiefly external” rather than spiritual; he considers her “glaze of beauty,” underneath which lies the normal “vulgar clay” of the female “herd.” His elevated vision of Lily is, therefore, cast in opposition to his insulting and misogynistic vision of women as “vulgar” and, in his use of the term “herd,” even animalistic. Finally, his description of Lily reveals certain historical ties to Gilded Age materialism. When he tells us that she “must have cost a great deal to make,” he associates himself with dehumanizing materialism and places himself at the center of a culture tied to Wall Street. His early thoughts suggest a bizarre split in his vision of Lily: a deep-seated attraction to her and yet a concomitant self-righteous attitude of disapproval and repulsion.

We see this same struggle within Selden throughout the text. Despite his seeming love for her, Selden continually avoids asking Lily to marry him. Contemporary responses to *The House of Mirth* revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the fact that Selden never marries Lily (Lewis, *Edith Wharton* 152). But, such criticism does not

³⁴ Technically, the narration is told in third rather than first person. Free indirect discourse, however, is clearly employed, and, thus, the perspective—both visual and ideological—is not that of the narrator but of Selden.

examine what Selden and Lily's failed relationship indicates. According to his own admissions, Selden's reasons for remaining a bachelor emanate from his spiritual republic, in which he says there are "not many married people" (56). Yet, while Selden would have us believe that his detachment stems from spiritual transcendence, his actions prove otherwise. During their early walk at Bellomont, Lily prods Selden and asks him quite plainly: "Do you want to marry me?" His retort is childish: "No, I don't want to—but perhaps I should if you did!" (58). As they return to the house, his defensive response reveals his fragile ego: "He drew his cigarette-case from his pocket and slowly lit a cigarette. It seemed to him necessary, at that moment, to proclaim, by some habitual gesture of this sort, his recovered hold on the actual: he had an almost puerile wish to let his companion see that, their flight over, he had landed on his feet" (59). His commitment to bachelorhood, therefore, emanates as much from egoism as from spiritual individualism. He uses his philosophy to compensate for his own social shortcomings; as he himself says, he "belittle[s] all the things [he] can't offer" her (58). His spiritual convictions become a front for his pride.

His perversion of Emersonian romance becomes most blatant at the Wellington Brys's "tableaux vivants" party. It is here that Selden comes closest to satisfying Wharton's readers and declaring his love for Lily. When he sees Lily in her own "tableau vivant," as a mute and motionless statue of Joshua Reynolds's painting "Mrs. Lloyd," he experiences a misguided awakening, where he tragically mistakes Lily's acting for spiritual transcendence. He is emotionally overpowered by her beauty:

The noble buoyancy of her attitude, its suggestion of soaring grace,
revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty that Selden always felt in her
presence, yet lost the sense of when he was not with her. Its expression

was now so vivid that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part. (106)

In this scene, Selden misreads Lily's role as a living statue, an image produced by upper-class society. He inverts Emerson's notions of the "me" and "not me"; he takes the most base, objectifying and dehumanizing vision of Lily—the ideal, social Lily—and rereads it as her "real," spiritual self. The tragedy, and the reason why most readers do not get their sentimental wish, is that Selden falls in love with a false social façade, a façade that undermines the type of natural spirit that Emerson celebrated.

Selden's hypocrisy becomes evident not only in his relationship with Lily but with two other women in the novel: Bertha Dorset and Gerty Farish. Bertha is portrayed, and even acknowledged by her friends, as a "nasty woman" (37). She is a keen materialist who exemplifies the empty, idle world of upper-class leisure life that Selden criticizes. She lacks spiritual virtues, is not self-reliant, and, in fact, depends upon the destruction of others to satisfy her selfish whims and desires. She is, by far, the most feared and "dangerous" woman in upper-class society (37); as critic Linda Wagner-Martin notes: "Bertha has power because Bertha represents the system, and whatever she does, her behavior is sanctioned by that system" ("Novel of Admonition" 33). Bertha Dorset represents the antithesis of Selden's philosophical theories of spiritual transcendence.

And yet, early in the novel, the reader learns that Selden has had an affair with this "nasty woman." Ironically, we learn of their affair only pages before encountering Selden's smug "republic of the spirit" lecture to Lily, in which he mocks her own

interaction with the Dorset social scene. His rhetoric belies his own actions. There is no sense that Selden has any spiritual connection with Bertha; in fact, there is no evidence that Bertha *has* a spirit. Selden is attracted solely to her material charm and beauty. In addition, unlike Lily's natural beauty, Bertha's good looks are artificial, acquired through financial means and leisure time. The narrator explains that "Mrs. Dorset never came down till luncheon: her doctors, she averred, had forbidden her to expose herself to the crude air of the morning" (48). Selden, who criticizes materialism, is incapable of seeing beneath the physical appearance that Bertha's wealth affords her. He becomes intimately involved with a woman who stands in stark contrast to his republic of the spirit. His secret affair with Bertha is, in short, an affair with the system; he uses society where it suits him and condemns those elements of society that are, for him, untenable. And, while we learn that this affair is over, the love letters between Bertha and Selden, which Lily later acquires and keeps throughout the novel, will act as a keen reminder of Selden's hypocrisy, a reminder that Selden enjoys all that he professes to disdain.

Although Bertha Dorset's attraction to Selden is primarily sexual and produced by upper-class ennui, Gerty Farish's love for Selden is heartfelt and genuine. Gerty is a single, middle-class working woman who, Selden seems to suggest, fits most neatly into his republic of the spirit. She is Bertha Dorset's opposite, similar only in their mutual sense of discontent. She is financially independent but poor, socially impotent, sentimental and kind, and—as an unmarried woman—is forced into emotional self-reliance. Her profession as a social worker indicates that she is a spiritual woman more interested in helping others than ameliorating her own position. In many ways, she represents the New Woman of early-twentieth-century America, the confident woman who breaks away from the subservient, dependent female mold and works to help other

women gain their independence. In this sense, Gerty's ardent attraction to Lawrence Selden seems logical; the fact that Selden often uses her as an example to Lily of an alternative route—as a way to transcend her own materialist trappings—proves that he sees Gerty as a member of his republic.

While Selden deeply respects Gerty Farish, however, he does not return her affections. Despite her spiritual accomplishments, Gerty is not considered physically attractive: "If there were compensating qualities in her wide frank glance and the freshness of her smile, these were qualities which only the sympathetic observer would perceive before noticing that her eyes were of a workaday grey and her lips without haunting curves" (70). Hard work, financial woes, and years spent in a "cramped flat" have all taken their toll on Gerty's looks (23). Although Selden censures Lily early on in the novel for calling Gerty "dingy" he, too, clearly finds her neither beautiful nor charming. It is, in fact, only when he is giddy with love for Lily that he even recognizes Gerty: "He had never before noticed that she had 'points'—really, some good fellow might do worse" (122). This tepid and patronizing acknowledgment typifies Selden's reaction to women. Just as he desires Bertha, the charming yet spiritually empty woman, so he finds Gerty, the spiritually wealthy yet unattractive woman, average and dull. Despite his anti-materialistic philosophy, Selden's own physical and material interests take precedence over his spiritual concerns.

At the beginning of the novel, Lily asks Selden about his book collection: "You collect, don't you—you know about first editions and things?" Selden responds: "As much as a man may who has no money to spend. Now and then I pick up something in the rubbish heap; and I go and look on at the big sales" (11). Selden treats women exactly as he treats his book collection. While he might "now and then...pick up

something” in the “rubbish heap,” Selden goes after the “big sales,” the beautiful, rich, and charming women of upper-class society. Selden’s own relationships with Bertha Dorset, Gerty Farish, and Lily Bart illustrate his blatant hypocrisy. The paradox of Selden’s philosophy is that women such as Lily and Gerty—who attempt to join his republic, to remove themselves from economic dependence and become spiritually and economically self-reliant—will ultimately be thrown into the “rubbish heap,” the heap of undesirable women.

Most importantly, however, Selden’s assumptions of Gerty’s situation are tragically incorrect. While she is one of the more moral and spiritually responsible characters in the novel, she is noticeably unhappy. As the narrator explains, “Miss Gertrude Farish, in fact, typified the mediocre and the ineffectual” (70). One of her main sources of unhappiness stems from her loneliness. While Gerty is respectable, she is not desirable. As Lily tells Selden, “Your coat’s a little shabby—but who cares? It doesn’t keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don’t make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman?” (12). While Selden responds “with amusement,” Lily’s comment is apt, and, in fact, Selden’s own preference for the fresh and charming Bertha over the “dingy” Gerty corroborates her observation.

Selden’s philosophy assumes that Gerty’s spiritual strength obfuscates the need for companionship or community, but it clearly does not; Gerty’s character symbolizes the emotional cost of spiritual detachment. Without companionship or community, Gerty sees “[her] future...[as] stretched out interminably, with her lonely figure toiling down it, a mere speck on the solitude” (123). Her only respite from loneliness comes,

ironically, in those rare moments when she acts as a social parasite, living vicariously through others: "Miss Farish...was accustomed, in the way of happiness, to such scant light as shone through the cracks of other people's lives" (118). Like Selden, she plays the role of spectator, but unlike Selden, who, as an attractive bachelor, is a genuinely desirable addition to social gatherings, Gerty's invitations stem from familial charity. Rather than an emblem of spiritual transcendence, Gerty represents a woman who, cast out on the margins of genteel society, has become self-reliant only by necessity. Selden's unrequited feelings toward Gerty, as well as his ignorance of her social sentiments, remind the reader what is missing in Selden's republic.

Selden's family background helps to explain his three fundamental inconsistencies: his "amphibious" social position, his problematic relationship with women, and his fear of spiritual connection (56). He appears to have been raised in an upper-middle-class family: "though many of Selden's friends would have called his parents poor, he had grown up in an atmosphere where restricted means were felt only as a check on aimless profusion" (120). His class status explains his position as a "critic...on the fence" and clarifies his own inability to completely transcend material society. Just as Selden occupies an "amphibious" position between a life of work and a life of leisure, so his family seems to have lived on the cusp of upper-class society, not wealthy enough to enjoy material ease and yet too proud to sink into middle-class mediocrity:

If their house was shabby, it was exquisitely kept; if there were good books on the shelves there were also good dishes on the table. Selden senior had an eye for a picture, his wife an understanding of old lace; ... [T]he few possessions were so good that their rarity gave them a merited

relief, and abstinence was combined with elegance in a way exemplified by Mrs. Selden's knack of wearing her old velvet as if it were new. (120)

Their ambiguous and precarious place in society is re-enacted in young Selden; like his parents, Selden illustrates a fair amount of class pride, a desire to prove that despite his need to work he can still afford the leisurely life of an upper-class gentleman. This class pride ties him to a Gilded Age mentality, one that, according to Thorstein Veblen, centers around the need to display one's ability for leisure, or the "non-productive consumption of time" (Veblen 43). Although Selden proposes that one use society "only as an escape for work" (*House* 56), his social romps not only provide an escape but also an opportunity to demonstrate his own "non-productive consumption of time." He insists on his spiritual readiness to transcend but is as tied to society as his upper-class peers.

Furthermore, narrative descriptions of Selden's mother explain his perception of women: "It had been Selden's fate to have a charming mother: her graceful portrait, all smiles and Cashmere, still emitted a faded scent of the undefinable quality" (120). The mention of cashmere subtly reveals the connection between his mother's charm and wealth; his mother, however, downplays this connection and gives Selden the impression that women are naturally charming. The narrator explains:

[H]is views of womankind...were tinged by the remembrance of the one woman who had given him his sense of "values." It was from [his mother] that he inherited his detachment from the sumptuary side of life: the stoic's carelessness of material things, combined with the Epicurean's pleasure in them. Life shorn of either feeling appeared to him a

diminished thing; and nowhere was the blending of the two ingredients
so essential as in the character of a pretty woman. (120-21)

Selden's own misguided image of women seems firmly rooted in his relationship with his mother, specifically in her conflicting "carelessness of material things" but actual "Epicurean...pleasure in them." She gives him the false notion that a woman's spiritual worth is reflected in her material beauty. And, it is for the reason that, in Lily's "tableau vivant," Selden is incapable of distinguishing the true woman from her physical ideal. Selden enjoys his romantic vision but, in the process, loses sight of the real.

Thus, Selden's "republic of the spirit" philosophy acts as a conflicted rewriting of Emersonian Transcendentalism. It is not simply that Selden lacks Emersonian underpinnings. He is one of the few characters who acknowledges and even acts as a spokesperson for spiritual values of self-reliance; and, as Lily notes, despite his enjoyment of the "great gilt cage," "he had never forgotten the way out" (45). Selden's problem amounts to fear. His gender and financial situation allow him to sit comfortably, too comfortably, "on the fence." He hides behind his romantic rhetoric, espousing spiritual values and judging others, and yet he proves incapable of relinquishing his own social privileges. His misogynistic image of women as physical and charming creatures justifies his moral self-righteousness, keeps him safely distanced from Lily, and allows him to rewrite Emersonian romance as spiritual detachment. His strong ego and pride, along with his dread of what lies outside the gilt cage, misleads him and prevents him from transcending that "joint-stock company" and fully immersing himself in any real republic of the spirit (Emerson 261).

IV

It is Lily Bart who, ultimately, comes to embody that Emersonian republic of the spirit. She translates Selden's misguided romance into a literal rendering of Emerson; specifically, she reinvests his romantic ideas with an emotional awareness of community and actually enacts this republic in her real life. In short, she infuses into his monologic romantic world a dialogic blend of both Emersonian romance *and* realism. In one sense, by the end of the novel, Lily fails; she experiences what Georg Lukács calls "transcendental homelessness," an inability to locate, in her own historical moment, a place for her spirit. On the other hand, her spiritual experiment acts as the central, heroic act of the novel. Lily's plot points us back to that "spirit of the pioneers and the revolutionaries," which Wharton honors in *A Backward Glance*.

At the beginning of the novel, Lily Bart is, like Lawrence Selden, a "victim of the civilization that produced her" (8). The narrator describes some of Lily's earliest memories:

Ruling the turbulent element called home was the vigorous and determined figure of a mother still young enough to dance her ball-dresses to rags, while the hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks. ... Even to the eyes of infancy, Mrs. Hudson Bart had appeared young; but Lily could not recall the time when her father had not been bald and slightly stooping, with streaks of grey in his hair, and a tired walk. It was a shock to her to learn afterward that he was but two years older than her mother. (25-26)

In this upper-class environment, her mother is in charge of conspicuously consuming, and her father is run ragged in the “perpetual...need of more money” (26). When her father loses all of his money, presumably in the stock market, it is as if, having failed to provide enough income for his family, he becomes valueless, and, shorn of any identity or purpose, he dies shortly thereafter. For Lily, her future is set; her mother has raised her as an ornament and a commodity: “Lily’s beauty...was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt. [Her mother] watched it jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian” (29). When faced with an unsure economic future, her mother tells her “with a kind of fierce vindictiveness: ‘But you’ll get it all back—you’ll get it all back with your face’” (25). As a result of her upbringing, Lily becomes a thorough realist who understands the truth of her mother’s words and her value to society; she tells Selden: “[Women] are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop—and if we can’t keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership” (12). At times, Lily proves rather dark in her sense of stark realism; she acknowledges, for example, that she is in “bondage to other people’s pleasure” (24) and envisions a “future of servitude to the whims of others, never the possibility of asserting her own eager individuality” (80).

Inherent, however, in her negativity is the desire for something more, for the chance to assert that “eager individuality.” Despite her keen social awareness, Lily displays a romantic yearning to escape the confines of her gilt cage. During her country walk with Selden, she reveals early signs of revolt: “there were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears. But gradually the captive’s gasps grew fainter, or the other paid less heed to them: the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger, and the

free spirit quivered for flight" (52). We see, at her core, an unconventional being, one who struggles between conflicting ideas of realism and romance. Lily's difficulty, however, is that she continually sees her momentary revolts—her visit to Selden's apartment or her pastoral ascent through Bellomont's "woody hollows"—as circumstantial events rather than products of her individual will and romantic desire for "personal freedom" (51).

It is only after Selden's "republic of the spirit" speech that Lily begins to locate her social rebellion. As Annette L. Benert notes, "Lily knows the speciousness, even the hypocrisy, of Selden's republic. Yet she cherishes this ideal as her only moral reference point" (33). Lily's dilemma, however, is that as a financially dependent woman she lacks Selden's "joyous irresponsibility" and cannot simply fly in and out of that gilt cage as he can (44); every choice she makes becomes critical in deciding both her financial and spiritual future. In book 1, Lily's plot marks her slow and wavering movement toward a republic of the spirit. We watch Lily make critical choices that solidify her quivering spirit but, at the same time, place her in increasing danger of excommunication and homelessness.

Lily's moral and spiritual shift becomes visible shortly after her trip to Bellomont. First, Lily—blackmailed by Mrs. Haffen, the charwoman—purchases Lawrence Selden and Bertha Dorset's private love letters. Although Lily, who is desperate for money, has a chance to profit by selling the letters back to Bertha, her thoughts lead her away from material concerns:

[S]he was aware only of feeling that Selden would wish the letters rescued, and that therefore she must obtain possession of them. Beyond that her mind did not travel. She had, indeed, a quick vision of returning

the packet to Bertha Dorset, and of the opportunities the restitution offered; but this thought lit up abysses from which she shrank back ashamed. (83)

While it is true that, at this point in the novel, Lily does not follow through with her plan to burn the letters, her moral judgment ultimately wins over concerns of vengeance and money.

Again, in the next scene, Lily, despite her own indebtedness, donates money to Gerty's charity, the Girls' Club: "The satisfaction derived from this act was all that the most ardent moralist could have desired. Lily felt a new interest in herself as a person of charitable instinct: she had never before thought of doing good with the wealth she had so often dreamed of possessing, but now her horizon was enlarged by the vision of a prodigal philanthropy" (88). There is a certain sarcastic undercurrent in this narration, in that Lily aggrandizes a seemingly moderate contribution. It is clear, however, that Selden's philosophy has begun to infect Lily; as the narrator tells us, Lily "found herself scanning her little world through his retina" (45).

Ironically, of course, each of these moral gestures results from the money that she has borrowed from Gus Trenor. One must question how much Lily knows when Gus offers to "make a handsome sum of money for her" (67). The narrator suggests that Lily remains willingly naïve about its source:

The haziness enveloping the transaction served as a veil for her embarrassment, and through the general blur her hopes dilated like lamps in a fog. She understood only that her modest investments were to be mysteriously multiplied without risk to herself; and the assurance that this miracle would take place within a short time, that there would be no

tedious interval for suspense and reaction, relieved her of her lingering scruples. (68)

Lily's moral hesitancy is in keeping with her wavering spiritual ethos. She unknowingly takes money from a married man and reinvests it in the morally righteous acts of buying letters and donating to charity. She tries to accommodate both her spiritual and financial needs.

It is only in the climactic scene of book 1, when Gus Trenor lures Lily to his house under false pretenses, that Lily must finally choose between economic necessity and spiritual ascendancy. In this scene, Lily is now finally confronted with the fact that her earnings have actually been payments from Gus for services not yet rendered. In this "society of irresponsible pleasure seekers," the most socially viable act would, ironically, be for Lily to play the game, become Gus's mistress, appease him, and gain both sexual and social leverage. As readers, we know that Bertha Dorset, in the same situation, would have no compunction about saving herself by easing his anger and repaying him with sexual favors.

Lily's first real moral awakening comes at this critical moment, where she not only refuses Gus's advances but experiences a new spiritual self-awareness: "She seemed a stranger to herself, or rather there were two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained" (117). Lily has always envisioned her feminine beauty as "a power for good," but she now realizes the full meaning of her mother's early words (30): her beauty is nothing more than an economic asset and sexual prize. Thus, in this scene, Lily notices "her helpless useless hands" and re-envision her social persona as "abhorrent" (116). With this recognition comes Lily's central paradox: her economic survival is, itself, "chained" to this social

persona, this “abhorrent being.” Lily must choose between character or plot, spirit or life.

That Lily immediately seeks shelter with Gerty Farish suggests her symbolic shift toward the spirit. As discussed, both Gerty Farish and Lawrence Selden seem the closest representatives of the text’s republic. The problem, however, is that neither Gerty nor Selden are capable of forging a supportive, spiritual community. We now learn that Gerty “hate[s] Lily Bart,” that she is consumed with jealousy over her relationship with Selden:

It closed with [Gerty] in the darkness like some formless evil to be blindly grappled with. Reason, judgment, renunciation, all the sane daylight forces, were beaten back in the sharp struggle for self-preservation. She wanted happiness—wanted it as fiercely and unscrupulously as Lily did, but without Lily’s power of obtaining it. And in her conscious impotence she lay shivering, and hated her friend—.

(128-29)

Gerty’s own desire for social potency prevents any sustained spiritual connection to Lily, and, thus, her asylum with Gerty proves futile.

Like Gerty, at this moment Selden illustrates his own spiritual limitations. While Lily is struggling to regain her pride at Gus Trenor’s house, Selden is searching for her at Mrs. Fisher’s dinner party. Ever since he has seen Lily in her “tableau,” Selden has been entranced and sailing on romantic visions of their bright future together. He envisions himself as Lily’s rescuer: “[H]e would lift her out of it, take her beyond!” (125).

Although he declares this determination to take her “beyond” and transcend material society, his actions prove otherwise. Returning home from Mrs. Fisher’s house, he and

Van Alstyne see Lily emerging from Gus Trenor's house; the scene is a short one: "Van Alstyne dropped his eye-glass with a low whistle. 'A—hem—nothing of this, eh, Selden? As one of the family, I know I may count on you—appearances are deceptive—and Fifth Avenue is so imperfectly lighted—.' 'Goodnight,' said Selden, turning sharply down the side street without seeing the other's extended hand" (127). This is a pivotal scene in the novel. Despite his own contention, Selden proves incapable of "separat[ing] the woman he knew from the vulgar estimate of her"(121); he judges Lily based solely on "appearances," and, instead of taking her "beyond," he runs away to Monte Carlo. At the exact moment when Lily most desperately needs Selden's faith, he is incapable of seeing the "real" Lily behind that "vulgar" social image. Thus, Selden sacrifices Lily to his own narrow-minded visions and leaves her alone to face the "Furies" (117).

V

Book 2 represents the tragic unraveling of Lily's plot as she searches to find a home for her transcendental spirit. This is the section of the novel that critics primarily treat as naturalistic. Larry Rubin, for example, argues that in book 2, "[h]aving been made what she is by forces beyond her control, she eventually falls victim to those same forces. Dogged by poverty and hounded by scandal, she is 'tossed as helplessly as a cork in the whirls and eddies of the social stream—tossed and buffeted and finally dragged under with her eyes wide open to her own helplessness'" (182). These readings all center around one critical presumption: "environment becomes the force which crushes the protagonist" (Rubin 183). There is no doubt that in book 2 Wharton condemns social constructions and proves her contention that American man has elaborately spun a "web of customs, manners, [and] culture" around himself (qtd in Nevius 64). Labeling this text naturalistic, however, is problematic. Naturalism focuses on the idea that forces of

nature, in particular fate and chance, are stronger than human will. Therefore, in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, after Hurstwood has decided to replace the money in the bank vault, he finds the door closed; unable to make that critical moral choice, he is subject to a number of random events that ultimately send him to his death. And, in Frank Norris's *McTeague*, we find our hero destroyed by his own violent and animalistic tendencies; his plot stands in strict opposition to Emerson's adage: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string" (260).

While it is true that, in book 1, society constricts Lily and, as Selden notes, acts like a "manacle...chaining her to her fate," book 2 is *defined* by Lily's rebellion (8). Unlike Wharton's infamous heroine, Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*, Lily makes critical moral choices that defy cultural determinants and divert her from her seemingly inevitable "marriage plot." Far from the forces of naturalism, Lily increasingly listens to her "latent conviction," those "spontaneous impressions" that Emerson applauds as part of self-reliance (259). And, in making these conscious choices, Lily continually both understands and accepts the consequences of her actions. Unlike Selden, Lily does not exhibit blind idealism or an inability to locate reality; she maintains a transcendental focus *despite* her knowledge of realism. Her final death reflects her transcendental homelessness and proves that "for nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure" (Emerson 264). Yet, her death does not necessarily detract from her success but, instead, reflects the power of the system she disobeys. If *The House of Mirth* is, indeed, naturalistic, Lily Bart is the one clear representative of Realism in the novel, the only individual aware and willing enough to transcend her fate.

Feminist critics are correct to note that in book 2 Lily's struggles emphasize the particular hardships of women, who must contend with issues of spiritual self-worth and

financial stability. Lily's plot reveals that Gilded Age America has no place for a woman of her specific nature, one who chooses her "quivering spirit" over the comforts of material culture. While Lily's quest reveals much about the hardships of class and gender, however, Wharton's critical scope extends further. Lily's fall down the social scale acts as a barometer of society's general malaise. Her plot includes a bevy of characters, of all classes and genders, and every one of them is either morally reproachable, spiritually defunct, or deeply unhappy. Wharton does not present us with a society in which men and the financially privileged reap happiness, rendering the disenfranchised the sole inheritors of misery; rather, Wharton shows us how this imprisoning social fabric has spread across all of America.

The first level of society that Lily falls from is the most fashionable set of the upper class: the Trenors. As Irving Howe notes, the Trenors "maintain a pretense of loyalty to traditional styles and values, even while frequently violating them" (123). Mrs. Trenor, like most of the upper-class women in this novel, seems to lack emotion of any kind; as the narrator tells us, she "exist[s] only as a hostess" and cannot "sustain life except in a crowd" (34). Her husband, Gus Trenor, is far more emotional than his wife but most frequently displays this emotion in the form of violence, expressing both anger and dismay at the "hard work" it takes to "keep the machinery running" (65). His continual, often aggressive passes at Lily suggest sexual frustration, emotional emptiness, and an unhappy marriage. In addition, while Gus and Judy Trenor have children, they are mentioned only once and appear both physically and spiritually removed from their parents: "It was Mrs. Trenor's theory that her daughters actually did go to church every Sunday; but their French governess's convictions calling her to the rival fane, and the fatigues of the week keeping their mother in her room till luncheon, there was seldom

any present to verify the fact” (42). Not only are the Trenors spiritually vacuous, but their misery suggests that their enviable social position has rendered them little in the way of contentment.

When Lily turns down Gus Trenor’s advances, she prevents any further association with the Trenors; her fall from this highest social level brings her one level down to the Dorsets, who, as Irving Howe describes, “no longer pretend to care about traditional styles and values. Bertha Dorset is a ferocious bitch, her husband a limp dyspeptic” (123). Although Judith Fetterley claims that in this novel “social waste” is female, in this relationship, as with most relationships in the text, it is in fact the husband who is literally wasted by society (200). From the first time that we meet George Dorset, we see him with his “long sallow face and distrustful eyes [, which] seemed barricaded against the expansive emotions” (94). Later, when we see those barricades come down, we witness a man so wrecked by his marriage that he literally begs Lily to help him: “He spoke pantingly, like a tired runner, with breaks of exhaustion between his words.... ‘You do see, don’t you? You understand? I’m desperate—I’m at the end of my tether. I want to be free, and you can free me. I know you can. You don’t want to keep me bound fast in hell, do you?’” (191). George Dorset represents the universal presence of despair in this society. It is not simply that this upper-class society victimizes its women; in this scene, Wharton reverses the gender roles, placing the male in the position of helpless victim begging to be rescued by his female counterpart.

George’s wife, Bertha Dorset, acts as his master; she is, indeed, a “nasty woman,” whose main source of pleasure is the perpetuation of others’ misery (37). She is described as

smaller and thinner than Lily Bart, with a restless pliability of pose, as if she could have been crumpled up and run through a ring, like the sinuous draperies she affected. Her small pale face seemed the mere setting of a pair of dark exaggerated eyes, of which the visionary gaze contrasted curiously with her self-assertive tone and gestures; so that, as one of her friends observed, she was like a disembodied spirit who took up a great deal of room. (22)

It would be impossible to measure Bertha's level of happiness because happiness requires a soul. And, it is clear that Bertha's "disembodied spirit" is nothing more than a symbolic representation of American capitalism at its worst. She is Wharton's living version of spiritual barrenness, possessing an unadulterated drive to acquire more and more material to supplant her meager existence.

Based on Bertha's character, Lily's decision to join the Dorsets on their European cruise is highly questionable. Lily, however, views it as the only possible escape from her "crushing difficulties" (153). Lily's problem is that, while she has always understood that Bertha is "dangerous" (37), her new spiritual awakening ironically makes her particularly vulnerable to Bertha's connivings; her own moral awareness shades her against the full ramifications of this selfish upper-class sect. Thus, when Bertha has her disastrous affair with Ned Silverton, all of the other characters involved understand the weight of the situation: Bertha will try to scapegoat Lily for her actions. Lily, however, cannot even perceive that the affair has taken place; when George tells her of Bertha's "dénouement," of her failure to return to the boat the previous night, Lily reveals her blindness: "*Dénouement*—isn't that too big a word for such a small incident? The worst of it, after all, is the fatigue which Bertha has probably slept off by this time" (158).

Whereas Lily has, until now, embodied a keen sense of figurative irony and blistering social awareness, she has difficulty here of thinking beyond the literal. Considering that Lily holds the proof of Bertha's affair with Selden, she is acting unusually naïve.

Lily's naïveté stems from her shift from social to moral awareness. Rather than attempt to defeat Bertha, she now empathizes with her:

[A]ll the disadvantages of such a situation were for the woman; and it was to Bertha that Lily's sympathies now went out. ... Bertha had been kind to her, they had lived together, during the last months, on terms of easy friendship, and the sense of friction of which Lily had recently become aware seemed to make it the more urgent that she should work undividedly in her friend's interest. (160)

Importantly, while Lily wants to help Bertha, Selden blames her for Lily's social failure and blindness; he asks: "What had brought her to this pass? What weakness had placed her so abominably at her enemy's mercy?" (170). Selden's response illustrates the problem with reading Lily's plot as a work of Naturalism. Instead of applauding her moral fortitude, Selden misreads her moral agency as social weakness. Ironically, this "weakness" actually symbolizes her shift from society toward a spiritual republic. Rather than profit from Bertha's mistakes, Lily "had not thought of her own situation at all: she was simply engrossed in trying to [restore] a little order in theirs" (164).

Lily's selflessness is, of course, repaid with exile. After her disastrous sailing venture, we find Lily in Mrs. Peniston's drawing room. Mrs. Peniston, we learn, has passed away and recently changed her will, leaving the majority of her estate to Grace Stepney. Lily's parents died rather early in her life, Mrs. Peniston represents her last close relative, and her death symbolizes Lily's final ties to the upper-class social structure.

Mrs. Peniston, along her brother, Lily's father, are two of the only representatives in this text of true old New York wealth, of the Knickerbocker set. Wharton, in her own life, was highly critical of new money, favoring, instead, the traditional values found in this old-monied sect. Yet, the novel portrays this dying breed—the last remnants of old New York—in the same vein as their new-monied peers, equally miserable, equally vacuous.

Mrs. Peniston and her brother, Mr. Hudson Bart, are both depressed and ineffectual. As discussed, Lily's father is described as aged beyond his years; we see him "effaced and silent," as depressed when he is wealthy as when he is impoverished (26). He is an automaton—what Elaine Showalter has recognized as a wealthy version of Herman Melville's *Bartleby* (366)—who "become[s] extinct when he cease[s] to fulfill his [economic] purpose" (*House* 28). His sister, Mrs. Peniston, despite her wealth and social position, is merely a "looker-on at life" and spends her days staring out the window to see what is "happening in the street" (32). Lily describes her home: "The house, in its state of unnatural immaculateness and order, was as dreary as a tomb, and as Lily...wandered into the newly-uncovered glare of the drawing-room she felt as though she were buried alive in the stifling limits of Mrs. Peniston's existence" (79). Mrs. Peniston holds one of the most envied positions in society, and yet, still, both she and her brother seem as dead when they are alive as when they have passed on.

Mrs. Peniston's death is important only in so far as it frees Lily from familial responsibility but renders her financially impoverished and helpless in the face of her debts. Carrie Fisher—a social climbing divorcee who, ironically, displays a level of effectiveness and spiritual fortitude not found elsewhere in society—helps to find Lily refuge with an increasingly lower set of social figures. Both the Gormers and Norma

Hatch are introduced briefly but become important representatives on our social scale. In one sense, these nominal social figurines parody their higher models; they are “caricature[s] approximating the real thing” (182). Carrie Fisher describes the Gormers’ gatherings as “a sort of continuous performance of their own, a kind of social Coney Island, where everybody is welcome who can make noise enough and doesn’t put on airs” (181). Their set attempts to approximate their social superiors by “pitch[ing] everything in a higher key”: “more noise, more colour, more champagne, more familiarity...” (182).

While the Gormers first appear solely as a New York phenomenon, Lily’s trip to Alaska with the family illustrates how far this society extends. She is invited as Mattie Gormer’s plaything, as “an expensive toy in the hands of a spoiled child” (189). Far from a pastoral alternative to urban society, Alaska is portrayed as just another Monte Carlo. The trip is described simply as “the Gormers’ tumultuous progress across their native continent” and signifies a critical shift in the history of America’s frontier (185). This trip mocks American ideals of man in nature and illustrates how the Gilded Age has, itself, become a Gilded Cage. Nature, once embodied in those “essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river the leaf,” is now the last stomping ground of the rich and spoiled (Emerson 8). As Jennie A. Kassanoff explains, *The House of Mirth* explores a world where “distinctions between the genuine and the imitative, the natural and the cultural, have all but collapsed...” (315).

Lily’s expulsion from the Gormer set and her subsequent downward shift to Norma Hatch may be seen as the cruel result of Bertha’s final attempts to poison Lily’s position in society. Yet, Lily is not simply “tossed as helplessly as a cork in the whirls and eddies of the social stream” but actually shows moral agency (Rubin 182); she plays a

critical role in deciding her own future. As Carrie Fisher tells Lily: “[The world is]...not a pretty place; and the only way to keep a footing in it is to fight it on its own terms—and above all, my dear, not alone! ... [T]he only thing to save you from Bertha is to marry somebody else” (197). Two options immediately present themselves. Carrie suggests that she marry George Dorset as a “particular form of retaliation,” and Simon Rosedale offers to marry Lily, provided she uses her incriminating letters to blackmail Bertha and reinstate her social position (197). Lily, however, opposes both marriage opportunities. Far from an act of naturalism, Lily relies upon individual will: “there had been nothing in her training to develop any continuity of moral strength...[, and yet she] had rejected Rosedale’s offer without conscious effort; her whole being had risen against it” (204). Lily’s spiritual self escapes social pressure and now echoes a crucial element of Emerson’s “Self-Reliance”: “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong is what is against it” (Emerson 262).

By contrast, Selden continually proves incapable of making any “independent, genuine verdict” (Emerson 261); during her fall down the social scale, he purposefully avoids Lily. She notices his absence and feels it “as [a] chief bitterness” of her social exile (216). Selden justifies his emotional and physical distance based on her friendship with the Gormers, but the narrator suggests that Selden’s reason is far more selfish: “It was much simpler for him to judge Miss Bart by her habitual conduct than by the rare deviations from it which had thrown her so disturbingly in his way; and every act of hers which made the recurrence of such deviations more unlikely, confirmed the sense of relief with which he returned to the conventional view of her” (212). His “conventional view” of Lily allows him to perpetuate his role as indifferent spectator and reinforces our

vision of him as the false Emersonian hero. His so-called philosophy of self-reliance and emotional separation amounts to a philosophy of self-concern.

Lily, meanwhile, remains the true Emersonian hero, sacrificing her financial and social security by rejecting George Dorset's and Simon Rosedale's marriage propositions. She does this, despite the fact that her choice pushes her one step further down the social ladder into the position of secretary for Norma Hatch, "the wealthy divorcee who lives in a chaos of indolence, forever a prey to sharpers and schemers" (Howe 123). It is here that Selden finally visits Lily but only with the intention of criticizing her job with the social climber. While Selden's intentions may seem honorable, his approach and execution are problematic. In this scene, he acts in an emotionally reserved manner, fearful that Lily might "attach...a personal significance to his visit" (216); he is so anxious to appear emotionally indifferent that he is incapable of acknowledging her very real concerns. He manufactures his own romantic narrative; he patronizingly claims that "starvation is not [her] only alternative" and suggests that she "contrive a life together" with Gerty (218). Clearly blind to Gerty's own unhappiness and social desires, his suggestion amounts to a prison sentence, a life for Lily that deviates far from any republic of the spirit.

Lily sees through Selden's presumptuous behavior and, in fact, points him toward his hypocrisy: "My relation to Mrs. Hatch is one I have no reason to be ashamed of. She has helped me to earn a living when my old friends were quite resigned to see me starve" (218). Ironically, however, the next chapter immediately begins: "Look at those spangles, Miss Bart—every one of 'em sewed on crooked" (219). In an exceptional narrative juxtaposition, Wharton takes her readers directly from Selden and Lily's meeting and thrusts us into the millenary factory where Lily is now employed

sewing spangles on hats. Once again, Lily accepts Selden's advice even though she knows it is flawed. Selden becomes a reminder of her own romantic desires; he feeds her independent spirit and prods it forward.

Many critics romanticize Lily's role as a hat-trimmer and either imply or state outright that these women are spiritually superior to their upper-class contrasts; thus, Elaine Showalter envisions Lily's new position as a "genuinely awakened woman, who fully recognizes her own position in the community of women workers" (370), and Wai-Chee Dimock says that Wharton grafts "her ideal on a lower social order, the working class" (389). When we descend to this final social caste, however, we find women who are as enmeshed in the social structure as their upper-class sisters. Physically, they're described as "dull and colourless" and prove thoroughly envious of the more colorful upper classes. Thus, they find their joy and comfort in living vicariously through the lives of those women whose hats they trim:

It was the strangest part of Lily's strange experience, the hearing of these names [the Trenors and the Dorsets], the seeing the fragmentary and distorted image of the world she had lived in reflected in the mirror of the working-girls' minds. She had never before suspected the mixture of insatiable curiosity and contemptuous freedom with which she and her kind were discussed in this underworld of toilers who lived on their vanity and self-indulgence. Every girl in Mme. Regina's work-room knew to whom the headgear in her hands was destined, and had her opinion of its future wearer, and a definite knowledge of the latter's place in the social system. That Lily was a star fallen from that sky did not, after the first stir of curiosity had subsided, materially add to their interest in her.

She had fallen, she had “gone under,” and true to the ideal of the race, they were awed only by success—by the gross tangible image of material achievement. (223)

As Dale Bauer notes, these “hat-trimmers have internalized the ideals of the authoritative cultural discourse” (120). And, as hat trimmers for the rich, they become an important part of the social wheel: they survive based on the husbands’ Wall Street earnings and supply ornaments for their rich wives. They act as the gaping mob, justifying and enabling conspicuous consumption. The suggestion, therefore, that these women act as Wharton’s ideal, that they offer a communal alternative to competitive female society or act as an escape from Gilded Age culture, blatantly overlooks Wharton’s searing analysis of these women and their own material desires.

Even more than these factory workers, however, critics continually sentimentalize another working-class woman, Nettie Struther. We meet Nettie late in the novel when Lily, who has by now lost her job as a hat-trimmer and become virtually homeless, rests in Bryant Park. Nettie sees her sitting on a bench and approaches her. We learn that Lily’s earlier financial contributions to the Girls’ Club have rescued this “thin shabby figure” from tuberculosis and that Nettie has since closely followed Lily’s social career (243). Nettie is often read as Wharton’s social alternative because, despite her lack of money and beauty, she seems relatively content: “Nettie Struther’s frail envelope was now alive with hope and energy” (243). She has gained this “hope and energy” from the love, support, and faith of her husband, George. Critics see this supportive marriage, along with Nettie’s maternal nature, as evidence of her ideal,

spiritual status.³⁵ Carol J. Singley, for example, argues:

Wharton offers her heroine a singular form of domestic shelter in Nettie Struther's kitchen.... The scene is reminiscent of those found in sentimental novels by nineteenth-century writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, and Louisa May Alcott, and the encounter between the two women is suggestive of the strength of female bonds and the restorative properties of home and hearth—qualities hailed in nineteenth-century domestic fiction as antidotes to a callous, materialistic world. (12)

Finally, Elaine Showalter tells us that "*The House of Mirth* ends not only with a death but with the vision of a new world of female solidarity, a world in which women like Gerty Farish and Nettie Struther will struggle hopefully and courageously" (370).

The problem is that these critics are searching for an ideal that Wharton simply does not offer. Nettie Struther is as tied to upper-class culture as her hat-trimming peers. The stock market, as David Stinebeck argues, is the "one institution that is responsible for virtually everyone's fate in *The House of Mirth*" (91). Nettie is no exception. Her recovery from tuberculosis depends almost entirely on Lily's own social fortunes: "The episode of Nettie[s]...timely rescue from disease had been one of the most satisfying incidents of her connection with Gerty's charitable work. She had furnished the girl with the means to go to a sanatorium in the mountains: it struck her now with a peculiar irony that the money she had used had been Gus Trenor's" (243). In a symbolic sense, Nettie's very existence depends upon the most demeaning social incident in Lily's life. Lower-class survival relies on the commerce and charity of upper-class materialism. In return, the lower classes worship and envy upper-class culture. We

³⁵ Lori Merish makes this argument in "Engendering Naturalism: Narrative Form and Commodity Spectacle in U.S. Naturalist Fiction."

learn, for example, that Nettie idealizes Lily. When Lily tells Nettie that she has been “unhappy—in great trouble,” Nettie responds: “*You* in trouble? I’ve always thought of you as being so high up, where everything was just grand. Sometimes, when I felt real mean, and got to wondering why things were so queerly fixed in the world, I used to remember that you were having a lovely time, anyhow, and that seemed to show there was a kind of justice somewhere” (243). Nettie’s naïveté becomes almost parodic when we discover that she has named her baby “Marry Anto’nette,” after an actress in a play that reminds her of Lily (244). Instead of “gently bring[ing] Lily into the chain of human generation,” as Gloria Erlich suggests, the baby’s name symbolically reflects Nettie’s own envy, an emotion that promises to be reproduced in her lower-class daughter (65).

It is important to emphasize that Wharton applauds the intimacy and spiritual companionship reflected in George and Nettie’s marriage. Lily herself praises Nettie’s marriage and notes:

All the men and women she knew were like atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance: her first glimpse of the continuity of life had come to her that evening in Nettie Struther’s kitchen. The poor little working-girl who had found strength to gather up the fragments of her life, and build herself a shelter with them, seemed to Lily to have reached the central truth of existence. It was a meagre enough life, on the grim edge of poverty, with scant margin for possibilities of sickness or mischance, but it had the frail audacious permanence of a bird’s nest built on the edge of a cliff—a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss. (248)

Wharton may very well share Lily's vision and, in this passage, seems to suggest the importance of love and community in forging a spiritual existence.

We go too far, however, to say that, in *Nettie*, Wharton gives us her idealized alternative of a woman who escapes from the strictures of society. This argument falls flat when we examine another working class woman in the novel, one who does, ultimately, succumb to that "sickness and mischance." Nettie can be seen as a younger, more fortunate image of Mrs. Haffen, the char-woman who blackmails Lily with Selden and Bertha's love letters. We learn, early in the novel, that an illness and operation have left Mrs. Haffen and her family without money or food for survival. Like Nettie, she too exhibits maternal tendencies, worrying about the safety of her husband and children. But, rather than represent the "central truth of existence," Mrs. Haffen's "sickness and mischance" have resulted in a thorough lack of scruples; as she admits when she blackmails Lily: "I ain't got no other way of raising money, and if we don't pay our rent tomorrow night we'll be put out. I never done anythin' of the kind before..." (83). The gender, class, and social connections between Nettie and Mrs. Haffen suggest that Wharton avoids the easy ideal, the panacea, to Gilded Age society. Rather than the ultimate New Woman ideal, Nettie acts as a final rung on the social ladder, the last measure of society's general malaise.

VI

In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton endorses Emerson's contention that "[s]ociety everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater" (261). In this novel, however, Wharton extends Emerson's assault on society because she presents us

with a vision of America, where, by 1905, there is no alternative, nowhere to avoid that “joint-stock company.” Lily becomes our spiritual alternative, our only image of a true self-reliant individual, and yet her plot keenly portrays her transcendental homelessness. She locates the spirit but lacks the republic, the country to which she can escape. “Beyond”—the symbolic insignia on her stationary—simply does not exist.

Lily’s struggle is best summed up by examining two contiguous scenes at the end of the novel. By this time in the text, Lily is unemployed, has no job prospects, and spends much of her time walking the streets of New York City. There, she runs into Simon Rosedale, a critical character in the text, often overlooked by critics or discussed solely in terms of his status as Jew. His race is obviously important but primarily in terms of how it solidifies his role as outsider.³⁶ As a Jew, Rosedale lacks the social privilege of Lawrence Selden, and he is, therefore, a social realist who understands that, just as he is valued for his money, an upper-class woman is valued for her ornamentality. In this way, Rosedale acts as Selden’s antithesis. While they are the only two characters who seem to truly love Lily, they are physically and culturally opposites. While Selden represents the blind idealist, so caught up in his romantic vision that he overlooks Lily’s very real struggles, Rosedale is the pure realist, the character who, as Gloria Erlich wisely states, is an “almost omniscient observer” (73). Rosedale’s unadulterated realism allows him to distinguish between objective truth and social fiction; thus, despite his purely materialist values and his business-like marriage proposition to Lily, he ultimately proves a more sensitive and understanding man than the intellectual philosopher.

³⁶ This is not to say that anti-Semitism does not exist in the text. Rosedale’s negative character, as the money-grubber, is clearly the product of early-twentieth-century American and, more specifically, Wharton’s anti-Semitism. And, it can be argued that Rosedale’s race is used in such a way as to highlight Selden’s own emotional poverty: even the “money-grubbing Jew” is more understanding and supportive than him.

It is for this reason that Lily reveals the true story of her debts to Rosedale, because she understands that he “was the fitting person to receive and transmit her version of the facts” (228). Free from Selden’s idealism, Rosedale has a greater capacity to empathize with her. When Lily tells him that she is out of work, for example, he responds: “‘Out of work—out of work! What a way for you to talk! The idea of your having to work—it’s preposterous.’ He brought out his sentences in short violent jerks, as though they were forced up from a deep inner crater of indignation. ‘It’s a farce—a crazy farce,’ he repeated...” (233). Rosedale’s response reflects a genuine level of concern for Lily, “a rather helpless fidelity of sentiment, which seemed to be struggling through the hard surface of his material ambitions” (234). He asks Lily to reconsider their “business arrangement,” to use her proof of Bertha and Selden’s affair to reclaim her social position and to marry him (233). His offer is crude and unfeeling, but, compared to Selden’s blindness, his honest realism and ability to see the truth is refreshing. The difficulty with Rosedale, of course, is that while he reinforces the importance of realism, he lacks any romantic imagination. Lily’s story emits sympathy from Rosedale, but his social ambitions never falter. He is as incapable of taking Lily “beyond” as Selden.

In the scene immediately following Lily’s meeting with Rosedale, we find her struggling with her central moral crisis: whether to embrace her romantic spirit or accept material reality. Ultimately, Lily decides to accept Rosedale’s offer; she realizes that she cannot survive in the working world and that spiritual transcendence realistically amounts to little in terms of her material stability. On her way to the Dorset house to bribe Bertha, she passes by Selden’s apartment and feels, yet again, drawn in by his spiritual influence: “It was strange to find herself passing his house on such an errand.

She seemed suddenly to see her action as he would see it—and the fact of his own connection with it, the fact that, to attain her end, she must trade on his name, and profit by a secret of his past, chilled her blood with shame” (237). She decides to visit him and, as her desire to live up to Selden’s ideals mounts, she burns the letters, her only remaining asset, that symbolic embodiment of “her old self” (241). Not a naturalistic fall from grace, here Lily employs individual will in order to free herself from her fate as a material ornament. She chooses romance in the face of realism.

This scene is important, however, not only for Lily’s actions but for Selden’s response. With the destruction of Selden’s letters, Lily sacrifices her final chance to save herself from poverty. Yet, while she exhibits moral fortitude, he utterly fails her. Selden’s problem is that, while he points Lily toward romance, he lacks any sense of realism. He manages to judge and patronize Lily but is so far removed from reality that he is incapable of actually helping her. Thus, at the exact moment when Lily throws the letters in the fire, Selden does not see her all-important act; instead, he notices how thin her hands look against the rising light of the flames: “He saw too, under the loose lines of her dress, how the curves of her figure had shrunk to angularity; he remembered long afterward how the red play of the flame sharpened the depression of her nostrils, and intensified the blackness of the shadows which struck up from her cheekbones to her eyes” (241). Selden’s blindness is made all the more poignant by the fact that he is too busy focusing on her loss of beauty, on the physical effects of her growing poverty, to notice her selfless act. Selden’s vision of Lily is even more disturbing when one remembers his earlier blithe comment that “starvation [was] not [her] only alternative” (218). Starvation is now actually an important concern for Lily.

At two earlier points in the novel, Selden has reveled in Lily's weakness. During their walk at Bellomont, he notes that "emotional...weakness had become the most interesting thing about her" (55). Again, at the Van Osburgh wedding: "The appeal of [Lily's] helplessness touched in him, as it always did, a latent chord of inclination" (75). Selden has had an almost perverse interest in his ability to affect Lily's composure. Yet now, when the physical effects of her weakness and growing frailty are real and severe, he is not amused but, instead, feels "a rising tinge of embarrassment" (238). That Lily has actually sacrificed her material strength, her beauty and charm, to follow his republic is unpleasant for him; his romantic vision has never accounted for these social truths. The reality of her situation makes him uncomfortable and, rather than support her moral and spiritual development, he represses the truth and, thus, fails her. His ahistorical romantic vision blinds him to the reality of her historical moment.

In this scene, Wharton actually reverses stereotypical gender roles. While Selden has always envisioned himself as Lily's rescuer, taking her "beyond the ugliness, the pettiness, the attrition and corrosion of the soul," it is Lily who plays this heroic figure (122). She sacrifices her own social position and financial survival in order to shield Selden from the hard truth that he, our false prophet, is too weak to bear. Lily replaces Selden as the spiritual prophet, a role Nina Baym suggests has been reserved for males, and stoically accepts the consequences. Unlike Rosedale, who represents pure realism, and Selden, who represents pure romance, Lily is the true Realist who combines a romantic vision with the courage to accept and address history. She offers us a double-voiced discourse, an alternative to the two monologic male characters.

And yet, despite her heroic efforts, at the end of the novel, she dies. Critics continually argue over whether Lily's death, induced by an overdose of chloral, is

intentional or accidental. In our need to find a tidy ending, we tend to emphasize Lily's last thoughts—either of the “word” that she wants to tell Selden or “Nettie Strether's child...lying on her arm”—in order to discover Wharton's final message (251). Her death, however, is not tidy—“slowly the thought of the word faded”—because it suggests that Lily can have no “real” end (251). After her death, the text, like reality, continues: “The next morning rose mild and bright, with a promise of summer in the air” (251). Lily's quest has resembled Christian's in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and her search for righteousness and death feels largely allegorical. In this novel, however, there is no Celestial City, no easy word or neat maternal message. In order to locate Emersonian romance, Lily literally has to transcend material reality.

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton tells us that her last page “is always latent in [her] first” (208). It is, therefore, appropriate that this novel ends with Selden alone in Lily's room, envisioning her much as he did in the first pages. In attempting to make sense of her death, he constructs another romantic narrative to exculpate himself and secure his complacency. He comforts himself with the thought that their separation was caused by a mixture of society and fate:

He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart; since his very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had increased his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically. But at least he had loved her—had been willing to stake his future on his faith in her—and if the moment had been fated to pass from them before they could seize it, he saw now that, for both, it had been saved out of the ruin of their lives. (255)

Selden's reading is problematic on several levels. First, his mention of "faith" and "love" is highly ironic; his faith in and love for Lily reach their pinnacle when she is a mute "tableau" and fail her when she most desperately needs him. Contrary to his vision, it is precisely this lack of faith that has proved his greatest weakness.

More importantly, however, Selden refuses to take any credit for their ruined lives. Instead, as Frances L. Restucchia notes, in this scene "Selden interprets Lily's story as a romantic tragedy" (40). Like those critics who mitigate Lily's fortitude by reading this text as naturalistic, Selden, similarly, mitigates his own failure by blaming her death on deterministic forces; he uses naturalism as a false romantic narrative. As discussed, far from deterministic, Lily's plot emerges from her strong will and, ironically, Selden's weakness. In a letter to her friend Sara Norton, Edith Wharton labeled Lawrence Selden a "negative hero" (qtd. in Lewis, *Edith Wharton* 155). "Negative hero," ultimately, appears the proper category for Selden. He is a well-meaning, intellectual man who truly believes in the value of his spiritual philosophy. And yet, his philosophy mistakes self-reliance for self-concern and the role of the social critic for spiritual lassitude. In Selden, Wharton illustrates the most dangerous elements of unguarded romanticism and the need to temper romance with realism.³⁷

³⁷ Interestingly, Wharton is not the only Realist author who reserves the role of the misguided romantic for a man. As will be discussed in the next chapter, we find a similar gender dynamic in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*; in that novel, Jim Burden plots his future—like Selden—as a lawyer in the East but, rather than accept his choices, blames his spiritual failings on larger, deterministic forces. In place of each of these men, in both *The House of Mirth* and *My Ántonia*, it is a woman who becomes the text's representative of spiritual heroism. Critics such as Nina Baym, who have assumed that this heroic role is reserved for men, overlook an interesting phenomenon of Gilded Age society. During this period, Wall Street replaced the frontier as the symbolic location of masculine virility; the male quest moved from the spiritual to the material realm. Thus, while Lawrence Selden's and Jim Burden's gender and class allow them to profess their spiritual leanings blithely, they hide behind ideas of determinism to validate their participation in mainstream culture and justify their complacency. Lily Bart and Ántonia Shimerda lack this privilege; as women, they must address the spiritual inconsistencies that Selden and Burden continually avoid. Their plots become both difficult and tortuous, but their inability to play that "amphibious" role renders them stronger proponents of spiritual romanticism and Emersonian heroism.

Thus, while Lawrence Selden represents our “negative” or ineffectual hero who substitutes a troubled philosophy for the courage to act, Lily Bart is the character in *The House of Mirth* who carries Wharton’s central theme: that Realism is neither a disavowal of romantic Emersonian philosophy nor a facile rejection of history. Rather, Realism is about making difficult choices between romance and realism, specifically between Emersonian desire and history. Lily’s plot revolves precisely around these difficult choices. For this reason, it is misguided to label Lily’s plot naturalistic, to see her simply as a female “victim” (Brown 66), or to envision her death as symbolic of her spiritual “failure” (Olin-Ammentorp 241). The text repudiates each of these claims. Rather than a failure, Lily is the only truly successful character in the text, the only character who has the courage to place character before plot and heroically seek Emersonian individualism in the postbellum world.

Chapter Four
Willa Cather: *My Ántonia*

The world exists for the education of each man. . . . He should see that he can live all history in his own person. He must sit solidly at home, and not suffer himself to be bullied by kings or empires, but know that he is greater than all the geography and all the government of the world; he must transfer the point of view from which history is commonly read, from Rome and Athens and London to himself, and not deny his conviction that he is the court, and if England or Egypt have any thing to say to him, he will try the case; if not, let them for ever be silent. . . . 'What is History,' said Napoleon, 'but a fable agreed upon?'

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History"

I

How should Willa Cather figure in a discussion of American literary history?

Does *My Ántonia* belong in a discussion of American Realism? Critics disagree over her place in literary history and have alternately placed her within the traditions of Romance, Realism, Naturalism, Impressionism, and Modernism. James Woodress, one of Cather's many biographers, for example, claims that Cather was a "devoted Romantic" (386). Alternately, John J. Murphy tells us that in *The Road Home* he "credits Cather with combining both realistic and naturalistic traditions" (*Critical Essays* 16). David Stouk asserts that Cather's literature "had its roots in those large movements in the arts in the late nineteenth-century—impressionism and symbolism" (52). And, Linda Wagner-Martin specifically marks *My Ántonia* as a "classic modernist text" (*The Modern American Novel* 16).³⁸ Janis P. Stout sums up these contradictory readings when she states that

³⁸ Her use of *My Ántonia* is particularly telling as the novel was one of Cather's earlier texts, published before the height of American Modernism.

“[L]ong regarded as a romantic realist, Willa Cather has in recent years also been read as a modernist, or more precisely a minimalist modernist” (168).³⁹

Why is Cather such a slippery literary figure? Why do critics—as Joan Acocella has noted—have such a hard time integrating her into a specific literary discourse?⁴⁰ Critical disagreement in Cather studies reflects, in part, her historical breadth; she wrote her first published short story in 1892, at the height of American Realism, and her last in 1945, after World War II when Modernism was already giving way to Postmodernism. Yet, this disagreement also stems from what scholars note as the elusive quality of Cather’s life and literature. As Hermione Lee tells us: “Like the image of the rock which she places at the centre of many of her books, she is a resistant subject, even an obstructive one. When you set out to write about her, you feel she would not have liked what you are doing, and would not have like you either” (3). Susan J. Rosowski tells us that *My Antonia*, in particular, “defies analysis, a quality critics often note when beginning a discussion of it” (*The Voyage Perilous* 75).

I begin my own discussion of *My Antonia* with a similar admission, not to temper my reading but, on the contrary, to insist that the text be discussed in relation to a very specific moment in American literary history: late American Realism.⁴¹ When one reads through the history of criticism on *My Antonia*, one is continually struck by the overwhelming insistence on the text’s ahistorical, mythical qualities. The novel’s elusive elements become reconfigured as evidence of a romantic parable. Thus, *My Antonia* is

³⁹ The use of contradictory and qualifying adjectives (“romantic realist” and “minimalist modernist”) accentuates the conflicting nature of these critical accounts.

⁴⁰ Joan Acocella outlines this argument in her 1995 *New Yorker* article “Cather and the Academy.” Her specific discussion surrounds what she sees as a forced attempt by feminist and queer scholars to pin Cather down as a feminist and lesbian writer.

⁴¹ I acknowledge that, in attempting to pin her down, Cather would very likely “not have liked what...[I am] doing, and would not have like...[me] either.”

most frequently read as a timeless portrayal of the American pastoral, as what James E. Miller labels a “commentary on the American experience” (112), Robert E. Scholes describes as “the myth of Adam in America” (19), and Harold Bloom claims is “an intense vision of a lost America” (1).⁴² Since its publication, most readings of *My Ántonia*—whether symbolic, feminist, queer, or even new historicist—assume the centrality of those two fundamental American myths: that myth of romantic possibility, which R.W.B. Lewis outlines in *The American Adam*, and the myth of loss, described by Leo Marx as the metaphor of the “machine in the garden.”⁴³ Even where Cather critics label *My Ántonia* romantic, realistic, naturalistic, impressionistic, or modernist, they still

⁴² While these critics—Miller, Scholes and Bloom—tend to reflect the “myth and symbol” school of criticism, one notes similar readings of *My Ántonia* throughout its critical history. Critical claims of Cather’s ahistoricism begin as early as the 1920s and 30s, when Marxist critics such as Granville Hicks complained of, what Hicks saw as, Cather’s indifference to contemporary life; he tells us, for example that “Miss Cather has never once tried to see contemporary life as it is; she sees only that it lacks what the past, at least in her idealization of it, had. Thus she has been barred from the task that has occupied most of the world’s great artists, the expression of what is central and fundamental in her own age” (440).

While New Critics of post-War America tended to ignore Cather’s work, the “myth and symbol” school of criticism—largely of the Cold War period—found much to say about *My Ántonia*. Like Miller, Scholes, and Bloom, these critics disagreed with arguments made by earlier Marxist critics. Although they generally acknowledged, as did Marcus Cunliffe, that Cather “stood apart” from her historical moment, they reaffirmed her importance—denied to her by critics such as Hicks—by celebrating the text’s relationship to fundamental, romantic tropes (23). Their project is most aptly spelled out by Amy Kaplan in *The Social Construction of American Realism*. She claims that these writers were attempting to build a national literature by “deliberately establishing [an]...alternative to F.R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition of English Novelists*...” (2).

Later, feminist and queer readings of the 1970s would counter claims made by critics such as Cunliffe, who argued that “Cather did not stake out a claim for herself as a woman writer” (24). These new scholars tended to focus on the importance of gender and sexuality in the text, but they did so, still, at the expense of history. Readings such as those by Susan J. Rosowski, Sharon O’Brien, and Mary Panizza Carden, for example, maintain this same mythological angle but claim that, as Carden tells us, the text “recasts the starring role in the national romance with pioneering women...” (295); here, the perspective shifts, but the reading still centers around the importance of myth in the novel.

Even more recent New Historicist readings have reinforced the text as immutable and mythic; in *Willa Cather in Context*, for example, Guy Reynolds ties Cather’s novels to the Progressive Era of 1890–1920 but grafts that reading back onto ideas of archetypes and myths; thus, he states that Cather “writes myth into her novels, self-consciously foregrounding a symbolic parable-like form of story-telling” (20). Although Cather critics continually alter the lens through which they examine *My Ántonia*, their focus still tends to remain primarily ahistorical.

⁴³ Thus, while Miles Orvell, for example, is one of the few critics to recognize within *My Ántonia* Cather’s use of the realist style, he too links her realism back to these myths by associating her “functionalist aesthetic[s]” with an “aesthetic of pastoral simplicity” (38).

tend to decontextualize the novel by grounding it in national, archetypal myths and, in doing so, mystify rather than clarify the novel's place in literary studies.⁴⁴

One poignant example of this mystification involves critical assumptions about the text's historical setting. Most readings place the text at the cusp of modernity, as an epic about lost potential. According to these assumptions, the story begins with promises of pastoral possibility, before technology has reared its reaping hook, and ends after the machine has, indeed, raped the garden. The actual historical placement of the text, however, illustrates fundamental problems with this assumption. One might argue that a novel such as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—set in the 1840s—retreats to this period of pastoral purity. Jim Burden's story, however, begins in 1885 and takes us to 1916 (Giannone 84). By 1885, the year *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was published, the machine had not only been introduced but had fully invaded the garden; it is for precisely this reason that Twain sets his text in antebellum, agrarian America. By the start of *My Antonia*, the promise of an agrarian wilderness and new world possibility had disintegrated in the American consciousness. Alfred Kazin claims that the 1880s and 90s were defined by "impending change [that] became almost oppressive in its vividness" (xxii). Just eight years before Frederick Jackson Turner would label the frontier closed, by 1885 Americans had already begun to acknowledge that irretrievable sense of loss.

One might simply assume that Cather overlooked historical accuracy, that, having herself been born in 1873, she was not fully aware of the historical complexities of her childhood America. This notion is sharply called into question, however, when we see Jim, in the first pages of the text, arrive as a young boy in Nebraska on the

⁴⁴ To mythologize, I would argue, is by definition an attempt to mystify, to imbue a work with mysterious, cryptic qualities.

transcontinental railroad. Perhaps the most important symbol of the “machine in the garden,” the transcontinental railroad simply doesn’t factor into a text seemingly poised in the heart of a golden era. Rather than place her text during a period of ahistorical romantic idealism, Cather locates the story after the Civil War, after the influx of modern technology, after the Homestead Act, after the railroad and, thus, at the end of the pioneering period. She sets the story during the heart of American Realism, during that time when Americans were, indeed, facing facts, not escaping from them. To assume that Cather was simply idealizing 1885 America would be to accept her as a rather naïve writer.

Cather was very clearly, however, not a naïve writer. *My Antonia*, and Cather’s literature in general, reveals a profound awareness of history and of the individual’s constantly shifting relationship to his environment. While the novel incorporates mythology and encompasses, as I will argue, fundamental elements of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s philosophies, the text is not a timeless “commentary on the American experience” but rather a commentary on a specific moment in American history. *My Antonia* should be read in terms of its engagement with this historical moment. By accepting Cather as “a resistant subject, even an obstructive one,” we miss the significant contextual element of the text and overlook its relationship to American literary history.⁴⁵ In fact, the novel, both in terms of its style and its theme, reflects many of the

⁴⁵ It is essential to recognize one recent study that links Cather to American Realism; volume 33, number 2 of *American Literary Realism*—published in 2001—is dedicated to, in the words of Susan J. Rosowski, “trac[ing]... Willa Cather’s life-long engagement with issues of representation identified with the literary school of realism” (95). While these articles *do* work toward making this important connection, however, in discussing these “issues of representation,” they focus more on Cather’s aesthetics than on her use of theme; in addition, none of these articles focus on *My Antonia*. Finally, in certain articles, there remains a tendency to qualify Cather’s relationship to the literary movement by still insisting on her overwhelmingly elusive, indefinable qualities. Janice P. Stout tells us, for example, that “[i]f literary labeling is risky with regard to Willa Cather, it is especially so when the label being applied is that of realism. Indeed, the elusiveness of the term ‘realism’ might well be seen as parallel to the elusiveness of Cather herself” (169).

tenets that Realist writers such as William Dean Howells and Henry James had earlier highlighted. Including *My Antonia* in a discussion of American Realism not only illuminates meaning in the text but ultimately sheds light on the movement itself.

II

Biographers don't hesitate to point out Willa Cather's distaste for Realism. They tell us that she spoke out against the literary philosophies of Howells, "blamed...[him] for being too tame" (Murphy, *The Road Home* 2-3), "thought him something of a pompous ass," and complained of his literary style that "[h]e might as well write a detailed account of how he had the measles and the whooping cough" (Woodress 107). We also know, however, that Cather both strongly admired and was influenced by Henry James and Edith Wharton. In one of her early journalist columns, for example, she labels James "that mighty master of language and keen student of human actions and motives" and reports that he is the only "English-speaking author who is really keeping his self-respect and sticking for perfection" (qtd in Woodress 108). Furthermore, we learn that she read Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* at least twenty times and listed it as one of "three American books which have the possibility of a long, long life" (qtd. in Orvell 31). While Cather may have disliked what Frank Norris complained of as Howells's "teacup tragedies," she often deferred to the work of other literary Realists and was highly engaged with this historical period.⁴⁶

While scholars tend to emphasize Cather's *critiques* of Realism, few analyze how she wrote *within* the literary movement. Cather's own literary criticism, in fact, marks her as a spokesperson for Realism. In an early 1894 article on Henrik Ibsen, for example,

⁴⁶ Specifically, Norris lamented the minuteness of Realism, which he described as "the drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner" (278).

Cather tells us that “Realism is a protest against lies” and praises Ibsen’s ability to “perceive [these] lies” (qtd. in Colglazier 99-100). In addition, Cather wrote several other articles in which she supported Realism and, not unlike Howells, attempted to map out its stylistic and thematic properties. In her essay “The Novel D  meubl  ,” for example, she discusses common misreadings of realism and tells us how the literary style *should* be defined:

There is a popular superstition that ‘realism’ asserts itself in the cataloguing of a great number of material processes, the methods of operating manufactories and trades, and in minutely and unsparingly describing physical sensations. But is not realism, more than it is anything else, an attitude of mind on the part of the writer toward his material, a vague indication of the sympathy and candour with which he accepts, rather than chooses, his theme? (37)

Cather was more interested in describing character rather than “material processes” and in presenting “scene by suggestion rather than by enumeration” (“The Novel” 40); in this sense, she links herself more closely to James’s method of realism than to Howells’s “enumeration,” for example, of a grasshopper. Her comments, specifically regarding the author’s relationship to theme, remind us of James’s own critical discussions of literary style. Like Cather, James accepts this natural relationship between author and theme and, in his Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, outlines how theme “grow[s]” out of the soil of the “author’s prime sensibility” (6); Cather supports this same organic component of writing. In “The Novel D  meubl  ,” she establishes herself as a proponent of realist aesthetics and becomes an important link in the development of American Realism.

In *My Ántonia*, Cather employs this realist style. Her use of the framing device, in particular, offers the type of verisimilitude that proponents of realism emphasize. In her introduction, she sets up Jim's story as the product of an agreement between two friends to "set down on paper" all that they remember of their old friend, Ántonia (713). The story that follows becomes Jim's impressionistic account of the young Bohemian girl and represents that same "fidelity to experience and probability of motive" that Howells earlier argued for in *Criticism and Fiction* (15). In this regard, we might link Jim's story to that of Huck Finn. As Miles Orvell claims, "Cather, like Twain, is making a virtue out of the seeming naiveté of her narrators...[and] opposing her narrator's artlessness and the presumed artificiality of the 'editor'" (35). Cather's use of authentic vernacular also ties her to Twain and reinforces that sense of "artlessness." In chapter 1, for example, we hear the farm hand, Jake Marpole, telling Jim about Ántonia's family: "They can't any of them speak English, except one little girl and all she can say is 'We go Black Hawk, Nebraska'" (715-16). In this quote, Cather manages to employ layers of authentic cultural and ethnic voices. Through her use of the vernacular, Cather continually contrasts Jim's own educated voice of the East with both the uneducated American farmers and the Bohemian immigrants of the Prairie.

Cather's association with Realism, however, emanates not only from her style but, more importantly, from her use of theme; like other Realist texts, *My Ántonia* reflects that struggle between the Emersonian character and his plot. Biographers continually note Cather's knowledge and appreciation of Emerson's work as well as her literary debt to him; James Woodress, for example, tells us that Cather's "world view derives...from Emerson" (242). And we note this world view in the novel. Through setting, symbolism, character, and plot, *My Ántonia* immerses itself in Emersonian ideals of self-

reliance, spiritual independence, and nature. While *My Ántonia* applauds the Emersonian individual, however, the text also asks how this self-reliant individual “fits” into American history; the novel struggles with the same question found in Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, and Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*: can the modern world contain the romantic Emersonian spirit? As much as Jim purports to tell Ántonia’s story, he also tells his own; and, Jim’s story in many ways mirrors the stories of Huck Finn, Isabel Archer, and Lily Bart. Like those earlier heroes and heroines, as Jim grows up he experiences a sense of, what Georg Lukács terms, “transcendental homelessness,” where the individual “enters into competition with the outside world” (112); his chapters, in fact, are defined by his physical movements and represent his search for a home. The central theme of Jim’s story becomes this conflict between the individual and history. The text belongs in a discussion of American Realism, therefore, because through Jim’s narrative Cather supports Emersonian Transcendentalism but also recognizes those philosophic ideals as fictions.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode specifically distinguishes between myth and fiction:

Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive. ... Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes *total* and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. (my italics 39)

These definitions are useful when discussing American Realism because, in much the same way, that movement called not for the “absolute” but rather for the “conditional assent” of Emersonian romanticism. While American Realists acknowledged their literary debt to Emerson, they criticized the way his philosophy “presuppose[d]...total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were.” History, they argued, simply wouldn’t allow for that “sequence of radically unchangeable gestures”; the individual would have to own up to the power of plot. Jim becomes our Realist writer because, in his rendering of *Antonia*, he celebrates the Emersonian ideal but, in doing so, acknowledges that myth as fiction.

What is particularly illuminating about this text, however, is that it not only writes within the Realist tradition but also begins to move beyond it; while the text disapproves of the Transcendentalist’s tendency to *avoid* history, it also examines and questions the Realist’s strict *confidence* in history. Against Jim’s Realist narrative, Cather offers us another story, one that honors Jim’s vision but also qualifies it. Specifically, this larger story comments on Jim’s narrative by recognizing him as an unreliable narrator and questioning his reading of history. Jim, we discover, puts too much emphasis on the power of plot; his version of history is *too* “absolute.” He blindly blames that “machine in the garden” for the loss of his childhood Emersonian spirit and naturalizes his seeming loss of innocence onto the inevitable passage of time. Instead, the text ultimately suggests that the American individual is not the passive victim of history but rather the enabler of his own destruction. While the novel acknowledges the power of history and recognizes that man may not be “greater than all the geography and all the government of the world,” it does begin to suggest that history, indeed, may also be “a fable agreed upon” (Emerson 239-40). Thus, while Realism tended to fictionalize

the myth of the Emersonian individual unbound by history or convention, Cather also begins to call for the “conditional assent” of history itself. She questions whether or not Realism, with its absolute faith in history as objective truth, has allowed that image of the “machine in the garden” to degenerate into myth. Cather does not produce any idealized solution for the binaries of romance and realism, but she suggests that perhaps *both* binaries attempt to “presuppose...total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were.” Thus, as a text of late Realism, *My Ántonia* embodies that dominant cultural movement and yet also begins to locate a new emerging literary culture.

III

When we first meet Jim Burden in the introduction, our extradiegetic narrator, presumably a fictional version of Willa Cather, makes it clear that the elder Jim is a realist character who lives a sterile and far from romantic life.⁴⁷ Despite his continued love for the “never-ending miles of ripe wheat,” he has moved from the “freemasonry” of the West to the urban metropolis of New York in order to work “as legal counsel for one of the great Western railways” (711). As legal counsel for the railways, he presumably now works to defend and support those who develop the land he loves. Furthermore, he is

⁴⁷ I will be using the original 1918 version of the introduction, found in the Library of America edition. In 1926, at the urging of her Houghton Mifflin editor, Ferris Greenslet, Cather revised and shortened her introduction. In the revision, Cather describes less of Jim’s current failures and makes Jim responsible for the idea to write a manuscript about Ántonia.

Although many critics choose to read the revised edition, I have chosen the original text for one central reason. As I am interested in the text as a work of American Realism, it makes sense to accept the earlier 1918 version. Much happened in American history, in Cather’s life, and in her writing style between the years 1918 and 1926. To read the 1926 version of the introduction, therefore, would be to mix Cather’s literary styles and motivations.

The big issue in the 1918 introduction is the admission by the external narrator that Jim’s manuscript is “substantially as he brought it to me” (714). The argument, put forth by Sharon O’Brien and other critics, is that “the word ‘substantially’...changes our reading experience,” as it makes the external narrator an editor and makes the reliability of the manuscript suspect (16). In the revision, however, Cather does not simply remove the word “substantially” but takes out the whole sentence. I would argue, therefore, that the reliability of the text in this later edition is as suspect; where the first edition reveals that the manuscript is “substantially” as Jim wrote it, the second edition leaves the veracity of the manuscript completely ambiguous.

married to a cold and detached woman, whom Jim wed, the narrator implies, only to further his career. The narrator admits that she does “not like his wife” and notes that she “seems unimpressible and temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm” (712). Their marriage appears loveless, a union based purely on social convenience and material gain.

Despite Jim’s lackluster adult life, his spirit is still considered “naturally romantic and ardent” (712). History, however, seems to have rendered Jim’s romantic desires inaccessible, and his romantic sensibility is now primarily destructive. The narrator tells us, for example, that his ardent spirit has been “one of the strongest elements in his success”:

He loves with a personal passion the great country through which his railway runs and branches. His faith in it and his knowledge of it have played an important part in its development. He is always able to raise capital for new enterprises in Wyoming or Montana, and has helped young men out there to do remarkable things in mines and timber and oil. ... Jim is still able to lose himself in those big Western dreams. (711-12)

The great irony of Jim’s “big Western dreams” is that, while his “faith in” and “knowledge of” the land “have played an important part in its development,” they have also helped to ensure its destruction. As a lawyer in the East, his only avenue to romance is through money and development; and that development, of course, only serves to turn the natural into Gilded Age capital. Rather than preserve his romantic vision, Jim has become a part of American history that corrodes romance.

Jim's alternative outlet for his "naturally romantic and ardent disposition" is through memory. His entire narrative of *Antonia Shimerda* comes out of this nostalgic longing. In the introduction, we find the extradiegetic narrator and Jim Burden both traveling away from their native New York, through the plains of Iowa. The narrator's description of the land suggests this yearning for the pastoral delights of their childhood:

We were talking about what it is like to spend one's childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers then the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the color and smell of snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and gray as sheet-iron.

(711)

This vision elicits the memory of the Bohemian girl *Antonia Shimerda*, who seems to embody the innocence of the landscape; each agrees to write down and share a narrative, a "picture" of *Antonia* (713). Jim, we learn, completes his manuscript first and decides not to name it "*Antonia*" but, rather, "*My Antonia*." Many critics have commented on the importance of this title; as Jim himself acknowledges, this narrative will not be an objective portrait of the Bohemian girl but a remembrance of things past, a personal, unorganized recollection of "what *Antonia's* name recalls to me" (714). Thus, although this story will be about *Antonia*, we sense that it will also be about Jim, about Jim's childhood and his subsequent loss. We will learn about Jim's romantic youth but will also come to realize how plot has led him toward Gilded Age materialism. In this way, we sense that Jim Burden will become the Realist writer who celebrates Emerson but

also credits himself with growing up and accepting the force of history.⁴⁸

In book 1, we become immersed in Jim's Emersonian childhood and thrust into the paradise of the Nebraska prairies. The book begins when Jim, an orphan at age ten, moves from Virginia to Nebraska to live with his grandparents. Like Huck Finn, Isabel Archer, and Lily Bart, Jim Burden has lost his parents and is in a position, in the words of Emerson, to "enjoy an original relation to the universe" (7). Jim reads this new experience as Emerson reads history in the opening pages of *Nature*, in the form of "new lands, new men, new thoughts" (Emerson 7). Jim echoes these words, telling the reader that he and his caretaker, Jake Marpole, were "set[ting] out together to try [their] fortunes in a new world" (715). His first impression of the prairie is not as "a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made" (718). Jim, like Emerson, chooses not to be retrospective, not to "grope among the dry bones of the past" but to search for a "poetry and philosophy of insight," a "religion by revelation" (Emerson 7).

Jim immediately locates that "poetry and philosophy of insight," that "religion by revelation," in nature. His first encounters with the land seem to come right out of the pages of Emerson, his descriptions "enumerating the values of nature and casting up their sum" (Emerson 8). Emerson's concept of the "transparent eye-ball" is notoriously difficult to express or conceive of within the realm of experience. And yet, Jim's descriptions of Nebraska embody just this concept. Bumping along the road to his grandparents' farm, Jim notes the empty landscape:

⁴⁸ As will be discussed, we are also meant to realize that Jim's story may be suspect, that his great faith in the power of history may be questioned and cast against an alternate reading. This possibility for such a reading comes through even in the introduction. First, Jim's story is told in the first person, and, thus, we are cognizant of his subjective perspective. Second, the external narrator's portrait of Jim—as a capitalist lawyer in a sterile marriage and as a developer of the land he once loved—makes us question his reliability. Finally, in the case of any framed narrative, we are asked to compare the world view of these competing narratives in order to locate the values of the implied author.

There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. ... The wagon jolted on, carrying me I knew not whither. I don't think I was homesick. If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky I felt *erased*, blotted out. (my italics 718)

When Jim tells us that “[b]etween that earth and that sky [he]...felt erased, blotted out,” he seems literally to “become a transparent eye-ball,” where, as Emerson explains, “I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.” In the words of Emerson, “mean egotism vanishes,” and, “in the tranquil landscape,” Jim “beholds something as beautiful as his own nature” (Emerson 10).

Another scene, shortly thereafter, helps to illuminate Jim's spiritual surrender to nature. Alone in his grandmother's garden, Jim feels “motion in the landscape..., as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping...” (723). He leans against a “warm yellow pumpkin” and, feeling as if he is at the edge of the world, merges his spirit with the landscape around him:

I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. (724)⁴⁹

These lines beg comparison to Emerson's words in chapter 4 of *Nature*: “I have no hostility to nature, but a child's love to it. I expand and live in the warm day like corn

⁴⁹ That these lines are inscribed on Willa Cather's tombstone emphasizes their significance in the text and accentuates the importance of Emerson's philosophy in Cather's life.

and melons” (38). The similarity between these two passages could be entirely coincidental. Whether intentional or not, however, the connection seems to transform Jim’s experience into a living embodiment of Emerson’s philosophy. In this scene, Jim “expands” and “lives” by becoming a “something,” an organic being created by the sun and entirely in tune with surrounding nature. As Hermione Lee explains, “Jim could be another Thoreau or Emerson (‘I am nothing, I see all’)...as the narrator contemplates his ‘intimations of immortality’ in the language of American transcendentalism” (141).

These early romantic encounters with nature continue throughout book 1, as Jim explores each of his first four seasons in the prairie with his new Bohemian friend and neighbor, *Ántonia* Shimerda. Because we do not have access to *Ántonia*’s consciousness, it is more difficult to assess her own spiritual relationship to nature. On the one hand, her experience with her environment is quite different from Jim’s. As an immigrant without the comforts of a house or the assurance of food, *Ántonia* must view the pumpkins not simply as a resting place but as a vital source of food. Her responsibilities contrast with Jim’s constant sense of ease. While Jim delights in the “dazzling light” of his first winter, *Ántonia* suffers from cold and hunger (753).

And yet, although they come from remarkably different cultures, in childhood these two characters share a similar Emersonian vision; in particular, they both maintain this same freshness, vitality, and spiritual awareness of landscape. Despite her hardship, *Ántonia* appears “light-hearted,” “never complain[s],” and is “always ready to forget [her] troubles at home” (733). She is amazed by the beauty of the sky, enjoys “scaring rabbits or starting up flocks of quail” (733), and, when she is cold, makes a nest for herself “in the long red grass” (729). Her communion with nature is seen, in particular, on a cold autumn day when she revitalizes a suffering grasshopper:

While we were lying there against the warm bank, a little insect of the palest, frailest green hopped painfully out of the buffalo grass and tried to leap into a bunch of bluestem. He missed it, fell back, and sat with his head sunk between his long legs, his antennae quivering, as if he were waiting for something to come and finish him. Tony made a warm nest for him in her hands; talked to him gaily and indulgently in Bohemian.

Presently he began to sing for us—a thin, rusty little chirp. (736)

On the way home, as a chill sets in, she “carefully put[s] the green insect in her hair, tying her big handkerchief down loosely over her curls” (737). Emerson tells us that “[i]n the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows” (10); for *Ántonia*, nature’s presence does, in fact, act as a respite from her “real sorrows,” and, like Jim, it allows her to “be dissolved into something complete and great.” As Edwin T. Bowden notes, “[o]n the prairie farm [*Ántonia*] expands to the limit of her being, and her inner horizon stretches toward the outer until the two join in one complete circle” (15). For both *Ántonia* and Jim, nature acts as material out of which to shape self. Book 1 comes to embody each of the central tenets of Emerson’s *Nature*: nature becomes commodity, beauty, language, discipline, idealism, spirit, and prospects. The story of Jim’s and *Ántonia*’s childhood is a story based on these classic American ideals; Emersonian possibility comes to life through their “unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, unaffrighted innocence” (Emerson 261).

IV

If book 1 offers the promise of uncorrupted nature and spiritual integrity, books 2 through 5 test these characters’ resilience against the forces of history. We find that life continually pulls Jim further away from this Emersonian possibility and toward what

he reads as the inevitable progression of time. In book 2, his grandparents retire to the town of Black Hawk and send Jim to a local school. An older and more restless Jim expresses the town's sterility:

People's speech, their voices, their very glances, became furtive and repressed. Every individual taste, every natural appetite, was bridled by caution. The people asleep in those houses, I thought, tried to make no noise, to leave no trace, to slip over the surface of things in the dark.

The growing piles of ashes and cinders in the back yards were the only evidence that the wasteful, consuming process of life went on at all. (851)

James reads the introduction of bourgeois civilization—that “wasteful, consuming process of life”—as corrupt. The townspeople's stifled and “guarded mode of existence” contrasts with earlier scenes of Jim's and Antonia's uninhibited life on the prairie (851). As C. Hugh Holman states, Jim “is the medium for expressing this recognition of the nostalgic sense that, as the obligations of civilization and history increasingly impress their weight upon the individual, they carry him further and further away from the good, simple, and pastoral life...” (34). In this sense, Jim expresses the vision of the American Realist, who both acknowledges and yet still attempts to battle those “obligations of civilization and history.”

As early as book 2, however, we begin to realize that Jim's reading of history may also be problematic. Where Jim, in book 1, has idealized each of the four seasons on the farm, even noting the delight of winter, he now rereads nature according to his own spiritual loss. Thus, while he remembers weather on the farm as “the great fact” (805), this “great fact” now becomes recast in Black Hawk as a “bitter song” (823):

The pale, cold light of the winter sunset did not beautify—it was like the light of truth itself. ... [T]he wind sprang up afresh, with a kind of bitter song, as if it said: “This is *reality*, whether you like it or not. All those frivolities of summer, the light and shadow, the living mask of green that trembled over everything, they were lies, and this is what was underneath. This is the *truth*.” (my italics 823)

This short passage offers profound insight into Jim’s growing perception of “reality,” of what he understands as “truth.” He passes off his reading of “reality” as objective, as a force that can only be temporarily mitigated through illusion. In a sense, he naturalizes his personal deprivation and, rather than take responsibility for his spiritual conflict, deflects his own failure of will back onto the landscape. It is not that Jim loses all sense of his childhood idealism. He still maintains a pastoral vision of America; country life is seen as fruitful and town as “wasteful” and “consuming” (851). He begins, however, to justify a life removed from that vision by rewriting it as an impossible illusion; sooner or later, the individual must accept the truth of history.

At the end of book 2, we see Jim move further away from the country to the city of Lincoln to continue his education. Again, rather than blame his move on personal weakness, Jim reads this move as the unavoidable process of growing up. Soon before Jim leaves Black Hawk, he spends a day in the country with the three “hired girls”—Tiny, Antonia, and Lena. Jim’s description of a plough joins man and nature in one stunning image:

Presently we saw a curious thing: There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, god-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disc rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure

suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. ... On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, [the plough]...stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disc; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.

(865-66)

This passage presents the reader with one of the most spectacular images in literature. It translates into words the beauty of nature and brings us back to Emerson, in particular to his chapter in *Nature* entitled “Beauty”: “To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal.... The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods, and is man again. ... The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough” (14-15). Cather’s image reinforces this restorative, “medicinal” element of nature; here, the plough—that symbolic representation of “noxious work”—is contained by the setting sun, and, through this image of the horizon, through the “sky and the woods,” the farmers and the “hired girls” become “man again.”

What is equally important about this scene, however, is that Jim goes on to emphasize the *ephemeral* nature of the plough figure: “even while [they] whispered about it, [the] vision disappeared” (866). Jim tells us that, while the image may be restorative, it is also temporary. He implies, by association, that his own Emersonian youth is fleeting; as natural as the sun setting, he must grow up, and his romantic vision must give way to reality. Jim laments: “When boys and girls are growing up, life can’t stand still, not even

in the quietest of country towns; and they *have* to grow up, whether they will or no” (my italics 835). Jim’s move to Lincoln, away from the prairies of his youth, thus, becomes justified by those inevitable “obligations of civilization and history” (Holman 34).

In book 2, Jim’s personal narrative is cast against the continued story of *Ántonia*. Like Jim, *Ántonia* moves to town, not for school but financial necessity. Unlike Jim, however, *Ántonia* does not mourn the loss of her childhood but adapts well to changing circumstances. Despite her new surroundings, she is able to maintain that same youthful vitality, individual integrity, and Emersonian self-reliance. While Jim notes that town seemed to make his neighbors “furtive and repressed,” incapable of expressing “individual taste” and “natural appetite” (851), he notes that “[e]verything [*Ántonia*] said seemed to come right out of her heart” (825). The limitations of the townspeople are dictated by their reliance on environment, property, and social approval for happiness; *Ántonia*, however, still seems to live by Emerson’s adage that “[n]othing can bring you peace but yourself” (282).

Ántonia’s spiritual individualism now becomes associated with a larger group of Bohemian and Scandinavian women, all of whom live outside of the strict conventions of American society and exhibit a similar “positive carriage and freedom of movement” (838). As a result of their “vigor,” they are “considered a menace to the social order”; Jim tells us that “[t]heir beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background” (840). In fact, *Ántonia* loses her job with the Harlings when she continues to attend the forbidden Vannis dances, which represent spiritual vitality and stand out against the “furtive and repressed” town of Black Hawk; she makes the important choice to overcome social and financial pressure in order to maintain her self-determination.

It is interesting that critics have viewed the other central female figure in the novel, Lena Lingard, as *Ántonia's* "literary foil" (Bowden 16).⁵⁰ Although *Ántonia's* and Lena's desires suggest certain binaries, their value systems are quite similar. Like *Ántonia*, Lena exhibits that same "positive carriage and freedom of movement." Jim explains his earliest memories of Lena as "out among her cattle, bareheaded and barefooted, scantily dressed in tattered clothing, always knitting as she watched her herd." He describes her as "something wild," quite unabashed about her "ragged clothes," with an "easy" and "gentle" disposition matched equally against her ruggedness (817). Unlike those "furtive and repressed" townspeople, Lena, like *Ántonia*, is comfortable with her body and her environment.

Despite the fact that Lena ultimately comes to represent an urban contrast to the earthy *Ántonia*, both Bohemian women share the same heroic individualism, the same fierce sense of self-reliance that privileges personal integrity and independence above conformity and social convention. Jim tells us how Lena manages to succeed in Lincoln business without giving into the capitalist American model: "Lena's success puzzled me. She was so easy-going; had none of the push and self-assertiveness that get people ahead in business" (885). As a dressmaker, Lena is consistently more interested in the product than the capital; unlike Jim, her interest is not in prospecting and making money but on clothing the human figure to look as "fresh as the spring morning" (885). Thus, while Jim's movement away from nature contributes to his spiritual decline, Lena translates her country qualities into a "blissful expression of countenance" (885). Even Jim admits that, despite her move to the city, Lena remains "almost as candid as Nature" (886). Rather than a foil, one might say that Lena Lingard is *Ántonia's* doppelganger; their

⁵⁰ John Murphy is another critic who, in *My Ántonia: The Road Home*, reads Lena as *Ántonia's* foil.

paths may diverge, sending one out into the world and the other back to the earth, but their similar spiritual drive and self-possession render them complementary Emersonian heroines.⁵¹

This idea is fostered by the fact that Jim comes to idealize and love both women. He does not, however, pursue either one but, rather, distances himself from them. As discussed, he resigns himself to a vision of reality that reads the loss of romance and of spiritual transcendence—with whom he associates *Antonia* and *Lena*—as an inevitable part of growing up. In books 3 and 4, Jim has the opportunity to connect with each of these Emersonian heroines but instead turns away. In book 3, he becomes physically and spiritually close to *Lena*.⁵² Yet, at a critical moment Jim chooses to detach himself. He has the choice to remain in the West or to move East and study at Harvard. He seems to make this decision during a conversation with *Lena*. *Lena* teases Jim: “What’s on your mind, Jim? Are you afraid I’ll want you to marry me some day?” (893). Jim’s response is telling: “Then I told her I was going away.” Although *Lena* has made it clear that she has no intention of getting married, the juxtaposition of the two lines reflects Jim’s fear, not necessarily the fear of marriage but of all that *Lena* symbolizes; in turning away from *Lena*, he turns away from that Emersonian vision of self-determination and of rugged individualism that he has already written off as lost.

⁵¹ This reading counters early criticism of the novel’s form. The complaints read that book 3, which is primarily about *Lena Lingard*, diverges from the focus of the book, *Antonia*, and creates a loose and disjointed plot. The section on *Lena*, however, makes complete formal sense, as it argues that *Antonia*’s path is not the only one supported by the text. In book 3, Cather suggests that it is possible to maintain spiritual integrity even away from nature. By association, Jim’s own path becomes not simply a turn away from nature but away from the very Emersonian vision that both *Antonia* and *Lena* embody.

⁵² There has been much debate over whether or not Jim and *Lena* become lovers. There is no clear evidence either way, and the question seems insignificant. The central point is that Jim clearly admires and even desires *Lena*; comments such as “I could sit idle all though a Sunday morning and look at her” render issues of consummation mute (887).

In book 4, we find Jim in a similar circumstance, this time with *Ántonia*. Having gone away and finished his studies at Harvard, he returns to Black Hawk for the summer and learns that *Ántonia* has been deserted by her American lover and is now unmarried with a baby girl. Jim notes *Ántonia*'s continued spiritual strength and calm, despite her hardship: "She was thinner than I had ever seen her, and looked as Mrs. Steavens said, 'worked down,' but there was a new kind of strength in the gravity of her face, and her color still gave that look of deep-seated health and ardor" (909). Recognizing the beauty and vitality intrinsic in her character, Jim confesses:

"Do you know, *Ántonia*, since I've been away, I think of you more often than of any one else in this part of the world. I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister—anything that a woman can be to a man. The *idea* of you is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don't realize it. You really are a part of me." (my italics 910)

The obvious question is: why he does not, then, choose to "have" *Ántonia* for a "sweetheart, or a wife"? He even admits that he feels the "old pull of the earth," and yet he still decides to return back East, away from the country, toward the center of sterile materialism (910). The key word in this passage is "idea"; Jim implies that *Ántonia* does not represent reality but rather an idea or, more precisely, an unattainable ideal. Thus, rather than admit his failure, Jim once again deflects his loss onto the natural landscape. Jim describes the setting sun and rising moon that he and *Ántonia* witness as they walk home:

As we walked homeward across the fields, the sun dropped and lay like a great golden globe in the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose

in the east, as big as a cart-wheel, pale silver and streaked with rose color, thin as a bubble or a ghost-moon. For five, perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world. (910)

Jim uses this image of the sun and moon to symbolize the grown man and woman who walk “homeward across the fields” and “rest...on opposite edges of the world.” His metaphor serves to naturalize, and thus justify, the position in which he and *Ántonia* now find themselves; just as *Ántonia* will remain the sun setting in the West, so Jim must become that figure of the moon rising in the East.

Jim relieves himself of the “burden” to act by relegating both Lena and *Ántonia* to the world of ideas and assigning them the status of Muse. In Lincoln, Jim writes these two women into the poetry of Virgil. As he reads Virgil’s *Georgics*, he actually sees the image of Lena “float[ing] before [him] on the page like a picture” (880). Blanche Gelfant suggests that Jim’s foray into the “make-believe world” reveals his fear of sexuality (67), which acts, she argues, as “a determining force in his story” (62). Gelfant astutely suggests that “by relegating Lena to the ideal but unreachable world of art he assures their separation” (69). While he clearly attempts to “assure...their separation,” however, his actions are not entirely based on his fear of sexuality. Instead, Jim is driven by his stubborn allegiance to history and realism, by his firm belief that those Emersonian values of his youth—as magnificent and heroic as they were—must give way to the entrance of the industrial, urban machine into the pastoral garden.

In one scene, Jim offers a telling comment on the relationship between the “hired girls” and Virgil’s poetry: “It came over me, as it had never done before, the relation between girls like those and the poetry of Virgil. If there were no girls like them

in the world, there would be no poetry. I understood that clearly, for the first time” (880). In many ways, Jim’s connection to these women is analogous to America’s connection to the land. Jim first reacted to the Nebraska prairie as “the material out of which countries are made” (718). Here, he employs a similar discourse to suggest that these women are the material out of which poetry is made. America’s myth of “manifest destiny” emerged out of the need to rewrite expansion and appropriation as ennobling. Similarly, these women now allow Jim to reconstruct his own problematic history as ennobling. Ántonia’s and Lena’s ability to maintain their vitality and independence threatens Jim’s *inability* to maintain such ideals; by writing them into the epic myth, and thus making them inherently impalpable and intangible, he relegates them to the world of romance, maintains his position as the realist, and justifies his own failure to locate the ideal within the real. Furthermore, by recasting them into the role of Muse and himself into the role of epic poet, he, in effect, rewrites Virgil into his own American narrative. His failure suddenly becomes heroic.

Jim also manages to preserve this illusion through the act of writing his narrative, his *My Ántonia*. In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks tells us that “narrative demarcates, encloses, establishes limits, orders” (4). Our impulse for narrative derives from our need for mastery and control. One central incident in the text elucidates this idea and reflects Jim’s need to contain and control meaning. In book 2, Jim offers to housesit at the Cutters in place of Ántonia, who fears Wick Cutter’s sexual advances. Cutter returns that night and attacks Jim, mistaking him for Ántonia. The response we expect is for Jim to be elated at having saved Ántonia and angry at Cutter’s misconduct. Instead, Jim blames Ántonia: “I heard Ántonia sobbing outside my door, but I asked grandmother to send her away. I felt that I never wanted to see her again. I hated her almost as much as

I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness" (869). This scene is often read in terms of Jim's problematic relationship to women or, again, in terms of his fear of sexuality.⁵³ While it clearly illustrates Jim's selfish disregard for women's sexual struggles, the word "disgustingness," in particular, suggests an additional reading. This moment is one of the few in the text that Jim can't seem to contain. Ántonia's reality—that "disgustingness" of her economic needs and physical danger—stains Jim's reading of her as his fresh, angelic Muse, as the material out of which poetry is made; it removes her from that cordoned-off space of illusory romance. He later complains that "the idea is one that no circumstances can frustrate" (884). In this one moment, the circumstances corrupt the idea. Jim's heroic revision of reality—his reading of Virgil and his writing of *My Ántonia*—attempts to counter this potential devastation; his act of repeating and restructuring memory helps him to "shape the recovery of meaning in time" (Brooks 36).

Nowhere is this tendency more obvious than in the last paragraph of book 5. While Jim's role up until now has been riddled with inconsistencies and problematic interpretations, it is here that his function as unreliable narrator becomes solidified, and the essence of his story can be understood. In one of the most beautiful passages of the book, Jim explains the circle of man's experience:

For Ántonia and for me, this had been the road of *Destiny*, had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which *predetermined* for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past. (my italics 937)

⁵³ Judith Fetterley is one critic, for example, who, in her article "*My Ántonia*, Jim Burden and the Dilemma of the Lesbian Writer," makes this connection.

Despite the brilliant poetics of the language, there are certain troubling inconsistencies in Jim's seeming "epiphany" (Helmick 113).⁵⁴ In particular, the words "Destiny" and "predetermined" are completely out of sync with Jim's story. In this passage, Jim naturalizes his failure and projects his breakdown of character—his empty marriage, his destructive job, and his overall parasitic relationship to society—onto some larger force that lies beyond individual choice. Jim understands this larger force, those "accidents of fortune," as history.

Jim's narrative, of course, undermines this strict reading of history. Far from being controlled by history, Jim's plot has been a product of his conscious choice to replace Emersonian ideals with urban material culture. As Demaree C. Peck notes, Jim has not traveled the "road of Destiny" but "has traveled the road of desire" (157). After book 1, each book begins with a decision by Jim that moves him further and further away from the land he loves. In book 2, Jim's grandparents *choose* to move to town, in part to send Jim to school and help him integrate into American society. Book 3 opens with Jim's move to Lincoln, where he *chooses* the realm of ideas over experience. At the end of book 3, Jim *chooses* to leave Lena and follow his teacher East to the center of urban life. At the end of book 4, Jim *chooses* to return to New York, to go to law school rather than stay in the country with Antonia. And now, Jim blames history in order to make sense of his empty life. His use of the words "Destiny" and "predetermined" belie the truth of his story.

⁵⁴ Calling this moment an "epiphany" is, in itself, problematic. When Jim says "now I understood" (as opposed to the present tense, "now I understand"), one can assume that the "epiphany" is experienced by the character and not the narrator. Jim has told us quite clearly in the introduction, however, that this narrative is a remembrance of things past; he says "I didn't arrange or rearrange. I simply wrote down what of herself and myself and other people Antonia's name recalls to me" (713-14). As such, he makes it clear that the text is based on memory, filtered through and greatly affected by his subsequent failures. Any epiphanies are, therefore, realistically those of the narrator who, in the present, "now understands." As will be discussed, Jim's seeming epiphany is simply one final attempt to rewrite history.

V

Jim's final lines urge the reader to go back and reconsider his entire narrative. In book 1, Jim reveals his position as the Emersonian romantic by reflecting on and deeply honoring his childhood vision. We soon realize, however, that, as much as he venerates transcendental philosophy, he also reads this mythic belief system as fiction; he becomes a Realist author who recognizes that, even as Emerson's ideas express a crucial and vital element of spiritual desire, they are not entirely adequate and do not, alone, represent truth. Cather supports Jim's reading of Emersonian romance and writes within this same tradition of Realism. In books 2 through 5, however, Cather illustrates what happens when Jim's vision of history is taken to its extreme; history becomes a scapegoat for personal failure, and spiritual loss becomes as natural as the image of the setting sun and rising moon. In this way, Jim mythologizes history in much the same way that Emerson mythologized the individual, by presupposing within this larger force "total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were" (Kermode 39). This is the narrative that, we realize through these final lines, Cather ultimately questions.

When we review Antonia's and Lena's narratives through this larger critical lens, we recognize within *them* the voice of Cather. These characters don't suffer from Jim's experience of transcendental homelessness because they temper their visions of both binaries, Emersonian idealism and historical reality; they understand romance as less than ideal and history as less than real. Thus, the text celebrates Lena and Antonia as Emersonian figures and applauds their persistence, despite all odds, to preserve their individualism. There is no doubt that the text favors the integrity of Antonia and Lena over Jim. The novel, however, also makes it clear that their lives are far from ideal and

that, in attempting to maintain transcendental values, they have had to battle forces of history in ways that Jim has not.

In book 1, we are continually witness to the difficult life of *Ántonia* and her family. *Ántonia* grows up “in the crowded clutter of their cave,” working the land instead of going to school (768). Out of pride, she hides her jealousy of Jim’s privileged childhood, but at one point she asks Jim, “with a sudden rush of feeling in her voice”: “Sometime you will tell me all those nice things you learn at the school, won’t you, Jimmy?” (792). By contrast, Jim grows up not having to worry about his difficult future; instead, like Tom Sawyer, he spends his leisure time writing himself into romantic adventures, such as those of Jesse James, Swiss Family Robinson, and Coronado. One snowy winter day, he finds himself busy with constant chores and calls this “a strange, unnatural sort of day” (774); he fails to recognize that this is *Ántonia*’s typical day. Before Jim moves to Black Hawk, she tells Jim: “If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us” (802). *Ántonia* enjoys a pastoral childhood but does not blindly idealize it; she experiences tremendous hardship in her relationship to nature and struggles courageously to preserve her spiritual values.

In book 5, when Jim finally returns from the East and visits her, we see a grown *Ántonia* with a husband and “ten or eleven” children (913). She explains to Jim that her children help her to tend the farm: “Oh, we don’t have to work so hard now! We’ve got plenty to help us, papa and me” (916). Despite her comment, *Ántonia*’s outer figure has clearly suffered from multiple childbirths and hard farm labor. Although critics often cite her at the end of the text as an Earth Mother, Jim’s description of her suggests a less

idealistic picture; he notices that she is “battered [if] not diminished” and presents her as “a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled” (914).⁵⁵

Jim realizes that, despite her appearance, her “inward glow” remains; he notes that “she was there, in the full vigor of her personality” (917):

She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one’s breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. (926)

Ántonia never seems to lose her commitment to Emersonian philosophy. In her natural vitality, her connection to the land, and her spiritual integrity, she does, in fact, maintain an original relation to the universe. But, despite her attachment to these romantic ideas, she is, at the *same* time, a realist. She accepts the sacrifices one must make in order to remain in the prairie and avoid Jim’s reliance on material existence. Eudora Welty tells us that Willa Cather “saw the landscape had mystery as well as reality. She was undaunted by both” (6). This quote is telling because it can be applied equally to Ántonia who, like Cather, recognizes and accepts both that romantic “mystery” *and* that “reality” in the landscape.

Lena also manages to maintain her Emersonian values, specifically self-reliance and freedom from social convention, and she too qualifies these ideals in order to preserve them. If Lena and Ántonia act as complementary heroines, they also lack what the other manages to incorporate. Thus, while Ántonia’s commitment to nature and

⁵⁵ Blanche Gelfant is one critic who, in “The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Ántonia*,” connects Ántonia to this goddess figure.

family results in physical degeneration, Lena holds onto that youthful energy and, as Tiny explains, is “the only person...who never gets any older” (896). By contrast, however, she sacrifices what *Ántonia* does not: community and family. Each woman retains her spiritual independence, despite external hardships, but neither lives a bucolic life. In both cases, any sense of pure idealism is mitigated by stark reality. Lena and *Ántonia* actually succeed in finding homes for their transcendental spirits; they locate that space where the subject merges with the object. But, theirs is not a neat fit and does not result in an easy, happy ending.⁵⁶

More importantly, even this tempered vision of Emersonianism is figuratively relocated outside America; neither Lena nor *Ántonia* is American born, and *Ántonia* ultimately reintegrates into Bohemian culture. *Ántonia*’s children—who exhibit that same Emersonian relationship to nature, who enjoy playing in the fields and sleeping in the barn—all speak Bohemian and do not learn English until they go to school. These “new Americans” give up that American myth of unadulterated idealism because they are willing to transform the ideal into the real. Cather’s use of immigrants suggests a subtle distrust of American culture, specifically of the American’s ability to live outside of myth. In order to locate Emersonianism in modern America, she argues, one must demythologize romance and accept historical struggle and material sacrifice.

In questioning the myth of the ahistorical Emersonian figure, Cather mirrors a main concern of American Realism. She acknowledges, as have the Realists before her, that modern industrial America has encroached on the individual and challenged earlier romantic ideals. She understands Jim’s conflict between the romantic and the real. She

⁵⁶ Joan Acocella claims that *My Ántonia* offers us a “sentimental ending” (62). This type of reading, however, is precisely what is at stake in reading Jim’s narrative as Cather’s own: we miss Cather’s actual critique of Jim’s “sentimental ending.”

places romance in a direct conversation with history and—through the characters of Jim, Ántonia, and Lena—examines how the Emersonian hero attempts to negotiate his changing world. While she envisions a home for the text's two transcendental spirits, Lena and Ántonia, she complicates that reductive trope of the "individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him..." (Lewis, *American Adam* 5). She exposes the myth of the American Adam and alters that simplistic vision of the Emersonian hero.

Her text, however, also begins to respond to American Realism and, in particular, begins to question the faith that Realist writers held in their vision of history as objective. Through Jim's narrative, she asks: do we fear a world that is too small? Does the spiritual individual struggle against a greater force called "history," a force that, despite our desires, threatens Emersonian possibility? Or, do we create our own history? Do we purposefully construct a narrow universe and limit our moral options because we fear a world that is too large? Jim's story, what John J. Murphy has labeled his "journey through the stages of civilization," becomes the story of an American Everyman who involves himself in increasingly intricate social environments in an attempt to "determine" his role as an individual (*The Road Home* 72). In *The American Adam*, R.W.B. Lewis expresses the same myth that Jim embraces as truth: "Instead of looking forward to new possibilities, we direct our tired attention to the burden of history, observing repeatedly that it is later than you think" (196). Jim Burden buys into this myth and writes himself into the novel as a symbol of that great "burden of history," as the character who must accept the power of plot; instead, however, Cather reads this myth as fiction, and Jim becomes the "burden" of all Americans who blame external forces on their own spiritual failures.

Thus, Jim's real dilemma is not that he has limited choices but rather that he has too *many* choices; as Catherine Holmes explains: "Jim's true burden in the new world is unrestricted freedom of movement and choice" (340). In his essay "From the World to the Wilderness: Renewal in Thoreau and Cather," John Jacobs makes a critical point about the wilderness as metaphor:

Most elementally, wilderness exists when a solitary individual confronts nature without easy access to the material and psychological securities of the civilized world. Since wilderness, ultimately, is a metaphor, what is essentially confronted in the wilderness is the self and/or the ineluctable power that transcends the wilderness condition. (12)

Jacobs explains that, for those who are "prepared by predisposition and discipline to wrest meaning from the wilderness, the wilderness experience yields great creative power"; but, for those ill prepared, the wilderness can result in dislocation and despair (12). As an unreliable narrator, Jim never openly reveals any feelings of dislocation and despair; as discussed, he tends to rewrite such emotions into tropes of memory and desire. Jim's life, however, his "journey through the stages of civilization," illustrates a certain fear of the wilderness, in particular a certain fear of that "unrestricted freedom of movement and choice."

Jim's early experiences on the prairie reveal this hidden fear. In these early scenes, Jim speaks in the language of American Transcendentalism, describing, for example, those two moments—in the wagon to his grandmother's house and in the garden—where he embodies that Emersonian concept of the "transcendental eye-ball." His descriptions present us with an image of the child giving himself up to his environment and joining his spirit with nature. There is a troubling undertone, however,

in Jim's language. In both scenes, he admits feeling as if "the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it"; in the garden scene, he elaborates: "the light about me told me that the world ended here: only the ground and sun and sky were left, and if one went a little farther there would be only sun and sky, and one would float off into them..." (723). There is a clear note of transcendental poetry in these lines. But, one can also sense in them a level of uncertainty. Jim's story suggests that, while he admires and honors this type of infinite union, he also fears it; he fears that he may walk over that edge, that he may be forever "erased, blotted out" (718). Thus, after his childhood, Jim retreats further and further from this edge toward the machine, toward "the material and psychological securities of the civilized world" (Jacobs 12).

Jim's own fears are mirrored by those of two other minor but important characters in the book. Early on in the text, two men commit suicide: Mr. Shimerda and the tramp at Ole Iverson's. Both of these men experience an intense weariness as a result of transcendental homelessness; Mr. Shimerda travels from Bohemia until he reaches that Nebraskan "edge of the world," and the tramp shows up at Ole Iverson's farm claiming that he's "tired of tramping" and "won't go no farther" (826). They both find themselves far from "the material and psychological securities of the civilized world" and, ultimately, can't seem to handle the infinite space and dislocation of their travels. And, thus, as a final choice, they embrace the machine, the great symbol of man over nature, as a way to regain control and end their lives. While Mr. Shimerda shoots himself in the head with his hunting gun, the tramp literally throws himself into the thrashing machine. In a metaphorical sense, their actions illustrate how and why man welcomes the machine into the garden, to ease that fear of what Lukács calls "the abandonment of the world by God" (97). In this sense, Cather reconsiders the

mythological trope of the “machine in the garden” and recognizes this idea of inevitable historical progress as fictional. Rather than accept history as an objective form, she questions how man actually invites the machine into the garden and constructs his own history. In this reading, Americans have become so attached to the failure of those Emersonian ideals that they have lost sight of those emblems of qualified romanticism, those true Emersonian spirits: *Antonia* and *Lena*.

VI

There is much resistance to the idea that Cather doesn't fully embrace Jim's vision. Hermione Lee, for example, states that “Jim's elegiac pastoral expresses Cather's deepest feelings: it would be *perverse* to argue that his reading of *Antonia* is meant to be distrusted” (my italics 150). Lee argues that Jim's story is Cather's story and, in many ways, it is. Cather and Jim share a similar reading of Emersonian romance that ties them both to the American Realist tradition. Realist literature charts the struggle of the self-reliant individual against the power of history. In these texts, desire—the element that makes the Realist novel so romantic—is grounded in the idealisms of Emerson's philosophy. Truth is cast against desire, however, as that inevitable progression of history, that objective reality that increasingly favors society over the individual. Like earlier Realist novels, *My Antonia* is about the struggle to incorporate the romantic subject into the “real” world. Jim's story examines this theme of transcendental homelessness. His narrative begins with the great Emersonian possibilities of childhood and follows his seeming inability to maintain those ideals of his youth. In his effort to translate his transcendental spirit into the adult world, society appears to veer him repeatedly toward a divergent, more material course. His narrative, his act of remembrance, becomes his attempt to rediscover that Emersonian childhood through

memory, seemingly the only romantic avenue left to the postbellum subject. Lee is right, therefore, to suggest that Jim's reading of *Antonia* is Cather's reading; Cather writes within Jim's Realist narrative.

In *My Antonia*, however, Cather also begins to move beyond Jim's narrative and, thus, beyond Realism. While earlier Realists have fictionalized the myth of Emersonian idealism and recognized its dissonance with the "facts" of reality, like Jim, they have not recognized the fiction within history itself. It is for this reason that so many readers complain that Huck Finn, Isabel Archer, and Lily Bart lack satisfying endings. In their attempts to negotiate the opposing forces of romance and realism, novels such as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* hit an impasse; they cannot ultimately imagine a space in postbellum America for the Emersonian subject. By contrast, *My Antonia* does offer endings for its true Emersonian heroines, Antonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard; their stories feel complete primarily because, unlike the other Realist characters, they see beyond those strict notions of romance and realism.

Thus, while critics continually connect Cather to myth, they fail to see how she questions, critiques, and renegotiates myth. By rehistoricizing Cather and contextualizing her novels, we begin to understand how *My Antonia* participates in that specific literary moment of late American Realism. Mark Twain published *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1885 but set the text forty years earlier, in the 1840s; one can locate in this novel those dual layers of historical consciousness and understand how Twain—as an early Realist—was writing within and against romance. In much the same way, Cather published *My Antonia* in 1918 but also set the text forty years earlier, in 1885, precisely that year that *Huckleberry Finn* hit bookshelves. Cather's text reveals similar

layers of historical consciousness and now situates itself both within and against Realism. Cather, thus, becomes a central linchpin in the connection between Realism and Modernism by questioning these binaries of romance and realism; *My Ántonia* begins to suggest the indeterminacy of the terms themselves. In Cather's novel, history is no longer simply objective. Unlike her Realist predecessors, Cather goes so far as to question to what extent history has itself become a myth. Have the Realists faced facts or have they allowed those "facts" to cloud "reality"? Through Jim's story, the myth of "real" history ultimately becomes, as Emerson notes, a "fable agreed upon"; it becomes just as fictional as the romance of Emerson.

Works Cited

- Acocella, Joan. "Cather and the Academy." *New Yorker* 71:38 (November 27, 1995): 56-71.
- Ammons, Elizabeth. *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980.
- . "Edith Wharton's Hard-Working Lily: *The House of Mirth* and the Marriage Market." *The House of Mirth*. By Edith Wharton. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990. 345-57.
- Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Bauer, Dale M. *Feminist Dialogics: A Theory of Failed Community*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.
- Baym, Nina. "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors." *American Quarterly* 33 (1981): 123-39.
- Bell, Michael Davitt. *The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Bell, Millicent. *Meaning in Henry James*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Benert, Annette, L. "The Geography of Gender in *The House of Mirth*." *Studies in the Novel* 22.1 (Spring 1990): 26-42.
- Blair, Walter. *Mark Twain and Huck Finn*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960.
- Bloom, Harold. "Introduction." *Major Literary Characters: Antonia*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991. 1-3.
- Bowden, Edwin T. "The Frontier Isolation." *Major Literary Characters: Antonia*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991. 14-18.

- Brodhead, Richard H. *The School of Hawthorne*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Brown, E.K. "Edith Wharton." *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Irving Howe. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962. 62-72.
- Bush, Harold K., Jr. "The Mythic Struggle Between East and West: Mark Twain's Speech at Whittier's 70th Birthday Celebration and W.D. Howells' *A Chance Acquaintance*." *American Literary Realism* 27.2 (Winter 1995): 53-73.
- Cady, Edwin H. "Realism Reflects a Common Vision of Everyday Life." *American Realism*. Ed. Christopher Smith. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2000. 56-67.
- Carden, Mary Panicia. "Creative Fertility and the National Romance in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 45:2 (Summer 1999): 275-302.
- Cargill, Oscar. "The Portrait of a Lady." *Perspectives on James's The Portrait of a Lady: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. William T. Stafford. New York: New York University Press, 1967. 256-96.
- Cather, Willa. *My Antonia*. *Cather: Novels & Stories 1905-1918*. Ed. Sharon O'Brien. New York: Library of America, 1999. 707-937.
- . "The Novel D  meubl  ." *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949. 33-43.
- Chandler, Marilyn R. *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Chase, Richard. *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957.

- Colgalzier, Douglas J. "Willa Cather on Henrik Ibsen's Realism: The Protest Against Lies." *American Literary Realism* 33:2 (Winter 2001): 99-103.
- Cox, James M. "Remarks on the Sad Initiation of Huckleberry Finn." *Huck Finn Among the Critics: A Centennial Selection*. Ed. Thomas M. Inge. Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1985. 141-55.
- Crowley, John W. "*The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*: The Company They Kept." *American Realism and Naturalism*. Ed. Donald Pizer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 117-37.
- Cunliffe, Marcus. "The Two or More Worlds of Willa Cather." *American Literary Realism* 33:2 (Winter 2001): 21-42.
- "The Day the World Changed." *The Economist* 15-21 Sept. 2001: 13-14.
- DeVoto, Bernard. "The Artist as American." *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ed. Claude M. Simpson. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968. 7-15.
- Dimock, Wai-Chee. "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*." *The House of Mirth*. By Edith Wharton. Ed. Shari Benstock. New York: Bedford Books, 1994. 375-90.
- Eakin, Paul John. *The New England Girl: Cultural Ideals in Hawthorne, Stowe, Howells and James*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1976.
- Edel, Leon. *Henry James: A Life*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Going to the Territory*. New York: Random House, 1986.
- Emerson, Everett. *Mark Twain: A Literary Life*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays and Lectures*. New York: Library of America, 1983.

- Erlich, Gloria C. *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Fabi, M. Giulia. "The Reluctant Patriarch: A Study of *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Bostonians*, and *The Awkward Age*." *Henry James Review* 13:1 (Winter 1992): 1-18.
- Fatout, Paul, ed. *Mark Twain Speaking*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1976.
- Fetterley, Judith. "My *Antonia*, Jim Burden, and the Dilemma of the Lesbian Writer." *Antonia*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991. 132-47.
- . "'The Temptation to Be a Beautiful Object': Double Standard and Double Bind in *The House of Mirth*." *Studies in American Fiction* 5.2 (Autumn 1977): 199-211.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Geismar, Maxwell. "Nostalgic Poison." *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of The Portrait of a Lady*. Ed. Peter Buitenhuis. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968. 45-50.
- Gelfant, Blanche H. "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Antonia*." *American Literature* 43:1 (March 1971): 60-82.
- Giannone, Richard. "My *Antonia*." *Antonia*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991. 83-96.
- Graff, Gerald, and James Phelan. "The Life of Samuel Clemens and the Reception of *Huckleberry Finn*." *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*. Eds. Gerald Graff and James Phelan. Boston: Bedford Books, 1995. 19-26.

- Helmick, Evelyn. "The Mysteries of *Antonia*." *Willa Cather's My Antonia*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987. 109-17.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *Green Hills of Africa*. New York: Scribners, 1935.
- Hertzberg, Hendrik. "Tuesday, and After." *The New Yorker* 24 Sept. 2001: 27-28.
- Hicks, Granville. "The Case Against Willa Cather." *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Margaret Anne O'Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 436-42.
- Hinton, Laura. *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy: Sadomasochistic Sentiments from Clarissa to Rescue 911*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Holman, C. Hugh. "The Bildungsroman, American Style." *Antonia*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991. 34-35.
- Holmes, Catherine D. "Jim Burden's Lost Worlds: Exile in *My Antonia*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 45.3: 336-46.
- The Holy Bible: King James Version: Standard Text Edition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Howe, Irving. "A Reading of *The House of Mirth*." *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Irving Howe. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962. 119-29.
- Howells, William Dean. *Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays*. Eds. Clara Maburg Kirk and Rudolf Kirk. New York: New York University Press, 1959.
- . *My Mark Twain: Reminiscences and Criticisms*. Ed. Marilyn Austin Baldwin. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967.
- . "Review of James's *Hawthorne*." *Discussions of Henry James*. Ed. Naomi Lebowitz. Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1962. 1-3.

Jacobs, John. "From the World to the Wilderness: Renewal in Thoreau and Cather."

Teaching Cather 3.2 (Spring 2003): 12-16.

James, Henry. *Hawthorne*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

---. "Preface to the New York Edition (1908)." *The Portrait of a Lady*. By Henry James.

Ed. Robert D. Bamberg. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995. 3-15.

---. *The Portrait of a Lady*. Ed. Robert D. Bamberg. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995.

Kaplan, Amy. *The Social Construction of American Realism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Kaplan, Fred. *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

Kaplan, Justin. "Born to Trouble: One Hundred Years of *Huckleberry Finn*." *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*. Eds. Gerald Graff and James Phelan. Boston: Bedford Books, 1995. 348-59.

Kassanoff, Jennie A. "Extinction, Taxidermy, Tableaux Vivants: Staging Race and Class in *The House of Mirth*." *Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth: A Casebook*. Ed. Carol J. Singley. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. 299-330.

Kaston, Carren. *Imagination and Desire in the Novels in Henry James*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984.

Kazin, Alfred. *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995.

Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.

Lee, Hermione. *Willa Cather: Double Lives*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

- Lewis, R.W.B. *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955.
- . *Edith Wharton*. New York: Fromm International, 1985.
- Lowry, Richard S. *"Littery Man": Mark Twain and Modern Authorship*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Lubin, David M. "Act of Portrayal." *Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987. 99-115.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*. Trans. Anna Bostock. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971.
- Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- . "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and *Huckleberry Finn*." *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*. Eds. Gerald Graff and James Phelan. Boston: Bedford Books, 1995. 290-305.
- Matthews, Brander. "Review." *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. By Mark Twain. Ed. Thomas Cooley. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999. 330-33.
- Matthiessen, F.O. "The Painter's Sponge and Varnish Bottle." *The Portrait of a Lady*. By Henry James. Ed. Robert D. Bamberg. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995. 577-97.
- Maynard, W. Barksdale. *Walden Pond: A History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Mazzella, Anthony J. "The New Isabel." *The Portrait of a Lady*. By Henry James. Ed. Robert D. Bamberg. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995. 597-619.

- McCall, Dan. "Foreword." *Hawthorne*. By Henry James. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997. vii-xvii.
- McLuhan, T.C. *Dream Tracks: The Railroad and the American Indian 1890-1930*. New York: Abrams, 1985.
- McMahan, Elizabeth, E. "The Money Motif: Economic Implications in *Huckleberry Finn*." *The Mark Twain Journal* 15.4 (Summer 1971): 5-10.
- Meissner, Collin. *Henry James and the Language of Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
- Merish, Lori. "Engendering Naturalism: Narrative Form and Commodity Spectacle in U.S. Naturalist Fiction." *Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth: A Casebook*. Ed. Carol J. Singley. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. 229-70.
- Miller, James E. "My *Antonia* and the American Dream." *Prairie Schooner* 48:2 (Summer 1974): 112-23.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. *John Milton: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*. Eds. Stephen Orgell and Jonathan Goldberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. 355-618.
- Mitchell, Charles E. *Individualism and Its Discontents: Appropriations of Emerson, 1880-1950*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997.
- Montgomery, Judith H. "The American Galatea." *College English* 32:8 (May 1971): 890-99.
- Murphy, John J. "Introduction." *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*. Ed. John J. Murphy. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1984. 1-28.

- . *My Ántonia: The Road Home*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989.
- Nevius, Blake. *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953.
- Niemtzow, Annette. "Marriage and the New Woman in *The Portrait of a Lady*." *American Literature* 47 (Mar. 1975-Jan. 1976): 377-95.
- Norris, Frank. "A Plea for Romantic Fiction." *McTeague*. By Frank Norris. Ed. Donald Pizer. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997. 277-80.
- O'Brien, Sharon. "Introduction." *New Essays on My Ántonia*. Ed. Sharon O'Brien. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 1-29.
- Olin-Ammentorp, Julie. "Edith Wharton's Challenge to Feminist Criticism." *Studies in American Fiction* 16.2 (Autumn 1988): 237-44.
- Olin-Ammentorp, Julie and Ann Ryan. "Undine Spragg and the Transcendental I." *Edith Wharton Review* 27.1 (Spring 2001): 1-9.
- Orvell, Miles. "Time, Change, and the Burden of Revision in *My Ántonia*." *New Essays on My Ántonia*. Ed. Sharon O'Brien. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 31-56.
- Peck, Demaree C. *The Imaginative Claims of the Artist in Willa Cather's Fiction: "Possession Granted by a Different Lease."* London: Associated University Presses, 1996.
- Pizer, Donald. "The Naturalism of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 41.2 (Summer 1995): 241-48.
- Poirier, Richard. *The Comic Sense of Henry James: A Study of the Early Novels*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- . *A World Elsewhere*. New York: Oxford, 1966.

- Powers, Lyall H. *The Portrait of a Lady: Maiden, Woman, and Heroine*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991.
- Rahv, Philip. "The Heiress of All the Ages." *Perspectives on James's The Portrait of a Lady: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. William T. Stafford. New York: New York University Press, 1967. 139-47.
- Restuccia, Frances L. "The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton's Feminism(s)." *The House of Mirth*. By Edith Wharton. Ed. Shari Benstock. New York: Bedford Books, 1994. 404-18.
- Reynolds, Guy. *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.
- Rosenblatt, Roger. "The Age of Irony Comes to an End." *Time* 24 Sept. 2001: 79.
- Rosowski, Susan J. "Introduction: Willa Cather and American Literary Realism." *American Literary Realism* 33:2 (Winter 2001): 95-98.
- . *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986.
- Rovit, Earl. "James and Emerson: The Lesson of the Master." *American Scholar* 33 (Summer 1964): 434-40.
- Rubin, Larry. "Aspects of Naturalism in Four Novels by Edith Wharton." *Twentieth Century Literature* 2.4 (January 1957): 182-92.
- Sabiston, Elizabeth Jean. *The Prison of Womanhood: Four Provincial Heroines in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. London: Macmillan Press, 1987.
- Safire, William. "A Spirit Reborn." *New York Times* 9 Sept. 2002: A23.
- Sawicki, Joseph. "Authority/Author-ity: Representation and Fictionality in *Huckleberry Finn*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 31.4 (Winter 1985): 691-702.

- Scholes, Robert. E. "Hope and Memory in *My Antonia*." *Major Literary Characters: Antonia*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991. 18-22.
- Scholes, Robert and Robert Kellogg. *The Problem of Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Shi, David E. *Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture, 1850-1920*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Showalter, Elaine. "The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's *House of Mirth*." *The House of Mirth*. By Edith Wharton. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990. 357-72.
- Singley, Carol J. *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Smith, Henry Nash. "'That Hideous Mistake of Poor Clemens's.'" *Harvard Library Bulletin* 9.2 (Spring 1955): 145-80.
- Smith, Roger. "Blown Away." *U.S. News & World Report* 14 Sept. 2001: 16-27.
- Stinebeck, David C. *Shifting World: Social Change and Nostalgia in the American Novel*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1976.
- Stone, Donald David. *Novelists in a Changing World: Meredith, James, and the Transformation of English Fiction in the 1880's*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972.
- Stouk, David. "Willa Cather and the Impressionist Novel." *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*. Ed. John J. Murphy. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1984. 48-66.
- Stout, Janice P. "Seeing and Believing: Willa Cather's Realism." *American Literary Realism* 33:2 (Winter 2001): 168-87.

- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden; or, Life in the Woods. A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers; Walden; The Maine Woods; Cape Cod*. New York: Library of America, 1985. 321-587.
- Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ed. Thomas Cooley. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.
- . "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences." *Huck Finn; Pudd'nhead Wilson; No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger; and Other Writings*. New York: Library of America, 2000. 669-81.
- . *Life on the Mississippi*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. "The House of Mirth: A Novel of Admonition." *Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth: A Casebook*. Ed. Carol J. Singley. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. 107-30.
- . *The Modern American Novel 1914-1945: A Critical History*. Boston: Twayne, 1990.
- Walker, Nancy A. "Reformers and Young Maidens: Women and Virtue in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*." *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*. Eds. Gerald Graff and James Phelan. Boston: Bedford Books, 1995. 485-504.
- "The War Against America: An Unfathomable Attack." Editorial. *New York Times* 12 Sept. 2001: A26.
- Welty, Eudora. "The House of Willa Cather." *The Art of Willa Cather*. Ed. Bernice Slote and Virginia Faulkner. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974. 3-20.
- Wharton, Edith. *A Backward Glance*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.
- . *The House of Mirth*. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990.

Whitley, John S. "Kid's Stuff: Mark Twain's Boys." *Major Literary Characters: Huck Finn*.

Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990. 155-63.

Williams, Raymond. *The English Novel: From Dickens to Lawrence*. New York: Oxford

University Press, 1970.

---. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Woodress, James. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press,

1987.

Woolf, Cynthia Griffin. "Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death." *The House of Mirth*. By

Edith Wharton. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990. 320-

39.

Zakaria, Fareed. "The End of the End of History." *Newsweek* 24 Sept. 2001: 70.