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National Taiwan Normal University

尋找伊蒂絲·華頓  
三本鍍金時代小說中的依附空間

The Quest for a Place of Attachment in Edith  
Wharton's Three Gilded Age Novels

指導教授：林 秀 玲 博士

Advisor: Dr. Hsiu-ling Lin

研 究 生：留宜婷

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The members of the committee approve the thesis of Yi-Ting Liu  
defended on Jan 30, 2017.

Yi-Ting Liu  
Advisor

Ming-Fen  
Committee Member

Wen-Chun Wang  
Committee Member

Approved:

Sun-Chieh Liang  
Sun-Chieh Liang, Chair, Department of English, National Taiwan Normal University

## 摘要

本篇論文旨在探討伊蒂絲·華頓及其三本鍍金時代小說中女主人翁追尋依附空間的歷程。十九世紀南北戰後的美國經濟快速成長、暴發戶崛起，造就了馬克·吐溫筆下的鍍金時代。這個時代炫富文化橫行，上流社會女性被視為男性資產。他們衣著華麗、出席各式社交場合，以維持家族聲望和地位。然而，光鮮亮麗的外表下，女性面臨了「物化」、「他者化」所帶來的身分認同危機。如何與其所處的環境建立情感上的依附關係，並將父權社會轉換成賦權空間，成為女性獲得歸屬感的依據。因此在討論創造依附空間的可能性時，首先我會指出空間和身分是相互定義的。當一個人能夠與一個地方產生正向的連結，這個地方將被賦予「家」的意義。第一章討論華頓的作品、生平以及她「第一個真正的家」——蒙特。從中我們將發現依附空間在女性的身心健康、自我建構上扮演著不可或缺的重要角色。第二章分析【歡樂之家】中莉莉·巴特尋找家的過程。藉由去商品化和經濟關係的扭轉，莉莉最後在愛和友誼中得到啟迪。第三章檢視【國家的習俗】中，昂黛·斯普拉格如何利用旅館、公共空間以及她數次的離婚所提供的移動自由，為自己建立數個流動的家。第四章探討【純真年代】中，艾倫·奧蘭斯卡的無家可歸。艾倫放蕩不羈的生活方式挑戰社會的傳統與權威，使其成為衛道人士眼中「具威脅性的他者」。無法得到家族的支持與諒解，艾倫只能接受被放逐的命運。最後，我將總結依附空間僅存在平衡對等的權力關係中。然而，鍍金時代大部分的婦女對自己的生活並無主控權，尋求、生產依附空間成了艱辛而漫長的旅程。

## 關鍵字

Gilded Age, Place of Attachment, Identity, Other, Commodity, Hotel, Mobility

## Abstract

The thesis aims to explore Wharton's production of homes and her female protagonists' quest for a place of attachment in her three Gilded Age novels: *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Custom of the Country* (1915) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Characterized by the conspicuous consumption and the display of wealth, the Gilded Age society was constructed within the context of gender inequalities. To secure a place of her own, a woman had to establish an affective tie with her society, turning her living environment into a site of empowerment. However, unable to take control of their life, most women only felt a sense of placelessness. Thus, to discuss the possibility and futility of their quest, first I will point out that "place" and "identity" are mutually defined, and a place becomes home when a woman endows it with meanings to which she can feel attached. In chapter one, by looking into Wharton's life and works and her design of the Mount, I will argue that a place of attachment is integral to a woman's well-being and self- conceptualization. In chapter two, I will talk about Lily Bart's decommodification and her final enlightenment in *The House of Mirth*. In chapter three, I will examine how Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* utilizes "the freedom of movement" provided by the hotel and her several divorces to establish her homes in mobility. In chapter four, I will turn to discuss Ellen Olenska's futile search for a place of attachment in *The Age of Innocence*. Finally, I will conclude that a place of attachment will be produced when one can find in it a balanced power relation.

### Keywords:

Gilded Age, Place of Attachment, Identity, Other, Commodity, Hotel, Mobility

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## Abbreviations

AI: *The Age of Innocence.*

HM: *The House of Mirth.*

CC: *The Custom of the Country.*

CS: *Collected Stories: 1891-1910.*

BG: *A Backward Glance.*

WA: "Wharton and Art."

AE: *The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton.*

DH: *The Decoration of Houses*

EI: "Edith Wharton and the Issue of Race."

LE: *The Letters of Edith Wharton.*

WE: *Women and Economics.*

POS: *The Production of Space.*

## Introduction

Edith Wharton (1862-1937), born Edith Newbold Jones to the socially prominent George Frederic Jones and Lucretia Rhinelanders Jones, was growing up in one of those “good old families” in New York. These families, priding themselves on their aristocratic ancestry with virtue as their chief quality, were playing the role of a moral arbitrator in their society. They despised the vulgar taste of the nouveau riches and were aiming to correct those who transgressed the moral boundary. Having witnessed the affluence and social conflicts of her time, Wharton is most well-known for her fictional chronicle of Old New York: *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Custom of the Country* (1915) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). These novels reconstruct the top drawer society as a “hieroglyphic world” which always involves clashes among the riches, the individual’s pursuit of wealth and status, and most importantly, the female protagonist’s struggle against the rules of their society. For example, in *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart is refusing to be commodified in the marriage market; in *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen Olenska is returning to New York to divorce her dissolute husband; and in *The Custom of the Country*, Undine Spragg never reconciles herself to a quiet domestic life. As a result, for many critics, Wharton’s Gilded Age society is a “prison cell,” and the “social crisis” posed by these protagonists’ indifference to the social conventions is their attempt to liberate themselves from a space that would hinder their self-independence.

In “Mrs. Wharton’s Mask” (1970), Marius Bewley speaks of the protagonists in Wharton’s fiction as “hopelessly trapped by the demands or the refusal of their society” (147); in *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (1975), R.W.B. Lewis indicates that Wharton took the prison cell as the image of a number of her characters’ condition in life (121). Meanwhile, Gary H. Lindberg argues in *Edith Wharton and the Novel of*



*Manners* (1975) that society functions as a prison and its individuals must learn to perceive reality through the bars of its cage (36). Later, when Wharton's works begin to invite feminist readings, Cynthia Griffin Wolff's *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (1977) interprets Wharton's fiction as the author's victory over social obstacles and patriarchal oppressions while Elizabeth Ammons' *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (1980) approaches Wharton as a critical writer who describes a social patriarchy robbing women of the right to control their own life. Carol Wershoven, in *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton* (1982), also points out Wharton's defiant heroines as embodiments of the author's rebellion. In these novels, Wharton's women are made prisoners of their society either by their marital status or by rules not of their own devising; and the violation of social taboos becomes a way for them to be delivered from the shut-in space of conventions.

However, while these women are non-conformers striving to free themselves from the imprisoned state, they are also avidly seeking for a place of their own in the society. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily is looking for a marriage that will secure her position; in *The Custom of the Country*, Undine is forever searching for a richer husband who will advance her social status; and in *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen is trying to win the support of her society people on her cause. They all wish to gain an acceptable place recognized by their society. Nonetheless, the process is not without its difficulties. While Undine is able to take control of her life, shifting from one marriage to another to establish her roots along her traveling route, both Ellen and Lily, regarded by their people as a threatening Other and a marketable commodity, will find their ideal place either a non-existence or one that transcends the bargain and trade of the material culture.

Therefore, in my thesis, instead of looking at these female protagonists' struggle merely as a form of escape, I will consider it their quest for a place of attachment in

which they can be accommodated and provided with an equal power relation with their men and society. To discuss the probability and futility of their quest, I will focus my thesis on the patriarchal social climate and its constraint on women in the Gilded Age. By pointing out women's subordinate position rendered by the objectification and commodification of her society, I will argue that an affective tie between a woman and a particular place can only be formed when the woman is able to take control of her life and to unite psychologically with the geographical environment around her. Her sense of place will be acquired when a place is transformed into a site of empowerment where her autonomy is assured and her mobility is guaranteed.

## **I. Having a Place of Her Own**

Many feminist writers have insisted on the need for women to have a place of their own. Examining the relation between women and their dwelling, Elizabeth Grosz notes that “[t]he containment of women within a dwelling that they did not build, nor was even built for them, can only amount to a homelessness within the very home itself” in that “it becomes the space of duty, of endless and infinitely repeatable chores that have no social value or recognition” (219). Thus, In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf is searching a place in which she can devote herself to the sole mission of writing. In “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), Charlotte Perkins Gilman depicts a mentally-deranged narrator who strives to free her imagined woman from the confinement of a place not of her own. In *The Awakening* (1899), Kate Chopin narrates the story of Edna Pontellier, who will come to her final awakening when she is given a physical and emotional room to ponder over the various aspects of her life and to take an active role of her own happiness. As for Wharton herself, horrified by the untended streets and the narrow houses of New York and distressed by an unsupportive society depriving her of the opportunities to write and to create, is to

build The Mount, her “first real home” in Lenox.<sup>1</sup> In her own place, she will dedicate herself to her profession of authorship and enjoy the company of her close friends. In her Gilded Age novels, her protagonists are working on the same goal to find themselves a place of attachment. However, before such a place can be found, a positive people-place bonding has to take place.

## II. Place and Identity

The meaning of place is always flexible and is subject to the interpretations of its dwellers. For a woman, the feeling of place attachment occurs when she can wield power over her living environment and have it relate to the every aspect of her life. A place becomes “home” because she can identify with it and thus defines it as one. In *Place and Placelessness* (1976), E. Relph explores place as “a phenomenon of the geography of the lived-world of our everyday experiences” (6) whose meanings are characterized by the beliefs of man (3). Its value, as Yi-Fu Tuan indicates in *Space and Place* (1977), lies in “the intimacy of a particular human relationship” without which it would have nothing much to offer (140). In *Psychology of Place* (1977), David Canter talks about place as “the result of relationship between actions, conceptions and physical attributes,” and we could not identify with it until we know what behavior is associated with it (158-9). Later in *The Sense of Place* (1981), Fritz Steetle argues that sense of place is an experiential process “created by the setting combined with what a person brings to it” (9). Thus, to some degree, we create our own place and it does not exist independent of us. Our personal identity is bound up with this place identity which is crucial for one to create and maintain one’s “self.”

This notion of identity is fundamental in defining one’s relation with others. In his discussion of ego identity in “Identity and the Life-Cycle” (1959), Erik Erikson

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<sup>1</sup> The Mount is, as Wharton calls it in *A Backward Glance* (1934), “my first real home” (125).

writes that “the term identity...connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself...and a persistent sharing of some kind of characteristic with others” (102). While identity makes its claim upon beings of every kind, it is founded not only in an object or an individual person, but also in a place to which they belong. This place identity however, is not a simple address which makes the place identifiable; instead, it is a basic feature of our experience of place (Relph 45).

In “Place Identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self” (1983), Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff claim that place identity is a substructure of one’s self in that it is a “potpourri” of one’s memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas and related feelings about specific physical settings (60). Meanwhile, Kalevi Mikael Korpela, in “Place-identity as a product of environmental self-regulation” (1989), regards place identity as a psychological structure arising out of the individual’s attempt to regulate their environments. He points out that “place-belongingness” is the basis of place identity and the practice of environmental usage will enable one to create and sustain a coherent sense of self (246). In other words, place identity is not static and unchangeable, but varies with human intentions and attitude, and place attachment is integral in the self-definitional process and the formation of one’s self-identity. When a woman is able to view the place as an essential part of her self, the place will turn into her “home.”

For many people, the childhood home is such an intimate place. In *The Poetics of Space* (1969), Gaston Bachelard states that the childhood home is one’s ideal in that it is a place where one’s life is enclosed and protected. It is one’s “original shell” one will always want to go back later in life whether physically or mentally (4). In *Topophilia* (1974), Yi-fu Tuan also points out that one’s awareness of the past is an important element for one to love a place (99). However, for Wharton, who always holds an ambivalent feeling to her birthplace, is not to return to her childhood

brownstone house. As Louis Auchincloss writes in his introduction to Wharton's autobiography,

On one hand, she [ Wharton ] loved it [ the Old New York ] for the very completeness of her understanding of it and for the richness of the material with which it supplied her. It was, after all, her cradle and family. On the other hand she resented the smallness of its imagination, the dryness of its appreciations and its ever turned back towards everything that made life worth while to her (xi; parenthesis mine).

Therefore, instead of living merely in her memory, she will go beyond her nostalgia to establish a personal bond with her current living space; and during her lifetime, she will produce more than one place of attachment for herself.

Having a place with which one can identify and to which one can feel attached is important to the self-perception of an individual. Anne Buttimer, in "Home, Reach, and the Sense of Place" (1980), points out an identity crisis posed by the loss of one's home or the losing of one's place (167); and Simone Weil, in *The Need for Roots* (1955), presumes that to have roots in one place is a necessary precondition for other needs of the soul, and it is vital for one to have multiple roots so that one can "draw well-nigh the whole of his moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a part" (53). Hence, while both Bachelard and Tuan regard the childhood home as the "psychic anchor" associating one with family love and security, they also believe that one's emotion and feeling for a place should not derive solely from one's longing for the "first home." Tuan suggests that it can take many forms and vary greatly in emotional range and intensity (*Topophilia* 27) and Bachelard also argues that in addition to the past, both present and future give a place

different dynamism that could stimulate one another (6). And among them, the present that can relate to one's living experience is foremost important. When a person can find in her current environment a repository for emotions and relationships that give meaning and purpose to life, the place will become part of one's self-identity and increase a woman's self-esteem and her feeling of belonging to the society.

However, for women in the Gilded Age, the society was a site filled with obstacles. There were problems brought by the influx of the new wealth and a consumer culture based on the male production of wealth. A look into the historical background of the second half of the nineteenth century will illuminate the difficult social circumstance of that time. When Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner coined the term "Gilded Age" in their 1873 novel, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, they portrayed the postbellum America as an era of excess and parvenus. When Paul Bourget (1852-1935), the French novelist and critic, was instructed by Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald* to do his "fashionable-watering place" article on Newport, he was captivated by the energy of the showy resort and was amazed at its grandest mansions<sup>2</sup>. He got the feeling that "you half fancy that you have been visiting some isle consecrated to the god Plutus, whose modern incarnation is the god Dollar" (19-20). Meanwhile, Henry James was equally stunned by this extravagant "American scene" after almost twenty-five years abroad. As he showed it in *the Ivory Tower* (1917), everyone out there was so "hideously rich" (207) and one could even hear "something like the chink of money itself in the murmur of the breezy little waves" (23).

Indeed, it was an important turning point of the country. It just transformed itself from an isolated, rural, agricultural nation into an urban, industrial, and multicultural

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the grandest mansions of that time: William K. Vanderbilt's Marble House, Ogden Goelet's Ochre Court and James Van Alen's Wakehurst on Bellevue Avenue

world power. However, Mark Twain, Andrew Carnegie, Leon Fink, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and several others have also pointed out the major problems hidden behind this prosperity. The discontent caused by its capitalism was satirized by Twain in his short story “Poor Little Stephen Girard” (1879) and documented by Carnegie in *Problems of Today: Wealth, Labour, Socialism* (1908).<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the Jim Crow Laws deepened the racial discrimination against the black people, erecting a virtual caste system of institutional segregation.<sup>4</sup> And later its “trap” of consumption would be noted by Gillman in *Women and Economics* (1898) while its rampant materialism was to be attacked by Henry James in *The American Scene* (1907). These were factors which not only made the Gilded Age society a space of conflicts but also subjected women to an inferior position.

The society ladies, whose presence in the public entertainment had become more visible than ever before, were objectified to gratify the desire of men and were commodified to be bought and possessed. The fierce competitions between the haute bourgeoisie and the Old New York elites required these ladies to demonstrate the wealth of their fathers and their husbands and to compete for the title of the “dowager empress” (O’ Connor 44). Therefore, while their men were busily engaged in the financial business, the women were attending operas, going to the theaters and hosting social events. Lavish balls would take place one after another in Mrs. Astor’s summer

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<sup>3</sup> In this story, Mark Twain aims to shatter the poor-boy-done-good theme, an ideology of success which was widely promoted in the Gilded Age America. The notion showed that with enough of hard work, everyone would be able to succeed. Meanwhile, it was also believed that poor boys might make good more often simply because of fortunate accidents. (“Gimme A Break! Mark Twain Lampoons the Horatio Alger Myth.” *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*. American Social History Production Inc. 2006. 15 October 2011. <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4935>>

<sup>4</sup> The Jim Crow Laws were state and local laws in the United States enacted between 1876 and 1965. They mandated de jure racial segregation in all public facilities, with a supposedly “separate but equal” status for black Americans. In reality, this led to treatment and accommodations that were usually inferior to those provided for white Americans, systematizing a number of economic, educational and social disadvantages. *Wikipedia*. 15 October 2011. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim\\_Crow\\_laws](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Crow_laws)>

palace Beechwood, the Berwinds' The Elm and Alva Vanderbilt's Golden Ballroom at Marble House, and Alva had to trump them all with the fancy Chinese costume ball at her newly-built Chinese-styled teahouse (Sommer 7-23). They made frequent appearance in the public to display their fine gowns, expensive jewelry, and most important of all, to maintain the status of their family. As a consequence, although their participation in these leisure activities seemed to emancipate them and lead them out of the domestic sphere, it also provided their men with further domination and control. The world was in fact constructed within the context of gender inequalities, and a woman's identity was a mere social construct.

Wharton detected these problems and reflected them in her novels as well. Though embracing the glamour and extravagance of her time and obsessing herself with the leisure activities of collecting and display, Wharton confessed in her autobiography *A Backward Glance* (1934) that she always hated the "general society" (213). She was acutely conscious of the restraint placed on her by her society, which thwarted her early interest in writing and was the cause of her unhappy marriage. Thus, whether in her writings or in her real life, she was looking for a place of attachment where she was able to live with a real self and not to feel deprived.

To discuss Wharton and her protagonists' quest, I will center my thesis on the social climate of Gilded Age and its influence on its people. I will argue that only when a woman is connected affectionately and positively with her place can she feel a sense of attachment. In chapter one, I will focus on Edith Wharton and her production of homes. By looking into her life and works and her design of the Mount, I will point out Wharton's belief in the mutual influence between people and their environment and the need to produce a home from which one's "real self" can be empowered.

In chapter two, I will talk about Lily Bart's quest for home and her final enlightenment in *The House of Mirth*. Here I will consider the Gilded Age society a



marketplace in which every “marriageable girl” has to commodify themselves to hunt for a wealthy husband. Refusing to be treated as a commodity and ignorant of the business rules of her time, Lily is going through a process of decommodification that will not only reverse her subordinate position in the economic relation but also lead her to discover a place of attachment in the real human connection.

In chapter three, I will examine the idea of “hotels” in the Gilded Age and look at Undine Spragg’s homes in mobility in *The Custom of the Country*. As a social climber, Undine is shifting from one place to another, always looking for opportunities. Knowing how to utilize the “liminality” or “the freedom of movement” provided both by the hotel space and the public space, she is empowered to establish homes everywhere on her traveling route.

In chapter four, I will turn to discuss Ellen Olenska’s futile search for a place of attachment in *The Age of Innocence*. I will investigate the tribal concept and the imperial mindset in the Gilded Age. I will look at how these two elements contribute to a binary system dividing the world into the insiders and the outsiders and epitomizing the unequal relation between the Orient and the Occident. And Ellen, the European countess who returns to Old New York to divorce her husband, is regarded as a threatening Other who is going to disrupt the order of her society. The society people’s fear of her presence will give her a sense of placelessness and render her an outcast. Finally, I will conclude that space of various types can be turned into place of attachment as long as one can find in it a balanced power relation. Ellen’s inferior position makes her unable to feel at home while Lily’s and Undine’s capability to reconstruct and identify enables them to find a home in the boisterous Gilded Age.

## Chapter One

### Edith Wharton and Her Production of Homes

In *The Production of Space* (1974), Henri Lefebvre suggests that each space is “actively produced” by its dwellers, and the one associated with one’s lived everyday experience is the most alive and dynamic. For Wharton, creating such a place that will be the locus of action and passion becomes a way for her to live a life in accord with her inner self. In the short story “The Fullness of Life” (1893), Wharton compares a woman’s nature to a great house full of rooms, and “in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes” (CS 14). This inner self, often elusive and unrestrained, is a source of one’s personal longings; and its interaction with its surroundings plays a great part in one’s existence.

In *The Age of Innocence*, the “soul” can be seen in Ellen’s unconventional bid for freedom; in *The House of Mirth*, it is realized in Lily’s instinct for love and humanity and in *The Custom of the Country*, it is manifested in Undine’s “monstrous” ambition to advance her marriage career.<sup>5</sup> As for Wharton, it is reflected in her desire to produce a place of her own. Always describing in her novels an individual modified or distorted by the mores, rituals or expectations of their society, Wharton believes that the influence between the environment and its people is mutual; and she emphasizes the need for one to build an emotional tie with the environment in order to live a life with energy and mobility.

Spending most of her childhood in Europe and growing up indulging herself in the historical sites of Rome and the townscapes of Paris and Florence, Wharton developed a lifelong standard of beauty that would prompt her to free herself from the

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<sup>5</sup> For the earlier reviewers, *The Custom of the Country* lacks a sympathetic heroine from whom the reader might learn a moral lesson. In the novel, Undine is glittery, greedy and soulless without any moral feature. For example, *The New York Sun* (1913) writes that Wharton has created “an ideal monster” with no human feeling, who is “absolutely unmoral” (qtd. in Killoran 66).

dreary landscape of Old New York and its suffocating way of life. To Wharton, the period from 1840 to 1890 was “the nadir of American taste” (Wilson 156), and she felt dismayed to find that most people felt it easier to arrange their room like some one else’s than to analyze and express their own needs. She could never wipe out from her memory the overcrowded rooms in her parents’ three-story brownstone house on West Twenty-third Street because

like those of most other New York town houses of the period, [ they ] were so designed as to lack any clear identity and to make privacy impossible. Each seemed somehow to be part of the room next to it—the drawing room was part of the hall, the library part of the drawing room.... The house was expensively but unharmoniously furnished.... (Lewis 22)

Therefore, in her first published book *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), she was redressing the ostentation and “indescribability” of Richard Morris Hunt’s designs with her architectural philosophies;<sup>6</sup> and when she built The Mount, her “first real home” in Lenox (1902), she admitted in her autobiography that finally she was able to enjoy “the freedom from trivial obligations” and to write contentedly (BG 125). Later, it was at The Mount that she was to finish her first important work, *The House of Mirth*. For Wharton, one’s living environment impacts significantly on the well-being of the individual; hence, it is important to create a place that will cater to the needs of its dwellers.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Morris Hunt (1827-95). An eminent and prolific American society architect. He is known for a series of increasingly opulent mansions for which he adopted a variety of styles, as seen in the Stick Style Griswold House, (1863); the Neo-classical Marble House (1882); the Italian Renaissance Revival The Breakers, (1895); and the French château style Biltmore House (1895), all for the Vanderbilt family. The most important of his commercial buildings in New York was the *New York Tribune* Building (1876). Hunt helped to establish professional building standards and a proper fee basis for architects; he also helped found the American Institute of Architects in 1857 (Calloway 531).

In *Edith Wharton as Spatial Activist and Analyst* (2005), Reneé Somers points out Wharton's belief in the mutual influence between people and their living space. Discussing Wharton's several literary texts, "Mrs. Manstey's View" (1891), "The Lamp Psyche" (1895) and *The House of Mirth*, Somers believes that Wharton was always exploring how space created meaning and how people were made into "creatures of their environment" (3). Her first novel *The Valley of Decision* (1902) is full of overwhelming details of settings and lifestyle in which the "background" just upstaged the characters (WA 189). Vanessa Chase also argues that "[ F ] or Wharton, architecture and its decoration both define and are defined by the inhabitants; the house one builds or the room one decorates is an expression of one's character, and the house or room in which one is obliged to live creates that character" (138).

In *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), Wharton herself praised Balzac as a pioneer in investigating the physical surroundings of his characters and their psychological make-up:

Balzac was the first not only to see his people, physically and morally, in their habit as they lived, with all their personal hobbies, and make the reader see them, but to draw his dramatic action as much from the relation of his characters to their houses, streets, towns, professions, inherited habits and opinions, as from their fortuitous contacts with each other. (8)

Moreover, she considered both Balzac and Stendhal "the first to seem continuously aware that the bounds of a personality are not reproduced by a sharp black line, but that each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things" (10). Thus, in *The House of Mirth*, as much as Lily Bart was irritated by Gerty Farish's "horrid little place", with the release of her emotion, she was able to transform it into a place where

the real human contact remains (7).

In other words, while a woman is much influenced by her environment, she too can have her personality influencing the surroundings. In Wharton's case, though she faults the excess of the Gilded Age, she knows how to "tone it down" to make it her place of attachment (Somers 140). In *The Decoration of Houses*, her main concern is to arrange a house with a view to our own comfort and convenience (20). In *Italian Backgrounds* (1905), she describes a landscape "humanized" by art (49). In *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1903), she is to conceive a space that is "meant to be lived in" (11). The garden should be "in relation to the house" and the landscape "to the requirement of the inmates" (6-7). Believing in the spatial influence on the people and the people's ability to define space, Wharton is to produce a place to which she can feel attached and through which she will be empowered.

Throughout her life, Wharton had owned and resided in several houses. Among them, The Mount was her masterpiece. In "History of the Mount" (1997), the architectural historian Scott Marshall, claims that Wharton had a "lifelong love affairs with her homes" (qtd. in Benert, AE 26), and her love for houses and gardens, as Philippe Collas and Éric Villedary observes in *Edith Wharton's French Riviera* (2002), "was not a superficial or simply aesthetic interests, but rather the symptom of an absolute need to have roots or a shelter to protect her from life's storms" (9). She was always looking for a way to live her life to the fullest, and a home where her feminine nature and masculine interests could coexist in harmony was just the place to provide her with this opportunity.

Being both a society "Grande Dame" and a devoted writer, Wharton was situated in a "threshold position" requiring her to have a place that can serve as a passage for her to traverse from one role to the other; and The Mount was such an invention. On the one hand, the house was a "secret retreat" to secure her privacy; on the other, it

was open for the guests to invite the fluidity of movement. Visiting it back in 1904, Henry James was impressed by its intricate design and its demarcation of the public and the private. It was composed of a series of different kinds of space: space for servants, space for privacy and for social relations. Her boudoir on the second floor was the room where she spent her mornings undisturbed and no one would have the permission to enter while she wrote. So to both Judith Fryer and Vanessa Chase, Wharton's boudoir was the "privatized power center" of the entire house. In the boudoir, Wharton was able to assure her autonomy and carry out her reflection and writings (Chase 154).

However, Wharton was not building a home only to seek her inner equilibrium. While Wharton considered privacy a requisite of civilized life and made it one of her major principles in *The Decoration of Houses*, she was also to make her home a place where social activities were provided. In *The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton* (2007), Annette Benert indicates that Wharton's vision of the house is that of "social aesthetic" conducive to human development and to gracious gatherings and conversations: "[ It ] anticipates her own high standards not only for house and grounds but for hospitality and relationships" (49). Earlier in *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (1969), Percy Lubbock also said of her as a "housekeeperish person" who wanted to lay out her garden, furnish her house and feed her friends better than anyone else (25-8). When she was not writing, she needed a place that would connect her with the outer world. Through *The Mount*, Wharton not only redressed the "brazenly open mansions" of the new plutocracy but also produced for herself a place of attachment.<sup>7</sup> Later when *The Mount* was sold, she would continue to make homes

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<sup>7</sup> In the chapter "New York: Social notes" of *The American Scene* (1907), Henry James diagnoses a chief cause of his unease in these clamorous American spaces: "the absence of closable doors, an 'affliction' against which he must continually 'brace himself'" (McDonald 228). This lack of privacy, of personal space is further testified in a report by Henry Adams, friend to both Wharton and James, on the Newport social life:

in France where she took her French citizenship.

This production of space, according to Lefebvre, is a means of control and domination; and Wharton's ability to negotiate a place of her own wherever she is derives from a mobility that can only be gained when she subverts her subordinate position. Independent financially from her husband, Wharton is an art connoisseur, an architect and a pioneering feminist writer partaking in the power relation of hegemony and domination. These roles help her to shape her space and to endow it with an identity to which she could relate. Nonetheless, while Wharton understands the importance of a home place and is able to create one for herself, she reflects in her novels the needs and difficulties for her contemporary women to find such a place. Her female protagonists, in their struggle for status and reputation in the society, must learn the coded meanings and values of her culture in order to exert control over their destinies.

Though making the pursuit of the soul an elusive theme in most of her novels, Wharton believes that the essence of self cannot be separated from its society. In her essay "The Great American Novel" (1927), she argues with William Dean Howell (1837-1920), the American realist author and literary critic, about the relationship between "self" and its society. There she questions Howell's claim that the essence of selfhood lays chiefly outside the social boundaries:

how much of it [ human nature ] is left when it is separated from the web of customs, manners, culture it has elaborately spun about itself? Only that

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[ Mrs. Steven's ] house [ in Newport ] is a sort of center for the New York fast set. The young men stroll in and shout up stairs to know if the ladies are there, and go up to their boudoirs. One rather clever game was extemporized at the house.....Three young men are selected as judges. The young ladies are then brought out in turn and given marks on a certain scale, say 5, for their points; as for instance, hair, 4; figure,3; hands and feet, 2; complexion, 5; and so on. The one whose marks are highest in the aggregate, wins.... (qtd. in Luria 307).

hollow unreality.... As to real men, unequal, unmanageable, and unlike each other, they are all bound up with the effects of climate, soil, laws, religion, wealth. (652)

Obviously, what forms the core of Wharton's fiction is an individual within the social structure rather than one outside its boundaries. To be accepted by her society, the woman has to combine her individual and "communal" aspects of identity to form a unified experience with her place.

For Wharton's part, though she is being addressed as a "self-made man" and a "masculine Henry James" (Gilbert 128) and is known as a "triumphant warrior" (Wolff 9) challenging the world with her "brave new politics",<sup>8</sup> she is not a feminist by nature. Born into a changing era when the old values were fading away and the idea of new woman was yet in the making, she was showing an ambiguous attitude toward her role in the society. Though in her novels, she denounced the social practice of her society, she was equally eager to embrace its prosperity. As a result, feminist critics like Margaret McDowell, Diana Zacharia Worby, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar find it hard to define Wharton's feminism in that Wharton is not a feminist in an ordinary sense and the nature of her feminism is both equivocal and elusive.

As a little girl, Wharton aspired to be "The best-dressed woman in New York"; and each year she shared with her mother the excitement rummaging through the "trunk from Paris" in which one resplendent dress lapped over the other (BG 20). Both her early photographs in her autobiography and Percy Lubbock's stories about her devotion to her wardrobe suggest that "she did very well in this respect" (Walton 19). Later when she became a literary hostess whose works earned her wide acclaim,

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<sup>8</sup> Cited from the title of Dale M. Bauer's work *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics*. (Madison : U of Wisconsin Press, 1994)



she showed her contempt to women who sought full political and economic independence.

For example, in her autobiography, lingering over the excellent foods served by the two famous cooks at her parents' house, she lamented on the fact that such cookery, which was one of the most important and honorable part of household arts, was to be swept aside by the "monstrous regiment" of the emancipated:

Young women taught by their elders to despise the kitchen and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of University degrees for the more complex art of civilized living. The movement began when I was young, and now that I am old, and have watched it and noted its results, I mourn more than ever the extinction of the household arts. Cold storage, deplorable as it is, had done far less harm to the home than the Higher Education. (BG 60)

Meanwhile, commenting on Ray Strachey's *The Cause*, a book about the history of British feminism, she observed that for her part, she believed that "women were made for pleasure and procreation" (Lewis 486). Hence in "Wharton's Women", Martha comes to the conclusion that

Look in vain for a Whartonian guide to laws regarding woman's suffrage, to references to women entering male-bound professions, or to the rise of female enrollments into institutions of higher learning. Those markers by which women defined their march through history between the 1840s and 1930s are absent from Wharton's pages. (51)

In a way, as Gilbert and Gubar put it in *No Man's Land* (1989), Wharton seems to present herself as “an old-fashioned ‘man’s women’” (126).

Nevertheless, despite her contemptuous remarks to the “New Womanly Striving” (Gilbert 126), what we find in her fiction is one of the most searching and searing analysis of the patriarchal construction of femininity. Inextricably bound to the material and social environment of her society, Wharton has to follow its rules to secure a place within its social order; yet at the same time, not to fall prey to its oppressive force, she needs to assault the “vulgarity and failures” of its patriarchal structure with a tone “bitingly cold” and a draftsmanship “harsh and crude” (Wilson 24). The bond between her and the society is always there. In her Gilded Age novels, her heroines are also seeking a metaphorical home that will ensure their autonomous selfhood. However, their “innocence” and failure to modify themselves before they rebel will render the people-place bonding impossible.

## Chapter Two

### Lily Bart and Her Place of Attachment in *The House of Mirth*

#### I. Lily Bart as a Commodity

While in the previous chapter, the prospect for a woman to find a place of attachment seems to be gloomy, the possibility still exists. In this chapter, I will look at Gilded Age as a space of competition and Lily Bart's survival skills. Same as Ellen Olenska, in *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart is looking for a place of her own. Born without a rich father, Lily considers marriage the only way for her to gain a position in the highest rung of society. However, refusing to be treated as a commodity to be traded, she is displaced from one place to another; and it is only when she is "decommodified" will she be able to discover a place of attachment in Gerty Farish's humble flat or Nettie Sruther's little house where her "real self" could find a shelter. To look at Lily's journey of quest and her final enlightenment, I will first investigate the "business domain" of the Gilded Age: its predatory nature and its culture of exchange.

When Paul Bourget was writing about his impression of America, he made this comment,

How many times in the course of this journey have people said to me: —“In Boston they ask you what you know; in New York, how much you are worth; in Philadelphia, who your parents were!” (6)

Indeed, the social atmosphere in the Gilded Age was a competitive one; and both the old guards and newcomers were striving to enhance their status either through their

prominent lineage and or through their newly-gained economic power. Social distinction was their main concern and “survival of the fittest” became a rule by which every participant must abide. Thus, both men and women were busily engaged in the “conspicuous consumption” and the display of leisure.<sup>9</sup> They were vying for space in the New York papers and a title that would secure their aristocratic position as society leaders in any rituals ranging from balls, evening parties, and any festivities.<sup>10</sup> In *The House of Mirth*, Mrs. Trenor is such an avid competitor. She was a hostess who “knew no more personal emotion than that of hatred for the woman who presumed to give bigger dinners or have more amusing house-parties than herself” (40). This aggressive characteristic, however, is essential for one to survive in the Gilded Age society.

In his discussion of the leisure class, the economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen categorizes it as a group of people consisting mainly of hunters and warriors. Both are of predatory nature and “reap where they have not strewn” (9). They do not participate in the productive process; instead, they depend on prowess, force or fraud. These devices can be seen operating in most of Wharton’s novels of manners, and they are part of the “adaptive mechanisms” required to be at work in an environment filled with implications for fitness: courtship customs, parenting behavior or status-seeking (Saunders 2). In the novel, Lily Bart is one of those social climbers. She knows that beauty is her asset and she has to use her good look and nice dress to make herself a popular socialite. Nonetheless, her ignorance of the business rules and her lack of the required predatory nature would cripple her ability to find a place of

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<sup>9</sup> “Conspicuous consumption” is a term introduced by the economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) to depict the behavioral characteristic of the nouveau riches in the nineteenth century. They consumed mainly for the purpose of displaying their wealth.

<sup>10</sup> From the early 1880s, the *Times*, *Herald*, *World*, *Sun* and other New York papers devoted increasing space to the doings of society leaders, such as the Astors or the Vanderbilts, the “royal families” of that time (Homburger 19).

her own in the top drawer society, and in the end, would relegate her to the working class position.

In the Gilded Age, a woman was serving as a form of commodity for men. Her power and status hinged mainly upon a successful marriage; as a result, she had to look for a potential buyer and sell herself to that man. This concept of women as commodities is discussed by the French feminist Luce Irigaray in “Women on the Market.” In the essay, Irigaray argues that women are two things for men: the “utilitarian objects” and “bearers of value” (175). As a utilitarian object, she is used and consumed by males; while as a bearer of value, she is an object of exchange that would provide status and economic gain to men (176). These two roles are exemplified in the objectification of women in the competitive display of male wealth. In *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton’s New York* (1988), Maureen E. Montgomery points out women’s objectified position in the Old New York. Examining the “optical excursions” of the society, she indicates that display and spectatorship are operating in a gendered paradigm, and “(s)ociety women signified with their bodily presence and appearance high social class and respectability, which in turn reflected on their male provider’s monetary wealth” (117). Thus, the value of women is purely social in nature. It is endowed solely by men, and she has to live up to the image of a valuable commodity both with her beauty and her reputation.

*A Moment’s Ornament*, Wharton’s first title for this novel, is a suitable metaphor for her heroine and for any women of leisure in this era. In the novel, Lily is aware of her role as an object d’art and she laments on the limited choices a woman could have to enhance her social status. On her first visit to Lawrence Selden’s private room in *The Benedick*, she grumbles,

“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 part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We 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.” (HM 12)

The value of a woman lies in most part in the clothes with which she adorns herself; and the expense of these dresses, as Veblen suggests, must be expensive and up to date, because “our apparel is always in evidence” and “what is inexpensive is unworthy” (168-9). Meanwhile, the dress should speak of where they are and vary with different social habitats that they occupy.

According to Jane Ashelford in *The Art of Dress* (1996), in Edwardian England, ladies on a four-day visit to a country house required at least twelve to sixteen ensembles; and back in New York, the fashion scene was much the same. As Caroline Milbank points out in *New York Fashion* (1989), a New York woman of fashion living around 1900 might change her clothes as often as six times a day. For an unmarried girl to hunt for a rich husband, she needs different dresses just to act and to pose in different social scenes. Hence, in spite of her financial difficulties, as long as she wishes to remain in the society, Lily has to keep up her good look, order new dresses regularly and make as much public appearance as possible. Her body, covered in glamour, luxury and leisure should be able to provoke public attention and make her presence the center of visual display.

However, when Lily has herself thus objectified, she has herself commodified as well. Spotting Lily outside the train station, Selden immediately noticed her radiant look, and while walking with her, he was conscious of himself taking a “luxurious pleasure” in “the modeling of her little ear” and “the crisp upward wave of her hair.” Then 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” (HM 5). He could not help but evaluate Lily as a commodity and analyze its mode of production. In the Gilded Age, people devoted excessively to the consumption of material things, and the atmosphere of “commodity fetishism” prevailed. In *Capital* (1867), Karl Marx has discussed the commodity as a thing, which, by its properties, is able to satisfy human wants or needs. It contains a use value equipped with a capacity to fulfill such needs and an exchange value which is measured in terms of money. Its presence and transactions are involved in almost any relations, and as a result, “commodity fetishism” becomes a phenomenon common in the capitalist society, and the social relations between people are replaced by the objectified relations between things. The commodity is believed to have an extraordinary power that would exert control.

Here without doubt, Lily is a kind of commodity to Selden. She arrests his attention constantly, yet her price is too high for him to afford. Her value is further enhanced after the *tableaux vivants* in the Brys’ conservatory. On this occasion, she presented herself as one of those splendid “pictures,” mixing herself with the fine surroundings. Her performance brings about a visual impression showing that “her loveliness was no more fixed quality,” and soon she became the center among a group of gentlemen (HM130). So when she found two notes at her bedside the next morning, she quickly dismissed that of Selden’s, and heartily accepted Mrs. Trenor’s invitation. For Lily, Selden, with his “republic of spirit” glorifying a life on morality free from money, poverty, ease and anxiety, is a man of no prospect while Mrs. Trenor, with her connection with the fashionable crowd, always implies a rosy future. Nonetheless, if Lily’s outward beauty made her a valuable commodity able to select and manipulate her potential buyers, her ignorance of the business rules of exchange would prove detrimental to her position in the society.

In *The House of Mirth*, the society itself is a marketplace, and each relationship is based on a reciprocal arrangement measured by money and personal interests. A simple gift giving does not exist and can easily turn into a form of commodity exchange.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in her Marxist reading of the novel, Wai-Chee Dimock argues that the story is fueled by a critical energy directed at the society as a marketplace. In her view,

The power of the marketplace resides not in its presence, which is only marginal...but in its ability to reproduce itself, in its ability to assimilate everything else into its domain. As a controlling logic, a mode of human conduct and human association, the marketplace is everywhere and nowhere ubiquitous and invisible. Under its shadow even the most private affairs take on the essence of business transactions, for the real of human relations is fully contained within an all-encompassing business ethic. (375)

Its influence is powerful yet subtle, and Lily never realizes its rules until Gus Trenor asks her for sexual favors. For Lily, Mr. Trenor's financial help is a "gift" while to Mr. Trenor, it is as an exchange based on the reciprocal obligations. His demand is actually legitimized by the language of the marketplace and traded benefits. So do Bertha Dorset's invitation to Lily to join them on board the *Sabrina*. While Lily considers it a stroke of luck that would renew her already disgraced life, it is in fact a

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<sup>11</sup> In his analysis of the precarious distinction between gift exchange and commodity exchange, Webb Keane examines the problem posed by money. He notes that,

The status of money itself is not entirely stable: in this case it serves as a formal token whose reference is confined to ceremonial exchange, yet it retains the potential for reinterpretation as cash value. In either case it is "symbolic," but its vulnerability to slippage is a function in part of its irreducible materiality. Even money shares with other objects the property of taking objectual form. Thus it can cross contexts and, being semiotically underdetermined, is subject to reinterpretation (69).

Keane's concern lies in the instability of material objects. When the exchange is not performed properly, it would simply turn into a version of commodity exchange (Miyazaki 251).



“business arrangement” Bertha contrives to cover her adultery.

As for Simon Rosedale, his love for Lily is also a form of exchange. He is juggling between his two roles as a suitor and an investor. He wants nothing but profits, and he proposes to Lily only because he knows that she will be a perfect display of his wealth and help stabilize his status in the society. Therefore, later when Lily’s reputation is tainted and is avoided by the society, he refuses to marry her unless she regains her position.

These rules of exchange, though offering Lily every possible chance for a place of her own, require her to compromise her dignity and self-respect and also run counter to her belief in conforming to a “real self,” a longing for love and intimacy. For Lily, learning to survive in the marketplace is like treading on a thin line. At one point, she ruminates, “I have to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, when one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time” (HM 47). Nevertheless, she still takes those “missteps” of her own accord. Reflecting on her ambition, she confesses that “she is secretly ashamed of her mother’s crude passion for money,” and “she would not indeed have cared to marry a man who was merely rich” (HM 34).

Thus first, she lies to Percy Gryce, and then she refuses Simon Rosedale’s marriage proposal, and finally she burns Bertha Dorset’s letters “on the spur of the moment” (Dimock 386). She foresees her incompatibility with Gryce and Rosedale, and out of her love for Selden, chooses not to tell on Bertha’s affair, and as a result, gives up her last opportunity to remain in the high society. In “Reflecting Vision in *The House of Mirth*,” Roslyn Dixon argues that “Lily’s choices are reduced to absolutes: she can survive by compromising the ideal, or she can honor the ideal by sacrificing herself” (218). Evidently, Lily is choosing the “ideal.” However, though her unwillingness to compromise would in the end put her in the lowest rung of the

society, it is also from this place that the economic relationship is reversed and she is able to decommodify herself to embark on the journey of self-discovery and find herself a real place of attachment.

## II. Discovering a Place of Her Own

Many critics who read the novel with a Darwinian perspective tend to see Lily's vacillating behavior and unsuccessful mate search as a result of her inherited biological failure. Analyzing the evolutionary concept in Wharton's novels, Paul Ohler points out that Lily lacks the "intention" and an "inarticulate instinct" guiding her to a most "proper" response to her circumstances (58). Thus, at Bellomont, though she lies to Percy that she is a regular churchgoer, she changes her mind at the last moment to absent herself, leaving a crestfallen Percy rolling away with the Trenors' girls. In "The Lying Woman," Ellen Goldner also attributes the "provisionality" of Lily's lies to her own "conscious will" and "uncertain aims" (289). However, whether her capricious emotional make-up is an inherited passion or an inborn scruple, I will consider it a result of her "nostalgic homesickness" for a place of attachment. This longing requires her to negotiate a relation that will fulfill her many non-economic desires, and most importantly, to come to terms with a divided self which on the one hand, has to be fluent with the world around it, while on the other hand, embraces a life based on love and friendship.

In *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1960), the Scottish psychiatrist Ronald David Laing points out that one's self-consciousness is divided by "an awareness of oneself by oneself and an awareness of oneself as an object of someone else's observation" (113). To some degree, everyone is defined by others; yet when the individual fails to "take the realness, aliveness, autonomy, and identity of himself and others for granted, then he has to become absorbed in

contriving ways of trying to be real...of preserving his identity...to prevent himself losing his self ” (44). For Lily, while she is conscious of herself as a commodity, she is also aware of a self who is supposed to be “alive,” to have her own autonomy and to transcend the social configurations.

Analyzing the politics of capitalism in *The House of Mirth*, Robert Shulman considers Lily’s “divided self” an example of the power of the market society to divide people internally (268). Meanwhile, in *The Figure of Consciousness* (2002), Jill Kress also notices the tension between “a singular conception of the self and the idea of a self that is continually shifting” in Wharton’s texts (xv). For Kress, Wharton’s protagonists, oftentimes in their struggle between a “socially constructed self” and an “authentic self,” have to concede to a self “saturated with the contents of the social world” (172). However, here Lily is hankering for a relationship beyond the bargain and trade of the market place. As a commodity, she has no real identity and is the mere embodiment of each suitor’s fantasy. Therefore, investigating the psychological space of the novel, Sean Sanlan suggests that we should see Lily as a “possible person,” a “human being” rather than a “deployed” theme (208). Lily is unable to find a partner because what she wants is not just another trade-off, but a chance for her to establish a place of attachment from which she can draw strength and strengthen her role as a human being.

Since she was orphaned, Lily has gone into a social-climbing career in which she acts as a transient, a guest, a pensioner and a boarder, and she is constantly oppressed by “the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spin-drift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them” (HM 314). Thus, throughout her life, she is not only searching for a husband but also a place she can call home, and home does not exist when love is nowhere to be found. Nevertheless, before she

can find such a place, she has to rise above her economic dependency, and her working in the millinery is her first step.

After rejecting Rosedale's offer and leaving Mrs. Hatch's fancy hotel, with the help of Carry Fisher, Lily went to live in a boarding house and worked in Mme. Regina's renowned millinery factory. She refused Mme. Regina's kindness to put her in the show-room as a displayer of hats and volunteered to take a job in the work room. There she used her work as an agency to decommodify herself and to fight against the exchange system. In his labor theory of value, Marx argues that all commodities are products of labor, and their value is determined by the amount of labor that goes into its production. Thus, in *Capital*, he claims that "(a) useful article...has value only because human labor...has been embodied or materialized in it" (45). For Marx, when unaffected by the private ownership of capitalism, labor is an essential source for a human being's self-conception and sense of well-being. It is as much an act of personal creation and a projection of one's identity as it is a means of survival. By working on and transforming the objective matter into objects of use-value, human beings meet the needs of existence and come to see themselves externalized in the world. In other words, a commodity is valuable because labor is involved; and when Lily joined in the workforce, she reversed her previous role as a commodity and made herself a distributor of such value.

Lily had recognized herself as part of that effort of production since the very early stage of her career. After a night's bad luck in cards and losing lots of money, it struck her that "she and her maid were in the same position, except that the latter received her wages more regularly" (HM 27). In "Edith Wharton's Hard-Working Lily" (1990), Elizabeth Ammons also points out her working class position: although Lily was associated in most part with the richest people in town, she was linked to the young women laborers "by the common bond of economic struggle." Later when

admiring Miss Van Osburg's bridal jewels with Miss Farish, Lily was fascinated by their artistry and the skills that had gone into their cutting and presentation:

[ Her ] heart gave an envious throb as she caught the refraction of light from their surfaces—the milky gleam of perfectly matched pearls, the flash of rubies relieved against contrasting velvet, the intense blue rays of sapphires kindled into light by surrounding diamonds: all these precious tints enhanced and deepened by the varied art of their setting. (HM 89)

While Lily's longing for a luxury life was further aroused by these finely-crafted stones, she was also conscious of an enormous human endeavor involved in the production of these treasures. This process of value production is a process of "self-creation" that will empower a woman to create and add value both to her economic status and her self-identity.

In *Women and Economics* (1898), Charlotte Perkins Gilman suggests that when it comes to the economic ability of men and women, men always seem to be thousands of years in advance compared to his female counterparts: "men produce and distribute wealth; and women receive it at their hands" either as their wives or their daughters (5). Gilman shares Veblen's disdain for conspicuous waste in that the conspicuous leisure only renders the well-off women completely idle, and their exclusion from production shrivels both of their social and maternal instincts. In addition, she emphasizes the importance of human labor, writing that "to do and to make not only gives deep pleasure, but it is indispensable to healthy growth" (78). The consumption, on the contrary, as Marx and Engels indicate, is "the destructive antithesis of production" because it uses up resources and consumes the consumers. So in "Consuming Clothes," Clair Hughes considers Lily one of Veblen's parasitic

“vicarious consumers” and a member of the “spurious leisure class” whose demand for a nice wardrobe only consumes and wastes her. The fashions she pursues do not only eat away at her but also erase her unique personality. However, while a woman is working or producing, she is utilizing her labor powers to obtain her independence, whether financially or emotionally. Thus, Gilman believes that human labor defines what it means to be human, and Lily’s identification with the girls in the girls’ club is an exertion of that labor that would help her create a new definition for her own existence.

For many critics, it is unlikely for Lily to have herself attached to the working class scenario. For instance, both Judith Fryer and John Clubbe believe that the different social layers that Lily descends is a “downward spiral” which will lead her to spaces with increasing disorder and make her a “lesser” Lily” (Clubbe 552). Eager to display her beauty, Lily seems to feel most at home in the mansions of her “old set” where her body can merge with the glittery surroundings. However, from her reluctance to sell herself to the society, we can see that these mansions can never provide the home that she eventually comes to yearn for. It is only when she disowns her “Vebeleanian fate” of unending consumption for the sake of love will she be able to find Gerty Farish and Nettie Struther’s simple tenements noble alternatives to her own tainted public life (Hughes 403).

After deciding to defer the purchase of an elegant dressing-case, Lily donated a generous amount of that price to the Girls’ Club, which was one of Miss Gerty Farish’s philanthropic efforts. Through this act, she was turning a potential consumption into a meaningful production facilitated by an instinct for love and connection between human beings. As she reflected, “These were young girls, like herself; some perhaps pretty, some not without trace of her finer sensibilities. She pictured herself leading such a life as theirs....” (HM 110). And her contribution was

praised highly by Gerty in a talk with Lawrence:

Do you know she has been there (Girls' Club) with me twice?—yes, Lily! And you should have seen their eyes! One of them said it was as good as a day in the country just to look at her. And she sat there, and laughed and talked with them—not a bit as if she were being *charitable*, you know, but as if she liked it as much as they did. They've been asking ever since when she's coming back; and she's promised me——oh!" (HM 131)

Here a sense of sisterhood has formed, and a union between women is created. The working girls' club becomes a symbolic home where a love for home is fostered and a sanctuary in a very unhomelike surrounding is established. As Eileen Connell argues in "Edith Wharton Joins the Working Classes" (1997), the working girls' club in New York City invents a "home" that suits the needs of the working class girls. It is a "representative home" or "a training school to the home" that would bridge the gap between class differences (564). In this "home," Lily shares with these girls a secondary social and economic position, a similarity that will become a binding force offering Lily a place of attachment and foreseeing her later enlightenment.

Thus, to turn a place into home, a particular human relationship is needed for a possible people-place bonding to take place; and sisterhood, generally understood as a nurturing, supportive feeling of attachment to other women which grows out of a shared experience of oppression, is considered a unifying force to confront male chauvinism and patriarchy. Hence, after Lily refused Mr. Trenor to pay back her debt with her body and freed herself from the suffocating mansion, she had a sudden craving for compassion and human nearness that would comfort her torn heart. Though previously, she despised Gerty's tiny apartment, seeing it as a horrid little

place suitable only for unmarried girls, now Gerty was the only one she could turn to. She knew that in her enfolding arms, she would no longer be alone, and she would feel warm and safe again. Frightened by her encounter with Trenor, there in Gerty's room, she lay in Gerty's arms like a "tossing child" clinging to her mother (HM 165). At this rare moment of intimacy, Lily finds herself in a place to which she has a strong sense of affiliation.

Her determination to extricate herself from the commodity system was further strengthened after Rosedale refused to marry her unless she could renew her status with Bertha's love letters to Selden. Not going to betray her love to Selden, she decided to keep Bertha's affair with Selden as a secret and burn the letters. However, before she made the decision, she went to visit Selden; and there in his room, she bade farewell to her "old self":

There is someone I must say good-bye to.... [ She is ] the Lily Bart you knew. I have kept her with me all this time, but now we are going to part, and I have brought her back to you—I am going to leave her here. When I go out presently she will not go with me. (HM 304)

She was to go on living, but not with the old Lily who was forever after wealth and status, but with a brand new self who saw a life with love and sincerity as her ultimate goal. Through this act of determination, she was able to discover the real value of things not in their outlook, but inherent in their own nature; and Nettie's humble house was just another place for this enlightenment.

Here Lily found her home in the bond that she felt with Nettie's child. The baby gave her a glimpse of a continuity of life based on a mutual understanding without the interference of the monetary system while Nettie, the poor working girl, seemed to



Lily to have reached “the central truth of existence” by finding strength to build herself a shelter with the fragments of her life (HM 314). In the novel, Nettie was not an embodiment of someone’s wealth. She was not loved for her “aesthetic value” but for the strength and competence that she exuded (Rosk 346). Her working together with her husband stabilized her identity as a working girl, a wife and a mother. From these roles, she felt a connection with those she loved and treasured. There was the love that she felt for her family and the gratitude that she felt for Lily. When she reached out for Lily, she was offering her an “alternative family” and Lily’s confession of herself being in great trouble indicates such need for a family.

At this moment, Lily came to terms with her helplessness and inability to relate emotionally with other human beings. There in Nettie’s kitchen, she held the baby in her arms, feeling “the child entered into her and became a part of herself” (HM 310):

the frozen currents of youth had loosed themselves and run warm in her veins: the old life-hunger possessed her, and all her being clamored for its share of personal happiness. Yes — it was happiness she still wanted, and the glimpse she had caught of it made everything else of no account. (HM 315)

The happiness no longer came from the new dresses she bought or the parties to which she was invited, but from a feeling of knowing that she was close to someone physically and emotionally. Having realized what she wanted in life, she returned to her boarding house with a clutch of solitude at her heart. The material poverty had ceased being her primal concern and the arrival of her aunt’s legacy no longer aroused in her any great excitement. After writing out the check for Mr. Trenor, she died in her sleep with a sense of fulfillment—having found her place of attachment in the

simplest human contact in life.

Lily's quest for a place of attachment is a process of decommodification that will enable her to transcend the commodity form to build a social relation based on love and mutual understandings. The material culture of the Gilded Age has produced a distorting and alienating effect in which one's dignity, worth and honor is measured solely by money and has shaped an environment in which people were treated like things and things like people. Lily's inability to adapt or to commit herself to the space of competition stems from a longing for an identity-anchoring place and her refusal to be treated like a commodity. Her rejection of Gus Trenor's sex demand and her insistence on "working" her way out of her debts by herself are proclamations of her autonomy.

Like Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, Lily is a victim of her time and space. However, while Ellen's sense of placelessness is immense and must be sent back to Europe, by a reversal of the producer—commodity relationship, Lily is able to survive and find herself a "home" in a rare moment of human intimacy. Although in the end, she dies of an overdose of chloral, she has proved to the world her every struggle against the influence of her surroundings and her victory in escaping the vulgarity of exchange, use and abuse altogether. It is a tough and long journey for one to realize where her heart is attached.

### Chapter Three

## Undine Spragg and Her Homes in Mobility in *The Custom of the Country*

### I. Hotels as Homes in the Gilded Age

In *The Custom of the Country*, Undine Spragg is constructing her place of attachment out of the mobility of her life. As an ambitious young woman aspiring to be the most prominent society grand dame in the New York fashion society, Undine is constantly in motion. She is moving from one place to another, forever looking for a better marriage. Dissatisfied with her life with Ralph Marvell, a member of the old New York family who no longer enjoys the significant wealth, she longs for a marriage with Peter Van Degen, a rich yet tasteless nouveau riche. When her wish fails to come true, she turns to marry the French count, Raymond de Chelles. Later when her life with the count becomes more and more tedious and unbearable, she divorces Raymond and again marries Elmer Moffatt, who now makes a great fortune and is a successful businessman.<sup>12</sup> However, she is not to stop here. While still enjoying the luxurious life provided by her husband, she already begins to dream about her life as an ambassador's wife. Unlike Lily in *The House of Mirth* whose restless life only results in her a feeling of lost and a feverish search for "home", Undine feels most at home when she is moving. The freedom of movement allows her to go beyond the gendered spheres and to achieve her goals. Thus, to discuss how Undine utilizes her mobility as an agency of self-empowerment, I will first discuss the mobile lifestyle in the Gilded Age America and investigate the importance of a hotel in the production of one's place of attachment.

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<sup>12</sup> Elmer Moffatt is both Undine's first and fourth husband. While Undine was still a young girl in Apex City, she eloped with Moffatt. However, the marriage only lasted two weeks and Undine was hauled back home by her parents. This incident occurred before she married Ralph Marvell. Later when Ralph discovered the truth, he committed suicide.

You come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they are dry, and the people are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have.... (CC 333-4)

In the novel, when Raymond accuses Undine of her attempt to sell the history-rich tapestries in the old family chateau Saint Désert, he does not only point out the capricious nature of her people but also describe a common phenomenon in the Gilded Age America: Making hotels their homes. In the Gilded Age, living in the hotels was in trend. Not to be bound by the tradition, the social climbers invented a new idea of home and attached themselves to places that would move them upward. Their eagerness to change and their incessant pursuit of wealth and power carried them from hotel to hotel. They were literally “born and died in the hotels” (CC 314). The hotel, as its French origin indicates, denotes either “a large public building” or “a nobleman’s residence.” It serves both as a gathering place for transient passengers and a “home” for long-term dwellers, and hence, naturally became these people’s ideal home (Jakle and Keith 5).

Additionally, infused in the hotel is a sense of freedom and progress. In *The American Scene* (1907), Henry James gives us a vivid description of this vivacity:

The amazing hotel-world quickly closes round him; with the process of transition reduced to its minimum, he is transported to conditions of extraordinary complexities and brilliancy, operating — and with proportionate perfection — by laws of their own and expressing after their fashion a complete scheme of life. The air swarms, to intensity, with the

*characteristic*, the characteristic condensed and accumulated as he rarely elsewhere has had the luck to find it. (102)

This characteristic is a mobility characterized by the spirit of transiency and the vague demarcation of private and public. It makes the hotel a liminal “third space” to which one can make a quick new attachment and from which one can obtain her freedom of movement to empower herself.

In *Thirdspace* (1996), Edward Soja defines “third space” as “a purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings” (2). In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha regards it as a “cultural space” in which the “non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures” meets and where “the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existence” (218). In *Topophilia* (1974), Yi-Fu Tuan believes that “[O]pposites are often mediated by a third term”, recognizing a possible “mediating third” out of the binary system that would reduce the distinction between the boundaries (16). His form of third space is a circle that symbolizes harmony and perfection. In other words, while the third space can be a site of tension and competing powers, it is also a space of flexibility bringing insurmountable differences together to produce a new hybrid discourse with multiple possibilities. Thus, as Soja argues,

Thirthing introduces a critical ‘other-than’ choice that speaks and critiques through its otherness. That is to say, it does not derive simply from an additive combination of its binary antecedents but rather from a disordering, deconstruction, and tentative reconstitution of their presumed totalization producing an open alternative that is both similar and strikingly different.

(61)

The third space becomes a threshold and a “liminality” between any two designated spaces. In this space, boundaries are traversed and choices are offered.

In this case, the hotel is a third space in that it is a place where strangers congregate, and the mixing together of these people come to make up what we call the “hotel life.” Andrew Sandoval-Strausz, in “For the Accommodation of Strangers” (2002), points out the “midwife” role played by the hotel in the reorganization of residential and public space. On the one hand, it is a home that should provide goods and services customarily found in the household yet unavailable to travelers away from home; on the other hand, the constant coming and going of its transient populations require it to mediate the encounters between strangers and negotiate the myriad human exchanges and relationships (198-200). This process, though complex and full of tension, is not without possibilities. It offers its dwellers not only a place of attachment but also a sense of mobility.

Investigating the contradictory and complimentary relations between place attachment and one’s mobility in “Roots and Routes” (2001), Per Gustafson concludes that while they might mean different things to different people, they are not opposites (681). On the contrary, their notions are an integrating one. The place, when discussed in a root theme, is a source of emotional bonds and community, and the physical movement between new or distant places could represent personal development and freedom (672). Hence, a home becomes a prison when it provides no chance of mobility, and the “open-minded” experience derived from travel is turned into a feeling of uprootedness and loss when a homeplace does not exist. And the hotel is serving as a “home,” to and from which one’s traveling route should lead.

Therefore, one can feel at home even when one is on the go because one can

actually have multiple dwellings as their homes. Home does not have to be rooted in one specific place. In “Power Geometry and a Progressive sense of place” (1993), Doreen Massey disagrees with the “static, bounded, parochial nature” of dwelling. Instead, she conceptualizes a dynamic and changing nature of places, arguing that we should think of them as “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” so that we will get an “extraverted” sense of place which is not enclosed but links with the outside world (66). Thus, while places could be homes, they do not have to be sites of nostalgia. We may, in fact, have many of them. As Massey later points out in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), the homeplace is “an equally complex product of the ever-shifting geography of social relations” (172), and people can actually claim attachments to multiple places by infusing the meaning of “home” and “rootedness” into the condition of away and mobility. When the bond between the place and its dwellers is established, a home is created.

As a result, home is no longer just one place. It can be in different locations. And calling these different locations homes becomes particularly important when one is in a state of alienation and estrangement. As bell hooks suggests in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1990),

Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the constructions of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become (205).

Homes in mobility are not only shelters for one to find their peace of mind but also sites of liberation where one will find unlimited possibilities. In *The Custom of the*

*Country*, Undine will transform the several hotels and restaurants into her homes in motion. However, how can a woman utilize these public spaces, traditionally considered exclusive to men, as her places of attachment? In the next section, we will look at how Undine produces her homes out of the socially constructed gendered space.

## II. Undine Spragg and Her Homes in Mobility

In the Gilded Age, the space was gendered. It was separated physically, emotionally and functionally for men and women. The public sphere, defined as the realm of economics and politics, belonged to men while the private sphere, exemplified by the domicile and domesticity, was a world for women. Nonetheless, though this demarcation upholds a belief that women not only wield their power and influence in the household but also contribute to the maintenance of the moral standard of society, it actually enforces a class distinction in which women are denigrated and subordinated to buttress men's careers and status. They are confined to the domestic space and are prevented from enjoying the freedom of the public domain. When their bodies are exposed to the public and are observed by men not related to them by ties of kinship or marriage, they are considered to be provoking attention to their sexuality. They become vulnerable under the male gaze and are running the risk of losing their virtue and being categorized as the "fallen woman."

Thus, in the opening scene of *The Age of Innocence*, while the prima donna was singing *Faust* on the stage, men all had their focus turn on women in the box of the old Mrs. Manson Mingott's. There were Sillerton Jackson's silent scrutiny of this attentive group, Newland Archer's "breath of satisfied vanity" when he caught sight of his Madonna-like fiancée and Larry Lefferts' exclamation when he spotted the most unusual Ellen Olenska (AI 5). In *The House of Mirth* too, Lawrence Selden's



role as a detached spectator constantly rendered Lily powerless. Evidently, these two activities are distinctly gendered — “it is men who do the seeing and women who are seen” (Montgomery 133). In these public spaces, women’s identity is a concept conceived by men and a mirror reflecting men’s power and desire. They have to be judged and evaluated by their masculine viewers without the chance to speak for themselves. In other words, the ideology of separate spheres has put women at a socially disadvantageous position in the public space.

However, despite the constraint felt by a woman in the public space, in *The Custom of the Country*, Undine feels most at home when she is at the luxury hotels, resorts and restaurants. These places, with their crowds and events coming and going, blur the distinctions between everything. To Henry James, this conglomeration of different people and things is a standardization of most hotels in America. As he observed in *The American Scene* (1907),

What I was most conscious of, from aspect to aspect, from group to group, from sex to sex, from one presented boarder to another, was the continuity of the fusion, the dimness of the distinctions. (452)

Hence, in the novel, the dining room in the great Nouveau Luxe restaurant is made up of “a seemingly endless perspective of plumed and jeweled heads, of shoulders bare or black-coated, encircling the close-packed tables” (CC 169), and Undine’s hotel sitting room in Paris, “flowered, cushioned and lamp-shaded,” gives out “a delusive semblance of stability” (CC 174). Meanwhile, the amusements organized by Mrs. Shallum in Switzerland is “the noisy interminable picnics, the hot promiscuous balls, the concerts, bridge-parties and theatricals which helped to disguise the difference between the high Alps and Paris or New York” (CC 97). These are spaces of fluidity

and high publicity which compose a scene that is always the same even when the individuals are not. In these places, the pace is chaotic and one's private identity is lost in the undistinguishable sameness. The lines between private and public, home and the foreign land have been transgressed, and women will reverse their inferior position in the traditional gender relation to have a place of their own.

For Undine, both the hotel sitting rooms and the crowded dining rooms bear the notions of hopes and opportunities. They are places where she can seek friends and profitable partners, and most important of all, take control of her life. Thus, not long after moving to New York with her parents, Undine decided that they had to give up the house they bought in West End Avenue and moved into the Hotel Stentorian because "all the fashionable people she knew either boarded or lived in the hotels" and "they could not hope to get on while they 'kept house'" (CC 11). There her old schoolmate, Mrs. Harry Lipscomb, would introduce her to the different clubs, and it was in the Stentorian dance hall that she would meet her future husband Ralph Marvell. Afterwards while on vacation in Europe, she would encounter her next husband, Raymond in the busy dining room of the Hotel Nouvea Luxe; then in the hotel of Paris, she would make her acquaintance with Raymond's cousin, the extraordinary Princess Estradine. Looking out of the hotel window at the thronged street of Paris, "she felt herself naturally akin to all the bright and careless freedom of the scene" and "[t]he noise, the crowd, and the promiscuity beneath her eyes symbolized the glare and movement of her life" (CC 174). Her love for crowds and publicity attached her to these places and spectacles, and they became her places of attachment in her traveling route.

For both Wharton and Undine, travel is a form of escape and empowerment; and both of them are deriving strength from their life of mobility and building homes along the road. For Wharton's part, she was traveling, first to escape from her mother

and her birthplace, and then to free herself temporary from the ballrooms and parties of the New York high society. Since she set sail to Europe with her parents at age four, traveling had become a mode of life. After spending their first year in Rome and traveling through Spain, the family settled in Paris at 61 Avenue Josephine. In the summer of 1870, they moved to Bad Wildbad, Germany, and by the end of that same year, they were living in Florence. Afterwards before she took permanent residence in France in 1905, she would be traveling back and forth between Europe and America. She would travel to Italy with her husband each spring, went on a four-month cruise to the Aegean on the *Vanadis*, and then enjoyed her motor-flight through France.

Wharton's traveling wherever and whenever she pleased, as Shari Benstock observes, is not a mere pastime; instead it serves as a means of education and a way for her to measure her independence as a woman ("Preface" xi-xx). Therefore, shortly after she went to live in Paris, she began her passionate love affair with Morton Fullerton, and later when she discovered the French Riviera in 1919, she was just divorced and about to embark on a fresh start. For the first time, she felt she had thrown off the shackles of convention and was free to live a life as she desired. For the next eighteen years until she died, she would divide her time between her two French properties. In spring and summer, she spent her time in St. Brice near Paris while in winter, she relocated to her château on the Mediterranean coast (Collas and Villedary 9). The vivacity of the hotel spirit was involved in her each movement, and in each new place, she was learning to live afresh.

And her restlessness is best exemplified in *Undine*, one of her favorite characters of all time. Many critics have pointed out the close affinity between Wharton and *Undine*. Like Wharton, *Undine* was traveling around. She was first moving from her birthplace Apex City to Illinois, then to New York and finally to Paris; and her each move would take her a step closer to liberation. In *Edith Wharton's Argument with*

*America* (1980), Elizabeth Ammons notes that Undine is both Wharton's opposite and twin sister:

Wharton cast Undine as her opposite—ignorant, intrepid, unintrospective—yet also as her twin: Undine's energy, her anger and pride, her love of travel and gorgeous clothing and her impatience with failure and shabbiness—these, although exaggerated and simplified in the fictional characters, do bring to mind the author herself. (98)

Meanwhile, R.W. B Lewis also detects in Undine “Edith's long yearning for psychological freedom” and a discovery that “each of her marriage is no more than another mode of imprisonment” (350). Indeed, Undine is Wharton's most developed “New Woman Figure”; and as her name connotes the “water sprite” and “wave motion,” she can be seen as “the most fluid of types” of Wharton's characters (Patterson 81-2):

“She was always doubling and twisting on herself, and every movement she made seemed to start at the nape of her neck, just below the lifted roll of reddish-gold hair, and flow without a break through her whole slim length to the tips of her fingers and the points of her slender restless feet” (CC 5).

Energy is her essence and her moving from one hotel to another with the divorce in between is an embodiment of her mobility and adaptability.

Hence, while she was spending her honeymoon with Ralph in Italy, she was bored by the monotonous rural landscape and had her heart set on the dances and parties in Switzerland and Paris. When she was back to their house in West End

Avenue, she longed for another trip to Europe. Nonetheless, when she was in France again, she was exasperated by the dreary atmosphere of Saint Désert and was drawn to Elmer Moffatt's rather shiftless life. Undine's optimal "home" is never a stable one originating from her childhood memory. Instead, it is "a set," a "*mise-en-scène*" that is "not a home but appears homelike" (Klimasmith 180). She could not just live happily forever in any one place or in any single marriage because no matter where she was, she was alert to other opportunities that would carry her to a space more opulent and "more heavily gilded" (Fryer 110). And the hotel, by occupying the "liminal zone" between permanence and transience, was turned into a "home" with which Undine could easily identify, and "divorce" became a legitimate means for her to build homes from one place to another.

In the Gilded Age, women's lack of participation in the process of production rendered them a mere "parenthesis" in the patriarchal society (CC 128). Being excluded from every aspect of men's work and business, they grew up to believe that their ultimate goal in life was to marry a rich husband who would satisfy their vanity and material needs. When their wish was hindered, they had to divorce their husbands and look for another marriage. Thus, in the novel, Charles Bowen, a friend of Ralph's sister's, was analyzing divorce in New York society as a consequence of its gendered system. Defending Undine's negligence of her duty as a mother and a house keeper, he argues,

Isn't that the key to our easy divorces? If we cared for women in the old barbarous possessive way do you suppose we'd give them up as readily as we do? The real paradox is the fact that the men who make, materially, the biggest sacrifices for their women, should do least for them ideally and romantically. And what's the result—how do the women avenge themselves?

All my sympathy's with them, poor deluded dears, when I see their fallacious little attempt to trick out the leavings tossed them by the preoccupied male—the money and the motors and the clothes—and pretend to themselves and each other that *that* what really constitutes life! (CC 128-9)

To Bowen, Undine, the gold-digger, was the “perfect result of the system” and the “completest proof of its triumph” while Ralph, the romantic poet, was its victim and exception (CC 129). Later in France, when Raymond saw Undine, a married woman, accompanied by Peter Van Degen instead of her own husband in the public, and asked Bowen about the use of marriage in America if men seemed to set no compulsory virtues on women, he answered candidly: “Oh, it still has its uses. One couldn't be divorced without it” (CC 172). This statement about the “interdependence” between one’s marriage and divorce, though ironic, also reflects the need for women to take control of their life.

For Undine, she would utilize her several divorces to trade in settings and manipulate environment. Being barred from the economic activities on “Wall Street,” she would find in the marriage career a place of their own. Discussing the leisure class marriage market in *The Custom of the Country*, Debra MacComb considers divorce a “logical mechanism” for women to forge their “nuptial careers” based not on a single but successive liaisons—unions that are ever more successful (765). Divorce is a business which not only helps facilitate their “market expansion” but also enhances their status and mobility (768). Kimberly Freeman, on the other hand, regards divorce both as a “tool” and a “right” for the individuals to refuse an unwanted identity (78). To expect a better new identity, one is not to be rooted in one single property. The impermanence of the mobile hotel life indicates one’s ever-changing identities while

the impermanence of marriage rendered by divorce is to create a variation of places likely for one to call home. This mobility blurs the line between the traditional gendered spaces and brings out in women a dominant public self that will lead to the empowerment of the individual.

Her presence in the public is legitimized, and she is able to assume the role of a spectator and traverse freely across the gender boundaries. Her space of femininity is no longer an operation limited only at the level of what is represented in the drawing room or the sewing room; instead, it includes the public space which is traditionally dominated by men. As Griselda Pollock points out in “Modernity and the Spaces of femininity” (1988), the feminist spaces are in fact

those from which femininity is lived as a positionality in discourse and social practice. They are the product of a lived sense of social locatedness, mobility and visibility, in the social relations of seeing and being seen. Shaped within the sexual politics of looking they demarcate a particular social organization of the gaze which itself works back to secure a particular social ordering of sexual difference. Femininity is both the condition and the effect. (66)

In other words, from a different position, the female spectators will subvert the objectified position of women. Alluding to the photograph *An Oblique Look*<sup>13</sup> by the French photographer Robert Doisneau,<sup>14</sup> Pollock believes that by presenting herself

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<sup>13</sup> In the photograph, a petit bourgeois couple stand in front of an art dealer’s window and look in. The spectator is hidden voyeur-like inside the shop. The woman looks at a picture and seems about to comment on it to her husband. Unbeknownst to her, he is in fact looking elsewhere, at the proffered buttocks of a half-naked female figure in a painting placed obliquely to the surface/photo/window so the spectator can also see what he sees (Pollock 85).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Doisneau (1912-94). The French photographer known for his modest, playful, and ironic

as someone who actively looks, the woman is creating a text that will enable her to assume a different position in the sexual politics of looking (85).

Wharton herself is this active onlooker. By characterizing her contemporaries in her novels, she carries out her public self as a writer, and thus writes herself out of the domestic sphere. After returning from the Vanderbilt entertainment in Newport, she wrote to her friend Sally Norton that the event was just what she said, “but for a novelist gathering documents for an American novel, it was all the more valuable, alas” (Dwight 97)! This change of positionality undermines the boundaries between feminine and masculine and differentiates Wharton from women who decorate themselves as mere ornaments. Here she is a spectator demonstrating her work as one of those masculine projects and seeking to construct a place of her own.<sup>15</sup>

However, while Wharton used the hustle and bustle of the public space as materials for her writing, Undine employed it as a relay between the media and her subjectivity. Since the late nineteenth century, the society women’s participation in the public social life had become a regular feature in various publications. This phenomenon led to the construction of a “new model of femininity,” and the lifestyle of these women is paraded as an ideal to be emulated. As Maureen E. Montgomery suggests in *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton’s New York* (1988),

Their activities were seen as trend-setting, [ giving ] them license to explore new directions. Moreover, the interest of the press in their lives

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images of amusing juxtapositions, mingling social classes, and eccentrics in contemporary Paris streets and cafes. *Wikipedia* Oct 10. 2011. < [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Doisneau](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Doisneau)>

<sup>15</sup> As Annette Benert observes, “throughout her architectural work, Wharton not only worked with men, placing herself in partnership with Codman and Mckim in particular, but her authorial voice identified with men...she took on the perspective and authority of a man in architectural contexts, identifying more with the profession than with her own gender” (AE 51).



conferred upon them a degree of prestige and influence that they could use to various ends in promoting themselves. (151)

As the tabloids only recorded things that were “newsworthy,” they were regarded as useful tools for self-promotion, and each of their reports on the changing image of the lady was the proof of her capability and popularity. Thus, when Undine’s portrait was revealed in Claud Walsingham Popple’s studio, she was thrilled by its success and decided on the spot that she would telephone her press-agent to do a paragraph about Popple’s tea (CC 123). This tabloid culture makes each of Undine’s transformation visible and enables her to present multiple public selves that would help her adapt herself to the various environments and make them her places of attachment.

Having a life story traveling from “The child-bride” headlined by the *Apex Eagle*, the annulment of her marriage with Ralph Marvell headlined by the *Sunday* papers to a clipping that finally announced: “Divorce and remarriage of Mrs. Undine Spagg-de Chelles. American Marquise renounces ancient French title to wed Railroad King. Quick work untying and tying. Boy and girl romance renewed” (CC 358), Undine had habituated to the media attention; and every time she came out with a new identity, she was bathed again in the bright air of publicity. The multiple public selves that she presented would enable her to adapt herself to the various environments and allow her to traverse from one public sphere to another, making them her places of attachment.

At the end of the novel, Undine and Elmer Moffatt, the newly-wed couple, though establishing themselves at a private hotel in one of the new quarters of Pairs, were always coming and going: “they had been perpetually dashing over to New York and back, or rushing down to Rome or up to the Engadine” (CC 353). And Undine, who had been “railroaded” through the divorce court with the highest speed, already felt discontent and dreamt of her next marriage as an ambassador’s wife. Not a single

moment did Undine feel like settling down. However, utilizing the mobility given by the liminality of each space and personalizing each of its unfixed identity, she was turning her temporary dwellings into places of attachment and planting her roots along her route.

## Chapter Four

### Ellen Olenska and Her Placelessness in *The Age of Innocence*

#### I. Ellen Olenska as the Threatening Other

While in *The Custom of the Country*, Undine is able to identify herself with the social climate of her time and turns it into a site of empowerment, in *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen Olenska's quest for a place of attachment is futile. She never has a place of her own. As an American bride marrying to Catholic Europe, she has to return to her home country to file for divorce. However, her attempt to extricate herself from a bad marriage and her indifference to the fastidious rules of her society not only captivate Newland Archer but also scandalize the reputation of her clan. Under the pressure of her family not to intrude upon Newland's happiness with May Welland, she decides to go back to Europe. In the novel, Ellen thinks that she has returned home, yet at home she feels so lonely. She can not win approval for her divorce appeal and is considered by her countrymen a menace to the harmony of the society. Ellen is in fact, an outsider of her society. Thus, to discuss Ellen's placelessness, I will first investigate the tribal concept in the Gilded Age.

In the 1870s, the Old New York society was categorized by tribes. To Wharton, the formation of the tribes is based on a socio-genetic relation among families and individuals that will lead to the idea of "boundary" and a "binary cosmos" filled with oppositions such as "within/without," "done/not done," and "accepted/outcast." Therefore, to be accepted by the society, one has to belong to a tribe. In *The Age of Innocence*, they are represented by the old Catherine tribe and the Archer-Newland-van- der-Luyden tribe. They were the "Old Guards"<sup>16</sup> who clung to

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<sup>16</sup> Members of the "Society." Usually they are regarded as "American aristocrats", such as Henry and Louisa van der luyden in *The Age of innocence* whose ancestors are the pre-Revolutionary Dutch aristocracy (Cable xi)

the manners and traditions of the old world, and who, as Wharton describes in her autobiography, had a “blind dread of innovation” (22) and were like “an empty vessel into which no new wine would ever again be poured” (5). They had a “tribal instinct” and “tribal discipline” that would warn them who was on their side and who was not. When the circumstances required it, they had to rally around to protect themselves from the intrusion of an outsider. This exclusiveness, however, often resulted in catastrophes in which the tragic heroes or heroines became victims of the group pressure of conventions. In the novel, Ellen was such a victim. Rebellious against the fixed rules of her society, she was rendered an outcast among the tribes.

The tribal people’s anxiety to make the distinction between “we” and “the others” has brought about the chasms between the individual and her tribes. In *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* (2004), Jennie Kassanoff points out that it is the “white Patrician anxiety” which generates the fear that the “foreign,” the “ill-bred” and the “vulgar” tastes of the masses would finally overwhelm the native American elites (3). Nevertheless, Wharton’s conception of race is not an exclusive matter of color; instead, it could be applied to any possible identification, ranging from national origins, aesthetic predilections to class memberships (Kassanoff 4). Thus, though being a white woman in America, Wharton considered herself of a different social category. In a letter to her friend Sara Norton (June 5, 1903), she attacked her country on its lack of the aesthetic side and called herself a “wretched exotic”:

My first few weeks in America are always miserable, because the tastes I am cursed with are all of a kind that cannot be gratified here, & I am not enough in sympathy with our “gros public” to make up for the lack on the aesthetic side. One’s friends are delightful; but *we* are none of us Americans, we don’t think or feel as the Americans do, we are the wretched exotics

produced in a European glass-house, the most *déplacé* & useless class on earth! (LE 84)

Here her unique taste and European upbringing had alienated her from her countrymen.

In the novel, Ellen also had a feeling of not belonging. However, different from Wharton whose sense of outsidership was a self-conscious and self-chosen uninvolvedness, her “homelessness” was an enforced exclusion.<sup>17</sup> Her outsidership was caused by her foreign manners thought to be menacing to the social order. So while Wharton was able to go into a self-exile in France, Ellen Olenska, on the other hand, had to be expelled from the American upper society. To further analyze the tribal people’s anxiety toward the “threatening outsider,” I will move on to examine people’s ambivalent attitude toward the idea of “Other” in the Gilded Age.

When Hegel Friedrich first proposed the concept of Other, he saw it as an indispensable constituent for the formation of “self.” It is the existence of an Other that inaugurates the existence of the self. Later in the twentieth century, the post-colonialist Edward Said applied the Hegelian notion to his imperialism theory while the French feminist Simone De Beauvoir extended it to include gender. Through the process of “Othering,” the “Occident” or “men” subordinate the Orient or women to the periphery and thus stabilize their race and dominance. Therefore, embedded in the notion is a master-slave relation in which the master wants a submissive Other that can be easily manipulated. As a result, when the Orient was

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<sup>17</sup> In *Place and Placelessness* (1976), Edward Relph is examining the idea of “existential outsidership.” As he writes, “It involves a self-conscious and reflective uninvolvedness, an alienation from people and places, homelessness, a sense of the unreality of the world, and of not belonging.... In existential outsidership all places assume the same meaningless identity and are distinguishable only by their superficial qualities” (51).

introduced through the commercial transaction between China and America,<sup>18</sup> people's feeling toward it was one filled with admiration and trepidation. On the one hand, they were fascinated by its exoticism; on the other hand, they were disturbed by its wildness and uncontrollable nature.

During a visit to the Chinese museum in Boston in the mid 1800s, Margaret Fuller expressed her sheer pleasure derived from the artifacts in display:

There was great pleasure in surveying there, if merely on account of their splendor and elegance.... The rich dresses of the imperial court, the magnificent jars, the largest worth three hundred dollars, and looking as if it was worth much more, the present-boxes and ivory work, the elegant interiors of the home and counting-room—all these gave pleasure by their perfection, each in its kind. (259)

Christopher Dresser, one of the major designers of that time, also thought highly of the Oriental art, as he wrote it in *Principles of Decorative Design* (1873),

I know of no ornament more intricately beautiful and mingled than the Persian...no fabrics so gorgeous as those of India—none so quaintly harmonious as those of China; and Japan can supply the world with the most beautiful domestic articles that we can anywhere procure (qtd. in MacKenzie 121).

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<sup>18</sup> As an article under the title "Early Trade between America and China" on August 18, 1901 in *New York Times* recorded, "the ship Empress of China, which loaded with ginseng, sailed from New York Harbor for Canton on Washington's Birthday, 1784, and returned on May 11, 1785, with a cargo of tea."

Obviously, they were all looking at the Orient art with awe and admiration.

However, while the search for pleasure and the spirit of curiosity and adventures contribute to the Oriental phenomenon in American art and culture, the unequal power relation between the Occident and the Orient is the real cause behind the two impulses. In this relation, the Occident places himself in a domineering position to which the Orient must be submitted. In his studies of the Orient, Edward Said discovers a rather systematical representation of the Orient and the Occident. The Orient is always irrational, static and backward while the Occident is rational, dynamic and progressive. Thus, he concludes in *Orientalism* (1979),

the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desire, repressions, investments, and projections. (8)

In other words, the Orient is a “European invention” (Said 1). Whether its image is negative or positive, it stems from the Occident’s desire for domination.

This colonial metaphor was manifest in the gender relation in the Gilded Age as well. There was the idea of an “Orientalized woman” and her “otherness” that would put her in a relatively inferior position compared to men. In a love letter to Morton Fullerton, Wharton compared herself to the exotic treasure and expressed her vulnerability and willingness to be dominated by her lover, the clever white man, and an “experienced white trader” :

And I'm so afraid that the treasures I long to unpack to you, that have come to me in magic ships from enchanted islands, are only, to you, the old familiar red calico & beads of the clever trader, who has had dealings in every latitude, & knows just what to carry in the hold to please the simple native—I'm so afraid of this, that often & often I stuff my shining treasures back into their boxes, lest I should see you smiling at them! (qtd. in Ammons 69)

This comparison is also implicated in the problematic relation between Ellen and Archer. The “blatantly orientalized Ellen Olenska”, as Elizabeth Ammons addressed her, is a “dark lady” with “dark hair” who possesses “outlandish arts” and has about her a “mysterious authority of beauty” (EI 83). Her look appealed to Archer’s fancy and her eyes reveal a “conscious power” (AI 43). In the opera house, her “dark blue velvet gown” and her “Josephine look”<sup>19</sup> make her a conspicuous object falling prey to the male gazes. To Archer, she is an exotic piece of art, and to possess her is to instill some fresh air into his tedious life.

However, Ellen’s presence was not entirely welcomed in the New York society. Pleasure seekers like the Beauforts and Mrs. Struther enjoyed her company, yet conservatives like the Archers shunned her. She was not only an Other but also a threatening one. Her fiery beauty and unconventional conduct were titillating but dangerous. Reading the novel from a racial perspective, Ammons interprets Ellen’s story as a parable of “white racist hysteria”. As a “dark woman,” Ellen’s “deep knowledge” and “brilliant creativity” have threatened to shake the very foundation of white patriarchy (83). This violation is a “social taboo” that would make Ellen what

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<sup>19</sup> Style of dress modeled on that of the Empress Josephine of France, Napoleon’s wife until their divorce in 1809 (AI note 255).



Carol Wershoven calls “the female intruder,” whose intrusion, more often than not compels a “representative member of society”, a “man” usually, to reexamine his world, and thus shatters his complacency (14). In “Purity and Power,” Judith Fryer also points out Ellen’s destructive potential. The sphere of purity and order is in danger because she crosses the line which should not have been crossed, and displaces the existing social order with rules that run counter to the expectations of her society. When she exclaimed, “I want to be free; I want to wipe out all the past” (AI 77), she was seeking a self-independence which, in the Gilded Age, was reserved only for men. As a consequence, her quest for a way out of her loveless marriage and a right to speak for herself are regarded both by the society people and her male counterparts as an act of “mimicry” which involves a subversive potential.

In “Of Mimicry and Man,” Homi Bhabha recognizes an ambivalence characterizing the paradox of the imperial mission: there is the colonizers’ wish to assimilate the colonized but also their fear that in so doing, the colonized might become too much like the colonizers. The latter’s mimicry on the colonial discourse, as Bhabha indicates, is profound and disturbing to the European’s dream of authority and authenticity. While the Europeans desire a “reformed” “recognizable” Other, the Other also poses an immanent threat to the “normalized” knowledge and disciplinary power of the Occident (123). It is a double vision that will lead to a sense of “xenophobia” and endless conflicts. In *The Age of Innocence*, this anti-foreigners sentiment was manifest in the tribal people’s refusal to accept Ellen as she intended to establish a footing for herself.

## **II. Not at home: Ellen Olenska and Her Placelessness**

In the novel, Ellen’s role had always been a marginal one. Being an American bride in Europe, she encountered not only contempt from her haughty in-laws but also

disdain from her compatriots.<sup>20</sup> Coming back to New York to seek a divorce not granted by the Catholic European society and frowned upon by her countrymen, she had to live on the margin and felt a deep sense of loneliness. However, in spite of her marginalized position, Ellen still worked hard to take control of her life. Talking about the politics of race and gender in *Yearning* (1990), bell hooks speaks of the possibility of choosing the margin as a space of “radical openness.” Instead of seeing it as a site of deprivation and a place one might wish to lose or surrender, hooks considers it a central location for the production of counter-hegemonic discourse. Its marginality nourishes one’s ability to resist, and offers one a radical perspective from which one can imagine and create some alternative, and possibly, a new world. So speaking from margins equals speaking from resistance (150-2).

Ellen’s attempt to empower herself from the margin can be seen in her pursuit of personal freedom and a longing to set her own fashions. She was adopting a self-abiding attitude to create a life to which she can identify. This “authentic attitude,” according to E. Relph in *Place and Placelessness* (1976), is important for one to attain a sense of place. As he suggests,

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<sup>20</sup> Talking about her experience in Paris, Wharton concedes that “the presence of an American woman was almost paralyzing to the ladies of the party.” It seems to prevent “the natural interchange of remarks on children, servants and prices which would otherwise have gone on between the ladies” (BG 290), and most of the time, she has to be subjected on such occasions to a drab conversation that invariably began with three questions:

“Are you soon to give us the pleasure of reading another of our wonderful novels?”, “Do you write in French, and then have your books translated into English?” and “Have you already seen all the new plays” (BG 290)?

The constraint and intellectual inquiries are demonstrations of these women’s cultural superiority, but just like Richard Harding Davis claims in *About Paris* (1895), “The American princess cannot expect people who have had title and ancestors so long...to look upon Sallie Sprigs of California as anything better than an Indian squaw” (qtd. in Cable 128). At the same time, however, the bride can be scorned by her compatriots in a way Emily Post\* complains about the “heartiness” of an American-born baroness whose father is a Chicago meatpacker (Cable 128). In the story, neither is Ellen a woman from California nor is she a daughter of the butcher and we do not know how she fairs in Europe, either; yet she has to deal with a dilemma coming from both sides.

\*Emily Post (1873-1960). She is the only child of a wealthy family in Baltimore. Her father is Bruce Price, an architect. Later Post becomes a writer and an advocator of proper etiquette. (“Emily Post Biography. *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. 2007. Advameg, Inc. 28 Feb 2008. <<http://www.notablebiographies.com/Pe-Pu/Post-Emily.html>>

{ The attitude is } a direct and genuine experience of the entire complex of the identity of places—not mediated and distorted through a series of quite arbitrary social and intellectual fashions about how that experience should be, nor following stereotyped conventions. It comes from a full awareness of places for what they are as products of a man’s intentions and the meaningful settings for human activities, or from a profound and unselfconscious identity with place. (64)

For Relph, with this attitude in mind, one is able to be “inside” and feel belonging to one’s place both as an individual and as a member of a community (65). However, under the social climate of Gilded Age, Ellen’s endeavor to liberate herself only resulted in her a sense of placelessness. When she had her place thus authentically created, she only felt even more marginalized.

Just returning from Europe, she settled herself at a “strange quarter” where writers and artists lived. The street was disheveled and the houses were dilapidated (AI 47). As for the room itself, she arranged it delightfully and made it one of those artistic “cozy corner { s } ,” which as Karen Halttunen explains,

openly violated the stiff immutable laws dictating the placement of furniture along the walls of moral parlor.... The divan was piled with cushions and usually decorated with some mix of Japanese, East Indians, Turkish and Egyptian motifs, suggesting what was popularly regarded as “The sluggish temperament of the Orient.” The desired effect of the cozy corner was one which invites repose and freedom from conventionality by offering a place to sprawl and lounge at ease. (qtd. in Rosk 334)

There was always something “foreign” in her room suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiment, and the atmosphere of it was so different that one’s self-consciousness could vanish “in the sense of adventure.” Though priding himself on his knowledge of Italian art, Archer was bewildered by the Italian-looking pictures hanging on the wall because they resembled nothing that he was accustomed to look at. His power of observation was impaired simply by the sheer “oddness” of finding himself in this strange house (AI 49-50). The undecipherable feature of Ellen’s room was a sharp contrast to the predictable design of May Welland’s. While May would “submit cheerfully to the purple satin and yellow tuftings of the Welland drawing-room” in the decoration of her and Archer’s house, here in her own room, Ellen followed no rules, and if she did, abided only by a calculated informality.

However, in the Old New York, while the house was to provide the texture of beauty for an appropriate setting for life, the life to be led in that setting had to be regulated by rules other than those of the Others. The “home” should be a place where men could find their surrogate or underground self to gain in strength and identity. In his discussion about “Women and Culture” of the Gilded Age, Alan Trachtenberg regards “home” as a precinct within which a feminization of culture is performed: the art, polite cultivation and manners, genteel styles of speech and dress and most importantly, a trained aesthetic sensibility (145). They form a fortress against “unruly feelings” and “rebellious impulses” (147), and women like May are dispensers of such “enjoyabilities,” devoting themselves to the “great mission” of “self-denial” (146).<sup>21</sup> Ellen, on the other hand, is playing her outlandish role out of a “female self-love,” which according to Gwendolyn Foster, is “a dangerous trope in opposition

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<sup>21</sup> In *The American Woman’s home* (1869), Catharine Beecher agreed that women should rule the domestic sphere, stay away from the ballot box, and devote themselves to the “great mission” of “self-denial” (qtd. in Trachtenberg 146).

to male surveillance, discipline, and objectification of women in performance” (97).

Growing up as a “wild child”,<sup>22</sup> Ellen was not to live in accord with “principles” and her behavior always indicated the “tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience” (AI 81); therefore, instead of creating a passive and receptive architectural experience where womanly peace could be found, her room was rather stimulating and provoking. It was not a place where Archer could call home and into which his masculine force could sink and find shelters, but one that would kindle his passion and question his moral standard. Thus, though to Ellen, the house was her little “heaven”, to the society people, it was a site from which she could represent herself to challenge the Gilded world of rules, and Ellen would always remain the “unsettling Other” whose presence must be banished (Knights 32).

Obviously, Relph’s previous theory about the necessity of having an authentic attitude to live an authentic life cannot be applied to the social climate of the Gilded Age. On the contrary, to get a sense of place and to survive in the space of conflicts, one has to adopt an “inauthentic attitude” to lead an “inauthentic existence.” The inauthentic attitude to place, as Relph indicates, may be “unselfconscious, stemming from an uncritical acceptance of mass values” or may be “selfconscious and based on a formal espousal of objectivist techniques aimed at achieving efficiency,” and the life to be led in that setting is often “stereotyped, artificial, dishonest, planned by others, rather than being direct and reflecting a genuine belief system encompassing all aspects of existence” (80-2). In *The Age of Innocence*, the Gilded Age society was a rigid space dictated by strict rules. Hence, to gain a position as one of its members and to feel a sense of belonging, the protagonists could only choose to accept its mass value with an attitude that was “self-conscious” yet “uncritical.” Mrs. Mingott’s

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<sup>22</sup> In “Cool Diana and the Blood-Red Muse: Edith Wharton on Innocence and Art.” Elizabeth Ammons compares Ellen Oklensa to Pearl, the “wild child” in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlett Letter* (220).

unconventional decoration of her houses and May Welland's role as a conformer of her society are two such examples.

In the Gilded Age, people had an insatiable taste for the consumption of visual display. When "Chang and Eng," "The United Siamese Brothers," were introduced to America in 1829 by the sea captain Abel Coffin, they were gaining stupendous popularity. Later "Afong Moy," the engraved Chinese lady in the Qing Dynasty silk gown with her hair decorated by two chopstick-like hairpins, was also obtaining much attention. They were deemed marketable and their rarity was exploited to gratify the social curiosity (Tchen 101-13). In the novel, Mrs. Mingott, the matriarch of her family and an independent-minded maverick in the polite world of Old New York, also made her dwelling one of these spectacles:

she had made her reception rooms upstairs and established herself on the ground floor of her house; so that as you sat in her sitting-room window with her, you caught the unexpected vista of a bedroom.... (AI 20)

The foreignness of this arrangement was a "flagrant violation" that would remind people of the way women with lovers live, and Archer could not help but picture her "blameless life" led in the stage-setting of adultery (AI 20). However, despite the house's unorthodox design and the fact that against her family's wishes, she acted as a secret ally between Archer and Ellen, supporting Ellen financially when she returned to Europe, she was still much respected. Her self-sufficient life was considered "blameless" and her idiosyncrasy, "harmless" and "non-threatening." This social tolerance derived from the fact that Mrs. Mingott played out her characters of otherness within the boundary of the social norms, and in some way, catered to the "crass and patent bad taste" of the general public (Roberts 169).

May Welland, too, knew how to pander to the taste of her audience. Though in Archer's eye, she was as innocent as the white lilies-of-the-valley, she was in fact one of the least innocent. When Archer implored her to hasten their marriage, she detected his qualm and expressed her understanding and generosity. Later when he lied to her that he was going to Washington on business, though seeing through his lie, she remained silent and reminded him to visit Ellen on his way. As the finished product of a hieroglyphic society "where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs" (AI 32), May was like one of those smart Chinese producers of oriental artifacts portrayed by John MacKenzie:

Chinese producers of ceramics and other goods had been accustomed to adapting their wares to the market from an early age. In the medieval period, their exports to the Middle East fitted the specific requirements of the market and it was some of these examples which were the first to reach Europe. By the seventeenth century, Chinese exports had more to do with European taste and fashion as they deviated increasingly from indigenous style. Thus chinoiserie, the construction of an imaginary Orient to satisfy a western vision of human elegance and refinement within a natural and architectural world of extreme delicacy, was as much a product of Chinese craftsmen as of the West. (108-9)

While these producers were following the "blueprint" planned out for them by their buyers in order to give a proper "aesthetic expression" to a rising American imperial vision (Tchen 57), May was following the moral teaching of her society to make herself a respectable lady in a male-dominated culture. Thus, when her featureless decoration of her rooms was much to Archer's chagrin, it also confirmed her

willingness to yield to the power of her master. It allowed Archer to furnish it with his imagination and if he would like to, freely transform his wife's bedroom into that of Mrs. Vanderbilt's in *The Breakers*.<sup>23</sup> May Welland, as Blake Nevius points out, personified all the evasions and compromises of her clan (185), yet it was also through this negotiation that May was able to find her place to survive in the space of conflicts.

Ellen, on the other hand, was not going to give in to this "inauthentic" way of life. Same as Mrs. Mingott, her presence in the society was a spectacle, and Archer, the selective buyer who felt himself distinctly the superior of those chosen specimens of old New York gentility in matters both intellectual and artistic, had regarded the untamable Ellen as another trophy, the acquisition of which would once again enhance his self-identity (AI 6). However, embracing an authentic attitude and a self that carried its own light, Ellen was not to be classified and brought under control.<sup>24</sup> Knowing this, Archer avoided Ellen's inquiry when she asked, "Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress—since I can't be your wife" (AI 203)? Later in their last rendezvous in the museum, the place where collectors shielded and protected their treasure, Archer confesses to her, "I am consumed by the same wants and the same longings" (AI 218). At this moment it dawned on Ellen that it was going to make no difference whether she stayed in New York or went back to Europe because Archer, just like her husband, was merely another collector of women; and once she was trapped in this undesirable affair, very soon she would be neglected by

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<sup>23</sup> *The Breakers* is Cornelius Vanderbilt II's second summer "cottage" in Newport. This mansion can be regarded as an enduring icon of the Gilded Age—the arrival of the robber barons and their "veneering" onto American society. (Newport, 164)

<sup>24</sup> In *Social Rule: A Study of the Will to Power* (1916), Elsie Clews Parsons claims that "The more thoroughly a woman is classified the more easily is she controlled" (55).



him like one of those “Cesnola antiquities”<sup>25</sup> in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, whose use was forever labeled as unknown, except for the sole function of display.

Archer, being thus rejected, had an urge to reestablish his self-esteem. He determined to follow Ellen wherever she went, but abandoned his whim right after learning of May’s pregnancy. As a member of a group representing “New York,” he could not separate himself from “the habit of masculine solidarity,” because “it would be troublesome — and also rather bad form — to strike out for himself” (AI 6). Unwilling to trespass the moral boundary, Archer finally gave up his pursuit; and Ellen, feeling herself further isolated among her tribes, could only concede and had herself being once again sent into exile in Europe.

In *The Age of Innocence*, Ellen was building herself a place she called home; unfortunately, the home lacked any understandable and acceptable communication with the outer world. Her failure to comply with the social convention orientalized her as a threatening Other that was not to gratify but to defy the pride of her male counterparts, and which would in the end result in her a sense of placelessness in the very place she built. The Gilded Age, though marking a crucial period in the reconstruction of a “robust,” “fearless” and sometimes even “lawless” America (Roberts 170), as Alan Trachtenberg indicates in *The Incorporation of America* (1982), also represented “the emergence of a changed, more tightly structured society with new hierarchies of control”(3). People are never less power-concerned, and the conflicts between “nature” and “culture” can never be tenser (Bentley 51). To avoid clashes and to secure their newly-acquired position, the nouveau riches had to keep the customs and old manners in good order, making assimilating the existing tradition their dearest ambition. Thus, newcomers like William Backhouse Astor (1792-1875)

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<sup>25</sup> A miscellaneous collection of antiquities from Cyprus (AI: Explanatory notes 265). These antiquities are labeled “Use unknown” (AI 217) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

would marry an Armstrong from the New York old family so that he could be taught and made into a gentleman (Cable 13).<sup>26</sup>

Though being a native of Old New York, Ellen was like one of those newcomers. Her “eccentric upbringing” and bohemian way of life had excluded her from the inner circle of her society. Hence, when she returned home, she needed not only a place to settle down but also the support and approval from her society people. She was conscious of herself living a life “too independently,” and she admitted to Archer that “I want to do what you all do— I want to feel cared for and safe” (AI 52). However, when a place of attachment was nowhere to be found, she could only surrender herself and, along with it, lost the chance to compete in a world filled with ruses and unalterable doctrines.

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<sup>26</sup> William Backhouse Astor is the grandson of a German butcher and the son of the well-known parvenu, John Jacob Astor. He married Margaret Rebecca Armstrong (1800-1872), the daughter of United States Secretary of War and Senator John Armstrong, Jr.. Though he was well-known for his exceptional nastiness, his wife taught him “the rudiments of manners” and made him a gentleman (Cable 13).

## Conclusion

I believe I know the only cure, which is to make one's center of life inside one's self, not selfishly or excludingly, but with a kind of unassailable serenity—to decorate one's inner house so richly that one is content there, glad to welcome any one who wants to come and stay, but happy all the same in the hours when one is inevitably alone. (Lewis 413)

In a letter responding to her friend, Mary Berenson's illness, Wharton offers her method of treatment: furnish one's mind with peace and happiness. However, this joy and serenity only exist in a place to which our heart feels attached. It should be the core of our existence where self-expression is possible and self-enhancement takes place. Thus, whether in her life or fiction, Wharton is looking for such a place of attachment.

When she was working on *The House of Mirth*, she just moved into The Mount, where she would unleash her creative power for the very first time; when she was creating the monstrous Undine, she just finished her love affair with Morton Fullerton and divorced her husband; when she published her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Age of Innocence*, she had made France her permanent home. Her life story actually parallels with her protagonists' journey of quest. There she shared with Lily's ambivalent feeling toward her role in the society and felt the same hopelessness that Ellen felt. Yet at the same time, just like Undine, she was brave enough to fight for herself. She was able to combine the "conceived space" with the "lived aspect" of her life, endowing space with a meaning to which she could identify. This is an act,

according to Henri Lefebvre, involves a spatial practice that will connect people to their place.

As a Marxist thinker, Lefebvre considers the production of space a means of control and domination. Each space is a social product “actively produced,” and different modes of production produce different spaces (POS 46). To decode the different modalities of space, he proposes the well-known spatial triad. First there are “representations of space” conceived by planners, urbanists, architects and various professionals and technocrats. It is a dominant space of any society intimately tied to ideology, power and knowledge. Then there are “spaces of representation” associated with the lived everyday experience. They are spaces of writers, inhabitants, users and a few writers or artists. To Lefebvre, this kind of space is the most alive. As he describes it in his book,

[ I ] t speaks. It has an affective kernel or center: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situation.... Consequently, it may be qualified in various ways: it may be directional, situational or relational, because it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic” (POS 42).

It may not obey rules of consistency or cohesiveness and it is felt more than thought. Nonetheless, while its energy and fluidity might allow other spaces to collide and interpenetrate, its elusiveness also renders it vulnerable to the thought and conception of the conceived. Lastly “spatial practices” embrace both the conceived and the lived, ensuring societal cohesion and continuity. These three different processes, though interactive in the social production of space, have a rather unstable relation in that the “lived experience invariably gets crushed and vanquished by the conceived”

(Merrifield 111).

Therefore, before women are able to create a place of attachment for themselves in which they can live an unrestrained life, they have to take control of their own life. However, in the Gilded Age, it was not an easy task. In the Gilded Age, the rules of games were constructed mainly by those in power. They were old members who spared no effort to guard the moral boundary and the nouveau riches who devoted themselves to the consumption of valuable goods and the display of massive wealth. They conceived a society leaving no room for the pursuit of personal freedom and subjecting women to the patriarchal rules of conduct and female suppression. For both Ellen and Lily, they have to forfeit their right to speak before they can obtain an acceptable place in the society. As for Undine, by taking up the role of planners herself and utilizing the conceptualized space as a source of empowerment, will be able to identify psychologically with her place and thus turn it into a place of attachment.

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