View South through Loggia Arch of Barbizon Hotel, ca. 1930

Photograph by Samuel H. Gottscho
Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York.

2.1. The Geography of City Space

> There are roughly three New Yorks. There is, first, the New York of the native man or woman who was born here, who takes the city for granted and accepts its size and its turbulence as natural and inevitable. Second, there is the New York of the commuter – the city that is devoured by locusts each day and spat out each night. Third, there is the New York of the person who was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something. Of these three bewildering cities the greatest is the last – the city of final destination, the city that is a goal. It is this third city that accounts for New York's high-strung desperation, its peculiar deportment, its dedication to the arts, and its incomparable achievements. Commuters give the city tidal restlessness, natives give it solidity and continuity, but the settlers give it passion.[2]

For the sake of my argument, I will define what E. B. White calls "commuters" as the indifferent masses of people in between the native New Yorkers, – the "millionaires" for my discussion – on the one hand, and the "immigrants" on the other. Because the masses are undefined and don't have distinctive, individualized traits, they serve in the role of extras and appear as "the crowd" often in Anzia Yezierska's and rarely in Edith Wharton's city literature.

One could argue though that there is an amalgam of sorts between the two types of the native "millionaire" and the "immigrant". It is what Edith Wharton generally calls "the intruders" and by which she means the influx of rich and successful, but at the same time rather uncultivated Americans of the west. To the native upper class New Yorkers, those intruders were often considered "immigrants", too, because even though they were not really foreign born, they still lacked all the necessary social skills and the adherence to tradition and decorum that "old" New York was so proud of. This group of "millionaires", however, is still best investigated along with the 'old' "millionaires" rather than with the true but poor "immigrants" since the financial bases as well as the living backgrounds were much better matched.

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2 E. B. White, "Here is New York", *Essays of E. B. White* (1948, reprint, New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 121.

Native New Yorkers, as E. B. White points out, give the city solidity and continuity. In Edith Wharton's city, her native-born New Yorkers are guardians of tradition and long established rules. "Immigrant" New Yorkers of Anzia Yezierska's fiction whose city White so fittingly describes as a "goal", have indeed great passion and endless drive.[93]

While there are three New Yorks as far as the city's population is concerned, one could argue at the same time that there are three New Yorks in its architecture, too: First, there is the city at street level. It is almost exclusively an outdoor city. Second, there is the physical city of buildings rising above the street level – houses, mansions, apartment buildings, tenements, hotels, and skyscrapers. Clearly, this city is mostly, but not exclusively, an indoor city. And lastly, there is the physical city of the underground, the hidden underbelly, where a maze of tunnels, sewers, pipes, and basement structures can be found. This last city often also exists metaphorically rather than physically in literature. Together, all these parts influence the human beings that inhabit them.

As Ada Louise Huxtable, the famous architecture critic and life-long Manhattan resident, has aptly stated: "Architecture is a very real and important art; it affects us all so directly." She goes on to say that one "must judge it in terms of problem-solving in this uneasy, difficult combination of structure and art". Huxtable sees quite clearly that a city like New York has, and always has had, a capitalistic conflict of interest to solve regarding its architectural manifestation. She states that in New York "we practice the art of the deal, not the art of the city".[94] This, for example, is beautifully evident in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* when Undine Spragg not only trades up husbands, but also real estate on an ever more gigantic scale, going from a relatively modest house on West End Avenue to finally a home on Fifth Avenue that is "an exact copy of the Pitti Palace."

93 Having explained the two terms "millionaire" and "immigrant" as they pertain to my discussion, subsequent usage of them in the text will be made without quotation marks unless particular emphasis is intended.

94 Phillip Lopate, "Her New York", *New York Times* (9 November 2008), The City section.

Burton Pike in *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* has pointed out that "[t]he city is an ideal mechanism for the writer, especially the novelist; it enables him to bring together in a plausible network extremely diverse characters, situations, and actions."[95] This is quite true when social conventions, both in reality and fiction, would make it unlikely or even impossible for different worlds to co-inhabit a similar space in time and place. Within its boundaries, the city as a literary protagonist and tool offers almost every conceivable plot; it gives the writer the means to pick from its vast masses of characters the few that will become expressive faces with a story to tell.

The writer's city in the late 19th and early 20th century is also a place quite different from the nature settings of yore that often had paradisiacal features. The city, more often than not, is now quite the opposite: evil, demeaning, negative, the center of vice, the symbolical antagonist who will undo the hero or heroine in question. Along with those traits, however, also comes the promise of education and learning, the promise of being "sivilized", to borrow Huck Finn's words. In the case of New York City, this duality or ambiguity shows itself time and again in its literature; the city often is part of the journey in the development of a protagonist without which there would be no dénouement at the end, either for good or bad.

New York City is the new "Wild West", the frontier that is yet unknown due to the new vertical dimension, its incredible size, and fluctuations as such. Exploration, comprehension, mapping are desperately needed to make sense of an always changing city. Ultimately, this is the urban version of the original quest for America: the search and acquisition of space, be it for the sake of settlement or for political or ideological purposes. The United States have "consistently defined [their] national identity through spatial models of expansion and ascension".[96] This Manifest Des-

95 Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 8.

96 See Elizabeth Boyle, "Building Up America: Architecture, Autobiography and the Precarious Construction of Urban Identity in Anzia Yezierska's Bread Givers." *The BAAS Postgraduate Journal, US Studies*, Issue 6 (Autumn 2004).

tiny applied to the American expansion to the Pacific and it continued also in the construction of cities where space was often horizontally limited but – if technically feasible – vertically available. Whereas the term "land" from a European perspective has much to do with "roots" and "origin" as defining factors of the self, from an American point of view "land" meant capital and thus was a form of investment.

This is a feature that can still be traced in the America of today. Not only is homeownership in the USA extremely high, it is also a goal in and of itself. In addition, the phenomenon of a "starter home" is typical for the American real estate experience. One buys a small and cheap home as early in life as possible and trades up to larger and more representative ones, given that the financial resources become available. The acquisition and expansion of space is thus still very much part of the American identity. In the urban context, and especially in the context of a city like New York, this probably holds true even more. Not only the size of one's space but also the physical location, conveyed in simple numbers and street names are, as we shall see, a key to a New Yorker's sense of selfhood.

As E. B. White so eloquently wrote in "Here is New York": "It is a miracle that New York works at all. The whole thing is implausible."[37] The city in its geographical and social entities can be seen as a text: in order to understand it, you must first decipher it. And in order to be able to do that you must be an urban literate. This, however, is an acquired profession that requires experience. Even if you are a native, you will still have to relearn the urban language of the time because the meaning of the city is constantly shifting and perpetually in flux: "After all, this New York into which she was being reintroduced had never, in any of its stages, been hers [...]."[38]

In this unstable labyrinth of the modern American city, the millionaire and the immigrant represent the two extremes on

37 E. B. White, "Here is New York", *Essays of E. B. White*, 123.

38 Edith Wharton, *The Mother's Recompense* (1925; reprint, New York: Scribner Paperback, 1996), 50. (Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *MR*).

other side of the social and emotional spectrum of the city. But they also inhabit different and distinct physical neighborhoods in the city, neighborhoods that may border on each other or, for short periods of time, overlap and interfere with each other.

Let us not forget that the geographical Manhattan at the turn of the 20th century was very much a city determined to be noticed from far away. In 1903, there were already 550 buildings that were over 10 stories high. The city was well suited to be seen, vision like, upon arrival from the water since it was practically reaching out to Europe.[39]

The skyscrapers themselves were also perfect advertisements for both the companies that named them and the city itself because they became recognizable icons the world over. Once one set foot on Manhattan Island, however, the city no longer projected one single image. In fact, once one got past the artificially looking and surreal view of New York's skyline, a traveler, an immigrant, or a native would find many rather distinct cities laid out on the island. Ask any New Yorker about his city and he will tell you about his neighborhoods; rarely will he consider the city as a whole. Unless he drives across one of the bridges and sees the city in its entirety, to him it tends to be rather an accumulation of small towns. He knows the neighborhoods of his New York City quite well and feels at ease there, but put him in someone else's city space and chances are that he will feel disoriented and somewhat lost:

> My New York was limited to ten blocks; the boundaries were Sixth Avenue from Twenty-third to Thirty-third Streets, with the cross-streets one block to the west. Central Park was a distant forest, and the lower part of the city a foreign land.[40]

This is also true for Edith Wharton's and Anzia Yezierska's protagonists. The city around them had grown and expanded both in the horizontal as well as the vertical direction, but

39 Richard Burns, dir., *New York: the Power and the People, Episode IV: 1898-1918*, PBS Documentary Series (New York: Warner Home Videos, 1999).

40 James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 82.

Wharton and Yezierska's protagonists are not disconcerted or in any way thrown off balance by the changes in the greater cityscape because their lives just revolve around their own neighborhoods with hardly an outing in another area of the city. They are all very much products of their location: Fifth Avenue, in a wider sense, for Wharton's protagonists, the Lower East Side for Yezierska's.

As Peter Conrad has fittingly phrased it in *The Art of the City*: "To locate an address [in New York City] is to ascertain a social station."[41] Where the address and the social station are not compatible, protagonists tend to be distressed or at least annoyed by the discrepancy, like Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*. She has to "resign herself to West End Avenue" and "was still submitting to the incessant pin-pricks inflicted by the incongruity of her social and geographical situation – the need of having to give a west side address to her tradesmen."[42] The wrong address is being "inflicted" like a wound; it attacks the physical substance of one's social persona.

This was true back then and, amazingly, still holds true now. Even though the city has become much more diversified and so large that there are today quite a few blocks that are "fashionable", an address in New York City reveals much more information than its geographical coordinates indicate. From an address you can learn not only about social status. You also gain information on finances and potential; it matters how far east or west someone lives and where on the north-south axis. There is the vertical address, too, that tells you on which floor the apartment is located. The closer to the sky, the fancier the address, unless the address is an entire townhouse. If you really know your social geography and are familiar with the buildings of the city you might be able to extract additional data from the letter or letters after the apartment number. More than one letter usually indicates a combined apartment, i.e. a larger than usual apartment,

41 Peter Conrad, *The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 25.

42 Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (1913; reprint, New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1987), 182. [Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation CC].

and the letter "P" stands for the penthouse level which, literally, can't be topped. Therefore, an address in New York City carries significance quite beyond its geographical coordinates. Now as well as back then you needed a certain knowledge to be able to read and understand the hieroglyphic world of the city.

The distinction of topos cannot only be found in the geographical opposition of Fifth Avenue or the Lower East Side. It is also quite present in the fact that the millionaire protagonists live mostly inside, enjoying their dining and drawing rooms with an occasional outing to the opera, a concert, or someone else's home, again all inside locations. The Lower East Side heroines in turn live mostly outside of their tenement buildings, be it in the streets, on the stoops in front of their dwellings, or on the rooftops. When either one of them ventures into the mostly man-created and organized nature of Central Park, they do so for entirely different reasons: the millionaire protagonist goes there on a social outing, an extension of one's drawing room, in order to fulfill social obligations and the requirement to be seen. The outside is but a different setting that has nothing to do with nature; it serves as ideal background to display one's newest dress from Paris. But the seamstress or laborer of the Bowery can barely pay for the carfare up to the park, and when she finally gets there, she does enjoy nature for its air, light, change of scenery, and relaxation. She feels free of all the urban elements that so define her drudgery; she is free of the sweatshops and tenements that don't let her breathe. Like the I-narrator in Anzia Yezierska's story "Soap and Water", she sheds the urban oppression represented in those Lower East Side sweatshops and tenements, until quite unceremoniously, city life calls her right back again:

> [ ] after months of shut-in-ness, in dark tenements and stifling sweatshops, I had come to Central Park for the first time. Like a bird just out from a cage, I stretched out my arms, and then flung myself in ecstatic abandon on the grass. Just as I began to breathe in the fresh smelling earth,

and lift up my eyes to the sky, a big, fat policeman with a club in his hand, seized me, with: "Can't you read the sign? Get off the grass!"[43]

Central Park, to Yezierska's heroine, signifies everything that is lacking in the tenements: it means freedom to spread your wings "like a bird" and do as you please, it provides a very real and immediate contact with the physicality of nature, it gives her even "ecstatic abandon" in the grass. Central Park also gives her full access to the sky, a feature that time and again in Yezierska's literature is very central and urgent. And last, but by no means least, it provides her with an opportunity to finally "breathe" again the way she couldn't in the tenements. But just as the I-narrator is about to do so, this idyllic union with nature is cut short by the intervention of a city representative who makes life so loathsome: the "big, fat policeman". He stands for all the rules and regulations of society, and he does not care whether the narrator can breathe or not. In fact, he makes an effort to stop her from doing so by interrupting her union with nature. Also, he is "fat", a sign of his relative prosperity and social standing. Anzia Yezierska's heroines are always painfully hungry for both food in the physical and mental senses. I will further investigate that hunger in Yezierska's narratives, or the lack thereof in Wharton's, in a subsequent chapter.

Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* represents one of the new urban female types. In reality and from a moral standpoint, she actually leads an impeccable life, but due to her situation as a single woman of an upper-class background with limited means, she is constantly perceived as being located on other side of the spectrum. Lily, however, is not cast well in the role of the endangered city woman. Acquiring a wealthy husband that she could also love proves to be practically impossible, and subsequently she cannot help slipping into the role of the dangerous single woman in the eyes of society. That this is even possible seems latent in the urban context where societal control appears much less stringent than it would in a rural or small town setting, where surveillance

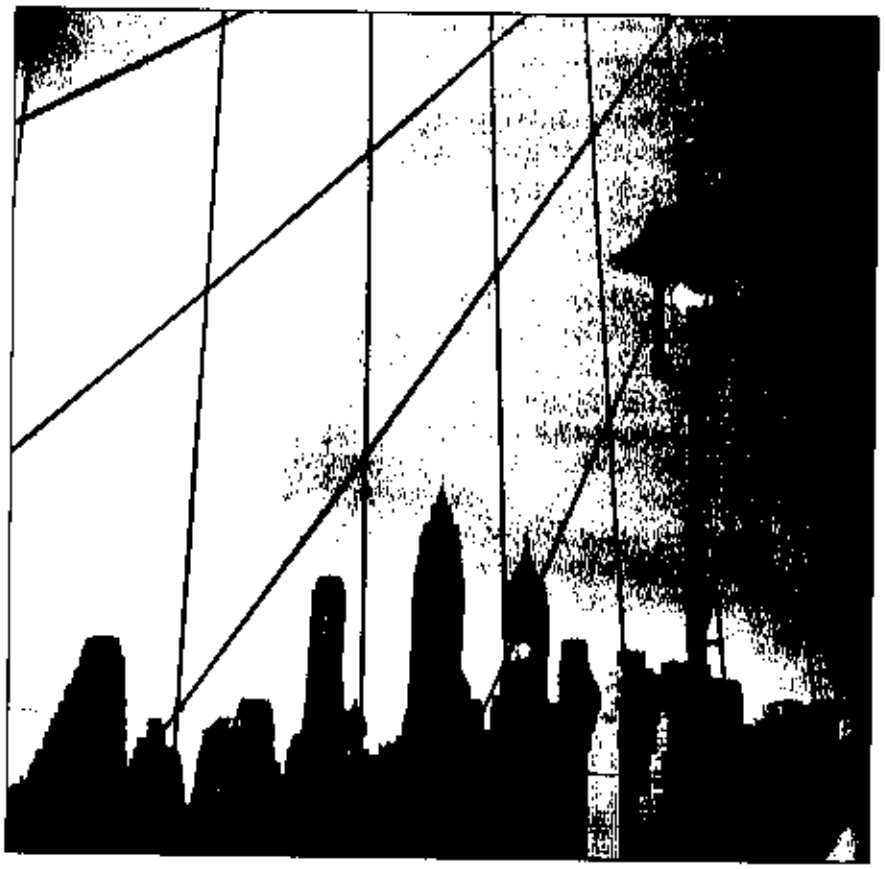
43 Anzia Yezierska, "Soap and Water", *Hungry Hearts* (1920; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 109.

by neighbors is common. This anonymity, real or imagined, that the city affords its inhabitants is also the trigger for rumors of all sorts: because a woman *could* technically become a dangerous woman and thus, by extension, a prostitute, it is simply assumed that she has overstepped the boundaries as soon as behavior outside of the norm is being observed.

Let me now lend the word to James Weldon Johnson again, who in 1912 in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* had so fittingly rendered the New York of Edith Wharton and Anzia Yezierska. In Johnson's words, New York is a "stimulant", it is "as binding and necessary as opium is to one addicted to the habit". And, quite like the drug, when the city withdraws its favors, the consequences are dire:

> We steamed up into New York Harbor late one afternoon in spring. The last efforts of the sun were being put forth in turning the waters of the bay to glistening gold; the green islands on either side, in spite of their warlike mountings, looked calm and peaceful; the buildings of the town shone out in a reflected light which gave the city an air of enchantment; and, truly, it is an enchanted spot. New York City is the most fatally fascinating thing in America. She sits like a great witch at the gate of the country, showing her alluring white face and hiding her crooked hands and feet under the folds of her wide garments – constantly enticing thousands from far within, and tempting those who come from across the seas to go no farther. And all these become the victims of her caprice. Some she at once crushes beneath her cruel feet; others she condemns to a fate like that of the galley slaves; a few she favors and fondles, riding them high on the bubbles of fortune; then with a sudden breath she blows the bubbles out and laughs mockingly as she watches them fall.[44]

44 James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 65–66.



Waterfront Skyline, 1937

Photograph by David Robbins
Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York

2.2. The City, Viewed from Without

> As Kate Clephane stood on deck, straining her eyes at the Babylonian New York which seemed to sway and totter toward her menacingly, she felt a light hand on her arm
> (Wharton, *MR*, 29)

The city as a geographical space and the city as a metaphor for its society are very frequently hard to distinguish. Leo Marx claims in his essay "The Puzzle of Anti-Urbanism in Classic American Literature" that negative feelings against the city are not really directed at the space, but against its inhabitants and the culture they represent and symbolize.[6] According to him, people are defining place and not vice versa. This, however, is a bit simplified and doesn't take into account that such a system is also self-feeding and self-centered in the sense that it is a two-way street. A modern example of this would be a building that has been vandalized – or decorated if one regards this as an urban art form – by graffiti. It is thus people defining space. But once the building has been tagged, it also sends a message back to the people who see it. It is now space defining people. This interaction and exchange is an urban perpetuum mobile if you will, drawing its invisible energy from constant mutations of urban ideas, people, and spaces. In city literature, the urban space can be realistic or imagined. The fact is that the city functions as an additional protagonist who at times acts and interferes with the other protagonists and at other times just becomes backdrop or setting.

It is also important to note here that the city viewed from the outside is very much a city stuck on an island that is surrounded by water on all sides. The Hudson, East and Harlem Rivers as well as the Upper New York Bay define and limit the city that cannot escape anywhere but upward. One of the most memorable descriptions of Manhattan, viewed from the outside, probably has

6 Leo Marx, "The Puzzle of Anti-Urbanism in Classic American Literature," *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City in Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1981), 63-80.

been composed by Herman Melville. On the opening page of *Moby Dick* he writes:

> There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs – commerce surrounds it with her surf. Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme down-town is the Battery, where that noble mole is washed by waves, and cooled by breezes, which a few hours previous were out of sight of land. Look at the crowds of water gazers there.[46]

It is this insularity of the city that elevates it to a special significance; it is the proximity to the water that attracts the "inlanders [who] come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues – north, east, south, and west" and who all "unite" as "nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in".[47] The insular city draws its inhabitants to the water, which promises a life beyond its shores. As much as the city beckons newcomers by its monumental and favored location on the island, as much as it is stretching out its piers towards incoming ships like drawbridges across the moats of medieval castles, these very same bridges are drawn up once you have reached land. You become a sort of prisoner of the city with few options of departure.

The city looms large and frighteningly for Kate Clephane on her imminent arrival in Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense*. The previously quoted passage which refers to the "Babylonian New York" is essential; it hints at a passage of the New Testament in The Book of Revelations: "And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH." And later in Revelations it says that "the woman which thou sawest is that great city", thus the whore personifies Babylon. Babylon is thought to have been used in the New Testament as a metaphor for Rome, or the power of the Roman Empire, which was seen as the Antichrist. Referring to New York as the new anti-Christian Rome is certainly rather stark, but may well represent popular impressions of the industrialized "evil" city that Edith Wharton did not really like. The emergence of intimidating skyscrapers, those symbols of commercial power competing in height with church spires that had previously dominated the skyline, certainly also added to this scary and unholy image of the city. In addition, in the Babylon of the Old Testament, the people meant to build themselves "a city and a tower" in order to "make [...] a name" for themselves rather than for God. The consequences thereof are well known: "So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city."[48] Comparing New York to the Babylon of yore is thus truly rather discouraging. Consequently, the city speaks in tongues unknown to Kate after many years of absence. Quite like its biblical sibling, the towers of the city have almost been built up to the sky. Similar to the people of Babel, Kate cannot read or understand the city from afar. It is quite incomprehensible to her. Historically, this image of New York as a Babylonian city had been a familiar one at the turn of the 19th century when Manhattan was at the epicenter of immigration.[49] The many languages spoken were features of the city that were considered "picturesque" in an effort to explain the modern industrial city in non-frightening ways to the native American population. Kate will eventually find out that while in European cities from whence she now arrives, "renewals make so little mark on the unyielding surface of the past", the "overwhelming changes [in New York] had all happened, in a whirl [...]" (*MR*, 35). Having been out of town for so long, Kate has lost an understanding for New York City's "hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs".[50]

46 Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851, reprint, London: Penguin Classics, 1986), 93.

47 Ibid., 94.

48 King James Bible, Revelations 17:5 and 17:18, Genesis 11:4–8. To re-read the passage from *The Mother's Recompense*, please turn back to the beginning of this chapter.

49 Carrie Tirado Bramen, "The Urban Picturesque and the Spectacle of Americanization," *American Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 3 (September 2000): 444–477.

50 Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (1920; reprint, London: Penguin Books, 1974), 41. (Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *AOI*.)

The city as physical space would seem to demonstrate stability in the sense that it is an organized, solid structure with easy historical references and a certain time-line in its architectural substance. In a city there are always sights of some importance, recognizable buildings that seem to be marks of permanence rather than symbols of change. But New York City, as portrayed in much of Edith Wharton's fiction, while static to the point of stubbornness regarding its society, is anything but unchanging with regard to its physical space: it is a city aspiring to a future that has not yet been reached. The city is always "becoming"; it is not there yet nor will it ever be. The only constant of it is, as Blanche Housman Gelfant has pointed out in *The American City Novel*, that "instability becomes a norm. The unchangeable element in city life seems to be change itself."[8] Wharton's New York City obeys the old Greek idea of "panta rhei" – everything flows (nothing remains as it is). The only state of being is a constant becoming or a constant movement. This, one feels, certainly applies to all living things but how can it be the case for inorganic urban structures? In Wharton's New York, the city is no longer just an accumulation of buildings. Architectural representations have become personified, are organic organisms if you will, and are being used in lieu of the social groups that inhabit them. It is thus that the dead stone structures of the city obey the laws of nature. From the mid 19th century, New York City has experienced an unmatched perpetual redefinition of its urban landscape due to an enormous influx of immigrants to Manhattan island which continuously altered and shifted the grid's reference meaning.

But change, even if the norm in New York City, is practically impossible to pin down, to analyze and comprehend. It cannot be grasped, captured, read. Because change remains vague and uncertain, an abstract force, this instability of the cityscape acquires a certain uncanny dimension: what we cannot decipher ultimately frightens us. While familiarity with places gives one surety and a certain confidence of knowing one's way around, the feeling of being new or foreign to a place leaves one unprotected and wor-

[8] Blanche Housman Gelfant, *The American City Novel* (Norman, Oklahoma: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 9.

[illegible] Not everything, however, that is unfamiliar or new is also necessarily fraught with fear, but it clearly does have the potential for it. In the landscape of a city like New York that is incessantly being reinvented, it is increasingly difficult or nearly impossible to find one's footing since what feels like home today will feel like a foreign place tomorrow.

There really are two dimensions to the notion of the uncanny nature of change here: one is the change that can simply be frightening because one is new to a place and because of this newness, one has not yet been able to acquire the tools to decode the city. The second one is the scary change that constantly happens to a city like New York which renews itself again and again due to the massive influx of immigrants. Consequently, New York City can never really be familiar for very long, not to the native and certainly not to the immigrant, unless the urban vocabulary is continuously updated and relearned. Interestingly enough, Freud also pointed out that the opposite to "unheimlich", was the word "heimlich" which literally translates as "familiar" or "homey", but really means "secretive" or "hidden". This dichotomy is quite revealing regarding the context of a city such as New York: it is familiar as a known place and yet it is not familiar because it is subjected to perpetual change. Because it is in flux, an "intellectual uncertainty" (Freud) is being created and this creates fear. Formerly familiar spaces seem foreign and can no longer be deciphered; they become "hidden" to comprehension. It is this mood of being lost in a familiar place that inhabits a lot of city stories.
It is helpful to remember at this point that Edith Wharton herself had an ambivalent and in many ways negative relationship with the city of her birth. In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, she does not only write about the "intolerable ugliness of New York" compared to European cities, but also describes at length the unstoppable change the city has gone through. This change of the urban frame of reference has itself brought on a shift in the city's

[9] Sigmund Freud, in his essay on "Das Unheimliche", has pointed to the connection of the German word "unheimlich", meaning "uncanny", to something that is not "homey" or "familiar". Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche", *Psychologische Schriften*, Studienausgabe, Bd. IV. (1919; reprint, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1970), 244.

society. Since that passage is so representative of Edith Wharton's opinion of the city, I would like to quote parts of it here:

> The old New York to which I came back as a little girl meant to me chiefly my father's library [...]. Out of doors, in the mean monotonous streets, without architecture, without great churches or palaces, or any visible memorials of an historic past, what could New York offer to a child whose eyes had been filled with the shapes of immortal beauty and immemorial significance? One of the most depressing impressions of my childhood is my recollection of the intolerable ugliness of New York, of its untended streets and the narrow houses so lacking in external dignity, so crammed with smug and suffocating upholstery [...]. What I could not guess was that this little low-studded rectangular New York, cursed with its universal chocolate-coloured coating of the most hideous stone ever quarried, this cramped horizontal gridiron of a town without towers, porticoes, fountains or perspectives, hide-bound in its deadly uniformity of mean ugliness, would fifty years later be as much a vanished city as Atlantis [...], or that the social organization which that prosaic setting had slowly secreted would have been swept to oblivion with the rest.[5]

This negative and often ambivalent perception of New York City by Wharton also finds its representation in most of her city fiction. In "Autres Temps", a short story, arriving in New York City is fraught with fear. Mrs. Lidcote saw "the huge menacing mass of New York" and "shrank back into her corner of the deck and sat listening with a kind of unreasoning terror [...]." The city in this story is always utterly scary when observed from the outside. It is a "huge threat" and it is "dwarfing" the ship's deck and its passengers "under long reaches of embattled masonry". Later, it becomes an "immense black prospect" and a "problem". To her, the personified city is the feminine "sphinx whose riddle she must read or perish".[6] The city thus not only menaces but also questions her very existence to the point where it becomes a question of survival: if she cannot decipher it she feels she must die. In fact, once Mrs. Lidcote has arrived she has indeed a very difficult time at interpreting the changed city. While from the outside the physical "mass" of New York City has been terrifying and intimidating, once landed she finds that it is rather the city's society that she can no longer comprehend after so many years of absence. She becomes aware that new standards now apply. The divorce and remarriage of her daughter in the present New York City is now being tolerated and nobody is being ostracized because of it. For her own divorce many years ago, however, the current New York society does not show similar forgiveness, not even now under this new set of rules. While the city has changed on every level, the old traditions still apply to her. After short-lived expectations that she will now be fully embraced and redeemed by society, Mrs. Lidcote comes to the conclusion that this will never be the case. She must flee the city. While she has eventually been able to solve the riddle of the sphinx, she must nevertheless "perish"; even though she has been able to decipher the city, or rather its moral code, she does not really comprehend why this must be so. She still does not fit in and the only valid option, already anticipated in the opening lines of the story, is flight.

This negative image of the city is contrasted by Madame Olenska's perception in *The Age of Innocence*. But even in its friendly mode the city has a negative connotation:

> New York was kind, it was almost oppressively hospitable, she should never forget the way in which it had welcomed her back; but after the first flush of novelty she had found herself, as she phrased it, too 'different' to care for the things it cared about [...].
> (*AoI*, 201; emphasis mine)

The city is no longer an abstract mass; it has become personified – New York, the city, implying New York, the society, has "welcomed her back". Madame Olenska experiences the city as "kind" in the beginning, and even though she does not quite fit in and is "too 'different' to care for the things it cared about", she is not intimidated at all. She will, however, in the end comply in part with the code of New York City society by leaving, but not in order to go back to her husband as she is expected to do. New York City, in both its geographical as well as its societal expression, has thus not truly tamed her. Choosing a life by herself outside of the city is Madame Olenska's own decision eventually. But even if the physical image of the city is generally a positive one here, it

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5 Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, Autobiography (1934, reprint, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 34f.

6 Edith Wharton, "Autres Temps", *Collected Stories, 1911–1937*, 59; 66; 80; 62.

doesn't mean that the city is easily entered from the outside. Time and again Edith Wharton utilizes the metaphor of the "citadel" to describe New York. As such it cannot be accessed without a "siege" or a "traitor" within who hands over the keys to the world beyond the citadel's walls (*AOI*, 29, 217). It is interesting to note that Wharton described herself as such a traitor after the publication of *The House of Mirth* in 1905. The book caused quite a scandal and quickly became a bestseller. In her introduction to a new edition of it in 1936, she wrote that her portrayal of this "little circle, secure behind its high stockade of convention, alarmed and disturbed the rulers of Old New York". Because she laid it all open to the people outside of this inner circle she was considered a traitor of sorts. But quite true to "old" New York's conventions, nobody "allude[d] to the book in the presence of its misguided author" and they all decided to "ignore the fact that she had committed this deplorable blunder".[55] The citadel is a fortress, a (last) stronghold separating the common masses from society. The citadel is the defender of the status quo of "old" New York City; it breaks the waves of change brought to its shores. To the outside, the city as citadel projects an image of strength, power and dominance, it represents the past and suggests a similar path for the future. If you want to enter the citadel you must subjugate yourself to the rules within its walls.

This force of "old" New York City can be seen very well in the story "Atrophy", one of Edith Wharton's later short stories, which was published in 1927. It is a story of no escape, brutally crafted by Wharton so as not to give her married heroine, Nora Fenway, any possibility of mutiny, if you will. While the story opens with an escape of sorts from Grand Central Station, this time by train and not by boat, an escape that seems to suggest in every line a break away from the traditions, boundaries and innumerable unspoken rules of "old" New York society, it is, in fact, a story of imprisonment. Deceivingly, the train "escape[s] from the ugly fringes of the city", and "the soft spring landscape" with "green

55 Edith Wharton, "Introduction to the House of Mirth". In *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, Ed. Frederick Wegener (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 268

lawns" and "budding hedges" come into focus through the train windows suggesting a new beginning. There is no looking back to the city's physical space from the outside. There is, however, a deep recollection of Nora's "carefully guarded" past life, "inwardly conventional in a world where all the outer conventions were tottering". She realizes that while new standards seem to have come to apply, similar to Mrs. Lidcote in "Autres Temps", these new, laxer rules do not really apply in her circles, not "even in big cities, in the world's greatest social centres".[56] Grand Central Station, the initial location of the story, suggests as many possibilities as there are tracks and trains leaving it. But Grand Central Station, the pulsing heart of so many arrivals and departures to this great city, with its Main Concourse depicting a starlit sky reaching out beyond the city, is in fact the terminus, the last stop. Interestingly enough, any train leaving there can exit only in reverse due to the station's construction. Grand Central Station is thus the architectural symbol for the "atrophy" in the story: it is a symbol for the wasting away of a life due to insufficient nourishment (in Greek, the word "atrophos" means ill-nourished). For an ongoing journey, this station allows only movement in the same direction as one came from and, to stay in the realm of symbolisms, the identical retracting of a past movement can hardly be considered "new" nourishment. By pulling out of Grand Central Station's dead end, nourishing forward movement is denied while, figuratively speaking, a life's previous history is being annihilated by the retraction.

"Atrophy" is a very short, dense story that brings home the point of Wharton's lifelong struggle and conflict with society's conventions. It is, perhaps, somewhat autobiographical, too. It shows the inescapable reach of New York City's society; the reader is tricked into thinking that Nora Fenway has finally managed to breach the conventions that have ruled her life by actually boarding the Pullman at Grand Central Station. One is led to believe that this step is the one step needed to change her life when, in fact, the step Nora takes to board the train is the one step that brings her back into the confines of that social order. Her meeting with the old sister of her lover – a relationship that she was so

56 Edith Wharton, "Atrophy", *Collected Stories: 1911–1937*, 436

certain of having concealed entirely – rules her escape nil and void. She will be "cribbed" and "cabined" again as she used to be, and has been left no choice whatsoever of changing her fate. Her fate is beyond her influence, as in so many, if not in all, of Edith Wharton's stories. It is this utter inability to break away from it all, to break away from New York, the city, and New York, the society, that makes Wharton's stories so immediate, brutal and hard to digest. Her heroines have few choices, and most of these choices turn out to be beyond their control, too. In "Atrophy", similar to the resolution of *The Age of Innocence*, there is no truly viable life possible outside of New York City.

Edith Wharton takes the question of one's fate a step further still in *The House of Mirth*. This work is probably Wharton's ultimate showcase of how New York society set the most stringent parameters for the behavior and comportment of its members. In Lily Bart Wharton has chosen a protagonist who is representative of the ambiguity of the city: Lily is a young woman who is old enough to have left her childhood home, i.e. she is past the dependent state of being a daughter, and she is still, though barely, young enough to get married and hand herself over into the protective custody of a husband. Procrastinating between those two states, she is an ideal protagonist because she is neither still there nor already here. Interestingly enough, her writing paper even bears witness to this undetermined position in her life; the grey seal on her stationary reads "Beyond!" and the design above the word is a flying ship unimpeded by water, or, if you will, a sense of reality.[57] She is in transition, not only in her personal development but also in a geographical sense: she owns no apartment or house but is constantly moving in between the houses of her friends, or so-called friends, and the occasional relative. Lily is free to the extent that both money and social circumstances will allow; she is free to develop in a number of directions. Develop, however, she must, since her situation and position in life do not permit her to remain as she is. Her unsettled, undetermined

[57] Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 151. (Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *HOM*)

situation, like the city in flux around her, creates anxiety in the observer who can interpret her in many ways. Again, as her persona has different levels that defy labeling, she feeds into the name "intellectual uncertainty" that creates the fear of the unknown, the "Unheimliche", as we have seen earlier regarding the city as such. There is an urgent need in any observer of Lily Bart to label her, to write a rap sheet about her, so that her ambivalent status will be defined. A climax in this respect is the famous "tableaux vivants" episode that I will look at more closely in the chapter on New York City interiors.

Feeling that she must obey society's rules as a natural consequence of her birth sets Lily Bart in a downward spiral towards her sad end. It is fate that directs Lily's life: society's autopilot has taken over. Lily herself sees it as "the ever-revolving wheels of the great social machine" towards the end of the novel when she is walking up Fifth Avenue – note the direction here – and is looking into the windows of the passing carriages (*HOM*, 263). Even though she is physically located in the city at this point, she is only an onlooker when she is walking up Fifth Avenue, the avenue being a reference to a life she no longer belongs to. A short time later we find another strong image of Lily's position outside of all social fabrics after she has joined Mrs. Hatch at the Emporium Hotel: "Lily had an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the treads were knotted and the loose ends hung" (*HOM*, 276).

The city in *The House of Mirth* is a place defined by its society alone, a society which functions according to a pre-programmed set of morals, habits, standards, and rules. From the outside, it is not really a personified city but one that takes on the quality and impersonality of an urban machine. Throughout *The House of Mirth* Edith Wharton uses references to the machine; she writes about "the great civic machine" (*HOM*, 276), the "luxurious world, whose machinery is so carefully concealed" (*HOM*, 301) and how Lily is but "a cog in the great machine" (*HOM*, 308). Lily Bart is caught in her "great gilt cage " and in spite of her knowing that the door "stood always open" (*HOM*, 54) she is unable to escape.

In *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton's 1913 novel, the city is entered through the backdoor. Two years in New York City have passed already before we are introduced to the heroine, Undine Spragg. Wharton's choice of the name "Undine" for her heroine is certainly not a coincident. In her autobiography she writes:

> [...] my characters always appear with their names. Sometimes these names seem to me affected, sometimes almost ridiculous, but I am obliged to own that they are never fundamentally unsuitable. And the proof that they are not, that they really belong to the people, is the difficulty I have in trying to substitute other names. For many years the attempt always ended fatally [...].[58]

So Undine has received her name for a reason; with it Wharton hints at the long literary tradition of the classical tale of the water nymph. One of the first tales in this line probably is the book *Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus* by Paracelsus. In Paracelsus' tale, the water nymph will receive a soul only when united with a human being and for this reason, the nymph will make every effort to woo a human being.[59] In this version, Undine, whose name derives from the Latin word "unda" which means "wave", can have human children, but will go back into the water if her husband betrays or otherwise fails her. Also, if her husband breaks his vows and takes another wife, Undine will see to it that he dies. There were numerous variations on this theme by many authors – Goethe, De La Motte Fouqué, Heine, Fontane, Andersen, Wilde to name a few – before Edith Wharton created her version of Undine in 1913. The one version that gave Wharton most likely plenty of material was Friedrich de La Motte Fouqué's well-known romantic tale "Undine", published in 1811 and translated into English in 1818, and which

58 Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 201.

59 In German the passage reads as follows: "[...] aber so sie mit dem Menschen in Bündnis kommen, alsdann [sie] gibt das Bündnis die Seele [...]. Daraus folgt nun, daß sie um den Menschen buhlen, zu dem sich fleißig und heimlich machen". Paracelsus, "Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus", Frank Rainer Max, ed. *Undinenzauber: Geschichten und Gedichte von Nixen, Nymphen und anderen Wasserfrauen* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1991), 100–108.

E.T.A. Hoffman turned into an opera in 1816. Wharton's Undine is as moody as her precursor before she receives a soul, and her boundless energy is similar, too. In Fouqué's tale, Undine – before she is united with her knight and thus when she is still soulless – "bubbles up" ("schäumen") time and again like rushing water. Undine Spragg is always rushing, too, impatient with life and the people surrounding her. This, however, is her true nature irrespective of her marital status. Fouqué's Undine essentially represents the romantic female ideal: once she has received a soul through her marriage to knight Huldebrand she is no longer moody but simply beautiful and kind, trying to help everyone as best as she can. The unpleasant action in Fouqué is entirely relegated to the male water sprite Kühleborn who is always negatively interfering. In Wharton, Undine Spragg is anything but a romantic female ideal. In fact, this Undine literally combines extraordinary female beauty with a very ruthless and typical male drive for success. Unlike Fouqué's Undine who puts herself last, she is extremely egocentric, focusing only on her own well-being. Undine Spragg is full of restless energy and activity; she will initiate things if life does not go as she wishes. The romantic Undine, true to the stereotype, almost never acts or initiates action on her own impulse but only passively reacts. Wharton's Undine represents the spirit of the "new" New York City that is energized and will not tolerate passivity.

The metropolis in *The Custom of the Country* has obviously not kept its alluring promise to the Spragg family from Apex City. Living in the city for two years (emphasis mine) has been "without any social benefit" to Undine Spragg, the girl who left Apex City because, among other reasons, she had been "too big for the place" (*COC*, 28). But even after two full years in New York City, Undine seems "too small" for the big city, has not yet managed to make herself visible on its social radar. Just like her mother whose "chief occupation [was] to watch the nightly lighting of New York" from her hotel room, Undine cannot really engage with the city on the same level yet (*COC*, 60). Being in the city has not changed her status as an outsider; the city treats her as if she was still gazing on from its parameters. Interestingly enough, Undine and her parents have spent their time at the Hotel Stentorian

rather than in a rented house or apartment. One could argue that a hotel as a place is a notoriously neutral location; while its foundation is set within the parameters of the city and, in this case, even at a fashionable location, within its walls the hotel could be anywhere. It is an artificial place that would look the same in any other city. The hotel creates an illusion of belonging to the city when, in fact, it symbolizes quite the opposite: by staying at a hotel, Undine Spragg unknowingly demonstrates to the city that she is not yet part of it, that while inside its geographical space she is still outside it. The city in turn, appearing to be open to outsiders, is anything but that.[60] Undine feels that she won't manage to "ever learn New York ways" and that "New York's not very friendly" to outsiders (*COC*, 75). The city's Fifth Avenue is synonymous with the society who resides there, a concept, however, that Undine quickly learns. In order to actually enter the city, she must thus enter its society first.

In *The Custom of the Country* the imagery of the Middle Ages that we have discussed earlier is again present. Ralph Marvell, Undine's future husband and a native son of New York City society, sees the newcomers as "Invaders" (note the capital letter) whose "rites and customs" he observes with curiosity. His own society group he calls the "indigenous", or then he refers to them as either "aborigines" or the "conquered race" because the "daughters of his own race sold themselves to the Invaders" and the "daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera box" (*COC*, 82, 81). The whole transaction, to him, should have occurred at the Stock Exchange on Wall Street. In fact, the carefully guarded citadel of New York could only be razed because the invaders managed to get a grip on the Stock Exchange first.

And yet Ralph Marvell is the one who had "early mingled with the Invaders" because he felt that Washington Square, the birth place of New York City, was now a "Reservation" (again, note the capital letter) with "vanishing denizens of the American continent doomed to rapid extinction" (*COC*, 77). Ralph is the one who first opens up the city and its society for Undine by marrying

60 For a discussion of American hotel culture, please see chapter 3.1

her — thus giving her a soul. Then, by committing suicide, he enables her to declare herself a widow rather than a divorcé. This allows Undine to keep her status in society and to launch her next quest from that position. Again, it is the traitor within the citadel who hands over the key to the city.

Edith Wharton's heroines, on approaching the city, often experience it as offering but few options. They seem doomed from the start. Tellingly enough, Edith Wharton herself writes in her autobiography *A Backward Glance* that it was "always a necessity to me that the note of inevitableness should be sounded at the very opening of my tale, and that my characters should go forward to their ineluctable doom." She continues that her character's "fate is settled beyond rescue". Wharton wrote with a plan and knew from the start where her characters would end up. This inevitability in her New York fiction was simply a fact to her; she had known and experienced it since she "had been steeped in it from infancy".[61] Hers was a city of endless social constraints and obligations. Many of Wharton's heroines, after having spent time traveling in Europe and thereby widening their horizons, come back to a New York City in which hardly anything has changed in their absence; the rules, regulations, and morals that governed society before they left are still the same. Wharton has them arrive in just a short sentence of the order "[…] when Mrs. Hazeldean arrived from Europe […]."[62], and they are usually not even given the chance to linger on the deck of an approaching steamer to contemplate the city before them. And if they do stand on a deck, it is almost as if Wharton's heroines would experience their last truly "free" moment before the social grid of the city will close in on them. The outlook on arriving in New York City is bleak in Edith Wharton's city literature.

In Anzia Yezierska's writings it is hard to find anything at all relating to the city as viewed from without. Her heroines cannot leisurely stand upon the deck of a ship as it pulls into the harbor. They have been squeezed below deck for most of the journey, left

61 Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 204; 207

62 Edith Wharton, "New Year's Day", *Old New York: Four Novellas by Edith Wharton* (1924; reprint, New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1995), 284.

alone in their sorrow and worry about what that "promised land" would bring: "I didn't see the day. I didn't see the night. I didn't see the ocean. I didn't see the sky[...]. Nu, I got to America."[63]

Anzia Yezierska's heroines rarely talk about the entire city as a place; their city is the city of streets and stoops, it is a concrete and real city full of smells and sounds and very much connected to the street level. On arriving, New York City is synonymous with America; it represents the American Dream. On leaving it, although this is a feat that Yezierska's heroines rarely achieve, there is no looking back at the city from the outside. The only thing that matters then is the sky, which, as in many other texts, is a metaphor for freedom and the possibility of breathing without constraint. We will look at the function of the sky in Yezierska's texts more closely in a later chapter.

From the outside, Anzia Yezierska's city is less a physical or geographical space upon which her characters comment in its entirety than a mental space or an idea that has been formed not by personal experience but by the conveyed experiences of many immigrants before them. From an outsider's perspective, the skyline and the glittering skyscrapers of New York City are the personification of the American Dream; they are the "promised land" for Yezierska's heroines. The city is a mythical place that only becomes real and physical once the heroines have walked the actual streets. Yezierska's New York indeed represents America, the "golden" land. It is a place of hope for a better life, a hope that has fed the hopeless for generations: "But for hundreds of years the persecuted races all over the world were nurtured on hopes of America." Yezierska's immigrants all tend to be "aflame with dreams of America".[64] The reference to the biblical exodus of the Jewish people out of Egypt is inevitable here: God's appearance in the burning bush and his promise to lead them "out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey" mirror to Yezierska's immigrants the tremendous promise of an exodus to America.[65] By choosing this journey, they hope to

63 Anzia Yezierska, "The Miracle", *The Open Cage*, 11.
64 Anzia Yezierska, "Soap and Water", *Hungry Hearts*, 107.
65 King James Bible, Exodus 3: 1-8

able to become decent human beings who are no longer restrained by persecution and poverty: they desire to be a "person", "somebody", a "mentsh". Most of Yezierska's protagonists have arrived a long time ago, living on the Lower East Side when we first meet them. The few that we encounter before they set foot on the "promised land" don't really get a glimpse of the city on arrival. Arriving on the steamer, they are usually "roped off, herded, like cattle, in the steerage, choked with bundles and rags and sea-sick humanity". They don't get to see the city rising out of the ocean at all; they are whisked off the boat and into the "narrow streets of squeezed-in stores and houses, [...] ash-cans and garbage-cans cluttering the sidewalks" to a tenement on the Lower East Side.[66]

For these immigrant heroines the city is, at least at the onset, a place of endless possibilities. It is a place of chance and, possibly, better fortunes. On arrival it is always a place of hope. This hope, however, is a mere chimera that the actual arrival on American soil will soon declare void and nil. It takes a while to make itself heard. In her story "How I Found America" her disillusioned immigrants lament exactly that lost hope:

> "In Russia, you could hope to run away from your troubles to America. But from America where can you go?"
> "Yes," I sighed. "In the blackest days of Russia, there was always the hope from [in] America."[67]

This sad realization still won't prevent Yezierska's heroines from continuing their quest for the "golden" land: "I'm an immigrant many years already here, but I'm still seeking America. My dream America is more far from me than it was in the old country."[68]

In Anzia Yezierska's story "The Free Vacation House", the female protagonist, who is a mother, is sent to the countryside by a charitable organization called "Social Betterment Society". The

66 Anzia Yezierska, *Salome of the Tenements* (1923; reprint, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 31. [Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation SOT]; Anzia Yezierska, "How I Found America", *Hungry Hearts*, 1981.
67 Ibid., 167
68 Ibid., 177

name of that society already implies Yezierska's take on the char
ity work of those days. What has been done in the name of charity
for the residents of the Lower East Side is severely criticized time
and again throughout Yezierska's fiction and often with good
reason one would think. Yezierska claims that the charities do not
understand nor even make an effort to understand the people of
the ghetto, neither economically nor socially. In Yezierska's narra-
tives, the charities are often displayed as the stereotypical "bad
people" who, by pretending to help in the name of Christian char-
ity, rather hurt than support the poor because of their lack of in-
sight into the manifold needs of the Jewish immigrants. The
mother's feelings in "The Free Vacation House" on accepting this
"gift" are quite negative: "Charities!" I scream out. "Ain't the
charities those who help the beggars out? I ain't no beggar. I'm
not asking for no charity. My husband, he works." Although the
mother decides to accept the vacation in the country to get away
from the struggle of city life, she feels humiliated and hurt in her
pride when walking to the train behind the charity nurse: "I kept
down my eyes and held down my head and I felt like sinking into
the sidewalk." Leaving the city in the train, however, lets her re-
gain her composure and catch her breath, literally:

> When we got into the train, I opened my eyes, and lifted up my head, and straightened out my chest, and again began to breathe. It was a beautiful, sunshiny day. I knocked open the window from the train, and the fresh-smelling country air rushed upon my face and made me feel so fine! I looked out from the window and instead of seeing the iron fire escapes with garbage-cans and bedclothes, that I always seen [sic] from my flat I looked – instead of seeing only walls and wash lines between walls, I saw the blue sky, and green grass and trees and flowers.[69]

With no word does the young mother mention the disappearing city on the horizon. What she sees and smells now are only the country sights. The joy at this, unfortunately, is short-lived. When the train conductor pulls her back to reality with his "Tickets, please", she becomes conscious of the fact again that she is not truly free, but quite dependent on the charity who sponsored this

69 Anzia Yezierska, "The Free Vacation House", *Hungry Hearts*, 63, *not*

This disillusion of freedom felt but not really had is only rein-
rced when she comes across the many restrictions and rules at
vacation house itself. While so-called "free", life at the vaca-
n house is an accumulation of rules that imprison the poor
ther in more ways than life in the tenements ever could.

> "Gott im Himmel!" thinks I to myself, "ain't there going to be no end to the things we classn't do in this place?" [...]
> I was thanking for why, with so many rules, didn't they also have already another rule, about how much air in the lungs to breathe."[70]

ll the rules choke her, deprive her of the air she had felt rushing
ainst her face in the train. Even her son Mendel "wisht [he] was
me and out in the street." The pastoral country turns out to be
e opposite of the city dweller's imagination and hope for a more
rmonious life closer to nature. Leaving behind the corrupted and
rrupting city crammed full of people had been an idealistic
omise that cannot be fulfilled. Even though this vacation is "free",
Yezierska's heroine pays a dear price for it, not with her hard-
rned pennies but with lost self-respect. The journey away from
the people of the ghetto does not live up to its initial purpose of
bringing the young mother some rest. It does, however, give her
thought. Only by leaving the city, can she return to it again to fully
appreciate the meaning of her particular urban landscape:

> I looked out from my window on the fire escapes, full with bedding and garbage cans, and on the wash-lines full with clothes. All these ugly things was grand in my eyes. Even the high brick walls all around made me feel like a bird what just jumped out from a cage. And I cried out, "Gott sei dank! Gott sei dank!"[71]

Ironically, this immigrant heroine feels free like a bird out of her
cage in the endless urbanity of the city but imprisoned in the
symbolic pastoral landscape of the country. No amount of gar-
bage cans or fire escapes or brick walls can make her feel as im-
prisoned as the suffocating free vacation house in spite of its idyl-

70 Anzia Yezierska, "The Free Vacation House", *Hungry Hearts*, 69
71 Ibid., 70–71

ic setting. This immigrant woman needs to be free and without restrictions not so much in body but in mind. Only when that is accomplished will she actually feel liberated.

That the country landscape is no setting for Anzia Yezierska's heroines can also be seen in *Salome of the Tenements*, her 1923 novel of the fiercely passionate and driven immigrant Sonya Vrunsky. The Salome motive has a long history: one biblical Salome was a disciple of Jesus (Marcus; 16,1) witnessing the crucifixion, but Salome was also the name of a sister to Herodes I. The one biblical Salome who caused the greatest repercussion and who was the basis for most reinterpretations in literature and the arts, was Salome, the stepdaughter of Herodes Antipas, a ruler who had killed his brother and had taken the wife of the latter as his own. For this act, Herodes was publicly denounced by John the Baptist whom he subsequently put into jail. On Herodes' birthday, his beautiful stepdaughter Salome danced for the guests and was therefore granted a special wish. Salome's mother Herodia instructed the girl to request John the Baptist's head. Herodes complied and the head was presented to Salome in a bowl. This particular Salome motive has been interpreted by art and literature throughout the ages. Especially Oscar Wilde's "femme fatale" in the tragedy "Salome", which he wrote in French in 1891 and which was first staged in Paris in 1896, may have served as Anzia Yezierska's inspiration. Wilde's Salome differs from the biblical one in a few key features: the modern Salome is a "femme fatale" who lusts after John the Baptist but is refused by him. When Salome is subsequently granted a wish by Herodes, it is she and not her mother who requests that John be beheaded. When the head is presented to her, she soliloquizes with the dripping dead man's head in her hands, kissing his lips. Finally, in Wilde's version, Herodes has Salome killed because of her terrible actions. Richard Strauss then made Oscar Wilde's tragedy into the opera "Salome", which had its first New York City staging in 1905. The original performance caused a major protest and was quite a sensation, too.[2]

2) Carol B. Schoen, *Anzia Yezierska* (Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1982), 40.

This may have been Yezierska's starting point for her *Salome of the Tenements*, whose passionate immigrant protagonist is also a bit of an anti-heroine in her ruthless quest to catch an "Anglo-Saxon" millionaire for a husband. One could argue that John Manning is John the Baptist to Sonya Vrunsky's Salome; in fact, Sonya sees Manning as a "born saint" and the very first chapter of the novel is also titled "Salome Meets Her Saint" (*SOT*, 31). Sonya is first mostly interested in his intellectual qualities, his learning and knowledge, his "head" if you will. Only later the passion for the man himself becomes also a factor. That this union between a young Jewish immigrant and an older Anglo-Saxon Protestant American, however, cannot entirely work out is clear from the start. Yezierska is first writing of a physical and then a contractual union (marriage) indicating that an intellectual union and comprehension between the two will not really be possible; that goal has been an illusion from the start.

The ideal as well as the most complete Americanization and assimilation of an immigrant outsider in Yezierska's literature takes place, in theory, by means of an interfaith and intercultural marriage. However, assimilation is also a two-way street: while adapting to the new culture with its religion, clothing, idiom, and culture in general, the immigrant is, at the same time, giving up her old Jewish traditions which so far have sustained her in life. This is a loss and a void that she is unable to fill with the newly acquired culture. The gap remains and eventually creates a chasm that can no longer be bridged. The abrupt separation of John Manning and Sonya Vrunsky in *Salome of the Tenements* dramatically declares the "melting pot" theory nil and void: the stereotypical Anglo-Saxon and the stereotypical immigrant Jew cannot reconcile their differences. While Manning is defined and certainly controlled, too, by his "head", Sonya is only ruled by her heart: "But with me, my heart is over my head" (*SOT*, 37). And if we now argue that John Manning, whose first name no longer seems just a coincidence, is not only modeled after John the Baptist but also after the real-life educator and reformer John Dewey with whom Yezierska worked and also had an affair, Yezierska refutes the "melting pot" theory a second time. Not only did that affair

eventually break up; John Dewey was also critical of the "melting pot" theory.[73]

A few years before the publication of *Salome of the Tenements* Anzia Yezierska had first fallen in love with the older educator who represented everything she could not attain. Yezierska "tended to look to any new acquaintance as a personal messiah, particularly if the friend was American-born".[74] Dewey actually became a role model for most of Yezierska's American-born male characters in whom her Jewish immigrant protagonists were interested. They were what the female heroines aspired to, they represented more than the men themselves since they often stood for what Yezierska's heroines didn't yet know or had not yet accomplished. They all were god-like, at least from an intellectual standpoint, and yet they were all found to be seriously lacking somewhere, usually in their "hearts".

Ann L. Shapiro has pointed out that Yezierska's heroines reject the subservient role of their mothers who are generally uneducated. Yezierska's heroines identify with strong and learned father figures – Reb Smolinsky in *Bread Givers* is only one example that comes to mind.[75] The search of Yezierska's protagonists' for intelligent Gentile father figures in their lovers, however, is bound to miscarry. The underlying incest motives make those choices highly problematic and entirely unsuitable from a sexual point of view.

After Sonya's fairytale wedding to the Anglo-Saxon millionaire John Manning, she feels an urgent need to return from her honeymoon:

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73 Dewey said: "I never did care for the melting pot metaphor, but genuine assimilation to one another – not to Anglo saxondom [sic] – seems to be essential to America. That each cultural section should maintain its distinctive literary and artistic traditions seems to be most desirable, but in order that it might have more to contribute to others." Carole B. Schiner, *Anzia Yezierska*, 12. See also chapter 4, footnote 229 for John Dewey's support of Horace Kallen's "Cultural Pluralism".

74 Mary V. Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land: the Story of Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey* (New York: The Free Press, A Division of Macmillan, Inc., 1988), 102f.

75 Ann L. Shapiro, "The Ultimate Shaygets and the Fiction of Anzia Yezierska", *MELUS*, vol. 21, no. 2, Varieties of Ethnic Criticism (Summer 1996) 79–88.

liberation, the call of New York became more insistent.

"When I am choked in by houses, the open country calls to me," she confided to Manning, "and I see before my eyes the sea and sky and hills. But I'm really only myself in the crowded city streets; the tenements."
(*Salome*, 189)

city here defines the immigrant woman's identity. By not maturing within the specific parameters of the urban landscape of the Lower East Side ghetto, they are losing parts of themselves. Eventually, these heroines lose themselves if they stray much beyond their neighborhoods, which represent the entire city to them. What is outside of their own neighborhoods appears just as foreign to them as other places that are located entirely outside of the metropolis. This partial identity loss outside of a specific topographical urban location is a feature that will repeat itself in numerous times in Yezierska's fiction.

One of the most cogent examples of an identity crisis can be seen in the prize-winning story "The Fat of the Land" for which Yezierska received the O'Henry Award in 1919. I will talk about it in this context because this story looks back on the city from outside of the neighborhood of the Lower East Side. New York is a city of cities, it is formed and defined by neighborhoods that sometimes have well-defined borders and sometimes have only frayed ones. Step outside of these neighborhoods and the territory while still within city walls – becomes frighteningly foreign.

We first meet Hanneh Breineh, the heroine of the "Fat of the Land", when she lives in the tenements on the Lower East Side. Hers is a life of tremendous struggle and great anxiety about feeding and raising her children. When she goes to the baker late in the day to buy "stale" bread because it is cheaper than the freshly baked one, she sometimes arrives too late when not even stale bread is available any longer. She then has "to trudge from shop to shop in search of the usual bargain, and spen[ds] nearly an hour to save two cents". Hanneh Breineh's outlook on life seems grim; at times, she barely knows how to feed her children or how to remain in control of her life. She is one of Anzia Yezierska's immigrant heroines who is always on the edge of a nervous breakdown. When Hanneh temporarily loses her "best" child Benny, the one with the good head, she cries out desperately: "Benny! mine heart, mine life!

Oi-i-i!"[76] Her children are her life, literally. But they are also "litt
blood-suckers" and "glutton[s]" who wear their mother out unt
she feels that she will "fall down like a horse in the middle of th
street" one day. She openly proclaims her wish that they woul
"get[] run over by a car", "fall from a window", "burn themselve
up with a match" or even "get choked with diphtheria". Her kindl
tenement neighbor Mrs. Pelz is used to Hanneh's bitter lamenta
tions and reminds her that her six children are also an investment i
a hopefully better future:

> "Wait only till your children get old enough to go to the shops and ear
> money," she consoled. "Push only through those few years while they ar
> yet small; your sun will begin to shine; you will live on the fat of the land
> when they begin to bring you in the wages each week." [...] "Just as soon a
> your children get old enough to get their working papers the more childre
> you get, the more money you'll have."

And after having advised her neighbor so, Mrs. Pelz realizes that at the bottom of her miserable outcry lies a much more immediate need: Hanneh's physical hunger. Mrs. Pelz feeds her "gefülte fish", a typical and traditional Jewish soul food to this day, and soon enough, Hanneh Breineh feels better again, exclaiming even that "the taste of that gravy lift[ed] [her] up to heaven".[77] She has been restored back to life by the help of her neighbor who not only shares her existential problems but also her culture.

The density of the people crammed in the tenements of the Lower East Side is tangible already in the very opening of this story: "In an air-shaft so narrow that you could touch the next wall with your bare hands, Hanneh Breineh leaned out and knocked on her neighbor's window."[78] Life in the tenements is typified here in the positive sense as offering the possibility of human emotional contact and support without which immigrant life would hardly be bearable. In the negative sense, however, life in the tenements could also mean the interference of neighbors in the lives of each other. Tenement dwellers were simply never

76 Anzia Yezierska, "The Fat of the Land", *Hungry Hearts*, 117; 119.
77 Ibid., 119; 126.
78 Ibid., 110.

[illegible] not when eating, not in their misery and also not in their happiness. Life, literally, was shared with everyone.

We meet Hanneh Breineh again years later when her children have all grown up. She now lives in a brownstone house on 84th Street with "shades on all windows like by millionaires". She is [illegible] outside of her social context as well as of her Lower East Side neighborhood. Hanneh receives a visit from her former neighbor Mrs. Pelz whose prophecy that the "more children you got, the more money you'll have" has come true in the meantime. Hanneh invites her neighbor "right into the kitchen" where she "can breathe like a free person". But she can only do this as long as her servant is not there. Soon after getting herself reacquainted with her former neighbor, with food – this time herring and onion – spread out in front of them "on the kitchentable like on Delancey Street", Hanneh pours out her sorrows:

> "A good neighbor is not to be found every day," sighed Hanneh Breineh. "I plowen here, where each lives in his own house, nobody cares if the person next door is dying or going crazy from loneliness. It ain't anything like we used to have it in Delancey Street, when we could walk into one another's rooms without knocking, and borrow a pinch of salt or a pot to cook in."

Again, Hanneh is utterly miserable but for very different reasons this time. She is alienated from her roots and the city and customs she knows, desperately trying to fit into her new life of ease. Hanneh continues her wailing soliloquy to the patiently listening Mrs. Pelz:

> "When I was poor, I was free, and could bother and do what I like in my own house. Here I got to lie still like a mouse under a broom. Between living up to my Fifth-Avenue daughter and keeping up with the servants, I am like a sinner in the next world that is thrown from one hell to another."[79]

Hanneh Breineh could easily be dismissed as being the archetypical person who is never satisfied and will always find something amiss. In this context, however, Hannah is the stereotypical alienated immigrant, who having been uprooted by success and money "In America children are like money in the bank" in Mrs. Pelz'

79 Anzia Yezierska, "The Fat of the Land", *Hungry Hearts*, 121; 122; 124.

words – cannot establish roots in her new city neighborhood; but neither can she go back to her old ghetto of the Lower East Side Streets, as we will see. The word ghetto here probably is a misnomer since Hanneh feels free and independent only in those streets but reigned in and imprisoned in her fancy uptown house. The ghetto, at least in her view, has never controlled or put a halter on her. But from her grown children's view, "Delancey Street sticks out from every inch of her", a feature that they all would like her to hide. The children eventually move the mother to a new Riverside Drive apartment with a dining service. No longer is there thus a need for a real kitchen, and the new apartment only features a kitchenette. For Hanneh Breineh, however, the kitchen had been the only place in her uptown dwelling where she felt remotely at home. Because of the food the old memories of her tenement days found their way into her new life. The kitchen had been "the last reason for her existence"; no longer having one gives her a "choked sense of being cut off from air, from life, from everything warm and human". Hanneh hates to eat in the public dining room of her apartment building; she feels "choked" by it and decides to go down to Delancey Street where she buys herself a new basket in order to be able to carry home the food she craves. Knowing no other way to appease her hunger for emotional connectedness, she enjoys buying a carp from the fish peddler and "walk[s] among the haggling pushcart venders, relaxing and swimming in the warm waves of her old familiar past." Leaving this familiar territory to go back "triumphantly" to her Riverside Apartment with a basket full of odorous Lower East Side memories, she is suddenly confronted again with her new life:

> A gilded placard on the door of the apartment-house proclaimed that all merchandise must be delivered through the trade entrance in the rear; but Hanneh Breineh with her basket strode proudly through the marble-paneled hall and rang nonchalantly for the elevator.[80]

Here in the lobby of her millionaire Upper West Side building the "gilded placard" sets the tone: again, as in Yezierska's story of "The Free Vacation House", there are more rules to make one's

80 Anzia Yezierska, "The Fat of the Land", *Hungry Hearts*, 123, 129, 130.

unbearably difficult. Hanneh Breineh, with the basket on her rings for the elevator, a means of conveyance that could not more indicative of this urban upscale neighborhood. In the ments there were no such things as elevators. But Hanneh, med with all the positive memories of her Lower East Side out- is ready to brave even this modern means of transportation. is stopped by the "Russian policeman" doorman who, "frigid ith dignity", tries to relieve her of her basket. Her own daughter, ho happens on the scene at this very moment, defends the orman and has the hall-boy take the basket up to the apart- ent, thereby greatly mortifying her mother. As a result of this, anneh Breineh now no longer wants to take the elevator, this tatus symbol of her new rich neighborhood. She chooses to walk up "the seven flights of stairs out of sheer spite" as if this apart- ment building was a tenement. By doing so she demonstrates the rejection of her new life and shows her utter incomprehension of its mechanisms and her disagreement with its rules.[81] But it is not simply the rules that set her off; it is the fact that the basket filled with foods and memories of her Lower East Side past is taken away from her. The basket is a metaphor for her entire life; taking it away not only robs her of her past but also of her identity and sense of self.

Later on, Hannah flees her Riverside apartment and, dressed in an expensive fur coat, pops into the tenement apartment of Mrs. Pelz with the words that "she is starved out for a piece of real eating".[82] Being inappropriately dressed for her tenement visit, Hanneh's confusion is evident. What has also become evident to Hanneh at this point is the fact that these two city worlds of hers cannot be reconciled. Again, the frustrated and disillusioned mother pours out her sorrow to Mrs. Pelz who lends her a comforting ear. Hanneh Breineh even spends the night at her old neighbor's apartment but when the morning comes she readily leaves after a "night of horrors". Utterly disoriented, not so much geographically but emotionally, Yezierska's sad heroine walks the "crowded ghetto streets" for hours. Having "fled from the marble

81 Anzia Yezierska, "The Fat of the Land", *Hungry Hearts*, 131.

82 Ibid., 133.

sepulcher of the Riverside apartment to her old home in th
ghetto", she comes to realize that she couldn't live there agai
either. By rising through poverty, and with the help of her man
children, she has become the ultimate personification of the imm
grant's American Dream. She experiences this achievement as
death sentence of sorts: her new home is a "marble sepulcher"
The umbilical cord to her Lower East Side has been severed, an
her new society ghetto – and here it really is a ghetto to her – wil
not nurture her. She remains starved for "a real piece of eating"
her desperate hunger for food both concrete and abstract cannot
be quenched. All that is left for her in the end is a "hard laugh o
bitter sorrow [...] as she walk[s] slowly up the granite steps" to
her Riverside Drive building, muttering to herself with a "choking
sob" these words: "the fat of the land!"[83]

Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* shows Sara Smolinsky's journey to "make herself for a person". Her family leaves New York's Lower East Side to earn a living in Elizabeth, a New Jersey suburb across the Hudson River. Leaving the city is not described, even though the trip to Elizabeth would have afforded great city skyline views along the way. In Elizabeth, Sara feels "the loneliness of that little town", she feels "like living among walking chunks of ice" and misses New York City's intense humanity of the crowded Lower East Side streets: "I wanted back the mornings going to work. And the evenings from work. The crowds sweeping you on, like waves of a beating sea" (*BG*, 128–129). The mother tries to comfort her with the traditional, positive images of the somewhat pastoral country setting:

> After all, it's the first time since we come to America that we have a little light and air. When I look out of the window, it's not into a black airshaft. I see a tree, the sky, green grass.
> (*BG*, 129–130)

But Sara feels very much disconnected from the life-affirming pulse and energy of the city; she feels internally torn outside of her usual environment so that she considers the country setting as even life-threatening: "There's a lot of grass in the cemetery, too"

83 Anzia Yezierska, "The Fat of the Land", *Hungry Hearts*, 130.

(*BG*, 130). The only way for Sara not to succumb to this life-
hibiting environment is an immediate return to the city where
e ends up "walk[ing] the streets, drunk with [her] dreams." The
urney back to the city is not depicted as it doesn't seem impor-
nt. What matters here is the arrival in the city – the city as the
al, the final destination: "New York! All out!" (*BG*, 130, 155). It
as if the city looked upon from afar was totally insignificant to
Yezierska's heroines. Beyond the parameter of the metropolis, life
appears to be possible only if the umbilical cord to the mother city
has remained intact, if it has not been severed by permanent relo-
cation. And only a temporary absence from the city with the
promise of a return to it allows Yezierska's heroines to remain
whole. New York City becomes a form of insurance for them; the
city will accept and nurture them again when the time is right.

In *Bread Givers* Sara Smolinsky's efforts at breaking away from Jewish traditions and life in the immigrant ghetto of the Lower East Side is only a temporary accomplishment that serves a particular purpose: to get an education and to thereby become "a person". The day when Sara leaves the city to go to college is a "burning day". Leaving New York City feels like "starting out for the other end of the earth" (*BG*, 209). New York City is the very center around which an immigrant's life gravitates – there is simply no need in Yezierska's world for an outside-of-the-city location. Characteristically, the heroine of *Bread Givers* needs the soul food of the Lower East Side to make the transition to the college world outside the city parameters. In an old newspaper, Sara has wrapped "a loaf of bread, a herring, and a pickle"; like Hannah Breineh in "The Fat of the Land", the particular kind of food that Sara has chosen to take on the train is one of the vital connections with her immigrant past.

In an interesting article Blanche Gelfant describes this urban female character as the opposite of the traditionally oppressed female stereotype.[84] The "hungry woman" character is not only defined by a physical hunger for food – though that is very much the case in Yezierska's heroines – but also by an incredible hunger for

84 Blanche Gelfant, "Sister to Eater: The City's 'Hungry Woman' as Heroine", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 23–38.

knowledge, i.e. the knowledge of books. Gelfant defines this "hungry woman" as "a sister to Faust" in her quest for transformation through knowledge and compares her to Eve reaching up to the tree of knowledge. Eve's act, too, is grasping actual food as well as reaching for knowledge. This "eating" of both food and knowledge is a forbidden act: Yezierska's heroines do not follow the paths set out for them by their paternalistic families and communities. By leaving home, they are often abandoning families that are dependent on their income. In their hunger for freedom and enlightenment, they interrupt the flow of physical food to their families when they no longer hand over their salary for that purpose:

> Knowledge was what I wanted more than anything else in the world. I had made my choice. And now I had to pay the price. So this is what it cost, daring to follow the urge in me. No father. No lover. No family. No friend. I must go on and on. And I must go on – alone.
> (*BG*, 208)

This quest for knowledge is a very male drive indeed. It is ego-driven and self-centered for the sake of one's self-fulfillment; it is antithetical to the expected behavior of a Jewish immigrant daughter. By putting her education and learning above serving and supporting her family, Sara mirrors to some extent her father's behavior. Reb Smolinsky needs a whole room for his books and his study of the Torah; the rest of the family has to make do with the remaining small space of the tenement apartment. He sacrifices his wife and daughters to work in the sweatshops to support his life of learning. Sara's case is different, however, because she comes back to the Lower East Side to work as a "teacherin". Thus in some sense she will become a mother figure to the immigrant school children, whom she will nurture with learning and knowledge. Sara will thus give back to her community what she gained for herself in the first place, quite unlike her father who only seems to take from the community, leechlike, without giving anything back, unless one counts the spiritual and religious support of the tenement community.

Sara doesn't look back on the physical city when leaving, but simply reflects that to date, New York had been "all of America" to her. She brings her Hester Street background to college with

[redacted] once she has arrived on campus she feels that she doesn't [redacted]ally belong there, that she is "always standing back and only [redacted]oking on". Even though Sara achieves in college what she had [redacted] out to do, she only feels fully alive again when she returns to [redacted] big city: " Home! Back to New York! Sara Smolinsky from [redacted]ester Street, changed into a person!" Three sentences, three exclamation marks – the return to the city could not be displayed more emotionally. But it doesn't happen by looking onto the city [redacted] a geographical entity, the return manifests itself as a mental [redacted]d internalized vision of the city as home. It is a return to the [redacted]reet level, to Hester Street. Now, as "a person among people" [redacted]ra Smolinsky can also walk "for the first time in [her] life, on [redacted]fth Avenue." And she no longer desperately needs her ethnic [redacted]od of "herring and pickle over dry bread" to give herself an [redacted]dentity (*BG*, 210, 218, 237).

At this point in *Bread Givers*, Sara has accomplished what she had originally planned for her life and she accomplished it in spite of a tough start on Hester Street. Note that the book opens with the street heading "Hester Street" which immediately allows the reader to infer a number of things about the protagonist: poor immigrant living in a tenement, probably of Jewish descent. Sara has nevertheless beaten the street, so to speak, and has become a teacher. She has followed her own rule: "And no fathers, and no mothers, and no sweatshops, and no herring!" (*BG*, 66). That she cannot quite enforce the "no father, no mother" rule all the way to the end of the book, seems inherent in her Jewish heritage. Jewish children, especially children of a religious and learned father who studies the Torah and cannot and will not go to work for a living, are expected to support their parents. In the end, *Bread Givers* is not really a novel of cultural reconciliation. Sara does return to Hester Street where she has a reconciliation of sorts with her dominant father. Being the good Jewish daughter she is after all, she reflects about the duty of having to take care of him, but this weighs heavily on her:

> Just as I was beginning to feel safe and free to go on to a new life with Hugo, the old burden dragged me back by the hair. Was there no place in the whole world for Father? My home? Must I give it to him? But with him there, it would not be home for me. I suddenly realized that I had come

> back to where I had started twenty years ago when I began my fight for freedom. But in my rebellious youth, I thought I could escape by running away. And now I realized that the shadow of the burden was always following me, and here I stood face to face with it again.
> (*BG*, 299)

Notice how the word "Father" is capitalized, representing not only Sara's own father, but also generations and generations of fathers and Jewish history that Sara cannot shake off. That history is part of her life and will remain there no matter how much she has become a "person" or an American. The "melting pot" theory of cultural assimilation is just that in Yezierska: a theory. In practice, Yezierska's heroines, even though they desperately try to assimilate, must feel that they can only incompletely reconcile their heritage with their chosen path. *Bread Givers* then is, as Gay Wilentz has pointed out, a "novel of lamentation [...] born of the collective memory of Diaspora Jews".[85]

Anzia Yezierska's characters are immigrant women of endless energy and passion who will get up time and again after a defeat, quite unlike most, if not all, of Edith Wharton's upper class female protagonists. If the story of Hannah Hayyeh in "The Lost Beautifulness" continued, you could be certain that she would yet find another way to continue the fight. Anzia Yezierska's women are certainly an obstinate bunch; they are loud in voice, color, and emotion, passionately proclaiming their sorrows for everyone to hear and see: "Oi-i-i! Black is my luck! Dark is for my eyes! [...] The dogs! The bloodsucking landlords! They are the new czars from America!"[86]

This emotional passion of Anzia Yezierska's female protagonists, rendered in a writing style that is full of local color and language, has often been used by critics to make light of her literary importance and achievements. While on the one hand she was often read – and dismissed – as a "patriotic assimilationist", her texts on the other hand were judged as lacking in plot and gram-

85 Gay Wilentz, "Cultural Mediation and the Immigrant's Daughter: Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*", *MELUS*, vol. 17, no. 3, Varieties of Ethnic Criticism (Autumn 1991–Autumn 1992): 33–41.

86 Anzia Yezierska, "The Lost 'Beautifulness'", *Hungry Hearts*, 94.

mar." However, none of this is the case. By showing immigrant heroines who struggle to the very end while trying to reconcile two worlds and realizing that it isn't possible, Yezierska consciously refutes the "assimilationist" theory. Her style can be seen as an artful means to convey her message: her sentences unconrollably flow off the page, the wailing misery of life and at the same time, the untamable joy of it all are always there. Hers is a style of immediate confrontation of protagonists, or of protagonists in communion with themselves in direct speech, with a lot of exclamation marks for impact. Yezierka's characters are not, like Wharton's, carefully thought out and planned, written up with their names already attached in a scenario before the composition as such. Anzia Yezierska is every single one of her heroines; she has little literary distance to separate herself from them. She uses the same protagonists again and again throughout her fiction to present a very rich picture of Jewish immigrant life on the Lower East Side. There is no clear line between fiction and autobiography. The lines are blurred everywhere, and even when Yezierska published her autobiography, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* in 1950, much of what, technically, should have been fact was also fiction. Analogous to her own life, her fictional protagonists won't ever give up entirely the way Wharton's protagonists do. They simply never quite give up even though they soon have to realize that the American Dream is often but a chimera. Their hunger for life, love, and people keeps Yezierska's heroines going:

> You got more than all those hothouse debutantes with their silks and diamonds. You have a head. You have brains. You got a will that will burn through everything and everybody to get the thing your will [sic].
> (*SCH*, 47)

87 Delia Caparoso Konzett, "Administered Identities and Linguistic Assimilation: The Politics of Immigrant English in Anzia Yezierska's Hungry Hearts", *American Literature*, vol. 69, no. 3 (September 1997): 595–619.

5th Ave. Apt. House, between ca. 1910 and 1915

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

City Streets

All night long I walked the streets, drunk with my dreams. I didn't know how the hours flew, how or where my feet carried me, until I saw the man hurrying out the lights of the street lamps.
(Dec. 25th 1905)

her influential study *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, e Jacobs makes a valid point when she writes: "Think of a city l what comes to mind? Its streets." She clarifies that "[s]treets l their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most l organs."[85] Jacobs is entirely correct in her observation because e looks at the city not from a post card view with just representa- ve landmarks in mind, but from the perspective of a city resident whom the streets and sidewalks are extensions of his urban liv- g space and to whom those urban spaces thus matter most.

In gender studies the city and its streets have habitually been ceived as a "male" space whereas the home has been declared "female" zone. Martha Banta notes that "[w]omen are kept out f the urban stories altogether" until the early 1900s. Male narra- ives tend to dominate the scene almost exclusively.[86] However, he emergence of the working girls, reformers, and female shop- pers in the late 19th century urban environment also opened up he streets to female exploration and comprehension. As a result f increased industrialization, the city was gradually "domesti- cated" since women had more reason to leave their home bases nd eventually claimed parts of the city for themselves, both in eal life as well as in urban narratives.

There is an abundance of different ways to refer to city streets as a physical space. In both Wharton's and Yezierska's New York City literature the streets are referred to with their real names like Fifth Avenue or Hester Street. In those cases, the street name provides both a clear geographical as well as a social frame of reference. The

85 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1962; New York: Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., 1992), 29.

86 Martha Banta, "The Three New Yorks: Topographical Narratives and Cultural Texts", *American Literary History*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 46.

social reference has larger implications; in fact, as briefly mentio
earlier, it could even stand for an entire social history of the city.

The importance of the physical aspects of city streets was
lined nearly one hundred years ago by Frederic C. Howe in
interesting article on "The City as a Socializing Agency:
Physical Basis of the City: The City Plan". Howe talks about
function of the streets: "Streets are worthy as much thought
cathedral, which is to endure for centuries". He likens the
streets to the "circulatory system of the community", and wh
he later mentions the "pathology of the city", the city itself
become a living character with ailments and joys.[7] The physi
city is thus much more than just a geographical location. C
space is responsible for, or at least contributes to, the diseases
well as the happiness and well-being of its inhabitants. The
streets are the arteries of the city-body: if they are well laid
and planned with attention to the community's needs, they wo
get clogged and become pathological. The streets will provide
city with oxygen, both literally as well as symbolically speakin
Out of this web of city-arteries grows life in New York City, th
physical as much as the spiritual one. The streets make the ci
happen; they are where one is immersed in the masses of peopl
where one is exposed to and confronted with every facet of lif
They are thus truly – and not only in Yezierska's city fiction – th
city's vessels of eternal life! Sometimes the street in city fictio
comes along as just that: "the street". It seems to be a neutral de
nominator, which, because yet undefined, will take its meanin
from an added adjective or the context. The "street" can thu
swing to either side and give the reader a positive or a negativ
impression.

In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, the city street is rarely
present as such because most of the action takes place indoors or
in idealized pastoral settings. In addition, Lily Bart feels at one
point that she is an urban illiterate who has "a fatalistic sense of
being drawn from one wrong turning to another, without ever

[7] Frederic C. Howe, "The City as a Socializing Agency: The Physical Basis of the City: The City Plan", *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 12, no. 5 (March 1907): 590 sqq.

ving the right road till it was too late to take it" (*HOM*, 127).
reet as a mostly negative factor appears at the beginning of
vel when Lily has just met Lawrence Selden again:

h, dear, I'm so hot and thirsty – and what a hideous place New York is!"
e looked despairingly up and down the dreary thoroughfare. "Other
ple put on their best clothes in summer, but New York seems to sit in its
irt-sleeves." Her eyes wandered down one of the side streets. "Some one
s had the humanity to plant a few trees over there. Let us go into the
ade."
"I am glad my street meets with your approval," said Selden as they turned
the corner.
(*HOM*, 5–6)

, the streets of New York City are described as "hideous" and
ary". Lawrence Selden's side street, however, is presented
ite differently due to the fact that some trees, bestowing "hu-
nity", had been added. Nature lends a softening touch to the
ault, thus giving Selden's street a hint of a pastoral setting in
urban jungle. This is soon reinforced when Lily, being told that
lden's apartment lies on the top floor of his building, notices
at nice little balcony" and exclaims: "How cool it looks up
re!" Leaving the street for the comfort of Selden's apartment is
t "too tempting" for Lily to resist in spite of the fact that it is
t appropriate for a single woman of her social standing to visit
bachelor in his apartment without a chaperone. Clearly, both the
reet and Lawrence Selden's apartment are gendered city spaces
re. While Lily is temporarily protected in the male space of
lden's apartment – after all, he is "not dangerous" as he points
ut – she becomes again a woman in danger once she reappears in
the street in front of a designated bachelor building that is neither
her home nor the abode of a feminine acquaintance or the location
of a business that a woman of Lily's standing would patronize.
Leaving Selden's apartment, she is first inconvenienced on the
stairs by a char-woman (who will later sell her Mrs. Dorset's let-
ters to Selden, believing them to be Lily's) whose curious and
judgmental gaze quite irritates her. Lily is very much aware that
she has accessed parts of the male city that are not available to a
woman of her social background without eventual consequences.

Indeed, when Lily finally re-emerges in the street, she encount
Mr. Rosedale by coincidence. But rather than admitting to him
visit to Lawrence Selden's apartment and thus making it a n
issue, she makes herself look guilty by telling Mr. Rosedale
false and unlikely story of having visited her dressmaker.
viously, Mr. Rosedale knows very well that this is not true –
Benedick is even a building that belongs to him – and that L
really has no business of being in this part of the city.

Later, the street as a setting takes mostly a backseat in t
novel. While Wall Street and Fifth Avenue are frequent refere
points, the street as a defining character only reappears when L
is already on her downward trajectory. Interiors can no lon
protect and insulate her from city life or the weather that rules
streets. She is feeling displaced in her new apartment of which
hates "the intimate domestic noises" as well as "the cries a
rumblings of the street." Lily is "yearn[ing] for that other lu
urious world, whose machinery is so carefully concealed that o
scene flows into another without perceptible agency" (*HOM*, 30
She cannot adapt to a city life where interiors and exteriors a
hardly separated, where one spills over into the other without th
possibility of escape. No longer living on the fashionable East Sid
nor being able to afford carfare, Lily has to walk home westwar
to her boarding house from her work in a millinery shop: "[...
and she hated every step of the walk thither, through the degr
dation of a New York street in the last stages of decline from fash
ion to commerce." That Lily is no longer part of Fifth Avenu
high life becomes painfully evident in a street scene, too. She
standing on a corner, observing "the spectacle of Fifth Avenue" a
"familiar faces in the passing carriages" provide a "fleetin
glimpse of her past" (*HOM*, 287f, 296f). Lily is an onlooker now
relegated to the street level and subjected to the elements:

> A cold grey sky threatened rain, and a high wind drove the dust in wil
> spirals up and down the street. Lily walked up Fifth Avenue toward th
> Park, hoping to find a sheltered nook where she might sit; but the wind
> chilled her, and after an hour's wandering under the tossing boughs sh
> yielded to her increasing weariness, and took refuge in a little restaurant in
> Fifty-ninth Street.
> (*HOM*, 302)

ile unlike Yezierska's heroines, Lily is no girl of the street and
rly unqualified to deal with this urban location. The streets are
her natural habitat and even when she tries, briefly, to regain
footing by looking for the protection of nature in the Park, she
t eventually seek shelter in the temporary "refuge" of the
p restaurant. But this interior space is not hers; she feels "shut
in a little circle of silence" and experiences "a sudden pang of
found loneliness" (*HOM*, 302). The street doesn't want her and
interior cannot accommodate her.

Not very long into *The Custom of the Country*, Undine, who is
ed to the homage of the street" and has just enjoyed "the gaze
admiration which she left in her wake", is already in search of
hoicer fare". She now craves the recognition of Fifth Avenue
dies who are "bowing to each other from interlocked motors."
ut those Fifth Avenue ladies do not really pay attention to her
ause socially she has not yet been introduced to them. Undine
ns moves on to the art gallery – a public interior space – where
he hopes to meet some of the right people. There she is "attract-
ing almost as much notice as in the street" because of her good
looks, but again, the art gallery does not provide for a valuable
ocial introduction if we discount Undine's bumping into a man:

> Peter Van Degen – who could he be but young Peter Van Degen, the son of
> the great banker, Thurber Van Degen, the husband of Ralph Marvell's
> cousin, the hero of 'Sunday Supplements', the captor of Blue Ribbons at
> Horse-Shows, of Gold Cups at Motor Races, the owner of winning race-
> horses and "crack" sloops; the supreme exponent, in short, of those
> crowning arts that made all life seem stale and unprofitable outside the
> magic ring of the Society Column?
> (*COC*, 58)

Wharton brings it all to a point: it is not so much the actual inclu-
sion into New York society that is "profitable"; it is the impor-
tance of appearing to be part of it that matters so as to have one's
name published in the "Society Columns" of the "Sunday Sup-
plements". As we will see time and again in *The Custom of the
Country*, it is not the reality that counts but the perception of it; by
aspiring to have her name included in the "Society Column" – the
newspaper clippings of which the masseuse, Mrs. Heeney, likes to

collect – Undine shows a clear preference for advertising o
substance, for appearance over fact. Put bluntly, if she can get
right kind of information about herself published by the "Soci
Column", she will appear to belong to New York City soci
eventually, at least in the eyes of the "Society Column" readers.

In *The Custom of the Country* the street appears and is refer
to in similar instances as in *The House of Mirth*. Here, too, the c
streets are geographical places that automatically imply the soc
connection and meaning. Again, Wall Street and Fifth Avenue
frequently mentioned and are often referred to in connection wi
each other. In fact, one could argue that they are interdepende
Wall Street in *The Custom of the Country* is were the funds are g
erated to support life on Fifth Avenue, and if Fifth Avenue we
not the perfect outlet to lavishly display the monetary rewards
Wall Street, what use would there be to do such risky business?

Thorstein Veblen's noteworthy sociological work *The Theory
the Leisure Class* had just the word for this lavish pecuniary di
play: "Conspicuous Consumption". Veblen argues that

> [I]n order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely
> possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, fo
> esteem is awarded only on evidence. And not only does the evidence o
> wealth serve to impress one's importance on others and to keep their sens
> of his importance alive and alert, but it is of scarcely less use in building u
> and preserving one's self-complacency.[98]

Members of the leisure class do not surround themselves with
consumer items only because they serve a particular and neces-
sary function; they surround themselves with things of superio
quality and often no detectable purpose because in so doing, they
make a statement about their pecuniary strength:

> Since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of
> wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due
> quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit.[99]

98 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899; reprint, New York:
Oxford University Press, 2007), 70.

99 Ibid., 53.

is exactly what happens to Lily Bart: if she wants to preserve
status in the upper realm of New York City society, she must
up" by default and spend money on things she doesn't
. Also, she must remain a lady of leisure without any kind of
nful work for the sake of earning money. Therefore, she is
ed once she is forced to take on the milliner's job.

According to Thorstein Veblen, "leisure is still fully as effec-
an evidence of wealth as consumption". This mechanism of
spicuous consumption" has much to do with Lily Bart's trag-
line. For her, too, "the conspicuously wasteful honorific ex-
diture that confers spiritual well-being" – such as, for exam-
, her visits to the dress-makers – is "more indispensable than
ch of that expenditure which ministers to the 'lower' wants of
ysical well-being or sustenance only". Clothes serve more func-
ns than purely ornamental ones, and Veblen is right when he
nts out that clothes are some kind of signposts:

> Our dress [...] should not only be expensive, but it should also make plain
> to all observers that the wearer is not engaged in any kind of productive
> labor [...] Elegant dress serves its purpose of elegance not only in that it is
> expensive, but also because it is the insignia of leisure.[100]

Veblen continues that women's dresses make this more evident
than men's because an item like a skirt also "hampers the wearer
at every turn and incapacitates her for all useful exertion". The
corset he declares to be, "in economic theory, substantially a muti-
lation, undergone for the purpose of lowering the subject's vitality
and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work."[101]
If she is unfit for work, consequently she must depend on a hus-
band for support. Clothes thus are the devices by which women
are subjugated to men: their textiles display the pecuniary status
of the husband and their designs prevent woman from perform-
ing any kind of financially gainful work. The "conspicuous con-
sumption" that drives the "new" New York City is mostly sup-
ported by "new" money. In *The Custom of the Country*, old money
and a certain way of life based on inherited traditions no longer

100 Thorstein Veblen, 64, 70, 113.

101 Ibid., 113.

seem significant. Frequently, Wharton states the interrelation
tween money and consumption by naming two city str
"Every Wall Street term had its equivalent in the language of F
Avenue" (*COC*, 461). Even Elmer Moffatt, Undine first and fo
husband who originally came from Apex City, eventually mana
to move into Fifth Avenue, both socially and physically. I
agreed that Moffatt now belonged to "permanent emine
among the rulers of Wall Street" and that his new "stability w
even beginning to make itself felt in Fifth Avenue" where he w
said to have built himself a nice house (*COC*, 395). Undine is
busy to "follow the perturbations of Wall Street save as th
affected the hospitality of Fifth Avenue" (*COC*, 179); as long as
money keeps coming, Undine could not care less about W
Street and only thinks about Fifth Avenue. This interaction
tween the two city streets culminates at last in Undine's seco
marriage to Elmer Moffatt, a humorous rendering of which we
given in the form of one of Mrs. Heeney's newspaper clippings:

> Reno, November 24th. The Marquise de Chelles, of Paris, France, forme
> Mrs. Undine Spragg Marvell, of Apex City and New York, got a decree
> divorce at a special session of the Court last night, and was remarri
> fifteen minutes later to Mr. Elmer Moffatt, the billionaire Railroad Kir
> who was the Marquise's first husband [...].
> The latter is said to be one of the six wealthiest men east of the Rockies. H
> gifts to the bride are a necklace and tiara of pigeon blood rubies belongi
> to Queen Marie Antoinette, a million dollar cheque and a house in Ne
> York. The happy pair will pass the honeymoon in Mrs. Moffatt's new hom
> 5009 Fifth Avenue, which is an exact copy of the Pitti Palace, Florence.
> (*COC*, 501–502)

Wall Street money has been put to use in Fifth Avenue Real Esta
in order to solidify a social position. There is no better way t
prominently show off one's wealth than building an opulen
home on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue, which in and of itself mak
the desired statement to both New Yorkers as well as foreigner
simply by its location. As the 1892 *King's Handbook of New Yor*
phrases it, "Wall Street is a short and narrow thoroughfar
representing "the magnitude, importance and far-reaching influ
ence of [...] financial operations". And about Fifth Avenue th
King's Handbook of New York remarks the following: "Fifth Avenu

elebrated the world over as the grand residence street of the
ocratic and wealthy families of the metropolis"; hence own-
"a luxurious residence in Fifth Avenue is a sort of stamp, or
nt of rank".[10] This is exactly what Undine originally set out
do but failed at in one way or another in her marriages to the
y young Elmer Moffatt, to Ralph Marvell as well as to the
rquis de Chelles. The young Elmer Moffatt was a nobody re-
ding pedigree, but had potential for business though not yet
ough financial success. Ralph Marvell had the pedigree and the
shington Square House of "old" New York social heritage and
putation, but no money or any kind of potential to bring in sig-
ficant amounts in the future. Marquis de Chelles even had an
istocratic title and a chateau, but he, too, did not have enough
ney for Undine. Finally, by getting married to Moffatt again –
hich is nothing else but a business transaction for both of them –
Undine gets the Wall Street money through Moffatt as well as the
fth Avenue recognition she so long craved – after all she is a
ivorced French Marquise as well as a widowed Mrs. Marvell.
The long sought acquisition of a Fifth Avenue mansion is a sym-
ol of her definite arrival in New York society. Tongue in cheek,
however, Wharton has provided us with an unlikely New York
City address for Undine's new home: 5009 Fifth Avenue simply
doesn't exist in Manhattan. Today, Fifth Avenue numbering stops
at about 2400 where the avenue intersects with the Harlem River.
Thus Wharton was purposely making fun of Undine's real estate
achievement, giving the address a house number that won't ever
exist on New York City's Fifth Avenue.

In *The Age of Innocence*, which was published seven years after *The Custom of the Country* in 1920 but deals with events set in the 1870s, Fifth Avenue takes a leading role while Wall Street, though present, is much less important. It is Fifth Avenue as a social signifier rather than a geographical space that is at the very center of this novel. This Fifth Avenue is the epitome of a New York City society that is steeped in tradition, a society where social interactions are standardized and thus predicable: "Every year on the

[10] Moses King, publ., *King's Handbook of New York* (1892 reprint, New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2001), 141, 134

fifteenth of October Fifth Avenue opened its shutters, unrolle
carpets and hung up its triple layer of window-curta
(*AOI*, 214). In as little as one sentence Edith Wharton manag
convey a complex picture of the society in question: first,
being wealthy, they had *all* been away spending their summer
their homes on Long Island, in the Hudson River Valley,
Newport or even traveling in Europe; second, that now that N
York society is back, the city homes have to be prepared for a n
season of socializing; and third, that no matter how much ti
those New Yorkers have spent outside of their New York "c
dels", they are still covering up their windows in "triple layers"
curtains, effectively shutting out any uninvited urban influen
while also preventing the inhabitants of those mansions from s
ing the city outside. In *The Decoration of Houses* Wharton a
Codman make the following remark regarding the use of curtai

> In town houses especially all outward show of richness should be avoid
> the use of elaborate lace-figured curtains, besides obstructing the vie
> seems an attempt to protrude luxury of the interior upon the street. It
> needless to point out the futility of the second layer of muslin which,
> some houses, hangs inside the sash-curtains.[103]

Thus the only way to participate in the urban street outside is b
projecting a luxurious image through the window. This, howeve
is a sign of excluding the city rather than including it. This is al
a Fifth Avenue society where "rules", "traditions", "conventions"
"rituals", "customs" or "proprieties" are closely observed and ar
never really questioned or even disputed. New York City's "in
scrutable totem terrors [...] had ruled the destinies" of New Yor
society for a very long time, and those totems (*AOI*, 8) – let's pic
ture them as the "old" New York skyline of Washington Square
and Fifth Avenue mansions – still stand about the city space like
signposts, marking the graves and serving as reminders of the
unchangeable traditions of this "tribe". The Fifth Avenue society
of *The Age of Innocence* is thus the antithesis of New York City;

103 Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr., *The Decoration of Houses* (1897; reprint, New York: Rizzoli and The Mount Press, 2007), 72. (Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *DH*.)

the city that is in constant flux and always ready to change,
ifth Avenue society has become inflexible. It is incapable of
ng to more modern urban forms of living and has thus self-
its own extinction which seems but a question of time.
lder generation of New Yorkers, like Mrs. Archer, Newland
r's mother, feels that the city is indeed changing but always
worse. Again, metaphors of the city streets are being used
cribe the social changes. Society closely observes "each new
in [New York's] surface" and looks at "all the strange weeds
ng up between the ordered rows of social vegetables"
, 214). The imagery couldn't be clearer: any alteration will
disorder and disarray to the pavement of New York, it will
k" it open and allow "weeds" – not just plants – to grow and
tually to even overgrow the existing endemic "social vege-
". Into this Fifth Avenue climate, Ellen Olenska is re-
duced and mistakenly believes that simply because every-
g seems to be the way it was when she left, it is also easy to
ipher. She refutes the metaphor of the labyrinthian city for the
ple neatness and easy readability of the urban street grid:

> Is New York such a labyrinth? I thought it so straight up and down – like
> Fifth Avenue. And with all the cross streets numbered" [...] "I'll you know
> how I like it for just *that* – the straight-up-and-downness, and the big honest
> labels on everything!"
> (*AOI*, 62)

llen Olenska confuses the physical Fifth Avenue with social Fifth
venue, an error which Newland Archer points out in his retort:
Everything may be labeled – but everybody is not." Archer him-
lf is quite aware of the deceiving clarity of the city grid and its
habitants. He knows that beyond his own "world [lies] the
almost unmapped quarter" of the city inhabited by people not
belonging to his urban society (*AOI*, 87), and he knows that even
where the city appears mapped it can still be incomprehensible:

> In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing
> was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of
> arbitrary signs [...].
> (*AOI*, 41)

The named streets and the organized way in which the new parts of the city are laid out are nothing but deceiving. Superficially everything appears clear and legibly labeled – "with all the cr streets numbered!" – but below the surface, the unwritten code New York society rules. In fact, just one single day after her ar val, Ellen Olenska commits another faux-pas in society: after h ing worn an "unusual dress" at the opera already, she is now s "parading up Fifth Avenue at the crowded hours with Julius Beaufort", a married society man of questionable reputation. Th is considered against good taste, and because "Countess Olens is a New Yorker, [she] should have respected the feelings of Ne York". Already, Ellen Olenska is faulted for not having read t hieroglyphs of the city correctly; she has failed to interpret t numbered street signs of New York society and has not realiz that "the searching illumination of Fifth Avenue" is reaching qu far (*AOI*, 30, 77, 242). Fifth Avenue very much dominates *The A of Innocence*, and the inability to correctly read that particul street sign – geographically as well as socially – eventually lea to the inevitable departure of Countess Olenska:

> There were certain things that had to be done, and if done at all, do handsomely and thoroughly; and one of these in the old New York cod was the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from t tribe. There was nothing on earth that the Wellands and Mingotts wou not have done to proclaim their unalterable affection for the Counte Olenska now that her passage to Europe was engaged [ ]
> (*AOI*, 279)

In *The Mother's Recompense*, Edith Wharton's 1925 novel, the New York City streets are there, too, but their influence is much le strong than in Wharton's earlier novels. The city as such has lazier and more superficial presence here than it had in either *Th House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, or *The Age of Innocenc* Clearly, the immense rigidity of Fifth Avenue no longer quit dominates the city's social and geographical space as it used to i the previous novels, be that due to the historical time – the nov is roughly set in the early nineteen twenties – or due to the fac that as the city had opened up to more outside influences, it als distanced itself from stringent organization and internal structure

New York of *The Mother's Recompense* is a "fluid city, where the ulest buildings seemed like atoms forever shaken into new pat- by the rumble of the Undergrounds and Elevateds" (*MR*, 32). arly, with the specific mentioning of the Underground and the vated, the narrator implies that New York had become a mod- city now. The beginnings of the Elevated go back to an expe- mental start in 1867, but it would take until 1872, after a number technical innovations, that the service was available to relieve chaos in the city streets. The first experiment with a pneumatic ubway goes back to 1870 when Scientific American publisher lfred Ely Beach came up with a visionary project to fight anhattan street congestion.[101] It took, however, until 1904 for a unctional and efficient subway to emerge.

The Fifth Avenue in *The Mother's Recompense* "was a new, an bsolutely new, Fifth Avenue" while the house that Mrs. Clephane returns to had not changed much and "was the very one which had once been [hers]" (*MR*, 32). There is a notable discrepancy between the New York City of Mrs. Clephane's past, which is represented by the unchanged house on Fifth Avenue, and the New York City of the novel's present that is depicted in the utterly changed Fifth Avenue. Interestingly enough, the city of the past is much better defined than the current one, which remains weirdly unspecific and vague. This contributes to making the reading of *The Mother's Recompense* an unsatisfactory experience. After Mrs. Clephane's arrival at her daughter's house – a house that used to be hers a long time ago – she looks out on the "new" Fifth Avenue:

> As it surged past, a huge lava flow of interlaced traffic, her tired bewildered eyes seemed to see the buildings move with the vehicles, as a stationary train appears to move to travellers on another line. She fancied that presently even the little Washington Square Arch would toot by, heading the tide of sky-scrapers from the lower realties of the city [...].
> (*MR*, 35)

101 Beach's proposed subway had upholstered seats and a station with "frescoed walls, paintings, zircon chandeliers, a grandfather clock, a grand piano, and a fountain with goldfish", mirroring the Empire phase. James Trager, *The New York Chronology* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2003), 158.

This "new" New York City is moving – relentlessly – upto
Mrs. Clephane is totally "confused" and even "oppressed"
these new sights which she cannot comprehend. For comfort
tries to recall in her mind a vision of the "old" Fifth Avenue of
youth, "a thoroughfare of monotonously ugly brown houses
vided by a thin trickle of horse-drawn carriages". Mrs. Cleph
finds herself constantly trying to reconcile the two New York
that of her past and that of the present – but somehow never qu
manages to do so. Her absence from the city has been too lo
Even when she had lived in New York City as a young, marr
mother she had been an outsider from a "remote inland tow
She realizes that "this New York into which she was being re
troduced had never, in any of its stages, been hers", a statem
which might reflect Wharton's own ambivalent feelings about t
city of her origin and youth. Mrs. Clephane finds temporary rel
in the presence of an old friend, Fred Landers, who is also t
guardian of her daughter Anne. His old house is the only pla
that "feels like home" to her who always felt "homeless". He
the only one in this "fluid" city who gives her a sense of stabilit
of "old-fashioned, solid and authentic" presence (*MR*, 50, 16
Mrs. Clephane, however, is incapable of arranging herself wi
her New York past. Up to this point the general impression is th
the positive image of "old" New York City with its "old" Fift
Avenue is contrasted with the negative image of the New Yor
City and Fifth Avenue of the present. Now, however, we lear
that the Fifth Avenue house is still choking her as it had in th
days of her youth when she had abandoned her marriage, youn
daughter, and society life with the argument that she "couldn'
breathe." And the present New York, this "new sumptuous city"
displaying "showy architecture and towering 'institutions'" and
"vista of Fifth Avenue [...] stretching southward, interminably
between monumental façades and resplendent shop-fronts",
simply confuses her (*MR*, 13, 48). These urban spaces, both inside
the Fifth Avenue house and outside on the street itself, refuse to
give Mrs. Clephane a sense of home or even grant her some kind
of access to understanding the new city. Her only option is to
escape from the city again, repeating her prior flight many years
ago. Ultimately, Mrs. Clephane is forced to conclude that the

[redacted] in the cityscape and in the city's moral climate have not
[redacted] altered her own situation other than giving her an even
[redacted] sense of disorientation: the old moral rigidity of her own
[redacted] set has remained as much the same as the old Fifth Avenue
[redacted] tion.

In Yezierska, the "street" is an indicator of the lineage, the pa-
[redacted]ge, almost more so than is the family name. It is a public
[redacted] but often, for lack of other possibilities, becomes a private
[redacted]n place, too. Street names in Yezierska deliver an entire social
[redacted]ry along with them. We can find an example for this in the
[redacted]y "The Fat of the Land" when Hanneh Breineh, the dislocated
[redacted]wer East Side immigrant mother who became wealthy, tells her
friend, Mrs. Pelz, about how her children have fared:

> "And my son Jake, I nearly forgot him. He began collecting rent in Delancey Street, and now he is boss of renting the swellest apartment-houses on Riverside Drive."
> "What did I tell you? In America children are like money in the bank," purred Mrs. Pelz, as she punched and patted Hanneh Breineh's silk sleeve.[10]

[redacted] that time, "Delancey Street" meant the same as "poor", [redacted]immigrant", likely of "Jewish parentage" to name but a few [redacted]nnotations; "Riverside Drive" meant "success", "new money", [redacted]t of "old" New York stock. The Lower East Side inhabitants of [redacted]nzia Yezierska's texts are often contrasted with those who have [redacted]n born in America and the contrast is used as an indicator of [redacted]cial worth. In *Salome of the Tenements*, the office girl Gittel tells [redacted]nya that her street origin won't do:

> "You poor sick! He, a rich, cultured American – a born bluebblood – and you, a crazy from Hester Street, a nobody from nowhere – you want to catch on to him!"
> (*SOT*, 7)

[redacted]ut "catch on to him", to the Anglo-Saxon reformer John Manning, [redacted]nya eventually does. At the wedding reception, the differences

[10] Anzia Yezierska, "The Fat of the Land", *Hungry Hearts*, 123f.

between "uptown" New York, that is the rich residential area
Fifth and Madison Avenues, and "downtown" where the im
grants live, are evident. When the guests arrive, Sonya soon f
the "vivisecting eyes" of the upper society and begins to feel "
a stranger in a strange land" inside her own house where "[s
no longer seemed the hostess." Manning had asked Sonya to
vite her Lower East Side friends, and surprisingly, they all sh
up, though in clothes borrowed for the occasion. Mrs. Peltz,
former landlady, "strutted in, decked in the gaudiest finery
Essex Street" (*SOT*, 122, 123). The clash between the Lower E
Side streets and the Madison Avenue interior seems programm
when Cittel, the office girl, is introduced to John Manning. T
following passage is a good example of Anzia Yezierska's writ
style, showing her excellent command of and ear for the nuanc
of immigrant speech. The text illustrates the unbridgeable disc
pancy between John Manning's high-flying theories of the Low
East Side and the reality of the ghetto as represented
Mrs. Peltz. Since it is impossible to rephrase the scene witho
losing its verbal color, I am quoting it here extensively:

> Cittel sunkingly extended her hand [to Manning]: "Did you believe th
> the East Side would come as far uptown?"
> "It's no harder for you to come up than it has been for me to come dow
> The pleasant part is that we meet."
> Cittel's sensitive pride heard only the words "come down". She could be
> no more. "What do you mean?" she flared.
> "I mean there's no coming up or going down. We all belong to the people
> see no differences."
> Mrs. Peltz, who sat placidly sipping tea from a saucer, caught the phras
> "no differences." She put down her tea and faced Manning:
> "Nu", she said. "Even downtown we got differences. Let me and th
> landlord's wife go to the butcher store for meat. For who will the butch
> pick out the fattest piece of meat? For me, who bargains herself for ever
> penny, or the landlord's wife what pays him over any price he asks?" [...]
> Thus cornered, the host struggled for an answer. "The values of life are no
> to be measured by material things. Democracy is of the spirit."
> Mrs. Peltz looked critically at Manning's slender form and thin aristocrat
> features. Then she shot forth, emphasizing her words with her gesticulatin
> palms: "With all the money to buy yourself the fat of the land, you got thi
> idea to live by the spirit! No wonder you got no meat on your bones."
> (*SOT*, 126)

Peltz street logic is simply unbeatable and leaves Manning
no reply. Interesting, too, is once again the mentioning of
of the land", the food that in Manning's case is not consumed
though he could afford it. This egalitarian "Anglo-Saxon"
ory that has no empirical foundation, this lack of a physical
ger for both food as well as life in contrast to the extreme
ger of the immigrant heroines, is often shown with disap-
val in Anzia Yezierska's fiction. It will not take long for the
m between Manning and Sonya to open up. After revealing to
new husband her prior business deal with the pawnbroker
nest Abe that she had entered in order to be able to buy nice
niture for her tenement room so as to display herself favorably
Manning's first visit (Lily Bart's aesthetic sense comes to
nd), the Lower East Side and uptown New York City differences
me out into the open. After the fight, Sonya refuses to "stay
der one roof" and rushes out into the streets where she can feel
breath by breath her consciousness returning." In the streets, she
mes to realize that "[h]er dreams had fallen but she was still
ll" (*SOT*, 154–155). Aptly, it is in the streets and not in any kind
urban interior, thus in a place "without a roof", where Sonya
olutely reaffirms her identity after the separation from John
Manning:

> "I'll fight the whole world against me. I alone, without a roof over my head
> I am I. Now that I've no one to hold on to, I have me, myself. In me is
> strength. I alone will yet beat them all."
> She walked on.
> (*SOT*, 162)

And a bit later she utters what has been clear from the start of her union: their worlds are not reconcilable. No cosmetic artifice on Sonya's part to beautify her tenement room with paint and new furniture to make it more pleasing to John Manning's eyes will ultimately make a difference. And because the tenement and the mansion cannot be reconciled, the impossibility of keeping one's identity, the impossibility of remaining true to oneself, becomes also evident: "Never with him was I me, myself!" (*SOT*, 163).

As noted, a home in New York City has been, and still is to some extent, a rather telling version of one's station in life and a

"curriculum vitae" that is difficult to hide. As Hanneh Breine
daughter puts it, her mother will always "spill the beans that
come from Delancey Street the minute we introduce her
where". That "black shadow of [her] past" cannot be hidden
cause "Delancey Street sticks out from every inch of her",[106]
thus the street that defines a character here. Yezierska takes this
the extremes in the I-narrator of the autobiographical story "
portant People" which treats her stint in Hollywood where she
"initiated into the sacred circle of 'eminent authors'". Having
inner monologue, the protagonist questions herself:

> Do you have to look like a *greeny* from Hester Street to be yourself? Immediately the other side of me protested. What's wrong with looking
> Hester Street? I am Hester Street. (emphasis mine)[107]

This is the ultimate fusion of the protagonist with the street. She
no longer just a resident of that particular street, the street is
longer simply a geographical or even a social indicator of plac
the street here is now the personified "I" – that is, identical wi
the self. But if that "I" is removed from Hester Street to Holl
wood, it cannot survive because that symbiosis no longer work
Yezierska's "I" is thus right to ask, "But can you be yourself wit
the money from the movies tucked safely in the bank?"[108] Th
interdependence of protagonist and city location is something th
all of Yezierska's immigrant heroines struggle with time an
again. At the bottom of it are the ultimate questions of assimila
tion: Do you have to assimilate at all in order to exist in a new
location? Do you have to give yourself up, give up your heritag
in order to be integrated and accepted, in order to b
Americanized? Or, is coexistence between your roots and you
present life possible or even desirable?

In the story titled "Brothers", a newly immigrated Russian
family arrives at Ellis Island where they are being met by the
oldest son, Moisheh:

106 Anzia Yezierska, "The Fat of the Land", *Hungry Hearts*, 129.
107 Anzia Yezierska, "Important People", *The Open Cage*, 176.
108 Ibid., 177.

like granite mountains – the tower of Babel," Berel mused aloud.
"How do they ever walk up to the top?" asked the bewildered old mother.
"Walk!" cried Moisheh, overjoyed at the chance to hand out information.
"There are elevators in America. You push a button and up you fly like on
wings."[109]

sheh had emigrated from Russia to America a few years be-
the family, but to the newly arrived Berel the Manhattan sky-
seems as incomprehensible as Babel. America, its language
its buildings do not yet speak to him intelligibly. It is the
ric an technological civilization – metaphorically used for the
gn social customs – that the mother does not comprehend.
is used to walking everywhere in the outdoors of a horizontal
t. Being suddenly stuck in the interior space of an elevator
to be carried up vertically is an entirely foreign concept. Back
the ghetto, the streets become again friendly "the moment we
ched our block" when "the people from the stoops and win-
ws waved their welcome."[110]

Historical and sociological studies suggest that a healthy
mulation is preferable to trying to remain exclusively within
e's prior language, customs, and culture. This, however, was
d is very much determined also by the historical context in
hich the assimilation is to take place as well as the size of a
mmunity of similar background. In the typical Lower East Side
migration years around 1900, the Jewish immigrant community
as quite large, geographically speaking as well as regarding
pulation. The Lower East Side was very much a city within a
y, and it was not always necessary to truly assimilate because
e community itself offered various options for a relatively satis-
ying, though poor life. Oftentimes, Americanization was discre-
ited, too. The older immigrant generation of the parents did not
like to see their children becoming Americans because it usually
meant parting with their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. It also
meant the negation of the parents' way of life, which by this nega-
tion tended to become endangered.

109 Anzia Yezierska, "Brothers", *Hungry Hearts and Other Stories*, 189.
110 Ibid., 200.

This struggle between the old world and the new is som
we meet time and again in Anzia Yezierska, and clearly,
struggle that is much more substantial and existential th
struggle between "old" New York and "new" New York in
Wharton. When yelling at their daughters, Fathers as well as
ers are heard exclaiming *"Amerikanerin!"*, this one word takin
negative meaning and carrying the heavy load of generatio
immigrant hardship and despair. Sara Smolinsky explains
Bread Givers like that: "It wasn't just my father, but the gener
who made my father whose weight was still upon me" (*BG*,
Undoubtedly, the novel *Bread Givers* already manifests very s
autobiographical traits that will later find an even more expa
outlet in Anzia Yezierska's official autobiography *Red Ribbon*
White Horse. The way Yezierska's heroines cannot escape the
ma of the ghetto, they cannot rid themselves of the "shadow
their upbringing either. In fact, they often do surmount those
mendous difficulties in their quest for a new American ide
only to then find out that they cannot and should not negate
roots. They are forever cast between two worlds neither of wh
will offer them a satisfying and happy life.[11] The immigr
must all learn to negotiate between their ancestral roots and t
American future in order to have both coexist within themse
peacefully. To reach their own satisfying futures, those immig

11 At the time I am writing this, the Swiss newspaper NZZ has just publi
its monthly magazine "NZZ Folio" under the theme of "Jung und Jüdi
In it, there is a very interesting article by Yves Kugelmann, editor-in-chi
the Jewish newspaper "Tachles", which touches on exactly this topic.
"Wenn ihr wollt, ist es ein Märchen" ["It Could Be a Fairy Tale If You
Desire"] Kugelmann writes: "Das Exil, die Diaspora war stets die
jüdische Heimat. Eine unheimliche Heimat und eine heimliche Unheim
[...]." He later continues that "jüdisches Leben und Denken bewegte
mehr als andere Kulturen zwischen Alt und Neu, zwischen Vergangenh
und Zukunft, zwischen den Zeilen, zwischen Gedanken und Worten,
allem aber zwischen Gefangensein und Freiheit." [The exile, the Jew
Diaspora, was always the first Jewish homeland. It was an eerie homela
as well as a secret foreign land [...]. Jewish life and intellectual thou
moved back and forth between old and new, past and future, between t
lines, thoughts and words, but especially oscillated between captivity a
freedom.] *NZZ Folio* 01/2008): 20–22.

try to break with the past in order not to duplicate the
istakes as their mothers.

quite noteworthy in this context to recognize that New
City streets also stand for an ethnic or religious definitions:
ing people from Essex or Hester Street are not only tradi-
ly dominated by their parents but also by all the ancestral
ions before them. This indicates as well that if one comes
these New York City streets, being in charge of one's own
practically impossible. Therefore, what makes a possible
room desirable is expressed simply in the geography of the
reet:

No! No one from Essex or Hester Street for me! [...] I'd want an American
born man who was his own boss. And would let me be my boss.

Sara Smolinsky continues by distilling the essence of heri-
parentage, work, and culture, all culminating in the exclama-
mark at the end of the sentence:

And no fathers, and no mothers, and no sweatshops, and no herring!
(*BG*, 66)

ntially, one of Sara Smolinsky's happiest childhood memories
of making her first profit by selling herring on Hester Street.
felt "[r]icher than Rockefeller" simply by being in the streets,
already knew that if she "ever had a quarter or a half dollar in
er] hand, [she]'d run away from home". Her success as a
rring peddler brought along "the music of the whole Hester
reet", transforming "all that was only hollering noise before"
o "a new beautiful song". The street was the scene of her first
mmercial success and it was also the place where Sara had
arned more about her existence: "I realized that the time when I
old herring in Hester Street, I was learning life more than if I had
one to school" (*BG*, 22, 223). In another story, the street, rather
than an indoor space, offers protection to the immigrant Shenah
Pessah. After her first visit to the public library together with an
American university student, a visit that left her in awe because of
the library's beauty and also made her aware of her own
immigrant appearance, Shenah offers the following reflection:

> "It was grand in there, but the electric lights are like so many eyes lookl
> you over. In the street it is easier for me. The dark covers you up
> good."[11]

Although Shenah, like all of Anzia Yezierska's heroines, crav
the light – literally as well as symbolically – she is silenced a
made self-conscious by being exposed to it. Only in the street, h
natural element, does she find herself at ease. Another heroi
explains:

> I wanted to write again with the honesty I knew when I lived in Hes
> Street. I wanted to make a new start away from the market place wher
> had lost myself in the stupid struggle for success.[12]

The values and culture of the street are the things that guarant
honesty and truthfulness, not only as a writer but also as a perso
Money, or more broadly, a change in one's living situation, is co
rupting the person and is leading to an identity loss. Again, Anz
Yezierska makes the street a conditio sine qua non for her pr
tagonist's identity and sense of self; ultimately, the dislocati
from the street leads to alienation. By losing the street, they
extinguish their voices.

In Anzia Yezierska's fiction, the streets are true living spac
extensions for the protagonists rather than linear connections b
tween different points. In "All I Could Never Be", the Gentil
American Scott Henry remarks to Fanya, the Jewish immigran
on a walk through the ghetto that the immigrants "push out th
walls of their homes to the street. They live their family life in th
open." And Fanya replies: "No privacy. That's the worst of bein
poor." (*ARCNB*, 52) Clearly, both sides of the immigrant situatio
are represented here. On the one hand, romanticized by th
Gentile American, is the positive image of a community wher
social interaction and continuity are supportive and valuable. O
the other hand, severely criticized by the Jewish immigrant, is th
negative image of a community where social scrutiny and contro

[11] Anzia Yezierska, "Wings", *Hungry Hearts*, 20.
[12] Anzia Yezierska, "Bread and Wine in the Wilderness", *The Open Cage*, 192.

prevalent and where the individual is practically incapable of
uring a private space.

Adele in *Arrogant Beggar* considers the bedroom of her lodg-
"that hole in the wall" where she could never welcome any
tors, let alone men: "They'd have to meet me in the street."
desperate to leave those streets – "I can't be calm if I have to
back to Essex Street" (*AB*, 8, 12). That wish, however, once ful-
d, will have more than just one dimension. By giving up what
y try to escape from in their quest for Americanization – the
e, the dirt, the crowds, "the streets that [are] to her inspira-
, life" (*ARCNB*, 183) – Yezierska's heroines also give up parts
their identities, as can be seen in many of the stories. Adele is
le happy to "escape from those horrible streets" to live at the
llman Home, a charity lodging house for working girls. But
n enough she starts wondering if she hadn't been "perhaps a
le freer" when she lived alone because one night, as she is com-
back to the Home, she finds the door locked already and the
use in darkness". Adele notes that "on Essex Street the houses
re always open" and realizes that the Hellman Home, with all
regulations, was not much of a home after all. Still, she contin-
to believe in "the protection of the Home" against "the terror
the street" for quite some time (*AB*, 27f, 34).

Hirondeau – North from Cortland St., 1898

Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York

The City Crowd

ution Place. The very name of the street had distinction. No crowds. No
nements. Every house was different. You could see even from the outside
homes were inside of them.
(*AoA NR*, 173)

is a major issue in Manhattan as the island location defines residential parameters. This premium of space was already reable in Yezierska's and Wharton's time. The 1900 census of consolidated city (Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, Staten Island) showed the population at roughly 3.4 million ple. Many lived in lower Manhattan where first Castle rdens and then Ellis Island welcomed most immigrants to erica and factories and sweatshops produced myriads of ngs. Manhattan in 1900 was home to 42,700 tenement houses l were occupied by almost 1.6 million people.[114] Sutton Place in East Fifties was comfortably out of the way of crowds or ngestion. It is the tenements and their extensional spaces of the oops and streets that give Yezierska's protagonists the drive to ecord. They constantly have to put up with crowded spaces, ey never have the luxury to enjoy the silence or emptiness of an partment:

> [ ] she went to the window, looking out on a fire escape where she kept her can of milk and groceries for her breakfast. The roaring tumult of the noises from the street below woke her from her dreams. Wedged in, jumbled shops and dwellings, pawnshops and herring-stalls, strained together begging for elbow room. Across the alley a second-hand store protruded its rubbish. Broken stoves, beds, three-legged chairs sprawled upon the sidewalk. The unspeakable cheapness of a dry goods shop flared in her face – limp calico dresses of scarlet and purple, gaudy blankets of pink and green checks. From the crowded windows hung dirty mattresses and bedding – flaunting banners of poverty.
> She slammed the window with a crash.
> (*SOUC*, 5)

114 Eric Homberger, *The Historical Atlas of New York City: A Visual Celebration of Nearly 400 Years of New York City's History* (1994; reprint, New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1998), 110.

It is not just the accumulation of people defining the living sp
it is also the crowded architecture where rooftops, stoops and
escapes fight for recognition in a cityscape packed with stalls
pushcarts. The lives of the tenement dwellers who are spend
long hours in endless quests for survival at poorly paying jobs
crammed, too, and are drowned by the sounds and smells of
urban profusion. While drawing their zest for life from exac
this, what is missing in a crowded urban life and is experienced
one of its greatest deficiencies, is the lack of silence. Silence me
wealth, which is not compatible with crowds. In *Arrogant Begg*
Adele is aware of that when she visits the home of Mrs. Hellma

> Here in the heart of the city, only half a block away from taxicab
> busses, was the stillness, the beauty of the country. A separate wo
> serene in its own atmosphere of rich silence.
> (*AB*, 72)

Noise and silence are indicators of social standing. Silence me
"rich" and noise thus signifies "poor". Silence is luxurious, it
"serene" and beautiful in an almost religious way. The acutene
of the city is rendered in but a few words below, capturing t
essence of silence in that short moment before the awakening
the noisy, crowded urban scene squeezes back into consciousnes

> Too excited to sleep, I crawled out on the fire escape, drawn to the lit
> patch of gray which was all the sky I ever saw between the black hulks
> the tenements. The gray began to glow. Morning was breaking.
> A moment of silence with nothing to mar the beauty. Then a cloud of bla
> soot from the factory chimneys darkened the glow of morning. The crash
> the elevated trains, factory whistles, rumbling trucks, and the thousand
> and one noises that begin the day swept away my thoughts.
> How could the soul keep alive here — where every breath of beauty w
> blotted out with soot, drowned in noise — where even the sky was
> prisoner and the stars choked?
> (*AB*, 16)

Finding silence in the crowded city becomes a question of survival
how can one keep "alive" if one is constantly "drowned in noise"
How can one be at peace if privacy, this "room of one's own",
simply impossible to obtain in the city? How can one, immersed i

multitude of humanity, stand out in a crowd and be an indi-
al? In *Salome of the Tenements* silence is even more than simply a
festation of beauty and wealth. When Sonya meets John
ning, and is introduced to his way of life, she sees the presence
nce as a defining influence on character:

> It came over her suddenly, the aesthetic value of silence as her eyes lingered
> lovingly upon his things [...].
> Till she met Mauranny all the people she had ever known had been steeped
> in noise. Silence was like a color to which they had been blind. Now she
> perceived that silence was eloquent and colorful, a refinement possible only
> to superior people [...].
> This silence was the poetry, the very pulse of emotion.
> (*SOT*, 85)

ly later she will see the flip side of silence which is the absence of
mmunication and community that distinguishes the "superior"
lo Saxons from the emotional Jewish immigrants. When im-
ed in a crowd, what more natural reaction is there than want-
to be ahead of it, to beat the others to the ultimate goal? It is the
tinct of the survivor and the immigrant who had to learn that
ly by being among the first in line there would be food at the
d pantries or a job at a factory. This instinct, generated by the
gh life in the Lower East Side streets, gives Yezierska's pro-
gonists energy to keep going against all odds. Even though they
n want to reject their origins, even though they want a room to
mselves and privacy as well as silence, they still know that the
y streets define who they are. Sonya in *Salome of the Tenements*
aks for them all when she says: "But I'm really only myself in
crowded city among the tenements" (*SOT*, 109). It is this pre-
usly mentioned tension between what they crave on the one
nd, and the hereditary traits they want to shed (but cannot entire-
lost they are willing to lose part of their identity) on the other,
hich gives life and passion to Yezierska's protagonists. The in-
tinct to beat the crowd is something that almost none of Edith
Wharton's heroines ever have had to preserve. Social evolution
ade that trait unnecessary. It is still visible in those heroines who
ve not yet been as highly specialized in society, such as Undine
prigg from Apex City. She shows a somewhat comparable bite in

her efforts to succeed as Anzia Yezierska's immigrant women,
sense, Undine Spragg is an immigrant, too, though not from
East but from the West, an immigrant driven to reach her goal.

In the opening scene of Edith Wharton's *The House of M*
we find Lily, "whose skills and morality are those of the Pe
lady" [*sic*] in Elaine Showalter's words, at Grand Central Sta
The name "Lily" hints at "female purity", an art nouveau m
And Lily is cast as exactly that: a pure and perfect lady again
backdrop of a "throng of returning holiday-makers, [...] shall
faced girls in preposterous hats, and flat-chested women".[115]
description of a crowd of women who do not have Lily's bea
style, or expensive quality of refinement, serves as a canva
display Lily as the perfect feminine specimen while, at the s
time, hinting at a yet remote possibility for Lily to become pa
that dingy crowd herself eventually, a fear she harbors very m
indeed. Wendy Steiner has pointed out that the name "Lily"
"stands for natural, unadorned beauty in the Sermon of
Mount".[116] This is another biblical reference aside from the nov
eventual title (which I will discuss at a later point). In the Serm
on the Mount in Matthew 6:28–29, King James Bible, it says:

> And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field,
> how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin.
> and yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory
> was not arrayed like one of these.

Contrary to those biblical lilies, however, Lily depicts herself o
as a work of art and she is thus "[l]ike all works of art [...] sem
tically open" for interpretation as Steiner correctly argues.[117] T
ambiguity between the natural, biblical "sylvan" beauty obser
by Lawrence Selden – "As a spectator, he had always enjoyed L

[115] Elaine Showalter, "The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's Hous
Mirth", *Representations*, no. 9, Special Issue: American Culture Between
Civil War and World War I (Winter 1985): 133–149.

[116] Wendy Steiner, "The Causes of Effect: Edith Wharton and the Economic
Ekphrasis," *Poetics Today*, vol. 10, no. 2, Art and Literature II (Sum
1989), 280.

[117] Ibid., 287.

" (*HOM*, 4) – and the artificial interior decorative object as
li she displays herself is thus already latent in the name
y". The biblical words "they toil not, neither do they spin"
n to be crucial in Wharton's decision to name her heroine; just
e lilies in the Bible, Lily is not made for any kind of work as
be seen later in the novel when she is trying to work for a liv-
with no success at all. Interestingly enough, *The House of Mirth*
started under different working titles – "A Moment's Orna-
t" in the first Donnée book, and "The Year of the Rose" in the
cript copy.[118] So both the artifice of the ornament as well as
natural aspect of a flower were present in Wharton's concept
n the start. Even Lily herself seems aware of this dichotomy in
behavior: "Why could one never do the natural thing without
ing to screen it behind a structure of artifice?" (*HOM*, 15)

Lawrence Selden, an old acquaintance of Lily's and later her
interest, observes in the opening scene of the novel that he
l never seen her more radiant" and that "against the dull tints
the crowd" at Grand Central station she appeared "more con-
uous than in a ball-room" (*HOM*, 4). The crowd here, or in
den's words "the herd", serves to set apart Wharton's protag-
t who seems to be running in an entirely different league. At
"tableaux vivants" presentations later in *The House of Mirth*,
society ladies and gentlemen are "filling the immense room
thout undue crowding". Apparently, society crowds do not
y the same rules as crowds of city workers in the street. In
e of the presence of a throng, this interior does not feel over-
pulated. On the contrary, the Brys' ball-room is "wonderfully
ming – every one look[s] so well!" This is not a noisy or smel-
accumulation of people but a well-behaved crowd that "pre-
ted a surface of rich tissues" as the perfect background for the
play of Lily's "tableau" (*HOM*, 132). As long as the crowd is
that, Lily knows how to use it best as the ideal background
the display of her beauty. Crowds form a passive scenery to
hance the distinct individuality of Lily. She is never one of the
rowd" but is always set slightly apart, even from her family.
When her aunt Mrs. Peniston has passed away, Lily appears for

[118] Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, 109.

the reading of the will. Her remaining family, consisting of c
sins, are already assembled in Mrs. Peniston's drawing-room:

> Mrs. Jack Stepney gave a careless nod, and Grace Stepney, with a sepul
> gesture, indicated a seat at her side. But Lily, ignoring the invitation, a
> as Jack Stepney's official attempt to direct her, moved across the room
> her smooth free gait, and seated herself in a chair which seemed to h
> been purposely placed apart from the others.
> (*HOM*, 221–222)

Lily's relation to the crowd starts to shift. After the reading of
will, she recognizes that aside from inheriting only ten thous
dollars, she had been disinherited. Lily feels "for the first ti
utterly alone" as "[n]o one looked at her, no one seemed aware
her presence; she was probing the very depths of insignifican
(*HOM*, 223). The crowd is no longer a beneficial backdrop, but
become what it usually is: a place of indifference. This is what L
will be unable to bear because she needs the crowd to set h
qualities apart. She is like an object in a picture where the ba
ground – the crowd – is chosen so as to best enhance it. Lily is li
an actress playing her social self on the city's urban stages;
needs the crowd – the audience – to act her very best. In her l
meeting with Lawrence Selden, Lily has come to realize that h
"specialization" had also been one of the reasons for her demise:

> "I have tried hard – but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I c
> hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a c
> in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I w
> no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits
> to one hole? One must get back to it or be thrown out into the rubbish he
> – and you don't know what it is like in the rubbish heap!"
> (*HOM*, 308)

If Lily must become an undistinguished part of the "rubbi
heap" – the crowd – and not remain an individual "cog" that h
just one hole to fit, that is one place in society to occupy, then sh
cannot exist. This is quite unlike Poe's story of an old man wh
seems to only muster energy for living when being part of
crowd. As a single individual separated from the city crowd, h
almost perishes ("I saw the old man gasp as if for breath while h

w himself amid the crowd [...]."[10]). This story of "The Man of
Crowd", which Poe wrote in 1840, has in its subtitle a quote
he French author Jean de La Bruyère, which reads: "Ce grand
heur, de ne pas pouvoir être seul." Interestingly, if we turn
to Wharton's opening chapter of *The House of Mirth* when
le "tak[ing] the risk" of going up to Selden's apartment for a
of tea, she is looking at a "first edition of La Bruyere" on his
helf (*HOM*, 11). It seems highly unlikely that this should be
a coincidence. Wharton, being a voracious reader who che-
ut knowledge and education above all, certainly placed the
ion to "The Man of the Crowd" on purpose. Even though
's goal is to inhabit a highly "specialized" and individualized
, she can in some ways still be compared to Poe's old man be-
e she needs people around her to satisfy her need for atten-
. Sadly, she cannot really be alone with herself and needs an
lience. Whereas for Poe's protagonist any crowd will do, Lily
ds a very specific and appreciative crowd of qualified specta-
or connoisseurs drawn from her own social circle. Poe's
wd is the typical urban crowd: it is coincidental, accidental,
n hierarchical, and open to additions and departures. One
ild argue that Poe's crowd is truly democratic. Lily Bart's
wd, however, obeys a totally different set of rules: it is formed
t by mere accident but by highly regulated hierarchies of so-
tal histories and structures that are close to impossible to pene-
te. This crowd thus bears royalist features, but Lily is never
ling better than when she can display herself, as a work of art,
the exclusive "tableau vivant" environment of the Bry's
llroom. She forgets, that this highly specialized society crowd of
rs is also much more dangerous than a less homogenous accu-
ulation of people. The relatively frank display of her feminine
tributes in the "tableau vivant" exposes her to attacks on her
aracter that she simply underestimates. By putting La Bruyere's
dition in Lily's hands at the very beginning of *The House of Mirth*,
Wharton tries to hint at this: when the spectators have finally

[10] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd," *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Second edition, vol. 1, eds. Nina Baym et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1985), 1987.

gone home, when Lily is left alone on the stage of her society
that loneliness will mean the ultimate "malheur", or death for

Naturally, in a city the crowds are probably the most ty
signposts apart from the major accumulations of archite
sights. Unlike rural settings, urban locations simply gen
crowds due to the presence of services, facilities, and jobs
they offer. Urban spaces and crowds are thus irrevocably lin
Due to expansive size, similar stereotypes – or even prejudi
are applied to city spaces and city crowds: loss of identity,
orientation, anonymity, and alienation. For Lily, all of thes
pects of the crowd come into play: by being marginalized
eventually ostracized by her own society crowd, Lily loses
identity because her identity is defined more by her crowd
by her own self. Subsequently, by becoming an anonymous m
ber of the "rubbish heap" – anonymous in the sense that her
ety crowd does not really pay attention to her anymore – Lily
disoriented and is finally destroyed. The anonymity of the cro
however, could also have beneficial features for other charac
who use it, or hope to use it, to their advantage. In Wharto
"New Year's Day", Mrs. Hazeldean hopes that the crowds
protect her from being seen by members of her own society:

> Mrs. Hazeldean paused at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Madison Squ
> The crowd attracted by the fire still enveloped her; it was safe to halt
> take breath. [...]

The safety of this crowd is deceiving because Mrs. Hazeldea
being observed from the window of the Preston family ho
across the street. Mrs. Hazeldean mistakenly feels that "in all
crowd and excitement" she was likely to have gone unnoticed,
crowd affording her secret protection. But her "almost con
cuously plain" dress sets her apart from the crowd of Fifth A
nue Hotel ladies in dresses with "low neck and short sleeve
broad daylight". Instead of being hidden in the anonymity of
city crowd, Mrs. Hazeldean stands out as much against this ba
ground as if she had walked Fifth Avenue all by herself. It th

[120] Edith Wharton, "New Year's Day", *Old New York*, 247

ws that in order to enjoy safety in numbers, one must do, or
, like everyone else. While Mrs. Hazeldean's standing out
the crowd is caused by the unexpected outbreak of a fire, Lily
displaying herself apart from her society crowd is all
ned and intended. Lily cannot resist casting herself in the title
which requires that the remaining cast act in supporting roles.
she always seems to forget the script before the happy end: her
antic yearnings for Lawrence Selden create an inability or even
acity to really play the role of "the maiden in the marriage
set" until the curtain falls, that is until the marriage is secured.
ost in spite of herself, she always ends up sabotaging her orig-
plan by abandoning the script. And by not sticking to her text,
opens the door for her expulsion: in the end, the cast on the
ty stage will not tolerate mavericks.

Another way of reading Lily's crowd would be from the point
view of consumer culture. In this case, Lily would be almost
rely blameless and could be simply seen as a victim of her
ture, class, and period. While Lily clearly enjoys displaying
self, as we have seen in the "tableaux vivants" scene, and can
tainly be blamed for this public display to some extent, she is
vertheless a product of her social class and thus subjected to its
ws and governed by its whims. Casting herself in this consumer
ture as a commodity makes Lily at once desirable and valued –
a commodity that is – as well as vulnerable at the same time –
a pure and marriageable woman. It appears that Lily generates
d destroys her market potential in one single stroke by submit-
herself to those consumer market principles.

The New York City upper class society crowd is cynical about
erything and especially about deeper values. What matters are
surfaces, the accoutrements of a well-off society that can be
n in the forms of interior decoration, clothes, carriages, or
usements. It is a very visually oriented urban society that cares
ry little about underlying values like morals, honesty, friend-
ip, or family. Ultimately, Lily is bound to lose because she is not
nical enough to resort to the same kind of mechanisms as does,
r example, Berta Dorset. While appearing to be no longer pure
the eyes of her crowd and, therefore, no longer a marketable
mmodity, Lily is in fact the only pure member in the end.

Street Scenes, The 59 Street, Jewish Quarter, 1898

Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York

Pavement, Gutter, and Below Street Level

I began singing in my heart, the music of the whole Hester Street. The wheat peddlers yelling their goods, the noisy playing of children in the gutter, the women pushing and shoving each other with their market baskets—all that was only hollering noise before melted over me like a new beautiful song.
(*BG*, 23)

City on the pavement level in both Edith Wharton's and Anzia Yezierska's fiction has few, if any, leisurely or beautiful moments. The pavement signifies the city stripped of its ornamentations and scenery. The pavement is the dividing horizontal surface of the street between the sewer below and the houses above. The word "pavement" clearly takes its reference from below the street level. The pavement and the gutter are where the streets become physical, where they become existential. The pavement is what one walks on: it has immediate presence and urgency. As can be expected, there are very few references to that aspect of the city present in Edith Wharton's fiction. Against all expectations, however, there are also not many in the writings of Anzia Yezierska. This can probably be explained by the fact that the pavement and the gutter in Yezierska's fiction are extensions of the stoops of tenement buildings as are the streets that are often used in lieu of the non existing living rooms. The gutter is a natural part of daily life; it is not idealized but also rarely demonized. In Yezierska's fiction it does not carry much reference to vulgarity or indecency as it can in the general usage of the English language. It is simply an outdoors place, a trench to collect and carry off surface water, derived from the Middle English word 'geter', or middle French 'gouttere', which means a "drop". In Yezierska, one "put[s] the baby down in the gutter", for example, since there is no better or more convenient place to put it (*BG*, 26). It is also a means to describe a low point in life: "It was like looking up to the top of the highest skyscraper while down in the gutter" (*BG*, 155) Here, too, the gutter is not vilified but is simply an expression of the status quo, an expression of the life that Sara Smolinsky in *Bread Givers* is leading at the moment, a reference to a life with no education. The

skyscraper reference in this passage points to exactly this qu
knowledge and learning. The image of the skyscraper rep
an accomplished state of learning – a schoolteacher in this
whereas the gutter stands for the ignorant immigrant girl.

Sonya Vrumsky in *Salome of the Tenements* is "[b]orn
blackest poverty of a Delancey Street basement". It is obviou
she had to start her life below grade. In the powerful story
Lost 'Beautifulness'", Hannah Hayyeh is evicted and lit
tossed out on the sidewalk from the tenement apartment a
lovingly painted and restored for the return of her son who
the army:

> All at once he stopped, on the sidewalk before their house was a h
> household things that seemed familiar and there on the curbstone a w
> huddled, cowering, broken, – Good God! – his mother! His own moth
> and all their worldly belongings dumped there in the rain.[121]

On the Lower East Side, evictions of families from their tenem
apartments were a daily occurrence and thus, unfortunately,
tremely common. As Moses Rischin wrote in *The Promised City*
study about Jewish immigration to New York from 1870 to
beginning of the First World War:

> Evictions for nonpayment of rent and rent strikes were perennial [...]. In
> year 1891–1892 alone, in two judicial districts of the Lower East Side, 11,
> dispossess warrants were issued by the presiding magistrates.[122]

This number is simply staggering, even more so when we consid
that the 11,550 dispossess warrants had to by multiplied by t
number of members in a family in order to derive at the actu
number of people who were put out into the streets. The miser
that must have gone along with those evictions can be made palp
ble by this passage from Yezierska's short story "The Lord Giveth":

> My life! My blood! My featherbed! – she cried, as he tossed the family hel
> loom into the gutter. "*Gevalt!*" prostrate, she fell on it. "How many winter

121 Anzia Yezierska, "The Lost 'Beautifulness'", *Hungry Hearts*, 61.
122 Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews 1870–1914* (1962, reprint, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1970), 84.

> ...ok my mother to pick together the feathers! My mother's wedding
> ...on! | ...[123]

...ther here appears in an unfavorable light because it is no
... an extension of the tenement's living space, but the place
... the living space is taken from her. In fact, the mother's cry
...life! My blood! My featherbed!" sums it all up: while life and
... are necessary and vital components of a human being, a
...rbed might not seem to belong in the same category at first
... And yet, the featherbed for this Jewish immigrant mother
...les everything that matters to her, everything that is vital
...life affirming in this brutal urban life. The featherbed is, aside
... the Sabbath candlesticks and wine-glasses, one of the most
...ured household items these immigrants owned, its worth not
...urable in its actual monetary value. A featherbed was a fami-
...irloom, passed down from mothers to their daughters when
... got married, often handed down through generations. It thus
... a clear reference to the past, an ancestral history. It implied
...itions and permanence in the upheaval and dislocation of
...table immigrant life. A featherbed was also desperately
...ded to provide warmth in cold tenement apartments. And
...ally, it was treasured because a featherbed was probably the
...timate symbol of "home". In Anzia Yezierska's stories, the fea-
...rbed is also usually the very last thing of any worth that these
...wish heroines are bringing to the pawnshop when there is no
...more money for food or rent. The drama of the featherbed in the
...utter in the passage above is thus not to be taken lightly.

Let us now turn to Edith Wharton's usage of the urban pave-
...ment and gutter, which, as indicated, is not very frequent. To-
wards the ending of *The House of Mirth*, the "street" is being re-
ferred to in terms of "pavement". In fact, Lily "emerge[s] on the
pavement" rather than in the street as she sets out to return
Bertha Dorset's love letters to Selden. The mentioning of the loca-
tion in such terms – it is not Fifth Avenue or Madison anymore –
announces the sure end of Lily's quest. There are no longer street
names to cushion the downfall; the only thing present is the hard,

123 Anzia Yezierska, "The Lord Giveth," *The Open Cage*, 130.

naked, brutal pavement. On the way to Mrs. Dorset, "the cl
broke abruptly", making Lily turn into a side street:

> It was down this street that she had walked with Selden, that Sept
> day two years ago; a few yards ahead was the doorway they had or
> together [...]. But the sudden longing to see him remained; it gre
> hunger as she paused on the pavement opposite his door. The stree
> dark and empty, swept by the rain. She had a vision of his quiet roo
> the bookshelves, and the fire on the hearth.
> (*HOM*, 304)

Edith Wharton's city here has become much more physical
imminent. Lily now experiences "hunger", not for food but
human community. Hunger, be it physical or mental, is a sen
tion that Wharton's heroines don't often experience. Lily no l
ger wants to be standing apart from the crowd now, she cra
company instead and does not want to be alone.

After the visit to Lawrence Selden, Lily again steps on
"dull pavement" and feels the "wet asphalt" (*HOM*, 311). T
streets are getting empty but she has only the "silence of h
cheerless room" at the boarding house to go home to. "Silence"
no longer rich as in Yezierska. Silence here, voiceless and desp
rate, has become a sign of poverty. In this situation, Nett
Struther, a working girl that Lily had previously helped wi
some money, temporarily rescues Lily off the pavement, so
speak. Nettie takes Lily home to her tenement and into her war
kitchen, an interior that I am discussing in a subsequent chapte
Afterwards, Lily emerges "down the tenement stairs" and reach
the "street" rather than the pavement, feeling "stronger and hap
pier". While there is clearly a downward movement from th
tenement stairs, the pavement is no longer mentioned. Th
kitchen scene serves as a brief respite, a moment of relief, and Lil
now manages to walk home to the boarding-house withou
further incident. The physical presence of the street, however, wil
haunt Lily to the very end. In fact, one could argue that due to th
unavoidable intrusion of the city street into her boarding-hous
quarters, Lily is finally driven to the overdose of the chloral. Th
noises of the street – and even more so the lack of them when the
city shuts down at night – find their way into the boarding-house

or. Not only has Lily been abandoned by her society crowd,
lly, too, has abandoned her:

> the street the noise of the wheels had ceased, and the rumble of the
> elevated" came only at long intervals through the deep unnatural hush. In
> the mysterious nocturnal separation from all outward signs of life, she felt
> herself more strangely confronted with her fate. The sensation made her
> turn cold, and she tried to shut out consciousness by pressing her hands
> against her eyes. But the terrible silence and emptiness seemed to symbolize
> her future – she felt as though the house, the street, the world were all
> empty, and she alone left sentient in a lifeless universe.
> (*HOM*, 321)

negative influence of the pavement or the street is also
nt in another one of Wharton's novels. In *Twilight Sleep*,
rton's Jazz age novel, there are place references to the streets
ughout. Once the streets are called "degraded", but no refer-
e to the "pavement" is made until one of the main characters
kes a decision concerning her future life.[19] And it is the kind of
ision that seems inherent in any of Wharton's "moral" charac-
, that is those of her protagonists who seem to mirror the au-
r's view about life. In *Twilight Sleep* that moral center is
presented by Nora, a girl of only nineteen, who is mature quite
yond her age. Even though she, too, is a young woman of her
e, she refuses to give in to her suitor's wooing before he gets a
per divorce first, which at this point in the novel seems an im-
ible feat because of his religious wife. So Stan, Nora's suitor,
decided to run away for a while with another "lady" who has
such moral scruples in order to pressure his wife to give in to
divorce. The "degraded streets" in this passage lead onto the "wet
pavement" where Stan informs Nora of his decision and where
Nora responds that if he forces his wife to divorce him in such a
way, she would never marry him. On the "wet pavement" Nora
effectively ends the prospect of a happy future with Stan or the
kind of life she had always hoped for. The wetness here has two
possible symbolic functions: on the one hand, it could indicate the

19 Edith Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* (1927; reprint, New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1997), 150, 145. (Subsequent references are cited parenthetically with the abbreviation *TS*).

slippery path that Stan has chosen, thereby defying all of the
New York City traditions. On the other, the wetness could st
for Nora's tears because of an impossible future life with S
Again, an end of sorts is presented in a "pavement" scene.

In *The Age of Innocence* references to named streets, indicat
not only a geographical location but also a social status, are
quent, whereas references to the pavement are hard to come
In *The Custom of the Country*, there are only two instances wh
the pavement plays a significant role. The first one occurs at
beginning of the novel when Undine, no longer satisfied by
general admiration of the city crowd, is trying to be noticed
New York society: "She had to content herself with the gaze
admiration which she left in her wake along the pavement;
she was used to the homage of the streets and her vanity crave
choicer fare." Undine now wants more: being on the pavem
level is not what she is after. She wants recognition and admi
tion as an individual, she wants to be like one of "the ladies w
were bowing to each other from interlocked motors", like the
dies about whom the "Society Pages" of the newspaper wou
always write about. Nobody wrote about pretty ladies simp
walking the pavement of the city, even if it was the pavement
Fifth Avenue (COC, 57). The second instance occurs towards t
end of *The Custom of the Country* and concerns Undine's discard
husband Ralph Marvell. Aside from "the pavement", Wharto
also talks about "the Subway" here. This is rather unusual b
cause the favored means of transportation in Wharton's nove
lends to be private means like carriages and motors. Even t
public Elevated is usually only referred to in terms of noise rath
than as a means of transportation for any of Wharton's characte
It thus comes as quite a surprise that "the Subway" is not on
mentioned here, but is actually being used by Ralph Marve
Wharton's gentle, cultivated but utterly non-viable "old" Ne
York gentleman. Here, we have a reference to the underbelly
gut of the city as well as a strong metaphorical reference
Ralph's inner life. Below the "pavement", which has "dust in th
cracks", below the "rubbish in the gutters", there is "the Subway
with its "nasal yelp" and "ritual wail", its tunnels hollowing ou
the "old" New York City above:

> He stood at the corner of Wall Street, looking up and down its hot summer perspective. He noticed swirls of dust in the cracks of the pavement, the rubbish in the gutters, the ceaseless stream of perspiring faces that poured by under tilted hats.
>
> He found himself, next, slipping northward between the glazed walls of the subway, another languid crowd in the seats about him and the nasal yelp of the stations ringing through the car like some repeated ritual wail. The blindness within him seemed to have intensified his physical perceptions, his sensitiveness to the heat, the noise, the smells of the dishevelled midsummer city; but combined with the acuter perception of these offenses was a complete indifference to them, as though he were some vivisected animal deprived of the power of discrimination.
>
> (COC, 406)

It is evident from the above passage that there is no way out for Ralph Marvell, the "vivisected animal". The city has closed in on him; there is no escaping the "blindness within" and the urban intrusions without. At the end of the chapter, Ralph kills himself.

In three of Edith Wharton's short stories, references to the pavement" are also worth mentioning. Again, they are usually indicators of situations that have gone amiss or will turn out negatively. In "Mrs. Manstey's View", looking down into the back yards from her window, Mrs. Manstey sees "the cracks of the pavement"; in the end, she will be deprived of even that view and will eventually die. Julia Westall in "The Reckoning" sees "the fissured pavement" when she walks the "sinister" streets after her husband has left her, making her "hasten back to Fifth Avenue" and more familiar territory. And the "shabby basement" shop of the "Bunner Sisters" lies in a street of "sad untended length" where "the fissured pavement formed a mosaic of coloured handbills, lids of tomato-cans, old shoes, cigarette stumps and banana skins, cemented together by a layer of mud, or veiled in a powdering of dust".[15] From the start, it is clear again that the end will be a sad one, too. The sisters lose their shop and one of them dies. Edith Wharton thus uses the imagery of the "pavement" and, rarely, the underbelly of the city, as indicators of serious problems and conflicts in her novels and stories.

[15] Edith Wharton, "Mrs. Manstey's View" and "The Reckoning", *Collected Stories: 1891–1910*, 2 and 470; "Bunner Sisters", *Collected Stories: 1911–1937*, 167.

Edith Wharton, ca. 1910

Courtesy of the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

ew York City Interiors
Edith Wharton and Anzia Yezierska

I've never been in a city where there seems to be such a feeling against
living in the *quartiers excentriques*. What does it matter where one lives? I'm
told this street is respectable."
"It's not fashionable."
(*Age*, 105)

Surprisingly, the interior New York City spaces of both Edith
arton and Anzia Yezierska offer tremendous opportunities to
le any lingering "melting pot" theories. As has been pointed
"space is hierarchical"; it can be "zoned, segregated, gated"
can either allow "freedoms" or put up "restrictions".[29] Inte-
spaces, unlike public spaces and streets, are simply not ac-
ible to everyone, they are generally spaces of exclusion rather
n inclusion. Connected with the definition and understanding
these particular interior cityscapes is the absence of a "crowd",
city feature I have looked at in the last chapter. In addition,
estions of noise and silence as well as the quality and quantity
space all matter when discussing urban interiors.

Quite expectedly, the interior spaces of Edith Wharton's mil-
naires and Anzia Yezierska's immigrants are generally to be
und at the opposite end of the real estate spectrum, though not
clusively so. Naturally, those interiors also tend to be located on
pposite sides of the metropolis. The Lower East Side neighbor-
oods are usually home to Yezierska's characters; the areas from
Washington Square up north, usually located on the East Side of
Central Park and only occasionally on the West Side, appear in
Wharton's fiction depending on the historical times of the respec-
tive plots. It is also important to note again that Wharton's urban
spaces consist of mostly interiors whereas for Yezierska locations

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[29] Liam Kennedy, *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 169f.

Anzia Yezierska, 1920

Photograph by Arnold Genthe
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

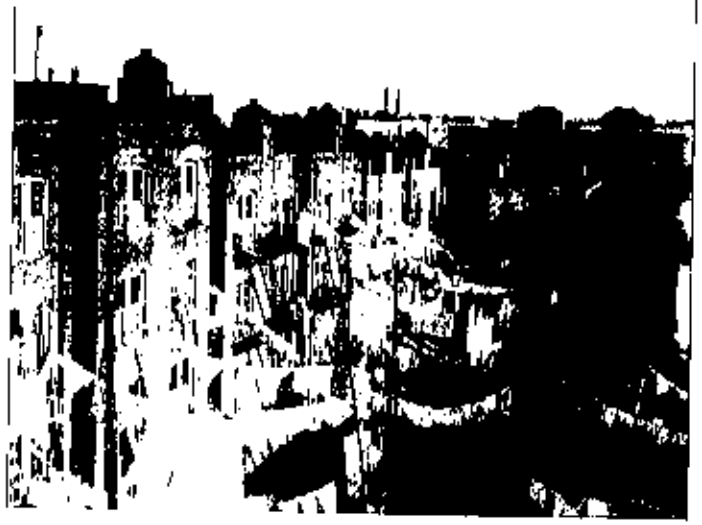
special importance are often outdoors, or are at least spaces oriented towards a public area. Wharton's protagonists tend to fling themselves into their urban space – for Mrs. Peniston in *The Age of Mirth* it is almost a sin that the maid did not draw the blinds down properly and "a streak of light" could be seen as she was driving up to her mansion (*HOM*, 107). Contrarily, Anzia Yezierska's heroines often look out the window to the sky or down to the busy streets when located inside as we have just seen in the last chapter. They generally look beyond their own city space, and this "beyond" already indicates their need to eventually escape from their own urban space in order to move up or, at least, to move on.

In the Gilded Age of late 19th century New York City, ostentatious display of wealth was not just visible in the oversized exterior architecture of Fifth Avenue mansions. Present was also a "preoccupation with the interior", showcased in the ever growing publication of specialty literature and magazines concerned with interior decoration. As mass-produced furnishings for the home became readily available and affordable, the "dwelling place" joined the "market place" in what Jean-Christophe Agnew has named "commodity aesthetic". He goes on to say that

> the commodified home became something more than a likeness or even an expression of the selves placed within it. It became something interchangeable with those selves, something out of which those selves were at once improvised and imprisoned, constructed and contained.[17]

The construction of the self, as well as the confinement of it in the home due to this "commodity aesthetic", can be very well seen in most, if not all, of Edith Wharton's New York City interiors that I will discuss now.

17 Jean-Christophe Agnew, "A House of Fiction: Domestic Interiors and the Commodity Aesthetic", in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 138; 136



New York, N.Y., Yard of Tenement, between 1900 and 1910

Astoria Apartments, New York City, between 1900 and 1908

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Versions of the Home: Tenements, Apartments, Estates, and Hotels

In an air shaft so narrow that you could touch the next wall with your bare hands, Hannah Breindl leaned out and knocked on her neighbor's window. "Can you loan me your wash boiler for the clothes?" she called.[18]

Anzia Yezierska's immigrant protagonists all live in tenements, at least at some point of their journeys. In order to present an authentic description of the tenement situation after the Tenement-House Act of 1867, it is best to lend the voice to Jacob Riis, the Lower East Side journalist and photographer, who, being an immigrant himself, chronicled the neighborhood in both word and picture:

> Look into any of these houses, everywhere the same piles of rags, of malodorous bones and musty paper, all of which the sanitary police flatter themselves they have banished to the dumps and warehouses. Here is a "flat" of "parlor" and two pitch-dark coops called bedrooms. Truly, the best is all there is room for. The family tea-kettle is on the stove, doing duty for the time being as a wash boiler. By night it will have returned to its proper use again, a practical illustration of how poverty in "The Bend" makes both ends meet. One, two, three beds are there, if the old boxes and heaps of straw can be called by that name; a broken stove with crazy pipe, from which the smoke leaks at every joint, a table of rough boards propped on boxes, piles of rubbish in the corner. The closeness and stench are appalling. How many people sleep here? The woman with the red handanna shakes her head sullenly, but the bare-legged girl with the bright face counts on her fingers. "Five, six!"
> "Six, sir!" Six grown people and five children.[19]

A natural consequence of the nightmare of these living conditions was the extension of the tenements onto the roofs, the stoops, or even into the streets. Since the indoor space was so overcrowded the only way to go was outside. This was true for any season of the year, but the exodus was largest in the hot summer months. In

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18 Anzia Yezierska, "The Fat of the Land", *The Open Cage*, 77.

19 Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), 54

fact, this exodus to the outdoors was also quite dangerou
tenement dwellers who often ended up "rolling off roof
window-sills while asleep" and getting themselves killed. A
Jacob Riis gives us an extremely photographic description o
life moved outdoors in the summer time:

> It is in hot weather, when life indoors is well nigh unbearable with co
> sleeping, and working, all crowded into the small rooms together, th
> tenement expands, reckless of all restraint. Then a strange and pictur
> life moves upon the flat roofs. In the day and early evening mothe
> then babies there, the boys fly their kites from the house-tops, undis
> by police regulations, and the young men and girls court and pa
> growler. In the stifling July nights, when the big barracks are like
> furnaces, their very walls giving out absorbed heat, men and women
> restless, sweltering rows, panting for air and sleep. Then every truck
> street, every crowded fire-escape, becomes a bedroom, infinitely prefe
> to any the house affords.[130]

As pointed out earlier, the worst insults of the tenements were
lack of privacy, the lack of space and air, which became a
current theme in immigrant literature. Exclusion of the fam
neighbors or even strangers was an impossibility that could no
achieved in the context of the tenements.

Often in Anzia Yezierska's fiction, her protagonists can
breathe inside their rooms and have to escape to the rooftops
stoops, to the street or lean out into an airshaft. Tenement roo
were notoriously and quite unceremoniously multi-tasking spac
They combined all social and private functions in a minimum
available space. Often, one single room served as the kitchen,
dining room, the living room, workplace and bedroom for
family members and possibly boarders, too. The few possessio
that the tenement dwellers owned had to be constantly re
ranged around this always reconfigured interior space:

> It was now time for dinner. I was throwing the rags and things from
> table to the window, on the bed, over the chairs, or any place where th
> was room for them. So much junk we had in our house that everybody p
> everything on the table. It was either to eat on the floor, or for me the job

130 Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 120

> ...ming off the junk pile three times a day. The school teacher's rule, "A
> ...place for everything, and everything in its place," was no good for us,
> ...since there weren't enough places.
> (*BC*, 8)

...e was no permanence in those living quarters since not only
...its contents continuously moved about, but also the place
...f was anything but permanent. Time and again, as shown in
...erska's fiction, a family found itself evicted by the landlord
...non payment of rent with the sidewalk functioning as a tem-
...ary stop in the search for a new abode. Thus, as interior tene-
...nt spaces were notoriously instable and unreliable, they were
...lly suitable to emanate a sense of home.

Anzia Yezierska's heroines in their quest for identity are de-
...mined to find a suitable interior space that is clean and offers
...luttered "emptiness" and privacy. It is not an easy quest by
...y standards. The city of Yezierska's heroines is in no way accus-
...med to lodge single and respectable women; they either have to
...y in their families' apartments or then find a room in a board-
...g house where privacy is simply not a possibility. After Sara, the
...tagonist of *Bread Givers*, has walked the city streets all night
...llowing her eviction from her sister's apartment, she realizes
...that [she] had yet never been alone since [she] was born." She
...herishes that aloneness tremendously in spite of having just
...ent the night in the streets. In fact, all alone she is "enjoying
...her]self for the first time as with the grandest company"
(*BG*, 156–157). Being with nobody but herself has become a vital
...ep in becoming the person Sara would like to be; after the
...ight's enlightening experience she thus sets out to find a room of
...her own. But being able to enjoy that aloneness inside a city build-
...ing by finding suitable housing is yet quite another feat. Sara ad-
...dresses a possible landlady as follows:

> "I want a room all alone to myself."
> "You? A room alone?" she gave me one fierce look till my cheeks began to
> burn. "This is a decent house. I'm a respectable woman."

The landlady clearly misunderstands the reasons for Sara's request. To find a room for herself is practically an impossible

quest, a "luxury" for a poor girl. Eventually, after many
efforts, she sees yet another sign for a cheap room:

> It was a dark hole on the ground floor, opening into a narrow airshaf
> only window where some light might have come in was thick with
> dust. The bed saw saved on its broken feet, one shorter than the other
> mattress was full of lumps, and the sheets were shred and patches. Bu
> room had a separate entrance to the hall. A door I could shut
> (*BG*, 138)

No matter what the place looks like, Sara feels as if it were a
lace" for her. But even this "hole" of a room she almost can
rent. When the future landlady hears that Sara is studying to
come a teacher, she worries about the extra cost of the gas
because of all the reading at night. But for Sara the entire a
has now escalated to a question of life or death; if she cannot
the room, she will "simply drop dead". The door to the room
comes a symbol for the privacy and independence she seeks
signifies the "bottom starting-point of becoming a person". F
ng like a "drowning person", the door is the life-line to her p
sonal promise of a successful future. Sara even physically clings
the door and clutches the doorknob, the latter being the symbol
a lockable, private space. In her agony she feels that "[t]his do
was life. It was air". And how, again, can one continue to li
without air? If the city's Lower East Side will not let Sara in, th
this refusal to grant her an urban space will be equal to a dea
warrant. The city, with the "ay" or "nay" of the landlady, decid
about Sara's existence as a person. By offering her shelter and
room of her own, the city presents a nurturing face, even if on
offering a "hole" as a starting point. This urban space enables Sa
to set out for herself to follow her dream of becoming a teacher.

The subsequent lodgings that Sara Smolinsky occupies wh
she moves out of the city to attend college all somewhat mirro
her attempt at fitting in with her fellow students who are a
American by birth. The rented rooms never feel like home and ar
hardly ever described as detailed as are her rooms in the city. I
college, Sara feels that she "simply didn't belong. I had no exis
tence in their young eyes" (*BG*, 219). Outside the city, Sara ha
difficulty finding her identity. When she finally finishes colleg

turns to New York City, she celebrates by walking not in
Street but in Fifth Avenue for the first time in her life.
ing for a new suit in one of the nicer shops there, the trans-
and educated Sara is now capable of securing a different
f city space:

> ow different was my search for a room now than a few years ago. It was
> ely a matter of going to a real estate office [...]. And in about an hour I
> d selected a sunny, airy room, the kind of a room I had always wanted.
> aling with an agent was as different from the tyranny of landladies, with
> eir personal questions, as bargaining for my things at a pushcart was
> ifferent from choosing them at a department store.
> I furnished my room very simply. A table, a bed, a bureau, a few com-
> fortable chairs. No carpet on the floor. No pictures on the wall. Nothing but
> a clean, airy emptiness. But when I thought of the crowded dirt from where
> I came, the simplicity was rich and fragrant with unutterable beauty.
> (*BG*, 240)

s new urban space finally allows Sara to find a "place for every-
g and everything in its place", providing permanence and
bility which were entirely lacking in her family's crowded
ment dwellings. She had long craved "beautiful aloneness"
d now "enjoy[s] [her]self as with the grandest company". Her
w home guarantees Sara's survival by offering everything that
had always required and passionately wanted – air, quietness,
ptiness, and "precious privacy". But the room itself has also
ained an almost religious quality for Sara; it has become a
cred" space (*BG*, 241). As far as her geographic location is con-
ned, Sara has come almost full circle towards the end of the
vel. As a teacher, she does return to the streets of the Lower
st Side where she grew up:

> The windows of my classroom faced the same crowded street where seven-
> teen years ago I started out my career selling herring. The same tenements
> with fire escapes full of pillows and feather beds.
> (*BG*, 269)

As Deborah Zak has stated in her study on female identity in the American city novel, Sara has escaped a home that had been "both a prison and a foundation for her success, a place she must

leave to realize her self, but a place to which she longs to
for emotional nurturing."[131] It is exactly this irreconcilable
ence between the "prison" and the "foundation" that s
drive Yezierska's immigrant heroines. They literally must
their origins – cultural, mental, and physical – in order
themselves and to be able to exist at all, but they also kn
well that this is only possible because their origins have
them the stamina as well as the physical and mental po
look for change and success. We will repeatedly see that
Yezierska's heroines, as they are trying to assimilate with v
results, can never quite rid themselves of their original ide
even if they are being forced like poor Hannah Breineh's in
Fat of the Land". In any case, the "street sticks out". The m
their tenement origins that those immigrant living condi
have imprinted in their souls, stays with them in one for
another; their cultural identities remain hybrids. Those of A
Yezierska's heroines who have come to accept that the jou
from immigrant to "Amerikanerin" must not inherently mea
rejection of all the old world baggage, but rather to both emb
and transform it, are those heroines who will have most succ
fully achieved their dreams.

At the other end of the interior spectrum are the dwelling
Edith Wharton's millionaires. A valid point is made by Ann
Benert when she writes that

> [p]hysical structures that in [Edith Wharton's] architectural and auto
> graphical works serve to maintain her own culture and class and to r
> then ideals become in her fiction agents of social domination, of inju
> and tyranny.[132]

[131] Deborah Jeanne Zak, *Redefining Female Identity in the American City: A Stu
of Selected Twentieth Century American Urban Novels by Women* (DU
Northern Illinois University, 2003; Ann Arbor, University Microfilms Int
national, 2003), 131.

[132] Annette Benert, *The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton: Gende
Class, and Power in the Progressive Era* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinso
University Press, 2007), 58.

ntly, Edith Wharton's gilt interiors are not based on the
values of a protective home. Hers are varnished homes –
golden, display not substance – that become "gilt cages"
and for their inhabitants. Wharton's homes are a succession
ms, each of which serves a different social or private func-
which the upper Four Hundred usually adhered. Those
were rarely bent as in the case of the matriarch Mrs. Manson
lt in *The Age of Innocence*:

> The burden of Mrs. Manson Mingott's flesh had long since made it
> impossible for her to go up and down stairs, and with characteristic
> independence she had made her reception rooms upstairs and established
> herself (in flagrant violation of all the New York proprieties) on the ground
> floor of her house, so that, as you sat in her sitting room window with her,
> you caught (through a door that was always open, and a looped back
> yellow damask portiere) the unexpected vista of a bedroom with a huge
> low bed upholstered like a sofa, and a toilet table with frivolous lace
> flounces and a gilt-framed mirror.
> (AoI, 37)

Mingott has essentially changed her townhouse mansion from
rtically used space on different floors to a horizontally used one
a single floor, comparable to both a tenement apartment and an
per class flat. While in tenements almost no object had its
manent place, in the mansions of the upper classes every object
d social function had its designated room: guests were received
drawing rooms, socializing took place in sitting-rooms – or for
cial occasions in ball-rooms for the lucky few who owned one.
ere were libraries for reading and smoking, dining rooms, halls,
lrooms, and bathrooms. The kitchen, that heart of a tenement
dwelling, was banished to the back of the house and was unseen
and generally not visited by the owners or the guests.

In general, both Edith Wharton's and Anzia Yezierska's New York City protagonists tend to remain in the respective interiors they are familiar with and they will generally not explore other city interiors. There are, however, two novels where the opposite interior spaces of the protagonist's habitual social sphere are most thoroughly represented and where the protagonists actually move between the two extremes. These novels are Wharton's *The House*

of Mirth and Yezierska's *Salome of the Tenements*. In the former, Lily Bart's specter of poverty, of "dinginess", is always looming large on the horizon. For Sonya Vrunsky, in turn, the prospect of establishing herself in the interior spaces of the upper half of New York society becomes indeed reality. It is also telling that both novels have dwellings in their titles: "house" and "tenement". Wharton's title alludes quite clearly to Ecclesiastes 7:2–4, quoted here in the King James Bible version:

> It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart.
>
> Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.
>
> The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

If we want to make a point that Wharton had the end in mind from the start, it may be worth while looking at verse 7:8 of Ecclesiastes: "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof [...]." This passage from Ecclesiastes rings quite true when we turn to a passage in Wharton's autobiography *A Backward Glance* in which she talks about the composition of *The House of Mirth*:

> [...] for there are certain subjects too shallow to yield anything to the most searching gaze. I had always felt this, and now my problem was how to make use of a subject – fashionable New York – which, of all others, seemed most completely to fall within the condemned category. There it was before me, in all its flatness and futility, asking to be dealt with as the theme most available to my hand, since I had been steeped in it from infancy [...].[13]

Edith Wharton continued that the difficulty was "how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance", but she soon came to realize that "a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys." Since this planned New York novel had already been promised to Scribner's Magazine for serialization before Wharton had finished composing it, she was "exposed to public comment before [she] had worked it out to its climax".[14] This, however, was not really a problem because – as the title's allusion suggests – the end was quite clear.

A further look at the Bible reveals that the passage, which is probably one of the best known in Ecclesiastes and sums up its entire significance, is one that appears prior to the one about the "house of mirth". It is Ecclesiastes 1:2: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity". Lily Bart's life, then, is a life lived in vain, among a vapid "society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers" in Wharton's own words. That this theme had been clear to her from the start is evident:

> What the climax was to be I had known before I began. My last page is always latent in my first; but the intervening windings of the way become clear only as I write [...].[15]

The "wise" are "in the house of mourning" for things past. Edith Wharton, who seems to be missing the "old" New York City of but a few families with social ties and clearly defined social and moral responsibilities, is indeed mourning this loss. She is mourning the moral failures of a ruthless upper class society that does not have second thoughts or the slightest misgivings about sacrificing one of their own – in this case Lily – in order to cover up their own shortcomings and moral depravity. Wharton is mourning also the loss of distinction and interest in learning. In days of yore this had been a privilege of the leisure class who owned expansive libraries that were actually being used. Now, Wharton seems to imply, learning is no longer deemed necessary and libraries are there just for decorum.

The moral failures of the "fools" in New York City society, the fools who reside in "the house of mirth", running endlessly after entertainment and merriment, these moral failures are expertly depicted by Wharton. In *The House of Mirth*, one of those entertainments is to take place at the Bry's ballroom. It is the perfect

13 Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 206.

14 Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 208.

15 Ibid., 208.

setting for the display of the "tableaux vivants". It is also, however, a setting that in spite of its architectural urban reality appears quite unreal

> The air of improvisation was in fact strikingly present: so recent, so rapidly evoked was the whole *mise en scène* that one had to touch the marble columns to learn they were not of cardboard, to seat one's self in one of the damask-and gold arm-chairs to be sure it was not painted against the wall. (*HOM*, 130)

Having chosen a picture by the 18th century painter Joshua Reynolds which shows a Mrs. Lloyd in classical costume but in a natural setting gives Lily the opportunity of "displaying her own beauty under a new aspect: of showing that her loveliness was no more a fixed quality, but an element shaping all emotions to fresh forms of grace" (*HOM*, 131). Unlike other women, Lily had chosen a picture devoid of accessories so that nothing would distract from her display. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but so is the interpretation of it: while Selden, Lily's useless hero, sees the "real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world" and hence "eternal harmony" in her Reynolds' tableau, others read the picture entirely differently. They see Lily's choice as "[d]amned bad taste" and read lewdness and indecency into it. The picture itself gives away its transient object: the Mrs. Lloyd in the original carves her future husband's name into the bark of a tree. It is a pastoral gesture in a pastoral setting that is no longer there in Lily's tableau. In Lily's artificial pastoral there is also no prospective husband to be referred to and, therefore, she cannot profit from the interpretational protection this would offer. Edith Wharton's clever use of exactly this "tableau vivant" outlines Lily's ambiguous state perfectly. A painting on canvas may create the illusion of permanence but it captures a scene at a certain given, ephemeral and elusive moment. By projecting that particular moment upon the canvas it fixes it forever, thus giving that ephemeral instant a chance at eternity. A "tableau vivant", however, only hints at permanence by the usage of the frame and the allusion to a "real" painting. The image itself in a "tableau vivant" is as fleeting as the scene it represents; it cannot be recreated again precisely as it was the first time around. Since the "tableaux vivants" were in

fact presented in an actual frame that allowed a curtain to be drawn aside, we have here an image of a cage of sorts. The only way to be released from the "tableau" – or cage – is when the interpreter steps out of it and thereby destroys the piece of art she created, literally annihilating her image. Destroying the cage means destroying the self-representation. And effacing one's representation can be equated with death. Purposefully or not, this is exactly what Lily will eventually do as *The House of Mirth* progresses.[10]

Let us turn to *Salome of the Tenements*, Anzia Yezierska's counter-novel to Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* as far as urban interiors are concerned. Here, too, the dwelling's specification is in the title already, however, it is no longer a "house" but a "tenement". The urban locations in these two novels are interesting to compare as they begin at the opposite end of the city's housing stock: predictably, *Salome of the Tenements* starts in the tenements

10 There has been an ongoing discussion whether or not Lily Bart's death was a suicide or simply an accident because of Lily's carelessness. Very recently, new light has been shed on that question when a previously undiscovered authentic letter by Edith Wharton to her physician resurfaced in a first edition copy of *The House of Mirth*. According to the article in the New York Times on November 21, 2007, the letter is dated December 26, 1901, and was therefore written shortly before the monthly installments of the novel were published in Scribner's Magazine. In the letter Wharton stated that she had a "heroine to get rid of" and needed to know "the best way of disposing of her". She continued that

> [w]hat soporific, or nerve-calming drug, would a nervous and worried young lady in the smart set be likely to take to, & what would be its effects if deliberately taken with the intent to kill herself? I mean, how would she feel and look toward the end?

I agree with Hermione Lee, who was interviewed for the New York Times article and who is also the author of a new biography of Edith Wharton published in 2007, that Wharton apparently intended Lily Bart to commit suicide, but that she must have altered that plan when she really set about to write the end. The final text of *The House of Mirth* still leaves the question of Lily's death or suicide ambiguously open in spite of this newly found letter. See also, Charles McGrath, "Wharton Letter Reopens a Mystery", *New York Times* (21 November 2007), Books section.

of the Lower East Side while *The House of Mirth* has Lily reside, technically as a "home" base, in the Fifth Avenue mansion of her aunt. From there, however, things do progress quite differently. In true "rags to riches" fashion, Yezierska's poor Jewish immigrant heroine Sonya Vrunsky manages to leave her tenement for a Madison Avenue mansion when she marries the rich WASP John Manning. Lily, on the other hand, is trading superior city interiors with steadily declining ones until she finds herself in a cheap boarding-house outside the city's fashionable neighborhoods. While Lily cannot go back, Sonya cannot keep up with her new interior location either, but rather than finding her death like Lily, she manages to return to her original neighborhood, the Lower East Side. There, she sets out for a new quest at which, eventually, she will be successful.

In *Salome of the Tenements*, Sonya's seduction by John Manning does not actually take place in the city, but at the country location of his family's estate to which they have escaped from the city. On the train ride to the estate, Sonya exclaims "Ach! Air! Open wide the window!" and when they get to the estate, she refuses to go into the house because it would indicate "surrender rather than conquest". Similar to the way she needs the street to be herself in the city, she needs the outdoors rather than an interior in the country, in order to not feel restrained. Also, "anything green with fences around it" won't do either because it gives her the feeling of being "only in a city park". Sonya needs to be "where nature's got a chance to be natural" and where there are "open spaces". Even though the subsequent sexual union seems to be ideal – "we come from opposite ends of civilization that we fuse so perfectly" – this physical "melting pot" image will not work for long (*SOT*, 104–107). Once the Lower East Side Jewish immigrant and this WASP Anglo-Saxon aristocrat are married, the fallacy of the idea of seamless assimilation becomes clear.

It is the interior of John Manning's Madison Avenue mansion that really triggers the break-up. Prior to her arrival, Sonya has "an idealized vision" of this house, believing it to be "a palace of shimmering beauty" with the "colors and textures she had craved all her life" demonstrating "tender warmth". But it turns out to be "not the house of dreams she had pictured", it was "so big, so

cold – like a museum, not a home" and even her glance feels "entangled by mirrors, paintings and colored tapestries". Ironically, "entangles" evokes a jungle metaphor – and thus nature – inside this mansion. But the word evokes the metaphor of "suffocating", too, which in turn evokes similarities to the perceived suffocation of the tenements, thus showing both housing arrangements to be unsuitable for Sonya. In addition, the portraits of the "ancestors seemed to follow her even when she took a stroll" outside, making her feel trapped in the streets also. Sonya exclaims, utterly bewildered:

> Between trying to act I'm a lady for the servants and holding myself up to the ancestors, God from the world! Where am I?
> (*SOT*, 111–116)

In spite of being in New York, the city that she has known for so long, Sonya feels entirely alienated outside of her own social as well as geographical neighborhood. She feels disoriented and lost because she cannot really read these different urban interiors nor the people that go along with them. "I never know what they mean when they talk", she says, and what she actually can read does not make sense to her either. While Manning continues to insist that "all social chasms can be bridged with human love and democratic understanding", Sonya knows that this is not possible.

At the wedding reception, she feels the "vivisecting eyes all about her" as if she were a lab animal and this makes her feel like "an outsider in her own house" (*SOT*, 120–122). The novel progresses from the illusionary climax of the Lower East Side – Fifth Avenue wedding to a denouement that finds Sonya back again among her people on the Lower East Side. This wouldn't be a typical Anzia Yezierska heroine, however, if she gave up at that point. So Sonya fights on and ends up marrying Jaky Hollins, the Jewish clothing designer who made a name for himself on Fifth Avenue. He is "the Fifth Avenue king from Division Street" (*SOT*, 172). By marrying Hollins, Sonya can hold on to her Jewish immigrant tenement roots while at the same time, acquiring urban status on Fifth Avenue. Sonya's narrative is a story of urban success and redemption.

Quite contrarily, Lily Bart's narrative in *The House of Mirth* [illegible] story of moral and social failure. From residing in the mansio[illegible] and estates of family and friends, Lily moves on to living in hot[illegible] and boarding houses that are a far cry away from her habitu[illegible] standard of living. Her voyage through urban real estate on[illegible] knows one direction: down. There is no redemption in her fi[illegible] living quarters; redemption for Lily arrives only post morte[illegible] Lily Bart and Sonya Vrunsky are typical for the work of their a[illegible] thors. Edith Wharton's heroines – aside from Undine Spragg [illegible] *The Custom of the Country* – usually don't really participate in li[illegible] and often don't truly belong in their circles. Lily Bart's widowe[illegible] aunt Mrs. Peniston who had taken her in after the death of h[illegible] mother, while not a heroine in her own turn, is nevertheless [illegible] good example of that upper-class passivity:

> She had always been a looker-on at life, and her mind resembled one o[illegible] those little mirrors which her Dutch ancestors were accustomed to affix t[illegible] their upper windows, so that from the depths of an impenetrable domes[illegible] hetly they might see what was happening in the street.
> (*HOM*, 37)

The *famed* home or "domesticity" is "impenetrable". Again, Edith Wharton's image of the New York City home as a citadel that cannot easily be entered is present in the wording of this passage. The home here will keep untamed life at bay, be that immigrants or generally people who do not belong to the same social set. But the home that Lily has at Mrs. Peniston's also is "as dreary as a prison" or even "as dreary as a tomb" and "she felt as though she were buried alive" (*HOM*, 109, 100). One tends to think that the point of a home, or the point of a home as a citadel, would be to protect its dwellers from outside influences. In Edith Wharton's citadels, however, the protection often comes with a price: to escape to the outside is simply impossible as these citadels are like jails.

One reason for Lily's unhappiness at Mrs. Peniston's is that her grand ideas of having a setting that conforms to her sense of beauty or that would give credit to her "artistic sensibility" cannot be achieved there:

> What a contrast to the subtle elegance of the setting she had pictured for herself – an apartment which should surpass the complicated luxury of her friend's surroundings by the whole extent of that artistic sensibility which made her feel herself their superior; in which every tint and line should combine to enhance her beauty and give distinction to her leisure.
> (*HOM*, 110)

[illegible]terior spaces for Lily are stage sets to enhance her beauty rather [illegible]an homes. It seems that she completely misunderstands the [illegible]gnificance and purpose of a domestic space of one's own. To [illegible]er, an interior space is devoid of the usual functions of a home, [illegible]e. the comfort, protection, and privacy that one needs to be at [illegible]ase. As Lily cannot truly call any space her own, her domestic [illegible]situation is very unstable and determined by the action and [illegible]oodwill of her society. Since interior spaces tend to be gendered [illegible]male realms, Lily's identity and purpose in life are at stake, too. The traditional upper-class woman's purpose in life – and the life that Lily is trying to organize for herself through a suitable marriage – is as the keeper and interior decorator of a home, and specifically in this society's context, a home that would reflect the financial status of a possible husband. The purpose of a traditional upper-class gentleman in obtaining a wife can be summarized by quoting Thorstein Veblen again when he writes that the "original reason for the seizure and approbation of women seems to have been their usefulness as trophies."[137]

Obviously, Lily would serve that purpose only too well; her actions show that she is the embodiment of Veblen's upper class woman who is "incapable of useful effort and must therefore be supported in idleness by her owner. She is useless and expensive, and she is consequently valuable as evidence of pecuniary strength."[138] This is not far from Lily's own view of her place in society. After all "she had been brought up to be ornamental" and could thus "hardly blame herself to serve any practical purpose" (*HOM*, 297). However, Lily also ultimately fails to find an "owner" and to thus acquire a pedestal to spend her life on. Interestingly, to this date and in spite of all the feministic tendencies of the last

137 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 201.
138 Ibid., 99

century, the "trophy wife" is still not an outdated model, but can be found in significant numbers in any wealthy society.

Edith Wharton's New York City is indeed a "city of interiors" as Nancy Von Rosk has pointed out. She writes that "these interiors [were] arguably the ultimate urban phenomenon – domestic theaters made possible by the new urban economy, the activity on Wall Street […]."[139] In *The House of Mirth*, the central role of these interiors is obliquely introduced right at the beginning of the novel when Lily Bart after a long time meets Lawrence Selden again at Grand Central Station. She has just missed her train – which could be read as a metaphor for the narrative of her life. She then visits his flat for a cup of tea and admires the fact that he has his own dwelling. Lily mentions there that if she "could do over [her] aunt's drawing-room" she would certainly "be a better woman" (*HOM*, 8). Space, in this world, is a condition for identity-building: if only she could install herself in the right setting, if only Lily could decorate a space to suit her persona, if only she could frame herself with and within an urban space of her own, then her self would be complete. In fact, by occupying the right urban space she would "have made herself over for a person" and would have gained her true identity, to borrow Anzia Yezierska's words. But to get there, Lily Bart must occupy many different interiors and none of those really suit her or are true possibilities to establish a life for herself. The premonition of the missed train in Grand Central Station is not to be forgotten here. Wharton purposely introduced this symbolical action in her opening pages to hint at what lies ahead in this narrative: the track of Lily Bart's life has been pre-determined and the train has already left the station. That there is no escape from this can be seen in one of Mr. Selden's observations:

> She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate.
> (*HOM*, 7)

139 Nancy Von Rosk, "Spectacular Homes and Pastoral Theaters: Gender, Urbanity and Domesticity in *The House of Mirth*": 322–350

Lily is presented as a "victim" of society with neither choice in nor influence on her own fate. In this world where one is judged by the value of the jewelry one wears, Lily's bracelet effectively controls her like "manacles". From Mr. Seldon's apartment she later catches a train to Bellomont, the Hudson River estate of her friends Judy and Gus Trenor. The easy and comfortable life of the rich "was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in" (*HOM*, 26). Constantly living in someone else's space, however, and depending on the financial support of others, is not conducive to finding one's own footing. In between residing in someone else's home as a guest, Lily spends time at her aunt Mrs. Peniston's house, but "[she] had always hated her room […] its ugliness, its impersonality, the fact that nothing in there was really hers." What should feel like home, what, in fact, is the only home the orphaned Lily has available, fulfills none of the functions of a home:

> To a torn heart unconsoled by human nearness a room may open almost human arms, and the being to whom no four walls mean more than any others is, at such hours, expatriate everywhere.
> (*HOM*, 148)

Even at home, Lily is an "expatriate"; she is a woman without a true home base. When visiting with friends, she again is an expatriate who, by definition, is someone abiding outside of his or her home country. In her frequent hotel stays, Lily is an expatriate, too. There is simply no place in New York where Lily is not an expatriate. Since even her room at Mrs. Peniston's offers no "human arms" the way a home would symbolically do, there is an utter lack of protection and comfort. Lily is for this reason not so much an "ex-patriate" but a "non-patriate", living in a residential void of sorts. She lacks an inherited estate or even just a patch of land that would reconnect her to the patriarchic soil and provide the much necessary grounding.

This lack of a geographical connection – be it to the streets like Anzia Yezierska's heroines, or to a home – foreshadows Lily's ultimate fate. Her various temporary dwellings on a downhill track are thus mere stations instead of genuine homes: Lily participates in the earlier discussed "tableaux vivants" – fixed interiors

in an interior setting – at the Wellington-Brys' "recently built house", a setting which interestingly lacks the Trenor estate's implicitly understood ancestral past. She then takes a Riviera trip that comes to an abrupt and rather unexpected end when Berta Dorset cynically maneuvers her into an impossibly compromising position in order to protect herself.

After Mrs. Peniston's death and Lily's return to New York, she is surprised to learn that she has not inherited the entire estate but only ten thousand dollars. A few more stops later on her downward spiral, she finds herself established in "a small private hotel". It was "on the edge of a fashionable neighborhood" and "considerably in excess of her means" but "it was of utmost importance to keep up a show of prosperity" (*HOM*, 246f). The show must go on, even in the impersonal interior space of a hotel. This, perhaps, is the archetypical urban space, as I will shortly point out when discussing Undine Spragg's hotel stays in *The Custom of the Country*. When Lily later briefly exchanges her abode for the much fancier Emporium Hotel, because she starts to work for a rich, divorced lady of somewhat questionable pedigree, she realizes how utterly unfamiliar she is with the world of New York City hotels:

> She was unacquainted with the world of the fashionable New York hotel – a world over-heated, over-upholstered, and over-fitted with mechanical appliances for the gratification of fantastic requirements, while the comforts of a civilized life were as unattainable as in a desert. Through this atmosphere of torrid splendor moved wan beings as richly upholstered as the furniture, beings without definite pursuits or permanent relations, who drifted on a languid tide of curiosity from restaurant to concert-hall, from palm-garden to music-room, from "art exhibit" to dress-maker's opening. High-stepping horses or elaborately equipped motors waited to carry these ladies into vague metropolitan distances, whence they returned, still more wan from the weight of their sables, to be sucked back into the stifling inertia of the hotel routine. Somewhere behind them, in the background of their lives, there was doubtless a real past, peopled by real human activities; they themselves were probably the product of strong ambitions, persistent energies, diversified contacts with the wholesome roughness of life, yet they had no more real existence than the pool's shadow in limbo.
> (*HOM*, 273f)

This passage is rich in hidden meaning. While, at first, it reads as just a negative judgment of the new hotel culture, a more in-depth analysis reveals that Wharton uses her characterization of hotel life as a composite parallel image of Lily's life. Everything is "over-" in this description: it is "over-heated", "over-upholstered", and "over-fitted". It could just be plain "luxurious", a word, however, that Wharton reserves to describe the estate of the Trenors:

> The hall was arcaded, with a gallery supported on columns of pale yellow marble. Tall clumps of flowering plants were grouped against a background of dark foliage in the angles of the walls. On the crimson carpet a deer-hound and two or three spaniels dozed luxuriously before the fire, and the light from the great central lantern overhead shed a brightness on the women's hair and struck sparks from their jewels as they moved.
> (*HOM*, 241)

The discrepancy between these two passages is indeed amazing. The Trenor's estate represents the ideal residence and Lily's hopes for a similar residential future. The dwelling is very elegant and beautifully decorated but never overdone, quite unlike the hotel setting mentioned above. The estate, however, is a building with "roots", both literally and figuratively speaking, while the hotel is simply "new" with no past to speak of. In the Trenor estate, there is nature as well as human and animal life present: in the hotel, on the other hand, "civilized life [is] as unattainable as in a desert". While "carpets" and a "fire" warm the Trenor setting, "mechanical appliances for the gratification of fantastic requirements" are dominant in the hotel. The estate is pictured as a living organism with a cozy past inherent in the building itself and this ancestral foundation also suggests a likely and stable future. The hotel, however, is stuck in "stifling inertia" peopled with "wan beings" who "drift […] on a languid tide". The contrast between the two sets could not be more stunning.

This might be an appropriate point to discuss and analyze hotel culture in America, a theme that received quite some attention from Edith Wharton and other authors of her time like Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Theodore Dreiser. In August of 1904, Wharton herself wrote quite mockingly to her friend Sara Norton that after having spent her first night in an "American 'Summer Hotel'" she

> despair[ed] of the Republic? Such dreariness, such whining sallow women, such utter absence of the amenities, such crass food, crass manners, crass landscape!! And, mind you, it is a new & fashionable hotel. What a horror it is for a whole nation to be developing without the sense of beauty, & eating bananas for breakfast.[140]

While towns and cities have always had inns or offered other sorts of lodgings to travelers, the emergence of ornate and very big luxury hotels around the mid 19th century was something quite suitable to the New York City scale.

The Waldorf-Astoria, for example, had about 1000 rooms, 765 private baths, and 40 public rooms. When it was finished in 1897, it was considered "the largest and most modern hotel in the world."[141] The Commodore Hotel, built next to Grand Central Station in 1919, even had 2,000 rooms, a number which seems surprising today even in light of the most recent developments in hotel construction. After all, space in New York City was rather limited back then, too. The average hotel room number probably was significantly below 500 rooms at the time, a figure that has not much changed in today's age with but a few exceptions. To date, the hotel with the most rooms – more than 7,000 – is the recently completed Palazzo Hotel in Las Vegas, which enlarges the previously built Venetian Hotel. In spite of this number, the size of The Commodore Hotel in 1919 was definitely staggering even from today's perspective.[142] Key features of the new luxury hotels were that they incorporated the newest building technologies as

140 R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, 93.

141 *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, 565; Joseph A. Ward, "'The Amazing Hotel World' of James, Dreiser, and Wharton", *Texas Tidal and Literary Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), 153.

142 Due to technological advancements in building construction, size does not matter quite as much today as does – similar to the skyscraper building frenzy with the invention of steel cage framing towards the end of the 19th century – the actual height of a building. Amazingly, this even holds true after 9/11. Currently, the tallest building for exclusive hotel use is the Rose Tower in Dubai with 333m. The tallest building project for mixed use occupancy, including a hotel on thirty-seven floors, is the Burj Khalifa in Dubai with a total height of over 800 meters. The Burj Khalifa has just celebrated its opening in January 2010. For additional and up-to-date information on the tallest hotels and/or buildings, see also: www.emporis.com.

well as up-to-date amenities in plumbing, heating and services. "At all these hotels", as the *King's Handbook of New York* puts it in 1892, "[…] there is every convenience for comfortable living; and at the best there is nothing to be desired in the way of luxurious furnishings, charming surroundings, perfect service and exceptional cuisine." *The King's Handbook of New York* goes on to mention that "[m]any New-York families make their homes in [the hotels] the year around, to avoid the annoyances attendant upon housekeeping, and to secure much more of comfort, luxury and freedom." The great relevance of those extraordinary services and technical amenities for New York City society can be deducted from the Handbook's entry for the Windsor Hotel. Keep in mind that this is a passage in a guidebook about the city, and not an advertisement for the plumbing company:

> The house is plumbed with the latest modern sanitary plumbing, absolutely safe in every respect, attention having been paid to the minutest details. The drinking water for the hotel is filtered with the famous Pasteur Germ proof Filters, and the ice is manufactured for the hotel by Hygeia Ice Company, from distilled water.[143]

At the other end of the spectrum we have Henry James' comment on the Waldorf-Astoria, published a few years later in 1907 in *The American Scene*. It may be quite representative of the feelings of "old" New York City families regarding those modern luxury hotels. James wrote about the Waldorf-Astoria that "New York told [him] more of her story at once, then and there, than she was ever again and elsewhere to tell." He continued that "the endless labyrinth of the Waldorf-Astoria", its "hotel-spirit" was actually "the American Spirit", and thus the American hotel world simply "a synonym for civilization."[144] Clearly, this Jamesian statement cannot be read as a compliment to either the American luxury hotels or the American civilization as such. Edith Wharton had similar misgivings about this new American culture and the new

143 *King's Handbook of New York*, 198 and 204.

144 Henry James, *The American Scene* (1907; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 77ff.

way of life that had so quickly taken over and superseded the New York City she grew up in.

Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* is unquestionably the ultimate hotel novel. Undine Spragg insists that the family give up their house in New York City shortly after moving there from Apex City, Kansas. Her plan is to move into the Stentorian Hotel because "they could not hope to get on while they 'kept house'" (*COC*, 30). As Joseph A. Ward has correctly pointed out in his interesting essay, hotel living "legitimizes escapism" and "conveys the illusion of a release from the ordinary world."[145]

Living in a hotel offers a number of advantages aside from better service and a higher standard of technical features. In a luxury hotel one really does not have to deal with mundane things like housekeeping. Basically, the hotel's infrastructure takes care of everything silently and non-invasively: the beds are made, the bathrooms cleaned, the food prepared and served. One never even needs to leave the hotel – public areas offer shops, ballrooms, courtyards, restaurants, and even theatres – and luxury hotels like the Waldorf-Astoria were cities within the city itself, a hotel society within an urban society with "laws of their own" governing "a complete scheme of life."[146] Hotel societies are also notoriously transient and generally lack the constant references to the past, or a possible future for that matter, thereby making social labeling extremely difficult. It is exactly this lack of a visible past – usually in form of a physical architectural presence like a house as well as a family history linked to that place – which makes this hotel culture so despicable to Wharton and her peers. Hers was a world of family "tribes" where every member could easily be traced to his or her ancestral roots. Often the intact family structure was an urban signpost linking the past with the present.

The comparison of such a life to the transient American hotel culture devoid of any past is probably best expressed by Raymond de Chelles, Undine Spragg's aristocratic French husband in *The Custom of the Country*. His reproach that Americans "come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper" and that they "are as proud of changing as [Europeans] are of holding to what [they] have" seems to reflect Wharton's opinion quite clearly (*COC*, 468). Wharton, who had emigrated in order to live in France in 1907, had many misgivings about the direction that American society – and New York City's architecture – took. In letters following the publication of *The House of Mirth*, Wharton wrote that she considered her writing "a criticism of life". She also wrote that she "meant to show only that little atrophied organ – the group of idle & dull people – that exists in any big & wealthy social body" and continued to say that "it seems more conspicuous in New York than in an old civilization [...] because the whole social organization" was "much smaller & less elaborate" but clearly "more harmful in its influence" since "fewer responsibilities attach to money [in New York] than in other societies."[147] In her introduction to a 1936 edition of *The House of Mirth* she wrote with an ironic undertone that she was

> looking back on [Lily Bart] now from the superior eminence of a world in which facilities for divorce and remarriage have kept pace with all the other modern devices for annihilating time and space [...][148]

In the early 20th century, New York City skyscrapers like the Flatiron building (built in 1902) with its 20 stories and the appearance of a ship sailing up the avenue were urban landmarks. But the city's luxury hotels, too, were uniquely modern architectural landmarks comparable to the landmark castles and churches of older European societies. Hotels were the new images that visitors took home with them, be it on postcards or in travel narratives. Luxury hotels were also verbal landmarks because newspapers would feature their prominence as social watering places in their daily reporting on society.

It has been pointed out that "Undine is speculating with space", that her perception of an ideal setting is "shaped in large part by newspaper articles" of the sort that her masseuse,

145 Joseph A. Ward, "'The Amazing Hotel World' of James, Dreiser, and Wharton", 1541

146 Henry James, *The American Scene*, 78

147 R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, 97, 99.

148 Edith Wharton, *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, 269

Mrs. Heeney, is collecting.[59] This is also about the only kind of writing Undine is actually reading and her perception of space is quite skewed because of that. She collects her data on urban domesticity from newspaper sources which are anything but reliable. Society news articles had a tendency to exaggerate the news and were reporting, by definition, only about a particular subgroup of the urban population.[60] Undine's reliance on newspaper clippings for information on and interpretation of the city's society shows that her understanding of New York City's domesticity must by default be utterly unreliable. Undine's social missteps and multiple marriages illustrate this point rather tellingly.

Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* opens at the Hotel Stentorian in New York City. By the descriptive use of adjectives like "highly-varnished", "salmon-pink", and "gilt" it is immediately evident that the setting is luxurious, and by providing a pompous name, the hotel is given a mistaken identity as well as a past that it does not have. But buildings like the Stentorian were simply "lofty hotels moored like a sonorously named fleet of battle ships along the upper reaches of the West Side" and their permanence, therefore, but a fallacy (*COC*, 40). As "battle ships" those hotels were accustomed to be unmoored to provide ever-changing settings for society to entertain and socialize. But life in

[59] Betsy Klimasmith, *At Home in the City*, 175 and 172.

[60] Since 1897, *The New York Times*, for example, has found it necessary to state the following words prominently in the upper left corner of its front page: "All the News That's Fit to Print." Supposedly, this self-advertisement was put there in an effort to distinguish *The New York Times* from the so called "yellow press" which obviously was quite unreliable and not always truthful in its reporting. Read superficially, this statement certainly appears to support ethical newspaper reporting; read from quite another angle, however, it could be argued that what "is fit to print" is only what the publisher of the paper decides to include and not necessarily what would be newsworthy. Because of the controlling function the publisher, through his editors, has the possibility to determine whether or how a news piece will be presented to his readers. That this controlling function may easily be dictatorial, too, is quite obvious. And the fact that a publisher will be very much tempted to publish content especially geared to the readers is clear also. As a consequence thereof, news can never be entirely free of bias, omission, guardianship, or even censure, and the term "factual news" thus becomes almost an oxymoron.

this luxury hotel world is described as if seen through a veil. It seems weirdly unfocused, somehow surreal. In the hotel's breakfast room, there was a "spongy carpet". Though "richly dressed", the families as well as the waiters were "pallid", the conversation "languid", and the food showed "gastronomic incompatibilities." In addition, the waiters "turned their backs by common consent on the persons they were supposed to serve", thus making sure that the inhabitants of this hotel seem displaced and somehow incompatible with the breakfast-room interior (*COC*, 51–52). This social netherworld of sorts in the luxurious New York hotels later becomes what Edith Wharton calls the "phantom society" at the Nouveau Luxe hotel in Paris. There, too, the description is of "incoherence" and "the reality of sham", which, again, is a contradiction in term. The independent observer of the scene, Charles Bowen, brings it all to the point: "Nothing ever goes on! Nothing that ever happens here is *real*" [emphasis mine].

The world of those luxury hotels thus functions as a parallel world "with all the rules, smirks, gestures of its model" but none of its "continuity and choice"; it is an unreal, "phantom" world (*COC*, 243f). And, as one might add, with none of the model's responsibility either: since the hotel setting is by definition a transitory setting, it can easily be swapped for another (transitory) setting somewhere else if need be or social etiquette requires it. In spite of the same "rules, smirks, gestures", it is thus entirely possible that "promiscuity" arises exactly because of this unstable setting, this "delusive semblance of stability" (*COC*, 250).

The only concrete and very real approach to hotel culture in *The Custom of the Country* seems to be by Mr. Spragg who, on his first trip to Europe, does not care much about visiting churches or museums, but is "haunted by a statistical curiosity" about the functioning as well as the economic impact of hotels. He wants to know about "their size, their number, their cost and their capacity for housing and feeding" as well as "the cost of construction and the probable return on investment", topping his investigation by calculating "the number of travelers who could be simultaneously lodged, bathed and boarded on the continent of Europe" (*COC*, 331f). The bottom line is, however, that he must return to Wall Street to "make money to pay for all this." So for Mr. Spragg

the only "real" place is Wall Street with its thrill of financial deals that give him life and not the hotel world that he inhabits most of the time.

When we now recall Lily in *The House of Mirth*, who has been incapable of securing herself a similar set as the Trenor estate, an estate that would embrace her with "human arms", we realize that the hotel setting represents her situation in life: the "wan beings" in the hotel do the very same things she does – they go to concert-halls, music-rooms, and dress-makers and return from those outings "still more wan". They don't have "real human activities" with a true purpose and therefore lack a "real existence". Similar to the hotel world in *The Custom of the County*, the hotel world in *The House of Mirth* also lacks a foundation in reality. Again there is talk of a "*pallid* world" of people who on a "*languid* tide of curiosity" are carried "into *vague* metropolitan distances" [emphasis mine] (*HOM*, 247). Again we have a contradiction in terms: how can curiosity be languid? It appears as if interchangeable social robots that were controlled by the arbiter of social rites and rules peopled these hotels. Prettily decorated shells with no core. Empty.

And yet, in *The Custom of the Country* Undine Spragg is dependent on this urban luxury hotel world for feeling alive. She needs to cross a hotel's "magic threshold" in order to have her "energies revived like plants in water", thus conveying the image that without this "native air" she would have to perish (*COC*, 478). This is one of the major differences between Undine Spragg and Lily Bart: while Undine needs the "hotel spirit" for existential reasons, Lily won't thrive in a hotel setting at all, experiencing spatial alienation and misplacement.[151] In this hotel society, which to Lily appears to "float […] outside the bounds of time and space," she misses "her share in the working of the great civic machine" where everyone had "inherited obligations" and "conventional benevolences" and "all hung together in the solidarity of these traditional functions" (*HOM*, 275–276).

151 This manifests itself in this previously quoted passage: "Lily had an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung." *The House of Mirth*, 276.

Another instance where the traditions of "old" New York City are confronted by the display of the new hotel culture appears in the novella "New Year's Day". In this interesting narrative, members of the "old" New York City society who have gathered in a house on West Twenty-third Street – the social reference is in the address, as usual – are seen observing the hotel crowd emerging from the Fifth Avenue Hotel because of a fire that has just broken out. The Fifth Avenue Hotel, which opened in 1859, was located on Madison Square at the junction of Fifth Avenue and Broadway and was considered "a sort of clearing-house for the city, the Nation [*sic*], and the world" because "[n]o other single hotel in the world ha[d] ever entertained so many distinguished people" and had also "borne a conspicuous part in the public life of the metropolis" for many years.[152] At the time of the story's narrative, however, the Fifth Avenue Hotel is "no longer fashionable"; clearly, it is no longer a place for a member of New York society to frequent. The novella opens, interestingly, with the mentioning of the hotel location:

> "She was *bad* always. They used to meet at the Fifth Avenue Hotel," said my mother, as if the scene of the offense added to the guilt of the couple whose past she was revealing.[153]

It is thus not only the fact of the affair as such that matters here, but very much the fact that it took place at the Fifth Avenue Hotel. According to the first person narrator of the novella, this "tracing of topographies" was indeed a feature that "characterized [his] old New York".[154] The Fifth Avenue Hotel was "frequented by 'politicians' and 'Westerners'" who belonged to the group of "illiterates and criminals" according to the narrator's

152 *King's Handbook of New York*, 200.

153 Edith Wharton, "New Year's Day", *Old New York*, 237.

154 Let us also consider here that Wharton had first hand experience of this location: she was born in a brownstone building on 14 West 23rd Street on January 24, 1862, just off Madison Square where the Fifth Avenue Hotel was located. The hotel thus most certainly played a role in the city of her childhood.

mother, herself a member of "old" New York City society.[15] It is also quite interesting to note the affiliation of "Westerners" with "criminals and illiterates" in this hotel context. It seems to reflect rather clearly – if not necessarily Wharton's sentiment but then certainly the sentiment of a narrator who is both an Easterner as well as a member of "old" New York City society – that at least part of the entire problem were western "intruders" like Undine Spragg. With all their newly made Wall Street money and no social responsibilities, obligations or ancestral histories they were ruining New York as it used to be. Because of illiterate "Westerners" like Undine Spragg – who quite obviously is not a reader and is thus seriously lacking any redemptive features – this new luxury hotel culture in America had a chance of establishing itself. The rich Westerners moving into the city all needed a suitable place to conduct their business, be that Wall Street or society "business". It is evident from her correspondence that Wharton had a hard time reconciling those two worlds, even if she may not have entirely agreed with the snobbish and exclusive environment of "old" New York City either. Relocating to France in the early 1900s after having lived at the scene of many of her best urban writings most likely didn't help with this either. When trying to reconcile a re-visited location with our memories, we often tend to favor what we remember over what we currently experience. Multiple memories form our past and those memories have become dear and familiar to us because we have been able to revisit them in our minds over time. Lastly, our past memories and experiences are what have given us our present state of being. Therefore, it is often rather difficult to adapt to new situations, be those geographical or social in nature. Paradoxically one of the most characteristic urban features of New York City has certainly always been the inescapable embracing of change at the cost of erasing the past.

Having discussed the new hotel culture, let us now return to Lily Bart's downfall in *The House of Mirth* as it is mirrored in the changed architectural background of the city. It really starts after

[15] Edith Wharton, "New Year's Day", *Old New York*, 2: 240.

Lily steps out of Trenor's Fifth Avenue mansion late one night. She had visited him there on the request of a note that she had received and that she thought had come from his wife. During her visit, however, Lily soon realizes her error and after a terrible scene, she manages to leave physically unharmed but mentally devastated:

> On the doorstep, with the street before her, she felt a mad throb of liberation, intoxicating as the prisoner's first draught of free air; but the clearness of brain continued, and she noted the mute aspect of Fifth Avenue, guessed at the lateness of the hour, and even observed a man's figure – was there something half familiar in its outline? – which, as she entered the hansom, turned from the opposite corner and vanished in the obscurity of a side street.
> (*HOM*, 147)

Lily finds now that her role, or her perceived role, has shifted because of the incident. For the first time, the street is up close before her. Quite tellingly, Fifth Avenue, is "mute". It is mute, but it is not blind: the "half-familiar" figure of a man in the company of another one sees her step out of Trenor's house at this late hour, and the rumors about Lily's changed status from a single, marriageable woman to a single woman of doubtable reputation suddenly seem true. Not only Lily's outward projection has now changed but also her self-image:

> She seemed a stranger to herself, or rather there were two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained [...]. She opened her eyes and saw the streets passing – the familiar alien streets. All she looked on was the same and yet changed [...]. Everything in the past seemed simple, natural, full of daylight – and she was alone in a place of darkness and pollution.
> (*HOM*, 148)

At this point in *The House of Mirth*, the outside city really starts to creep in. The streets are "familiar" and yet simultaneously "alien" and Lily Bart is "alone in a place of darkness and pollution". She seems to experience the city with all its implications for the first time, and it frightens her.

I have previously pointed out that Edith Wharton's urban narratives are mostly narratives of interior spaces from which the

city is generally shut out. Aside from the ancestral money it is the Wall Street and real estate profits that make the general display of wealth as well as all those balls and expensive entertainments possible and help keep the city at a distance. But Lily Bart no longer has the protection of that kind of money. She had not been able to secure one of the city's rich "old" New York bachelors by marriage, and she wasn't going to be satisfied with a bachelor of lesser pecuniary means but equal social standing like Lawrence Selden.

Lawrence Selden's very cozy apartment at The Benedick – *Much Ado About Nothing* comes to mind – is an in-between urban zone of sorts and so is the apartment of Gerty Farish, Seldon's cousin, where Lily finds shelter and comfort. While Lily dislikes Gerty's flat – "a horrid little place" – she does like Seldon's apartment with its library:

> "How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman." She leaned back in a luxury of discontent.
> Selden was rummaging in a cupboard for the cake.
> "Even women," he said, "have been known to enjoy the privileges of a flat."
> "Oh, governesses — or widows. But not girls — not poor, miserable, marriageable girls!"
> (*HOM*, 7)

Thus, this most urban space of all – the apartment or flat – seems not available to respectable and marriageable girls like Lily. That apartment living for upper-class single women was rather unusual at the time is evident in Seldon's answer that he indeed knows just one single girl who lives in a flat, his cousin Gerty.[150]

After the intermezzo on a Mediterranean cruise, Lily returns to New York City only to learn that Mrs. Peniston, had unexpectedly died. After the reading of her aunt's will, Lily finds herself together with her friend, Selden's cousin Gerty Farish, in her aunt's "purple drawing-room, which more than ever, in its stuffy dimness, resembled a well-kept family vault, in which the last

[150] We will look at Lawrence Seldon's flat and, in particular, his library in chapter VI. The library is central to Seldon's apartment as it provides Lily with something that the other urban interiors don't.

corpse had just been decently deposited." Far from ever having been a true home for Lily, Mrs. Peniston's mansion bears no life affirming traits, it is a "vault". Lily has no choice but to reside in a hotel now. All of her friends are out of town "and not one of them had made any proffer of hospitality" (*HOM*, 224, 226). Essentially, Lily has been socially abandoned. She visits her aunt's mansion once more to ask her cousin, Miss Stepney, albeit unsuccessfully, for financial support until her meager inheritance is being paid:

> It seemed to Lily, as Mrs. Peniston's door closed on her, that she was taking a final leave of her old life. The future stretched before her chill and bare as the deserted Fifth Avenue, and opportunities showed as meagerly as the few cabs trailing an quest of fares that did not come.
> (*HOM*, 231)

Fifth Avenue will be deserted for Lily, quite literally, from this point onwards. Her society friends don't invite her any more after her break with Berta Dorset, and she has no choice but to follow the few opportunities that she is being offered even if they turn out to be more and more beneath her set. Lily must learn that she is no longer the decorative individual that can set herself off favorably from a crowd. Rather, she now has "the odd sense of having been caught up into the crowd as carelessly as a passenger is gathered in by an express train".

A trip to Alaska with the Gomers won't bring relief to Lily Bart's long-term living situation either. She soon has to retreat to a small hotel that is financially above her means but socially at least located just "on the edge of a fashionable neighborhood" (*HOM*, 233, 246). Now that Lily is no longer an integral part of her former New York society – not really because it avoided her on purpose, but rather because in its vapid ways society simply ceased to remember her – Lily becomes somewhat aware of the vacuity of her former existence. The passage alludes again to the biblical title of the novel:

> [...] It seemed a welcome escape from the empty noises of her life. She was weary of being swept passively along a current of pleasure and business in which she had no share; weary of seeing other people pursue amusement

and squander money, while she felt herself of no more account among them than an expensive toy in the hands of a spoiled child.
(*HOM*, 241)

As her downfall through the landscape of the city continues and as she becomes gradually removed from the urban signifiers that she has known to read for so long, Lily becomes more aware of life and its different manifestations. It seems that Lily's downfall triggers an introspection that she had been unable to achieve at an earlier stage of her development. She realizes that society – "the ever-revolving wheels of the great social machine" – will simply continue on its course in spite of her absence, and that on the other side "many thousands of insignificant figures" will continue going up or down on "dull stairs destined to be mounted by dull people" (*HOM*, 263). Neither side of the social spectrum offers any true solution to Lily's dilemma: the "ever revolving wheels" of the upper class remind us weirdly of the social city's uncanny role as automaton on auto-pilot with no driver in its seat and beyond anyone's true control for this reason, and the Sisyphean effort of "dull people" going up and down the stairs of life with no apparent result. In either urban society there is simply no place for Lily.

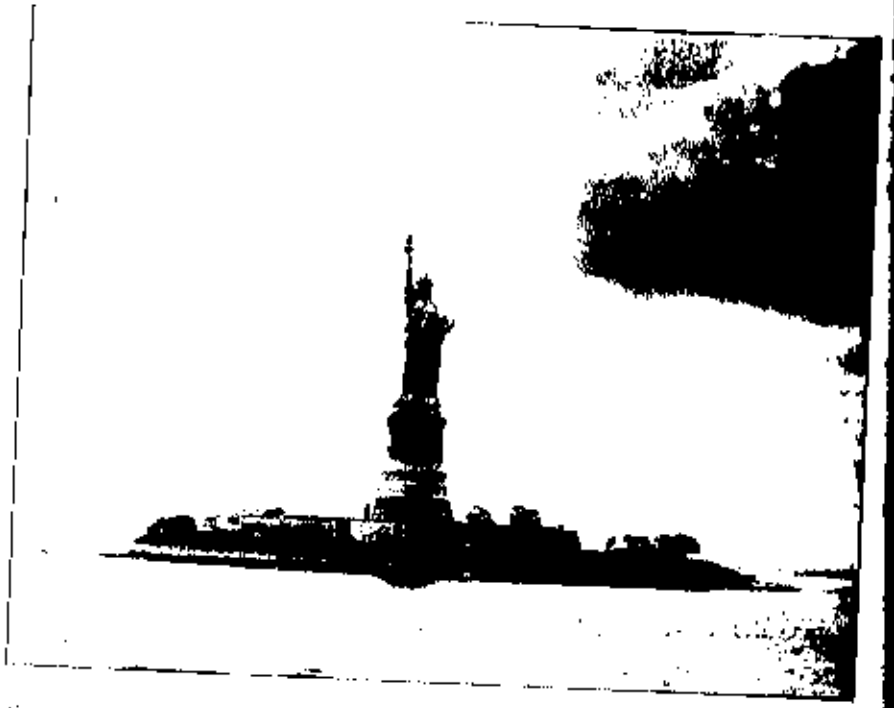
Lily Bart's last dwelling on her downward spiral is a simple boarding house west of New York City's Sixth Avenue, "past a long line of areas which, through the distortion of their paintless rails, revealed with increasing candour the disjecta membra of bygone dinners". The boarding house is located far away from Lily's former city orb. Here, the outdoors city becomes quite physical now, even guttural. This is no longer the structured, vainly decorated, and polished city further east; it is now a city that shows its innards and the discarded rubbish of its inhabitants. Simon Rosedale, who is on an upward trend from his outsider position as the "Jew" of Wall Street to a tolerated Fifth Avenue membership, is one of the few people who still sees Lily occasionally and seems to care about her to some extent. He observes her new neighborhood with "incredulous disgust" but still offers, though with "visible effort", to return to see her again "some day" (*HOM*, 293).

The urban interior that Lily visits before she retires to her boarding house is Nettie Struther's warm kitchen. This is an unusual interior location for Wharton heroines whose lives tend to be spent in the representative or public rooms of a private house – drawing rooms, sitting rooms, and libraries – and occasionally in the bedroom, but hardly ever in any of the functional rooms like the kitchen. That there even is a "kitchen" scene in *The House of Mirth* thus asks for further investigation in a subsequent chapter.

Shortly before she takes an overdose of chloral, we find Lily Bart in her boarding house room on the Westside, away from her familiar neighborhood. She feels, justifiably, "rootless" and "ephemeral", having grown up "without any one spot of earth being dearer to her than another" (*HOM*, 319). One of Lily's greatest problems, it seems, is simply the lack of a proper home that would connect her to her world and provide some grounding, both physically and spiritually speaking:

> In whatever form a slowly-accumulated past lives in the blood – whether in the concrete image of the old house stored with visual memories, or in the conception of the house not built with hands, but made up of inherited passions and loyalties – it has the same power of broadening and deepening the individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving.
> (*HOM*, 319)

The end does come full circle in *The House of Mirth* with the image of "inherited passions and loyalties" of an "old house" that has a past and which has, exactly because of that, a future, too. The "old" house has known "mourning" but has become wise through it, whereas the "new" house that is only built on temporary merriment and mirth for instant gratification will simply not endure.



Statue of Liberty, New York Harbor 1895

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

4. Conclusion: "Gilt Cage" or "Promised Land": Resignation and Hope in the City

> I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing-room, where one receives formal visits, the sitting-room, where the members of the family come and go as they list, but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes.[213]

Throughout her urban narratives, Edith Wharton always returns to analogies of people and homes. The two are interlinked, almost fatally so at times. In the above quote, a woman's soul, her "innermost room", is never truly reached as no one ever finds access to it. In the short story "Autres Temps", as we have previously seen, the protagonist once believed that

> I'd got out of it once, but what really happened was that the other people went out, and left me in the same little room [...]. I've lost any illusions I may have had as to an angel's opening the door.[214]

Wharton's urban protagonists are passively stuck in their rooms. They are physically incarcerated because they are also mentally imprisoned by stringent social control. By submitting themselves to the rules and regulations that govern New York's Four Hundred, they are completely incapacitated and simply unable to realize that – to stay with the room metaphor – a door, while being an object of separation, is also a movable object connecting an inside to an outside. By turning a door's handle, its restriction

213 Edith Wharton, "The Fulness of Life", *Collected Stories 1891–1910*, 14.

214 Edith Wharton, "Autres Temps", *Collected Stories 1911–1937*, 86. See the introduction for a citation of the entire passage.

could be reversed into the option of access and thus into an escape. But none of Wharton's protagonists are able to do just that. They may open windows, like Newland Archer, but they can never open the door of their "gilt cages", remaining caught in "their tight round of habit and association" and resigning themselves to their fates. Even the atypical Wharton heroine Undine Spragg stays trapped in a "gilt cage" of her own choosing: having married into society and thereby establishing her place in New York City, she must also surrender to the rules and regulations that govern it and cannot continue to simply do as she pleases. Even though she is certainly the least incarcerated protagonist in Edith Wharton's urban narratives, Undine remains trapped by her own ambition.

In *The Decoration of Houses*, it is evident that the decoration of a room is never a coincidence to Wharton (and Codman) but is inherent in the architecture itself: "Structure conditions ornament, not ornament structure" (*DHC*, 11). It is tempting to apply this to Wharton's vividly decorative passages also: structure not only conditions ornament, but people, too. Her characters are very much the product of their environment; how the two are linked becomes evident when we turn to her essay on *The Writing of Fiction*. In "Constructing a Novel", Wharton notes the following:

> The impression produced by a landscape, a street or a house should always, to the novelist, be an event in the history of a soul, and the use of the "descriptive passage", and its style, should be determined by the fact that it must depict only what the intelligence concerned would have noticed, and always in terms within the register of that intelligence.[215]

The description of a setting should directly refer to the character it relates to and it should "be an event in the history of the soul" as Wharton writes. When we think of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, we notice that the urban interiors she was made to inhabit were all of the "gilded" type before she was sent on her downward trajectory, they were settings that were rich and luxurious in their decorations. Lily, as the artful object, was to be an ornament within that space, pure and useless. Wharton's and Codman's *The*

215 Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction*, 63

Decoration of Houses can be read as a refutation of exactly this useless ornamental style of the times. In their foreword they proclaim that "simplicity is at home even in palaces" and later argue that "in the treatment of rooms we have passed from the golden age of architecture to the gilded age of decoration". To them, the statement "non murato ma veramente nato" (which can be translated as "not built brick by brick but truly born") by the 16th century Italian architect, painter, and biographer Giorgio Vasari on the architecture of the Farnesina palace in Florence, rings quite true. In their final chapter, the writer and the architect come back to their original statement and apodictically rephrase their original premise: "The supreme excellence is simplicity" (*DHC*, xxii, 196, 198). If we now even go a little further and superimpose this thesis on Wharton's persona of Lily Bart – after all Edith Wharton herself in *The Writing of Fiction* makes the analogy that "a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms" – then we can conclude that Lily, the ornament, who is both "nato" by descent and "murato" by design, has no chance at survival. Even though she makes an effort at simplicity in her reenactment of the Reynold's picture, simplicity is not a sustainable quality of her. In fact, the "tableau vivant" reveals that there is no simple structure supporting Lily's ornamental self: without money of her own she is forced to lead a parasitic life which, due to the purity of her moral nature, is not a sustainable solution for very long. Lily Bart is doomed from the start by Edith Wharton's architectural verdict.

Edith Wharton's concern with habitable space was always present. Looking through her letters and the ones written by her friends, it is quite evident that she continued to attach the greatest importance to the design, meaning, and effect of built structures. Henry James would say of her: "No one fully knows our Edith who hasn't seen her creating a habitation for herself."[216] In a letter to a friend in 1913, James also wrote about Edith Wharton that "[y]ou don't know her till you have seen her as a builder and

216 Avis Berman, "Edith Wharton: On her 125th Anniversary", Architectural Digest, vol. 44, no. 11 (November 1987): 314; Percy Lubbock, *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (New York: Appleton, 1947), 129f

restorer, designer, decorator, gardener."[217] About the long-term rental of a house in Hyères, France, that she later bought, Edith Wharton herself would ecstatically write to a friend: "I am thrilled to the spine [...] and I feel as if I were going to get married – to the right man at last!"[218] With an exclamation mark, the house and the self are thus described as a perfect union in, supposedly, a lifelong bond. Wharton stated in her autobiography in 1933 about the house she built herself in the Berkshires: "The Mount was my first real home, and though it is nearly twenty years since I last saw it [...] its blessed influence still lives in me" (*BG*, 125). And she later added: "[...] but though I liked New York well enough it was only at the Mount that I was really happy" (*BG*, 149).

Returning to Edith Wharton's fiction, we find more evidence of the interrelation of houses and people. Ralph Marvell in *The Custom of the Country*, being disgusted by the judgment of Undine Spragg by the society portrait painter Mr. Popple, is returning to his family's house on Washington Square. The house now shows a "familiar human face". Ralph feels that both his mother as well as his grandfather "so closely identified with the old house in Washington Square that they might have passed for its inner consciousness as it might have stood for their outward form [...]". Having become a character of its own, the house "seemed to affirm [the] intrinsic rightness [...] of the social disintegration expressed by widely-different architectural physiognomies at the other end of Fifth Avenue." The separation between "old" and "new" New York City is not only caused by inherited "old" money and "new" money made on Wall Street, it is not present simply because of differences between old traditions and newer customs. The divide is visibly caused by the stark discrepancy between the old and the new architectural city. As Ralph Marvell "bolts" the door behind him, thus shutting out the city, he reflects that

> "[...] society was really just like the houses it lived in: a muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin steel shell of utility. The steel shell was built up in Wall Street, the social trimmings were hastily added in Fifth Avenue; and the union between them was as monstrous and factitious, as unlike the gradual homogeneous growth which flowers into what other countries know as society, as the Blois gargoyles on Peter Van Degen's roof and the skeleton walls supporting them."
> (*CC*, 77)

This description of the wealthy New York City society and the cityscape is not the idealized one of a successful combination, but that of a "muddle", of "social disintegration", and of "widely-different architectural physiognomies". There is no sense of the "natio", the born, here: there is no time for a gradually and slowly created society that would "flower" from a perfect union. "Social trimmings were hastily added" and put together in a disjointed fashion, everything is "murato", ready-made and built on the spot. In this "monstrous" combination, no society that deserves the name could ever prosper as little as the "Blois gargoyles" and the "skeleton walls" could ever contribute to an aesthetic of good architecture.

Edith Wharton's protagonist Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* is quite possibly the ultimate representative of the city as she, too, lacks a solid core as well as an urban home that would satisfy Wharton's exacting architectural specifications. Undine is inhabited by constant change:

> She was used to such feats of mental agility, and it was instinctive with her to become, for the moment, the person she thought her interlocutors expected her to be; but she never had quite so new a part to play at such short notice.
> (*CC*, 335)

Not long into her marriage to her second husband, the Frenchman Raymond de Chelles, he sees her as the epitome of the American who cherishes nothing as much as change itself and who, as soon as that change is attained, is on the lookout for yet something new. Raymond's heated speech against the Americans from the French perspective could also stand for an outcry of "old" New York City – the New York of the Marvell family – against the intrusions of the "new" Americans:

217 Letter of Henry James to Mary Hunter, dated 25 July 1913, as quoted in Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton*, 255.

218 R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, 417.

> "You come among us from a country we don't know, and can't imagine, a country you care for so little that before you've been a day in ours you've forgotten the very house you were born in – if it wasn't torn down before you knew it! You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean, wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; aping our weaknesses, exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about – 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're dry, and the people are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have – and we're fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for us!"
> (*COC*, 468)

Raymond's indictment of the American character is, at the same time, an indictment of the American city. After all, Undine came to Paris as Mrs. Ralph Marvell, the "New York Beauty". By judging the American character, Raymond sentences the American city where "the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry". Americans, in the Frenchman's view, are "proud of changing", an image that can be applied both to New York City and Undine. As we have come to see, this New York is change; it is a city that is constantly reinventing itself in spite of its "indigenous" society that still lives according to the old Washington Square standards. And Undine, the water sprite, has practically lived that change all her life, she has internalized the city and perfected its ways of creating, demolishing, and re-building. Marrying up, Undine trades up real estate also; she goes from a small Apex home to a big New York City mansion but her houses never manage to become homes. Through her business transactions of repetitious marriages she is perpetually reinventing herself only to feel each time, after but a brief incarnation of her newest persona, that what she has just become is never good enough. Every successive marriage brings her closer to her new ideal situation and yet never quite lets her arrive. Every time Undine thinks that she has solved the puzzle, or navigated the labyrinth of New York City and its society, she is forced to realize that there is still another goal that she has not yet attained. In the end, it is the role of an Ambassadress which she won't be able to play because of her previous divorces. Undine has to learn "that there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her" (*COC*, 509). The constant reinvention of Undine's character goes hand in hand with the internal changes of the city, but the vacuity of all these efforts are depicted also: nothing of value is attained by constant destruction and recreation. Consequently, both Undine and her New York City remain strangely faceless and impersonal. It seems that in the end, in spite of the sprite's gaining of a soul by marrying a human, the acquired soul is of no consequence to the nymph who in every changing incarnation remains weirdly vapid.

In *The Reef*, Edith Wharton's 1912 novel that is mostly set in France with but an occasional reference to New York City, there is also a brief passage that links a protagonist to the house she inhabits. Anna Leath's house had over time come to be "the very symbol of narrowness and monotony". In spite of the confinement, the house is described as "the shell of a life slowly adjusted to its dwelling" in a slightly more positive and protective way. Even though it was "an inconvenient house" of which "one knew all the defects, the shabbiness, the discomforts", it had eventually become part of the self. The house was

> [...] the place one came back to, the place where one had one's duties, one's habits and one's books, the place one would naturally live in till one died [...]

Once again the importance of books in Wharton's narratives is quite evident: books are where the home is. In fact, books *are* the home. They are on a par with the "habits" and "duties" that make up the corner posts of life. And, as the above passage continues, if one should be so bold as to "think one's self away from" this house, one could expect to be "suffering a certain loss of identity".[219] Again, the house is a conditio sine qua non for a protagonist's existence; the self and the house are irrevocably interrelated.

In *The Buccaneers*, Wharton's last and unfinished novel, New

219 Edith Wharton, *The Reef* (1912; reprinted, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 66.

York City has "rejected" the St. George family. In spite of quite some success on Wall Street, in spite of being inside business circles, entry into "old" New York society proves impossible. The St. George family is always a step behind; they frequent Saratoga and the races when fashionable New York City has already deserted the place for Newport. When Mr. St. George can finally afford a house in the city, he buys one on Madison rather than on Fifth Avenue. His wife fears that she is being classed by the address; if she has to give it to anyone it will indicate "at best [...] decent mediocrity". New York City has not allowed Mrs. St. George to "launch" her daughters which has "bitterly disappointed" her. This "difficulty", she believes, was brought on by her husband who "was too free-and-easy, too much disposed to behave as if Fifth Avenue and Wall Street were one".[220] That they are not becomes evident when the Elmsworths, whose daughters are friends of the St. George daughters, manage to move to Fifth Avenue, but still have not truly arrived. The citadel of New York City cannot be conquered here. As Ward McAllister wrote in 1890:

> [...] if your were not of the inner circle, and were a new-comer, it took the combined efforts of all your friend's backing and pushing to procure an invitation for you. For years, whole families sat on the stool of probation, awaiting trial and acceptance, and many were then rejected [...][221]

The last resort in social warfare is entrance by ambitious foreign social alliance. After making it elsewhere, one can return to conquer New York City. Even "old" New York will let the drawbridge down for some titled foreign beauty in spite of the fact that the title has only been acquired by marriage. It is conquest by circumvention, but getting access to social circles in London is not so easy at first either. The Wall Street millionaires and their families are again considered uncultivated "invaders", which is just what they were called on Fifth Avenue, too. This time the judgment is pronounced by the English aristocracy:

> "I suppose it's because you know how I hate the whole spitting tobacco-chewing crew, the dressed-up pushing women dragging their reluctant backwoodsmen after them, that you suggest polluting my house, and desecrating our last few days together, by this barbarian invasion – eh?" (*BHC*, 233)

The language here is strong, much stronger still than in Wharton's earlier fiction. The American invasion would "pollute" and even "desecrate" the English society, it is not just an "invasion", but a "barbarian invasion". The London defense, at least in terms of verbal guards, seems much heftier than the one in New York City, but the violence is deceptive. Against an American heiress, even if the money comes from Wall Street, the London citadel will not stand for long. And once it has fallen, there is no sweeter reward for Mrs. St. George than using that weapon to turn it against the city that has rejected her and her family for so long: "All that London could give, in rank, in honours, in social glory, was only, to [...] Mrs. St. George, a knife to stab New York with – and that weapon she clutched with feverish glee" (*BHC*, 342).

The analogy of people and houses can also be found, though clearly not with the same frequency, in Anzia Yezierska's representations of New York City. Returning to Essex Street in *Arrogant Beggar*, for example, Adele "saw again the houses huddled together in neglect, like a poor, over-crowded family" (*AB*, 12). In the short story "Wings", Shenah Pessah, a young Lower East Side tenement janitress who would like to study and learn, feels that she is but a part of the building in the eyes of a tenant:

> After all, she was nothing but part of the house. So why should he take notice of her? She was the steps on which he walked. She was the door that swung open for him. And he did not know it.[222]

220 Edith Wharton, *The Buccaneers* (1938; reprinted, in *Fast and Loose and The Buccaneers* [Unfinished], Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1993), 183, 265. (Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *BHC*.)

221 Ward McAllister, *Society As I Have Found It* (New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1890), 119.

222 Anzia Yezierska, "Wings", *Hungry Hearts*, 17

In one of Yezierska's strongest short stories, "The Lost 'Beautifulness'", the tenement kitchen walls of Hanneh Hayyeh are her very "own soul". In this story, the immigrant laundress saves and puts away every single penny that she can somehow spare in order to paint her kitchen. She wants a beautiful white kitchen "like that in the old Stuyvesant mansion" of Mrs. Preston, her employer, to welcome back her son Aby who was serving in the American army. Mrs. Hayyeh paints her kitchen all white because "[s]hining up the house for Aby is [her] only pleasure." Her husband points out that "it ain't [her] house. It's the landlord's", but the deed is done already and Hanneh Hayyeh proudly shows her freshly painted kitchen to the entire immigrant community.[223] When the landlord, Benjamin Rosenblatt, comes to collect the rent, his only remark is "very nice", but two weeks later he raises the rent to five dollars a month. His argument is that now that "the flat is painted new, [he] can get more money for it".[224] Hanneh and her husband, however, can no longer afford this apartment now and are being evicted.

The night before the eviction, Hanneh looks about her kitchen and exclaims: "[...] all this beautifulness that cost me the blood from my heart. Is this already America? What for was my Aby fighting?" She decides that the landlord should not be able to rent her beautifully painted kitchen to someone else who has not suffered for it; she "mutilates" the place and its beauty in a "savage fury". Utterly exhausted Hanneh now comes to realize that while she had wanted "revenge", while she had really wanted "to spite the landlord", she had only succeeded in destroying herself because the beautiful kitchen and her own self were one:

> [...] It was her own soul she had killed. These walls that stared at her in their ruin were not just walls. They were animate – they throbbed with the pulse of her own flesh. For every inch of the broken plaster there was a scar on her heart.[225]

223 Anzia Yezierska, "The Lost 'Beautifulness'", *Hungry Hearts*, 44.
224 Ibid., 511.
225 Ibid., 601.

The story ends with the return of the son Aby, finding his mother "and all their worldly belongings dumped" in the rain on the sidewalks of New York City.[226]

Similar to Edith Wharton's protagonists, Anzia Yezierska's heroines don't permanently remove themselves from their urban locations on the Lower East Side though they may occasionally foray into different parts of the city, including Fifth Avenue. Fifth Avenue as point of reference is a frequent location in Yezierska's work and her heroines often use the term "Fifth Avenue" as an indicator of or qualifier for their aspirations: "Like a lady from Fifth Avenue I look, and for only ten cents, from the pushcart on Hester Street" (*BC*, 2).

Even on the city grid, Fifth Avenue does and did not physically intersect with the Lower East Side either. Conversely, Broadway comes much closer to intersecting with Hester Street. Below Union Square and just east of Broadway, the Bowery runs almost parallel to it and finally extends diagonally into the Lower East Side. In the 1900s, Broadway, the Bowery as well as Wall Street to the south all meant business. But Fifth Avenue at the time stood apart and implied almost exclusively a social agenda. If anything could bring the "gilded city" and the "city of promise" together, it was definitely business. But as countless instances show, questions of descent, race, and ethnical culture still made genuine assimilation or fusion extremely difficult.

Edith Wharton's and Anzia Yezierska's representations of New York show a city that remains divided not only on a purely geographical level. The divide is visible, too, when education, speech, manners, customs, and consumption – on the one end it is adequate necessary consumption, on the other it is "conspicuous consumption" – come into play. The social merging of Fifth Avenue and the Lower East Side – and thus the theory of the "melting pot" remains, at best, a theory. We have seen that it doesn't hold up in the end neither in Edith Wharton's nor in Anzia Yezierska's urban texts. And it is not for the lack of trying either, especially in Yezierska's narratives of "upward mobility". The assimilation tendencies are strong there since the immigrant

226 Anzia Yezierska, "The Lost 'Beautifulness'", *Hungry Hearts*, 61.

heroine in general wants to "make herself over for a person" and often describes her desire to be "like a lady from Fifth Avenue". Yezierska's strong-minded immigrants want to Americanize their idiom, their clothes, their social habits, and even their particular descent and past. That this is ultimately impossible and fraught with a severe identity crisis can been seen in many of Anzia Yezierska's novels and stories.

The most representative example of a failed union can be found in Anzia Yezierska's powerful *Salome of the Tenements*, the one novel where the protagonist actually tries to assimilate through marriage to a rich Anglo-Saxon, thus trading urban loci, too. The crucial chapter after the wedding, when the couple is headed for the groom's Madison Avenue town house, is quite tellingly called "The Days After". It couldn't be more gloomy and foretelling. Sonya Vrunsky, the bride, is reflecting on her new social status and the fact that she is to be the new mistress of this mansion where "ancestral portraits [...] dominated every room." She wonders if "the town house [would] bring the deeper flood of love", but quickly realizes that "[h]er every step was silenced in thick, rich carpets" (*SOT*, 115, 111f). The town house here symbolizes the entire upper New York City society, the citadel that must be stormed. If the house itself makes her voiceless and unheard, if the house itself feels "like a museum, not a home" (a metaphor for things that were created in the past, but are devoid of life now) then the fusion of Fifth Avenue and the Lower East Side is destined to fail, too. Not even the archetypical Jewish remedy of food to satisfy Sonya's hunger helps in this hostile and cold environment. In fact, when Sonya uses the wrong fork on her first meal in the ancestral town house, the butler "silently, but significantly" indicates the correct fork thereby pointedly and cruelly illustrating her ignorance of and incompatibility with Fifth Avenue life (*SOT*, 113). Sonya does not follow her impulse to toss the fork after the butler, but ends up not being able to eat anything at all. The food, which had been such a central and dominant feature in her native setting, won't go down in her new environment. Not only is she silenced here, but she is also being starved. Under societal supervision, even if it is only by extension through the butler, the urban house turns into a "gilt cage" for Anzia Yezierska's

heroine, too, just as urban homes tend to do in the narratives of Edith Wharton. The entire chapter prepares for the disaster of the wedding reception where the impossibility of a successful union between widely diverging social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds is brutally displayed.

At the wedding reception of John Manning, the Waspish Anglo-Saxon, and Sonya, the Jewish immigrant, Fifth Avenue and Hester Street meet, or rather clash. Even though Sonya has armed herself with a beautiful new dress designed and made by Hollins, the former Jaky Solomon of the Lower East Side, the dress is not protection enough against the biting comments and "vivisecting eyes" of Manning's relatives and friends, all members of New York's Four Hundred. Sonya's words and gestures give away this "Ghetto prodigy" who feels like "an outsider in her own house" (*SOT*, 121–122). But it only gets worse when Sonya's old ghetto friends start showing up. Mrs. Peltz, Sonya's former landlady, literally brings along the entire East Side in the selection of her clothes:

> "They don't have to know that what I'm wearing is the lend from all the neighbors on the block." Then she proceeded to enumerate: "This silk waist, Mrs. Finkelstein from the fish market lent me. And the diamond earrings is from the butcher's wife. Mrs. Sarnsky from the second-hand store let me wear this hat for to day. But don't it all fit me together like I was a lady born? They all said I shined up the block with my clothes. Everybody turned out from the windows to give a look on me."
> (*SOT*, 123f)

Along with her wardrobe Mrs. Peltz not only brings the ghetto neighborhood that Sonya has left behind, but also the warmth and community spirit of the tenements. It is a touching picture in spite of the fact that Sonya's Lower East Side friends clearly make the new bride's acceptance into the "higher-up" society impossible. As Sonya herself had voiced in a syllogism on the inequality that was blatantly visible on the ships bringing the immigrants to America:

> "Tell me in plain words how can there be democratic understanding between those who are free to walk into steerage and the steerage people who are not allowed to give one step up to the upper deck?"
> (*SOT*, 120)

Fifth Avenue and the Lower East Side cannot really mingle, neither socially nor emotionally. The two cultures must co-exist side by side; even if their respective members choose to cross the threshold into the other neighborhood, that endeavor will ultimately be fraught with failure. Figuratively speaking, a "melting pot" city only remains functional if all the social ingredients remain separate and distinct. The fact that Fifth Avenue and the Lower East Side cannot mingle socially is not only felt by the representatives of Fifth Avenue. It is a very common sentiment in Anzia Yezierska's stories when the children of immigrants, trying to climb the social ladder through assimilation, are confronted time and again with the habits of their parents and are embarrassed by them. As we have seen, it is Fanny in "The Fat of the Land" who voices this clash of generations perfectly:

> "You know mother, She'll spoil the beans that we come from Delancey Street the minute we introduce her anywhere. Must I always have the black shadow of my past trailing after me? [...] I've borne the shame of mother while you bought her off with a present and a treat here and there. God knows how hard I tried to civilize her so as not to have to blush with shame when I take her anywhere. I dressed her in the most stylish Paris models, but Delancey Street sticks out from every inch of her. Whenever she opens her mouth, I'm done for."[227]

No matter how hard one tries, assimilation is never complete and the mythical "melting pot" remains an illusion. The heritage of the tenements is a "black shadow" for Fanny who feels a need to "civilize" her mother as if her mother had not already been civilized. Again, Huck Finn comes to mind, but "lighting out for the territories" is no longer an option in this urban context.

In 1915, the philosophy teacher Horace Kallen presented "Cultural Pluralism" as an alternative to the "melting pot" theory. It was well received by, among others, John Dewey, Anzia Yezierska's one time lover and mentor who served as the model for most of her male American protagonists. Kallen created the metaphor of an "orchestra" playing an entire "symphony" with

227 Anzia Yezierska, "The Fat of the Land", *Hungry Hearts*, 122.

different instruments in lieu of the worn metaphor of the "melting pot". In my opinion, and also in light of almost a century of New York immigration history since the publication of "Cultural Pluralism", this is a very apt metaphor indeed:

> As in an orchestra, every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization, with this difference: a musical symphony is written before it is played, in the symphony of civilization the playing is the writing, so that there is nothing so fixed and inevitable about its progressions as in music, so that within the limits set by nature they may vary at will, and the range and variety of the harmonies may become wider and richer and more beautiful.
> But the question is, do the dominant classes in America want such a society?[228]

Kallen's orchestra is indeed a valid and accurate metaphor for the possible future of an immigrant society, then as well as now: nothing is fixed in the urban civilization of Manhattan, it is a symphony in the making or – to use a somewhat more modern term to grasp the essence – it is an unpredictable and jazzy "jam session". Every ethnicity is in the spotlight for a while, but will also contribute to the greater melody of the city at large to produce a specifically urban tune that is new and exciting. After the publication of the Nation article, John Dewey wrote approvingly to Kallen that he agreed with "the orchestra idea, but on condition we really get a symphony and not a lot of different instruments playing simultaneously."[229]

Horace Kallen's remaining question, however, whether "the dominant classes in America want such a society", cannot be answered. America's dominant classes have often prevented immigrants from playing in the urban orchestra and yet nowhere

228 Horace M. Kallen, "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot", *The Nation*, vol. 100 (February 25, 1915) n. pag.

229 Sidney Ratner, "Horace M. Kallen and Cultural Pluralism", *Modern Judaism*, vol. 4, no. 2 (May, 1984) 188. For a continuation of John Dewey's quote and his opinion on the "melting pot", see also footnote 74.

else did immigrants get a better chance to make their tunes heard than in New York City. Another article on "Cultural Pluralism" has pointed out that even with Horace Kallen's apt metaphor of an orchestra to describe the composition of America's population, the questions remain:

> And if this country is like an orchestra, does it follow that there must be a conductor? Who? And a score? Who wrote it? Or do we make it up as we go along?[230]

These good remarks uncover the limited usefulness of attaching metaphors like "melting pot" and "orchestra" (or other used terms like "mosaic", "salad bowl" and the like) to the complexity of a city and its population. And yet, these metaphors are all valid in their own ways, and help us visualize and comprehend to some extent the characteristics of a city that never comes to a halt. The wish for legibility and the wish for some kind of urban truth is understandable even if that truth ultimately turns out to be a different one for everybody. As people we are in dire need of containment and structure to find sense in situations that seem uncontrollable and dangerously in flux. Undoubtedly, there lies a certain safety in naming. By naming the city we fix it, if only in our imagination.

We have come a long way to see that New York City cannot present a unified face with one simple tune or "homogeneous growth" (*COC*, 77); it is a city that means various things to many people, both in reality as well as in its representations. On a purely geographical level the city unites – everything is located on Manhattan island – and yet the separation between the neighborhoods of the Lower East Side and Fifth Avenue could not be more pronounced than if they were located in two separate cities.

In Edith Wharton's New York City immigrants and working people are not given a voice. Minor figures like the charwoman or poor Nettie Struther in *The House of Mirth* remain sketchy types

230 Jules Chametzky, "Beyond Melting Pots, Cultural Pluralism, Ethnicity: Or, Déjà Vu All Over Again", *MELUS*, vol. 16, no. 4, Toward the Multiculture (Winter 1989–Winter 1990): 10.

rather than genuine characters even though their presences are relevant for the development of the plot. Wharton does not really use her descriptive abilities to fully furnish those characters with a true life of their own. An early study of Edith Wharton put it quite bluntly:

> Of the relations of class with class, which is the vital issue of social morality today, she is profoundly ignorant. She has no outlook upon the great mass of humanity.[231]

"Millionaire" New York in Edith Wharton's narratives never really touches upon Anzia Yezierska's "immigrant" city, and it is probably safe to say that the two writers' lives had no points of contact or much in common either. Throughout Wharton's writings and in her letters there are but a few passages openly relating to topics of race. What can certainly be said is that she generally appeared to agree with the "dominant-culture racial attitudes" of her time.[232] Immigrants could be seen as either "racial threat" or "American Potential"[233], but it is obvious that in the early 1900s, fear was likely to often take the upper hand in the face of the massive influx of foreigners to New York City. Even though it was a topic of great concern during her times, Wharton chose to leave race mostly out of her narratives. But even though topics like race and immigration are not "explicit" in her writing, it is important to remember that "race commonly functions to frame ways of seeing and reading the city".[234] We simply cannot entirely discount who we are when producing or receiving literature, visual art, or even music.

Contrary to Edith Wharton's representations of New York City, Anzia Yezierska's city of immigrants does occasionally ex-

231 Stanton Coblentz, "Edith Wharton, Novelist of Manners", *New York Times* (7 June 1925).

232 For a further discussion of Edith Wharton and race, please refer to Elizabeth Ammons, "Edith Wharton and the Issue of Race", in *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, ed. Millicent Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 69.

233 Lori Jirousek, "Spectacle Ethnography and Immigrant Resistance: Sui Sin Far and Anzia Yezierska", 28.

234 Liam Kennedy, *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture*, 2

tend to Fifth Avenue areas, but those contact points tend to stand for the protagonist's aspirations to a better self rather than a true exploration of and adaptation to another city space or ethnic culture. If the contact really does take place, it is bound to lead to more alienation and distress as in *Salome of the Tenements*. New York City's neighborhoods thus touch, but don't truly mix in either Wharton's or Yezierska's urban literature. The "widely-different architectural physiognomies" are simply impossible to reconcile on a social level.

In their urban texts, both Edith Wharton and Anzia Yezierska describe a city of great extremes and a wide range of human expressions. Manhattan's urbanism is presented as intoxicating and voracious in its demands on the urban dweller. As the fictional city infringes upon their sanity, the possibility of domestic retreat becomes a question of urgency and survival for all protagonists. The quest for a home, as an architectural structure as well as spiritual resting place, is a central notion in the urban literary experience.

It is often said that displacement and exile have been conditio sine qua non for Jewish artistic production. Throughout centuries, to be far away in the Diaspora, aching to find a home and, by extension, an identity, has been a central topic in immigrant Jewish literature. For Anzia Yezierska, European displacement and the subsequent search for a true home and identity within the American city has certainly been a driving factor of her literary output as well as an inspiration. As Irving Berlin has so aptly remarked: "Everybody ought to have a lower East Side in their life".[235] Anzia Yezierska's heroines are always internally torn, sometimes even to the point of considering emigration as Fanya in *All I Could Never Be* does: "Can you who have once escaped from all this go back? Can you be an immigrant twice in a lifetime?" But true to Anzia Yezierska's profile of an immigrant who, while agonizing to no end still never gives up and always

235 William Cole, *Quotable New York: A Literary Companion* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 21.

remains hopeful, Fanya refuses defeat and finally shouts: "Damn this introspection!" (*AICNB*, 127).

Ultimately, the double identity of Yezierska's ethnic immigrants cannot be read negatively, although the double consciousness contributes significantly to identity struggles and questions of assimilation. As a writer, Yezierska sees the hyphen in Jewish-American not as a "minus sign" but as a chance, a plus sign if you will, exactly because of the two individual parts.[236] Not only do her protagonists have the fire, drive, and zeal of their immigrant backgrounds, they also acquire the positive attributes of and the option to a future in their "promised land":

> "The big thing about America is what it might become. And it needs you and me, the last no less than the first, to make of it the country of promise it was meant to be."
> (*AICNB*, 91)

Maybe displacement and exile have also been essential to Edith Wharton's work though not existential to her life. After all, the "millionaire" writer left New York City, the city of her birth and heritage, at her own will and was then able to write about it from France at a safe distance across the Atlantic. In leaving the "small and slippery pyramid" of New York City, Wharton freed herself from the confinement of this city. While she herself did not surrender to the pressure of its society, she did not offer the same possibilities to her urban protagonists (*AOI*, 44, 87). As Amy Kaplan put it, Edith Wharton was able "[t]o write herself out of the domestic sphere into the alternative realm of professional authorship".[237] Or, as Wharton herself phrased it in her autobiography, writing gave her an identity: "I had as yet no real personality of my own, and was not to acquire one till my first volume of short stories was published [...]" (*BC*, 112). Still, Edith Wharton

236 For an interesting general discussion of the "minus sign", please refer to Werner Sollors' informative study *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Especially pages 88–92 and 247–254 deal with this topic.

237 Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 72.

left all of her protagonists devoid of true urban homes; she left them resigned to their fates and trapped in a "gilt cage" with no hopes of escape or the possibility of a different future.

The great ache to find a place to call home as well as the hope to reach the "promised land" in New York City can be very well heard in all of Anzia Yezierska's emotional immigrant tales where domesticity truly is a primal concern. She calls attention to this existential question when she writes that "for hundreds of years the persecuted races all over the world were nurtured on hopes of America."[238] Yezierska's stories, full of immigrants in pursuit of the American Dream, could be read as narratives of a homecoming. The immigrant Anzia Yezierska found her voice as a writer in New York City, her "city of final destination."[239] By finding her own voice in the streets and tenements of Manhattan and by giving a hopeful voice to versions of her immigrant self in her urban fiction, Anzia Yezierska managed to create a new identity and thus a life for herself. As she said in "America and I": "In only writing about the Ghetto I found America."[240] In writing, she found her "promised land"; in having her immigrants persevere in spite of adversity and hardship, she let them reach theirs.

Edith Wharton's urban protagonists never lead fulfilling and passionate lives because they submit themselves to the stringent controls and unyielding decrees of New York City, thereby resigning themselves to a fate in the "gilt cage" of society. Just as the city embraces change, urban protagonists, too, must embrace change if they desire to reach their personal "promised land". And it is hope that fuels this change. In closing, the words belong to Anzia Yezierska:

> And hope is the only reality here on earth. It's hope that makes people build cities and span bridges and send ships from one end of the earth to another.
> (*BC*, 126)

238 Anzia Yezierska, "Soap and Water", *Hungry Hearts*, 107.

239 E. B. White, "Here is New York", 121. For the entire quote, please refer to chapter 2.1

240 Anzia Yezierska, "America and I", *The Open Cage*, 33.

5. Appendix: A Brief History of New York City until 1900[241]

5.1. Earliest Evidence: 1524–1621

It is believed that European fishermen had visited the waters around Manhattan and ventured up the Hudson River in the first decade of the sixteenth century. A first record was kept by Giovanni da Verrazzano who, under orders of King Francis I of France, was piloting the "La Dauphine" to find a northern route to China. "La Dauphine" briefly anchored in the Narrows in March 1524 before sailing further north. A year later, Esteban Gomez, of Portuguese descent, sailed up the Hudson River, but decided that it did not lead to China. Fur traders are thought to have followed these explorers in the following decades, especially after the French had discovered the St. Lawrence River Valley in 1535. The traders must have ventured up the Hudson River to trade with the local Lenape Indians well before Henry Hudson anchored off Sandy Hook in September of 1609 with his "Halve Moon", a Dutch ship sent by the East India Company. Looking for a shortcut to the Indies, Hudson also turned around some ninety miles upstream the river later named for him. Nevertheless, the fertile land and the beaver furs he brought back convinced Dutch merchants and captains that it would be worthwhile their efforts to sail across the Atlantic for furs and pelts.

241 For this historical summary, I am deeply indebted to Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace and their concise and interesting work: *Gotham, A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). It has enlightened many aspects of New York City to me and has been invaluable in reference to my interpretation and understanding of city literature. (Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *Gotham*).

5.2. The First Deal: Indian Real Estate for Dutch Money: 1621–1664

The first map of the region, which used the name of "Manhates", was brought back in 1614 by the Dutch captain Adriaen Block who had wintered on the island of Manhattan because his ship, the "Tyger", had been destroyed by fire. Having built another ship, the "Onrust", with Indian help, he explored Long Island Sound as well as the East River and left some of his men on the island to establish the fur trade before returning to Holland.

By the year 1621, reports about the profitability of that trade post led the States-General, the governing body of Holland, to hand "New Netherland", as well as the monopoly for all Dutch fur trade, over to a newly formed company, the "Geoctroyerde West-Indische Compagnie" or West India Company. Thus, the European settlement of Manhattan was not started by a nation but by a company.

The company's instructions for the organization of the new trade post were confusing, however, and after the failure of a number of directors, Peter Minuit was sent to what was now called "New Amsterdam". Minuit was the director who "purchased" Manhattan from the Lenapes in 1626 for relatively worthless trinkets. The Lenape probably did not understand this deal as being a permanent one since their culture had no true sense of property. But from the local Dutch perspective it was the beginning of New Amsterdam, a small village of about 270 inhabitants. From the perspective of the West India Company, it was still nothing more than a trade post and colonization or permanent settlement were not its goals. Possibly, this was one of the main reasons why New Amsterdam did not succeed at first.

After a succession of directors, New Amsterdam still had less than one hundred structures inhabited by some four hundred people twelve years later in 1638. About a quarter of the town's building were taverns or "grog-shops" and its populace spoke some eighteen different languages. A significant number of English dissidents also came for refuge from the strict Puritan rule of the colonies in Massachusetts. Many different backgrounds, not

enough public services or amenities, lots of alcohol, not enough women, massive conflicts with the Lenapes involving taxes, guns and, again, alcohol as well as the fear of losing the trade post to English rule almost brought New Amsterdam to its knees.

In 1647, the West India Company appointed yet another director, Petrus Stuyvesant, to fix the situation. Apart from his involvement with the slave trade and his extreme intolerance of religions other than the one proclaimed by the Reformed Church of Netherlands, Stuyvesant was relatively good for New Amsterdam. He managed to tidy up the trading post and helped transform it into a well-run town by 1664 even though, at times, he had to be reminded by his employer to "[g]overn the people with the utmost caution and leniency [since] [...] too much vehemence may draw upon you the hatred of the people" (*Gotham*, 63). Relative tolerance was thus a very early theme of New York City's founding history.

Petrus Stuyvesant's rule came to an end due to England's renewed pursuits of Dutch interests in the American colonial trade when in March of 1664 King Charles II made his younger brother James, the Duke of York, the proprietor of all the territory of New Netherlands. By September of the same year, the Duke of York's men were sailing into New Amsterdam's harbor. In spite of Stuyvesant's unwillingness to capitulate he really did not have an option. New Amsterdam had only a few soldiers, was short on guns and supplies for a siege, and most residents, being above all merchants of many different nationalities, were simply not willing to put up a fight. Stuyvesant had to capitulate peacefully.

New Amsterdam was renamed after the Duke of York and henceforth became "New York". In spite of Dutch protests in London, the colony was not returned. In March of 1665, Charles II declared war on Holland. In the peace negotiations that followed the war, Holland favored Surinam – highly priced for its sugar and slave trades – and thus let the English keep the new colony.

5.3. New Amsterdam Becomes New York Under British Rule: 1664–1783

New York was briefly repossessed in the second Anglo-Dutch War, becoming New Orange in July 1673 only to be returned to England again a few months later. The city now finally prospered into a truly mercantile city. Major Edmund Andros, the newly installed British Governor, was mainly responsible for giving New York a new economic direction since he realized that the profits from the fur trade had significantly decreased over the years as demands had dwindled overseas. New markets for goods had opened up in the plantation colonies of the West Indies in the meantime and Governor Andros made sure that the New York City merchants had a monopoly over all those trades. New York City in the 1680s was still very much a Dutch town: Dutch culture and language were omnipresent in the streets in spite of a much greater influx of affluent English merchants. The city now had roughly three thousand inhabitants of which the English population represented less than 20 percent but constituted over 40 percent of the city's taxable population (*Gotham*, 87).

In 1683, Governor Andros was replaced by Colonel Thomas Dongan, an Irish Catholic. He brought along Jesuit priests who immediately celebrated the first Mass. New York was a rather tolerant city and, as one early traveler observed, New Yorkers "seem not concerned what religion their neighbor is of, or whether hee hath any or none" (*Gotham*, 94). What Colonel Dongan also did was to institute the "Charter of Libertyes and Priviledges", or what came to be called "Donogan's Charter", which outlined the colony's form of government and the basic rights (e.g. no taxation without representation). He divided the colony into counties with their own local governments and issued a new charter for the city that made it a self-governing corporation. But unrest was everywhere and the people of New York became worried about the recent changes in government. This new English system, after all, obliterated many Dutch customs like a married woman's right to purchase land or to conduct business in her own name. Dutch society was in many ways more

modern and tolerant, favored a much less patriarchal society than the English did. In February of 1685, Charles II died and the Catholic Duke of York became King James II. New York now became a Catholic royal colony, which worried many Protestant and Huguenot inhabitants. The "Charter of Libertyes and Priviledges" was renounced and the "Dominion of New England" was created which included all of New England, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. It was quite clear that both the colony's and the city's destinies were now subject to English Catholic rule. Shortly afterwards the Queen of England gave birth to a male heir, thus establishing the succession of Roman Catholicism. The Whigs, however, called Mary, one of the daughters of James II who had remained a Protestant, and her Dutch husband Prince William of Orange for help. With their army they took London in 1688 and were crowned by the Parliament. Again, Protestant succession was reestablished in New York, too.

News in those days took quite a while to travel across the Atlantic; when it finally did reach New York and the colonies, it certainly made people even more aware of how they were all subject to the whims and politics of Europe without being able to take action. Unrest and dissatisfaction thus fell on fertile grounds.

Throughout the next decades, New York was in flux and subject to many influences. Through their Ministry Act in 1693, the British tried to suppress "irreligion, drunkenness, cursing and swearing, fornication and adultery, thieving, and other evils". The new Governor, Colonel Benjamin Fletcher, pointedly remarked to the bishop of London that the locals only went to church "to find fault in him that preacheth rather than to hear their own" (*Gotham*, 103). It is fascinating to see how certain traits of New York City have been there all along and still endure today. It can be said that New Yorkers were always a nonconformist lot irrespective of their religious, social or cultural backgrounds.

By 1704, there were about 750 houses for some 5,000 inhabitants, the city was already perceived as "compacted" by one visitor, and real estate was hard to find. The city had to make significant efforts to keep up with the demand. Helped along by the growing trade of "white gold" – sugar from the British West Indies – the city expanded, both geographically and population-wise.

After 1750, it already ranked second in wealth and population after Philadelphia. The sugar trade also led to a significant increase of the slave population. Today, it is not well known nor acknowledged that, in fact, New York had the highest concentration of slaves in any of the colonies north of Virginia; by 1746 the African-American population of the city made up about 21 percent of a total population of some 11,000 inhabitants (*Gotham*, 127).[24]

The demand for labor for the sugar and related trades also increased greatly the number of immigrants from Europe who, often fleeing from religious persecution, only too gladly filled those jobs. First came the Germans, mostly Lutherans and Calvinists, followed by the Irish, most of which were Roman Catholics. Many were indentured servants, called "redemptioners", who first had to work for a couple of years to pay off their passage debts. The Jewish population grew also by a continuous immigration of Portuguese speaking Sephardim from many different places. Most of the immigrants faced legal difficulties due to the fact that they were not English subjects and were thus basically prohibited from doing business in New York. But true to its already established mercantile spirit, New York City was quite free in its application of those laws. Local authorities realized early on that those restrictions would only work contrary to any commercial interests.

In 1729, New York City received a new municipal charter, the "Montgomerie Charter", and was acknowledged by his Majesty as a "considerable seaport and exceedingly necessary and useful to our kingdom of Great Britain in supplying our governments in the West Indies with bread, flour, and other provisions" (*Gotham*, 138). The city, as a property owner, could conduct any kind of civic duty, such as building streets, proclaiming regulations and laws, setting up courts, and so on, but it could not tax its residents, and the corporation's top officials were still appointed by the colonial governor under British rule.

Over a period of some twenty years – while the Old World fought the Anglo-Spanish war and the French and Indian war (Seven Years War) – New York briefly slid into a recession as the

24 Eva Homberger, *The Historical Atlas of New York City* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1994), 44.

trades with the West Indies had become much less profitable. Also, being relatively close to French Canada, New York endured a constant state of uncertainty and alert. However, as one New Yorker pointed out in his diary in 1756, "War is declared in England – Universal joy among the merchants" (*Gotham*, 168). Because the city was made "General Magazine of Arms and Military Stores" to provide the British Armies with supplies in the colonies, it quickly regained financial strength again. New Yorkers just always knew how to "make a buck".

Interestingly enough, they also had a nice little lucrative side business in supplying the French enemy with all kinds of goods at the same time and, quite true to the city's mercantile spirit, New York merchants also helped to establish some rather gainful "privateering" during those years. The merchants would actually finance pirate enterprises by buying shares of a particular journey. This financing provided the necessary essentials – ship, food, supplies, and crew – for a voyage to the Caribbean to take out the cargos of French and Spanish ships. Those cargos would then be distributed according to a distribution schedule: the crew of a "privateer" would get 60% of the value while the rest of it was distributed among the shareholders according to their investments. Aside from this very profitable "privateering", the recovery was also helped along by New York's shift to manufacturing. By 1750, New York was prospering again and a period of relative peace followed. Prosperity helped New Yorkers to become increasingly "smart" in dress, education and manner. King's College was founded in 1754. The tranquility didn't last and when British troops captured Montreal in 1760, luck turned for New York, too. British troops departed from Manhattan to continue their war efforts against the French in the Caribbean. This in turn not only drained the city of a very profitable income for its taverns and merchants, but it also essentially voided the possibility of "privateering", because the French and Spanish ships were chased away by his Majesty's navy.

When the mother country under George III introduced the American Revenue Act in 1764 (commonly called the Sugar Act) to raise duties on many items imported into the colonies from the West Indies, and then also introduced the Stamp Act which taxed

paper sold in the colonies just a year later, the colonies started to finally resist. New Yorkers vowed to no longer buy or sell any British goods until those acts were repealed. Even though Parliament did repeal the Stamp Act the following year, it simply passed another new Revenue Act shortly thereafter.

In 1774, after the Boston Tea party, New Yorkers also dumped British tea cargo into the harbor. They did so half-heartedly as they let another tea ship sail back to England. New York now sank into a true depression; exchange rates with England soared, the cost of living increased dramatically, poverty spread while transatlantic immigration still increased, mostly at this time from the British Isles. By 1775, New York had more than 22,000 inhabitants and still was the second biggest city in America after Philadelphia. After the Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 4, 1776, Patriots everywhere spoke of New York as the weakest link in the struggle for independence against Britain. In fact, after George Washington's army was driven out of the city, New York remained virtually the only American city under constant British occupation and was the principal base for the British military until "Evacuation Day" in 1783.

5.4. Commerce Rules: 1783–1843

After two disastrous fires and seven years of enemy occupation, New Yorkers needed to do some serious rebuilding. Thousands of people continued to pour into the city because the Continental Congress had selected it as their seat until a permanent place for the new national government could be decided upon. General George Washington was inaugurated in New York as the first President of the United States on April 30, 1789. But already in 1790, Congress met for the last time in New York City before moving to Philadelphia.

News of the revolution in France reached New York in 1789. While many New Yorkers were happy to lend support to the revolutionaries, New York merchants pleaded neutrality in the interest of commerce, a strategy that "paid off handsomely for New York [...] and transformed the city into the nation's premier port and marketplace" (*Gotham*, 333). Helped along by the utter chaos in Europe, Americans were able to get a firm grip on international trade. New York in particular became the first port of entry in the United States, passing Philadelphia for reasons of geography on the one hand, and volume of banks and insurance companies on the other. The city had again perfectly positioned itself to succeed commercially. As money begets money, business begets business, and people from all over continued to be sucked into the city to try their luck. When Robert Fulton designed and constructed the first steamboat in 1807, another leap for trade was made. His voyage up the Hudson opened up many possibilities to ship goods like furs, cotton, or wheat downriver to New York, thereby again enforcing its dominance over other American ports. In 1808, the first American millionaire, John Jacob Astor, emerged. A visitor to the city in those days was well aware of its commercial character. The city was framed by the masts and sails of ships in her wharves. As Walt Whitman would write a little later in his poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", "Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-hemm'd Manhattan?"[313]

But Manhattan wasn't just impressive. A lot of things did not work well or at all. Sanitation, among other things, was one of the major problems as the city had a hard time getting her fresh water supply organized. Also, hogs kept roaming the streets and were just about the only ones "cleaning up". As it grew rapidly, the city would get ever more dirty and frequent visitation by yellow fever and plagues was quite common. It would take another couple of decades before New York would manage to clean up the mess.

In the meantime, the wealthier residents simply moved up the island to the countryside, and the division of home and work was implemented. This required the establishment of some sort of public transportation between the downtown business district and the uptown residential areas. New York coach makers introduced the omnibus, a copy of the European wagon drawn by

313 Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Third ed. (New York: Norton & Company, 1983), 766

horses that could seat 12 or more passengers. The emergence of this new, efficient means of transportation rather increased the separation of home and work for the more prosperous families to an extent that the downtown district became almost exclusively a male domain with female presence heavily frowned upon.

Some New Yorkers envisioned the city's future possibilities. DeWitt Clinton, Mayor and then Governor of New York, proposed the construction of the Erie Canal which would even better connect New York to the West. It would take until after the conclusion of another war with England, from 1812–1815, before this aspiring project would take off. In eight years, from 1817 until 1825, the Erie Canal was constructed. Being a true engineering miracle that would soon spur the development of the West, it was 363 miles long, forty feet wide, four feet deep, passed eighty-three massive stone locks and eighteen aqueducts. Within only one year, tolls brought in all the expenditures of the construction and New York became busier than ever with the influx of goods, money, and people.

The introduction of gaslight in the mid 1820s again furthered New York as a market place, allowing, among other things, shops to stay open late. Frances Trollope, an English visitor who was not very impressed with the rest of America, wrote about New York in her book *Domestic Manners of the Americans* in 1832:

> I have never seen the bay of Naples, I can therefore make no comparison, but my imagination is incapable of conceiving any thing of the kind more beautiful than the harbor of New York. Various and lovely are the objects which meet the eye on every side, but the [in] naming them would only be to give a list of words, without conveying the faintest idea of the scene. I doubt if ever the pencil of Turner could do it justice, bright and glorious as it rose upon us. We seemed to enter the harbour of New York upon waves of liquid gold, and as we darted past the green isles, which rise from its bosom, like guardian sentinels of the fair city, the setting sun stretched his horizontal beams farther and farther at each moment, as if to point out to us some new glory in the landscape [...].
>
> I must still declare that I think New York one of the finest cities I ever saw [...]. Its advantages of position are, perhaps, unequalled any where. Situated on an island, which I think it will one day cover, it rises, like Venice, from the sea, and like that fairest of cities in the days of her glory, receives into its lap tribute of all the riches of the earth [...].
>
> I [...] will only say that during the seven weeks we staved there, we always found something new to see and to admire; and were it not so far from all the old-world things which cling about the heart of an European, I should say that I never saw a city more desirable as a residence.[244]

In spite of all the monetary success of the city in those years, one thing was felt lacking by both residents and visitors alike: New York did "not abound in men of learning" as one French traveler would remark (*Gotham*, 376). It was lacking an intellectually stimulating exposure to literature, the arts, and history unlike other cities of its magnitude in Europe. When Washington Irving published *A History of New York, From the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*, in 1809, he in fact became the first American writer to write about local issues, characters, and history even though the writing was largely fictional. Irving's book was surprisingly well received abroad, too, and made the point that America, and specifically, New York had to offer more than just commercial goods. Even though speaking tongue-in-cheek through his character Diedrich Knickerbocker, Irving realized quite accurately that "cities of *themselves*, and in fact empires of *themselves*, are nothing without an historian."[245] In order to become a city of importance New York had to acquire culture. Incidentally, it was also Irving in his *Salmagundi* (1807), in collaboration with his brother William and James Kirke Pauling, who gave New York its nickname "Gotham", meaning "goat-town" after the English town of Gotham where people in the Middle Ages had successfully acted insane in order to avoid being taxed by King John. This lack of culture would eventually be resolved. As New York City grew and became an ever more powerful magnet for both a domestic as well as an international influx of people, it was also able to draw on an ever increasing body of literary people and artists. New York was already the hub of incoming news from Europe because of its busy port. At the same time, it now had the best and fastest distribution channels in America due

244 Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832; reprint, London: Penguin Books, 1997), 26ff.

245 Washington Irving, "A History of New York, from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty", *Washington Irving: History, Tales and Sketches* (1809, reprint, New York: The Library of America, 1983), 379.

to the opening of the Erie Canal and the invention of the steamboat. It had all the advantages for collecting and distributing the news ahead of anyone else in the country. New York's newspaper and publishing business grew therefore with almost unstoppable speed; by 1830, there were 47 newspapers, 11 of them were published daily (*Gotham*, 440). New York soon also became the book-publishing center of the United States.

The city grew. And grew. So much that in 1811 a state-appointed Streets Commission presented plans to superimpose a grid over parts of the existing streets extending well north all the way up Manhattan island. The idea was to "unite regularity and order with the Public convenience and benefit, and in particular to promote the health of the city." The plan called for twelve avenues a hundred feet wide, being crossed at right angles every two hundred feet by streets of fifty or sixty feet width. There were to be "no circles, ovals, and stars" as they would interfere with the "principles of economy". Only Broadway was allowed to continue diagonally, and few open spaces were planned since the surrounding East and North (Hudson) Rivers were considered enough. Quite utilitarian and egalitarian, the streets and avenues were numbered for easier location and, as the surveyor of the Streets Commission, Robert Randel Jr., claimed, this also made for better "buying, selling, and improving real estate" (*Gotham*, 421). Again, the financial aspects of city planning were vital.

In 1817, New York brokers formed the New York Stock and Exchange Board to better organize regular trading. Soon, New York City would bypass Philadelphia as the nation's first money market. How important New York City was regarding business became apparent when in 1818 the Black Ball Line introduced a new concept of sailing to Liverpool and Le Havre. Instead of waiting until a ship's hold was finally full, they would now sail at an appointed date every month, making it much easier for merchants to plan their business. Before the middle of the century, New York was connected with Europe with an average of three sailings per week. Soon, the packets would not only carry cargo but passengers, too, and as a result, European immigration increased again. Manhattan's population, at 124,000 in 1824, grew to over 270,000 by 1835, i.e. it more than doubled in only 11 years (*Gotham*, 434).

New York was the fastest growing city in the United States; real estate prices soared and construction exploded. Not only did the city have to grow either by lateral or by vertical expansion, but it also had to accommodate ever more people of all kinds of backgrounds. With increased German and Irish immigration, conflicts with poor local blacks over lowly paid jobs ensued more often. In spite of its earlier history, New York now also became the center of the national antislavery movement. The American Anti Slavery Society was founded in Manhattan in 1833, which soon led the city to becoming a haven for fugitive slaves from the South.

New York City got another boost from the railroad boom in the 1830s. This also helped its financial markets and established the city as the undisputed financial capital of America. These prosperous times for some were experienced quite differently by what Jacob Riis would later call "The Other Half" who lived in ever more dire and filthy quarters, called "tenements", with no clean, running water nor fresh air.[246] Cholera swept through the town in the summer of 1832 and again in 1834, affecting mostly that "other half" while the richer half had fled to the country. The Great Fire in 1835 made it also quite clear that water was still a desperately needed urban good. Philip Hone wrote in his diary:

> How shall I record the events of last night, or how attempt to describe the most awful calamity which has ever visited these United States? [...] Nearly one half of the first ward is in ashes, 500 to 700 stores, which with their contents are valued at $ 20,000,000 to $ 40,000,000, are now lying in an undistinguishable mass of ruins. There is not perhaps in the world the same space of ground covered by so great an amount of real and personal property as the scene of this dreadful conflagration. [...] The night was intensely cold, which was one cause of the unprecedented progress of the flames, for the water froze in the hydrants and the engines and their hose could not be worked without great difficulty. (December 17, 1835)[247]

Amazingly, only two people died in the Great Fire since the downtown district was almost exclusively commercial. The glow

246 Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives. Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971).

247 Hone, Philip, *The Diary and Selected Papers of Old Manhattan*, ed. Louis Auchincloss (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 51.

could be seen all the way to Philadelphia. Within only a year, 500 new building emerged and the entire area was completely rebuilt in an enormous real estate boom. By 1837, construction of the Croton Water Aqueduct was started. It ran 32 miles to the Harlem River Valley and would soon provide the city with fresh water and better sanitation. But in 1837, depression hit the city again due to the Bank of England's raised discount rate which dramatically reduced the flow of capital to the new world.

5.5. Manufacturing Takes Over, Immigration Takes Off: 1844–1879

After a few hard years, New York City was up and running full steam once more. The port was still a big magnet for the world. In 1849 over 3,000 ships from more than 150 countries used the city's harbor. They "carried with them half the nation's imports and departed with nearly one-third its exports." The California gold rush in 1848 also brought a lot of business to Manhattan. How incredibly busy the city already was back then is evident in the comment of a visiting correspondent for the London Times: "There is a perpetual jam and lock of vehicles for nearly two miles along the chief thoroughfare" (*Gotham*, 653).

The city now shifted from trading to manufacturing. It had an ideal location for export as well as for the growing local market; it had readily available financing and a cheaply available labor force that kept growing due to the increasing immigration. Among the manufactures, the textile industry was dominant from the 1850s.

Anzia Yezierska would later recall her own experiences in those immigrant sweatshops and base her stories in the textile quarters that so transformed the cityscape. The garment industry, through the production of "ready-made", store sold clothes (as opposed to clothes that were sewn at home by female family members for their family's sole use), became Manhattan's biggest industry, employing some 35 percent of all manufacturing employees and exporting about 40 percent of the nation's clothes

(*Gotham*, 664). Those jobs were poorly paid and the workdays extremely long. Single women and widows made from only 50 cents to two dollars a week as seamstresses, while unskilled male laborers in other trades made around seven dollars. Unless the whole family worked, it was barely enough to survive. On the other side of the social spectrum, the rich were busy building the city and making known New York's status as "the" metropolis all over the world.

The invention of the "daguerreotype" arrived in New York City in 1839. The city could finally be photographed and mapped, especially from a bird's eye view, so that it would become comprehensible, readable and above all coherent. This helped proclaim the growing metropolis even further, making it soon the most reproduced city in the country. In 1858, an effort at establishing a cable connection between Europe and the New World also helped New York City. Unfortunately, the cable failed shortly after its inception. It was not immediately repaired and was only fully functioning again a few years later.

By now, New York was the capital of information, with its many newspapers, "penny papers", and books. As the female readership grew it became more acceptable for women to write for publication, too. Writers now tried to make sense of the city, to bring some system into the urban chaos by explaining metropolitan life to outsiders in the form of travel or guidebooks. These were generally rather one-sided versions of the city that did not include any mentioning of the shadier parts of the metropolis. The city of the guidebooks was understandable, legible, and noble. Charles Dickens was one of the few who, after his visit to America in 1842, also included at least some information on the city's darker side in his travel accounts in *American Notes for General Circulation*. In it, Dickens had few positive words for this New World: "[…] 'we are a new county' which is so often advanced as an excuse for defects which are quite unjustifiable […]".[248] Talking about the people in general, he ventures a harsh critique: "Too much of the old Puritan spirit exists in these parts to the present

248 Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842; reprint, New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 289

hour [...]." When writing specifically about New York City, which he found "most hospitable" and "generally polished and refined" in spite of "a greater infusion of the mercantile spirit", Dickens seemed to like his American experience a little better. Apart, that is, from the "portly sows" that roamed in the streets and the colorful dresses of the ladies: "Heavens save the ladies, how they dress! We have seen more colours in these ten minutes, than we should have seen elsewhere, in as many days."[249]

Dickens' commentaries spurred many new urban sketches. These talked about life in the metropolis with all of its chaotic quality, the smells, the noises, the squalor, and the pain. They made clear that the city as such was not decipherable as glossily shown in the guidebooks and daguerreotypes. Reading the city would require a different set of eyes, ears, and noses. The publication of George G. Foster's *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches* in 1850 showed a revealing portrait of the city just as it was being recognized as a major metropolis.[250] Foster, who was also a reporter for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, started the tradition of urban journalism that would later be continued by Jacob Riis' texts and photographs of "the other half". The city was gaining a new urban confidence that found its way into all kinds of literature. While some considered the crowds, the changes, the pace and the size of it all intimidating and were deploring the fact that the "city's relentless focus on the future was ravaging its past, undermining the sense that New York was a home, not just a grid of opportunities", others saw the city as full of "wonderful energy and vigor" and considered the crowds, the changes and the pace a "grand kaleidoscope in perpetual motion" (*Gotham*, 692–695).

New York City continued to attract writers, such as Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville, who both adopted a rather gloomy view of it, quite unlike Walt Whitman, who gave Manhattan its first exuberant urban ode in his "Leaves of Grass", published in 1855. Whitman introduced a new way of writing poetry – doing away with rhyme and stanzaic order – and basically using every

249 Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation*, 122; 143; 139; 128.

250 George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches* (1850; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

day language so that anyone could understand him. He was truly at home in the city, having experienced it, like so many other ordinary people, not from a comfortable distance but from within. Whitman's love for the city can very well be heard in one of his later poems called "Broadway". It was published as an annex to the 1889 edition of "Leaves of Grass":

> What hurrying human tides, or day or night!
> What passions, wishings, desires, ardors, swim thy waters!
> What whirls of eyes, bliss and sorrow, stem there!
> What curious questioning glances – glints of love!
> Envy, envy, scorn, contempt, hope, aspiration!
> Thou portal – thou arena – thou of the myriad long drawn lines and groups!
> (Could but thy flagstones, curbs, façades, tell their unwritable tales;
> Thy windows rich, and huge hotels – thy side-walks wide;)
> Thou of the endless sliding, muscity, shuffling feet!
> Thou, like the parti-colored world itself – like infinite, teeming, rushing life!
> Thou vast'd vast, unspeakable show and lesson![251]

Isn't his exuberance just amazing? Whitman almost shouts out his praise for Broadway. Every line but the one in parenthesis ends with an exclamation mark – the vertical mark that could well stand as a metaphor for the entire city itself.

As the city grew, so did the fortunes of a few of its luckier citizens. By the mid 1850s, New York City was starting to produce a constantly expanding new category of residents, the "millionaires". In earlier days, there had been a few moneyed, native New York families like the Astors, the Stuyvesants, and the Schermerhorns, who made their money in real estate or trading. Now even people who had moved to the city recently became part of the so-called "millionaires". By 1856, only a little more than one quarter of the top taxpayers were true New Yorkers of older heritage. As can very well be seen in Edith Wharton's fiction, the old moneyed and the new moneyed classes, while clashing over morals and

251 Walt Whitman, "Broadway", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, Eds. Nina Baym et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1985), 2099

standards at first, would eventually fuse into one single class, at least when seen from the less endowed outside. The money also kept the manufacturing businesses growing; the women of the "millionaire" class kept the textile industry very busy as one could certainly not be seen twice in the same dress. If one takes into account that the average skirt in those times measured about six feet in circumference – apparently the department store aisles had to be widened to accommodate those skirts – and required some thirty or forty yards of fabric, which from today's perspective is simply mind boggling, it comes as no surprise that the textile industry must have done very well indeed.

This even more so because of the very cheap, abundant, and mostly immigrant labor force available (*Gotham*, 722). From 1840 to 1859 immigration levels soared to over 4 million people, and by 1860, Manhattan island was well covered with housing up to 42nd street. Famines in Ireland, general unrest in Europe, and the religious suppression of Jews in Germany led to increased immigration. By 1850, two out of three residents had been born abroad (*Gotham*, 727, 737). In 1854 alone more than 300,000 of the 428,000 immigrants who came to the United States decided to settle in New York City at first. No wonder then that the streetscape changed dramatically. As demand for housing became ever more urgent, the construction of more "tenement" buildings increased. Tenements changed the housing in the city: by 1900, there were 42,700 tenements housing almost 1.6 million people.[2] The tenements became cities within the city. They formed, changed, and even dominated the working classes. The New Tenement House Law of 1879 tried to address issues of construction and sanitation, but it was nearly impossible to control the greedy tenement landlords and correct the dire housing situation, starkly portrayed by Jacob A. Riis, in 1890, in *How the Other Half Lives*.

As the town grew with more people of various social, ethnic, religious, and financial backgrounds, the problems multiplied. Cholera and typhus, due to poor sanitation and overcrowding, were common. Even though the pigs were finally banned uptown, the manure from the more than 22,000 horses employed to pull

[2] Eric Homberger, *The Historical Atlas Of New York City*, 110

public transportation as well as the stench from overflowing sewers and backyard privies must have been horrible. Theft was rampant, too. The city was clearly not a safe place anymore and became more polarized.

Between 1857 and 1860, Frederick Law Olmsted, together with Calvert Vaux, designed and implemented Central Park, the biggest urban park in America. It was an effort to give the city "lungs" to breathe, to bridge the gap between the masses and to foster a sense of community among the city's residents. The vision of man-made nature available to all residents was wonderful but did not work out in the beginning as public transportation from the Bowery to Central Park was simply too expensive for most workers. The park was thus mostly enjoyed by the upper classes who already lived in proximity to it.

Prostitution was also very common. It constituted the city's highest paying jobs for women: while a seamstress would barely make three dollars a week now, a courtesan in a fancy brothel could easily get ten dollars or more for entertaining a gentleman for an hour or two. A growing feminist movement unsuccessfully tried to abolish prostitution, but the business of some estimated 7,5 million dollars, which was just below the value of the garment industry, was being supported and patronized by too many New York men (*Gotham*, 807). In the mercantile spirit of the city's foundation, a profitable business was not to be given up lightly!

The city became more polarized not only between rich and poor, but also between the male downtown business domain and the uptown empire of the female gendered home, at least regarding the middle and upper classes. Women felt left out of the glorifying action of the bustling city, doomed to passivity behind their own walls. Starting in the 1850s, a steadily growing domestic literature for a female readership, written by women, was one way to escape from the restraints of idleness. Respectable women could not work for money, but writing was one of the few exceptions. With the growing feminist movement as well as the increased immigration, women of the upper classes did eventually find small escapes out of their domestic prisons by being vocal supporters of many a reform movement for the betterment of the poorer classes. How patronizing that reform movement of the rich New

Yorkers was for the poor immigrants can be seen time and again in Yezierska's fiction. As Burrows and Wallace put it,

> [r]eform projects justified respectable women's claim on city space. Social housekeeping was deemed a legitimate extension of women's sphere into the public arena [...]. Like the women writer who (with the help of readers) had secured a position in the marketplace, so female reformers (with the help of reformesses) secured a place in the civic and charitable arena.
> (*Gotham*, 803)

Another acceptable escape location was the midtown fashion district. With the railroad and real estate booms not only the mansions had become bigger and more ornate, but the focus on ladies' fashion had dramatically increased also. A lady's wardrobe had become a sign of her husband's success in business, a canvas to show off his wealth. New York City was the first stop for fashion coming in from Paris and a great magnet for ladies from all across America journeying to the city to shop for clothes. New York's garment industry grew enormously and the demand for fashion provided many newly arrived immigrants with lowly paid work. But New York women were still very much under the command of their husbands or fathers: they could not control their earnings or properties and could not vote or be the legal guardians of their children. To a point, the poorer immigrant women were almost more liberated because they could at least work and earn their own money, even if they had to share it with their families.

The panic of 1857 showed the world how interconnected and important New York City had become, having repercussions abroad, too. Most of the New York banking system essentially collapsed because of decreased European demand for American wheat, low railroad stock earnings, speculation, and the great difficulty of merchants to collect on Midwestern debts. The resulting depression – in which even the completion of Fifth Avenue mansions was halted in mid construction – also put a temporary break on immigration numbers since many laborers were laid off and the news spread across the Atlantic. New York did not have much time to recover from the depression before domestic troubles started once more with the Civil War in 1861. The city had to shuffle its political alliances again. As usual, the determining

factors were business and economic interests. New York was the one Northern city with the most financial contacts in the South; it was the number one port where Southern cotton would ship to Europe and European merchandise in reverse ship down to the South. In spite of the fact that many New Yorkers were on principle against slavery and that the city was home to a lot of free blacks, having become a prominent station on the Underground Railroad for runaways, New Yorkers still wanted to keep the status quo. They did not want to offend the Southern states because that would certainly jeopardize their business associations. As one merchant put it quite frankly in a letter to an abolitionist:

> [...] we are no such fools as not to know that slavery is a great evil, a great wrong. But a great portion of the property of the Southerners is invested under its sanction; and the business of the North, as well as of the South, has become adjusted to it. [...] We cannot afford, sir, to let you and your associates endeavor to overthrow slavery. It is not a matter of principles with us. It is a matter of business necessity.
> (*Gotham*, 868)

Finally, the provisional Confederacy government announced its tariff policy to reduce taxes on shipments through Southern ports to only half of the federal rates charged in New York City. As this meant circumventing the metropolis by directly exporting to and importing from England, New York's merchant classes were now convinced of the necessity of war. While businesses briefly struggled at the onset of Civil War, the merchants soon shifted their interest to the West. When the Mississippi river became unavailable for commerce, traffic shifted to the railroad again. Grain and cattle became the major focus and wartime orders of clothes and supplies kept the city quite busy. The Civil War contributed significantly to the emergence of many city millionaires who, in spite of federal laws, still managed to do business with the Southern enemies. In 1863 more Northern soldiers were needed because Confederate armies started invading the North. Those drafts were not democratic: by either paying three hundred dollars or offering a substitute, the draft could easily be avoided. The subsequent New York draft riots were the worst display of civic disobedience American soil had yet seen. The fury of the white, mostly Irish

workingmen, was not only directed at rich white New Yorkers, but also at poor blacks who had long been blamed for taking over lowly jobs. Even George Templeton Strong, who had supported the upper class New York opinion ("We Northerners object to slavery on grounds of political economy, not of ethics [...].") had a profound change of mind, writing in his diary on July 19, 1863:

> Men and ladies attacked and plundered by daylight in the streets, private houses suddenly invaded by gangs of ruffians and sacked, while the women and children run off for their lives. Then there is the unspeakable infamy of the nigger persecution. They are the most peaceable, sober, and inoffensive of our poor [...]. This is a nice town to call itself the centre of civilization! [...] How this infernal slavery system has corrupted our blood, North as well as South![24]

The draft riots, however, even though horrible as they happened, were not more than a hiccup in the city's wartime boom. As always, New Yorkers traded heavily with the enemy and profited handsomely by it. Land speculation, stock manipulation, a new gold exchange, there seemed to be no limits.

After the Civil War, New York directed industrialization of the West expanded even more as open business with the South was not yet considered safe or reliable again. While the city was quick in reacting to new business opportunities out West, it was much slower in responding to issues closer at home that had nothing to do with making money. For the size of New York, the city's social, infrastructural, and sanitation services were not up to standard. New York did not have a professional fire department until after the Civil War. It had an enormous housing crisis as the immigrants had continued to come to America in spite of its domestic war. More than half of the city's residents were immigrants packed into unsanitary, overcrowded tenements (*Gotham*, 921). The city desperately needed to bring order to the chaos by improving transport and access to the business centers, providing more as well as affordable housing, getting rid of the muck and manure that still piled high in the streets because of the horse carriages (apparently some 400 tons of manure on a daily basis!) and by widely improving sanitary installation and health.

But the upper half of New York society was rather busy with other things after the war. It seemed that they had only waited to show off their new wealth and attire; they spent some seven million dollars on six hundred balls in the first year after the war (*Gotham*, 960). The city seemed to be ruled from both ends: on the one side, the millionaires with their extreme displays of enormous riches, and on the other side, the poor immigrants who lived in the Lower East Side settlements like cattle. Even though there was an extensive number of middle class New Yorkers, they just blended into the ever-growing streetscape of the city. The middle class voice was not heard as much or was being drowned out by the increasing excesses of the rich or the loudly present masses of the immigrant poor. After the war, the middle class would eventually become synonymous with the educated class, an achievement that was self-acquired and earned rather than bestowed by simply being wealthy. Naturally, this cultivation did require prosperity, too, as cultivating the arts and letters was not possible on labor wages and disposable time. Thus, the educated upper professional class started to blend in somewhat with the moneyed class. The working class started mingling with the upper class when the Sixth Avenue El finally reached Central Park in the 1870s for an affordable fare and in reasonable time. But the depression did not help in bringing the two extremes of New York City's population any closer as the times were marked by many labor uprisings and unrest. New York had become a city with a distinct business center downtown and resident quarters uptown that kept being relocated north as the city continued to grow. As Henry James has Morris Townsend say in *Washington Square*:

> "That's the way to live in New York – to move every three or four years. Then you always get the last thing. It's because the city's growing so quick – you've got to keep up with it. It's going straight up town – that's where New York is going."[25]

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24 George Templeton Strong, *The Diary and Strong Diaries of Manhattan*, 221.

25 Henry James, *Washington Square* (1880; reprint, New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 50

5.6. Corporate New York City: 1880–1900

Once the war and the depression were over, New York City's economy was rapidly expanding again. Thomas Edison brought incandescent electric light to the city. Even the Statue of Liberty was illuminated when it was dedicated in 1886. The lights later had to be dimmed as they made navigation difficult for incoming ships. A metaphor for the illuminated and promising city, the gleaming Statue of Liberty tempted travelers, either warming or then scorching them when they arrived at the city's shores like insects attracted to light. The "golden door" often turned out to be anything but golden:

> Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
> With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
> Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
> A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
> Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
> Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
> Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
> The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
> "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
> With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
> Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
> The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
> Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
> I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"[255]

Begun in 1869, Brooklyn Bridge was completed in 1883, showing New York not only as a capitalist city, but also as one on the cutting edge of invention. It was a city that dared, a city that craved challenges and sought the international spotlight. New York City now stood for progress and possibility; in the eyes of the world the city had become identical with the promise of America.

255 Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus", was written in 1883 to raise funds for the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty. The last five lines were engraved on a plaque and placed on the pedestal in 1903, many years after Emma Lazarus' death. By 1945, the entire poem was relocated and placed over the Statue's main entrance.

New York City was the center of the universe. United as one in the eyes of all outsiders, but deeply divided within: it was two cities on either end of the capitalist scale. It was filled with two kinds of immigration: one very large stream of people from mostly the old world in search of a better life in the "promised land", and one much smaller one from within America to join and socialize with the moneyed and privileged classes. The "fashionable" or "smart" set of those times comprised "only about 400 people" according to Ward McAllister who, along with Mrs. Astor, was steering the course of New York society. In his book, *Society As I Have Found It*, published in 1890, McAllister gives us an almost shockingly simple and conceited insight into the doings of said society without the beneficial filter of fiction. He wrote plainly and proudly about what society did, which was limited to balls, receptions, dinners, and what was or was not fashionable.[256] By sheer luck, my 115-year-old copy of *Society As I Have Found It*, discovered in a rare books store in Richmond, Virginia, provided me with a tiny newspaper clipping of the book's reception at the time and shows no date or verifiable newspaper source due to its size; I have decided to nevertheless include it here as it seems authentic and provides us with a rare glimpse of the past. It is about a sermon delivered by the Rev. Carlos Martyn of the first Reformed Church in Newark, New Jersey, who, in referring to McAllister's book, preached that it

> has no literary value, is wretchedly and ignorantly written, and offends against grammar as sadly as it does against morals. Its only importance comes from the fact that it is a photograph of what calls itself 'society'. It echoes the vapid ideas and points the empty life of our American codfish aristocracy. It is a representative book, therefore, alike in manner and in matter.

While money, no matter where it came from, would eventually unite society to some extent, religion became often a more dividing factor. Wealthy and mostly Sephardic Jews had previously been integrated with their Anglo-Saxon Christian peers, but now

256 Ward McAllister, *Society As I Have Found It* (New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1890).

anti-Semitic ostracism grew during the 1880s and became quite common as Eastern Jewish immigration increased dramatically toward the turn of the century. While there were already some 40,000 East European Jews in New York City by the 1870s, this number would climb to more than seven times that to roughly 290,000, by the end of the century (*Gotham*, 1114). The new immigrants came from the Pale of settlement from the Ukraine over Russia to Lithuania. They came from the shtetls and had fled from either increased Pogroms after Czar Alexander's assassination in 1881, or they came for economic reasons. To New Yorkers, they seemed exotic and foreign and were in desperate need to be "Americanized". A standard saying of the time was that Europe was "vomiting" which was certainly not a nice way of referring to the people who had decided to come to the New World.

The railroad stocks boomed, and Wall Street took off once again. The city invested greatly and successfully in self promotion and advertisement to attract new corporations, thereby also funding a tremendous real estate boom, both up the island and vertically up in the sky as space became more limited.

The invention of the passenger elevator in the late 1850s made the taller buildings easily accessible. The first building that included an elevator, the Equitable Building, had been finished in 1870 and was seven and a half stories tall. In 1889, a new technology using iron skeletons to support even higher structures, introduced by architect Bradford Lee Gilbert, was first used for the construction of the eleven-story Tower Building on Broadway. It was 158 feet tall. The people of New York, not yet accustomed to the new dimension, actually called the Tower Building the "idiotic building".[257] A year later, the Tower Building was toppled by the 309 feet tall Pulitzer or World Building which was also the very first building to overshadow the spire of Trinity Church. Henry James called this "cruelly overtopped" in "New York Revisited". To James, the skyscrapers "have so promptly usurped a glory that affects you as rather surprised, as yet, at itself", and he considers

257 Richard Burns, Dir., PBS Documentary Series: *New York: The Power and the People Episode IV: 1898–1918* (New York: Warner Home Video, 1999)

them "extravagant pins in a cushion already overplanted."[258] It was no longer just a vertical quest for space, it was also very much a race for the tallest building for the entire world to see and admire. Never before in urban architecture had the third dimension been so rigorously explored. Even to this date, New York City has more skyscrapers than any other city.[259] The famous architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable has quite rightfully written that there is more to skyscrapers than just the height: "Its symbolism is complex, its role in the life of the city and the individual is vexing, and its impact is shattering. The skyscraper is Olympian or Orwellian, depending on how you look at it."[260]

Aside from these technical advances, New York City also boomed on the stage and in publishing. The huge influx of people who, in spite of having to assimilate and change did nevertheless bring their cultural baggage with them, helped infuse the theaters with new ideas. While Jewish and Yiddish theaters would try to depict the immigrant experience, the press would now also focus more on the perspective of ordinary immigrant people. Those were both efforts at mapping the urban experience through art. Art became a tool to decipher the confusing and frightening urban grid of life. First, however, these portrayals were often picturesque rather than realistic assessments of the urban immigrant poor. It would take Jacob Riis' photographic publication in 1890 – coincidentally published in the same year as McAllister's *Society As I Have Found It* and often very favorably compared to it – to give that picturesque image a disturbing reality that could no longer be ignored. While poverty had long been assumed to be an individual problem, it became clear now that the underlying cause had a big social dimension and needed to be tackled on a governmental scale.

The Panic of 1893 again brought temporary hardship as more businesses than ever before were financially ruined. In 1895, Theodore Roosevelt, even went as far as to declare that America

258 Henry James, "New York Revisited", *The American Scene*, 60.

259 Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995), 1074

260 Ada Louise Huxtable, "The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered", *On Architecture: Collected Reflections on a Century of Change* (New York: Walker and Company, 2008), 134

needed a war to stimulate the economy and help an expansionist agenda. When America's meddling in Cuba finally led to a brief war with Spain, the victory satisfied those imperial cravings while lifting the country out of depression. But New York had also long entertained expansionist ideas much nearer to home: the business community felt that the city needed to keep an edge by consolidating the metropolitan area and annexing surrounding cities and villages in order to remain a competitive urban empire.

Finally, after all the administrative and political hurdles had been overcome and the new Charter of Greater New York had been signed, the five boroughs of Brooklyn, Queens, Bronx, Staten Island, and Manhattan were combined to form the City of New York at midnight on December 1897. For New York City, the 20th century had started early.

In subsequent years, New York City literally exploded on all fronts. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the population of New York City increased by 1.330 million between 1900 and 1910 to a total of 4.767 million.[20] The city became the epicenter of the modern world.

[20] Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, 920–925.

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View South through Loggia Arch of Barbizon Hotel, ca. 1930

Photograph by Samuel H. Gottscho
Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York.

2.1. The Geography of City Space

> There are roughly three New Yorks. There is, first, the New York of the native man or woman who was born here, who takes the city for granted and accepts its size and its turbulence as natural and inevitable. Second, there is the New York of the commuter – the city that is devoured by locusts each day and spat out each night. Third, there is the New York of the person who was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something. Of these three bewildering cities the greatest is the last – the city of final destination, the city that is a goal. It is this third city that accounts for New York's high-strung desperation, its peculiar deportment, its dedication to the arts, and its incomparable achievements. Commuters give the city tidal restlessness, natives give it solidity and continuity, but the settlers give it passion.[2]

For the sake of my argument, I will define what E. B. White calls "commuters" as the indifferent masses of people in between the native New Yorkers, – the "millionaires" for my discussion – on the one hand, and the "immigrants" on the other. Because the masses are undefined and don't have distinctive, individualized traits, they serve in the role of extras and appear as "the crowd" often in Anzia Yezierska's and rarely in Edith Wharton's city literature.

One could argue though that there is an amalgam of sorts between the two types of the native "millionaire" and the "immigrant". It is what Edith Wharton generally calls "the intruders" and by which she means the influx of rich and successful, but at the same time rather uncultivated Americans of the west. To the native upper class New Yorkers, those intruders were often considered "immigrants", too, because even though they were not really foreign born, they still lacked all the necessary social skills and the adherence to tradition and decorum that "old" New York was so proud of. This group of "millionaires", however, is still best investigated along with the 'old' "millionaires" rather than with the true but poor "immigrants" since the financial bases as well as the living backgrounds were much better matched.

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2 E. B. White, "Here is New York", *Essays of E. B. White* (1948, reprint, New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 121.