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Amy Simpson Birk

University of Kentucky, abirk@bellarmine.edu

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MOVING EXPERIENCES:
WOMEN AND MOBILITY IN LATE NINETEENTH AND
EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

Amy Simpson Birk

Lexington, KY

Co-Directors: Dr. Virginia Blum, Professor of English
and Dr. Andrew Doolen, Professor of English

Lexington, KY

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

MOVING EXPERIENCES: WOMEN AND MOBILITY IN LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

This project recovers and revises late nineteenth and early twentieth-century narratives of mobility which invoke female protagonists who move from stifling, patriarchal domestic settings in the rural and suburban United States to the more symbolically emancipated settings of New York City and even Europe to reveal both the limitations and possibilities for women's lives in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. By challenging popular American fiction's preoccupation with urban white slavery myths and the lingering proscriptive standards for women's behavior of the Victorian era, the Introduction argues the selected works of this dissertation mark a significant, but perhaps fleeting moment in American history when women were on the verge of profound gains toward equality. Chapter Two reads Gertrude Atherton's late nineteenth-century interrogation of intimate and professional mobility in *Patience Sparhawk* as a significant precursor, if not prototype, of the recently recognized middlebrow moderns of the 1920s. Chapter Three examines Edith Wharton's competing views of mobility and motherhood in *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *Summer*. Chapter Four aims to recover David Graham Phillips' posthumously published novel, *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise*, as a complicated engagement with unconventional views of mobility and prostitution in early twentieth-century America, and Chapter Five argues that Jessie Redmon Fauset's oft-maligned, sentimental novel, *Plum Bun*, warrants more critical attention for its revolutionary efforts to imagine an alternative cultural aesthetic whereby young, aspiring African-American women can acquire intimate and professional fulfillment through an empowering transnational mobility. Recognizing how stories of fallen womanhood in American literature traditionally overemphasized and criminalized a woman's desire for intimacy, while stories of New Womanhood often scripted characters ultimately devoid of desire and companionship, I argue Atherton, Wharton, Phillips and Fauset examine and challenge these categories of womanhood in important, often overlooked, depictions of mobility. Too often dismissed or excused for their conservatism, these authors warrant more attention from modern literary scholars for their shared, varied, and intentionally "moving" experiences for women in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America.

KEYWORDS: Mobility, New Woman, Fallen Woman,
White Slavery Myth, Middlebrow

Amy Simpson Birk

February 8, 2018

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By

Amy Simpson Birk

Dr. Virginia Blum

Co-Director of Dissertation

Dr. Andrew Doolen

Co-Director of Dissertation

Dr. Jill Rappoport

Director of Graduate Studies

February 8, 2018

To Abby, Callie, Caitlyn, and Ava – my most cherished blessings in life –
you inspire and motivate every move I make.

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Chapter One: Introduction

As travel carried women into the byways and cities of the world, so their transformations of travel into prose carried their voices and opinions into the public square, furthering the transformation of women from receptacles into creators of politics and culture, and women's writing from accounts of travel into agents of cultural work. (Schriber 7)

Although Mary Suzanne Schriber's comments speak specifically to the subject of American women travel writers from the mid nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, her insights help make a strong argument for the historical and cultural significance of fictional representations of women travelers as well, particularly during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Fictional women travelers during this period who move from stifling, patriarchal domestic settings in the rural and suburban United States to the symbolically emancipated settings of New York City and even Europe reveal both the limitations and possibilities for women's lives at the turn of the twentieth century. By challenging popular American fiction's preoccupation with urban white slavery myths and the lingering proscriptive standards for women's behavior of the Victorian era, the works of Gertrude Atherton, Edith Wharton, David Graham Philips and Jessie Redmon Fauset mark a significant, but perhaps fleeting moment in American history when women were on the verge of profound gains toward equality.¹ Like Schriber's women travelers, the female protagonists these authors create "in the act of freeing themselves physically

¹ I'm thinking here of the "backlash" of fictions in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s which again move toward more 'Victorian', essentialist views of women as ideal mothers and homemakers, blaming much of what's wrong in America upon the "loose" women of the previous decades who rejected domesticity.

from geographical constraints, free themselves from less tangible ideological boundaries hemming them in” (8), namely, turn-of-the-century American culture’s often conflated preoccupation with fallen women and modern, so-called New Women.

Elizabeth Ammons’ now seminal account of middle-class American women’s achievements toward power and public legitimacy at the end of the nineteenth century creates a compelling argument for the shared accomplishments of middle-class women, white and black. Her examination of “the artistic triumph or emergence and maturation of ... seventeen women [authors]” (3) highlights the effect and influence of the New Woman upon American literature and culture at this time.² In many ways a direct reaction and challenge to the True Woman of the Victorian era, the New Woman “carried the invasion into the public sphere even further” (7) than did her literary mother whose efforts of the 1860s and 1870s “confidently combined household management and civic involvement” (7).³ Interestingly, much of the American literature that addresses this historical transition regarding women’s proper place in society pairs two contradictory images of womanhood: the “fallen woman” and the New Woman.⁴ The paradigms of fallen and New Women seem mutually exclusive until the literary experiments of authors like Atherton, Wharton, Phillips and Fauset. Stories of fallen womanhood traditionally overemphasize and criminalize a woman’s desire for mobility, while stories of New

² Ammons *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* focuses upon works of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Ellen Glasgow, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Pauline Hopkins, Sui Sin Far, Gertrude Stein, Mary Austin, Humishuma or Morning Dove, Anzia Yezierska, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Edith Summers Kelley, and Nella Larson.

³ See Barbara Welter’s 1966 essay, “The Cult of True Womanhood.”

⁴ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg further defines this New Woman in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*.

Womanhood often script characters ultimately devoid of desire and companionship in their attainment of mobility. Atherton, Wharton, Phillips and Fauset warrant further study for the struggles within their novels to establish a middle ground whereby American women can attain mobility and some degree of intimacy. And while the manifestations and consequences of the mobility these authors embrace may vary, all four authors invoke mobility as a means of challenging the stultifying social conventions of their day.

Of course these authors are by no means the first or only writers to “move” their heroines to free them from what hems them in; however, this dissertation aims to reveal how Atherton, Wharton, Phillips and Fauset are unique in their willingness to ultimately reward female protagonists for their desires to venture beyond the proscriptive boundaries of the worlds to which they are bound. Neither Atherton, Wharton, Phillips, nor Fauset sends their protagonist out into the world to drown, die in childbirth, or suffer eternally for her transgressive movements.⁵ This dissertation traces the ways in which the selected works of these authors reward women for their wanderings and warrant greater attention from modern critics for their shared and varied “moving” experiences for women.

⁵ My allusion here is to other turn-of-the century works such as Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: a Girl of the Streets*, Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* and the seduction novels of earlier in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, which may have created sympathy for female protagonists who sought mobility or challenged social convention, but fell short of allowing these female characters to survive their transgressions, always ending their plots with suicides, death in childbirth, etc.

New Women and Fallen Women

Many critics like Ammons have studied the powerful influence of the New Woman upon American culture.⁶ In addition, literary and historical criticism has addressed the relationship between reform work of women during the Progressive movement and their revision of the plight and place of “fallen women” in American society. In *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States 1885-1920*, Mary E. Odem explains how “Female reformers challenged a widespread perception of the ‘fallen woman’ as depraved and dangerous by portraying her instead as a victim of male lust and exploitation” (3). With the Progressives, the trope of the fallen woman changes from a figure of damnation to a figure demanding redemption.⁷ These efforts toward redemption validate the New Woman’s desires to leave the home, while simultaneously linking her with the fallen woman, resulting in a revealing conflation of imagery within American literature.

This dissertation identifies how Gertrude Atherton, Edith Wharton, David Graham Phillips and Jessie Redmon Fauset challenge the traditional view that a woman’s place is in the home by embracing the imaginative possibilities of women’s mobility, while at the same time confronting the imagery and repressive demands of fallen and New Womanhood. In doing so, this study aims to uncover a paradox between the reality and fiction of early twentieth-century America through several close readings of texts which challenge the culture’s ambivalent attitude toward women who leave home. Much like nineteenth-century slave narratives which inverted the pattern of African-Americans’

⁶ See also Caroll Smith-Rosenberg’s *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*.

⁷ See also Kara Donaldson’s Dissertation, *Heathens, Harlots, and Housewives: True Womanhood and the Fallen Woman in Periodical Literature of the Gilded Age*. Rutgers University, 2000.

travels and trials to the southern United States, detailing a movement north and then east to Europe for any real sense of freedom, so too, I argue, do these late nineteenth and early twentieth-century fictions of “successful” women travelers move their female protagonists north and east, often finally to Europe, with the same kind of social commentary regarding the status of women and freedom in American culture. At this time, women in the city, even “New Women” need some outside source of legitimacy, be it a social calling or an aesthetic calling, like the women writers Ammons studies. Yet what the authors of my study also demonstrate is how a woman’s need for personal fulfillment or intimacy further motivates and justifies her desire for mobility. Their texts underscore the fact that merely to desire to leave home and experience life for oneself, to become one’s *Own Woman*, despite the accomplishments of the New Woman, is still a highly contested endeavor in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States.

In her important study, *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition*, Karen Lawrence investigates “how the genres, plots, and tropes of travel and adventure have been ‘useful’ for British women writers in supplying a set of alternative models for women’s place in society” (18). She theorizes that “these myths or models cohere in an expansion of women’s sphere and extension of their itinerary, that is, they seek both to allot more (and new) territory to women’s province and to replace the static mapping of women as space (which we have seen in male configurations of the map of travel) with a more dynamic model of woman as agent as self-mover” (18). Fictional depictions of women who travel prove poignantly relevant for revised views of American womanhood as well. Successful imaginings of an American woman as a “self-

mover” in this dissertation will demonstrate how particular novels of the late 1800s and early 1900s rely upon the concept of mobility as a means of exploring “not only potential freedoms but also cultural restraints” (Lawrence 19). The authors recognize not merely the value of travel as a means to such cultural exploration, but their shared invocation of the concept of mobility seems to also argue that such literal movement is actually necessary for a woman’s emancipation, especially regarding intimacy, personal, and professional fulfillment. Even Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, oft-regarded as the quintessential domestic drama of feminine docility and decorum, scripts travel as the means for all of the daughters’ intimate encounters. Meg’s marriage results from her travels with Mr. Brooks to bring her father home from the Civil War. Amy and Laurie fall in love as they travel Europe. Joe leaves home to find true companionship with Professor Bhaer. It is poor Beth, the most domestic of all, who has to leave the Earth to find her final intimate fulfillment in heaven. So while Atherton, Wharton, Phillips and Fauset may not be the first authors to invoke mobility as a means of agency for women, their willingness to mobilize their protagonists away from home without dire penalties or the protection of a patriarchal figure marks a significant moment in American literature. And while Alcott’s women were allowed “little” wanderings to snare their husbands, the authors of this dissertation much more boldly script young women protagonists who all set out in the world on their own, indefinitely, often without the blessings of home or the approval of the society to which they belong.

Women, Mobility, and History

Of course scrutinizing the logistics and meaning of mobility for American women demands some understanding of the larger history of travel and theories of its gendered

nature. Eric J. Leed's *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism*, especially his chapter on "The Spermatic Journey," provides valuable historical background regarding dominant views of travel's inherently masculine nature. In tracing the origins of man's compulsion to travel from his fleeting, disconnected contribution to human reproduction, Leed explains that the "conception of the normative person was originally associated with travel, and the experience of travel remained its primary verification" (229). The idealized individual for postclassical European culture, Leed contends, was not a contributing member of a specific social group, but rather "the independent, separate, self-sufficient man" (227) who compensates for the losses of the spermatic journey through travel that offers "the gain of a world and the articulation of space" (226).⁸ That American novelists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries should invoke travel as a means of female empowerment seems a logical progression from the domestic dramas of the Victorian period. Separation and exploration enable independence and self-sufficiency for Atherton, Wharton, Phillips and Fauset's heroines.

These authors reveal that in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America, there exists an idealized woman of accomplishment who, like Leed's masculine hero, also seeks to gain the world and an "articulation of space" through travel to the city and beyond. For just as Leed invokes the influential *Robinson Crusoe* as a critical representative of the modern, western, "normative person," so too does Karen Lawrence

⁸ Leed explains, "Men's participation in biological reproduction is only for the briefest moment of ejaculation, idealized as the apotheosis of masculinity but in actuality experienced as a wasting, a diminution and loss of substance, even as death. After this event, men are biologically superfluous unless they create their own necessity as they do in wars and travels, in the acquisition and defense of women from men much like themselves" (223).

write of a “‘Female Crusoe’ [that] crosses adventure with domestic realism to illustrate that for women the two cannot be held distinct; it shows, almost allegorically, that the ‘safe haven’ of domestic fiction is riddled with its own politics of adventure” (238).⁹ Through her readings of a range of texts from the British literary tradition, Lawrence reveals how travel and movement have been a part of British women’s experiences for much longer and to a far greater extent than studies such as Leed’s imply. This dissertation posits the same is true for American women and American literature.

Marilyn C. Wesley recognizes the American literary parallel in *Secret Journeys: The Trope of Travel in American Literature*. Like Lawrence, Wesley reads a wide array of nineteenth and twentieth-century texts which effectively dispel antiquated notions of female stasis. By looking at a range of essentially canonical texts not traditionally studied as stories of female agency, Wesley’s book contextualizes the social and cultural realities that contributed to the anti-travel tradition and turn-of-the-century authors such as Atherton, Wharton, Phillips and Fauset’s desires to break with that sentiment through deliberate narratives of traveling women protagonists.¹⁰

Sidonie Smith further highlights the value and significance of mobility for fictional challenges to the status quo for women with her documentation of how “women’s move to motion gained momentum in the late- nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries when increasing numbers of western women participated in the cultural logic of the individualizing journey” (ix). Smith’s examination of the actual accounts of

⁹ For further discussion of the significance of mobility and domesticity, see Julie Elizabeth Prebel’s 2000 dissertation, *Domestic Mobility in the American Post-Frontier 1890-2000*. Washington University.

¹⁰ By “stronger” here I mean the women’s travels are not so “secret” and their outcomes are far more successful than many of the texts Wesley examines.

thoughtful, accomplished, successful women travelers from this period suggests the inadequacy and inaccuracy of the many fictional accounts which fail to afford women the same degree of self-awareness, agency, and accomplishment, but rather participate in what Karen Lawrence details as the age-old, historical and literary “link between female wandering and promiscuity” and suggestions that the circulation of women is dangerous” (16). Smith’s attention to the gendering of travel in reality reveals how crucial it should be to fiction. Her conclusion that “travel functions as a defining arena of agency” (ix) corroborates my contention that the works of Atherton, Wharton, Phillips and Fauset mark significant and unique attempts towards the transformation of American culture’s attitude toward women and mobility.

Legitimizing a woman’s travels becomes the means to legitimizing a woman’s agency and autonomy. With specific attention to the geographic pattern of movement, the anonymity afforded by travel and urban surroundings, and the direct confrontation of discourses of femininity through which “travel is constructed as physically dangerous and a site for sexual threat,” this dissertation will reveal how the novels of Atherton, Wharton, and Fauset uniquely and significantly aspire to challenge the myth of women’s vulnerability on the move and in the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Mills 103). In reading what Doreen Massey has described as the ways in which “mobility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power” (qtd. in Law 574), this dissertation will argue that the works of these late nineteenth and early twentieth century authors are challenging the historically male-dominated trope of mobility as a means of empowering their female protagonists and challenging social convention.

Christine Stansell, in her conclusion to *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860*, captures a sense of the more complicated realities of movement in the city in turn of the century America:

Its [New York's] sexual latitude and material delights, in cutting working girls adrift from the family ties that had sustained as well as oppressed them, could certainly numb the soul.

All through the nineteenth century, working class New York was like that. It led women astray; then again, it made something new of the ones who had gone *bad* [Stansell's italics]. It was a place where the dialectic of female vice and female virtue was volatile; where, in the ebb and flow of large oppressions and small freedoms, poor women traced out unforeseen possibilities for their sex. Therein lies the importance of its tenements, sweatshops, promenades and streets for the history of American women. (221)

Drawing on Stansell's rich reading of the city's influence on women, I argue the novels of Atherton, Wharton, Phillips and Fauset offer more nuanced readings of women's mobility in the city in twentieth-century America by grappling with the desires and motivations of the women to use the city as much as the city may seem to use them. Sarah Deutsch's *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* clarifies how women were already far more savvy and mobile in the city than many historical and literary accounts admit:

Middle-class and elite matrons had constructed an urban moral geography that defined city streets, factories, department stores, and almost all spaces except their own homes as dangerous spaces for young working-class women full of

snares and temptations ... Young working class women, on the other hand, those between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five, dubbed the 'working girl,' had their own moral geographies, their own notions of safe and unsafe spaces and what made them so. (79)

Atherton's *Patience Sparhawk*, Wharton's *Lily Bart*, *Undine Spragg* and *Charity Royall*, Phillips' *Susan Lenox* and Fauset's *Angela* and *Virginia Murray* map their own moral geographies and often implicate women's original homes as the real "dangerous spaces," revealing what modern feminist historians have clearly established as a much more honest depiction of women's place in the city and relationship to mobility at the turn of the twentieth century. The novels of this dissertation warrant the attention of historians and literary scholars for these efforts. These fictional depictions of very different women's movements in turn of the century rural and urban America reveal how these authors invoke mobility as a means toward an alternative view of women as empowered, autonomous individuals making their way in the world on their own terms.

In discussing women's movements and mobility, it bears noting the ways in which this dissertation coincides with more recent studies in the social sciences labeled the "new mobilities paradigm" or "the mobility turn."¹¹ Admittedly motivated by more recent developments of globalism and modern technology and the extent to which "new forms of 'virtual' and 'imaginative' travel are emerging and being combined in unexpected ways with physical travel," this intensified attention to the significance of mobility in the 21st century only highlights the value and significance of earlier attention

¹¹ See Mimi Sheller and John Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm" in *Environment and Planning A*, volume 38, pages 207-226.

to real and imagined mobility by the authors in my dissertation (Sheller and Urry 207). Cresswell and Merriman complicate modern notions of mobility, while clarifying more traditional views of the concept whereby “movement is most often seen as the outcome of rational choices involving the comparison of one location or mode with another”(3), a view that best coincides with my own historical reading of the empowering nature of mobility for women across class and racial divides in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America. Cresswell and Merriman’s recognition that mobility is not always so liberating, especially in light of twenty-first century crises of trafficking and displacement highlights the significance of the moment in literary history this dissertation aims to define as uniquely empowering for women seeking to subvert the limits of gender, race, and class in the late 1890s and early 1900s. I contend that in the works of Atherton, Wharton, Phillips and Fauset, the embrace of mobility is a deliberate, rhetorical move requiring a conscious decision by the female protagonist who must first dare to imagine alternative possibilities to her present circumstances and then, further dare to act accordingly and move toward another, new opportunity for personal or professional fulfillment. In the chapters on Atherton, Phillips and Fauset, in particular, “mobility is inextricably linked to concepts of freedom, emancipation, flexibility, and ‘the modern’” that we are increasingly likely to question in our modern world (Endres 117). In the Wharton chapter, there is a recognition of the degrees to which “mobility is mainly inhibitory to or at least defers family development, while conversely the decision to start a family requires a drop in mobility ... with strong gender-specific differences” (Endres 117). In the end, Wharton’s embrace of mobility becomes complicated by the reality of maternity, whereas Atherton, Phillips and Fauset largely avoid questions of motherhood

for the purpose of manipulating notions of mobility as especially liberating for late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American women. Ultimately, all four authors invoke mobility as a transformative means toward female agency at the turn of the twentieth century.

Methodology and Significance

In her introduction to *Conflicting Stories*, Elizabeth Ammons explains that her book is “offered” as a part of the “new historical project” that answers Annette Kolodny’s demand “for scholars of American literature at this point in time to immerse themselves in unfamiliar texts and traditions” (qtd. in Ammons 19). She explains that her form of grouping women writers from the Progressive period “is simply an invention, one way of organizing a perspective on the material. Other organizing principles and combinations of authors could be used, each creating its own structural argument about the parts and the whole” (19). This dissertation is structured as a response to Ammons’ and Kolodny’s recognition of the validity of similar organizing principles and combinations of authors.

My dissertation’s grouping of a “middle-brow” white woman, an affluent white woman, a middle-class white male and a middle-class African-American woman aims to further contribute to Ammons’ challenge of “the dominant-culture ideal of ‘masculine culture’” she contends took over the academy at the turn of the century. Where Ammons’ convincing answer to the “new, expanding, highly ambitious ‘professional’ professoriat” that minimized and marginalized the works of all women and minority authors is her study of seventeen women authors, part of my contribution to a new historical project is the inclusion of what have been characterized as more conservative voices to the discussion. My goal is to complement Ammons’ valid concerns regarding

“ghettoization, erroneous generalization, and complicity in the institutional structures and methods of thought that have helped achieve the marginalization of women ... in the United States” (13) without entirely excluding seemingly more conservative, and assumedly complicit voices. I contend that not entirely unlike the dominant masculine culture of the early twentieth-century literary academy, a dominant feminist culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century persists in current literary studies, explaining how and why the work of Atherton has gone largely unexamined until now. By second and third wave feminism’s standards, Gertrude Atherton was certainly never much of a feminist. And while Wharton is oft lauded for her scathing indictment of the frustrating fruits of patriarchy, namely, predatory leeches and ineffective dilettantes, her preoccupation with children and motherhood has gone either largely neglected or implicated as evidence of her racist or eugenic sympathies.¹² David Graham Phillips earns little respect or attention in modern literary studies, mentioned rarely, if at all, as a muckraker of the earliest decade of the twentieth century. Frequently compared to Wharton and critiqued for her middle-class ethos, Jessie Redmon Fauset’s struggles to gain the respect modern literary studies that her male contemporaries and African-American women writers who followed her have attained.¹³ This dissertation offers alternative readings that intend to recover, validate, and elevate the relevance of these authors within contemporary literary studies.

¹² See Jennie Kassanoff and Dale Bauer, respectively, for their comprehensive studies of Wharton’s racist and eugenic texts.

¹³ Jaime Harker explains Fauset’s complicated status in contemporary criticism: “[Alain] Locke’s version of the Harlem Renaissance has endured, while Fauset is remembered mainly as a footnote. Even critics who reclaim her must address the ‘problem’ of her middle-class identity and her novels that seem painfully old-fashioned next to vernacular triumphs by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. This is true not only of African American male critics, but of many feminist critics as well” (33).

What links the writers in this study then are their consistent efforts toward making sympathetic what other literary texts of their era typically deem decadent or dangerous.¹⁴ Through the narrative strategy of the sympathetic daughter who leaves home to fulfill her own, individual longings for independence and even intimacy on her own terms, these writers all endorse the profound power and freedom more mobility offers American women at the turn of the century. Rather than punishing such daring daughters with disastrous or damning conclusions to their stories, these writers, through very revealing, though sometimes heavy-handed, plotting and social commentary, reward the venturing women in their novels to varying degrees.

In her study of Edith Wharton's complex associations with travel and modernity, Nancy Bentley argues that Wharton's stories of travel and family "imagine a modern kinship that holds the possibility of altogether new forms of intimacy. When family relationships are chosen rather than merely inherited, Wharton suggests, they carry the promise of reciprocity of pure affinity free from the petty tyrannies that mar traditional family relationships" (173). The readings of Wharton's, Atherton's, Phillips' and Fauset's representations of female characters' movements away from an array of traditional family repressions broadens the reach of Bentley's description of Wharton's "tantalizing vision of unalloyed love" (173), through "the freedom of modern kinship, . . . , its foundation in consent rather than in birthright" (173). The writers this dissertation

¹⁴ Emily Wortis Leider recognizes Gertrude Atherton's perceptive recognition of this tendency in the literature in her 1991 biography, *California's Daughter: Gertrude Atherton and Her Times*, writing: "In the public imagination, and in reality, there was a link between the feminists and the Decadents. The New Woman, like the Decadent, subverted social norms and heightened sexual consciousness. As far as most of the late Victorian public was concerned, 'the decadent was new and the New Woman was decadent'" (155).

examines all reject the dominant culture of their day for its myopic view of women and mobility. Furthermore, reading the novels of these writers amidst the historical context of the Progressive movement and its exaggerated preoccupation with keeping girls safe at home away from the “dangers” that threatened their escapes to the city reveals just how invested the national literature was in staving off threats to many lingering middle-class Victorian ideals, despite the many tangible accomplishments of the New Woman.¹⁵ Many scholars have now well-documented how “during the first decades of the twentieth-century, the educational attainments of women began to approximate those of men; growing legitimacy was extended to female activity outside of the home; and ... new realms of work opened up to women” (Mintz & Kellogg 111), the home and family were still largely considered sacred and idyllic bastions of safety that should shelter women. Much of the literature of this period affirms that traditional view; however, the works of Atherton, Wharton, Phillips and Fauset, notably, do not always concur.

While neither of these authors scripts an entirely smooth, nor necessarily plausible, scenario for women’s fulfillment, their deliberate attempts to both literally and figuratively *move* women toward something more than their era typically offered women mark a truly notable moment in American literature. Two World Wars and a devastating Depression inevitably distract and detour women’s desires for different opportunities to varying degrees, but this dissertation insists the academy should not ignore these writers’ efforts to reimagine and privilege the place of mobility in the lives American women at the turn of the twentieth century.

¹⁵ See Odem’s *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States 1885-1920*.

The Novels:

Gertrude Atherton's *Patience Sparhawk*

Gertrude Atherton's 1895 novel, *Patience Sparhawk*, an important, but rarely studied late nineteenth-century novel, invokes the trope of travel to challenge the proscriptive cultural views of the fallen woman and the New Woman. This insistent appeal for a woman's right to be her *Own* Woman tells the story of a soulful adolescent girl tormented by a drunken, widowed mother in Monterey, California who is obstructing her daughter's opportunity to move east for a better life. Patience is quite extraordinary, we are told, very early on by her impressed young teacher, Miss Galpin, whose "ideas of life were accumulated largely from the novels of Mr. Howells and Mr. James, whom she revered" (45). However, Miss Galpin wisely concludes that "neither of those gentleman photographed such characters as Patience. It had probably never occurred to them that Patience existed" (45). Miss Galpin's "sudden thrill of superiority" (45) at her understanding and experience of a young woman beyond the ken of two of America's most highly esteemed authors poignantly reveals the aim of this dissertation. *Patience Sparhawk* merges the narrative of the fallen woman with that of the New Woman, to articulate a seemingly simple, but apparently complex demand to travel to the city, so she may become her *Own* woman.

Patience's early struggles to free herself from the scorn and embarrassment of her alcoholic mother and an unimaginative dead-end town and her later struggles to free herself from her spoiled, dolt of a husband reveal a woman who thinks much more than the people to whom she finds herself obligated. She desires mobility, not for a specific cause or social program, like her religious, temperance companions, or for self-indulgent,

mind-numbing extravagance, like the wealthy “swells” she encounters as the wife of Mr. Beverly Peele, but rather Patience seeks “ideals” she describes as “a sort of yearning for some unseen force in nature; I suppose the large general force from which love is a projection” (252). “Every mortal . . .,” Patience explains, “has an affinity with something in the invisible world, an uplifting of the soul” (252). Atherton’s articulation and affirmation of a woman’s need for mobility as a means to attaining autonomy and personal fulfillment emerges through her chronicles of Patience’s movements.

When Patience finds herself in a situation which impedes the development of her soul, she seeks to leave it; thus, Atherton invests Patience’s travels with profound importance. When pleading with her father-in-law to free her from the stifling husband, Patience begs, “But couldn’t I live abroad? I could do so on very little. I should care nothing for society if I could live my life by myself. I should be quite contented with books and freedom” (267). Patience sees travel and movement as a means to a humble pursuit, to merely learn to know and be herself. The success of Atherton’s novel lies in Patience’s ultimate triumph. Through Garan Bourke, the mysterious, inspiring stranger of her youth, Patience is freed quite literally from death in the electric chair, but also from the death of unfulfilling relationships and vocations. The perfect communion of souls Atherton narrates between Patience and Bourke validates the character’s trials and upheavals as the character-building consequences of women’s mobility.

Atherton writes the story of a woman, fallen in so many people’s estimation – the people of Monterey who cannot forgive her for her sinful mother or paradoxically her violent attack of the same woman they abhor, the Peeles and the rest of the elites, so threatened by Patience’s cleverness and failure to give in to their materialism, the

dogmatic Miss Beale who wishes “it could only be said that you died like a Christian!” (470), and even the “most exaggerated product of modern civilization” (487), the newspapermen whose “excited sympathy” she understands only in the end. Through Atherton’s careful plotting, Patience succeeds in the complete fruition of her desires and ideals, though they are not the ideals proscribed to her by either the image of the fallen or the New woman, but rather her own individual conflation of the two.

Patience no doubt plans to marry and raise children with Bourke, having already cast her career as a newspaperwoman aside, certainly removing her from the ranks of the New Women, while her status as a widow who left her husband and considered taking a lover should place her in the “unmarriageable” category of the fallen woman. And yet, Atherton describes Patience as tremendously happy and triumphant in the end. Unlike so many of her literary predecessors and contemporaries who dictate somber or even disastrous endings for such women, Gertrude Atherton imagines through Patience Sparhawk the possibility for American women at the turn of the twentieth century to live as they choose. Chapter one of this dissertation will attest to the value of *Patience Sparhawk* and Atherton’s argument through the plotting of this novel that it is only through mobility that a woman can aspire toward and attain agency and autonomy.

Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *Summer*

The second chapter of my dissertation recognizes how Edith Wharton’s depiction of a woman on the move recurs and evolves in three of her novels. Like Atherton, Wharton recognizes the need for women to leave home to experience life and seek intimate fulfillment; however, Wharton’s embrace of women’s mobility is complicated by her fictions’ oft-neglected, but arguably increasing preoccupation with mothers and

children. Close readings of *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *Summer* reveal an author committed to an examination of women's desires for more independence from patriarchal constraints, but conflicted about the consequences of those desires, in particular the degree to which women's mobility may impede what Wharton considers maternal responsibility.

Atherton, Phillips and Fauset simplify and isolate their arguments for women's personal pursuits, keeping their protagonists, not necessarily chaste, but somehow childless, while Wharton increasingly recognizes the very obvious, inevitable consequence of her heterosexual heroine's movement's toward intimacy - children. Where Atherton, Phillips and Fauset fail to consider (or intentionally avoid) the possibility of motherhood for their venturing protagonists, this chapter will examine how Wharton's wandering women all confront motherhood to varying degrees. As a result, Wharton's invocation of mobility as a means toward women's independence becomes complicated by her seemingly increasing sentimental and conservative views of children and motherhood. Like Atherton, Phillips and Fauset, Wharton literally moves her protagonists throughout her novels to challenge cultural expectations of womanhood; however, unlike Atherton, Phillips and Fauset, she also grapples with the impact of mobility on motherhood and children.

David Graham Phillips' *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise*

Like Atherton's *Patience Sparhawk*, David Graham Phillips' *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* repeats a pattern of successful movement for an American woman, though the vicissitudes for Susan Lenox are far more graphic than those Patience confronts. Posthumously published in 1917, Phillips' controversial novel is often compared to

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* for its attention to the issue of prostitution in urban America, though it receives only a small fraction of the critical attention. More in keeping with the culture of his day, Dreiser's work contributes to the way "the story of sexual slavery became an urban myth, used as a warning to adventurous young women who want to explore the city" (Joslin 107), while *Susan Lenox* "comes closer than most narratives to the probable experiences of many turn-of-the-century prostitutes" through Phillips' narrative choices (Joslin 111).¹⁶ Phillips' failure to participate in the proliferation and the exaggeration of the urban myth of white slavery likely accounts for the obscurity of his own text and the flourishing success of Dreiser's. Margit Stange explains in *Personal Property: Wives, White Slaves, and the Market in Women* that "white slavery literature was more than a reaction – it was reform ... the reform to be enacted is not the restoration of the women's freedom, but their reclamation by the ordinary man" (78). Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* emphasizes the failure of the family to reclaim the woman, while Phillips' *Susan Lenox* (ultimately choosing her shamed, single-mother's last name, not that of her adoptive, legitimizing family) is in a sense prostituted *by her family*. Rather than agreeing with the paternalistic controlling motives of the Progressive culture that produced the Committee of the Fourteen for the Suppression of the "Raines Law Hotels" in New York City among other efforts of social control and fear-mongering to keep women safe at home, Phillips, unlike his other naturalistic contemporaries, reveals the home as one of the most dangerous places for a

¹⁶ Katherine Joslin notes how Emma Goldman argues in "The Traffic in Women" (1910) that "prostitution was 'a dangerous and degrading occupation that, given the limited and unattractive alternatives ... enabled thousands of women to escape even worse danger and deprivation.' Much prostitution, in fact, involved young women who wandered in and out of the business during their lives and who left the trade as raises in pay for other labor allowed" (111).

girl; hence, his novel embraces mobility as both a literal and figurative means to real freedom for American women.

Susan Lenox, like Patience Sparhawk, insists upon cultivating her own imagination rather than satisfying the limited imagination of those around her. Despite a wide variety of degrading experiences as a prostitute, the one experience that wakes her up crying in the middle of the night, repeatedly throughout the novel's two volumes, is her stranger-husband's raping of her at the age of sixteen. When Susan prostitutes herself after fleeing from this marriage, it is under a different name she chooses, when she decides, for reasons of survival. The rape is irreconcilable because it is at the hands of her "father," uncle, and husband – the supposedly legitimate male protectors in provincial Midwestern American culture. Susan Lenox never marries, like Patience, but Phillips scripts her success as she takes control of her own identity, first moving east and then to Europe, where she is able to gain a sense of freedom she never could have in America. In Phillips' final description of her, she is notably on the move:

... the last time I saw her she was about to enter her automobile. I halted and watched the graceful movements with which she took her seat and gathered her robes about her. And then I noted her profile, by the light of the big lamps guarding her door. You know that profile? You have seen its same expression in every profile of successful man or woman who ever lived. Yes, she may be happy – doubtless is more happy than unhappy. (II 489)

Phillips' novel, unlike the long tradition before it that seeks to protect American womanhood from portended painful experiences, precluding imagination and success,

embraces a woman's right to move to the city and learn to live and succeed and seek intimate connections without the rigid rules of convention.

Rather than paternalistically sheltering the adolescent girl and woman at home, Phillips' work imagines women struggling and moving like men have always been encouraged to reach beyond the limits of their imagination and their hometown. The difference lies in direction. Most nineteenth-century tales of American men making their way in the world, first send them west to conquer the frontier.¹⁷ For women in the twentieth century, the frontier lies in the urban landscape, amidst the unconcerned masses and away from those who would have them sheltered from the world and themselves. The lonely solitude of the crowd is where Phillips argues women are able to test their limits and see their real potential in society.

Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun*

In *Plum Bun*, Jessie Redmon Fauset's protagonist, Angela Murray, struggles with the African-American experience of passing, embracing geographic and social mobility as a means toward agency and self-fulfillment. Embracing a similar pattern of geographical self-discovery as Atherton, Wharton, and Phillips' heroines, Angela leaves her suburban home in Pennsylvania for New York City, and similar to Patience Sparhawk, Lily Bart, Undine Spragg, Charity Royall, and Susan Lenox, she must learn to understand the power and limitations that her increased mobility affords her. The frantic

¹⁷ Janis P. Stout's *The Journey Narrative in American Literature: Patterns and Departures* delineates a wide array of basic patterns in the journey narrative in American fiction, relating how their direction, motivation, incidents, images, and tone reveal writers "who utilize journey narratives to perceive them after the patterns of history" (17), an insight which informs my discussion of a very specific trajectory of success for women travelers who succeed in early twentieth-century American novels. Stout's observations regarding the mythic power of western movement for American men certainly provide a basis for my own reading of American women's need to reverse this pattern and move east, back toward the civilization from which they have been denied initiation.

pace of daily life in New York City and the obscurity of its great population offer Angela opportunities for learning and suffering the stifling scrutiny her suburban home would never permit. This chapter examines how Fauset's depiction of an increasingly self-aware woman who "was restlessly conscious of a desire for broader horizons," relies upon an urban and transnational mobility as a means toward agency, sharing the literary vision of Atherton, Wharton and Phillips before her in order to reject patriarchal efforts that imprison American women through the fear of experience (Fauset 64).¹⁸ The chapter also aims to recover Fauset's rightful place in American literary history as an innovator and revolutionary and much more than the mere "midwife of the Harlem Renaissance" to which she was relegated in the decades that followed her career in the 1920s and 30s.

Furthermore, this final chapter discusses the extent to which Jessie Redmon Fauset challenges the categories of New Woman and New Negro as they exist for African-American women in the 1920s, as well as her invocation of revolutionary representations of mobility and an insightful awareness of transnationalism in her novel to challenge the proscriptive racial and gendered expectations of the world in which she lived and struggled to be published. Through the struggles and triumphs of Angela Murray, Fauset reveals how social and transnational mobility can precipitate professional and intimate fulfillment for African-American women willing to challenge social convention. A close reading of Fauset's hopeful conclusion in Europe at the end of *Plum Bun* reveals her insistence that the agency created by both Angela's and her sister, Virginia's, intimate and professional mobility throughout the novel is real and attainable,

¹⁸ The patriarchal tradition implicated here is represented by writers such as Hawthorne, Howells, James, and other canonical writers who all very blatantly 'discipline' adventurous women in their texts with tragic ends.

though it is profoundly threatened by cultural constraints of race and gender in America and even abroad at key moments in the text. This chapter delineates Fauset's deliberate challenge to the gendered and racial limitations of mobility in the American imagination in the early twentieth century and the extent to which *Plum Bun* reflects the tension between persisting, patriarchal desires to protect an idealized femininity and modernity's inevitable provision of more opportunities of mobility for all, broadening the literal and figurative horizons for all American women.

Chapter Two: Intimate and Professional Mobility in
Gertrude Atherton's *Patience Sparhawk*

I had attacked, or held up to ridicule, many of the prejudices they held most sacred. And the spirit of feminine revolt alarmed them. It was to be hoped that the estimable young women of America would see nothing in the reprehensible Patience save a solemn warning.¹⁹

In accounting for the widespread disapproval of American critics upon the 1895 publication of her novel, *Patience Sparhawk*, Gertrude Atherton proudly acknowledges the defiant stance of her work toward the place of women in American culture. However, Atherton's "spirit of feminine revolt" seems to have been lost on twentieth and twenty-first century feminist critics who on the whole have largely ignored her early novel. How is it that someone who considered herself so revolutionary could be so disregarded for so long?

Sybil Weir comes close to answering this question in her 1975 essay, "Gertrude Atherton: the limits of Feminism in the 1890s." Of Atherton and her relationship to feminism, Weir writes:

Atherton was a pioneer in her treatment of female sexuality and in her presentation of heroines who were actively seeking an identity based on their own needs and capabilities rather than on the attributes their society ascribed to women. Atherton could not, however, escape the convention of "They lived

¹⁹ Gertrude Atherton, *Adventures of a Novelist*, 267.

happily ever after.” By 1932 she could present herself in her autobiography as a thoroughgoing feminist, contemptuous of home and family. But in many of the novels she published during the 1890s her feminism was limited by her extolling home and family as the one goal for her heroines (Weir 31).

Weir’s reading of Atherton is revealing. She equates feminism with a necessary and complete “contempt for home and family,” thereby accounting for the inadequacies or “limits” of Atherton’s feminism, a likely explanation of her omission from nearly all significant works of modern feminists who look at the likes of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin as representative women writers of the 1890s. In the essay, Weir compares Atherton to the much more popular (with feminists) Kate Chopin:

Chopin’s novel, after being excoriated by reviewers as immoral, indelicate, and poisonous, was a commercial failure. Atherton’s novels were also condemned by critics for their immorality, but they sold well. There are a number of reasons for this difference in public reception. Chopin presents sexual impulses as normal, and moreover, as important to personal development as a human being’s spiritual aspirations. Atherton recognizes sexual impulses but presents them as base, belonging to a man’s or woman’s “lower” nature. Chopin allows her heroine to engage in an adulterous affair with a man she does not love, whereas Atherton carefully protects her heroine’s virtue. Finally and perhaps most importantly, Chopin rejects domestic bliss as the goal for all women; Atherton cannot conceive of any reward for her heroines other than finding the ideal man. In the 1890s, readers accepted Atherton’s version of the “new woman” because she was careful to meet their sentimental expectations. (26)

While Weir's comparisons recognize some interesting thematic distinctions between Atherton and Chopin, I would argue that they oversimplify Atherton's feminist project (and feminism in general), by failing to recognize Atherton's attempt to seek a middle ground between professionalism and intimacy that had not existed before for women in American culture. Atherton embraces a new romantic, middle-class, heterosexual ideal, whereby women attain opportunities for professional and intimate self-discovery. Despite Weir's contention otherwise, Atherton does not recognize all sexual impulses as base, rather she seeks to connect the sexual and the spiritual as an idealized intimacy. At the end of *Patience Sparhawk*, there is no doubt regarding both the spiritual and the sexual nature of Patience's intimate relationship with Garan Bourke. The real difference between Atherton and Chopin is that Atherton actually breaks with the long held tradition in American literature of killing off the sexually adventurous woman. As Patience awaits the electric chair, it seems her novel will kill her off for her transgressions, but she is saved literally at the last minute, not by a domineering, thoughtless man, but rather by a desperately vulnerable and spiritual lover who embraces all of her, well aware of her sexual history. Chopin's novella is less generous and less hopeful for its female heroine, which feminists such as Weir read as less 'sentimental' and therefore more progressive; however, this study aims to read Atherton's sentimentality as a restructuring of intimacy, rather than a revisitation of an antiquated literary convention.²⁰

²⁰ Much of 1990s literary criticism focuses on the nature and meaning of sentimentality in the mid to late 1800s. June Howard's chapter, "What is sentimentality?" in *Publishing the Family* examines the views of key figures in the literary discussion of sentimentality, most notably Nina Baym, Jane Tompkins, Ann Douglas, Shirley Samuels, Lora Romero, and Laura Wexler. Essentially, Howard explains how sentimentality is fraught with differences of intention and interpretation in studies of nineteenth-century American literature, and that it "although not always stigmatized is always suspect, always questionable; the appearance of the term marks a site where values are contested" (223).

Weir states that Chopin rejects “domestic bliss” for her female protagonist, while Atherton “cannot conceive of any reward for her heroines other than finding the ideal man.” My reading of Atherton’s novel concedes that Patience is highly motivated to find an ideal mate, but I contend that Atherton challenges the drudgery of domesticity as emphatically as Chopin. And furthermore, rather than merely levy a complaint against the double standards of American culture, I argue that Atherton presents a vision of a more egalitarian society whereby intimacy and professionalism can together complete a women’s sense of individuality, rather than dash it. This chapter seeks to outline just how “revolutionary” Atherton’s project regarding intimacy and professionalism is in *Patience Sparhawk*. I will begin by first situating the novel amidst changing views of American womanhood at the turn of the century and then revealing Atherton’s savvy rejection of still lingering Victorian ideals of domesticity. I will proceed to delineate how she invokes a renewed travel narrative to advance a new approach to professionalism and intimacy, which seeks to offer American women opportunities for both. Finally, I will return to the question of Atherton’s place in the history of American women’s writing and why feminist criticism has yet to embrace her.

An Ambivalent America

Written at a key point in American history when images of New Womanhood challenge the Victorian “cult of true womanhood” and enable women to imagine a life beyond the domestic realm, Atherton’s novel articulates the precarious plight of American women who must negotiate a life for themselves in the face of the nation’s conflicted, ambivalent attitude toward women’s role in society.

The burgeoning popularity and acceptance of the New Woman toward the end of the nineteenth century in the United States offered women many new opportunities, among them, “rights to education, to political participation, to employment, to sexual expressiveness, to a voice as cultural critics” (Glenn 3). Nevertheless, the concept of New Womanhood threatened a range of long-standing cultural institutions.²¹ Strong voices within the country, male and female, still heralded the domestic ideal and attacked New Womanhood on a variety of fronts. An April 1895 article appearing in *The Ladies Home Journal*, written by the Rev. Charles H. Parkhurst, D.D, represents typical concerns and complaints levied against the New Woman. Parkhurst extols the century-old ideal of the home entrusted to the good Republican mother “as the fountain of all that is best in church and state” (15). He chides “adventurous women,” “new fogies of the female sex,” and “loquacious sisters,” assuring them that “any feminine attempt to mutiny against wifehood, motherhood and domestic ‘limitations’ is a hopeless and rather imbecile attempt to escape the inevitable” (15). He concludes “that domestic laxity and miscellaneousness lie at the root of a good deal of the world’s current mischief” (15). Insisting women have no place in the public sphere and not so subtly attacking the ever increasing numbers of New Women finding validation and fulfillment amidst a range of social causes outside the home, Parkhurst insists that if women would just stay home “to take care of their own boys and girls, it is presumable that the great outside world will be in condition to take care of itself” (15). Parkhurst represents legions of conservative thinkers throughout the 1890s who see New Womanhood, with its efforts towards

²¹ For an extended discussion of attempts to relegate the New Woman to a literary concept and the range of complaints levied against her negative influence on society, see Ann Ardis’ chapter on “Naming the New Woman” *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (1990).

legitimizing women's role outside the home, as a destabilizing danger to society.

Interestingly, attacks on women's struggles for more opportunities outside the home come from women as well as men like Reverend Parkhurst.

Less than a year after the clergyman's complaints and the London publication of Atherton's novel, in a February 1896 article in *The North American Review*, Mrs. Amelia E. Barr attacks New Womanhood as vicious "Discontented Women." Identifying the "vice of discontent" as "the original sin" of woman (201), Barr rails against women of her times, *complaining* (my own italics):

With all its variations of influence and activity there has never been a time in the world's history, when female discontent has assumed so much, and demanded so much, as at the present day; and both the satisfied and the dissatisfied woman may well pause to consider, whether the fierce fever of unrest which has possessed so large a number of the sex is not rather a delirium than a conviction; whether indeed they are not just as foolishly impatient to get out of their Eden, as was the woman Eve six thousand years ago. (201)

Relying on the same Christian principles as Rev. Parkhurst, Barr demeans progressive women as essentially overemotional fools who remain the proverbial "root of all evil". She goes on to detail the range of "revolts" of modern women: against housekeeping, marriage, children, or a lack thereof and concludes that most discontented women are simply "dull." She trivializes working women who complain about abuse and low wages, stating simply, "Nothing is more certain than that good work, either from man or woman, will find a market; and that bad work, will be refused by all but those disposed to give charity and pay for it" (204). She trivializes the suffrage movement, concluding that

women are too self-interested and emotional to vote in the best interest of the nation. And quite ironically with her *published article* in a popular magazine, she insists she is serving the public good, because “Women must be criticized by women” (210). She concludes with an apparently sweeping endorsement of ignorance, urging women to abandon their discontent and “join that happy multitude who have never discovered that Life is a thing to be discontented with” (210). Barr endorses for women a life of repression and denial. Insisting that women suppress their discontent with their status and place in society, Barr’s essay highlights critic June Howard’s contention

that the New Woman is a charged figure not only because she evokes the politics of gender – as she certainly does – but also because she challenges the boundary between public and private. The female individualist, the woman who steps out of the home into the working world, the woman whose inner life is manifestly shaped by her reading, may or may not be stigmatized, but she inevitably provokes attention to, and potentially unsettles, the separation of the individual from social, male from female, home from marketplace. (204)

The often scathing critiques from certain elements of society represented by Parkhurst and Barr, paired with our knowledge of the Progressive Era and its dramatic changes for American women who rejected nineteenth-century domesticity and began “asserting their right to a career, to a public voice, to visible power, ... [staking] claim to the rights and privileges customarily accorded bourgeois men” convey the nation’s ambivalent attitude toward women’s roles at this time (Smith-Rosenberg 176).

As Howard succinctly summarizes in the passage above, the New Women who sought to question, complain, and even alter the status of women in society were derided

for their perceived subversiveness and growing influence by more conservative-minded Americans still heavily invested in the maintenance of women's role as "the Angel in the House, the woman at home [who] exemplified ideal values and presided over a superior moral economy" (Brown 6). Such conservative-minded Americans predominated amidst a growing white, Protestant middle-class committed to the "separate spheres" ideology, likely purchasers of the popular, best-selling, evangelical author Rev. Charles M. Sheldon, "whose published books ... had a sale of over three million copies in America, Canada, and England" (Brown 18).

While the conservative Sheldon and his best-selling 1895 work, *In His Steps*, enjoyed widespread endorsement from the public and publishers alike, the fact that Atherton had to leave the United States for London to get *Patience Sparhawk* published further highlights the influence of conservative domestic ideology and the limitations of late nineteenth-century American society's tolerance for defiant, freedom-seeking women who critique the national culture. Commenting on the American publishers who turned down her novel, Atherton concedes, "those publishers who declined it on the ground of not liking the spirit of revolt in the book ... had certainly read it" (*Adventures* 227). Atherton is very clear about her novel's revolutionary agenda. And while much has been recently written regarding the more complicated nature of the "separate spheres" model for nineteenth-century American culture, the fact remains that comparatively speaking, throughout the nineteenth century, "women had neither the property and political rights, nor the freedom of movement enjoyed by white men. For the middle class, an elaborate ideal of femininity emphasized innate sexual purity ... Women who did not achieve the

ideal of purity were considered to have ‘fallen’ into a lower class” (D’Emilio 57).²²

Atherton’s references to this initial lambasting by American critics and her insistence on the revolutionary stance of her work speak specifically to Patience’s Sparhawk’s willful quests for independence and rejection of idealized Victorian femininity.

The Story

Atherton’s novel tells the story of the highly imaginative and sensitive Patience Sparhawk who confronts the hardships of small-town California life as the condemned daughter of a drunken, immoral woman. Aware of her alienated status, Patience finds reprieve from small town thinking and an inattentive mother through the intellectual stimulation of her paternal grandfather who insists Patience study in his vast library. Consoled by her academic and intellectual success and her one friend, a beautiful aspiring actress, Rosita, Patience manages to survive her youth and escape her fate as a frustrated intellect in a mindless rural wasteland. As Atherton scripts it, Patience’s life is opened to opportunity when her grandfather secures for her the chance to move east to New York to be taken in by a very nurturing but very dogmatic Women’s Christian Temperance Union worker, Miss Tremont.

On her way to New York, Patience has the good fortune of befriending the influential newspaper editor, Mr. Field, who is impressed by her breadth of knowledge and intellectual curiosity, so much so, that he assures her, once she is grown, she can look him up, and he will find her a job with his newspaper. Patience enjoys the warm reception of Miss Tremont, but she cannot warm up to the rigidity of the religious

²² See Lora Romero’s *Home Fronts: Domesticity and its Critics in the Antebellum United States* and the 1998 special issue of *American Literature* entitled *No More Separate Spheres!* for challenges to the separate spheres ideology of nineteenth-century literature and culture.

temperance women with whom she associates. Instead, still smitten with romantic fantasies inspired by her discovery of Byron in her grandfather's library, Patience allows herself to fall for the romantic advances of the young, physically attractive Beverly Peele. Having shared her first intimate experiences as a young woman with this son of the very wealthy and very influential Peele family of New York, Patience acquiesces to social expectations and marries the young "swell."

It does not take long, however, for Patience to recognize her choice of marriage as a dreadful mistake. Excited by little more than horses and a good meal, Patience's husband does not share his wife's love of books, nor does he plan to indulge her desires to travel. Patience finds some solace in her friendship with Beverly's jet-setting sister, Hal, and the finery that comes with her new life as the wife of an extremely wealthy man, but it fails to sustain her for long. Ultimately, Patience tires of her boorish and ill-tempered husband and leaves for the city to become a newspaperwoman.

Relying upon Miss Merrien, a newspaperwoman she had coincidentally befriended at the residence of her old friend, now famous actress, Rosita, Patience tries to find fulfillment as an urban professional woman. Despite some success and her new relationship with the attractive editor, Morgan Steele, Patience finds herself manipulated into returning to Peele Manor and her life as Mrs. Beverly Peele. However, after Beverly dies from a suspicious morphine overdose, Patience is accused, tried, and convicted of murder, only to be spared execution at the last minute by her dashing lawyer-lover, Garan Bourke, a man whom she first met as a young girl in California. The idealistic and ambitious Irishman had inspired many of her dreams regarding self-fulfillment, and the novel ends in dramatic fashion with their ultimate union as soul mates.

Atherton's Critique of Victorian Domesticity

Throughout Atherton's novel, images of New and fallen women call into question the validity of late nineteenth-century American definitions of womanhood dependent upon purity, chastity, and submissiveness. In order for women to discover themselves and truly enjoy their own individuality, Atherton argues that the category of the "fallen" woman is not only repressive, but destructive for all of society. And yet, Atherton does continue to make judgments regarding women's sexual morality. Such judgments convey an ambivalence which likely accounts for some of the disappointment feminists such as Weir find in Atherton's novel.

In her biography of Atherton, *California's Daughter: Gertrude Atherton and Her Times*, Emily Wortis Leider captures Atherton's seemingly conflicted attitude toward turn-of-the-century American womanhood:

Gertrude, as we have seen, tried to distance herself from the 'depravity' and 'effeteness' of the Decadents; and she had trouble accepting the sexual liberation that New Woman independence and unconventionality seemed to many to imply. But *Patience Sparhawk* does celebrate both the sexual attractiveness and the rebellious, independent status of the heroine; it does attack hypocrisy in marriage and the double standard. Gertrude took pride in May Sinclair's assertion, ten years after the book was published, that it had boosted the Emancipated Woman's cause. (156)

Not entirely accepting of all the precepts and variations of New Womanhood, especially as they relate to sexual license, Atherton nevertheless certainly objected to women's vulnerability to rigid social and familial bonds. While not endorsing a "free love"

position whereby women can and should be intimate whenever and with whomever they choose, Atherton does advocate some freedom for sexual experimentation and rejection of oppressive familial bonds. Her character, Patience, defies more rigid Victorian expectations of piety and purity at every turn. She hates her own mother, detests and eventually leaves her husband, considers taking a lover, and faces the electric chair. Certainly a “fallen” woman according to traditional, Victorian standards, still popular even amidst the emerging influence of New Womanhood, Atherton rewards her rebellious heroine with love and freedom. Unlike the traditional trajectory of the fallen woman who must repent and die, Patience’s story ends with triumph and promise.²³ In the very last scene of the novel, Patience is whisked away from the electric chair in the arms of the *third* man she claims to have loved in the novel, and there is cheering, not jeering heard from the crowd.

Affording her protagonist more than one chance at love, Atherton imagines an alternative vision of female identity through the character of Patience. By promoting Patience’s right to make a few mistakes along the way, Atherton advocates allowing American women access to the kind of mobility whereby a woman can leave her family for good reason, not marry the first man with whom she is intimate, and experiment with many of the same professional opportunities afforded middle-class men in order to find the most fulfilling life for herself that suits her individual personality.

²³ See Nina Baym’s *Woman’s Fiction*, Cathy Davidson’s *Revolution and the Word*, Mary Kelley’s *Private Woman, Public Stage*, Susan Glenn’s *Female Spectacle*, especially pp. 18-21, and Elizabeth Hardwick’s *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature* for more detailed accounts of the plight and expected demise of fallen women in nineteenth-century American literature.

Throughout the novel, Atherton's descriptions of Patience quite cleverly celebrate her uniqueness and departure from traditional views of womanhood. Garan Bourke first notices Patience walking "along from school with a dozen or more of the girls" (54). He tells her, "I noticed you first because you stood a little apart from the others" (54). When asking about her, a local describes Patience to Bourke in startlingly defiant terms, "She's got bad blood in her and the temper of Old Nick himself. She'll come to no good, homely as she is,' ... 'Curious enough, the boys all like her and would spark her if they got a show; but she's hell-set on getting' an education at present and doesn't notice them much'" (54). The local's identification of Patience with devilishness and homeliness contrasts sharply with her magnetic appeal to Bourke and "the boys," revealing Atherton's contention that ideal womanhood should defy conventional expectations. Furthermore, she clearly associates Patience's intellect and independence with sexual attractiveness to *worthy* suitors.

Patience's later encounters with such esteemed, yet varied, individuals further attest to Atherton's advocacy of independence for women. Mr. Foord, Mr. Field, Miss Tremont, Miss Merrien, Mr. Steele, and even the elder Mr. Peele all find themselves drawn toward and respectful of Patience's unique, independent spirit. On their enlightening voyage to New York, Mr. Field tells Patience:

'Your experience and the bad blood in you, taken in connection with your bright and essential modern mind, will make a sort of intellectual anarchist of you ... I doubt if you take kindly to the domestic life. You will probably go in for the social problems, and ride some polemical hobby for eight or ten years, at the end of which time you will be inclined to look upon your sex as the soubrettes of

history. Your enthusiasm may make you a faddist, but your common sense may aid you in the perception of several eternal truths which the women of to-day in their blind bolt have overlooked.’ (86)

Field’s prophetic description of Patience’s trajectory in life reveals the ambivalence of Atherton’s feminist agenda. She enthusiastically supports women’s desires and right to pursue their own goals in life, while simultaneously dismissing large groups of women in derogatory terms such as “soubrettes” and “faddists.” In Atherton’s view, the pure, pious, domestic angel of the Victorian era is as mindless as the majority of New Women are reckless. Nevertheless, Field’s sage advice to Patience that ““there is one thing more fascinating than beauty, and that is a strong individuality. It radiates and magnifies”” (87) heralds Atherton’s advocacy of women’s mobility and liberation. The entirety of her novel is committed to Field’s statement; above all else, women must be able to pursue and cultivate their individuality.

Further challenges to strict definitions of ideal womanhood result from other characterizations of female characters throughout the novel. The loose, immoral representative of the sexually liberated extreme of New Womanhood, the actress, Rosita, is described at various moments throughout the text as “loyal” (18), “exquisitely pretty” (62), “made to drive men mad” (144), “a mercenary wanton” (408), “as pretty and as naughty as possible” (433), and “one of the most abandoned women in America” (449). Patience disapproves of Rosita’s pragmatic approach to love and sex, but she cannot deny her honesty and loyalty as a friend. Atherton’s depiction of Rosita’s unflinching loyalty to Patience and her mastery of the theater world and material success in life challenge traditional views of a woman such as Rosita as reprehensible and “fallen,” contributing to

Atherton's assault on more conservative constructions of femininity without wholeheartedly endorsing key elements of New Womanhood. Atherton's middle ground asserts that what is best for the American woman is the possibility of discovering and fostering her own individuality.

At the other extreme of the feminine spectrum from Rosita appears Honora, who is described in repeatedly idealistic, angelic terms. The antithesis of the fallen woman, Honora is first described as "A girl, looking like a large butterfly, in her yellow frock, ... fluttering about the hall amidst the palms and the huge vases of flowers. Her skin was of matchless tints, her large blue eyes as guileless as those of an infant" (192). And yet moments later, Hal describes Honora as "a whole rattlesnake, and no mistake" (193). Hal's description of the discrepancies between Honora's appearance and true nature articulates Atherton's critique of the domestic angel. Warning Patience, Hal says of Honora, "'You can imagine how subtle she is, and what a dangerous force such self-control is. I shall never understand how she failed to get Bev'" (193). Hal's description of her calculating cousin undermines the traditional view of the idyllic innocence of "true womanhood," revealing it as a premeditated pretension rather than an innocent manifestation of ideality. The devilish, deceptive woman is not the "fallen woman" who defies the somewhat waning, but still accepted and often expected, Victorian conventions of love and intimacy, but rather the "angel of the house" who plays by the rules of society in order to accomplish her ends. Honora's demureness is a ruse, not an inherent mark of her goodness. And the trial, condemnation, and redemption of Patience Sparhawk reveal how shrewd Hal's insights into Honora's character really are.

Before the damning testimony of the supposedly depraved, but honest Rosita, Honora takes the stand against Patience, looking “dignified and sad” (425). “In her clear childlike voice she described to the jury her moment of confusion and horror when awakened from a profound sleep by the prisoner; told the mournful story of the unavailing attempts at resuscitation; and hesitatingly admitted, in full detail, the unmistakable indifference of the wife” (425). She *hesitatingly* describes Patience’s inappropriate behavior *in full detail*. Of course Honora’s hesitation is the real performance on the stand. She hesitates as if she does not want to reveal her version of Patience’s behavior, but then she is instantly able to do so in remarkable detail. The supposedly incredible actress Rosita, the “fallen” woman told nothing but the truth on the stand, even when it made Patience look bad, while the “angelic” Honora is the one lying to serve her own ends. Finally, Hal’s warning that Patience would “hear from her [Honora] yet” (194) reveals the chilling paradox that is Honora Mairs.

Before the trial ends, Honora retakes the stand, and Atherton’s description of her and her effect on the jury expresses the author’s sage exposure of the hypocrisy of the Victorian feminized ideal:

As Honora ascended the stand there was a deep murmur of admiration.

She looked like an angel and nothing less. She wore a white lawn frock, girt with a blue sash; a large white leghorn lined with azure velvet, against which the baby gold of her hair shone softly. Her great blue eyes had the clear calm serenity of a young child. Patience drew her breath in a series of short gasps. (439)

Describing Honora’s ideal appearance with repeated references to infantile and childlike qualities, Atherton critiques the stultifying effects of traditional gender conventions on

American women. There is something especially troubling about a grown woman whose most noticeable and commendable traits are those of an infant or child. In her essay, "Sob Sisterhood Revisited," Jean Lutes comments on the real-life trial of Harry Kendall Thaw for the 1906 murder of Stanford White, a man who had raped Thaw's young wife, Evelyn, before she and Thaw were married. Lutes writes about the trial in the context of its gender politics, noting how descriptions of the young wife which sought to elicit sympathy for her and her stolen innocence repeatedly made reference to her girlish and childlike qualities in order to establish her status as "a naïf, a passive victim who cannot be held responsible for what happened" (Lutes 517). In the same way, Honora's childlike appearance evidently persuades the jury of her innocence and credibility, an impression the novel clearly condemns.

Furthermore, despite this childlike, innocent, angelic appearance, Honora proceeds to lie, under oath, inventing the story that she actually witnessed Patience pour the fatal dose of morphine for her husband. The shocking contrast between her demeanor and her deeds reveals the extent of Atherton's frustration with traditional expectations of women's piety and purity. Honora bears all the markings of an ideal Victorian lady, but her character is as venomous as Hal portended. Convincing and angelic in appearance to the jury, Honora does not affect Garan Bourke. He sees through her pretensions toward feminine perfection and recognizes her deceptions and murderous role in Beverly Peele's death. When Bourke finally persuades Father Connor to confront Honora and elicit her confession, the priest ironically finds her in her "celestial bedroom" (461) and persuades her to confess after flattering her that her "face would be enough to make a sinner think of heaven – sure it's the face of an angel!" (462). Atherton's deliberate pairing of such a

perfect appearance and imperfect soul reveals her intentional invocation of imagery and character as means of indicting Victorian conventions of intimacy for their harmful effects on women and the need for women to be freed from such rigid standards in order to discover their own individuality. When Honora finally does confess, she offers her upbringing as a defense of her sins:

‘Oh I am not a monster, I am not abnormal, I am merely a result ... It was early that I learned the lesson that if I would occupy a supportable position in life I must “work” people; I must cultivate will and tact – how I hate the loathsome word – and study the natures of those about me, and play upon them; that I must acquire absolute self repression, be a sort of automaton, that being once wound up properly, never makes a false move.’(464)

Honora is the “result” of the Victorian traditions to which she conformed in order to make a life for herself. Finding herself a child amongst the blue-blooded Peeles, she knew that becoming “a sort of automaton” is exactly what nineteenth-century conventions of ideal white womanhood demand. Her insights in this passage reveal that Honora is really not so different from Patience. She understands how the world she lives in works. The difference lies in her decision to conform and Patience’s determination to rebel. Given the plotting of the novel and the outcome of the text, there is little doubt regarding Atherton’s view of which approach is best for women. Honora is left “with pale distended eyes, no breath issuing from her dry lips, ... a miserable, collapsed, quivering heap,” who lied and cheated in the most egregious ways because of her determination to be with the one and only man Victorian conventions permitted, while Patience, who refused to be shackled to the first intimate encounter of her life, is smiling

and proud at the novel's end, allowed to experiment and find a man she really loves (468).

Atherton's Ambivalent Alternative

It is undeniable from her critical portrayal of the angelic Honora, as well as the accounts of her critics and Atherton herself, that *Patience Sparhawk* embraces the revolutionary spirit often associated with New Womanhood and demands a woman's right to independence and individuality. Discovering the kind of white, middle-class women's alternative her novel advances demands a careful look at Atherton's sometimes ambivalent challenge to conventional modes of women's liberation in the late nineteenth century. Atherton imagines an alternative whereby white, middle-class women can embrace professionalism as a means of self-discovery which will facilitate a successful intimate connection with an ideal mate who can love them completely because they both know exactly who they are and what they want in life.

In her study, *Modern Women, Modern Work*, Francesca Sawaya examines the ways in which a variety of white and black women writers from the turn of the century to the mid-1940s "sought to stabilize the opposition between domesticity and professionalism" (16-17). In so doing, Sawaya "calls into question the assumptions about gender and race that animate the opposition between Victorian domestic and modern professional culture on which modernists relied" (17). Ultimately, Sawaya uncovers the many ways in which professional discourses relied upon tenets of Victorian domesticity for their own validation, despite their aspirations toward modernity and insistent rejection of domesticity for its association with a primitive and repressive past.

In a similar manner, Atherton's demands for women's independence simultaneously challenge and conflate images of New Woman professionalism and Victorian domestic ideology. For what Atherton's novel advances is white, middle-class women's need for mobility with the license to experiment with their professional and intimate lives, without sacrificing either. To this end, Atherton's novel advances some elements of New Woman professionalism through her description of stock images of New Womanhood such as the actress, the newspaper woman, and the social reformer, while also critiquing the stifling effects of these professions on an individual woman's desire for intimacy. Atherton's novel clearly disparages key elements of Victorian domestic ideology, especially its creation of the fallen woman category, while also advancing an idealized notion of heterosexual intimacy which embraces some key elements of Victorian views of romantic love. In the end, Atherton's ideal is a middle-ground whereby women can enjoy the independence of professionalism without sacrificing their desire for an intimate connection with a partner.

The Actress and the Newspaperwoman: Successful Symbols of Feminine Independence, Inadequate Models of Intimacy

Steven Seidman, in *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830-1980*, reveals how "historians have long observed that beginning in the 1890s a far-reaching, perhaps unprecedented, public discussion about intimate life began" (65). Atherton's novel emerges amidst a significant social phenomenon within the country whereby, "Everyone – from secular intellectuals, social scientists, psychologists, artists and writers to journalists, feminists, socialists, and ordinary citizens – claimed a right to speak about sex" (Seidman 65). And yet the frankness of the discussions varies greatly from one

individual to the next, as does the range of “alterations in norms and mores of intimate behavior” (Seidman 65) advanced by a particular point of view or element of society.²⁴

In analyzing the social context of these altered perspectives on American intimacy, Seidman identifies the ways in which New Women, “with careers of their own and female-centered networks for social support” (69) could approach marriage as “optional.” Rejecting the inevitability of marriage, New Women could simultaneously be perceived as threats to the idealized family structures of the Victorian era or as trailblazing feminists creating opportunities and advancement for women. Gertrude Atherton, in *Patience Sparhawk*, heralds a woman’s right to independence via a profession as well as extols the value of an idealized intimacy between a woman and a man. These two goals thereby characterize her text as potentially conflicted, because late nineteenth-century American visions of professionalism and intimacy usually consider the two as mutually exclusive. By advocating a quest for self-discovery that ideally ends with a communion of souls united in a heterosexual love relationship, Atherton’s advancement of a woman’s right to also seek a professional life as a means toward self-discovery becomes problematic because of the restrictions on traditional intimacy necessitated by many of the most accessible New Woman professions.

In Atherton’s text, the figures of the actress and the newspaperwoman emerge as key representatives of New Womanhood. The actress of the novel, Rosita, is first introduced as Patience’s “loyal friend,” a role Rosita maintains throughout the novel despite Patience’s misgivings regarding her life as an actress, a life Patience determined

²⁴ For more on the increasingly public dialogue regarding sex in nineteenth-century America, see Helen Horowitz’s *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America*.

in many ways. For it is Patience who “emphatically” assures her teacher, Miss Galpin when she questions Rosita’s acting ability: “Rosita can act ... I’ve seen her imitate every actress that has been here, and take off pretty nearly everybody in Monterey ... Rosita has a lovely voice, almost as pretty as a lark’s” (47-48). In her early years, it is Patience who most encourages Rosita’s theatrical aptitude and aspirations: “You [Rosita] must brace up. When you get there [on stage] you’ll be all right. And you *must not* get stage fright. Rosita, you *must* make a success. Remember you’ve got the star part. Don’t, *don’t* make a fool of yourself” (61). Patience convinces her teacher to give Rosita the part; she trains and drills Rosita every day; and she expects Rosita to shine, which she does. Rosita, we discover, is changed forever, “Oh I’m going to act, act, act forever! I never want to do anything else” (63). Here the text clearly embraces Rosita’s passion for meaningful work.

Despite Patience’s significant role in Rosita’s earliest endeavors to become an actress, when she learns Rosita is really “*on the stage*” (121), she reads Rosita’s “letter with some alarm. All that she had heard and read of the stage made her apprehensive” (123). She fears that Rosita will “become fast, would drink and smoke, and not maintain the proper reserve with men” (123). Patience’s concerns are not unique to the time period. The growing influence of the theater and the actresses who reigned on stage between 1880 and 1910 raised significant concerns amongst conservatives and social reformers preoccupied with the moral decline of the American family and its women in particular. And yet, at the same time, the ever-increasing presence and influence of these

female performers in society encouraged and in many ways initiated the feminist movement of the early 1910s and 1920s.²⁵

Patience's ambivalence regarding Rosita's career echoes Atherton's own ambivalent relationship with New Womanhood. Having read Rosita's letter "with some alarm" (123) regarding Rosita's moral and ethical future, Patience quickly recovers, and "the natural independence of her character asserted itself, and she felt pride in Rosita's courage and promptness of action. She even envied her a little: her life would be so full of variety" (124). Patience goes on, "She [Rosita] was cut out for the stage if ever a girl was. You might as well try to keep a bird from using its wings, or Miss Beale and auntie from being Temperance. I wonder what my fate is. It's not the stage, but it's not this, neither – not much" (124). Atherton's grouping of acting and temperance work in the passage identifies the two extremes of New Womanhood. New Women in the late nineteenth century were exercising their freedom and independence in the public realm through reform work like Miss Beale and Miss Tremont, while actresses were asserting women's independence on the stage. The conflict for Patience lies in the inability of her own personality to find fulfillment in either extreme. She is uncomfortable with the moral 'looseness' of the actress; at the same time, she recoils from the rigid morality of the Temperance women. In terms of the opportunity for an idealized intimate life, both careers fall short. Rosita's intimate life seems more like a financial transaction than a respectful communion of souls, while the entirely too ephemeral ranting of the

²⁵ See Susan Glenn's introduction and first chapter of *Female Spectacle* in which she details how "on the critical demand for women's right to sexual expressiveness and personality or self-development, female performers clearly constituted a kind of proto-feminist vanguard," (6).

temperance women who speak of Jesus as their lover also fails to fulfill Patience's personal desires for intimacy.²⁶

Atherton biographer, Leider, reads *Patience Sparhawk* as an autobiographical novel that expresses Atherton's "trouble accepting the sexual liberation that New Woman independence and unconventionality seemed to many to imply" (156). Leider claims "'free love' offended her [Atherton's] Puritan moral inheritance" (211). Patience seems to share this Puritan bent when she blanches in the face of Rosita's stories regarding her calculated, profitable sexual dalliances with men of power and influence, while at the same time, she refuses to pass judgment, telling Rosita, "I never judge any one. Why should I? Why should we judge anybody? I couldn't do what you have done, but that is no reason why I should condemn you. That would be absurd" (148). And yet we know Patience is left "with a profound loathing of life, of human nature" (148) after her encounter with Rosita. She cannot align herself with religious reformers, who would condemn a woman like Rosita, while she simultaneously cannot entirely make peace with Rosita's sexual capitalism.

Leider describes the writer Atherton in similarly conflicted terms:

Although she wrote one frankly suffragist novel, another in which women stage a revolution against men, and many others with spirited, bright, assertive heroines, Atherton was the kind of feminist who complains how ugly most other feminists are. Delighted to remain free of the yoke of matrimony after she was

²⁶ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman discuss the origins of this idea of a communion of souls in nineteenth-century America, explaining, "In the middle class, ... an ideal of romantic love also began to influence the decision to wed. The romantic ideal, in which love bound a couple together, also encouraged expectations that marriage would involve a new level of personal intimacy, along with requiring the traditional duty of the spouses ... especially within the middle class, sexual desires had become increasingly fused with a romantic quest for emotional intimacy and even spiritual union" (73-84).

widowed at the age of 30, she advocated economic independence for women, favored divorce, protested the double standard, but confessed to a preference for the company of men – they were more interesting. Like her heroines, she was attracted to fatherly, even grandfatherly gentlemen of wealth, achievement, worldly experience, and stature in the community. But she never compromised her freedom for such a man, preferring a footloose existence to one of roots, domesticity, and ties that might bind. (5-6)

Such ambivalence speaks to the conflicted responses of Patience Sparhawk to the theatrical life of her childhood friend, Rosita. She is repulsed by Rosita's sexual freedom and perceived moral compromises, while she recognizes her ultimately honest and independent spirit. When Patience is accused of murder and has nowhere to go, she turns to Rosita; and yet, in her murder trial, she and her lawyer must distance Patience from Rosita, clarifying that since their childhood in Monterey, the two only met three times, and "that she [Patience] should not have gone to [Rosita's] house if there had been any possibility of obtaining entrance to a hotel, or if she had not been turned out of her father-in-law's house" (435). Rosita, the actress, certainly represents a New Woman of the nineteenth century with her life filled with travel, freedom, and sexual liberation, but her forms of freedom are ultimately unpalatable to Patience's moral code and incompatible with her belief in a romantic ideal.

When she first contemplates Rosita's life as an actress, Patience confesses a tinge of jealousy at her life of freedom. She wonders what her fate is, and in her next visit with Rosita, after explaining her less than fulfilling life with the Temperance Union, declares "I have no intention of pursuing it. I'm going to be a newspaper woman" (141). And yet

the life of the newspaperwoman, another representative of turn-of-the-century New Womanhood, as the novel unfolds, ultimately disappoints in Patience and Atherton's estimation as well. A January 1899 article in *The Ladies Home Journal* authored by Elizabeth G. Jordan and entitled, "What it Means to be a Newspaper Woman," begins with a list of questions "the young woman who wishes to do newspaper work, or, as she might prefer to put it, 'enter journalism' should ask herself" (8). The three questions follow:

Have I the brains for newspaper work, with the education and mental training which will enable me to attain success in a profession that is so exacting?

Have I the health to withstand the long hours, the nervous strain, the effects of irregular meals, and the frequent attacks of physical and mental exhaustion incidental to the life of a reporter?

Have I the character and dignity which will win the respect of my fellow-workers and hold that respect for all time; can I work among men on the footing of common interest and good-fellowship, with no tears, no flirting, no affairs, no question of sex? This is a question at least as important as the other two. (8)

And it seems this is the question that explains Patience, along with Atherton's ultimate frustration with the brand of New Womanhood offered by newspaper work. Because Patience perceives intimacy as explicitly forbidden in the world of newspaper work, Patience cannot find complete fulfillment through the profession, though it proves crucial to her quest for independence. Ultimately, the profession proves a necessary means to the

end of self-fulfillment and intimacy rather than an end in and of itself. Through the character of Miss Merrien and Patience's interaction with her and the editor Morgan Steele, we can read the extent to which newspaper work inspires and frustrates Atherton's revolutionary approach to women's opportunities and intimacy in the late 1800s in this novel.

Notably, it is through Rosita that Patience first meets Miss Merrien, the newspaperwoman. Exasperated with her life at home with Beverly, Patience wakes one morning with the idea to "go to town and see Rosita ... It seems to me that she is the fittest companion I could find" (270). As the actress living a life on her own in the city, Patience, stifled by her domesticated status as the wife of Beverly Peele, sees Rosita as a more fit match for her than the high society '*swells*' surrounding her at home. Circumstance, or perhaps as Patience would contend, *fate*, brings Miss Merrien to Rosita's residence the same day. Immediately upon hearing Miss Merrien is a journalist, Patience is curious: "do you like being a newspaper woman? Is it very hard work?" (273). In their conversation, Patience twice declares her intention to become a newspaper woman, a notion Miss Merrien dismisses based on Patience's refined, "Princess and the Pea" appearance. But after another interview shortly thereafter when Miss Merrien comes to interview Patience after reporting her diatribe against the religious hypocrisy of the women of the WCTU, Patience's repeated questions regarding life as a reporter and her revelation of Mr. Field's promise to make her a newspaper woman when she met him on the steamer to New York when she was only sixteen convince Miss Merrien that perhaps Patience has the "brains and pluck, and ... push ... to get there," which she does ten days later when she finally leaves Peele Manor for her new life as a newspaper

woman (302). The profession provides Patience with a means of supporting herself and examining herself as well.

The appeal of the newspaperwoman was compelling at this time in American history: “In the second half of the nineteenth century, prominent women set themselves up as role models for others when they turned to journalism to promote their causes or seek financial support for themselves” (Gottlieb 55); at the same time, “many women were seeking careers in journalism by 1900 because the job had been glamorized to excess in romantic fiction writing” (Gottlieb 56). These conflicting motives echo the conflated status of professionalism and domesticity Sawaya investigates in her text, also exposing Atherton’s ambivalent participation in the dynamic. Miss Merrien, the New Woman, lives by herself, answers only to herself and her editor, no doltish husband or exacting in-laws or century-old traditions of proper behavior and permissible relationships. When Patience confronts Mr. Field with her decision “to be a newspaper woman,” she explains her “break” from the Peeles and assures him her decision is not a rash one, insisting, “I’ve thought and thought and thought about it. I can’t understand why I didn’t leave before. I suppose my ideas and intentions didn’t crystallise until I met Miss Merrien” (312). Patience, in many respects, owes much to Miss Merrien and New Womanhood for her escape from the pressures and stifling confines of Peele Manor.

Nevertheless, the life of the newspaperwoman, like Rosita’s life as an actress, fails to fulfill Patience’s dreams of independence entirely. For as *The Ladies Home Journal* article expressly states, life as a newspaperwoman, a late nineteenth-century New Woman, brings its own restrictions, particularly in terms of intimacy. Agnes Hooper Gottlieb, in “Grit Your Teeth, then Learn to Swear: Women in Journalistic Careers, 1850-

1926,” explains that “Despite tales of heroic adventure, romance, and fun in fictional accounts of women journalists, it appears that the climate for women reporters in reality was an inhospitable one” (59). Gertrude Atherton, likely relying on her own experiences as a reporter exempts her fiction from this mythologizing.²⁷

Patience’s first encounter and response to her editor, Mr. Steele, portends her ultimate frustration with newspaper work (and much of *New Womanhood*). After his having listed to her all the “rules” of newspaper work, emphasizing “that you are not on this newspaper to make an individual reputation, but to become, if possible, a unit of a harmonious whole” (315), Patience “felt as if he had plucked her individuality out with his thumb and finger and contemptuously tossed it aside” (316). Atherton’s depiction of Patience’s frustration with newspaper work and its thwarting of her individual style contributes to the ambivalent status of Atherton’s attitude toward the professionalism of *New Womanhood*, but maintains the necessity of white, middle-class women’s access to such professions in order to discover true fulfillment. For even though newspaper work is not Patience’s ultimate end, it is a necessary part of her journey toward self-fulfillment, particularly her recognition that she needs a profound intimate connection with a man for true happiness.

Here in the novel we see how for Atherton “the pursuit of happiness – the individual’s questioning of or questing for a purpose in life within the boundary of social institutions – serves as her major and basic fictional motif. Her characters react to the

²⁷Leider tells us that Atherton worked intermittently for newspapers in the early 1890s: first in San Francisco and then later in New York. She appreciated the opportunities for travel and the paychecks, but she resented the class implications of her role as reporter (not a “blue blood”) and the drudgery of the job (139-140).

varied forces that either constrain them or free them to develop themselves fully and happily” (McClure 31). In the case of Patience Sparhawk, key elements of New Woman professionalism, like the domestic ideology of Victorian culture, repress her need for intimacy to be entirely happy and fulfilled in life. Later, in confessing her anger and frustration with Morgan Steele and his attitude toward her, Miss Merrien recognizes the real source of Patience’s ire:

‘You vain girl,’ ... ‘you are piqued because Morgan Steele did not succumb as other men – including Mr. Field – have done to your beauty and charm. But I’ll tell you this, by way of consolation: it is a point of etiquette – or prudence – among editors never to pay the most commonplace attentions to, or manifest the slightest interest in the women of the office. It would not only lead to endless complications, but would impair the lordlings’ dignity: in other words, they would be guyed. So cheer up. You haven’t gone off since this morning. I see three men staring at you in true Elevated style.’ (318)

Challenging the rules of good newspaper women described in *The Ladies Home Journal* and reflective of Atherton’s own experience as a journalist, Patience’s relationship with Steele quickly becomes quite conscious of sex. Two months after their initial meeting, Steele asks Patience to the office after hours where “He dropped his business-like manner suddenly” (333). Shortly thereafter he calls on her at Peele Manor where he instantly warms upon sight of Patience outside her life as a newspaperwoman, ‘How charming you look in that frock and with your hair in that braid! I always imagine *you* in prim tailor things, with your hair tucked out of sight under a stiff turban. This is lovely. You look like a little girl. Those awful dress reformers should see you’” (348). Patience echoes

Steele's anti-feminist attitude responding, "'It's a comfort to think that the She-males cannot exterminate the artistic sense'" (348). Both Steele and Patience reject the sexless demands of professional New Womanhood, mirroring what Emily Wortis Leider concludes regarding Atherton and her work in journalism. Like Patience, Atherton found "Newspaper work made her feel 'hacky,' and she hated seeing her writing cut 'to make room for illustrations,' but at least it provided assignments, deadlines, paychecks, and a ready-made audience" (Leider 140). Atherton's most recent biographer also goes on to report the repeated conjectures regarding a romantic relationship between Gertrude and Ballard Smith, the married managing editor of the *New York World*, where Atherton worked while writing *Patience Sparhawk*, quoting Miss Merrien's cynical description of the newspaper man:

'A newspaper man who is at the same time a gentleman, is charming. It is true they have no respect for anybody nor anything. They believe in no woman's virtue and no man's honesty – under stress. Their kindness – like Morgan Steele's – is half cynical, and they look upon life as a thing to be lived out in twenty years – and then dry rot or suicide. But no men know so well how to enjoy life, know so thoroughly its resources, or have all their senses so keenly developed, ... All this makes them very interesting, although, I must confess, I should hate to marry one. It seems to be a point of honour among them to be unfaithful to their wives; however, I imagine, the real reason is that no one woman has sufficient variety in her to satisfy a man who sees life from so many points of view daily that he becomes a creature of seven heads and seven hearts and seven ideals. (317-18)

Of course Miss Merrien's practical, professional rejection of the newspaperman as an object of love or affection is not imitated by Patience whose nature she is discovering demands more romantic intimacy. At one point in the novel, Atherton writes, "She [Patience] had never wanted anything in her life as much as she wanted to marry Morgan Steele ... and she was convinced she was profoundly in love" (364). Yet we know, true to Miss Merrien's characterization of his type, Steele's feelings and intentions at the time are less romantic, "I'm not stuck on matrimony, but I certainly should like her for a companion in a little house or double apartment where there would be plenty of elbow room and some chance of keeping up the illusions. I think it would be some years before I should tire of her, and I think I could love her a good deal" (358). Poignantly, after first confessing her hatred for "free-love and adultery" (365), terms less offensive to Steele, the two recognize the incompatibility of their respective 'ideals.' And once Patience is arrested and in prison, she admits to herself that she and Steele are not 'meant' to be. Steele explains:

'If you hadn't started out in life with ideas upside-down, you would really love me now in loving me no more than you do now. But ideals and the fixed idea have got to be worked out to the bitter end as you are fond of remarking. In reality, happiness means a comfortable state of affairs between a man and a woman with plenty of brains, philosophy, and passion, who are wholly congenial in these three matters, and have chucked their illusions overboard.' (400)

What is "upside-down" about Patience's ideas is her commitment to a romantic ideal. She is bright, independent, and resentful of Victorian conventions of intimacy; yet, she still objects to the 'sexless' or 'oversexed' extremes of late nineteenth-century modernity and

New Womanhood represented in the novel by Miss Merrien, the newspaper woman, and Rosita, the actress. A relationship with Steele lies somewhere in between, where Patience cannot settle, conceding that “Steele’s philosophy was correct. And if he did not inspire her with a mightier passion it was her fault, not his ... ‘I made a mistake once, and the shock was so great that it either benumbed or stunted me; or else the imaginary me was killed and the real developed’” (401). Patience determines not to make the same mistake with Morgan that she made with Beverly, holding out for an alternative ideal of intimacy that her experiences of New Womanhood fail to fulfill.

The lonely life of Miss Merrien invites her for a time, but she needs an intimate connection with a man and a validation of her femininity. Rosita’s freedom as an actress is more honest than that of the woman who marries for financial reasons, but the amorality is too unsavory for Patience’s middle-class morality and her desire for a fulfilling love match with a man who fosters and embraces her individuality as a woman.

Traveling toward New Structures of Intimacy

For Atherton, the trope of travel functions as a means of liberating women from the proscriptive cultural views of both New and fallen womanhood and enabling them to discover and nurture their own individuality. Neither label affords women any true sense of connection or belonging. The New Woman is often depicted ultimately on her own, without any true intimate ties, while the fallen woman is stripped of all family and social connections. Since neither label adequately defines or fulfills late nineteenth-century American women, Atherton’s critique in *Patience Sparhawk* demands a reconfiguration of the structures of intimacy for women. In order to truly emancipate American women from society’s repressive demands, Atherton’s text embraces the concept of mobility in

order to free women logistically from the inadequacies of current constructions of family and intimacy. Travel becomes an actual means for women to seek the best life and *home* for themselves and a figurative image of the sort of social mobility Atherton advances as the means towards women's discovering their individuality.

Patience's early struggles to free herself from the scorn and embarrassment of her alcoholic mother and unimaginative dead-end town and her later struggles to free herself from her spoiled, dolt of a husband reveal a woman who thinks much more than the people to whom she finds herself obligated as a member of traditional family structures. Her mother lived to drink and be with men. The only book her husband enjoyed was essentially a picture book of horses. Excited by the prospect of the Peele library, Patience is unable to enjoy it, because every time she seeks solace in reading, her husband appears and begins to berate her for her neglect of him and her preference for books. She desires freedom to travel not for a specific cause or social program, like her religious, temperance companions, or for self-indulgent, mind-numbing extravagance, like the wealthy "swells" she encounters as the wife of Mr. Beverly Peele, but rather Patience seeks "ideals" she describes as "a sort of yearning for some unseen force in nature; I suppose the large general force from which love is a projection" (252). "Every mortal . . .," Patience explains, "has an affinity with something in the invisible world, and uplifting of the soul" (252). The affinity Patience imagines runs counter to traditional notions of family and intimacy established in American culture. Her affinity is outside of the families to which she was born and to which she finds herself obligated as a wife. Following the rules of established structures of family and intimacy actually fills Patience with hate rather than love. Early in the novel, we are told Patience

was filled with a volcano of hate. She hated the girls, she hated Monterey, she hated life; but above all she hated her mother.

After a time all the hate in her concentrated on the woman who had made her young life so bitter. She had never liked her, but not until the dreadful moments just past had she realized the full measure of her inheritance... The girl looked the incarnation of evil passions. She was elemental Hate, a young Cain. 'I wish you were dead,' she continued. 'You've ruined every bit of my life.'(39)

The Biblical reference here highlights Atherton's trouble with key elements of American culture. The nation's inheritance of a profound Judeo-Christian influence vilifies the defiant emotions Patience reveals at this moment in the text. To express such hatred for one's own mother is to liken oneself to the monstrous Cain who killed his brother. Time and again in the novel, characters recoil at the revelation of Patience's attitude toward her own mother, and yet such social disapproval is the reason for Patience's hatred of her mother. The sins of her mother have been visited upon her, and she has spent her whole early life in California an outsider and a pariah, because of her mother's behavior. Atherton exposes the irony and hypocrisy of such a system that punishes the girl first for being her mother's innocent daughter and second for hating exactly what society hates. Society can ostracize and hate her mother, but she cannot, because it is a daughter's duty to love and honor her mother without exception.

When Patience is finally free from her mother and arrives in New York, receiving the love and affection of Miss Tremont seems to change Patience instantly. She is nearly overwhelmed by the sincere feelings of an actually nurturing mother figure, one who has

been chosen rather than inherited. Of their initial affectionate meeting, Atherton writes, “She [Patience] hardly knew how to meet so much effusion. But something cold and old within her seemed to warm and thaw” (92). Patience’s blossoming under Miss Tremont’s influence makes a strong case for an individual’s power to choose their own intimate relations:

Patience for the first time in her life experienced the enfolding of the home atmosphere, an experience denied to many for ever and ever. She turned impulsively, and throwing her arms about Miss Tremont, kissed and hugged her.

‘Somehow I feel all made over,’ she said apologetically, and getting very red. ‘But it is so nice – and you are so nice – and oh, it is all so different!’

And Miss Tremont, enraptured, first wished that this forlorn homely little waif was her very own, then vowed that neither should ever remember she was not, and half carried her up to the bedroom prepared for her, a white fresh little room overlooking the shelving town. (99)

All of the affection Patience seemed so devoid of earlier in the novel emerges once a deserving figure is found worthy of it. Patience is “all made over” through this reconfiguration of the home and family life, as is Miss Tremont who, despite her own deep personal convictions and sincere concerns for Patience’s eternal soul, never forces Patience to accept her religion nor withholds her love and affection from her chosen daughter when the young girl chooses not to convert. This dynamic is “so different” from the mythologized, traditional order of love and family still predominant in American society, and yet Atherton posits it as a much healthier possibility for American women.

It is not until Patience marries Beverly Peele that accusations of coldness and inhumanity return, this time from her husband, yet another representative of the inadequacy of society's structures of intimacy and family.²⁸ Shortly after their wedding and Patience's introduction to their society of friends, Beverly exclaims, "I believe you are growing cold. You have not been the same lately. Sometimes I think that you shrink from me as you did at first" (211). Patience's response outlines how social convention is responsible for this mismatched marriage:

'I've tried to explain – but you don't seem to understand – that I didn't want to fall in love with you – not in that way. That should not come first. Then when I found myself made of common clay, I said that I would forget that I had ever been Patience Sparhawk, and begin life again as Mrs. Beverly Peele. Novelty helped me ... But now I am beginning to feel like Patience Sparhawk again, and it frightens me a little.' (212)

Rather than dismiss her relationship with Beverly as a youthful indiscretion or experiment, Patience, not yet sure enough of herself to defy traditional expectations of intimacy, is forced by convention to marry a man with whom she had the slightest physical attraction and absolutely no spiritual or emotional connection. Later, Patience elaborates upon the absurdity of such conventions:

'What is the matter with civilisation anyhow? I can only explain my own remarkable aberration in this way: youthful love is a compound of curiosity, a

²⁸ In *Sex Seen*, Sharon Ullman explains how a common motif in films at this time was "asexuality in marriage" (74). She notes how "this representation of the asexual wife is particularly interesting given the rich set of contrasting cultural images that otherwise celebrate female sexuality" (74). Used by Atherton at this moment in the text the image of the "frigid wife" seems to argue that such asexuality in marriage is the logical result of the likely mismatch of mates fostered by repressive Victorian standards of intimacy.

surplus of vitality, and inherited sentimentalism. It is likely to arrive just after the gamut of children's diseases has run its course. Of course the disease is merely a complacent state of the system until the germ arrives, which same is the first attractive and masterful man. All diseases run their course, however. I could not be more insensible to Beverly Peele's dead ancestors out in the vault than I am to him. No woman is capable of loving at nineteen. She is nothing but an overgrown child, a chaos of emotions and imagination. There ought to be a law passed that no woman could marry until she was twenty-eight. Then, perhaps a few of us would feel less like -- Well, there is nothing to do but make the best of it, regard life as a highly seasoned comedy, in which one is little more than a spectator after all" (222)

In her attack on social convention, Patience stops short of revealing the extent of her desire to rebel, but Atherton's "spirit of revolt" is poignantly clear in this passage. Her question for civilization and reference to Peele's ancestors crystallizes her contention that the social structures of intimacy in earlier nineteenth-century America repress women and relegate them powerless in their own lives, revealing Atherton's more modern participation in "some of the variety, tension, and change in American sexual patterns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" through her novel (D'Emilio 173).

To craft her "feminist revolt" against such social pressure and power, Atherton narrates a story of mobility. To escape the small-minded determinations and petty distractions of her early life in Monterey, Patience successfully travels east to New York and finds opportunities for self-discovery in the home of Miss Tremont; to escape the oppression of the Peeles and the society of "swells," Patience again must travel and make

a new home for herself. Before leaving Beverly she reiterates her recurring request, “Now I ask you for the last time, Will you let me travel?” (304). Peele shouts back a resounding “No!” and Book Four begins with Patience settling in to “the house that was to be her new home ... and an entirely new existence” (307). While a bit daunted and frightened at first, it does not take long for Patience to feel the kind of rebirth she felt upon her first relocation to New York:

Patience’s indignation had worn itself out by bedtime. When Miss Merrien left her for the night she locked her door and spread her arms out with an exultant sense of freedom. She seemed to feel the ugly weight of the past two years fall from her, and to hear it go clattering down the quiet streets ... She now felt that she was a woman whose mistakes and dark experiences would corrode the brain and spirit, ruining the present and future ... The future seemed to her to be full of infinite possibilities. She could be her own fastidious dreaming idealising self again. (319)

Patience’s compromise with society and with the Peeles would have been travel. Earlier she had implored Beverly’s father: “But couldn’t I live abroad? I could do so on very little. I should care nothing for society if I could live my life by myself. I should be quite contented with books and freedom” (267). When the Peeles cannot even agree to give her this modicum of freedom offered many women of their class, including their own daughter, Patience must travel on her own terms, lest she lose herself. The fact that it takes less than twenty-four hours away from the stifling confines of Peele Manor for her to feel absolute release and rejuvenation makes Atherton’s statement very clear. Mobility liberates white, middle-class women in late nineteenth-century America by enabling

women to relocate themselves outside of domestic structures in order to examine and determine what they really desire in life.

Life with Bourke: Atherton's Imagined Ideal of Intimacy

We know Patience's initial experiences upon leaving Peele Manor fail to fulfill immediately in themselves: life as a newspaperwoman is too unimaginative and impersonal; love with Morgan Steele is incomplete. However, through Patience Sparhawk's personal experiences and travels, Atherton does ultimately fulfill Patience's desires for an intimate ideal. The fulfillment of that ideal manifests itself through the character of Garan Bourke and Patience's romantic relationship with him.

In many ways, Atherton's critique of the images and ideals of both 'fallen' and New Women at the turn of the nineteenth century echo Richard Sennet's concerns regarding the two images of "intimate tyrannies" (337) he identifies in his conclusion to *The Fall of Public Man*. The first intimate tyranny Sennet describes results from "a catalogue of domestic routine" (337). He likens it to "claustrophobia" and the plight of Madame Bovary. In Atherton's novel, it can be read as the oppressive confines of Peele Manor and Patience's miserable winters alone with Beverly or summers amidst the demanding social calendar of the 'swells'. The second tyranny Sennet describes in political terms, whereby "all one's activities, friends, and beliefs pass through the net of government surveillance" (337). Applied to Atherton's late nineteenth-century cultural commentary in *Patience Sparhawk*, this second form of intimate tyranny simultaneously applies to the social pressures of Victorian high society and its exacting standards of public and private life, as well as what Atherton perceives as the ever-increasing scrutiny

of New Womanhood and its equally exacting expectations of either extreme sexual liberation or a sexless rejection of intimacy in favor of a profession.

As a close reading of the plot and characters of the novel reveals, Atherton rejects both forms of “intimate tyranny” in favor of an alternative structuring of intimacy for the individual that embraces some elements of traditional Victorian views of intimacy, while clearly rejecting others. This alternate vision is outlined in Patience’s earliest encounter with Bourke when he tells her:

‘You’ve got a good will, begad, and like all first-class American women, you’ll keep your head up until you drop. And you have all her faculty of beginning life again over several times, if necessary. You’ll never rust nor mould, nor write polemical novels if things don’t go your way. You’ve got a good strong brain behind those eyes, and although you’ll make mistakes of various sorts, you’ll kick them behind you when you’re done with them, begin over and be none the worse. Remember that no mistake is irrevocable; that there are as many to-morrows as yesterdays; that only the incapable has a past. It is all a matter of will as far as the world is concerned and the ideals as far as your own soul goes. No matter how often circumstances and your own weakness compel you to let go your own private ideals, deliberately put them back on their pedestal the moment you have recovered balance, and make for their attainment as if nothing had happened. Then you’ll never acquire an aged soul and never lose your grip.’ (56-7)

Bourke’s emphasis on Patience’s need to allow herself to make mistakes contrasts sharply with traditional Victorian social convention which at its height demanded

impeccable purity from women. John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman describe how this standard of chastity peaked in the American south, whereby expectations of white womanhood “remained virtually untouchable, exemplifying a purity that was beyond corruption” (186). D’Emilio and Freedman quote the regionalist novelist, Frances Newman as having “wryly commented that ‘in Georgia a woman was not supposed to know she was a virgin until she ceased being one’” (186). Atherton’s character of Honora Mairs, living in the Victorian North reveals how little-removed other parts of the country may have been late into the nineteenth century from such exacting standards of purity when she confesses to Father Connor that:

‘One night he [Beverly Peele] came in here. The next night I kissed the pillow his head would lie on. For a year I was happy; for another I alternated between joy and anguish, jealousy and peace, despair and hope. Then a year of misery, during which he brutally cast me off. It was that which drove me to the Catholic Church – not only the peace it promised, but the knowledge that with baptism my sin would be washed away – for when happiness went remorse began. I have not the brain of iron, like that woman he married. She could snap her past in two and fling it behind her. She could snap her fingers at moral laws, if it suited her purpose, and know no regret, provided she had had nothing to regret meanwhile. That was one reason why I hated her.’ (465-66)

Honora’s reason for hating Patience is Patience’s rebuff of Victorian social convention. Per the advice with which Garan Bourke empowered her as a mere child, Patience would not punish herself the way Honora did, nor label herself “fallen” for her first sexual encounter with Beverly Peele. Of course, Patience is vulnerable enough to society’s

demands that she does marry him, but she does not remain with him. When she recognizes the inadequacy of her second attempt at intimacy with Morgan Steele, Patience finally sees how her life is progressing just as the Irish lawyer had advised back in Monterey:

After he [Steele] had gone Patience drew a long sigh of relief. The first terrible mistake of her life was buried with Beverly Peele. A second had been averted. Something seemed rebuilding within her: the undeflected continuation of the little girl in the tower. For the first time she understood herself as absolutely mortal can; and she paid tribute to the zigzag of life which had helped her to that final understanding. (409)

Herein lies a key element of the restructured view of intimacy advanced by Atherton's novel: defying Victorian social convention, Patience's story insists that love need not follow from an individual's first intimate experience. Patience's trial-and-error approach to intimacy finally results in an ideal match for herself, a match that may not have been recognized as so ideal or fitting had she not afforded herself the opportunity to make mistakes. When advising her sister-in-law, Hal, on whom she should marry, she insists that a woman "be true to [her] ideals" (228). She goes on, "No temporary aberration can permanently divert one's paramount want from its natural course" (228). For Patience, the aberrations were Beverly Peele and Morgan Steele, and her "paramount want" was love, an idealized intimate connection with a man. At the end of the novel, still believing she is fated for the electric chair, Patience resigns herself to her fate and takes solace in knowing she attained her ideal:

For after all, happiness is of kind, not of quantity. They could strike from her many years of life, but had she not lived? And a few years more or less – what mattered it? One must die at the last. She had realized an ideal. She had known love in its profoundest meaning, in its most delicate vibrations. A thousand years could give her no more than that. (471)

Atherton expressly identifies the profoundly spiritual intimate connection between Patience and Garan Bourke as the complete fulfillment of her heroine's individual ideal.

Of course Atherton's romantic view of love and emphasis on its ultimately spiritual value does resound with Victorian sentiment. Steven Seidman explains in detail in his second chapter of *Romantic Longings*, "True Love, Victorian Style," how "at least one prominent middle-class Victorian construction of love defined it in spiritual terms. Love originated from the longing of the soul for spiritual elevation and completion through communion with a kindred spirit. The mutual attraction that Victorians described as love was basically a spiritual, mental and moral one" (60). This spiritual communion of the Victorians, which mimics nearly verbatim some of Atherton's own descriptions of Patience and Garan Bourke's attraction toward one another, Seidman determines, "was accomplished through a courting process that involved an ordeal of mutual self-disclosure" (60). However, Seidman goes on to recognize how "the Victorian sexual regime was not entirely successful" (60). Atherton's novel separates itself from the Victorian project as it implicates the unrelenting expectation for women's childlike chastity and ignorance as the impediment to the spiritual ideal. The "courting process" rather than enabling women to grow and learn, actually demanded that they stifle and misrepresent themselves in order to land a mate, as the character of Honora Mairs

confessed to the priest. Furthermore, the behavior of characters like Beverly Peele in the woods with Patience and in Honora's bedroom reveals how Victorian men often brazenly bypassed the "courting" process altogether in their pursuit of potential mates, forcing women to marry too soon, lest they become "fallen" in the view of society. So despite the similarities between Atherton's spiritualized vision of intimacy and specific Victorian ideals of romantic love, her approach is clearly more complicated and honestly concerned for women's need to seek and determine their individuality.

Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen's July 1895 article in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, "The New Womanhood" affirms the ultimately progressive nature of Atherton's alternative, echoing her vision of white, middle-class women's independence as a means toward an idealized intimacy between men and women and ultimate happiness:

Love is, to my mind, nothing but an enthusiastic congeniality of soul. It is a profound sense of a pervasive harmony of being ... I am therefore inclined to believe that the development of individuality in women (though during the transitional period it may result in added friction and greater misery) will, in the end, be conducive to a higher matrimonial felicity, resting upon a safer foundation. The New Womanhood, whatever queer guises it may assume during the transition, has avowedly for its object the training of women for larger spheres of usefulness and responsibility; and that is, of course, the very process by which individuality is fostered. The movement is therefore in the current of the social evolution, and as such likely to result in improved conditions and a larger sum of human happiness. (129-130)

Though wary of the sexual license of particular elements, likely those Boyesen deems “queer guises” of New Womanhood (actresses like Rosita) and the sexual repression of others (like the temperance women and newspaper women), Atherton’s acceptance of the new mobility and freedom afforded by New Womanhood and her restructuring of intimacy in *Patience Sparhawk* clearly represent the “revolutionary spirit” she so proudly touted in her novel. Acutely aware of the ways in which social mandates relating to intimacy can tyrannize women and thwart their individuality, the life and loves of Patience Sparhawk advance new forms of social mobility as opportunities for white, middle-class American women at the turn of the twentieth century, underscoring the value of Atherton’s novel as a significant contribution to the history of early modern middle-class women’s fiction and explaining her marginalized status in her day.

Atherton as Marginalized Middlebrow

Many of her critics relied upon associating Atherton’s work with what came to be known in the early twentieth century as middlebrow culture. Criticized by the ranks of the literary elite in the United States, Atherton’s first novel anticipates many of the notions Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith advance in their anthology of early twentieth-century middle-class women’s fiction, *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s*. Botshon and Goldsmith emphasize how the term *middlebrow* “has most often been defined by what it is not: lacking the cachet and edginess of high culture ... associated with other slightly soiled middles, including the middle class” (3). Invoking the influential works of Joan Shelley Rubin, Ann Douglas, and Andreas Huyssen, regarding the rise of the middlebrow and the feminization of modern culture, Botshon and Goldsmith explain how the milieu of middlebrow fiction

came to be gendered as feminine,²⁹ and they make a strong case for the cultural contributions of such women writers who “negotiated a delicate balance of commercial success and (albeit grudging) critical success” (6). They identify the ways in which these women authors, sensitive to both the literary marketplace and the growing middle-class reading public addressed a range of culturally and historically relevant issues in their writing. Unhampered by the disinterested posture of the “high modernists” and their increasingly necessary “rejection of both women and the popular” in order to establish their elitist position as avant-garde artists, middlebrow women writers offer contemporary scholars revealing insights into “a confluence of ideas, plots, settings, and themes born of necessity” (11) which help to “reframe the American modern period in terms of popular women’s writing” (5) “much as feminist critics intervened in the masculinist discourse of nineteenth-century American letters by heralding the previously scorned sentimental writers” (5). Adapting Botshon and Goldsmith’s theory to the case of Gertrude Atherton and *Patience Sparhawk* invites a closer look at Atherton’s career-launching novel as an essential link between the Victorian and modern periods as well as an insightful record of middle-class white women’s struggles for independence and individuality at the turn of the century.

The condescending and elitist tone of much Atherton criticism seems to qualify her as one of the earliest middlebrow authors. In an albeit reluctantly positive review of her later, “comparatively restrained” (394) novel, *The Californians* in the November 1898 issue of *The Critic*, her reviewer writes, “Mrs. Atherton’s possibilities as a novelist

²⁹ See Joan Shelley Rubin’s, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, Ann Douglas’ *Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, and Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide*.

have always been evident to the discerning, but her popularity with that class has been damaged seriously heretofore by the fact that many of her stories are of the lurid and passionate variety, seeming to demand a refrigerator rather than a bookcase as their receptacle” (394). Her critic goes on to write, “if she has permanently given over exploiting the *Patience Sparhawk* type of femininity, some very good times are in store for the chronic novel-readers who unite a preference for refinement in literature with an affection for exuberant high-spirits, cleverness and grip” (394). This reviewer identifies the problem with Atherton and *Patience Sparhawk* as more associated with Atherton’s style as a writer than her rebellious, high-spirited character. Her rejection of the “discerning” class and its aesthetic alienates her from a more favored status among them. And though the terms do not appear in this article, her classification as “middlebrow” is definitely implied.

Another 1898 review in the July issue of *Current Literature* marginalizes Atherton’s writing as outside the realm of the literary elite:

‘Mrs. Atherton is hampered by a theory,’ says the Critic; ‘or, rather, she is hampered by the desire to theorize about a condition that confronts us. Now to deduce a theory from facts is as risky as to forecast facts from theories – when we begin by assuming that the facts at hand are right. The individuality of the American woman is one of her greatest charms – when she has been well-educated. Mrs. Atherton considers it her mission to explain to us that an American woman has a right to her individuality even when she has not been educated at all. Untrained individuality is simply license, an unquestioning obedience to every mood and whim of the moment. It means disregard for the

rights and feelings of others and the repudiation of self-assumed duties when they become irksome; in the end it means ruin. (23)

Atherton biographer Charlotte S. McClure explains that “In the late 1880s, when Mrs. Atherton began to indulge in coherent dreams of a literary career and of making a living by writing, she had attempted no formal study of literature or of literary conditions” (33). The fact that Atherton successfully used the “favorable attention of London reviewers and readers [via *Patience Sparhawk*] ... as a wedge to get publication and approval of her books in America” (33) no doubt “irked” American critics forced to recognize her popular appeal. Her reviewer in *Current Literature* expresses this disdain by criticizing Atherton’s “theory” as a risky product of erroneous assumptions, clearly an unprofessional sort of flaw, likely the result of Atherton’s lack of refinement and formal training. Again the critical tactic is to marginalize Atherton as “middlebrow,” without ever expressly stating it in such terms.

Like the works in *Middlebrow Moderns*, the ultimate popularity of *Patience Sparhawk* in spite of its American critics attests to Atherton’s often complicated, often competing commercial and critical success. Admitting that she “had [not] one favorable review in the United States” (*Adventures* 266), Atherton reveals that her novel “had a slow but steady sale in the United States – for something like twenty years; and later critics admitted – with manifest reluctance – that its influence was indisputable” (*Adventures* 267). A 1909 piece on Gertrude Atherton as a “Representative American Story Teller” in *The Bookman* invokes an earlier critic’s “unkind” description of Atherton’s ‘Intellectual Anarchy’ as a “sort of condensed explanation of the success she has achieved, and also of her failure to reach certain greater heights that seem to have lain

so easily within her reach” (356). Sounding a bit like a frustrated parent whose brilliant child has failed to follow a predetermined path toward success, this sort of condescending and often “backhanded” praise reveals how Atherton was pushing the envelope in the 1890s for acceptable novels.

Shunned by early American critics for the novel’s less than respectable characters and concerns with women’s sexuality and liberation and its failure to conform to the artistic ideals established by formal training and the prevailing school of American realism, *Patience Sparhawk* certainly reveals how Atherton’s popular novel challenged the tenets advanced by realism’s American spokesman, William Dean Howells. Sybil Weir captures Atherton’s conflict with the ‘high’ literature of her day:

Atherton correctly conceived of herself as leading the fight against the glorification of the domestic heroine. Howells, whom she repeatedly accused of ‘littleism,’ was her particular *bete-noir*. To Atherton, as to the writers of the 1920s, Howells and his followers represented a smug, bourgeois, Victorian outlook which, according to Atherton, made American literature ‘anaemic, ... as correct as Sunday clothes and as innocuous as sterilized milk.’ The problem with contemporary writers, Atherton wrote in 1904 was that ‘They are all good family men, who eat well, rarely drink, are too dull to be bored with their own wives.’

(25)

Atherton’s condemnation of the predominant literary modes of her day was emphatic. “Describing what she believed style ought to be, Mrs. Atherton complained of the grammatical offenses, dialect, and local color in magazine fiction and of the ‘narrow, finicky, commonplace’ style of the Howells school. In these comments, she was

apparently objecting to the ideas that the style of writing reflected” (McClure 50). Her “heroines contradicted the Victorian myths about female moral superiority and sexual imbecility. Her women were sensual, egotistical, and intellectually ambitious. And the public – although not the male critics – apparently loved them” (Weir 25). Atherton’s rebellious heroines appear as utter foils to the refined women of Howells’ drawing rooms.

In his 1895 contribution to *Harper’s*, Howells writes:

Shall I go a little farther and say that this American world of thought and feeling shows the effect, beyond any other world, of the *honor* [my own italics] paid to woman? It is not for nothing that we have privileged women socially and morally beyond any other people; if we have made them free, they have used their freedom to make the whole national life the purest and best of any that has ever been. Our women are rare in degree the keepers of our consciences; they influence men here as women influence nowhere else on earth, and they qualify all our feeling and thinking, all our doing and being. If our literature is at its best, and our art at its best, has a grace which is above all the American thing in literature and art, it is because the grace of the moral world where our women rule has imparted itself to the intellectual world where men work. (85)

Howells’ advancement of women’s role as rulers of the moral world and his honoring of that Victorian view of ideal womanhood is clearly critiqued in Atherton’s novel. Given that the most deplorable character in the novel, *Honora*, is anything but honorable, it is easy to recognize how Atherton’s writing challenged the predominant literary voices of her day: “*Patience Sparhawk*, however, achieved an enduring reputation as an impetus to the spirit of independence of women through two decades of sales ... [appealing to an

audience] falling between contempt of Edgar Rice Borroughs and admiration for the refinements of Henry James because of their lowbrow desire for spiciness and melodrama and their highbrow aspirations to discuss and analyze theories of [the] psychology [of women],” clearly demonstrating Atherton’s middle-brow status (McClure 45).

In her contribution to Botshon and Goldsmith’s compilation, “Feminist New Woman Fiction in Periodicals of the 1920s,” Maureen Honey identifies a recurring image of a New Woman heroine in the periodical literature of the 1920s who sounds very much like the Patience Sparhawk Gertrude Atherton introduced decades earlier. The phenomenon Honey describes is “a protofeminist popular heroine whose career aspirations are reconciled with her need for a nurturing personal life that supports her modern ambitions and talents” (88). Honey goes on to clarify that though “A New Woman character similar to this figure had appeared in American fiction at least by the 1890s, ... prewar magazine stories largely concluded in romantic failure or serious compromise of her desire to live in the world on her own terms” (88). Atherton’s development of the heroine Patience and her careful plotting of her travels toward self-discovery and fulfillment mirror not the ultimately doomed prewar fiction Honey describes, but the postwar stories she identifies as “feminist new woman fiction.” Read in this light, Atherton’s early novel stands as a significant precursor to if not prototype for the newly recognized middlebrow moderns of the 1920s, making a case for modern feminists to look beyond the apparent sentimentality of Atherton’s romantic ending and recognize the practically prophetic place her 1895 novel occupies in the history of American women’s writing.

Chapter Three: Toward an Ideal of Cultural Motherhood:
Wharton's Competing Views of Mobility and Motherhood in
The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country, and Summer

While Gertrude Atherton's perceived sentimentality and conservatism contribute to her lack of attention and praise in modern literary criticism, Edith Wharton's sentimentality and conservatism have often been largely overlooked. As other elements of Wharton's work, particularly her perceived feminism, continue to earn her considerable attention from critics, most modern studies, with a few notable exceptions, continue to avoid some of Wharton's most conservative messages.³⁰ No doubt partly attributable to the fact her private papers were finally available to the public in 1968, coinciding, as Helen Killoran emphasizes in *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton*, "almost exactly with the rise of the first wave of feminism," Wharton's questioning of women's roles and opportunities through three tumultuous decades of the early twentieth century makes much of her work more than amenable to feminist scholars, explaining their vast, persistent, even, *enthusiastic* interest in her work (2).³¹

Despite such keen and largely well-founded interest in Wharton's more advanced ideas regarding women, Jennie Kassanoff's introduction to her compelling contribution to Wharton criticism, *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race*, warns Wharton scholars

³⁰ Two notable exceptions include Jennie Kassanoff's extensive study of Wharton's racial anxieties in *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* (2004) and Hildegard Hoeller's recognition of Wharton's relationship to sentimental fiction in *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* (2000)

³¹ To gain a sense of this *enthusiasm*, consider some of her most notable critics' titles about her, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (1977), *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (1980), *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics* (1994).

that “we ignore Wharton’s conservative opinions at our own peril. By overlooking what we do not wish to see, we risk ... whitewashing the complexity of American cultural politics” (5). In a concise and candid manner, Kassanoff outlines the history of Wharton criticism and how, “many critics have taken a don’t-ask-don’t-tell approach to Wharton’s conservatism” (1). Appreciative of Kassanoff’s model with her forthright discussions of Wharton’s views of race and class in early twentieth-century America, this chapter heeds Kassanoff’s warning and addresses the conflict between Edith Wharton’s notable advocacy for women’s mobility as a means to agency and a consistently conservative approach to motherhood in her novels. Through close readings and analysis of the haunting images of children and mothers in *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *Summer*, the chapter uncovers some of Wharton’s clearest and earliest endorsements of a conservative, even, idealized, view of motherhood that complicates a feminist reading of her earlier novels as brazen endorsements of women’s mobility.

As the “mobility turn” continues to influence scholars of the twenty-first century across a multitude of disciplines, examining Wharton’s engagement with women’s mobility in her fiction recognizes how “moving involves making a choice within, or despite, the constraints of society” and how her characters’ choices to move or not shape the ethos of her early novels (Cresswell 5).

Of course this is not to say Edith Wharton’s engagement with mobility and motherhood has never been addressed by her critics. On the contrary, Nancy Bentley studies Wharton’s compulsion towards movement and travel in “Wharton, Travel, and Modernity,” while her most notable biographers, R.W. B. and Nancy Lewis and Shari Benstock, in addition to such notable critics as Elizabeth Ammons, Cynthia Griffin

Wolfe, Susan Goodman, and Dale Bauer have all addressed her concerns with motherhood, mothers and daughters, and eugenics.³² Nevertheless, most critics conclude Wharton is largely ambivalent on the subject, and they have avoided reading early novels such as *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* as conservative in their approach to motherhood. Rather, most feminist, new historical, and cultural critics continue to emphasize Wharton's more overt challenges to marriage and its implicit denial of women's autonomy and individuality in these novels. Susan Goodman captures the typical pairing and reading of these two early Wharton masterpieces:

The House of Mirth and *The Custom of the Country* are maps that chart the range and scope available to most of Wharton's characters ... they resist to the best of their ability... If the world persists in turning a deaf ear Wharton warns, future Lily Barts will grow up to be Undine Spraggs, women who seek the new and stylish as relentlessly as Ahab sought his whale, women, who claiming their rightful place in the lobby of the Nouveau Luxe, have an apocalyptic effect on every culture they encounter. (48-9)

Goodman's reading of these two novels' pleas for societal reform regarding women's roles reflects a general consensus among Wharton scholars that both novels indeed advance women's rights and encourage mobility as a means toward agency for women. However, it is notable that Goodman recognizes Wharton's often conservative preoccupation with a social Armageddon. Kassanoff's study outlines how

³² See Cynthia Griffin Wolff's *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (1977), Elizabeth Ammons' *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (1980), Susan Goodman's *Edith Wharton's Women: Friends & Rivals* (1990), and Dale Bauer's *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics* (1994).

Wharton's early fiction articulates a host of early twentieth-century white patrician anxieties: that the ill-bred, the foreign and the poor would overwhelm the native elite; that American culture would fall victim to the 'vulgar' tastes of the masses; and that the country's oligarchy would fail to reproduce itself and thereby commit 'race suicide'. (3)

What Goodman and most Wharton critics have historically left unexamined however are the extent to which Wharton's powerful images of Nettie Struther's child in *The House of Mirth*, Undine Spragg's essentially orphaned young son in *Custom of the Country*, and Charity Royall's unborn child temper some of her novels' more zestful appeals for women's freedom and agency vis a vis mobility, in favor of an embrace of an idealized view of motherhood as a solution to Wharton's perception of America's declining culture.

This chapter will argue that while Wharton always writes for women's need for mobility and agency to be free from the oppression of a patriarchal society, she does not include children in the ranks of the oppressors. In fact, her works (even these earlier ones) convey a grave concern for the plight of children and the role of mothers in modern society. Julie Olin-Ammentorp captures a sense of the interconnectedness of the three works this chapter will examine:

Summer resonates with issues that surface in Wharton's works from before the war: like many of her other works, it examines the situation of women in society; Charity's expected baby is the flesh-and-blood version of the imagined infant cradled by Lily Bart at the end of *The House of Mirth*; and the socially

conscious Charity may be a small-town (and less successful) version of Undine Spragg. (61)

Significantly, neither Charity nor her baby dies in *Summer*, making this novel the most transparent and least ambivalent in its endorsement of an idealized view of motherhood as necessarily demanding and rewarding of women's sacrifices. And significantly, it is the impending birth of Charity's baby that presumably and seemingly necessitates the cessation of her mobility, a mobility that had initially seemed to empower and afford Charity a remarkable degree of agency for a young woman of modest means. Lily Bart and Undine Spragg are Charity's foils. Lily cannot reconcile social mobility and love, so she dies childless; Undine sacrifices all intimacy for social advancement and pleasure-seeking, so she persists soulless, while her child suffers and implicates her as a failure as a mother. Wharton's conflicted, often conservative social commentary emerges from an analysis of mobility and motherhood in these novels. In Wharton's novels, mobility empowers women with agency, while it also limits the degree to which these women can succeed and serve their children and the culture at large as "good mothers."

Most of Wharton's novels published after *Summer* are recognized, though usually negatively, for a sort of conservative view of motherhood, but few studies have focused on the imagery of mothers and children in her earlier works and their endorsement of women's responsibility for their children. And though most of these earlier novels do not devote extensive pages to the concept, the works do quite dramatically sketch poignant images of what Wharton imagines is lost for both women and children when mothers fail their children. In the end, Edith Wharton's oft-neglected desire to promote an idealized view of motherhood in *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *Summer*, at

the expense of women's mobility for the sake of children and the future of American culture reveals the limits of Wharton's feminism.

**Lily's Unfulfilling Wanderings and the Fleeting Promise of Motherhood
in *The House of Mirth***

Edith Wharton's fiction is rife with portraits of inept and unfulfilling male characters as evidence of her attack on patriarchy. Lily Bart wanders the landscape of New York's high society in search of intimate fulfillment to no avail, revealing how *The House of Mirth* likely possesses the starkest examples of Wharton's symbols of male unworthiness and subjection of women. The list of potential suitors for the sympathetic Lily Bart: from the emotionally unavailable Lawrence Selden to the woefully boring Percy Gryce to the barbarous Gus Trenor to the calculating and unromantic Simon Rosedale render Wharton's hopes for Lily's intimate ambitions quite bleak. Through her movements throughout the novel, Wharton affords Lily literal and figurative mobility to attempt to find fulfillment in her life, an admittedly forward thinking agenda for early twentieth-century America, but Lily's ultimate failure in this endeavor and her tragic end cast doubt upon the degree to which Wharton is really arguing for women's mobility.

In "Edith Wharton and the Fiction of Marital Unity," Laura K. Johnson contends that "*The House of Mirth* chronicles Lily's unsuccessful efforts to locate a spiritual union that transcends the concerns of the marketplace" (952). Echoing the same sort of idealized intimacy of a "transcendental, spiritual union" Gertrude Atherton imagines in *Patience Sparhawk*, Johnson's reading of Wharton's *House of Mirth* chronicles how the increasingly contractual nature of American marriage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century inspires Wharton's critique of women's contemporary intimate

opportunities on three grounds: “contract’s association with commerce, its transient nature, and its ability to disguise coercion” (951). And one need only recall Lily’s objectification in the tableau vivant, the fleeting and morally compromising terms of Rosedale’s proposals, and Gus Trenor’s near rape of Lily as compelling evidence of the validity of Johnson’s reading. Concluding the novel with no marriage, but rather Lily’s death, Wharton clearly concludes that marriage as it exists in early twentieth-century America is not a fulfilling endeavor for women. However, the novel does seem to identify a glimmer of hope for women’s intimate fulfillment through Wharton’s idealized vision of motherhood. This glimmer of hope, however, comes with a price, namely the sacrifice of mobility.

An idealized vision of intimate fulfillment for Lily emerges in a seemingly unlikely setting, but profoundly significant moment in the novel. Lily has just left Selden, aware that their “moment is gone” (214), and along with it, her hope of ever having “the passion of her soul for his” (241) reciprocated. Lily is sick and weary *walking* through the streets when she is recognized by Nettie Struther, whom Lily recalls as the sickly girl for whom she gave Gerty Farish money. “The episode of Nettie Crane’s timely rescue from disease had been one of the most satisfying incidents of her connection with Gerty’s charitable work” (243). In this scene, Lily contemplates the warm and grateful beneficiary of her earlier kindness:

Her eyes rested wonderingly on the thin shabby figure at her side. She had known Nettie Crane as one of the discouraged victims of over-work and anaemic parentage: one of the superfluous fragments of life destined to be swept prematurely into that social refuse-heap of which Lily had so lately expressed her

dread. But Nettie Struther's frail envelope was now alive with hope and energy: whatever fate the future reserved for her, she would not be cast into the refuse-heap without a struggle. (243)

Wharton's words in this passage reflect what Carol Singley describes as Wharton's belief "in basic human dignity" and how "she worked through her fiction and in her life to give expression to the pain of the misunderstood and defenseless, whether they wore working clothes or Doucet gowns" (10). Lily's recognition of Nettie's inherent value, despite her degraded status as a "victim" and "frail" stands in stark contrast to the complete and utter apathy conveyed by the wealthy and socially ambitious characters who surround her throughout the novel. Furthermore, this passage initiates Wharton's highly sentimentalized and idealized vision of motherhood; for what has changed since Lily's earlier impression of Nettie as a doomed victim of a cruel economy is more than her last name - Nettie has become a mother.

And Wharton makes clear it is Nettie's child and not her husband who inspires her remarkable transformation. Her husband, she barely mentions and dismisses quickly, stating simply, "it's my husband's night-shift - he's a motor man" (244). But her child -- Nettie proudly extols: "I did n't tell you I had a baby, did I? She'll be four months old day after tomorrow, and to look at her you would n't think I'd ever had a sick day. I'd give anything to show you the baby, Miss Bart ... It's real warm in our kitchen, and you can rest there, and I'll take *you* home as soon as ever she drops off to sleep" (244). The pride and warmth Nettie exudes clearly emanates from her delight in motherhood. When Lily arrives at their home, Wharton continues her sentimental scene:

It *was* warm in the kitchen, which, when Nettie Struther's match had made a flame leap from the gas-jet above the table, revealed itself to Lily as extraordinarily small and almost miraculously clean. A fire shone through the polished flanks of the iron stove, and near it stood a crib in which a baby was sitting upright, with incipient anxiety struggling for expression on a countenance still placid with sleep. Having passionately celebrated her reunion with her offspring, and excused herself in cryptic language for the lateness of her return, Nettie restored the baby to the crib and shyly invited Miss Bart to the rocking-chair near the stove. (244)

Wharton's description of Nettie's "passionate" interaction with her baby and her "beaming countenance" (244) clearly suggest her apparently miraculous recovery from utter despair to complete joy and fulfillment, despite her meager surroundings.

Wharton's sentimentalizing through Nettie and her infant continues, with important, intimate details:

'You see I wasn't only just *sick* that time you sent me off – I was dreadfully unhappy too. I'd known a gentleman where I was employed -- ... and – well – I thought we were to be married: he'd gone steady with me six months and given me his mother's wedding ring. But I presume he was too stylish for me – he traveled for the firm, and had seen a great deal of society. Work girls aren't looked after the way you are, and they don't always know how to look after themselves. I did not ... and it pretty near killed me when he went away and left off writing ... It was then I came down sick – I thought it was the end of everything. I guess it would have been if you hadn't sent me off. But when I

found I was getting home, George came round and asked me to marry him. At first I thought I couldn't, because we'd been brought up together, and I knew he knew about me. But after a while I began to see that made it easier. I never could have told another man, and I'd never have married without telling, but if George cared for me enough to have me as I was, I did n't see why I should n't begin over again – and I did.'

The strength of the victory shone forth from her as she lifted her irradiated face from the child on her knees. (245)

Always returning to the bright and hopeful imagery and empowering effect of the child upon her mother, Nettie's story reveals how she was so intimately failed by this deceiving, ineffectual, Seldenesque "travelling" man (particularly typical of Wharton's male characters), and that George, with whom she had somehow "been brought up together" married her even though he "knew about" her. These key details of Nettie's romantic life crystallize Wharton's sentimental idealization of motherhood as a profoundly fulfilling intimate endeavor for women, in contrast to the victimizing, judgmental realm of intimacy with men. Nettie's achieves her "victory" over an unfeeling society she mistakenly believes "looks after" girls like Lily (though the reader and Lily, in her state, know better) through her welcome embrace of motherhood and the security and intimacy it provides both mother and child, when the mother who "never [would] have had the heart to go on working just for myself" (245) strives harder than she ever thought she could for the sake of her child and revels in it.

In her reading of *The House of Mirth* as evidence of Wharton's "own desperate search for friends and mentors" (104) in "Edith Wharton and Partnership," Carol Singley

contends “that Lily’s death at the novel’s end is as much Wharton’s indictment of failed communal love as it is a critique of individually squandered opportunity” (104). Like Johnson’s view that “Lily eventually recognizes the quest for human ‘solidarity’ that underlies her search to marry” (307), Lily learns that “more miserable still” than poverty is “the clutch of solitude at her heart” (306). Both critics recognize Wharton’s quest to accommodate and satisfy women’s desire for intimacy in the novel, and a close reading of the symbolic power of Nettie Struther and her baby reveal the closest Wharton comes in *The House of Mirth* to describing a quenching of that desire. Describing Nettie’s joy in spite of her poverty, Wharton’s emphasis on Nettie’s narrative supports Johnson’s reading that fulfilling intimacy is more valuable to a woman than material riches. Nettie’s baby not only warms and fills her mother’s heart, but in just one brief encounter, the baby has a fleeting, though poignantly similarly fulfilling effect on Lily. In response to Nettie’s wistful murmuring, “I only wish I could help *you* – but I suppose there’s nothing on earth I could do” (245), Lily, instead of answering, rose with a smile and held out her arms; and the mother, understanding the gesture, laid her child in them:

The baby, feeling herself detached from her habitual anchorage, made an instinctive motion of resistance; but the soothing influences of digestion prevailed, and Lily felt the soft weight sink trustfully against her breast. The child’s confidence in its safety thrilled her with a sense of warmth and returning life, and she bent over, wondering at the rosy blur of the little face, the empty clearness of the eyes, the vague tendrilly motions of the folding and unfolding fingers. (245-46)

The “help” Nettie provides Lily is the warmth and wonder of her baby. Temporarily, Lily is “thrilled with a sense of warmth and returning life.” Upon leaving Nettie’s refuge of maternal bliss, Lily “realized that she felt stronger and happier: the little episode had done her good. It was the first time she had ever come across the results of her spasmodic benevolence, and the surprised sense of human fellowship took the mortal chill from her heart” (246). Lily’s original charity is reciprocated by Nettie in this scene through Nettie’s sharing of her child and her experience of motherhood. Significant in this scene is the wording of Wharton’s description of the child’s and Lily’s effects upon one another. The child’s “motion of resistance” is quelled by her mother’s provision of food for the child, showing how mobility and motherhood may be at odds. The “safety” the child feels derives from the stasis of Lily’s still arms. One could argue that “the vague tendrilly motions” of the infant symbolize the soothing power the child seems to hold over Lily.

Hildegard Hoeller also recognizes the profound significance and striking sentimentality of the Nettie Struther scene, explaining how “Nettie’s kitchen allows Wharton to imagine a different, predominantly female world, in which women do not negotiate but give freely to each other” (118). Wharton, desiring to reimagine a fulfilling intimacy for women in America, must remove Lily from the harsh realities of the male-dominated society to which she has failingly aspired and travelled throughout the novel. As Hoeller notes,

The urge to express female fulfillment of motherhood is displaced in *The House of Mirth* to the domestic space of the kitchen; it is even further removed into the working class, a setting as foreign to the world of the book as any foreign

country could be. It is in Hyde's terms, an anarchist space, one that believes in the goodness of human nature once it is freed from social contracts. In the Nettie Struther kitchen scene, Wharton affirms the anarchist belief in the innate goodness of human beings and the power of the 'contracts of the heart,' not the codified contracts of a market economy. (118)

Hoeller here invokes Lewis Hyde's book, *The Gift* for its "useful distinction between two forms of economies: a gift economy and a market economy" (114) and confirms that motherhood's status as a "gift economy" demonstrates Wharton's efforts to idealize the concept in her novel. Hoeller's interpretation also corroborates Johnson's contention that "*The House of Mirth* demonstrates that the construct of contract elides women's true social and economic constraints with ruinous consequences," evident through the multiple overt and implied contracts which bind and harm Lily throughout the text (957). In idealizing motherhood as a uniquely female and fulfilling form of intimacy available to women, Wharton's novel offers a hopeful, albeit "foreign" and fleeting alternative to the *fruitless* intimate prospects afforded Lily via her wanderings throughout the rest of the novel.

The profoundly significant, though ephemeral, value of Wharton's idealization of motherhood in *House of Mirth* undeniably asserts itself at the novel's end. For just as Nettie's baby inspires Lily with warmth in the scene in the mother's humble kitchen, so too does the child bring Lily the rewarding sense of warmth and intimacy she desired throughout her life in her deathbed scene:

She had been unhappy, and now she was happy – she had felt herself alone, and now the sense of loneliness had vanished.

She stirred once, and turned on her side, and as she did so, she suddenly understood why she did not feel herself alone. It was odd – but Nettie Struther’s child was lying on her arm: she felt the pressure of its little head against her shoulder. She did not know how it had come there, but she felt no great surprise at the fact, only a gentle penetrating thrill of warmth and pleasure. She settled herself into an easier position, hollowing her arm to pillow the round downy head, and holding her breath lest a sound should disturb the sleeping child. (251)

Wharton’s description directly associates Lily’s comfort and loss of loneliness with her own stillness and the imagined presence of Nettie’s baby at her side. Lying on her side as a mother nursing her child would, Lily experiences “a gentle penetrating thrill of warmth and pleasure” from the child and her own selfless concern for the baby, going so far as to hold her own breath [making her about as motionless as a person can be] to prevent the baby’s being disturbed. Remarkably, Wharton is associating the woman’s intimate fulfillment in bed, not with a man, but with her child. In fact, it is not until she troubles herself again with thoughts of Selden that Lily’s sense of peace is disturbed:

She started up again, cold and trembling with the shock: for a moment she seemed to have lost her hold of the child. But no – she was mistaken – the tender pressure of its body was still close to hers: the recovered warmth flowed through her once more ... (251).

The fact that thoughts of Selden precipitate Lily’s brief pang of discomfort and cause her to move is no accident. It is also no oversight that Wharton never enables Lily to articulate “the word, which lingered vague and luminous on the far edge of thought ... if she could only remember it and say it to him [Selden]” (251). Hoeller contends that “The

word (probably *love*) never spoken between Selden and Lily is one way for Wharton to sustain this ambivalence [toward a sentimental love plot]" (113). Furthermore, I would argue, Wharton recognizes and desires her readers to likewise recognize that Lily's love for Selden is misplaced. He is unappreciative and undeserving of Lily's value as a woman. A marriage to Selden would never fulfill or liberate Lily from the rigid society that has disciplined her throughout the novel. By interjecting this ultimate silencing and minimization of Lily's feelings for Selden between Lily's warm and soothing imaginings of Nettie Struther's baby, Wharton is clearly articulating a conservative, sentimental privileging of motherhood over the intimate possibilities Lily fruitlessly sought as she "moved" through the social circles of elite New York, suggesting Wharton's argument for women's agency through literal and social mobility is threatened by her literal and figurative embrace of motherhood at the end of the novel.

The ultimate problem for Lily and for Wharton is of course the reality that the fulfillment of motherhood is impossible without *some* man at *some* point. And at the time in history and her career when Wharton is writing *The House of Mirth*, she is unable or unwilling to script the story any other way for Lily. The novel has painstakingly made all other options undesirable and incompatible with Lily's true self. Percy Gryce, who, with his "droning voice" and dismal interests, Lily realizes would, were she to marry him, be "boring her for life" (23). Lily's Aunt Peniston, overall "quite ignorant of the world" (98) even recognizes that Gus Trenor is "a fat stupid man almost old enough to be her [Lily's] father" (98). And Simon Rosedale will never suffice, with Wharton's anti-Semitic portrayal of "his small stocktaking eyes ... [that] made her [Lily] feel herself no

more than some superfine human merchandise” (200).³³ Clearly, Lily’s prospects for any sort of intimate fulfillment through marriage within the plotting and characterization of Wharton’s novel are unbearable; so Lily dies, only delusionally fulfilled by the idealized vision of motherhood.

Wharton describes the society Lily explores and Wharton indicts in *The House of Mirth* in her memoir, *A Backward Glance*: “a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart.” (207). While feminist critics may extol Wharton’s critique of the marriage market and the compelling, but limited mobility she affords her protagonist as Lily pursues her marital prospects throughout New York and even across the Atlantic, her novel’s sentimental devotion to Nettie Struther and her baby make clear Wharton’s nascent vision of an increasingly conservative and even idealized view of motherhood in *The House of Mirth*.

The ‘Monstrous’ Mobile Mother in *The Custom of the Country*

If *The House of Mirth* puts forth Wharton’s idealized view of motherhood as a selfless means of intimate fulfillment for women in stark contrast to the unrewarding and unfulfilling demands of American marriage in the early twentieth century, then *The Custom of the Country* suggests Wharton’s conservative view of motherhood is a social responsibility women, who’ve become disillusioned by the inadequacies of marriage and subsumed in the “new regime of property relations” may shirk in favor of an intimate

³³ For an elaboration upon Wharton’s anti-Semitism see Jennie Kassanoff’s chapter, “‘The real Lily Bart’: staging race in *The House of Mirth*,” (2004), Elizabeth Ammons’ “Edith Wharton and Race” (1995), Dale Bauer’s *Edith Wharton’s Brave New Politics* (1994), and Hildegard Hoeller’s “The Impossible Rosedale: ‘Race’ and the Reading of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*” (1994).

mobility to the detriment of both their children and the culture (Sassoubre 690). In *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton reasserts a growing resistance to women's mobility as a threat to the idealized view of motherhood she introduces at the end of *The House of Mirth*. In this novel, her conservative view of motherhood becomes a crucially significant remedy to what she perceives as America's declining culture. Having relegated her detailed depiction of motherhood to the working class in *The House of Mirth* in order to protect it from the corruption of the "smart set" she satirizes, Wharton relocates motherhood within the "frivolous society" she rebukes in *The Custom of the Country* to more vehemently express a critique of how that society and its intimate mobility damages its children.

Susan Goodman partially addresses the grave concern Wharton's 1913 novel expresses regarding motherhood. In her reading of the novel, Goodman declares "*The Custom of the Country* is rightly viewed as an indictment of American marriages, but it is overlooked as an indictment of irresponsibly permissive child-rearing practices" (62). Goodman makes a clear case for Wharton's critical portrayal of the Spraggs' overindulgence of Undine and essential abdication of their parental responsibility (62-3).

She contends that Undine's parents' permissiveness has left her with "no knowledge of herself, so it follows that she experiences no real intimacy with others" (64). Goodman is quite accurate in her conclusion regarding Undine's inability to experience or even desire intimacy. Undine's conversation with Indiana Rolliver regarding her affair with Peter Van Degen, in which "Undine had been perfectly sincere in telling ... that she was not an 'immoral woman.' The pleasures for which her sex took such risks had never attracted her, and she did not even crave the excitement of having it

thought that they did” (308) makes perfectly clear the truth of Goodman’s view regarding Undine and intimacy. She truly has no desire nor appreciation for it.³⁴ However, throughout the novel, Undine’s parents, especially her father, though persistently indulgent and accommodating of their daughter, ultimately share in the novel’s disapproval of her. In the end, far more vehement than her critique of the Spraggs’ overindulgent parenting style looms Wharton’s scathing portrayal of Undine as a mother on the move.

From the first moment the novel introduces Undine as an expectant mother, her response is far from idyllic. In contrast to her husband’s initial response to Undine’s pregnancy as “wonderful and divine” (169) and his desire to “hold her close and give her the depth of his heart in a long kiss” (169), the mother-to-be, after pressing her face into a sofa and weeping violently (169) protests: “Why on earth are you staring at me like that? Anybody can see what’s the matter!... It *takes* a year – a whole year out of life! What do I care how I shall feel in a year?” (170). Accustomed to the role of “taker” in all her relationships to date, Undine is horrified by the prospect of someone “taking” anything from her. In response, Ralph “found himself groping for extenuations, evasions – anything to put a little warmth into her!” (170), until finally, Undine details the depths of her repugnance at the prospect of having a child:

‘Look at me – see how I look – how I’m going to look! *You* won’t hate yourself more and more every morning when you get up and see yourself in the glass! *Your* life’s going on just as usual! But what’s mine going to be for months

³⁴ For more on Wharton’s estrangement of intimacy in her works, see Dale Bauer’s “Addiction and Intimacy” (2003).

and months? And just as I'd been to all this bother – fagging myself to death about all these things' – her tragic gesture swept the disordered room – 'just as I thought I was going home to enjoy myself, and look nice, and see people again, and have a little pleasure after all our worries -' She dropped back on the sofa with another burst of tears. 'For all the good this rubbish will do me now! I loathe the very sight of it!' she sobbed with her face in her hands. (171)

Just when it seems as if Wharton may be articulating through Undine a serious commentary on the toll of motherhood upon a woman – her body, her independence, her sense of self and the gross inequity betwixt the mother's burden and that of the father, Wharton identifies Undine's complaints as selfish and superficial, all wrapped up in the new bundles of "heaped up finery" (169) Undine has recently indulged in, despite her and Ralph's financial troubles.³⁵

Wharton's next address of Undine as a mother even more deliberately vilifies Undine for her uncaring attitude and the damaging effect it will have on her child. Of Undine's role as mother, Wharton next writes, "That first winter ... she [Undine] had not regretted her exile; while she awaited her boy's birth she was glad to be out of sight of Fifth Avenue, and to take her hateful compulsory exercise where no familiar eye could fall on her. And the next year of course her father would give them a better house" (182). Wharton makes clear Undine's consistent revulsion of impending motherhood and more significantly, she introduces how Undine will use her child for her own material gain – a good excuse to expect a new, bigger home, in this case. However, unfortunately for

³⁵ See Nancy J. Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* for an elaborate study of the social history of motherhood as the unique realm of women and a thorough explanation of why and how "Women's mothering is one of the few universal and enduring elements of the sexual division of labor" (3).

Undine in this instance, we discover "... the next year rents had risen in the Fifth Avenue quarter, and ... little Paul Marvell, from his beautiful pink cradle, was already interfering with his mother's plans" (182). Undine's emotional distance from her child becomes more disturbing from the narrative perspective as it is revealed Undine has forgotten the little boy's first birthday. Undine, reveling in her "triumph in the studio" (183) with Peter Van Degen after Popple's unveiling of her much anticipated portrait, suddenly confesses, "Mercy! It's the boy's birthday – I was to take him to his grandmother's. She was to have a cake for him, and Ralph was to come up town. I *knew* there was something I'd forgotten!" (185). Like a loaf of bread at the market, Undine's thoughts of her son are well beyond the proverbial back burner of her mind.

Wharton does not easily let this lapse in maternal duty go. The next chapter not only details the distress of her in-laws who had made a variety of specific arrangements to commemorate the boy's first birthday, but significantly, the commentary turns to "Poor little Paul – poor chap" (191). After finally arriving back home after bemoaning his wife's transgression with Clare Van Degen, Paul goes to see his child, but is met "on the threshold ... with the whispered request not to make a noise, as it had been hard to quiet the boy after the afternoon's disappointment, and she had just succeeded in putting him to sleep" (196). Now, anyone who has spent any time with a one-year-old knows that the difficulty in getting the baby to sleep is no stretch of the imagination; however, the fact of a missed birthday party as the cause of such sleep disturbance is a bit suspect. More likely would be the case that the excitement of an actual party would render the child difficult to settle down for the night, but not many one-year-olds have lost sleep over the abstract concept of a family party that never came to pass; sure, such a scenario

for any child over two could cause such despondence and a bitter memory to last a lifetime, but Wharton, the realist, really stretches the bounds of verisimilitude in this scene in order to disparage Undine's mothering. By inventing this hurt to the one-year-old, Wharton reveals the motivation behind her vilification of Undine. Wharton is deeply concerned with the effects of bad parents, and mothers, in particular, upon their children.

Wharton follows this damning portrait with further insightful fragments of Undine's comments and feelings (or lack thereof) regarding her son. From "asking only that the noise of Paul's play should be kept from her" (230) to her having "had decided exactly how her husband and son were to be *disposed of* in her absence" (236, my italics), before her first trip abroad, Wharton makes clear Undine's unfitness as a mother, not so much through her natural disinclination to all that motherhood entails, but again, most repugnantly through her ability to *use* and "dispose of" her child for her own personal gain:

As the day of departure [for Europe] approached it became harder for her to temper her beams; but her pleasure showed itself so amiably that Ralph began to think she might, after all, miss the boy and himself more than she imagined. She was tenderly preoccupied with Paul's welfare, and to prepare for his translation to his grandparents' she gave the household in Washington Square more of her time than she had accorded it since her marriage. She explained that she wanted Paul to grow used to his new surroundings; and with that object she took him frequently to his grandmother's, and won her way into old Mr. Dagonet's sympathies by her devotion to the child and her pretty way of joining in his games. (237)

Tempering somewhat her indictment of Undine's motives in "acting the part" of a tender mother, Wharton adds:

Undine was not consciously acting a part: this new phase was as natural to her as the other. In the joy of her gratified desires she wanted to make everybody about her happy. If only everyone would do as she wished she would never be unreasonable. She much preferred to see smiling faces about her, and her dread of the reproachful and dissatisfied countenance gave the measure of what she would do to avoid it. (237)

After having explained that Undine is only for the first time showing any real interest in Paul's welfare in order to facilitate her travels to Europe and impress her father-in-law and of course, be admired for her "prettiness," Wharton attempts to palliate her judgmental tone with the insistence that it is really only the utter and sheer joy Undine feels at her pending separation from the child that explains her sudden interest in his welfare? Again, Wharton, through her satirical narration, cannot redeem Undine's selfishness as a mother who is looking forward to leaving her child. Rather than endorsing Undine's mobility as a freeing means to feminine agency, Wharton condemns it. For no sooner has Wharton scripted this potential apology for Undine, then she describes how Undine, on a chance encounter with Elmer Moffatt after one of these cherished "play dates" with the boy's grandfather, "reflected that, with Paul's arms about her neck, and his little flushed face against her own, she must present a not unpleasing image of young motherhood" (237). Wharton goes on to highlight how regarding her own son's physical beauty as she has done her own countless times in the mirror, "Undine saw that Moffatt was not insensible to the picture she and her son composed"

(238). Shortly thereafter, Undine, hands her son over to Moffat, “glad to be relieved of her burden, for she was unused to the child’s weight, and disliked to feel that her skirt was dragging on the pavement” (238). Foreshadowing the ease with which Undine will not only “dump” her child upon whomever she can, but also objectify his value to her, Wharton cannot stop condemning Undine as mother “on the move” – away from her responsibility as a mother.

Later, after Undine and Paul’s divorce, Wharton occasionally interjects moments of narrative concern for Paul and the fact his mother has essentially abandoned him, only to dismiss the asides with the generally satirical sense that Undine’s “parents’ diminished means and her own uncertain future made her regard the care of Paul as an additional burden, and she quieted her scruples by thinking of him as ‘better off’ with Ralph’s family, and of herself as rather touchingly disinterested in putting his welfare before her own” (322). As when Undine had first left Paul and his father for Europe, Wharton’s satirical references to Undine’s mothering convey her reproach of the woman’s maternal failings: “One could only infer that, knowing in what good hands he was, she judged such solicitude superfluous” (270). That one could actually characterize a mother’s simplest concerns for her child as “superfluous” conveys the extent to which Undine is unambiguously defined as not merely unsuited, but entirely unfit as a mother in Wharton’s estimation.

The “abyss of difference” (337) between Undine’s attitude toward her child and that of Princess Estradina, who though “unofficially separated from her husband, had with her two little girls ... extremely attached to both” (337) represents the gulf separating Undine from any plausible estimation of any redeemable qualities as a mother.

With her detailed description of a successful European socialite who shared so much in common with Undine including “their youth, their boredom, their high spirits, and their hunger for amusement” still managing to function as a nurturing parent to her *two* children, Wharton argues against all of Undine’s excuses for her aversion to motherhood as a necessary effect of her nature and ambitions and reinforces her contention that Undine is warped by the new commodity culture of modern society. As Ticien Marie Sassoubre observes, “As in the free market, goods and people have value for her [Undine] only insofar as they are either scarce or necessary to the attainment of her goals – she has no sense of intrinsic value” for humanity (695). Undine’s defining characteristic makes her the monstrous mother Wharton deplores above and beyond all other transgressors in her novel. Prizing upward mobility and all its trappings, including travel, in particular, Undine symbolizes Wharton’s conservative view of motherhood and her growing concern over women’s failure to serve their children well, a view that seriously compromises her arguments for women’s autonomy, mobility and agency.

When Undine eventually ransoms her own son in order to attain the annulment she needs to marry the French nobleman, Chelles, and as usual, get and go wherever she wants, Wharton scripts the climax of this argument against Undine and her untempered mobility. In discussing the matter over with his loyal cousin, Clare Van Degen, Ralph Marvell discovers how low Undine will go:

‘Why do you suppose she’s suddenly made up her mind she must have Paul?’

‘That’s comprehensible enough to any one who knows her. She wants him because he’ll give her the appearance of respectability. Having him with her will

prove, as no mere assertions can, that all the rights are on her side and the “wrongs” on mine.’

Clare considered. ‘Yes; that’s the obvious answer. But shall I tell you what I think my dear? You and I are both completely out-of-date. I don’t believe Undine cares a straw for the “appearance of respectability.”’

‘What she wants is the money for her annulment.’

Ralph uttered an incredulous exclamation.

‘But don’t you see?’ she hurried on. ‘It’s her only hope – her last chance. She’s much too clever to burden herself with the child merely to annoy you.

What she wants is to make you buy him back from her.’ (385-86)

Clare’s insistence that she and Paul are “completely out-of-date” crystallizes Wharton’s recognition of her own conservatism and her argument against Undine’s mothering as the product of an increasingly superficial and meaningless consumer culture that commodifies its own children. Clare, who herself has stayed married to the lecherous Peter Van Degen for a range of “old,” traditional reasons, all tied to family, particularly, the sake of her own children (387), recognizes that she and Paul are part of a dying breed of Americans whom Sassoubre writes, “attempt to preserve their identities against their increasingly unstable personal contexts ... [representing Wharton’s view of the modern threat to American culture as] a crisis of authenticity because as everything becomes commodified, intrinsic value is lost” (704). The contrasts between Ralph’s view of Paul and Undine’s view of her own child convey how Undine’s brand of motherhood, representative of this mobile, modern market culture, finds no intrinsic value in her child whatsoever. In attempting to stoop to understand Undine’s reasons for asserting her

parental rights, Ralph completely misjudges the depths of Undine's selfishness.

Beginning with his initial responses to Undine's pregnancy, Ralph idealistically and to his ultimate demise, considers his son as beyond and above the forces of the new world order of the market-driven economy, as his outburst in Mr. Spragg's office reveals:

'Oh, this is all too preposterous!' Ralph burst out, springing from his seat.

'You don't for a moment imagine, do you – any of you – that I'm going to deliver up my son like a bale of goods in answer to any instructions in God's world? Oh, yes, I know – I let him go – I abandoned my right to him ... but I didn't know what I was doing ... I was sick with grief and misery. My people were awfully broken up over the whole business, and I wanted to spare them. I wanted, above all, to spare my boy when he grew up. If I'd contested the case you know what the result would have been. I let it go by default – I made no conditions – all I wanted was to keep Paul, and never to let him hear a word against his mother!'

(381)

Paul's horror at the prospect of his son's value having been reduced to that of a "bale of goods" articulates Wharton's own grave concerns regarding America and the new "custom of the country" which reduces children to the status of material assets or burdens, depending upon one's social situation. Ralph's inability and refusal to consider his son on such terms ironically renders him unable to "spare the boy" such a grim and degraded status in this "preposterous" culture of mobility and commodification, while Undine's inability to consider Paul as anything but a material possession incurs Wharton's most vehement disapproval.

With her sentimental depiction of “a little boy in mourning” (413) literally “pushed” by his estranged mother to instantly ingratiate himself and thereby *herself* with the new in-laws, Wharton casts little doubt upon her perspective on Undine’s perverse view and use of her own child:

An odd mingling of emotions stirred in her while she stood watching Paul make the round of the family group under her husband’s guidance. It was ‘lovely’ to have the child back, and to find him, after their three years’ separation, grown into so endearing a figure: her first glimpse of him when, in Mrs. Heeny’s arms, he had emerged that morning from the steamer train, had shown what an acquisition he would be. If she had had any lingering doubts on the point, the impression produced on her husband would have dispelled them ... Undine, at first, was somewhat dismayed to find that she was expected to fit the boy and his nurse into a corner of her contracted *entresol*. But the possibility of a mother’s not finding room for her son, however cramped her own quarters, seemed not to have occurred to her new relations, and the preparing of her dressing room and boudoir for Paul’s occupancy was carried on by the household with a zeal which obliged her to dissemble her lukewarmness. (414-15)

Undine’s instant *appraisal* of her child as an “acquisition” and strictly in terms of the effect he has on those of social and material value to her reinforce Wharton’s censure of Undine. Furthermore, Undine’s discomfort and displeasure at the prospect of actually sharing living space, in contrast with his new French family’s enthusiasm over his arrival

further solidify Wharton's disapproval.³⁶ Her privileging of conservative, "old world" values of a mother's joy in sacrificing for her child overtly rejects Undine and the selfishness of her intimately utilitarian and mobile existence.

Finally, Wharton's most compelling evidence of her deep concern for Paul as a child of divorce and her increasingly conservative view of motherhood culminate in the final chapter of *The Custom of the Country*. William R. MacNaughton acknowledges the considerable significance of this chapter, noting two "important related keys to Wharton's presentation of Paul in this chapter -- ... it's length, because for the first time she invites readers to concentrate their attention on Paul, and its focalization, because for the first time (and only the second time in her published fiction), she allows readers to experience events from a child's perspective" (53). In choosing to make Paul's the final perspective of the novel, Wharton conveys the extent and true focus of her concern in the novel. MacNaughton notes how

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton cautions novelists against 'shifting the point of vision' too frequently, and thus destroying the 'unity of impression.' She goes on to recommend that writers should 'let the tale work itself out from not more than two (or at most three) angles of vision' (87).

The fact that, in *The Custom of the Country*, Paul Marvell's is the third 'angle' from which the action is viewed suggests how important it was to Wharton to allow her reader to experience the world from the child's perspective. In stretching her own rules of

³⁶ Ever increasingly identifying with the French and their customs, Wharton's invocation here and elsewhere in the novel of "the French sense of family solidarity" contrasts sharply with her portrait of American family relations throughout the novel, further intimating the extent of her growing alarm and alienation from modern American culture.

structure and style, Wharton reveals just how committed to the plight of Undine's most innocent victim she is. For though readers may feel for Undine's pathetic parents or poor Ralph Marvell or any of the poor women whose husbands or suitors Undine has distracted, all of Undine's "victims" share some culpability in their victimization, except for Paul. Her parents overindulged and denied her any discipline (311). Ralph, deluded by her beauty, really just wanted to mold her "flexible soul" (85) into an ethereal ideal to arrogantly and foolishly "save her from Van Degen and Van Degenism" (85), but the child has no role nor say in Undine's mistreatment of him. In this final chapter, Wharton, unlike his mother, will give Paul a voice before the novel's end. With over ten pages carefully devoted to the child's feelings and impressions, Wharton makes clear her allegations against Undine.³⁷

In the chapter, Paul is first described as "listlessly gazing out into the twilight" (495). The reader learns he is "now a big boy of nearly nine" (495). He goes to "a fashionable private school" (495) and is *home* for Easter holiday. The portrait Wharton paints is of Undine's careless neglect of her child:

He [Paul] had not been back since Christmas, and it was the first time he had seen the new *hotel* which his step father had bought, and in which Mr. and Mrs. Moffatt had hastily established themselves, a few weeks earlier, on their return from a flying trip to America. They were always coming and going; during the two years since their marriage they had been perpetually dashing over to New

³⁷ MacNaughton's essay, "The Artist as Moralist: Edith Wharton's Revisions to the Last Chapter of *The Custom of the Country*" (from *Papers on Language and Literature* 37:1 2001) studies the revisions Wharton made from her manuscript of the final chapter to its first publication in serial then book form, noting how she "attempts to support a 'thesis' about the 'human cost of separation and divorce' (Benstock 159)" (52).

York and back, or rushing down to Rome or up to Engadine: Paul never knew where they were except when a telegram announced that they were going somewhere else. He did not even know that there was any method of communication between mothers and sons less laconic than that of electric wire; and once when a boy at school asked him if his mother often wrote, he had answered in all sincerity: ‘Oh yes – I got a telegram last week.’ (495)

Establishing Undine’s insensible disregard as directly related to her incessant “coming and going” poignantly reveals Wharton’s growing disdain for mindless mobility.

Wharton compounds the extent of Undine’s villainous mobility and resultant desertion of her child by detailing how Paul “had been almost sure – as sure as he ever was of anything – that he should find her at home when he arrived; but a message (for she hadn’t had time to telegraph) apprised him that she and Mr. Moffatt had run down to Deauville to look at a house ...” (496). As Sassoubre recognizes, “In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton praises Balzac for his attention not merely to detail, but to the relationships between characters and their material surroundings ... [she invokes] the traditional liberal idea that the individual is constituted by her relationship to her surroundings ... [and] reflects her sense of the interdependence of identity and the external world” (689). While Sassoubre’s line of thought supports her argument regarding Undine’s sense of identity, the same reasoning applies to Paul. In revealing the lack of constants in Paul’s surroundings, beyond the shocking fact that Undine could not bring herself to stay home long enough to greet her young son whom she had not seen in months, Wharton reveals the consequences of their constant mobility and instability for *his* identity and sense of self. Because of his mother’s transience and the fact that he literally arrives at a new

“home” every time he returns from school, Wharton suggests Paul’s identity is severely and detrimentally affected by his mother and her mobility. As it turns out, Paul is sure of nothing. Several additional revelations in the chapter corroborate this reading of Wharton’s anxiety regarding the harmful effects of maternal mobility.

While Paul waits for his mother’s arrival, Mrs. Heeny greets him and offers him the chance to peruse her infamous newspaper clippings of his mother’s illustrious appearances in the society pages. After several stories about hers and Moffatt’s latest purchases and their resulting effects on various markets (art and pearls specifically), Paul is unimpressed. “He wanted to hear about his mother and Mr. Moffatt, and not about their things” (501). Paul, like his father, does not see the world as his mother and Moffatt do, and the result is devastating. Trying to give the boy what he wants, Mrs. Heeny offers Paul what he is looking for:

‘Divorce and remarriage of Mrs. Undine Spragg – de Chelles. American Marquise renounces ancient French title to wed Railroad King. Quick work untying and tying. Boy and girl romance renewed... At the trial Mrs. Spragg – de Chelles, who wore copper velvet and sables, gave evidence as to the brutality of her French husband, but she had to talk fast as time pressed, and Judge Toomey ... The latter is said to be one of the six wealthiest men in the Rockies. His gifts to the bride are a necklace and tiara of pigeon-blood rubies belonging to Queen Marie Antoinette, a million-dollar cheque and a house in New York. The happy pair’ (502)

Upon this detailed report of his latest father’s riches, Paul’s reaction edifies Wharton’s argument against Undine:

In the dazzling description of his mother's latest nuptials one fact alone stood out for him – that she had said things that weren't true of his French father. Something he had half-guessed in her, and averted his frightened thoughts from, took his little heart in an iron grasp. She said things that weren't true ... That was what he had always feared to find out ... She had got up and said before a lot of people things that were awfully false about his dear French father (503)

Through the perspective of Paul and his sympathetic "little heart," Wharton's final chapter sentimentalizes the son and tallies the cost of Undine's mobile and manipulative mothering. The child has no books, no toys, no father, no mother, no one to love, no real identity nor sense of self, no stability.

Wharton's final reunion of mother and child confirms Sassoubre's recognition of Wharton's "understanding of the constitutive relationship between identity and property" (688) and her indictment of Undine for her privileging of social and literal mobility over her responsibility to love or in any way nurture her own child. Still reeling from the confirmation of his suspicions that his mother was indeed a liar (much the same as his suicidal father did years earlier), Paul, upon Mrs. Heeny's urging, runs to greet his mother:

As he reached the landing he saw that the ballroom doors were open and all the lustres lit. His mother and Mr. Moffatt stood in the middle of the shining floor, looking up at the walls; and Paul's heart gave a wondering bound, for there, set in the great gilt panels, were the tapestries that had always hung in the gallery at Saint Desert ...

‘Oh, mother, mother!’ he burst out, feeling, between his mother’s face and the others, hardly less familiar, on the walls, that he was really home again, and not in a strange house. (503)

Wharton associates Paul’s fleeting sense of security and intimacy with the familiarity of the tapestries from his “favorite” father’s home. However, his emerging sense of self is swiftly squashed first, by his mother’s usual dismissive attitude: her instant critique of his “haircut” (503), his too emphatic hug, she calls a “squeeze” (504), her deferral of his “prize in composition” as something insignificant he can tell her about “to-morrow” (504); and finally, by Moffatt’s insult to his French father and dashing of “a hope he dared not utter that, since the tapestries were there, his French father might be coming too” (504). Realizing the futility of such hopefulness and the hurt the separation of the symbolic tapestries inflicted upon the only human in his recollection who had shown him any actual affection in his life, as Moffatt likens his acquisition of them to “drawing teeth for him [Chelles] to let them go,” Wharton’s leaves her reader with the lasting image of the child “burst into tears” (505). Unaware of the wound he has inflicted, Moffatt cannot console the child who “could only sob and sob as the great surges of loneliness broke over him” (505). Like his father, dead Ralph Marvell, who painfully came to understand how Undine “was completely unconscious of states of feeling on which so much of his inner life depended” (194), so too is Paul left at the mercy of Moffatt (while his mother plans for her dazzling dinner party) whose empty consolation that “one of these days you’d be the richest boy in America” succinctly articulates Wharton’s critical assessment of the shallow, materialistic future of the country if it continues on with its vapid quest for social mobility. “For Wharton, commodification means the destruction of the specific

identity of an object” (696). In the sad case of Paul Marvell, his mother’s unending social climbing and resultant commodification of her own child results in irreparable damage Wharton cannot condone. *The Custom of the Country* unequivocally declares that a mother must make some sacrifices for her child’s sake, mobility in particular. Despite Wharton’s appreciation for all the ways women are victimized by the American marriage market, her portrayal of Undine’s refusal to make any sacrifices for her child’s sake and even further, her repeated movements away from that child, mark Undine as a harrowing symbol of the threat to the future of America Wharton considers a modern and mobile motherhood to be.

Summer and the Movement toward a ‘Good’ Mother

While Wharton’s conservative view of motherhood in *The House of Mirth* focuses on how the intimate rewards of motherhood may potentially empower women outside the stringent rules of high society and unproductive social climbing, and in *The Custom of the Country* it focuses upon how mothers on the move hurt children and the culture, in *Summer*, Wharton seems to concentrate her concern upon both mothers and their children, still embracing a very conservative view, but one that seeks to serve both women’s and children’s needs for mobility, intimacy and security, creating an enduring sense of caring and commitment that benefits the entire culture, a culture for which she is increasingly anxious.

From Wharton’s own personal comments and R.W.B. Lewis’ subsequent study of them in his renowned biography of Wharton, we know she wrote the novel “‘at a high pitch of creative joy’ and that she listed it among her personal favorites” (Killoran 81).

We also know that since its publication in 1917, critical responses to the novel have ranged from highest praise to utter abhorrence.³⁸

Dale Bauer best summarizes the range of modern critical responses to Wharton's novel with her succinct juxtaposition of the "misleading extremes" (35) of Cynthia Griffin Wolff's and Elizabeth Ammons' readings. Wolff, Bauer explains, "reads the novel's conclusion as a positive example of Charity's mature and 'genuinely meaningful social [choice]'" (35). Ammons, at the other interpretive extreme, Bauer states, "recognizes the horror of the situation [Charity's marriage to Lawyer Royall], acknowledging as it does Wharton's protest against the social roles available to women" (35). Bauer concludes that both Wolff's and Ammons' readings are "too univocal" (35); Wolff's is too yielding, and Ammons' is "totally bleak" (35). Bauer looks more deeply into the novel and its cultural context, reading the novel as "a critique of hereditary family studies and their ideas about sexuality" (29), convincingly establishing Wharton's ultimate rejection of "the biologism dominating popular eugenics" at the time she is writing *Summer* (51). Drawing on Bauer's conclusion that Wharton rejects key tenets of eugenics, especially those regarding *bad* mothers; this chapter argues that Wharton actually presents Charity as an idealized example of a "good mother," most notably through her unequivocal rejection of abortion, and in her submission, not to any man, but to her child. The chapter will further argue, despite the inherent ambivalence of the quasi-incestuous marriage, the novel's conclusion is more hopeful than despairing, and more

³⁸ See "Chapter 5: The Law of the Father" in Helen Killoran's *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton* (2001) for an overview of critical responses to *Summer*.

culturally than racially motivated, empowering Charity and her child, via mobility, as much as the times and culture would permit.

Images of motherhood in *Summer* are compelling. First, there are the disturbing visuals of Charity's mountain mother overheard by Charity listening to Royall's discussion with Harney, as "a mother who wasn't 'half human, and was glad to have her [child] go" (102), and later, seen by Charity as "she looked at her [dead] mother's face, thin yet swollen, with lips parted in a frozen gasp above the broken teeth. There was no sign in it of anything human: she lay there like a dead dog in a ditch" (227). Clearly, the callous imagery of the mountain mother emphasizes her depravity and her unfitness; her lack of "humanity" signifies her status as a *bad* mother.

Similarly and significantly, the abortionist, Dr. Merkle, is described in terms of her lack of humanity, whereas Charity's mountain mother is inhuman because of her debauchery and lack of life's bare necessities, let alone, the trappings of civilized society. In contrast and not unlike Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*, Dr. Merkle's inhumanity centers around her artificiality and excess. Her "office" lies behind a "glazed door" (208). Charity waits "in a handsomely furnished room, with plush sofas surmounted by large gold-framed photographs of showy young women" (208), only to be "led into another room, smaller, and still more crowded with plush and gold frames" (208). Wharton makes it clear Dr. Merkle is only feigning to be motherly, for personal and financial gain (evidenced by her lavish surroundings). Tellingly, this woman's physical presence is even more unsettling to Charity than her depraved mountain mother's. Charity's impression of Dr. Merkle dramatically crystallizes the offense of this posing mother:

Charity gazed at her with widening eyes. This woman with the false hair, the false teeth, the false murderous smile – what was she offering but immunity from some unthinkable crime? Charity, till then, had been conscious only of a vague self-disgust and a frightening physical distress, now, of a sudden, there came to her the grave surprise of motherhood. She had come to this dreadful place because she knew of no other way of making sure that she was not mistaken about her state; and the woman had taken her for a miserable creature like Julia The thought was so horrible that she sprang up, white and shaking, one of her greatest rushes of anger sweeping over her. (209)

The reality of Charity's own motherhood, a *good* motherhood emerges amidst the imagery of this false mother, whose "smile grew more motherly" (209) in the face of Charity's imminent rejection of her "services" (210). Charity's physical revulsion, her "stammering," her "bursting into tears" contrast sharply with the coldness and "concision" of Dr. Merkle who ends up impressing "her firm shoulders against the door ... like a grim gaoler making terms with her captive" Charity (210). Rather than positing the abortionist and her service as an empowering force or choice in Charity's life, Wharton, in no uncertain terms, represents the abortionist as a fearful and stultifying option which, at best, in the careful plotting of the novel will render Charity a whore, like "miserable" Julia Hawes - whom Charity and the reader know "came as near as anything to dying" at the hands of Dr. Merkle (139).

One need only contrast this imagery of Dr. Merkle's "provisions" with the modest, but much more sincere offerings of old Mrs. Hobart who warmly opens her home, "the first house in the village" to Charity and Royall after he rescues her from the

mountain (the second time) (240). Wharton elicits a vision of ‘good motherhood’ from this “old woman with a kindly face” who asks nothing of Royall or Charity when they arrive early in the morning, merely looking up and nodding (240). Wharton sympathetically describes how “Mrs. Hobart smiled on Charity and took a tin coffeepot from the fire ... compassionately” (240). Mrs. Hobart demonstrates the warmth and unquestioning kindness Wharton associates with good motherhood in the novel. Unlike the chilling and life-thwarting presence Dr. Merkle represents, Mrs. Hobart’s humble offerings awaken Charity’s body and spirit from the effects of her experience with her dead mountain-mother: “As the warmth of coffee flowed through her veins her thoughts cleared and she began to feel like a living being again” (240). While Charity is still distraught over her condition, the sincere kindness of this modest woman represents the seemingly conservative, but potentially empowering ideal Wharton offers women in the novel. After all, Royall specifically identifies their stop as “old Mrs. Hobart’s place,” revealing nothing of the woman’s past or present except that she is warm and kind and lives well enough *on her own* on terms much more palatable to the novel’s professed morality than Dr. Merkle, leaving open the possibility that Charity will ultimately benefit from her acceptance of a certain amount of sacrifice for the sake of her child.³⁹

Jennie Kassinoff, borrowing from Dale Bauer’s earlier recognition of Dr. Merkle’s “vague foreignness ... (perhaps German)” (43), links Wharton’s depiction of

³⁹ For a more thorough discussion of Wharton’s commitment to a moral component to her fiction, see Carol J. Singley’s *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit* (1995). See also Wharton’s *The Writing of Fiction*, in which she explains how “A good subject, then, must contain in itself something that sheds light on our moral experience” (27).

Merkle with Wharton's "wartime sensibilities" (146). Kassanoff quotes a letter from Wharton "to her friend Robert Grant" (146) in which she writes:

Of course you know that all the wild rumours of 'atrocities' are *true*, & *understated*, & that the question of abolishing the penalty for abortion & infanticide is to be considered in the French Senate! The assination [*sic*] of countless priests is fully established, & there are mutilated soldiers here in the hospitals now. At first we none of us believed these stories, but now we know, alas, how true they are. And half the horrors are yet untold, because no Belgians still in Belgium dare speak of what they have seen, for fear of reprisals. (qtd. in Kassanoff 146)

Kassanoff goes on to explain Wharton's source for such assertions as a political report which was serialized in journal form, cited in newspapers, and reprinted in both French and English brochures (146), noting how "Despite its relatively muted account of German assaults on French and Belgian civilians, property and homes, the *Commission* showed no similar restraint when describing the enemy's sexual crimes" (146).

Kassanoff logically reads the French response of lifting the ban on abortion as a remedy to "the dysgenic consequences of the invader's vicious penetration [brutal rapes of French women and girls]," but does not explain Wharton's emphatic concern regarding the practice of abortion and her own restraint in detailing the range of wartime atrocities, choosing, unlike the report, to give equal weight to the "mutilated soldiers" as well.

While Kassanoff's "evocative comparison between Charity and France" (147) through which she argues that Charity's impregnation and subsequent decision to have Harney's child and marry Royall as a means of establishing a "revitalized racial past" (148) is

indeed “evocative,” it neglects the very likely possibility that Wharton was including abortion and infanticide among the other shocking crimes documented in the war report, making her appreciation of Charity’s choice to keep her child, not a matter of racial preservation, but rather a noble embrace of motherhood, a selfless concern for her unborn child, and a wise decision to improve her own condition in life.

Julie Olin-Ammentorp’s study of Wharton’s wartime experiences, *Edith Wharton’s Writings from the Great War* (2004) supports the contention that Wharton embraces an idealized, conservative view of motherhood in *Summer* in order to advance a culturally-motivated intimate ideal of motherhood for early twentieth-century American women. Olin-Ammentorp demonstrates that Wharton’s wartime experiences account for a particular “loss of ambiguity” in Wharton’s work. Olin-Ammentorp discusses this loss most overtly in terms of Wharton’s impassioned support of France and vilification of Germany (making Bauer’s recognition of the possibility of a German Dr. Merkle all the more likely and significant), but she also discusses how Wharton’s conclusion to *Summer* can be read in the context of her war experience. *Summer* does not condemn Charity for her youthful sexuality, nor does it condemn her – or Lawyer Royall – for a marriage many have seen as “figuratively incestuous” (Ammons 137). In the context of the war, Royall’s treatment of Charity can be seen as generous:

Charity is twice homeless – twice a refugee – and he twice provides her a home, first as his ward and then as his wife. The sheer emphasis on physical comforts, on Royall as providing them – not as foolish luxuries, but as the basic creature comforts of human existence – may be an outgrowth of Wharton’s

experience with the displaced and homeless refugees she served. (Olin-Ammentorp 64)

All the more striking are the ways in which the “creature comforts” provided by Royall are so warmly described versus the coldness and inappropriate excess of Dr. Merkle’s luxurious surroundings earlier in her office. Wharton makes clear Merkle’s plush surroundings are fruits of her profiting from young girls in trouble; they are for *her* pleasure, not for the young women who briefly encounter her office. In contrast, what Royall provides first in his buggy, then at Mrs. Hobart’s, later at the hotel in Nettleton, and ultimately at home in North Dormer is lasting security and opportunity for Charity and her child.

Several key moments in the novel support Olin-Ammentorp’s reading of the value in what Royall provides. The first occurs when Charity and Harney must seek refuge from a sudden storm at the nearly mountain home of the Hyatt’s where Charity is overwhelmed by the squalor surrounding her:

As the minutes passed, and the rain still streamed against the windows, a loathing of the place and the people came over Charity. The sight of the weak-minded old woman, of the cowed children, and the ragged man sleeping off his liquor, made the setting of her own life seem a vision of peace and plenty. She thought of the kitchen at Mr. Royall’s, with its scrubbed floor and dresser full of china, and the peculiar smell of yeast and coffee and soft-soap that she had always hated, but that now seemed the very symbol of household order. (109-110)

Confronted with real dearth and destitution, Charity learns some modicum of appreciation for the things Lawyer Royall has provided her. Later, after witnessing even

more profound poverty, Charity reiterates her growing sense of reality regarding what could have been and what could be for her life: “She had seen poverty and misfortune in her life; but in a community where poor thrifty Mrs. Hawes and the industrious Ally represented the nearest approach to destitution there was nothing to suggest the savage misery of the Mountain farmers” (234). Opening her eyes to the suffering of the Mountain people, Charity begins to recognize what may be most important for her future and that of her child, mirroring what many friends wrote of Wharton’s own eye-opening wartime experiences:

‘With the war Edith threw herself into refugee work and a side of her character which was latent but had had little chance of expression developed rapidly, and her rather starved heart expanded, and she became a warmer personality, and a larger human being. One felt it in a thousand inexpressible ways – human sympathies were no longer hidden behind a social veneer and Edith Wharton, the critic, the novelist, became the humanitarian, and I think the change rendered her more free – social values were no longer of much importance, her whole outlook widened.’ (qtd. in Olin-Ammentorp 230)

While one could question “Wharton’s good friend Sally Norton” as to how “social values” could lose nearly all importance to such a profound social critic as Wharton, it is clearly evident that Wharton’s wartime experience would be tremendously difficult to suppress during the months Wharton was writing *Summer*. Emilie Mindrup, whose reading of *Summer*, “The Mnemonic Impulse: Reading Edith Wharton’s *Summer* as Propaganda” quotes Wharton’s letter to Charles Scribner in 1916 when she was trying to get her novel published and argues that “Her [Wharton’s] plea of not being able ‘to turn

[her] mind from' the war ...confirms ... that Wharton was too close to the events of the war to write without being influenced – consciously or subconsciously – by them” (14). Indeed, Mindrup’s view and Norton’s personal comments make it all the more plausible, despite other moments in Wharton’s life and writings where an anxious and elitist preoccupation with race pervade her work, that in writing *Summer*, Wharton’s concerns likely center around a shared sense of humanity and a hope for alleviating suffering in any and all who are needy, particularly mothers and children.⁴⁰ In writing Charity’s growing awareness and appreciation for the basic comforts of life, Wharton echoes Royall’s later revelation that, “Come to my age, a man knows the things that matter and the things that don’t; that’s about the only good turn life does us” (242). Following his second proposal of marriage to Charity, Royall’s words seem to be imploring Charity to arrive at the same conclusion regarding her life and that of her child, of whom he is well aware, though she does not yet realize he knows. Royall knows Charity, as well as her child, will be provided for, and further, he knows he loves her *the right way* - he respects her and her feelings, unlike Harney.

Several key moments in the novel reveal how Royall grows to appreciate and respect Charity. Beyond his initial acceptance of her as a needy infant, there are the moments where he actually thinks of her feelings before or in lieu of speaking something

⁴⁰ For further discussion of Wharton’s wartime work with mothers and children in particular, see Olin-Ammentorp’s conclusion to *Edith Wharton’s Writings from the Great War*, especially pp.228-230 and Shari Benstock’s chapter on “Charity” (pp.301-349) in *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* (1994).

he deems potentially hurtful (nearly a first for a male character of Wharton's). First, when he omits her name from his discussion with Harney, Charity herself admits, "She had noticed that Mr. Royall had not named her, had even avoided any allusion that might identify her with the child he had brought down from the Mountain; and she knew it was out of regard for her that he had kept silent" (102). Later, when he rescues the pregnant Charity from the mountain, Royall again silences himself in order to spare Charity's feelings and avoid any implication that he believes she owes him anything for his kindness:

After an interval he began again: 'It was a day just like this, only spitting snow, when I come up here for you the first time.' Then as if fearing that she might take his remark as a reminder of past benefits, he added quickly: 'I dunno's you think it was such a good job, either.'

'Yes, I do,' she murmured, looking straight ahead of her.

'Well' he said, I tried -' (239)

Royall's efforts and increasing ability to consider Charity's feelings and point of view explain Wharton's privileging of Lawyer Royall above Charity's other options in the text. His repeated deference to Charity's wants and needs makes him a much more ideal match for Charity in the end.

Further evidence of Royall's sincere concern for Charity emanates from his distress over her relationship with Harney. Early in the novel, the adolescent Charity assumes Royall's dislike of Harney is rooted in jealousy and his need to control her, and many readers and critics alike share her interpretation. However, Veronica Makowsky and Lynn Z. Bloom offer a different reading of Royall and his motives:

Charity, however, has been unable to recognize Royall's acts of charity and has seriously misjudged him until the end of the novel. Her interpretation of her guardian is that of a young, uneducated, unsophisticated, resistant teenager who last took a good look at her benefactor at the time of his wife's death when Charity was twelve or thirteen. Regrettably, 'she had always thought of him ... [as] someone hateful and obstructive,' a 'dull-witted enemy' (275). Oddly, readers are inclined to accept Charity's view of Royall, even while they concurrently override her judgments of Harney [everyone knows he will never choose Charity]. Only when we realize how wrong she is about 'her' Mountain people are we impelled to test her adolescent stereotyping of her benefactor. Again, Wharton presents a main character ambiguously, but in Royall's case, in contrast to that of Charity, readers tend to overlook the positive more than the negative. (230)

Makowsky and Bloom's insights illuminate Shari Benstock's revelation in her biography of Wharton that "To Edith, Lawyer Royall was the most important character in the book: 'Old man Royall ...*he's* the book,' she wrote Berenson" (328). When Royall declares to Charity regarding Harney that "if he'd wanted you the right way he'd have said so" Wharton makes Royall's wisdom and sincere concern and regard for Charity evident (132). His words hurt Charity, but Wharton and her readers know he speaks the truth. Makowsky and Bloom point out how Royall follows this moment in the text with his second marriage proposal, noticing how

Unlike Harney's language in his 'Dear Jane letter,' Royall's words are truthful: he is *straight* and therefore deserving of *trust*; because he loves Charity

as a *decent* woman, he is honorable. He is *older*, and as the respect of denizens of North Dormer indicates at their Old Home day, superior to his peers and capable of creating for Charity the life that she would like in a more active, cosmopolitan place. (231)

While Charity is not yet persuaded, Makowsky and Bloom's reading reveals how Wharton is making the case for Royall's value and the validity of her novel's conclusion, as well as an attempt toward reconciling the responsibilities of motherhood with women's desire for mobility and agency, two interrelated realities that also likely found affirmation through Wharton's wartime experiences as Teresa Gomez Reus notes how Wharton, "deprived of car," living in Paris during the war, made "continuous walks across the city [that] opened up the possibility of enjoying a kind of liberty that had historically been reserved for men" throughout history (34). Wharton affords Charity some mobility in her novel, as she moves about, first with Harney, and then on her own up the mountain, witnessing ugliness similar to what Wharton would see in France during WWI, but her mobility will not eclipse the idealized maternity Wharton narrates as the novel progresses, and Charity moves toward a union with Royall for the sake of her child, in a rhetorical move, I argue suggests how Wharton seeks to reconcile maternity and mobility for the sake of women and the good of society.

Compared to Harney (who shares much in common with Lily's Selden and Nettie Struther's office romance), who "was utterly careless of what she [Charity] was thinking or feeling" (166) and to whom "All her tossing contradictory impulses were merged in a fatalistic acceptance of his will" (174), Royall offers Charity a much more empowered future, substantiating what many critics recognize as Wharton's "European" view of love

and marriage. Olin-Ammentorp explains of Wharton: “She staunchly argues that marriage is for procreation and the perpetuation of the family ... ignoring the fact of political change and shifting social mores (86). And Kassanoff concurs, “Like the ‘New Frenchwoman’ in *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Charity realizes that parenthood, not passion, is the proper arbiter of matrimonial choice” (148). Reconciling the desire for passion and romance fancied by Lily Bart before her with the grave concern regarding the plight of children conveyed in her condemnation of the cold Undine Spragg, Wharton posits Charity’s story as a sort of reconciliation of modernity, mobility, and motherhood: Charity is allowed the romantic fancy of her “relationship” with Harney, but she is shown how fleeting it may be, while her admirable and constant love for her child *moves* her toward a recognition of the value of a match with Royall for both her and her child. Obviously, such a functional view of marriage and children is indeed a mostly conservative one; however, Kassanoff’s extrapolation from this view that “Charity’s commitment to generational continuity trumps her desire for feminist individualism” (148) may be an overstatement of the extent of Charity’s concessions and certainly seems to misread her motives at the end of the novel.

Until Charity becomes pregnant, not only is she adamant that she will not marry Royall: “When I leave here it won’t be with you” (133), she seems perfectly content not to marry at all:

Since the fanciful vision of the future that had flitted through her imagination at their first meeting she had hardly ever thought of his [Harney’s] marrying her. She had not had to put the thought from her mind; it had not been there. If ever she looked ahead she felt instinctively that the gulf between them

was too deep, and that the bridge their passion had flung across it was as unsubstantial as a rainbow. But she seldom looked ahead; each day was so rich that it absorbed her... Now her first feeling was that everything would be different, and that she herself would be a different being to Harney. Instead of remaining separate and absolute, she would be compared with other people, and unknown things would be expected of her. She was too proud to be afraid, but the freedom of her spirit drooped (200-01)

Contrasted with Charity's repeated exultations of powerfulness over Lawyer Royall and her influence in their home, established as early as the third chapter of the novel, where it is declared, "Nothing now would ever shake her [Charity's] rule in the red house" (78), Charity's vulnerability to Harney seems to highlight what she will gain by marrying Royall. Well aware of the power and value of passionate romantic love, Wharton seems to see such passion as ultimately more controlling and threatening to a woman's freedom than the practical, mutually respectful marriage she describes at the novel's end, whereby Charity and Royall both profess an appreciation of their respective "goodness" (255). Wharton allows Charity to experience the "wondrous unfolding of her new self, the reaching out to the light of all her contracted tendrils" that her sensual bliss with Harney provides, but when it comes to her future and that of her child, Wharton knows that in the world in which she lives, Charity's marriage to Royall is her best chance for independence and prosperity (177). Royall is the man, Charity "felt to be so powerless that if he had questioned her [about her "love nest" with Harney] she would probably have told him the truth" (178). He is also the man to whom, she is superior to all others [unlike Harney whom she fears would unfavorably compare her to others]: "'You know I

always wanted you to beat all the other girls” (251). Royall’s “rooting” for her is sincere and significant for Charity’s future, a future secured because Charity chooses “to be took home and took care of” (242), not for the sake of home or its patriarch but for her child, for whom “she would ... bear any burden life might put on her” (235). With her careful plotting of the development of Charity and Royall’s relationship as mutually respectful and the best option for both Charity and her child, Wharton seems to revisit Nettie Struther’s story of jilted love turned triumph through the love of a baby and marriage to a decent man she has known from childhood who “knew about me” (*House of Mirth* 245) in order to reaffirm her essentially conservative view of motherhood, while not entirely rejecting a woman’s right to mobility and the agency it may afford her.

Like Kassinoff, Allison Berg reads *Summer* in terms of a racialized motherhood, claiming “Wharton’s investment in the reproduction of race is ... striking” (75).

However, Berg concedes:

Though Wharton describes Charity as ‘swarthy’ (8), her difference from the community of North Dormer is not, strictly speaking, a distinction of race. Yet by the second decade of the century the distinction between racial and class difference was blurred by the growing interest in family studies, which attempted to prove the hereditary origins of crime and disease by tracing ‘dysgenic traits to particular families.’ (75)

Berg goes on to essentially dismiss Bauer’s reading of *Summer* as a critique of eugenics, because of Bauer’s description of the mountain mother’s ‘fitness’ (75) in terms of Charity’s recognition and appreciation for the life her mother enabled her to have by giving her up to Lawyer Royall. Because of “the profoundly dysgenic image that this

mother presents” (which Bauer also acknowledged), Berg argues that “Charity’s positive reinterpretation of her mother’s story influences her own decision to marry Royall and raise her child within a ‘civilized’ patriarchal family” (76). However, we must recognize from whence Charity’s reinterpretation originates. There is nothing she witnesses on the mountain to explain Charity’s revision of her mother’s story; rather, it is her own insight, experience, and ultimate maturation in the face of impending motherhood which explains Charity’s newfound feelings for her birth mother:

Well! after all, was her mother so much to blame? Charity, since that day, had always thought of her as destitute of all human feeling; now she seemed merely pitiful. What mother would not want to save her child from such a life? Charity thought of the future of her own child, and tears welled into her aching eyes, and ran down over her face. (234)

It is Charity’s own sentimental feelings of motherhood which precipitate her new impression of her mother. And these tears, like those Charity shed in the face of Dr. Merkle and the grave responsibility and feelings from which they arise which come to define Wharton’s view of the *good* mother. Charity is a good mother, because she wants her child to live; she wants her child not to suffer; she wants her child to be loved. Witnessing her own mother’s suffering and experiencing her own pain on the mountain compels Charity “to save her child from such a fate” (235). Charity’s decision to think of her mother as something less than monstrous, someone more like herself, making a sacrifice for the sake of her child, may influence, but does not immediately lead to what so many critics read as her acquiescence to patriarchy. In fact, Charity’s mind quickly races to imagine an entirely different possibility:

Vague thoughts of Nettleton flitted through her mind. She said to herself that she would find some quiet place where she could bear her child, and give it to decent people to keep; and then she would go out like Julia Hawes and earn its living and hers. She knew that girls of that kind sometimes made enough to have their children nicely cared for; and every other consideration disappeared in the vision of her baby, cleaned and combed and rosy, and hidden away somewhere where she could run in and kiss it, and bring it pretty things to wear. Anything, anything was better than to add another life to the nest of misery on the Mountain.... (235)

This vision establishes significant elements of Wharton's evolving idealization of motherhood. The predominant theme is not of sacrifice to men or patriarchal society or for men or society, it is for the child. Where most feminists conclude Charity's marriage to Royall is a submission to patriarchy, a disturbing, incestuous disaster with "narrative ... closure so complete that it suffocates," I contend Wharton's ending is more paradoxically liberating and conservative than most feminist critics recognize (Chambers 123). The image in the scene quoted above of the rosy, safe child is the focus of Charity's vision, in addition to the mother's access to the child and her ability to "run in and kiss it," an act implicitly as rewarding for the mother as it is for the child. Wharton idealizes motherhood for the sake of the mother and the child; all that is needed to implement the vision is "decent people" to enable her dream. The only figure who ultimately emerges as "decent" and capable of sufficiently providing for Charity and her child is Lawyer Royall, making Charity's choice an obvious endorsement of an idealized motherhood, which benefits not only the mother and the child, but American culture as well. As

Wharton's wartime experiences vividly illustrated for her, when mothers and children are separated by poverty, disease, or the "unthinkable crime" "offered" by the "murderous" Dr. Merkle, civilization and culture flounder in jeopardy (209). In her endorsement of an idealized motherhood rooted in sacrifice and self-preservation, Wharton finally voices in *Summer* something of a solution for the competing concerns with mobility and motherhood she struggles with in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*. Like the "republican motherhood" Linda Kerber identifies in nineteenth-century American fiction, Wharton seems to imagine an ideal of "cultural motherhood" where mothers must modify their own mobility and sacrifice for their children themselves, and the culture at large. Wharton's Cultural Mothers have different motives from their nineteenth-century counterparts. Republican mothers "sketched the contours of 'the American woman'" (180), Priscilla Wald explains in so far as:

Their patriotic duty consisted in reproducing citizens in every sense of the word, populating the nation with boys trained to uphold the ideals of the nation through civic and economic participation across a wide range of occupations with girls prepared to support them by turning their domestic duties themselves into civic virtues (180).

Wharton's idealization of motherhood is far less specific in terms of economics, race, or even class. In *Summer*, Wharton's wartime experiences help her reconcile the concerns for women's mobility versus children's security she grapples with in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, corroborating Carol Singley's recognition that "Although not exempt from the cultural biases of her time, Wharton's idealism was ... based ultimately on sense of a shared humanity" ("Edith Wharton and Ernest Renan" 42).

Wharton's ideal is ultimately focused on security and intimacy. Charity is a good mother because she sacrifices for her child and its physical and emotional well-being. Her one vision of the child happily and healthily welcoming and receiving her affection attests to Wharton's hope for *all* women and children. The decision to marry Royall, in addition to attempting to remedy what Robin Peel describes as Wharton's exploration of "the [modern] drive toward rootlessness" (279) may also decry the only viable means toward a "foreshadowing [of] the comforts of mutually considerate married love" (Makowsky and Bloom 232) between Charity and Royall, confirming Wharton's hopeful, albeit conservative, vision of the rewarding intimacy and intrinsic value of a cultural motherhood whereby mothers sacrifice some mobility to secure their own and their children's future. Cresswell and Merriman in *Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects* acknowledge that "Advocates of the 'new mobilities paradigm,' have consistently noted the need to consider mobilities alongside 'moorings' ... we all need moments and spaces of rest" (7). Charity's marriage to Royall, with its reconciliation of the protagonist's mobility with her maternity may be just that – a necessary and welcome rest for the sake of children and culture.

Chapter Four: David Graham Phillips' "Low Lusty Wail of Angry Protest:"

Embracing Mobility and Challenging the White Slave Myth

in *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise*

Edith Wharton's significant struggles to afford her female protagonists any real sense of sustained mobility and intimate fulfillment in her novels may explain her affinity for the long-forgotten novelist, David Graham Phillips, and his posthumously published novel, *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (1917). In her contribution to Mary Papke's *twisted from the ordinary: Essays on American Literary Naturalism* (2003), Donna M. Campbell notably gives Phillips' novel the academic attention it has oft been denied in her essay, "The 'Bitter Taste' of Naturalism: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and David Graham Phillips's *Susan Lenox*." Campbell's essay elucidates how Phillips' novel captivated the attention of Edith Wharton. She examines Wharton's "lavish praise for a naturalistic novel [*Susan Lenox*] that has largely been neglected by contemporary critics" (237). Quoting R.W.B. and Nancy Lewis' *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (1962), Campbell focuses on Wharton's reply to Sinclair Lewis' praise for her Pulitzer Prize in 1921 where she wrote, "Your book [*Main Street*] and *Susan Lenox* ... have been the only things out of America that have made me cease to despair of the republic – of letters" (237). Campbell also uncovers several other instances in Wharton's personal and professional correspondence where she reveres Phillips' *Susan Lenox*.⁴¹ Hermione Lee's

⁴¹ These references include several unpublished letters to Rutger Jewett in which Wharton strongly hints that she desired to write the introduction to the next edition of *Susan Lenox*.

2007 biography of Wharton also acknowledges “*Susan Lenox* (1917) [which] Wharton greatly admired” (424).

From her reading of Wharton’s autobiography, Campbell reveals how Wharton considered Phillips’ novel “a neglected masterpiece” (qtd. in Campbell 238) for which she hoped “to restore perhaps some of the critical attention, as opposed to notoriety, that she felt had been unjustly denied it” (239). Campbell acknowledges how other critics make passing mention of Wharton’s enthusiastic admiration of Phillips’ novel as either a peculiar example of Wharton’s “wide-ranging reading” or mere evidence of the amenability of Phillips’ view of marriage to Wharton’s description of the institution’s economic function for women.⁴² But Campbell contends “Wharton’s affection and extensive comments about the book suggest that it deserves a much fuller treatment in light of her own work, especially *The House of Mirth*” (237). Appreciative of Campbell’s conclusion that Wharton “promotes [*Susan Lenox*]...as an artistically complex means to examine the nexus of sexual display, artistic identity, and economic power at the heart of early twentieth-century culture” (237), this chapter aims to further argue that Phillips’ novel, appreciated in its day by other influential literary critics, in addition to Wharton, should never have fallen into obscurity for its valuable insights into the necessity and limits of women’s mobility in early twentieth-century America.

David Graham Phillips’ novel’s bold attack on American families’ treatment of its daughters and society’s degradation of women qualifies Phillips’ text and his revision of the tired fallen woman trope as a notable and remarkable exploration of women’s limited

⁴² Campbell refers here to Elizabeth Ammons’ *Edith Wharton’s Argument with America* (1980).

opportunities in early twentieth-century America and the necessity of women's mobility to thwart the continued subjection of women in America. From his potentially titillating and opportunistic, nevertheless, unconventional engagement with the white slavery scare to his even more scathing indictment of small-town America's calculated miseducation of its young women, David Graham Phillips' novel deserves more attention from literary scholars, feminists in particular.

An Appeal to Candor

According to his biographer, Louis Filler, David Graham Phillips first conceived of his epic novel "early in the 1880s when young Phillips had witnessed an unforgettable scene":

A young woman, no more than a girl, had been accused of having "fallen," something which in all innocence she did not understand. To blot away her shame, she had been forced to marry a backwoods lout. Graham had seen the girl sitting defenseless on a wagon, waiting to be carried away to her new home. He had seen the rough husband to whom she had been assigned, and read the tragedy in her face. The blighting of so young a life by ignorance and cowardly pressure Phillips had never been able to forget. (173)

Filler goes on to explain how this scene, for Phillips, "had attained greater meaning as he grew older and better understood the role of women, especially in the impersonal cities, condemned almost en masse to suffering as they readjusted themselves to changing conceptions of their role, and particularly so in America" (173). Filler, likely motivated to defend his subject from the many accusations of indecency levied against him upon the novel's initial publication, (accusations this study will examine later), argues that

Phillips, aware of the statistics in the early twentieth century “which were able to foretell in advance what percentage of girls would become prostitutes” (173), just wanted to “make clear why prostitution occurred” (173). Filler ultimately concludes “it was the basic influence of sex in the lives of men and women in American society” (173) that was the true focus of *Susan Lenox*. This chapter seeks to elucidate how Phillips’ repeated references to prostitution and argument for women’s mobility constitute his impassioned remonstrance against conventional expectations and bleak opportunities for young American women. I will argue that Phillips’ text repudiates “backwoods” America as much as “impersonal cities” for the indignities they inflict on women in the early twentieth century. Phillips certainly does not *endorse* prostitution, but in seeking to *explain* it, he seems to argue that it is no worse than many rural girls’ marriages in terms of the nature of the intimacy it offers and the illusory security it provides. In Phillips’ exhaustive examination of conventional marriage and urban prostitution, he and his novel expose both as woefully inadequate options for American women. His careful, at times even tedious, plotting of the novel’s eponymous protagonist’s exhaustive trajectory through the Midwest to the city to Europe and back to America again corroborates this dissertation’s contention that significant turn-of-the-twentieth-century authors invoke this specific mobility to create and advocate pathways to agency and autonomy for American at this time in history.

In his preface to the novel, entitled “Before the Curtain,” Phillips deems “the most important and most interesting subject of the world, the relations of the sexes” (*SL*, ix). He outlines three prevailing approaches to the subject in American society. The two wrong ways, he labels “the Anglo-Saxon and the Continental” (*SL*, ix). He argues that

“Both pander to different forms of the same diseased craving for the unnatural” (*SL*, x). His characterization of the “Anglo-Saxon” reads as the stereotypical, prudish, persistent, Puritanical influence in rural and middle-class America, while his description of the “Continental” reads as a more cosmopolitan, European, even decadent, presence in urban America. Of both approaches to the “woman question” Phillips is quite colorfully critical:

The one [Anglo-Saxon] tends to encourage the shallow and unthinking in ignorance of life and so causes them to suffer the merciless penalties of ignorance. The other [Continental] tends to miseducate the shallow and unthinking, to give them a ruinously false notion of the delights of vice. The Anglo-Saxon “morality” is like a nude figure salaciously draped; the Continental “strength” is like a nude figure salaciously distorted. The Anglo-Saxon article reeks the stench of disinfectants; the Continental reeks the stench of degenerate perfume. The Continental shouts “Hypocrisy!” at the Anglo-Saxon; the Anglo-Saxon shouts “Filthiness!” at the Continental. Both are right; they are twin sisters of the same horrid mother. And an author of either allegiance has to have many a redeeming grace of style, of character drawing, of philosophy, to gain him tolerance in a clean mind. (*SL*, x)

The approach Phillips advocates and to which his novel *Susan Lenox* aspires “is the way of simple candor and naturalness” (*SL*, x). He argues “the sex question” should be treated as would any other question. He significantly, though with characteristic didacticism, implores his reader: “Don’t look on woman as mere female, but as human being. Remember that she has a mind and a heart as well as a body” (*SL*, x). *Susan*

Lenox: Her Fall and Rise, within its vast two volumes, spanning nearly one thousand pages, certainly explores the mind, heart, and body of the young American woman in a notable literary attempt to invoke dramatic mobility to argue for a woman's right to agency.

Phillip's text is often compared to Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* for its attention to the issue of prostitution in urban America, though it receives only a small fraction of the critical attention. More in keeping with the predominant culture of his day, Dreiser's work contributes to the way "the story of sexual slavery became an urban myth, used as a warning to adventurous young women who want to explore the city" (Joslin 107), while *Susan Lenox* "comes closer than most narratives to the probable experiences of many turn-of-the-century prostitutes" (Joslin 111).⁴³ Phillips' failure to participate entirely in the proliferation and exaggeration of the urban myth of white slavery likely accounts for the obscurity of his own text and the popularity of Dreiser's. Where Dreiser's novel tells the story of a venturing vixen's "fall," and subsequent vapid rise to stardom that leaves her unfulfilled, Phillips' wandering woman ultimately "rises" and finds happiness. Margit Stange explains in *Personal Property: Wives, White Slaves, and the Market in Women* (1998) that "white slavery literature was more than reaction – it was reform ... the reform to be enacted is not the restoration of the women's freedom, but their reclamation by the ordinary man" (78). Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* emphasizes the failure of the family to reclaim the woman, while Phillips' *Susan Lenox* actually

⁴³ Katherine Joslin notes how Emma Goldman argues in "The Traffic in Women" (1910) that "prostitution was 'a dangerous and degrading occupation that, given the limited and unattractive alternatives ... enabled thousands of women to escape even worse danger and deprivation.' Much prostitution, in fact, involved young women who wandered in and out of the business during their early lives and who left the trade as raises in pay for other labor allowed" (111).

implicates the family in the prostitution of the girl. Rather than agreeing with the prevailing, paternalistic motives of the Progressive culture that wanted to keep women safe at home, Phillips, more akin to Stephen Crane's naturalistic masterpiece, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, reveals the home as one of the most dangerous places for a girl.⁴⁴ However, unlike Crane, Dreiser, and the legions of other American authors who all punish the fallen women in their novels with the usual suicide, violence, sickness, misery or death in childbirth, Phillips allows Susan to not only live, but to eventually flourish. And rather than reclaiming Susan for the "ordinary man," Phillips repeatedly dismisses the ordinary man, while he (like his admirer, Wharton) struggles to create an "extraordinary man" worthy of his empowered, feminine protagonist.

Like Wharton's long list of brutes or ineffective, unworthy dilettantes, the men whom Susan encounters usually fall woefully short of worthiness, with two notable exceptions. Both of these men die in the novel, but not before they help empower Susan with the skills she needs to succeed in the world. Significantly, neither of these men (despite several inattentive misreadings over the years) is crafted as a romantic match for Susan.⁴⁵ The first, the show boat operator, Robert Burlingham, reads almost grandfatherly in demeanor, while the last, Robert Brent, this chapter will argue, embodies a revisionary father-figure Phillips creates to remedy the wrongs done to Susan by her real father(s). It is likely no accident both men are named Robert, which originates from

⁴⁴ Few readers of Crane's novella would argue against the case Crane makes for Maggie's parents' and brother's abusive treatment of her as a determining factor in her fall into "prostitution."

⁴⁵ A brief and glaring example of such a misreading is Dawn B. Sova's plot summary of the novel in the "Banned Books" series, *Literature Suppressed on Sexual Grounds* (2006) where Burlingham is described as Susan's "manager-lover" (234). Unless Sova has access to a different version of the novel, there is little evidence in the novel to suggest the relationship is anything but platonic and fiercely protective of Susan's "virtue".

the Germanic and means “bright fame.” The final recompense Phillips awards Susan is that “she is a famous actress, reputed great” (*SL* 487). Phillips navigates Susan through several relationships which expose men and society’s failings, but with no saccharine “happily-ever-afters”; however, Phillips does craft these two “Roberts” as valuable vehicles to Susan’s ultimate empowerment and rise. Their value lies in their frank education of Susan as to the ways of the world, and men in particular, and the direction and mobility they provide her toward the world of the stage, where she may secure the means to individual and financial freedom.

Much of what likely explains Wharton’s affinity for Phillips’ novel is their shared struggle to negotiate a successful intimate connection for their female protagonists. Where Wharton often returns to the double-bind of personal fulfillment via mobility and good mothering via stability for her young women characters, Phillips entirely ignores the possibility of Susan Lenox’s becoming a mother (despite her *many* sexual encounters), while he painstakingly struggles to create a healthy intimate connection for Susan. Mired by the social conventions of the period, the best Phillips can offer is a redemptive father-figure to right the wrongs done to Susan by her birth-father, adoptive uncle/father and the abusive patriarchal society of early twentieth-century America. Rather than protectively sheltering the young girl and woman at home, Phillips’ work imagines women struggling and moving like men have always been encouraged to reach beyond the limits of their imagination and their hometown.⁴⁶ By thrusting Susan through

⁴⁶ Eric J. Leed’s *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* (1992), especially his chapter on “The Spermatic Journey,” provides valuable historical background regarding dominant views of travel’s inherently masculine nature and the idealized postclassical view of “the independent, separate, self-sufficient man” (227) who embraces travel for “the gain of a world and the articulation of space” (226).

a variety of landscapes, Phillips' novel challenges what Sidonie Smith calls "sedentary femininity".⁴⁷ The aim of the novel is the rescue of the poor country girl in the back of the wagon from the stifling misery Phillips always knew awaited her. Her haunting image is the muse for Phillips expansive novel of female empowerment via mobility.

The Real Crime

In keeping with the many accounts of his original inspiration for the story, Phillips begins his novel with the endearing characterization of a beautiful young girl, mercilessly betrayed by the family who is supposed to love her.⁴⁸ First, Susan is the innocent, but inherently sullied (in society's eyes), baby born to her unwed mother, Lorella Lenox. In a nod to the literary tradition Phillips is challenging, the mother has died in childbirth, having never revealed the baby's father's identity, and the baby is born blue and not breathing. The first page of the novel begins:

"The child's dead," said Nora, the nurse.

It was the upstairs sitting-room in one of the most charming and pretentious houses of Sutherland, oldest and most charming of the towns on the Indiana bank of the Ohio. The two big windows were open; their limp and listless draperies showed that there was not the least motion in the stifling humid air of the July afternoon. At the center of the room stood an oblong table over it were neatly spread several thicknesses of white cotton cloth; naked upon them lay the

⁴⁷ See Smith's first chapter of *Moving Lives: 20th-Century Women's Travel Writing* (2001), "The Logic of Travel" where she describes how "certain traveling women sought to circumvent dependent and infantilizing bourgeois femininity ...[taking] their identities and their discontents on the road" 16).

⁴⁸ See accounts of Phillips' inspiration for the novel in Isaac F. Marcossion's *David Graham Phillips and His Times* (1932), Abe C. Ravitz's *David Graham Phillips* (1966), and Louis Filler's *Voice of the Democracy: A Critical Biography of David Graham Phillips: Journalist, Novelist, Progressive* (1978).

body of a newborn girl baby. At one side of the table nearer the window stood Nora. Hers were the hard features and corrugated skin popularly regarded as the result of a life of toil, but in fact the result of a life of defiance to the laws of health... The young man, blond and smooth faced, at the other side of the table and facing the light, was Doctor Stevens, a recently graduated pupil of the famous Schulze of Saint Christopher who as much as any other one man is responsible for the rejection of the hocus-pocus and the injection of common sense into American medicine. For upwards of an hour young Stevens, coat off and shirt sleeves rolled to his shoulders, had been toiling with the lifeless form on the table. He had tried everything his training, his reading, and his experience suggested – all the more or less familiar devices similar to those indicated for cases of drowning. Nora had watched him, at first with interest and hope, then with interest alone, finally with swiftly deepening disapproval, as her compressed lips and angry eyes plainly revealed. It seemed to her his effort was degenerating into sacrilege, into defiance of an obvious decree of the Almighty ...The young man did not rouse from his reverie. He continued to gaze with a baffled expression at the tiny form, so like a whimsical caricature of humanity. He showed that he had heard the woman's remark by saying, to himself rather than to her, "Dead? What's that? Merely another name for ignorance." (1-2)

The young doctor proceeds, despite nurse Nora's protests, to grab the baby by its ankles and fling it around the room "round and round with all the strength and speed the young man could put forth – round and round until the room was a blur before his throbbing eyes, until his expression became full as demoniac as Nora had been fancying it" (4) until

the sound of the baby emerges as “a low but lusty wail of angry protest” (5). Amidst this dramatic, nearly incredible scene, Phillips outlines the plan for his own “lusty wail of angry protest” that is his novel. From the stifling description of the motionless air in the “pretentious” house to the Nurse’s backward and provincial protests, Phillips literally and figuratively positions the baby, Susan, in stark contrast to all stale, stagnant thoughts and practices the small town represents. The young doctor, like Phillips, “looking into the light,” will “inject common-sense” into the American imagination through his dramatic “toiling” with the body of Susan Lenox. Like her birth, Susan’s life will not be easy. She will be judged and suffer, but Phillips will author her rise above ignorant social conventions and perversions with movements through society as vivid and seemingly abusive as the young doctor’s flinging of the baby through the air. Susan’s struggles and movements will illustrate the author’s hopes and fears for women’s prospects for mobility and agency in America. In “defiance of an obvious decree of the Almighty” in the representatively rigid, stifled, “Anglo-Saxon” Nora’s estimation and in stark contrast to the volumes of American literature written before him, Phillips undertakes to create a path toward agency and accomplishment via literal and figurative movement of the body and mind of young Susan Lenox.

In the earliest chapters of the novel’s first volume, Susan is being raised by her mother’s sister, Fanny Warham, her husband, George, and their daughter, Ruth, who is three years older than Susan. They own the home where the infant Susan was so dramatically brought to life. Originally, we are told it is Fanny who feels the most affection for the child, having lost several babies of her own. Phillips narrates how George originally resists loving the child, not wanting the stigma of her illegitimate birth

to an unwed mother to harm his own daughter's prospects in life. However, in time, Susan's beauty and charms win over her uncle, and it is her aunt who becomes regretful of having her in their home. As adolescence arrives, Fanny Warham begins to consider Susan a threat to her own daughter Ruth's plans to marry. When the two girls are falling romantically for the same boy, who clearly finds Susan more attractive than her cousin, Mrs. Warham repeats her husband's complaint of nearly seventeen years earlier, "If she'd only been a boy! ... A girl has to suffer her mother's sins" (33). Ultimately, both "adoptive" parents fail Susan, mirroring Nurse Nora's reaction to the young doctor during Susan's dramatic resuscitation: "at first with interest and hope, then with interest alone, finally with swiftly deepening disapproval, as her compressed lips and angry eyes plainly revealed" (2). Fanny turns on Susan first, once she realizes the town cad/catch, young Ivy-League-home-for-the-summer, Sam Wright, prefers Susan's darker beauty, to that of Fanny's pretty, blonde daughter, Ruth. George takes longer to betray Susan, but his betrayal is far more damaging to Susan when he ignorantly jumps to the conclusion that Susan has gone the way of her mother with the weak and unworthy, Sam. The sad truth emerges that Susan has been so pitifully educated in the ways of men and women, not by her parents, but by her jealous, calculating, almost as ignorant, though far less innocent, older cousin/sister, Ruth, that she cannot even articulate her own defense when she is accused of having premarital sex.

Having "misunderstood" from her cousin's description of what happened to Susan's mother, Lorella, that the word "betrayal" means anything other than being misled and mistreated by someone she trusted and loved, Susan mistakenly leads George Warham to think that she and Sam Wright had sex, when all they had really done is kiss.

Her uncle turns on her with a violence and venom that leaves Susan despondent and helpless:

Perhaps the most amazing, the most stunning, of all the blows fate had thus suddenly showered upon her was this transformation of her uncle from gentleness to ferocity. But many a far older and far wiser woman than seventeen-year-old Susan has failed to understand how it is with the man who does not regard woman as a fellow human being. To such she is either an object of adoration, a quintessence of purity and innocence, or less than the dust, sheer filth. Warham's anger was no gust. He was simply the average man of small intelligence, great vanity, and abject snobbishness or terror of public opinion. There could be but one reason for the flight of Lorella's daughter – rottenness. The only point to consider now was how to save the imperiled family standing, how to protect his own daughter, whom his good nature and his wife's weakness had thus endangered. The one thing that could have appeased his hatred of Susan would have been her marriage to Sam Wright. That he would have – not, in deed, forgiven her or reinstated her – but tolerated her. It is the dominance of such ideas as his that makes for woman the slavery she discovers beneath her queenly sway if she happens to do something deeply displeasing to her masculine subject and adorer. (123-24)

Phillips' choice of words is striking. Later in the novel, when Susan is duped by a "cadet" in a scene that perfectly recreates the narrative of the white slavery myths with which Phillips knows his readers are aware, Phillips does not use the word "slavery." In choosing to invoke that volatile and loaded word in this passage of scathing social

commentary, and in the context of Susan's own *uncle's* mistreatment of her, Phillips sets his novel apart from others of his day. While the rest of society is obsessing over the white slave trade, creating commissions on vice, Phillips is insisting Americans realize that the greatest injuries to young American women often happen at home.

Phillips fuels his indictment of provincial family values in the scenes that follow. Determined to save his own daughter's reputation and marriage prospects, George Warham escalates his earlier threat of sending Susan to live on her Uncle Zeke's farm. He now arranges and forces Susan to marry one of Uncle Zeke's tenants, Jeb Ferguson. All Susan can say is "I – I don't want to" (*SL* 139). In a heart-wrenching exchange with her uncle where Susan, baffled that she is being so harshly punished for doing what she [has] "seen Ruth do ... with Artie Sinclair – and all the girls with different boys ... [admitting] I never heard it was so dreadful to let a boy kiss you" (140) seals her fate. Susan's mentioning George's own daughter feeds his anger and stiffens his resolve as he threatens Susan with being sent to jail if she refuses to marry the farmhand (141). The contrast between Susan's sad innocence and her uncle's ignorant fury delineate Phillips' case:

"I never heard it was so dreadful to let a boy kiss you."

"Don't pretend to be innocent. You know the difference between that and what you did!"

Susan realized that when she had kissed Sam she had really loved him. Perhaps that was the fatal difference. And her mother – the sin there had been that she really loved while the man hadn't. Yet, it must be so. Ruth's explanation of these mysteries had been different; but then Ruth had admitted that she knew

little about the matter – and Susan most doubted the part that Ruth had assured her was certainly true. “I didn’t know,” said Susan to her uncle. “Nobody ever told me. I thought we were engaged.”

“A good woman don’t need to be told,” retorted Warham. (141)

Warham’s grammatical and logical failings are no accident here. Phillips wants the uncle’s ignorance recognized. The clichéd fallacy that a “good woman” should somehow know better and know nothing at the same time poignantly captures the impossible position Phillips believes the young American girl faces. The rest of the novel struggles to remedy this precarious plight, though his recognition of the inherent misogyny of society will not make it easy for Susan or for Phillips.

When Susan finds herself finally being frankly educated about the relations between the sexes, on a riverboat by a showgirl, Phillips makes clear the stark differences between the way things are and the way he thinks they should be for young women, and precisely whom is to blame:

“It seems to me you’re very innocent,” said Mabel. “even for a well-brought-up girl. *I* was well brought up, too. I wish to God my mother had told me a few things. But no – not a thing.”

That set the actress to probing the girl’s innocence – what she knew and what she did not. It had been many a day since Miss Connemora had had so much pleasure. “Well!” she finally said. “I never would have believed it – Now I’m going to teach you. Innocence may be a good thing for respectable women who are going to marry and settle down with a good husband to look after them. But it won’t do at all – not at all, my dear! – for a woman who works – who has to

meet men in their own world and on their own terms. It's hard enough to get along, if you know. If you don't – when you're knocked down, you stay knocked down."

"Yes – I want to learn," said Susan eagerly. "I want to know – *everything!*"

"You're not going back?" Mabel pointed toward the shore, to a home on the hillside, with a woman sewing on the front steps and children racing about the yard. "Back to that sort of thing?"

"No," replied Susan. "I've got nothing to go back to." (SL 214)

The ironies of the scene abound. The obvious reason Susan cannot go back to the bucolic, familial setting is because she was not educated enough in the ways of the world to defend herself from the onslaughts of a philandering, foolish boy or her steadfast, provincial uncles who literally sold her into marriage for two thousand dollars (SL 148). The reader knows all too well that Susan has already been literally "knocked down" (and far worse) by the "good husband" her uncle bought her. Far more sensitive than any one in her family ever was to her, the worldly Mabel prefaces her speech by telling Susan, "Then I'll educate you. Now don't get horrified or scandalized at me. When you feel that way, remember that Mabel Connemora didn't make the world, but God" (215). Phillips describes how "Susan heard from those pretty, coarse lips, in language softened indeed but still far from refined, about all there is to know concerning the causes and consequences of the eternal struggle that rages round sex" (SL 216). Through his character of Mabel Connemora, who is both pretty and coarse, Phillips clearly privileges softened frankness over refined ignorance where relations between the sexes are

concerned. The fact that Susan's "education" comes too late to spare her the betrayal and brutality of her family is unfortunate; the fact Phillips has her learn these lessons while floating down the river on a showboat is symbolic. For Phillips, his novel is a plea for women to be permitted mobility to empower them with knowledge and opportunity.

Susan's reaction to Mabel's "talk" surprises the wiser woman. Far from scandalizing and frightening the child, Mabel's frankness leaves Susan somehow "feeling better" (*SL* 216). Phillips reminds his reader why: "nothing that Mabel told her – not the worst of the possibilities in the world which she was adventuring – burned deep enough to penetrate beyond the wound she had already received" (*SL* 216). Throughout the two volumes chronicling Susan's many struggles – her resorting to prostitution, living in squalor and filth in tenements, surviving brutal fires, being bullied and beaten by Tammany bosses, cheated on and belittled by her lover, Roderick Spenser, witnessing women and children die agonizing deaths in city slums -- nothing in the novel hurts Susan as deeply and profoundly as the brutal rape on her wedding night, "the wound she had already received" because of her family's mistreatment and miseducation of her (*SL* 216). Phillips uses this scene to reinforce his view of the "sex question" outlined in his preface and illustrate how a little bit of knowledge - a frank, simple discussion could have saved Susan from her profound suffering. If provincial America will not provide this education for its young women, then, Phillip contends, women need mobility as a means of escape, education, and empowerment.

The "softened" but not "refined" truth that comes from the showboat actress contrasts starkly with what Susan is so brutally taught on her wedding night at Jeb Ferguson's. Phillips' rail against patriarchal conventions begins with the sad portrait of

Susan's aunt as Jeb drives her away from Uncle Zeke's place. Knowing too well but unable to speak or warn what the beautiful girl-child faces, Aunt Sallie, who "threw her apron over her face, knelt by the bed and sobbed and uttered inarticulate moans" (145) when preparing Susan's bundle to take with her to her new "home" with Jeb, stands with "her fat chin ... quivering; her tired-looking, washed-out eyes" gazing "mournfully at the girl who was acting and looking as if she were walking in her sleep" (SL 146). Sallie, in all her portly misery, represents Susan's future with Jeb. Sally is the only character to show Susan any sympathy, and yet her demeaned place in society as the stultified evangelical farmer's wife makes her "inarticulate" and unable to assist Susan in any way. In contrast, having bowed or been cast out of "refined society," Mable Connemora has mobility and a voice to tell Susan what she needs to know, but only once Susan too has been expelled from the world of the "well brought up" (SL 214). The fact that Mabel has to have Susan reassure her that she isn't going back home before she will share her knowledge with her underscores Phillips' view of the absurdity of society's expectations for women and girls. Back home is where this knowledge could have saved Susan from the greatest harm, yet Mabel *knows* back home would still not want Susan to *know* what she knows if she were to return to their world.

Like Aunt Sallie, another symbol of feminine squalor awaits Susan at Jeb's place. His sister, Keziah, "on the threshold, in faded and patched calico, ... a gaunt woman with a family likeness to Jeb" (SL 151) coolly greets Susan with "thin, shiny black hair, a hard brown skin, high cheekbones and snapping black eyes" (SL 151). Yet despite her repulsive appearance and scowl, even Keziah has the good sense to exclaim, "For the Lord's sake! ...She ain't married *you!*" (152). Keziah recognizes Jeb's unworthiness and

indecent: “As for this here marryin’ ... I never allowed you’d fall so low as to take a baby ... and a bastard at that” (153). Now forced herself by Jeb to “go get the dinner. Then ... pack ... and clear out for Uncle Bob’s” (153), Keziah has to retaliate with the jab at Susan’s disgraceful beginnings, but not before she articulates her greater disapproval of her brother. Yet, like Sally, Keziah is in no position to assist the poor child-bride; she can only scoff and sneer at her brother’s unfitness and depravity. Jeb’s proclamation in the face of his sister’s taunts that “Ain’t this a free country?” (152) poignantly reveals the distance between men’s and women’s opportunities in America. Sallie is not free enough to save her niece from her woeful fate; unmarried Keziah is at the mercy of whichever male relative is willing to take her in and allow her to cook and clean for him; and wretched Susan is on the verge of a brutal crime following the religious/civil ceremony that supposedly legitimizes her and saves her family from disgrace. The pathetic portraits of Sallie and Keziah and the brutal details of Jeb’s raping of Susan not once, but twice, on their wedding day dramatically convey Phillips’ critique of social convention and women’s lack of hope for any sort of dignity, let alone, freedom in provincial American life.

From the appalling horror of Jeb’s crushing kisses and “great slobbering smacks [that] gnawed at the flesh of her neck with teeth that craved to bite” (*SL* 156) to the pitiful and fruitlessness of Susan’s “pushing at him” and “maniac shrieks” of protest, David Graham Phillips purposefully describes the violence against Susan. Recovering from the first attack, from which Jeb “had slunk like a criminal” (*SL* 157), Susan “did not think; she did not feel, except an occasional dull pang from some bodily bruise. Her soul, her mind, were absolutely numb” (*SL* 158). Phillips wants society to recognize the souls and

minds of women and the injuries and indignities current social conventions inflict upon them. Through these terrible assaults on Susan's body, Phillips hopes to rouse America's consciousness of the plight of women in society, rather than titillate the public, as his censors and critics would insist. The second attack (in one night) ends with Susan "sobbing and moaning, feebly trying to shelter her face from his gluttonous and odorous kisses" (SL 160). Jeb passes out into a smelly, snoring stupor that affords Susan the opportunity to escape. She grabs a few possessions, makes her way to the front door and out to the road: "To the left would be the way she had come. She ran to the right, with never a backward glance" (SL 161). And so proceeds this novel of mobility, increasingly far from Midwestern social conventions, first on a riverboat and then to the bustling urban landscapes of Cincinnati and New York, and even Europe in this calculated challenge to the myth of fallen womanhood and the blighted opportunities for women in early twentieth-century America.

"Occasions" of Prostitution

Susan's successive dalliances with prostitution which follow her escape from Sutherland support this chapter's contention that Phillips' engagement with the white slavery trade/myth/scare, is far more nuanced than many of his contemporaries appreciated and certainly worthy of closer examination by feminist literary critics today. As, Leslie Fishbein recognizes in "Harlot or Heroine: Changing Views of Prostitution, 1870-1920," "In viewing prostitutes as victims, whether of the double standard, economic circumstance, or the white slave trade, reformers denied these women the autonomy necessary to work for their own liberation" (25). Phillips' treatment of prostitution in his novel is notably different. The victimization of Susan Lenox is emphasized in the abuse

and rape she suffers at the mercy of her “family.” When Phillips narrates actual occasions of Susan’s prostitution, he associates it with a valuable mobility and agency for Susan, a far cry from the typical white slavery narratives of early twentieth century:

White slavery narratives – stories about women forced into prostitution – circulated in many formats. From 1905 to 1910, newspapers and popular magazines frequently published accounts of white slavery. At the height of the agitation against white slavery from 1909 to 1910, at least eight books were published on the subject. Some recounted a single story about the plight of a white slave, while others contained several stories detailing the fate of different women abducted into prostitution. Many books about white slavery included essays from physicians, religious leaders, missionaries, and moral crusaders emphasizing different aspects of the problem. Some were explicitly fictional, but most books about white slavery claimed to have a factual basis. (Donovan 17)

The published accounts Brian Donovan references in *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-vice Activism, 1887-1917* emphasize “the dangers of city life, the threat of new immigrants, and the equivalence between chattel slavery and white slavery” (18), all points that different episodes in *Susan Lenox* arguably address. While “the core elements of the white slavery genre allow for criticism of a number of people and institutions, including industrial capitalism, new amusements, immigrants, lackadaisical parents, and the white slaves themselves,” (18) David Graham Phillips’ invocation of the white slave narrative deviates from these “core elements.” For though the novel certainly attacks “a number of people and institutions,” including “industrial capitalism” and

“immigrants,” Phillips “reform project” is ultimately far more focused upon issues of mobility and opportunity for young American women.

The first evidence of this distinctive approach has been discussed; Susan’s “fall” from propriety in provincial, Sutherland “society” highlights Phillips’ consternation at the “Anglo-Saxon” morality which so woefully failed to educate Susan and guaranteed her castigation from proper society from the moment of her unwelcomed birth. Phillips’ invocation of the frank conversations between Susan and Mabel on the riverboat further fulfills his wish in the novel’s preface “to be as sensible about sex as we are trying to be about all other phenomena of the universe in this more enlightened day” (xi). Phillips’ description of the girl after this enlightenment reinforces his position:

But Susan happened to be of those who can concentrate – can think things out. And that afternoon ... she studied the world of reality – that world whose existence, even the part of it lying within ourselves, we all try to ignore or to evade or to deny, and get soundly punished for our folly. Taking advantage of the floods of light Mabel Connemora had let in upon her – full light where there had been dimness that was equal to darkness – she drew from the closets of memory and examined all the incidents in her life – all that were typical or for other reasons important. One who comes for the first time into new surroundings sees more, learns more about them in a brief period than has been seen and known by those who have lived there always. After a few hours of recalling and reconstructing, Susan Lenox understood Sutherland probably better than she would have understood it had she lived a long eventless life there. And is not every Sutherland the world in miniature. (218)

Not always subtle with his observations, Phillips overtly announces the symbolic value of Susan's struggles in Sutherland and the necessity of *removing* her from that world for her enlightenment. Scripting this scene on a moving riverboat, the author inextricably links Susan's mental prowess and potential for real agency in her life with the value and promise of mobility.

Phillips seeks to empower Susan with agency in her own life, unlike most white slave narratives to which, Jo Doezema argues in "Loose Women or Lost Women?: The re-emergence of the myth of 'white slavery' in contemporary discourses of 'trafficking in women'" (*Gender Issues* 18.1, 2000):

An essential aspect of the abolitionist campaign against white slavery was to arose [sic] public sympathy for the victims. Neither the pre-Victorian 'fallen women' nor the Victorian 'sexual deviant' was an ideal construct to elicit public sympathy. Only by removing all responsibility for her own condition from the prostitute could she be constructed as a victim to appeal to sympathies of the middle-class reformers, and public support for the end goal of abolition [of prostitution] be achieved. The 'white slave' image as used by abolitionists broke down the old separation between 'voluntary' sinful and/or deviant prostitutes and 'involuntary' prostitutes, construing all prostitutes as victims (28-9)

Doezema goes on to specify how, "in the US, the primary narrative motif was that of the 'innocent country girl' lured to the dangerous and corrupt city" (30).⁴⁹ She adds that "the horror of the supposed trade in 'white slaves' was magnified by stressing the youth of the

⁴⁹Here Doezema is referencing Frederick K. Grittner's *White Slavery: Myth, Ideology, and American Law*, 1990.

victim” (30). Yet for Phillips, the emphasis on Susan’s youth and innocence is far more exaggerated in the scenes leading up to and including her wedding night on the farm, as compared to her experiences with prostitution later in the city. Susan is not the “country girl” *lured* to the dangerous city, rather she is the innocent girl victimized by that “country.” Her story is not the clichéd white slave narrative of the fall of the country girl a la *Sister Carrie*; rather, *Susan Lenox* tells the story of the fall of the country.⁵⁰ Susan is more the innocent victim when raped by her husband in her “home”, than when she *chooses* prostitution moving out and about on the streets of the city.

Phillips’ treatment of prostitution is infinitely more balanced than the traditional white slavery narratives of his day. The occasions of Susan’s prostitution are narrated and examined frankly as carefully wrought decisions to save herself from worse degradation brought on by more wretched circumstances. Consider the first occurrence of prostitution in the novel. The riverboat has been destroyed in a horrible accident. The arrogant and depraved actor, Tempest, has stolen all of the troupe’s earnings on their tour, and Susan is left under the thoughtful protection of the riverboat proprietor, Robert Burlingham. Burlingham first saved Susan from destitution when thieving hotel owners stole from her the money Roderick Spenser left with her after he found her following her visceral flight from Jeb Ferguson. She is supposed to reconnect with Spenser in Cincinnati, but a medical mishap keeps him away (a not-so-subtle foreshadowing of Spenser’s inherent weakness). Susan is too ashamed of having lost Spenser’s money to look him up and face him. Burlingham recognizes her vulnerability, and rather than

⁵⁰ Ruth Rosen, among many others, notes how “Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* helped to popularize and perpetuate the ‘fall of the country girl’ myth” (*The Lost Sisterhood* 139).

taking advantage of her, protects and empowers her by introducing her to acting, the world Roderick Spenser promises throughout the novel, but repeatedly fails to deliver. Phillips' "Roberts", first Burlingham, and then Brent, actually provide, "...this stage, it was the world she had dreamed of – the world where there lived a wholly new kind of people – people who could make room for her" (*SL* 191). Where Spenser cannot make room for the girl and sends her off on her own, Burlingham literally welcomes Susan to his boat and "drew curtains round the berth let down for Susan [while] the others indulged in no such prudery on so hot a night" (*SL* 227). Affording Susan her own private space on a showboat, assuring her she needn't perform in Sutherland, even after he learns from the local newspaper that there is a one thousand dollar reward for her return (tellingly, half the value of George Warham's price to Jeb Ferguson), reveals to the runaway "bride" the depths of Burlingham's sacrifice:

She realized that he had indeed made an enormous sacrifice for her; for, though very ignorant about money, a thousand dollars seemed a fortune. She had no words; she looked away toward the emerald shore, and her eyes filled and her lip quivered. How much goodness there was in the world – how much generosity and affection! (*SL* 234)

Even more so than the hope she garnered from Mabel Connemora's frank explanation of human sexuality, Burlingham's successful facilitation of Susan's escape from Sutherland (versus Roderick Spenser's half-hearted attempt) emboldens and enables Susan's future. Furthermore, Phillips framing this contrast between the safer, mobile world of Burlingham versus the dangerous stagnation of Sutherland in financial terms makes clear his view the provincial "market" or "traffic" in women. Clearly, Susan's husband is

protecting his investment and not willing to bring her back for the entire cost of what her uncle “paid” for her “marriage.”

Having carefully protected her from the hardships and degradation that surely would have befallen her on her own at such a young age (first in Louisville and then in Cincinnati) after the boat’s capsize, Burlingham becomes gravely ill with typhus and is hospitalized. Susan fears the worst and hopes the extra ten dollars required for a private room will guarantee Burlingham a fighting chance at survival. Down to her last pennies, Susan prostitutes herself for the first time. The contrasts among this scene, her wedding night, and the traditional white slave narrative are significant. For one, the man, boy, really, to whom she sells herself is not much older than she, making her youth far less of a factor than in the scenes with the older Jeb Ferguson. Desperate for money, Susan is sitting on a bench debating whether or not to agree to the paltry terms offered her by the bloated, leering “talent agent,” Maurice Blynn, from whom Burlingham has been trying to shelter Susan and with whom she would have to spend the night before he would “place” her (284-287) when she realizes she is being watched:

A man was walking up and down the shaded alley, passing and repassing the bench where she sat. She observed him, saw that he was watching her. He was a young man – a very young man – of middle height, strongly built. He had crisp, short dark hair, a darkish skin, amiable blue-gray eyes, pleasing features. She decided that he was from a good family, was home from some college on vacation ... She liked his looks, liked the way he dressed. It pleased her that such a man should be interested in her; he had a frank and friendly air, and her sad young heart was horribly lonely. (294)

The fact that this “very young man” whom Susan “likes” and is “pleased by” contrasts sharply with the physically revolting Jeb Ferguson her uncle “sold” her to and the equally unattractive Maurice Blynn from whom Burlingham has protected her. Phillips’ recognition of the loneliness of “her sad young heart” indicates that elements of this encounter fulfill a natural need for intimacy:

Though, “the small-town girl, unsuspecting toward courtesy from strange men” (294) reads somewhat like the traditional white slave narrative, Phillips’ description of the exchange is far more complex. More likely a restatement of Susan’s inherent innocence, despite the injustices done to her, Susan “brightens” in this young man’s presence. Like the author Phillips, the young man “drew a lively and charming picture, one that appealed to her healthy youth, to her unsatisfied curiosity, to her passionate desire to live the gay, free city life of which the small town reads and dreams” (297). Far from condemning Susan’s longings, Phillips writes as if he is rewarding her and rescuing her from the tired, uneventful, monotony country life would have afforded her. The scene starts to read almost romantically:

“You and I can go round together, can’t we? I haven’t got much, but I’ll try not to take your time for nothing, of course. That wouldn’t be square. I’m sure you’ll have no cause to complain. What do you say?”

“Maybe,” replied the girl, all at once absentminded. Her brain was wildly busy with some ideas started there by his significant words, by his flirtatious glances at her, by his way of touching her whenever he could make opportunity. Evidently there was an alternative to Blynn. (297-98).

The physical and even emotional attraction between the two is evident. Though Phillips has already written that the young man's questions have helped him "place" Susan as "available," he still describes the interactions between the pair as flirtatious and reciprocally affectionate. Despite the boy's urgings that she drink wine, "she refused to take anything but a glass of milk; and he ended by taking milk himself" (299). Susan is actually making choices, decisions: attractive young man versus repulsive old Blynn? She is even influencing the young man to drink milk, creating an intentionally ironic, wholesome image of this pending prostitution. The encounter strives to achieve the candor and frankness, the middle ground, between the Anglo-Saxon and the Continental Phillips scorns in his preface:

She felt thoroughly at ease and at home, as if she were back once more among her own sort of people – with some element of disagreeable constraint left out. Since she was an outcast, she need not bother about the restraints the girls felt compelled to put upon themselves in the company of boys. Nobody respected a "bastard," as they called her when they spoke frankly. So with nothing to lose she could at least get what pleasure there was in freedom. She liked it, having this handsome, well-dressed young man making love to her in this grand restaurant where things were so good to eat and so excitingly expensive. He would not regard her as fit to associate with his respectable mother and sisters. In the castes of respectability, her place was with Jeb Ferguson! She was better off clear of the whole unjust horrible business of respectable life, clear of it and free, frankly in the outcast class. (299-300)

Emphasizing freedom and frankness through Susan's rationalization of her submission to her desires to find some pleasure in life, Phillips narrates Susan's first experience as a prostitute as an improvement over anything "respectable life" could have offered her. Far from some exotic and deceptive enslavement, he describes Susan's prostitution as a conscious decision. Susan contemplates, as the young man asks, "Why shouldn't it be me as well as another? ... At least sit down till I pay the bill" (*SL* 302). Tellingly, since women cannot "pay the bill" as men can, Susan seats herself and continues to reflect until:

Susan took her bundle, followed him. She glanced up the street and down. She had an impulse to say she must go away alone; it was not strong enough to frame a sentence, much less express her thought. She was seeing queer, vivid apparently disconnected visions – Burlingham, sick unto death, on the stretcher in the reception room – Blynn of the hideous face and loose, repulsive body – the contemptuous old gentleman in the shop – odds and ends of the things Mabel Connemora had told her – the roll of bills the young man had taken from his pocket when he paid – Jeb Ferguson in the climax of the horrors of that wedding day and night. They went to Garfield Place, turned west, paused after a block or so at a little frame house set somewhat back from the street. The young man, who had been as silent as she – but nervous instead of preoccupied – opened the gate in the picket fence.

"This is a first-class quiet place," said he embarrassed, but trying to appear at ease. (303)

The imagery that floods Susan's mind is an obvious commentary on the desperate logic of her decision to prostitute herself. Given her lack of money, her indebtedness to Burlingham and her desire to help him live, the attractiveness and almost respectfulness of this young man compared to the violence and repulsiveness of Ferguson and Blynn make the ironic picture of the little house with the picket fence almost appropriate, and certainly a clear contrast to the seedy, dark, farmhouse bedroom where she was so violently "taken" by Jeb Ferguson.

When the "business" is done and the two young people are "once more in the street," the young man makes repeated inquiries to somehow get to know Susan as a human being. He wishes he could take her to dinner, but he's out of money. He tells her, "You – you attract me awfully; you've got – well, everything that's nice about a woman – and at the same time, there's something in your eyes – Are you very fond of your friend [Burlingham]?" (303) He even goes so far as to tell her he's afraid he'll fall in love with her when he begs her to see him again the day after next, once he has more money from his father. The young man's inquiries and concern make him far more sympathetic than the brutish Ferguson and wolfish Blynn. The reader is led not only to sympathize with Susan's predicament, but to agree with her *decision*. Yet, Susan's silence after the transaction, far from the wrenching agony of the encounter with her husband, still decries women's limited hopes for real independence and intimate fulfillment. The young man articulates Phillips' unconventional view of prostitution which follows:

He looked at her searchingly, wistfully. "I know it's your life, but – I hate to think of it," he went on. "You're far too nice. I don't see how you happened to be in – in this line. Still, what else is there for a girl, when she's up against it? I

often thought of those things – and I don't feel about them as most people do...
(304)

But, like Sam Wright and Roderick Spenser before him, the young man also lacks the independence and strength of character necessary to entirely challenge convention and pursue an honest relationship with Susan, despite his obvious desire. Nevertheless, the intimate encounter between the two young people paints a far different portrait from the “dozens of sensationalistic tracts alleging a widespread traffic in women that sold young girls to virtual slavery” (D’Emilio and Freeman 208)” Phillips’ readers would have expected.

The details of this scene, far from recreating the scintillating details of the many white slave narratives circulating at the time Phillips is writing his novel, affirm what modern feminist historians have clearly established as a much more honest depiction of women’s participation in prostitution in early twentieth-century America.⁵¹ Furthermore, with his repeated references to the marital rape, Phillips challenges the Progressive Movement’s persistent invocation of the urban white slavery myths and the dangers of leaving home for the city, recalling more pervasive threats to young womanhood found at home.⁵² Phillips tellingly complicates Susan’s first dalliance with prostitution by placing the two youngsters in a house with a white picket fence, as if to tantalize himself or his readers with the ideality of two young people having an intimate encounter based on a

⁵¹ Ruth Rosen documents how “Such ‘occasional’ prostitution has always been part of the history of the trade. As the Wisconsin vice report revealed, many women during the early years of the twentieth century quietly slipped into and out of prostitution as economic need required” (*The Lost Sisterhood* 150).

⁵² Mary E. Odem, in *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (1995), corroborates Phillips’ view that “Young women clearly faced assaults by male employers and coworkers in factories and offices and by men they met at recreational venues. But they were particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse in the home because of their greater psychological dependence on male guardians” (60).

candid, mutual attraction, rather than an exercise in respectability and social preservation. The boy is clearly attracted to Susan, but society forbids his pursuing an “honest” relationship with her. Phillips hints there is probably some girl back home he does not really desire, but he is supposed to marry. Susan has no legitimate opportunity to have a healthy relationship with the kind of man she desires nor does she have any opportunity to make money to buy what she needs in the world, so the “transaction” occurs. Far from ideal for either, especially Susan, Phillips narrates significant details to ensure readers recognize the two characters’ mutual attraction and fleeting satisfaction with one another. Susan gets the money she needs and some sense of affection, while the young man gets to spend a short time with a girl he finds incredibly attractive, while being forced, albeit briefly, to reconsider the constraints and hypocrisy of social conventions himself.

Susan’s subsequent ventures into prostitution continue to distinguish Phillips’ social commentary from the prevailing rhetoric of his day. Not interested in condemning or policing women’s sexuality, Phillips continues to invoke this woman on the move to examine the often harsh realities of women’s changing, yet still degraded status in the rapidly expanding landscape of urban America. Susan learns right after the first episode of prostitution that Burlingham has died. The pain of this revelation is obviously piercing to Susan, having now essentially prostituted herself for nothing, though, in a move reminiscent of Lily Bart’s final check to Gus Trenor on her deathbed, Susan insists on paying the young doctor for Burlingham’s care anyway and not using the money for herself. But unlike Lily Bart, Phillips’ Susan Lenox is spared the mortal blow Wharton delivers, in fact the sting does not last too long; even though Susan finds herself penniless again and literally walking the streets, turning away several propositions for more “easy”

cash, reaffirming Phillips' characterization of Susan's "virtue" as far more complicated than typical depictions of prostitution. If it was just about money, she would get some more the same way, but she abstains. Her circumstances are not as desperate as the day before when she thought she could save Burlingham, but also, these propositions are not as attractive as the young man she did oblige. Though Phillips never relents with his railing against women's limited opportunities in the city, it is never narrated in the awful, graphic terms as what befell Susan in the country amongst "family."

Instead of just becoming a "full-time" prostitute, Susan instead befriends another young girl, Etta Brashear, whose family takes her in and helps her acquire factory work and wages. Recalling the young man from days earlier and her agreement to meet him at the little house with the picket fence again, Susan, after securing the factory job, tells her new friend, Etta, "I'm going to work at seven in the morning ... I might as well have gone today. I had a kind of engagement I thought I was going to keep, but I've about decided I won't'" (328). Having secured friendship, housing, and the means to keep herself afloat, Susan decides against more prostitution at this time, though the option persists. Implicit in this decision-making process seems to be Phillips' desire to address Susan's agency via social mobility. The intimacy and employment Susan finds with Etta and her family is more secure and satisfying than she could find with the young man.

Yet, as Susan and Etta become closer friends, Phillips invokes the subsistent life of the young tenement girl for further insights into American girls' limited opportunities for independence and autonomy within another family dynamic:

... Etta confided in her the only romance of her life – therefore the real cause of her deep discontent. It was a young man from one of these houses – a

flirtation lasting about a year. She assured Susan it was altogether innocent.

Susan – perhaps chiefly because Etta protested so insistently about her unsullied purity – had her doubts.

“Then,” said Etta, “when I saw that he didn’t care anything about me – except in one way – I didn’t see him any more. I – I’ve been sorry ever since.”

Susan did not offer the hoped-for sympathy. She was silent.

“Did you ever have anything like that happen to you?” inquired Etta.

“Yes,” said Susan. “Something like that.”

“And what did you do?”

“I didn’t want to see him any more.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know – exactly.”

“And you like him?”

“I think I would have liked him.”

“You’re sorry you stopped?”

“Sometimes,” replied she, hesitatingly. (334-35)

Phillips does not specify of whom Susan is speaking. It could be the young and attractive, though spineless, Sam Wright, whom she likely now knows she could have carried on with for some time in Sutherland, but it could also be the young man to whom she prostituted herself who told her he was afraid he’d fall in love with her, who offered to walk her home, whose “eyes lingered tenderly upon her” (305), at their parting and whom she had chosen not to see again, even though he essentially begged her to promise she would. By conflating Etta’s story of her one “romance” with Susan’s stories of her

one “seduction” and her one “prostitution,” Phillips reaffirms the conflation of “romance,” prostitution, and women’s limited opportunities in America. After the stirring and symbolic conversation with Etta, whereby the advances of most young men are described as little different from those of a solicitor, Susan reflects:

She was beginning to be afraid that she would soon be sorry all the time. Every day the war within burst forth afresh. She reproached herself for her growing hatred of her life. Ought she not to be grateful that she had so much – that she was not one of a squalid quartette in a foul, vermin-infested back bedroom – infested instead of only occasionally visited – that she was not a streetwalker, diseased, prowling in all weathers, the prey of coarse humors of contemptuous and usually drunken beasts; that she was not living where everyone about her would, by pity or out of spitefulness, tear open the wounds of that hideous brand which had been put upon her at birth? Above all, she ought to be thankful that she was not Jeb Ferguson’s wife. (335)

In a catalogue of increasing repugnance, Phillips again clarifies his contention that the wrong done to Susan by her family supersedes all of the other loathsome experiences that have or may follow her flight from Sutherland. That the “marriage” Susan was forced into was more hurtful and degrading than her prostitution in Phillips’ authorial estimation suggests how unconventional Phillips’ views are when he is writing his novel in 1913.

Susan’s next foray into prostitution further illustrates Phillips’ representations of prostitution as an indictment of marriage and social convention. There is a horrible tenement fire. Etta’s parents both die from their injuries, and the two young girls find themselves working in a box factory, sharing half of a backroom of another wretched

tenement with another destitute family, struggling to subsist in the world. (A scene not so subtly foreshadowed in the passage quoted above.) The girls carry with them at all times all the possessions they have. In a classic, naturalistic Progressive Era diatribe, Phillips describes how “the last traces of civilization were slipping from the two girls; they were sinking to a state of nature”:

Foul smells and sights everywhere, and foul language; no privacy, no possibility of modesty where all must do all in the same room: vermin, parasites, bad food vilely cooked – in the midst of these and a multitude of similar ills how was it possible to maintain a human standard, even if one had by chance acquired a knowledge of what constituted a human standard? (372)

Phillips writes how, despite the increasingly wretched squalor and degradation around them, Susan and Etta, struggling on in chastity against appalling odds, became the models, not only to Mrs. Cassatt [their landlady], but all mothers of that row held up to their daughters:

The mothers – all of them by observation, not a few by experience – knew what the “fancy lady’s” life really meant. And they strove mightily to keep their daughters from it. Not through religion or moral feeling, though many pretended – perhaps fancied – that this was their reason; but through the plainest kind of practical sense – the kind that in the broad determines the actions of human beings of whatever class, however lofty the idealistic pretenses may be. These mothers knew that the profession of the pariah meant a short life and a wretched one, meant disease, lower and ever lower wages, the scale swiftly descending, meant all the miseries of respectability plus a heavy burden of miseries of its own.

There were many other girls besides Susan and Etta holding up their heads – girls with prospects of matrimony, girls with fairly good wages, girls with fathers and brothers at work and able to provide a home. But Susan and Etta were particularly valuable as examples because they were making the fight alone and unaided. (373-74)

What seems like Phillips' participation in Progressive rhetoric against prostitution quickly reveals an entirely different agenda. He writes how the girls are being watched; how any "new garment of any kind" would signal their "fall," while their persistence is "proudly" touted by their boss as evidence of the fairness of the meager wages he offers. He describes the girls' "descent":

As their strength declined, as their miseries ate in and in, the two girls ceased talking together; they used to chatter much of the time like two birds on a leafy, sunny bough. Now they walked, ate their scanty, repulsive meals, dressed, worked, all in silence. When their eyes met both glanced guiltily away, each fearing the other would discover the thought she was revolving – the thought of the streets.

Finally after months of such misery, "one Saturday evening ... Etta put on her hat – slowly. Then, with a stealthy glance at Susan, she moved slidingly toward the door. As she reached it Susan's hands dropped to her lap; so tense were Etta's nerves that the gesture made her startle. "Etta!" said Susan in an appealing voice ...

"Don' t do it," said Susan.

“You get four, I only get three – and there’s no chance of a raise. I work slower instead of faster. I’m going to be discharged soon. I’m in rags.”

Etta looked at her with eyes as devoted as a dog’s. “Then we’ll go together,” she said. (375)

So Susan’s next occasion of prostitution is essentially narrated as a heroic gesture and “movement” to save another loyal friend, articulating Phillips’ challenge to the common-held stereotype of the materialistic girl who chooses prostitution as a means to finery and frivolity.⁵³ Susan’s decisions to prostitute herself are her own, but Phillips always carefully crafts her motives as unselfish to counter popular notions that women who “choose” prostitution are weak and selfish, just looking for an easy dollar. The outcome from this episode of prostitution propels and frustrates Phillips’ ambitious, revisionary agenda. Phillips narrates another story of youthful desires thwarted by social convention. He scripts a way for Susan to heroically sacrifice for Etta’s advancement, simultaneously creating more sympathy for Susan’s “virtue” and vexation with the ways of the world, which necessarily precludes any chance for her much deserved desires for intimacy and independence and forces her to *move* on – alone.

Susan and Etta walk for some time. While Etta sees all the finery in the shop windows and bemoans “how all those things go to some women – women that never did work and never could. And they get them because they happen to belong to rich fathers and husbands or whoever protects them. It isn’t fair! It makes me crazy” (SL 378),

⁵³ Margit Stange describes this phenomenon with her analysis of Jane Addams’ *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil* (1912) whereby Addams “appeals to the myth of women’s inevitable vulnerability” (*Personal Property* 128) and “imagines the prostitute as a woman ... driven to extremes by unfulfilled consumerist need” (*PP* 130).

Susan simply replies, “The thing is *we* haven’t got what we want, and we’ve got to *get* it – and so we’ve got to *learn how*” (378). “I want to be my own boss, said Susan” (*SL* 379). Phillips depicts prostitution as a reasoned decision for two young girls with no better options for finding some sense of agency and control in their lives. They are exploited by their factory boss every day. The option of moving on and away from such subjugation seems like a more desirable and rational choice for the two young women.

The physical brutality of their existence as chaste wage earners: “I can’t think of anything but the cold,” said Etta. “My God how cold I am! There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to get warm. There isn’t anything anybody wouldn’t do to get warm, if they were as cold as this. It’s all very well for warm people to talk--” (378) will contrast with the “comforts” that prostitution will bring. Not unlike Susan’s first encounter, she and Etta meet two young men, students from Ann Arbor looking for a good time. The girls have been enjoying the fruits of Susan’s latest labor, a thick steak and some “beautifully browned fried potatoes” (382), when the two young men approach them. They all partake of some beer and champagne, the boys more than the girls, for Susan has been sharing with Etta what Mabel Connemora “had explained to her – about how a woman could, and must, take care of her health, if she were not to be swept under like the great mass of the ignorant, careless women of the pariah class” (379). In no time, Susan and Etta come to life:

The faces of both girls were flushed and lively, and their cheeks seemed already to have filled out ... Susan was even gayer than Etta. She sang, took a puff at John’s cigarette; then laughed loudly when he seized and kissed her,

laughed again as she kissed him; and she and John fell into each other's arms and laughed uproariously as they saw Fatty and Etta embracing. (387)

The reciprocal affection, the enjoyed kisses, compared to the devouring assaults of Jeb Ferguson just six months earlier, reiterate Phillips' attempt to narrate stories of prostitution as potentially profitable and pleasurable for the prostitute. The scene Phillips describes reads more like a successful double-date. The two couples carry on together for a week "with the quiet little hotel as headquarters ... in exploring Cincinnati as a pleasure ground" (393). The week ends with Fatty inviting Etta to return to Michigan with him, and John hoping for the same from Susan. However, since John's pockets are not as deep as Fatty's, his entreaty is for Susan to come with him, work for two years as she has been, while he completes his law degree. Knowing her presence will only undermine Etta's hopes of acquiring respectability, and highly doubtful of John's willingness to really make her his wife, Susan declines the proposition. For, despite some small glimpses of sincere consideration, as when he had to explain to Fatty to give the girls a chance to clean and dress on their own in the hotel on their first night together, Fatty's proposal sounds hauntingly familiar. Like Sam Wright and the first young man in Cincinnati, John rapturously confesses, "I'm – I'm tempted to say all sorts of crazy things that I think but haven't the courage to act on ... I'm crazy about you ..." (395). To stop the young man's groveling, Susan finally tells him she's already married. When he asks her to tell him about it, Phillips reminds his reader of the greatest crime of the novel:

She looked at him in astonishment, so amazing seemed the idea that she could tell anyone that experience. It would be like voluntarily showing a hideous, repulsive scar or wound, for sometimes it was scar, and sometimes open wound,

and always the thing that made whatever befell her endurable by comparison.

(397)

In the midst of the country's great frenzy over the white slave trade as a means of keeping young women in their place and away from the city, Phillips continues to argue for more honest relations between the sexes and to deride respectable society's disrespectful and stultifying treatment of young women.

Phillips Foils Convention

At the very end of the novel's first volume, Phillips reunites Susan with Roderick Spenser, whom she can finally track down and repay, after John has left her one hundred dollars. However, far from an idyllic reconnection, Phillips narrates a frustrating tale of masculine weakness. In fact, the second volume of the novel arguably posits the notion that a white slave pimp is a more fulfilling partner than the trifling "common man" Spenser represents. Volume Two will juxtapose both Spenser, the weak dilettante, and Freddy Palmer, Tammany thug turned successful businessman with the "intellectual ethos of the novel" (Ravitz 155), Robert Brent, whom biographer, Abe C. Ravitz, considers "spokesman for David Graham Phillips" (155). These juxtapositions reinforce Phillips' rail against convention and rally cry for women's right to mobility.

Though Volume Two, reminiscent of Phillips' past as a muckraker journalist, devotes much attention to a wide range of glaring atrocities festering in city life, from wretched slums to sweatshops, as critics such as Ravitz address how "Phillips was also concerned with stressing what he called 'the irresistible pressure of economic forces'" (154), Phillips never abandons his "low, lusty wail of angry protest" against social conventions and his despair for the girl on the back of the wagon.

After traveling with Spenser to New York City as his “muse,” With Whartonesque poignancy, Phillips quickly details Spenser’s inadequacy and unworthiness as a partner for Susan. Remarking on all of the “street girls” in the city, Spenser asks Susan, “You can’t imagine yourself doing such a thing?” (433). Susan, ever-honest, replies that she has. Spenser, who has just convinced the young girl to travel with him to New York City without a wedding proposal, reveals the same sort of commonness Phillips’ deplored in George Warham:

He stopped short and his expression set her bosom to heaving. But her gaze was steady upon his. “Why did you tell me!” he cried. “Oh, it isn’t so – it can’t be. You don’t mean exactly that.”

“Yes, I do,” said she.

“I might have known! I might have known!” he cried – rather theatrically, though sincerely withal – for Mr. Spenser was a diligent worker with the tools of the play-making trade. “I learned who you were as soon as I got home the night I left you in Carrolton. They had been telephoning about you to the village. So I knew about you.”

“About my mother?” asked she. “Is that what you mean?”

“Oh you need not look so ashamed,” said he, graciously, pityingly.

“I am not ashamed,” said she. But she did not tell him that her look came from an awful fear that he was about to make her feel ashamed of him.

“No, I suppose you aren’t,” he went on, incensed by this further evidence of her lack of a good woman’s instincts. “I really ought not to blame you. You were born wrong – born with the moral sense left out.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said she, wearily.

“If only you had lied to me – told me the one lie! cried he. “Then you wouldn’t have destroyed my illusion. You wouldn’t have killed my love.”

(433-34)

The parallels between Spenser’s reaction and Uncle George’s are striking. Most tellingly, both men rail against Susan’s inherent lack of morality in the same breath with which they passionately deride her for *not* lying. Much more knowledgeable this time around, Susan, because of the experience and knowledge her mobility in and out of different cities have afforded her now knows that the shame is Spenser’s. And when he goes on to basely and cruelly take Susan’s beautiful face in his hands to ask, “Where is *it*? Where *is* it? ... the dirt” (434), Phillips melodramatically portends the future for this relationship. Spenser is too self-absorbed and ignorant to love Susan. Susan is still too selfless and hungry for affection to not try to love Spenser. Ironically, their second parting occurs when Spenser’s associate Drumley convinces Susan that *she* is hurting *him* (Spencer). With Spenser’s literary ambitions floundering, and his spirit fleeting, Drumley convinces Susan to leave Spenser, explaining how her presence in his life and his feelings for her are interfering with the hack’s opportunities for success.

From this broken, never-fulfilling, relationship, Phillips invokes mobility and again sends Susan into the world of prostitution, first as a dress-shop girl, who like so many other wage-earning women who find their wages inadequate to subsist on, “supplement ... their earnings at labor with as large or larger earnings in the stealthy

shameful way” (*SL*, II 5).⁵⁴ But for Susan, the ultimate impetus to prostitute herself, as always, is for someone else. This time, it is for all of the other workers in the department store who she has been convinced are dependent upon her for their own income:

It made her heart heavy to think of probable failure, when the house had been so good to her, had taken her in, had given her unusual wages, had made it possible for her to get a start in life, had entrusted to her its cause, its chance to retrieve a bad season and to protect its employees instead of discharging the lot of them. (*SL*, II 28)

Rejecting yet another offer to live as a mistress, this time of the wealthy dress-buyer, Gideon, Susan, Phillips writes, “For better or for worse ... was free. She was ready to begin her career” (*SL*, II 55). Having prostituted herself once more, Susan concludes “Never again could she even indulge in dreams of going to Rod” (*SL*, II, 54-5); while Phillips adds, “Her love for Rod had been stricken of a mortal illness the night of their arrival in New York. After lingering for a year between life and death, after a long death agony, it had expired” (*SL*, II 55). Susan can never be free with Rod. Equating Susan’s relationship with Rod to an agonizing illness, Phillips’ commentary makes clear his continued contention that women’s prospects for freedom and agency in America require mobility but remain derisory in his day, particularly with the common self-absorbed type of man Roderick Spenser represents. Connecting the source of the relationship’s toxicity to Spencer’s callous treatment of her for her honest admission about prostitution foreshadows the extent to which Phillips is willing to take his protest: prostitutes are far

⁵⁴ Ruth Rosen documents how “The Committee of Fourteen *Department Store Investigation Report* of New York revealed that the *highest*, and not the lowest, paid saleswomen most often turned to prostitution” (155).

less evil than the men and the conventional society to which they belong which insist upon degrading women and never offering them the mobility they need to acquire agency and education.

Naively leaving most of her money behind for Spencer, Susan is yet again nearly penniless and walking the city streets. Still stinging from Spencer's judgment of her, Susan returns to the squalor of tenement life and the exploitation of factory work in several chapters of railing against the vices of capitalistic greed. Finally, Phillips narrates Susan's swift departure from that world. She leaves on a Saturday night and is quickly welcomed to the elusive world of the stage she still yearns for by a "stout young man" who offers her a drink. He takes her to a café where she first sees the playwright, Robert Brent. Her impression is an elaborate one:

The face of the actress's man interested her. It was a long, pale face, the mouth weary, in the eyes the strange hot fire of intense enthusiasm. He was young and old and neither. Evidently he had lived every minute of every year of his perhaps forty years. He was wearing a quiet suit of blue and his necktie was a darker shade of the same color. His clothes were draped upon his good figure with a certain fascinating distinction. He was smoking an unusually long and thick cigarette. The slender strong white hand he raised and lowered was the hand of an artist. He might be a bad man, a very bad man – his face had the expression of freedom, of experience, that made such an idea as conventionality in connection with him ridiculous. But however bad he might be, Susan felt sure it would be an artistic kind of badness, without vulgarity. He might have reached the stage at which morality ceases to be a conviction, a matter of conscience, and

becomes a matter of preference, of tastes – and he surely had good taste in conduct no less than in dress and manner. The woman with him evidently wished to convince him that she loved him, to convince those about her that they were lovers; the man evidently knew exactly what she had in mind – for he was polite, attentive, indifferent, and – Susan suspected – secretly amused. (*SL*, II 96-7)

The “indifference” Susan recognizes, and Phillips now privileges in this portrait of preeminent success (notably described as an antithesis to “conventionality”) now becomes the embodiment of the advice Susan received long ago from Burlingham: “Never forget this, and don’t stop thinking about it until you understand it: ‘Make men *as* incidental in your life, precisely as men who amount to anything make women *as* women incidental’” (*SL*, II 237). As Phillips scripts Susan’s much delayed recognition of the value of Burlingham’s advice, the novel’s struggles with mobility become less frustrated and fruitless, as Susan finally severs her vague longing for love from her determination to succeed and triumph:

When Susan was alone, she gazed round the crowded café, at the scores of interesting faces – thrillingly interesting to her after her long sojourn among the countenances merely expressing crude elemental appetites if anything at all beyond toil, anxiety, privation, and bad health. These were the faces of the triumphant class – of those who had wealth or were getting it, fame or were striving for it, of those born to or acquiring position of some sort among the few thousands who lord it over the millions. These were the people among whom she belonged. Why was she having such a savage struggle to attain it? Then all in an instant the truth she had been so long groping for in vain flung itself at her. None

of these women, none of the women of the prosperous classes would be there but for the assistance and protection of the men. She marveled at her stupidity in not having seen the obvious thing clearly long ago. The successful women won their success by disposing of their persons to advantage – by getting the favor of some man of ability. Therefore, she, a woman, must adopt that same policy if she was to have a chance at the things worthwhile in life. She must make the best bargain – or series of bargains – she could. (*SL*, II 98)

The “bargains” presented to Susan are not those society would necessarily approve.

Phillips defends his protagonist’s choices in the face of her limited options as “the outcast without friends or family, the woman alone, with no one to lean upon or to give her anything except in exchange for what she had to offer that was marketable” (*SL*, II 98):

She must make the bargain she could, not waste time in the folly of awaiting a bargain to her liking. Since she was living in the world and wished to continue to live there, she must accept the world’s terms. To be sad or angry either one because the world did not offer her as attractive terms as it apparently offered many other women – the happy and respected wives and mothers of the prosperous classes, for instance – to rail against that was silly and stupid, was unworthy of her intelligence. She would do as best she could, and *move* [my italics] along, keeping her eyes open; and perhaps some day a chance for much better terms might offer – for the best ... (*SL*, II 98-99)

Phillips’ narration of Susan’s recognition of what she desires and how she must proceed to acquire it summarizes the novel’s pragmatic treatment of prostitution as merely an option toward acquiring upward mobility for women in a world prefers to hem them in.

Phillips frankly reveals that for many women, prostitution can be the only option they have for self-preservation, and if they are intelligent and astute, a means toward self-elevation and upward mobility. He also draws little distinction between the marriages of the women who have the advantages and comforts of life and the prostitution less “fortunate” women like Susan are forced to choose. Phillips plotting suggests the sordidness of this reality is not the fault of the women, but of the society which objectifies them. Struggling to rehabilitate the “fallen” woman, for Phillips, does not include convincing her of the errors of her indiscretions, but rather through empowering her to see how she can manipulate society’s misuse of her to her own advantage.

Susan’s first implementation of this new, more mercenary approach to prostitution includes acquiring enough money from the young man who had befriended her and brought her to the world of Robert Brent to which she aspires to set herself up with some lodging and sustenance. Able, from the money she earns from this time with “Blond-Beard,” to take a much needed bath and “restore her body to somewhere near her ideal of cleanliness, she let the water run out and refilled the tub with even hotter water. In this she lay luxuriously, reveling in the magnificent sensations of warmth and utter cleanliness” (*SL*, II 107). Like the bath that so refreshed her in Cincinnati when she and Etta “befriended” John and Fatty, Susan’s washing here deliberately challenges the mainstream notion of prostitution as the lowest and filthiest degradation of women. If not for prostitution, Susan could never get literally clean or figuratively free. By challenging the notion of prostitution as filth and enslavement, Phillips clearly privileges the moments of Susan’s selling herself to the alternative of tenement life:

And Susan was still in the first flush of the joy of escape from the noisome prison whose poisons had been corroding her, soul and body. No, poison, is not just comparison; what poison in civilization parallels, or even approaches, in squalor, in vileness of food and air, in wretchedness of shelter and clothing, the tenement life that is really the typical life of the city? (*SL*, II 109)

To this rhetorical question, Phillips offers the answer the novel will not forget: ... “Susan was free to go to bed. She slept hardly at all. Ever before her mind hovered a nameless, shapeless horror. And when she slept she dreamed of her wedding night, woke herself screaming, “Please, Mr. Ferguson – please!” (*SL*, II, 110). After all Susan has suffered and experienced, the horror of her wedding night persists as the worst experience of her young life. Amidst his extensive commentary on the injustices of city life, a passage that starts to read like a page out of Jacob Riis’ *How the Other Half Lives*, Phillips will not “move on” or relent in his harsh attack on provincial America’s mistreatment of young women, nor forget the image of the sad, young country bride.

In the chapters that follow, Phillips is forever “moving Susan along.” The first episode introduces the character of Freddie Palmer whose story reads something like a “pimp with a heart of gold” tale. Rather than entirely demonizing the Tammany thug who is using women to line his own pockets and get on in the world, Phillips’ describes Palmer in ambivalent terms:

The other young man was also looking at Susan; and it was an arresting and somewhat compelling gaze. She saw that he was tall and well set up. As he was dressed only in trousers and a pale blue silk undershirt, the strength of his shoulders, back and arms was in full evidence. His figure was that of the

wonderful young prize-fighters she had admired at moving picture shows to which Drumley had taken her. He had a singularly handsome face, blond, yet remotely suggesting Italian. He smiled at Susan and she thought she had never seen teeth more beautiful – pearl-white, regular, even. His eyes were large and sensuous; smiling though they were, Susan was ill at ease -- for in them there shone the same untamed, uncontrolled ferocity that one sees in the eyes of a wild beast. His youth, his good looks, his charm made the sinister savagery hinted in the smile the more disconcerting. (SL, II 121-22)

The extensive commentary on Palmer recalls Susan's impressions of Robert Brent and Rod Spenser. Palmer emerges as much stronger than Spenser, more youthful than Brent, but with a troubling element of violence. Where Brent's attractiveness was cold and aloof, Palmer's is sensuous, but frightening. Phillip's descriptions of Susan's impressions of the men clearly privilege the power and accomplishment of Brent and even Palmer over the solipsistic ineffectiveness of Spenser.

Susan's time with Palmer as a prostitute bullied into service for fear of being arrested is complicated. Palmer does intimidate and violently mistreat Susan, as typical stories of white slavery would concur, but as Phillips writes it, Susan holds a certain amount of power over Palmer. Having become an alcoholic to endure the drudgery of full-time prostitution, Susan enrages Palmer with her defiance of his repeated demands that she stop drinking. He tells her "You're getting broken in. Don't take yourself so seriously. After all, what are you doing? Why, learning to live like a man." (SL, II 133). The same advice of Burlingham, coming from Palmer, does not exactly enact the

stereotypical pimp-prostitute dynamic, while Phillips' invocation of the phrase "broken-in" challenges the terminology of white slave narratives. Doezema explains:

Deceit, force and/or drugging featured heavily in the accounts of "white slavery." Some accounts reported women and girls kidnapped outright, others focused on 'deceit', with violence entering in after the 'victim' became aware of what was expected of her, to ensure compliance and prevent escape. This process was referred to as being "broken in." (30)

Referencing the National Vigilance Association (NVA) of 1910, Doezema explains that the "breaking in" relates specifically to the young girl's deceptive, forced and/or drugged initiation into the "business" of prostitution, Palmer's/Phillips' use of the term is much different. For one, Freddie is outraged rather than complicit in Susan's "drugging" of herself. But more significantly, her "breaking-in," as he terms it, is for *her* benefit, not *his*. In a much cruder form, Palmer is offering to help Susan help herself, just as her less violent protectors, Burlingham and Brent do. Phillips is not willing to entirely vilify the prostitute or the pimp. There is a conversation; he asks questions; he assumes Susan has a voice and a choice – not unproblematic, but still startlingly different from the lack of a voice or any choice Susan had back in Sutherland. In a passage explaining the relationship between Palmer and the police, Phillips chides:

... And anyone disposed to be critical of police morality or of Freddie Palmer morality – in this matter of graft would do well to pause and consider the source of his own income before he waxes too eloquent and too virtuous. Graft is one of those general words that mean everything and nothing. What is graft and what is honest income? Just where shall we draw the line between rightful

exploitation of our fellow-beings through their necessities and their ignorance of their helplessness, and wrongful exploitation? Do attempts to draw the line resolve down to making virtuous whatever I may appropriate and vicious whatever is appropriated in ways other than mine? ... are not the police and the Palmers entitled to their day in the moral court no less than the tariff-baron and market-coroner, the herder and driver of wage slaves, the retail artists in cold storage filth, short weight and shoddy goods? ... never is the human race so delightfully, so unconsciously, amusing as when it discusses right and wrong. (SL, II 134-35)

The author has already drawn parallels between prostitution and other “legitimate” occupations for women, from wives to factory workers; now Phillips makes a similar argument for the other side of the “white slave trade,” with Palmer’s simultaneous affection and objectification of Susan. Phillips spent the first decade of the twentieth-century as a journalist exposing the abuses of graft in society and government. His article “Treason of the Senate” was the actual occasion and impetus for Theodore Roosevelt’s coining the term “muckraker” to describe the dozens of journalists of the era who fought to expose public and private corruption.⁵⁵ So Phillips knows of what he writes in this passage, but as Susan contemplates Palmer’s advice:

She found this new point of view interesting – and true, too. Like a man – like all men, except possibly a few – not enough exceptions to change the rule.

Like a man; getting herself hardened up to the point where she could take part in

⁵⁵ See David Mark Chalmers’ *The Social and Political Ideas of the Muckrakers* (1964) and Willard Torp’s *The Lives of Eighteen from Princeton* (1946) and Filler and Ravitz’s biographies of Phillips for extensive discussion of his muckraking work.

the cruel struggle on equal terms with the men. It wasn't their difference of body and more than it was their difference of dress that handicapped women; it was the idea behind skirt and sex – and she was getting rid of that The theory was admirable; but it helped her not at all in practice. (*SL*, II 134)

Phillips aims to craft the story of female empowerment, whereby the young woman can get on in the world as successfully as a man, without being under the control of some man. Yet social convention and Phillips' own chauvinistic tendencies seem to interfere. The complicated connection between Susan and Palmer demonstrates the complexity of "relations between the sexes" with which Phillips grapples. The same man who "cared for her – better still, liked her – liked to talk with her, liked to show – and to develop – the aspiring side of his interesting, unusual nature for her benefit" (*SL*, II 136), Susan discovers is planning to have her arrested again and incarcerated in "the Island for three months" (*SL*, II 145) because "he's crazy in love ... and that he wants to put you where other men can't see you and where maybe he can get over caring about you" (*SL*, II 145). For Phillips, Palmer's "desire to seize her and try to conquer and to possess [Susan]" (*SL*, II 140) is his inherent masculine weakness and why he is ultimately unfit for her. Even when Palmer seems to be dissuaded from his plans, discussing Susan's reading of "Emerson – Dickens – Zola" (*SL*, II 147) and insisting she come to live with him in his flat because he has given up: "I need you. You're the one I've been looking for" (*SL* II 148), Phillips transfers Palmer's power to Susan. When Palmer asks her what's her "game," she responds with her own version of Burlingham's and Palmer's advice:

"To get strong," replied she. "Women are born weak and bred weaker.

I've got to get over being a woman. For there isn't any place in this world for a

woman except under the shelter of some man. And I don't want that." The underlying strength of her features abruptly came into view. "And I won't have it," she added. (*SL*, II 147)

Freeing Susan from Freddie's overtures, Phillips finally narrates the white slave story his readers would expect. Alfred Hodder's contribution to *Outlook* in January of 1903, "The Fight for the City: The Story of a Campaign of Amateurs" (73:5), offers a good example of the sorts of white slave stories that would be told and retold in the precise years Phillips is writing his novel.⁵⁶

With details that would be invoked in novels, articles, and plays in the decade to follow, Hodder tells the tale:

... Men put women into houses of prostitution; ... These men are the so-called cadets. They are no nightmare, no mere monsters of the imagination, they are a horrible reality. They live there on the spot, and there are very many of them. Occasionally one is caught and convicted. Everybody in that district knows them well.

The women in those houses of prostitution are not paid. The keeper of the house receives the wages of the woman's shame, and gives her a brass check ... Once or twice a week, in theory at least, they cash their checks; a check like this represents twenty-five cents. But if the girl is put into that house by a man, often and even usually it is not she herself that takes and gets the cash for even these

⁵⁶ Isaac F. Marcossou, in *David Graham Phillips and his times* (1932) writes, "Phillips worked on this novel intermittently for nearly seven years. During this time he produced more than twenty other books, many short stories, scores of articles, and two plays. Yet he never lost sight of *Susan Lenox – Her Fall and Rise*, to which he dedicated the best that was in him" (247).

checks: the man who put her in there takes the checks and keeps the money. In a week, in a month, in a year, the amount of money is considerable ... The girl in there has no means by which she can escape. Her clothes have been taken from her: she has perhaps her wrapper, a pair of stockings, and slippers ... They are told that they are indebted to the woman of the house in this amount or that amount, and that they cannot leave without their paying. I have in my possession account-books of these places, showing how these women are charged for the ordinary necessities of life and are kept there in that condition. There is not simply one of these houses on the East Side; there are several hundred houses in which substantially the same method is pursued... That is the sort of civilization that has sprung into existence and that flourishes under the rule of Tammany Hall.

(251)

And so it happens to Susan after she leaves Freddie. She stops to inquire about an acting position, only to once again discover her credentials won't allow it. She stops for a drink in the "family" entrance of a Raines Law hotel looking for a room for the night when she is "befriended" by "a good-looking, darkish youth, well dressed in a ready-made suit of the best sort. At second glance Susan saw that he was at least partly of Jewish blood, enough to elevate his face above the rather dull type which predominates among clerks and merchants of the Christian races. He had a small, shifty eyes, an attractive smile, a manner of assurance bordering on insolence ..." (*SL*, II 157). A few moments later, after declining a second drink with a polite

"Thanks, but I want to be alone ... not to seem unappreciative of his courtesy she took a small drink from her glass. It tasted very queer. She glanced

suspiciously at the young man. Her legs grew suddenly and strangely heavy; her heart began to beat violently, and a black fog seemed to be closing in upon her eyes. Through it she saw the youth grinning sardonically. And instantly she knew. “What a fool I am!” she thought (*SL*, II 158-59).

Phillips invokes several of the tropes of the white slave narrative, especially the “drugging” and the clichéd, anti-Semitic description the Jewish cadet, in addition to the stealing of her own clothes and replacing them with “a fast-house parlor dress of pink cotton silk, and a kind of abbreviated chemise” (*SL*, II 160). The scene reads like an excerpt from S.S. McClure’s “The Tammanyizing of a Civilization” in the November 1909 *McClure’s Magazine*:

The Committee of Fifteen describes the “cadet,” the new political power of whom Mr. Moss had written in 1897 as follows:

‘His occupation is professional seduction. By occasional visits he succeeds in securing the friendship of some attractive shop-girl. By apparently kind and generous treatment, and by giving the young girl glimpses of a standard of living which she has never dared hope to attain, ... The Raines-law hotel or the ‘furnished room house, with its café on the ground floor, is soon visited for refreshments. After a drugged drink, the girl awakens and finds herself at the mercy of her supposed friend ... and ... finds herself an inmate of a house of prostitution.’ (McClure 124)

Susan, after coming to and finding herself in the sordid place she had already heard stories about, “from the lips of girls who had embarked through it” (*SL*, II 159) first appeals to the man who has just taken advantage of her drugged and lifeless body to

which he replies, “Good Lord! ... I’m a married man. I don’t want to get mixed up in this.” (*SL*, II 160). Phillips quick jab at respectable society tells the other side of the white slave narrative that is so willing to vilify foreigners and innocent women, namely, respectable men’s demand for the corrupt “product/service”.

Phillips will not allow his story to dwell too long with this episode, but its inclusion in the novel, especially toward the end is admittedly problematic. Phillips has invoked and embraced mobility throughout the novel to afford Susan education and opportunities to “move up in the world” she would never experience in her hometown, and yet, somehow, after all of these enlightening experiences and degradations, Susan falls prey to the clichéd story of the naïve, young girl victimized by the city.

Nevertheless, by enabling Susan to recall the candid truths her unconventional experiences and mobility in New York have afforded her, Phillips quickly remedies Susan’s “silly appeal” to the common, married man with the far more savvy threat to the madame, “Oh come off, ... I’ll not stand for that. I’ll go back to Jim Finnegan” (*SL*, II 160). Using the knowledge she acquired from her time with Freddie Palmer, Susan is able to quickly escape from the now terrified madame’s clutches with “twenty dollars” for her trouble. Like Betsy Israel, historicizing the life of single women in the city in her own study nearly a century after Phillips’ novel, Phillips is willing to acknowledge the reality of white slavery, but he still insists the threat to young women is often exaggerated and misguided. Israel writes:

That is not to be glib. White slaving was a real and extremely serious crime. The Rockefeller Commission and other small communities spent years patrolling docks, brothels, rackets and their upscale counterparts, cabarets, and

while few people were ultimately prosecuted, Congress passed the Mann Act, a law prohibiting the transport of underage women across state lines for the purpose of prostitution.

Still, the passage of the Mann Act would not become the lasting legacy of this episode. Nor would the vilification of men who preyed on defenseless young women. The primary message, unspoken but unmistakable, was to condemn women out on their own and also to scare them. (124)

Like the twenty-first century feminist, Israel, Phillips uses his novel to increasingly embrace the importance and value of Susan's independence and mobility which keeps her out of the clutches and control of any one man. So while this episode concedes white slavery was not a fabrication, it does clarify that most Americans preoccupied with the practice were more interested in policing women than sexual predators.

Intimate Sacrifice

The one man of whom the novel seems to approve is the playwright Robert Brent, who reappears when Susan has reconnected with Spenser whom she finds near-death in a dance-hall. Using the ailing Spenser to give Susan "something to live for – something to fight for ... someone to redeem" (*SL*, II 199), Phillips does not take long to remind Susan and the reader of the young girl's selflessness and the man's self-absorption. Susan is again a prostitute for the sake of another:

What she had been unable to do for herself, to save herself from squalor, from hunger, from cold, she was now able to do for the sake of another – to help the man who had enabled her to escape from that marriage, more hideous than anything she had endured since, or ever could call upon to endure.... (*SL*, II 217)

And again, in spite of all the calamities and degradation to which Phillips has subjected his young protagonist, the author still insists upon the superlative insult of the brutal country marriage. However, Phillips now describes Susan with an ability to manipulate those around her to a certain advantage. In a way, she uses Spenser's illness to save herself from despair, reinvigorate her mobility, and in the process, rediscover Robert Brent.

Susan, having successfully financed Spenser's imminent recovery with her prostitution, is now sent by Spenser to an old acquaintance's office for more palatable (to Spenser) work as an actress, now seeing how Rod "had been brooding over the source of the money that was being spent upon him" (*SL*, II 219). Tellingly, Spenser kept such deep concerns to himself while he most needed her financial support to pay for his medical care. Now on the mend, with only her to thank, Spenser is already trying to control her career. Fortunately for Susan, despite Spenser's friend's quick rejection of Rod's appeal to hire Susan, Robert Brent just happens to be in the same man's office that day:

... After a few minutes she looked up. She was startled to find that the man was giving her a curious, searching inspection – and that he was Brent, the playwright – the same fascinating face, keen, cynical, amused – the same seeing eyes, that, in the Café Martin long ago, had made her feel as if she were being read to her most secret thought. (*SL*, II 221)

The figure of Brent quickly emerges as a perfect foil to the weak Spenser. Phillips describes how "His figure, tall and slim and straight, had the ease of movement which proclaims the man who has been everywhere and so is at home anywhere" (*SL*, II 223).

In the chapters to follow, Brent emerges as an ideal teacher for Susan – a man who invokes mobility as a means to ultimate freedom and success. He is described as honest and respectful, though often aloof. His treatment of Susan realizes Phillips’ plea in the preface to recognize women as human beings. Invited to Brent’s library to discuss his plans for her acting career, Susan “felt almost at her ease. After all, while his gaze was penetrating, it was also understanding; we do not mind being unmasked if the unmasker at once hails us as brother. Brent’s eyes seemed to say to her, ‘Human! – like me’” (*SL*, II 229-30).

Brent departs from Susan, unexpectedly, and she fears he has tired of her, that she has disappointed him. But rather than subject her to a demeaning life with Roderick Spenser, who is yet again cheating on her with an actress in his latest play, Phillips reunites Susan with Freddie Palmer who is now far removed from the streets and looking for a female partner to facilitate his rise to respectability in Europe. Susan, unwilling to be degraded and insulted by Spenser any longer and thinking Brent has abandoned her, accepts Freddie’s offer, but only on her terms. Again complicating his characterization of the man and the woman, Phillips writes how to Susan, “He was as handsome as ever, she saw – had the same charm of manner ... His look at her could not but appeal to her vanity as a woman, and to her woman’s craving for being loved; at the same time it agitated her with specters of the days of her slavery to him (*SL*, II 330-31). Still dangerous, Freddie’s strength and his appreciation for Susan’s strength of character make him a preferable alternative to the inept Spenser. Furthermore, his business dealings and own upward mobility create the means by which Phillips can transport Susan to Europe to further expose the inherent flaws in America’s treatment and opportunities for women.

Always privileging the decency of Robert Brent, Phillips scripts Susan's inquiry to Brent's assistant one last time, hoping to avoid a partnership with Freddie, but once offered no hope of a better offer, Susan consents to go to Europe, but vows she will never marry Palmer: "This time, her terms or no terms at all" (*SL*, II 360). Phillips illustrates the extent to which Susan has finally accepted the advice of Burlingham (Palmer and Brent):

Susan flushed. She hastily lowered her eyes. But she need not have feared lest he should suspect the cause of the blush ... a strange, absurd resentment of the idea that she could be married to Freddie Palmer. Live with him – yes. But marry – now that it was thus squarely presented to her, she found it unthinkable. She did not pause to analyze this feeling, indeed could not have analyzed it, had she tried. It was, however, a most interesting illustration of how she had been educated at last to look upon questions of sex as a man looks on them. She was like the man who openly takes a mistress whom he in no circumstances would elevate to the position of wife. (*SL*, II 362-63)

Susan will use Freddie as a means of securing some wealth of her own, but she will not be his wife, not even when he begins to insist in Europe. Symbolic of a looser moral code, the European setting enables Phillips to continue to insist on the value of mobility for American women. It is no accident that Susan finally articulates and acquires her independence in Europe. Phillips insists America's prudish social conventions stymie women's agency and mobility. Despite the paternalistic and persisting patriarchal overtones of Susan's relationship with Robert Brent, Phillips' sacrifice of his life instead of Susan's at the end of the novel underscores Phillips' commitment to challenging social

convention. Palmer is convinced Brent does not love Susan, but he is increasingly afraid that she loves Brent. When Palmer's brutality prevails over his newly acquired refinement, and he has Brent killed, Phillips reverses the conclusion of so many seduction stories by having the sympathetic, noble *man* killed to save and redeem the "fallen" *woman*.

Susan sees through Palmer's attempts to act the sad friend rather than the murderous rival, and she chooses to finally leave Freddie. Enraged, he reveals the meaning behind Phillips' meaningful orchestration of Susan's ultimate success:

"You and I were getting along fine. He had his chance with you and had lost it. Well, he comes over here – looks us up – puts himself between you and me – proceeds to take you away from me. Not in a square manly way but under the pretense of giving you a career. He made you restless – dissatisfied. He got you away from me. Isn't that so?"

She was sitting *motionless* [my italics] now.

Palmer went on in the same harsh, jerky way: "Now, nobody in the world – not even you – knew me better than Brent did. He knew what to expect – if I caught on to what was doing. And I guess I would be pretty sure to catch on."

(*SL*, II 470-71)

Brent did know Palmer better than anyone, and he counted on him to finally facilitate Brent's ultimate empowerment of success. Convinced of her abilities and determination to be an actress, Brent realizes that she only needs his fortune to succeed. Getting Palmer to kill him, Brent makes the ultimate sacrifice for Susan in order to free her from the constraints and conventions of the world. Upon hearing that Brent had recently changed

his will and left everything to her, Susan's "motionless" reaction reveals Phillips' remedy for the young country girl so misused by the world to which she was born:

... But Susan had long since lost the last trace of awe of the opinion of others. She was not seeking to convey an impression of grief. Grief was too real to her. She would as soon have burst out with voluble confession of the secret of her love for Brent. She saw what Garvey was thinking; but she was not concerned. She continued to be herself – natural and simple. And there was no reason why she should conceal as a thing to be ashamed of the fact that Brent had accomplished the purpose he intended, had filled her with honest exultation – not with delight merely, not with triumph, but with that stronger and deeper joy which the unhoped-for pardon brings to the condemned man ...

She must live on; and suddenly she discovered that she could live *free!* Not after years of doubtful struggles, or reverses, of success so hardly won that she was left exhausted. But now – at once – *free!* The heavy shackles had been stricken off at a blow. She was free -- forever free ... Free to live as *she* pleased, instead of for the pleasure of a master or masters ... The ecstasy of it surged up in her ... (*SL*, II 482)

Having finally acquired the freedom she desires, Susan is permitted a moment of motionlessness to assess all she has experienced and gained through her literal and figurative mobility out of the country into the city across the ocean to Europe.

While Donna M. Campbell considers Edith Wharton's claims for *Susan Lenox's* greatness validated because of the novel's striking parallels to *The House of Mirth*, this chapter's examination of Phillips' complicated engagement with unconventional views of

mobility and prostitution in early twentieth-century America argues that there is much more to appreciate in Phillips' lengthy work. In her 1951 article, "The Rise of the Fallen Woman," Margaret Wyman recognizes how "The fact that out of years of bodily degradation and spiritual hardening Susan salvaged the experience and the independence of spirit with which to achieve spectacular theatrical success represents the twentieth-century fictional overthrow of the sentimental tradition that feminine sexual immorality, however motivated, must be punished by suffering and early death" (176). In addition to Wyman's recognition of Phillips' engagement with sentimental fiction and seduction novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is important to recognize the significance of Phillips' symbolic struggles to free more than just one woman from the fate of the "fallen." Amanda Anderson's study of the category of "fallen" in Victorian culture and literature clarifies how "fallenness is assimilated to narrative itself, identified or equated with a 'downward path.'" (9). The fact that Phillips' novel embarks on a revision of that narrative and a reversal of the trajectory of that path bears further consideration from modern scholars, especially as questions of mobility continue to inform our increasingly global society.

In *Susan Lenox*, Phillips aspires to validate and elevate the experiences of nameless young girls labeled "fallen" and driven away in wagons to lives of utter degradation and virtual imprisonment. While the bulk of his novel focuses on a woman "adrift" in the city, Phillips' rapturous release of Susan Lenox in the final pages of the novel from the labels and subjection of a patriarchal society should be recognized as a *novel* approach to invoking mobility as a means towards autonomy. Instead, with few exceptions, Phillips' novel has been denied the attention it first attained from such a

reputable critic as Edith Wharton. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century critics of modernity have given much attention to the place of women within modernism, oft identifying a “privileging of male experience in the literature of modernity” (Wolff 20). Given Phillips’ valiant attack on repressive social convention with relatively few lapses into objectified and patriarchal views of womanhood and the unique, empowering mobility he affords his literary heroine, David Graham Phillips’ “low, lusty, wail of angry protest” in *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* deserves hearing by contemporary critics.

Chapter Five: Recognizing a Revolution of Professional and Intimate Mobility
in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun*

While David Graham Phillips' contemporary appeal to Edith Wharton may help validate a recovery of his novel *Susan Lenox*, it seems connections between Wharton and Jessie Redmon Fauset, on the contrary, may contribute to modern critics' begrudging and often back-handed recognition of the significance of Jessie Redmon Fauset's novels. Insisting on the now well-accepted practice of moving away from periodization in our study of American literature, Elizabeth Ammons reminds us how "inherited categories themselves by definition marginalize the work of women," especially regarding the historical and literary scholarship of the first few decades of the twentieth century (208).⁵⁷ Ammons details precisely how women writers like Wharton and Fauset struggle for legitimacy in academia:

Wharton, by almost any standard the major fiction writer of the first two decades of the twentieth century, fits into the category neither of Naturalism nor of the Lost Generation. Likewise, Fauset, though usually mentioned in discussions of the Harlem Renaissance, shows up in most of those discussions as a misfit. She appears as a writer failing at the central task of the Harlem Renaissance of rebelliously breaking through sexual and formal barriers: precisely, it is important to point out, what Naturalists and the 1920s triumvirate of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner are

⁵⁷ Here Ammons references traditional categories such as "Naturalism," the "Twenties" and the "Harlem Renaissance" (208).

also said to be doing – and Wharton, like Fauset, is frequently said to be failing at. In short, white or black, one of the major women fiction writers of her generation – Wharton in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Fauset in the New Negro 1920s – is conveniently defined by existing historical categories as peripheral, anomalous, out-of-step. (208)

Ammons' observations of this link between Fauset and Wharton in the late 1980s as she embarked on her groundbreaking attempt to "reconceptualize the era [of early twentieth-century American literature]" in *Conflicting Stories* addresses a fact of Fauset criticism that now persists well into the second decade of the twentieth-first century: namely, the dismissal and diminution of Fauset's contributions to American literature. This chapter aims to echo the few voices in Fauset criticism who unapologetically consider her something more than the mere midwife of the Harlem Renaissance and champion a revision of her place in American literary history based upon what I argue is a truly revolutionary imaginary of intimate and professional mobility in her 1928 novel, *Plum Bun*.

Fauset's Supposed Conservatism

In the second chapter of her book, *America the Middlebrow: Women's Novels, Progressivism, and Middlebrow Authorship Between the Wars*, Jaime Harker details the nature of Jessie Fauset's struggles to earn the respect and appreciation of her male counterparts during the Harlem Renaissance. Harker begins her chapter, "Jessie Fauset and the 'Authentic' Black Middle Class," with a lengthy quote from a letter Fauset angrily penned after reading Alain Locke's review of her last novel, *Comedy: American Style* in 1933. Beginning with "I have always disliked your attitude toward my work ...,"

adding “you have shown yourself so clearly as a subscriber to that purely Negroid school whose motto is ‘whatever is white is right ...’ and ending emphatically with “No dear Alain, your malice, your lack of true discrimination and above all your tendency to play safe with the grand white folks renders you anything but a reliable critic. Better stick to your own field and let us writers alone. At least I can tell a story convincingly,” Fauset’s frustrations at being misunderstood are undeniable (qtd. in Harker 31). In this bitter diatribe against one of the great mouthpieces of the Harlem Renaissance, Fauset ironically accuses Alain Locke, famed editor of the seminal *The New Negro* of inauthenticity and pandering to white, middle-class America. Harker illuminates the audacious role reversal in Fauset’s missive, admitting,

Locke’s version of the Harlem Renaissance has endured, while Fauset is remembered mainly as a footnote. Even critics who reclaim her must address the ‘problem’ of her middle-class identity and her novels that seem painfully old-fashioned next to vernacular triumphs by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. This is true not only of African American male critics, but of many feminist critics as well. (33)

Even scholarship written since Harker’s 2007 examination of Fauset’s revisionary view of her own place in the Harlem Renaissance continues to address the ‘problem’ of Fauset’s middle-class predilections. Meredith Goldsmith, writing in *Legacy* in 2015 begins with “Virtually all contemporary scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance novelist Jessie Fauset contains an obligatory move in which critics respond to her stylistic and apparent social conservatism” (258). Catherine Rottenberg in 2013 confesses in “Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* and the City’s Transformative Potential” how “indeed, until the

1980s, Fauset was considered to be what Langston Hughes called a ‘midwife’ of the Harlem Renaissance, and scholars had little positive to say about any of her four novels” (267).⁵⁸ Notably, Mason Stokes elaborates how

Fauset’s early reputation followed almost precisely the fault lines that divided literary Harlem in the twenties – between those like W.E.B. DuBois, who imagined literature as the place to portray the ‘best’ of the race, and that younger cohort of fire-breathers who sought to portray the New Negro, warts and all. The former liked what they saw in Fauset’s work; the latter scoffed. And in their scoffing, they painted Fauset as an uptight remnant of earlier times, a writer stubbornly clinging to Victorian ideals in an age of the New Woman and free love. Three years after the publication of *There is Confusion*, fellow writer and Harlem fixture Wallace Thurman described it as ‘an ill-starred attempt to popularize the pleasing news that there were cultured Negroes, deserving of attention from artists, and of whose existence white folks should be apprised’. Two years later, in a letter to Langston Hughes, Thurman declared simply: Jessie Fauset should be taken to Philadelphia and cremated’. (68)

Obviously, the evident vitriol between Fauset and many of her younger, male counterparts was real and unrelenting. Elaine Showalter identifies this conflict with the male power structure of the Harlem Renaissance as, “Among the reasons for Fauset’s decline and her unpopularity with the Harlem literati [because] her friendships with white women writers and her general sympathy for feminist concerns [emerged] at a time when

⁵⁸ Rottenberg clarifies how Cheryl Wall “traces the critical reception of Fauset’s work” in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (1995) and attempts to “rectify” in her reclamation of Fauset’s novels as does Anne duCille in *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction* (1993).

neither were acceptable among the Harlem group” (76). Showalter recognizes how failing to subscribe to the male-dominated movement of the Harlem Renaissance created more than a little conflict for Fauset.

So, where lies the truth? Who were the real trailblazers of the Harlem Renaissance? Fauset would certainly argue she was, and this chapter aims to argue how it is precisely through trailblazing, or rather, mobility, that Fauset establishes herself as something of a revolutionary in her time. Admittedly, connecting Fauset, whose perceived middle-class, bourgeois sensibilities often render her neglected or even disparaged by her contemporaries during the Harlem Renaissance (and literary critics ever since) to a revolutionary “movement,” may seem a stretch to most academics; however, if we closely examine Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun*, the revolutionary nature of her attempt to negotiate mobility, professionalism, and intimacy for African-American women in the early twentieth century can hardly be considered anything else.

Furthermore, it should be noted that not all critics share a condescending, dismissive attitude toward Jessie Redmon Fauset. As recently as February of 2017, a *New Yorker* feature article entitled “The Forgotten Work of Jessie Redmon Fauset” bemoans how “though she helped to usher in a crucial period of artistic flourishing, and was herself a vital participant in that flourishing, she was not destined to get much credit for it,” revisiting Fauset’s contentious relationship with Locke and others as well as quoting modern critics who find increasing value in Fauset’s writing, including Cheryl Wall whom Jenkins reveals “told me recently, ‘I think we lose a bit of our literary history if we do not acknowledge the contributions of Jessie Fauset’” (Jenkins 2). This *New Yorker* piece reiterates how the often hypermasculine ethos of the Harlem Renaissance

marginalized Fauset, quoting University of Wisconsin professor Chereene Sherrard-Johnson who considers *Plum Bun* Fauset's "best" work, but explains how "Initially, Fauset's work was dismissed as sentimental and Victorian, primarily because she dealt with 'women's issues,' centering on the marriage plot," a concern and convention contemporaries such as Locke and DuBois dismissed and later critics such as David Levering Lewis demean as "a bit prissy, to some extent, even for the time" as more evidence of the male, literary elite's dismissive attitude toward Fauset over the years (Jenkins 2). In stark contrast to such tired criticism of Fauset, Jenkins identifies Colorado College professor of English and director of Race, Ethnicity, and Migration Studies, Claire Oberon Garcia, who insists "A look at Fauset's entire body of work reveals a writer who is more engaged with modern questions of race, class, and gender than she has been given credit for" (5). Rather than apologizing for her mingling of concerns regarding race and gender, this chapter relies on the insights of critics such as Susan Goodman who argue "Fauset defined the 'best' in a cross-cultural context of racial equality and pride. She saw African-American literature belonging to a larger tradition of American, European, and Caribbean writing, the relationship more reciprocal than contentious," and, I would argue, remarkably forward-thinking and transnational rather than retrograde, as contemporary critics are still too often wont to complain (131). Recognition of more complicated, nuanced readings of Fauset such as Garcia's and Goodman's validate this chapter's intention of recovering Jessie Redmon Fauset's revolutionary role in American literature without qualification of her merits as a writer or stipulations of a problematic conservatism in her writing.

Fauset's Sense of Self

Rather than capitulating to the essentialist claims of many of her Harlem Renaissance contemporaries and their privileging of the black 'folk', vernacular language, and the headier, lustier elements of life in certain parts of Harlem, Fauset "believed that good literature conveys "the universality of experience" (qtd. in Pfeiffer 79). In "The Limits of Identity in Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*," Kathleen Pfeiffer clarifies how Fauset "insists that literature crosses boundaries of space and time and creates communities of like-minded artists. But the cultural and social changes of the 1920s curtailed the possibility for the meaningful connection that Fauset advocates" (80). Fauset's efforts towards universality are what her contemporary and even modern critics usually dismiss as a harkening to a bygone era, mistakenly reading her efforts towards universality as a rejection of the uniqueness and inherent value of black Americans' experiences in the United States and a privileging of white standards and expectations. And yet, Harker clarifies how "Fauset's letter [to Alain Locke] suggests that her writing was not a failure of New Negro philosophy but the product of conscious choices. It points to another Harlem Renaissance, one less concerned with formal innovation and cultural rebellion than with the needs of 'race' men and women" (33). Harker details how

Fauset came out of a nineteenth-century tradition of uplift, and she made that Christian tradition into a secular vision of art's transformative power. This was not a betrayal of Fauset's black heritage but the means by which she could contribute to the creation of an independent, self-sufficient black culture. Her writings show considerable nuance on this point ... Whatever similarities Fauset's program might share with middle-class values were, in her mind, simply

incidental, for ‘the reason we adopt such and such criteria which are also adopted by the Anglo-Saxon, is because these criteria are the *best*, and not essentially because they are white.’ In other words, Fauset felt her combination of middlebrow authorship and progressive, middle-class activism was as black as the blues. (42)

Herein lies the conundrum of determining Fauset’s place in African American literary history. She did not consider her embrace of certain values and universal truths as a quiescence to white, proscriptive standards of behavior, and yet she was writing in a historical moment when critics like Locke and writers like Hughes believed to be authentically black, a writer must be consciously *not* white.⁵⁹ The irony, and the hypocrisy for Fauset was that the system of patronage that black writers depended upon during the Harlem Renaissance, in her estimation, meant that what was white and what was black was ultimately determined by wealthy, *white* patrons.⁶⁰ Fauset’s novel, *Plum Bun*, rather than participate in such a racially regressive system actually critiques it, and in the process creates a revolutionary narrative that aims to create new “selves,” “identities,” and “relationships” for young, African-American women in terms of professional and intimate mobility.

So while it is well documented that many of the more heralded writers of the Renaissance like Langston Hughes spent much of the 1920s tailoring their writing to the demands of wealthy white women patrons such as Charlotte Osgood Mason, the “rich

⁵⁹ See Hughes’ “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” for the Harlem Renaissance’s view of middle class values as mere “aping of things white.”

⁶⁰ For more on the influence and extent of the system of white patronage in the Harlem Renaissance see Ralph D. Story’s “Patronage and the Harlem Renaissance: You Get What You Pay For” and Carla Kaplan’s *Miss Anne in Harlem: The White Women of the Black Renaissance* (2013).

white widow who liked to be referred to as ‘Godmother’ by the artists she sponsored” (Story 284), Jessie Redmon Fauset was being undermined and marginalized for far more equitable friendships she naturally formed through her own life experiences and concern for the “intersections of race, class, and gender” as she saw them in early twentieth-century Harlem (Garcia 93). While Fauset’s own references to this tension between herself and the male establishment of the Harlem Renaissance in her aforementioned correspondence with Alain Locke was long lost in later accounts of the period, as was most appreciation for her literary accomplishments, it warrants recognition for its resemblance and resonance with more recent, and vehement rejections of the binary assumption that black women must be either silent and supportive or vocal and antagonistic toward the struggles of their black husbands, brothers, and sons. As Toni Cade Bambara brazenly declared in 1970 in “On the issue of Roles,” “We’d better take the time to fashion revolutionary selves, revolutionary lives, revolutionary relationships ... Not all speed is movement. Running off to mimeograph a fuck-whitey leaflet, leaving your mate to brood, is not revolutionary. Hopping a plane to rap to someone else’s ‘community’ while your son struggles alone with the Junior Scholastic assignment on ‘The Dark Continent’ is not revolutionary. If your house ain’t in order, you ain’t in order. It is so much easier to be out there than right here” (134). Bambara’s emphatic plea for relational healing and *real* revolution for African American communities in the 1970s is really not so far removed from the appeals of Jessie Redmon Fauset decades earlier as she navigated the Harlem Renaissance on her own terms in her life and her writing. Connecting Fauset, whose perceived middle-class, bourgeois sensibilities often render her neglected and even disparaged by her contemporaries during the Harlem Renaissance

and most literary critics ever since with the presumably more radical voice of Bambara may seem a bit of a stretch. However, if we closely examine Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun*, the revolutionary nature of her attempt to negotiate mobility, professionalism, and intimacy for African-American women in the early twentieth century echoes many of Bambara's frustrations with the patriarchal establishment and masculinist ethos of the Black Power and Black Arts movements of the 1960s and 1970s that too often silenced or relegated black women's voices to the periphery of what she called the Struggle in the same way Fauset's voice has been too often and too easily overlooked or dismissed since her integral and active participation in the literary and cultural work of the Harlem Renaissance.

Professional and Intimate Mobility in *Plum Bun*

In "Vision to Visionary: The New Negro Woman as Cultural Worker in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun*," Susan Tomlinson astutely argues that Fauset's novel, "Written at the height of both the New Negro and New Woman artistic and political movements, ... represents the aims, outcomes, and implications of both movements" (90). Tomlinson goes on to conclude that Fauset's protagonist, Angela Murray, "embodies the convergence of two conflicting feminist projects whose shared aim is a woman's control over her body and her destiny" (97). Tomlinson identifies obviously gendered and racial distinctions between the two movements grounded in sexuality. According to Tomlinson, the New Woman is most overtly and strictly represented in the novel by the character of Paulette, a bohemian, white woman who teaches Angela about the ways of men, and insists "There is a great deal of the man in me. I've learned that a woman is a fool who lets her femininity stand in the way of what she wants ... I see what

I want; I use my wiles as a woman to get it, and I employ the qualities of men, tenacity and ruthlessness, to keep it. And when I'm through with it, I throw it away just as they do." (Fauset 105). By definition, Paulette, a quintessential New Woman, whom we are told is "a world apart" necessarily embraces modern [white] women's increasingly validated desire to engage in sex outside or without marriage, a trait and desire Paulette exhibits throughout the text. In contrast, the competing feminist representation, the New Negro Woman, must adhere to stricter, more conventional and middle-class views of sexual purity due to the persistent influence of nineteenth-century doctrines of racial uplift which demanded black women be "symbols of their race" in order to counter and refute racist notions of the past that rendered black women "characterized as licentious and immoral, as the very antithesis of 'ideal' (white) womanhood" (Melancon 47). While other critics such as Catherine Rottenberg invoke Angela Murray's foil, her sister, Virginia, as the most precise embodiment of the New Negro woman, Tomlinson's recognition of Angela's *movements* between these "movements," is more compelling and best captures the novelty of Fauset's *novel*.

Indeed, a close reading of the earliest sections of *Plum Bun* where the younger sister, Virginia, is the ideal homebody who aspires to nothing more than a humble teaching position and a traditional marriage just like her middle-class mother before her certainly seems to overtly cast the younger sister as the modest, disciplined, demure New Negro woman versus the older sister, Angela, who is repulsed by her bourgeois existence, limited professional prospects in Philadelphia, and the boring advances of Matthew Henson, "the boy next door." Even later in the novel, when Angela finally agrees to the "free love" arrangement of the wealthy, white Roger Fielding, once she is officially

passing as white full-time (not just for fun on Saturdays with her mother), Angela's association with New Womanhood is juxtaposed with her younger sister's more modest existence in Harlem as a prim, yet vibrant, independent black woman who "was established in New York with friends, occupation, security, leading an utterly open life, no secrets, no subterfuges, no goals to be reached by devious ways," more in keeping with the cultural and historical restraints of the New Negro woman (243). Adhering to these strict distinctions between the sisters might seem to corroborate claims that Fauset is participating in proscriptive, white standards of proper behavior for black and white women.

However, on the contrary, when read closely, Fauset's depictions and development of these characters become more nuanced as the novel progresses and Angela's "fall" into New Womanhood fails to preclude her from participation in the New Negro Movement, as she quite literally becomes a Negro again in a grand gesture of defiance in the face of white racism and assaults on the perfectly stoic, very black artist, Miss Powell. Unable to accept the racist restrictions which refuse Miss Powell her rightful opportunity to pursue her art in Paris, Angela stops passing for white and embraces her blackness in order to defend and affirm Miss Powell's right to pursue her career. The professionalism that unites the New Negro and New Woman movements, somehow, in Fauset's appeal to certain universal truths, redeems Angela from her earlier racial and sexual transgressions, not in terms of typical bourgeois standards of behavior, but in entirely new terms, carefully crafted by Fauset as reflective of certain "cosmic echoes" (231) that legitimize a black woman's right to intimate and professional mobility. Her characterization of Angela is far more complicated than most critics who

dismiss her as middlebrow and/or middleclass recognize. Far from subscribing to dated nineteenth-century conventions which would render Angela forever a fallen woman and permanently tainted by her affair with Roger Fielding and her brazen dalliance with sexual license, Fauset instead clarifies:

Angela's brief episode with Roger had left no trace on her moral nature; she was ashamed now of the affair with a healthy shame at its unworthiness; but beyond that she suffered from no morbidity. Her sum total of the knowledge of life had been increased; she saw men with a different eye, was able to differentiate between the attitudes underlying the pleasantries of the half dozen young men in her office; listening, laughing, weighing, all their attentions, accepting none. (245)

That Angela's virtue is "restored" or more truly, was never in question, is certainly a profoundly "modern" view of women and intimacy. In Fauset's revolutionary moral economy, Angela's affair with Roger has made her wiser and more "sophisticated," particularly in her workplace of the art world. Fauset intentionally affords her female characters a kind of intimate mobility, whereby they are free to move from one lover to another without dire consequences.

Possibly more revolutionary and remarkable is Fauset's penchant to link and reward her female protagonists in *Plum Bun* with a reciprocal brand of professional mobility through which they must literally and figuratively "move" to pursue professional longings as well. Initially, Angela moves to New York for intimate and professional reasons. Yes, she wants to fall in love with someone more exciting than Matthew Henson, but Angela is also motivated to move because of the ways in which her

racial ambiguity, being black but looking white, is continually precluding her artistic endeavors in Philadelphia, opening and closing doors for her. Angela rationalizes and insists that she must go to New York: “Why should I shut myself off from all the things I want most, - clever people, people who do things, Art, - her voice spelt it with a capital, - ‘travel and a lot of things which are in the world for everybody really but which only white people, as far as I can see, get their hands on.” (78). In one of the novel’s many justifications of Angela’s right to “pass,” Fauset frames the validity of her character’s desires in terms of an inherent right to mobility as a means toward intimate fulfillment and professional success. The description of Jinny’s motivation to “move” to New York is couched in similar terms: “This loneliness and her unfortunate affair with Henson had doubtless proved too much for her, and she had deliberately sought change and distraction elsewhere” (243). Virginia leaves Philadelphia because of heartache, loneliness, a desire for more intimacy, and yet she first tells her sister it is because there are better teaching opportunities in New York, a fact of life in New York Fauset puts to “work” for her character’s ultimate, personal fulfillment via a flourishing career and romantic relationship. Like Angela, who was initially looking for sensual and hedonistic experiences of freedom under the auspices of looking for better opportunities in her profession, Virginia expresses a professional motivation for moving to New York that finds intimate fruition in the end, just like her sister who finds artistic, professional opportunity in Paris, in addition to the “gift” of Andrew Cross’ true love.

In the end, Virginia articulates Fauset’s revolutionary defense of the sisters’ rights to define their own terms for their intimate and professional mobility:

Well now, when I get right down to it sometimes I think I do [love Anthony]. Sometimes I think I don't. Of course the truth of the matter is, I'd hardly have thought about Anthony or marriage either just now, if I hadn't been so darn lonely. You know I'm not like you, Angela. When we were children I was the one who was going to have a career, and you were always going to have a good time. Actually, it's the other way round; you're the one who's bound to have a career. You just gravitate to adventure. There's something so forceful and so strong about you that you can't keep out of the battle. (355)

Virginia's description of herself and her sister reiterates Fauset's engagement with the tropes of New Womanhood and the New Negro vis a vis mobility, intimacy, and professionalism. And "through the depiction of these characters and the milieus of Greenwich Village and Harlem, [and beyond], *Plum Bun* argues for a revised racial and gender identity. The concern with types [represented by Angela's artwork] mitigates against the concept of a unitary racial subject. Variations in terms of class and geographic location inform subjectivity." (Wall 72). Virginia and Angela's diverse experiences in Philadelphia, New York, and Europe vary significantly based on the women's individual personalities and motivations, as do those of other female characters such as Paulette, Martha Burden, and Miss Powell. The professional and intimate mobility Fauset forges for these characters convey her intentional "representation of two sisters, whose interests, talents, and *choices* [my italics] diverge dramatically [and] suggest the importance of psychological variables" (Wall 72) and reinforce Fauset's rejection of essentialist claims about race. Fauset affords both Angela and Virginia a range of experiences in terms of both professional and intimate mobility based on their inherently unique personalities, not

their racial or gender identity, a rhetorical *move* of her own that merits more respect than Fauset typically earns from most literary scholars. Her characterization of the two sisters through her navigation of their intersecting movements toward professional and personal fulfillment and her complication of the categories of New Womanhood and New Negro Womanhood reveal a mastery of the novel of manners not as an homage to an outdated literary aesthetic, but rather as a keen invocation of the form as a “creative revisioning of the American novel and American identity” in important ways (Goodman 149). Contrary to typical, limited readings of Fauset’s novel, recognizing Fauset’s manipulation of Angela and Virginia’s professional and intimate mobility reveals her laudable effort to actually “present the diversity of African Americans and protest their narrow portrayal in fiction” in profoundly important ways in early twentieth-century America (Goodman 149). Fauset inextricably links intimate and professional mobility in order to motivate and enable the sisters’ growing confidence and competence in their personal and professional relationships. With *Plum Bun*, “Fauset plays with the conventions of the sentimental novel to subvert myths about women’s nature ... [and] also explore the historical exploitation of black women” in her development of Angela and Virginia as women on the move (Goodman 142).

In “Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* and the City’s Transformative Potential,” Catherine Rottenberg does herald Fauset’s novel for “raising crucial and timely questions about the emancipatory potential of urban space for upwardly mobile black women” in the Harlem Renaissance (266). Departing from the chorus of critics who have “had little positive to say about any of her four novels,” Rottenberg examines how *Plum Bun* “engages in and contributes to debates regarding the modern city’s transformative potential, since, like the

early urban sociologist Park and the contemporary feminist urban scholar Elizabeth Wilson, Fauset offers a relatively optimistic vision of the metropolis” based on the experiences of Angela and Virginia Murray, as representatives of the New Woman and the New Negro Woman, respectively (267).⁶¹ Drawing on the “principal belief among Renaissance writers ... that the geographical relocation and urbanization of black people would provide the means for innovative black cultural expression and that this, in turn, would re-shape the nation’s cultural landscape, empowering black Americans to exercise social and political rights that a democratic society guaranteed but that history denied them,” Rottenberg’s assessment of the value of Fauset’s use of the city as a site and means of cultural work is compelling (Lewis 605). Recognizing that the novel is “set exclusively in variously and increasingly cosmopolitan city spaces – from Philadelphia to New York City to Paris” Rottenberg’s connection between “progressive ideas about urban space” and Fauset’s novel is important, but it may emphasize the significance of space and setting at the expense of what I continue to argue is a more remarkable aspect of the novel - its embrace of mobility.

Though Angela and Virginia both enjoy emancipatory moments in these urban spaces, neither city is sufficiently equipped to offer the women what they really need to realize their true identity and potential in the world. Virginia thinks Philadelphia is the ideal space for her the happy home of her dreams, but it falls short, and she must move to New York. Angela thinks New York is the liberated, cosmopolitan space where she can access her artistic and romantic dreams of freedom and opportunity, but the city (and the

⁶¹ Here Rottenberg references Robert E. Park’s 1925 essay, “The City” and Elizabeth Wilson’s 1991 *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women*.

racist and sexist regulations which persist therein) also fall short for her expectations. Echoing Emerson's famous contention that "life is a journey, not a destination," Fauset's novel enables its upwardly mobile, young, female, African-American protagonists the opportunities to realize their professional and intimate desires via mobility, not urbanity. None of the cosmopolitan destinations in the novel affords either Angela or Virginia everything she wants or needs. The women's movements, their literal and figurative travels towards their ideals, are what enable them to accomplish their goals, far less so than the spaces where they exercise their mobility. Rottenberg rightfully remarks on the significance of "Angela's daring decision to set off as an unfettered woman" and how "Fauset's novel thus traces Angela's movement over time and space: from her early years in a respectable black neighborhood in Philadelphia, through her adventures as a young woman passing as a white artist in bohemian Greenwich Village, and eventually reclaiming her racial identity and moving to Paris to pursue her art;" however, Rottenberg may emphasize the significance of these destinations at the expense of realizing that it is Angela (and Virginia's) "setting off," "passing," "reclaiming," and "moving" through the journey of the novel that make Fauset's cultural commentary so significant (265). The professional and intimate mobility both women seek and attain in the novel attests to the innovation of Fauset's literary imagination.

Fauset's Transnationalism

Another element of Fauset's work in *Plum Bun* which attests to her forward rather than backward thinking is the degree to which she imagines black experience as something transnational. Inverting the original trajectory of Africans to the United States across the Atlantic then south, Fauset deliberately charts her protagonist's course north,

then east back across the Atlantic to Paris. Brent Hayes Edwards, in *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, recognizes in Fauset's essays "evidence of this persistent and pervasive internationalist outlook," adding "it is evident that [because of her internationalism] Fauset cannot be easily pigeonholed as solely an apologist for the urban U.S. black bourgeoisie" (135). Locating this internationalism in Fauset's essays, Edwards' insights invite a natural extension and opportunity to recognize significant moments of internationalism in *Plum Bun*. Most prominent is the obvious, albeit modestly hopeful conclusion of the novel in Paris, where Angela and Anthony can consummate their love, and Angela can presumably continue her career as an artist – a "marriage" of intimacy and professionalism facilitated by the transnational mobility of the novel.

Paris as the desired but thwarted goal of Miss Powell looms large throughout the end of the story as Fauset creates a pretext for Angela's reconciliation with her racial identity. But even before it all "works out" for Angela and Anthony, Angela becomes nearly giddy at the prospect of sharing her racial heritage with him, happily considering "they were based and rooted in the same blood, the same experiences, the same comprehension of this far-reaching, stupid, terrible race problem. How inexpressibly happy, relieved and overwhelmed he would be! She would live with him in Harlem, in Africa, anywhere, any place" (294). I would argue Fauset's deliberate attention to the international component of Angela and Anthony's shared struggles as African-Americans in the diaspora reveals an enlightened, international approach to race relations that was arguably ahead of her time, if not at the very least, overlooked in many critics' limited assessments of Fauset's work.

Also significant and reflective of Fauset's specific engagement with the diaspora is of course Anthony's personal history and his lineage. His mother's Brazilian background, "with the blood of many races in her veins" (287) conveys a keen diasporic awareness in Fauset's plotting of the novel. Before she knows Anthony's true history, Angela, in recollecting that Anthony, being from Brazil, "was probably Portuguese, a member of a race devoid, notoriously devoid of prejudice against black blood" (265) hints at the international awareness the Van Meier scene also evinces:

Angela, reveling in types and marshalling bits of information which she had got from Virginia, was able to divide the groups. There sat the most advanced coloured Americans, beautifully dressed, beautifully trained, whimsical, humorous, bitter, impatiently responsible, yet still responsible. In one section loomed the dark, eager faces of West Indians, the formation of their features so markedly different from that of the ordinary American as to give them a wild, slightly feral aspect. These had come not because they were disciples of Van Meier but because they were earnest seekers after truth. But unfortunately their earnestness was slightly marred by an unwillingness to admit conviction. Three or four coloured Americans, tall, dark, sleek young men sat within earshot, speaking with a curious didactic precision. 'They're quoting all the sociologists in the world,' Ladislas Starr told his little group in astonishment. (216-17)

In a deliberate narrative strategy, the termination of Angela's time with Roger is imminent when they attend the Van Meier lecture. Angela, learning from Virginia, who has actually socialized with the great thinker, some hint of the connections and relationships among blacks in America and throughout the world foreshadows the sisters'

reconciliation and Angela's cosmopolitan destination of Paris at the end of the novel. And while Edwards considers Fauset's "articulation of diaspora" (138) underdeveloped, its existence nevertheless speaks to her recognition of a complexity and a connection between individuals and communities of African descent throughout the world that is clearly progressive and integral to the plotting of her novel.

Briefly comparing and connecting Jessie Redmon Fauset's depictions of her protagonist's international mobility as a means towards attaining professional and intimate fulfillment to similar elements of plot and character in the work of Nella Larsen further highlights the unique power of Fauset's internationalism. Beyond the simple fact of history that Fauset published *Plum Bun* within a year of Nella Larsen publishing *Quicksand*, Brent Hayes Edwards identifies the significance of both women's engagement with questions of mobility and the connection between these two black women authors and their respective novels in terms of their "common critique of the ways the black modernist modes of imagining expatriation and migration are always gendered" (141). In *Plum Bun*, Angela only realizes true hope and joy in Paris with the arrival of Anthony Cross. Until their reunion is orchestrated by Virginia and Matthew Henson, Angela had grown weary in the city of light: "Paris, so beautiful in the summer, so gay with its thronging thousands, its hosts bent on pleasure, took on another garb in the sullen greyness of late autumn" (376). Fauset's mostly hopeful conclusion in Europe hinges on her insistence that the agency created by both Angela and Virginia's intimate and professional mobility is real, though it has been realistically curbed and at times even thwarted by constraints of race and gender in America and even abroad. Her internationalism is an important facet of her endorsement of mobility, while Larsen's

transnational moments in her text are ultimately far less empowering for her character and her story.

Angela's movements are far more deliberate attempts at negotiating the "place" of the young African-American artist in terms of both intimacy and her profession than Larsen's depictions of Helga as an objectified and commodified *objet d'art*. Affording her protagonist far more agency in her movements, Fauset's embrace of mobility in *Plum Bun* is more similar to how Totten describes the way Zora Neal Hurston "emphasizes her expertise and control over her work and identity and links her physical and professional mobility to her acquisition of cultural knowledge" (2). Unlike Helga, Angela is neither victimized nor exhausted by her travels; rather, she is intimately and professionally enlightened and invigorated by her mobility.

At the end of *Plum Bun*, we know enough of Angela and Anthony's painful pasts not to be deluded into thinking they will live happily ever after, but we are at least assured by the last word of the novel that they do have "love" and Angela will still have her art (379). "Helga Crane's Copenhagen: Denmark, Colonialism, and Transnational Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*" recognizes how, like Fauset's narrative, Larsen's novel uses geography to cast the specter of slavery and racial violence upon times and places that might otherwise seem removed from such ugly historical facts, but in *Plum Bun*, Fauset's willingness to grant professional and intimate mobility to her female characters ends far more hopefully than Larsen's protagonist's exhaustive exercises of mobility which end with Helga living in degradation and frustration back in the rural

South.⁶² This contrast between Fauset's and Larsen's engagement with transnational mobility is significant. Helga's experiences in Europe are directly connected to the exoticism surrounding her black body. Recognizing the ultimately degrading nature of this "appreciation" of Helga sends her back to America in a move which obviously limits Europe's symbolic value of liberation in her story.

Fauset's invocation of Europe as a more liberating destination for her female protagonists is similarly limited when she narrates Angela's disenchantment with Paris before Anthony's arrival; however, her manipulation of a European destination ultimately marks her narrative of mobility as more hopeful and transnationally empowering than Larsen's, for Angela and Anthony's diasporic connection is grounded in a shared history of rebellion against racial subjection and violence, while Helga's movement is far less referential to a shared history and far less redemptive. Helga's time in Europe objectifies, rather than empowers the young, black woman. Though Larsen has been far less criticized for conservatism than Fauset, it is her protagonist, not Fauset's, who ultimately avoids a sexual relationship with a white man, retreats back to New York, and then the rural south to marry a religious zealot who leaves her perpetually pregnant and personally miserable and unfulfilled by all accounts. And though Larsen is certainly not endorsing such a trajectory for African-American women of the 1920s, her inability to

⁶² In the case of *Plum Bun*, Anthony Cross' father's lynching in Georgia gets several pages of discussion, while the specter of the Middle Passage haunts the story with its references to his father's nautical history.

imagine any other outcome for her protagonist is nothing, if not disappointing in contrast to Fauset's transnational conclusion in *Plum Bun*.

Fiction and the Cultural Work of Mobility

Real-life mobile, black women's bodies like those of Larsen and Fauset's fictional protagonists are the focus of Gary Totten's *African-American Travel Narratives from Abroad: Mobility and Cultural Work in the Age of Jim Crow* (2015). In an examination of Fauset's travel writings in *The Crisis* throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Totten argues how Fauset "invokes her black mobile body" in these essays in an effort to pursue important cultural work (76). I would argue that "the cultural critique [Totten contends] informs Fauset's representation of African American mobility and identity" in her *Crisis* essays also persists in her characters' fictional travels and movements in her novel *Plum Bun*. Totten argues that "The fact we find Fauset's essays published alongside reports of lynchings and articles about racial violence in *The Crisis* underscores the Jim Crow contexts informing her travel writing" (80). Detailing how these articles vociferously describe black Americans' efforts to support and echo the resolutions of the Third Pan-African Congress of 1924 for "the suppression of lynching and mob-law, the end of caste and the recognition of full citizenship despite race and color" (qtd. in Totten 81), Fauset's engagement with these important issues becomes obvious in her essays. Similarly, I suggest Fauset's inclusion of Anthony Cross' brutal history is just as significant in *Plum Bun* as strong evidence of what Totten describes as "the connections that black travel writers during this period were making between increased mobility and efforts to expand civil rights and end racial violence" in Fauset's fiction as well (3). In detailing Cross's family's movements throughout North America, Fauset includes a detailed family history

traumatized by the scars of racial violence. In a deliberate rhetorical move, Anthony and Angela's mutual passing becomes much more significant than a sentimental literary convention. When Anthony first shares details from his past with Angela, he is deliberately vague, but unmistakably traumatized:

She asked him idly, "Haven't you always been happy?"

His face underwent a startling change. Not only did the old sadness and strain come back on it, but a great bitterness such as she had never before seen.

"No," he said slowly as though thinking through long years of his life. "I haven't been happy for years, not since I was a little boy. Never once have I been happy nor even at ease until I met you."

But she did not want him to find his happiness in her. That way would only lead to greater unhappiness for him. So she said to change the subject: "Could you tell me about it?"

But there was nothing to tell, he assured her, his face growing darker, grimmer. "Only my father was killed when I was a little boy, killed by his enemies. I've hated them ever since; I never stopped hating them until I met you." But this was just as dangerous a road as the other plus the possibilities of re-opening old wounds. So she only shivered and said vaguely, "Oh, that was terrible! Too terrible to talk about. I'm sorry, Anthony! And then as a last desperate topic: "Are you ever going back to Brazil?" For she knew that he had come to the United States from Rio de Janeiro ...

The conversation languished. She thought: "It must be terrible to be a man and to have these secret hates and horrors back of one." (140-141)

The contrast Fauset draws between the gravity of Anthony Cross' suffering and Angela's equally desperate efforts to avoid such depth of feeling regarding Anthony or her place in the world at this moment in the text and the reader's awareness of the racial pain that already informs Angela's life journey creates a juxtaposition similar to what Totten notices in the pages of *The Crisis* where stories of lynchings appear amidst far less serious topics, not to trivialize, but rather, to highlight the gravity of the magazine's and Fauset's social concerns and commitment to cultural work.

Anthony and Angela's connection at the end of the novel becomes all the more significant and symbolic of Fauset's own serious engagement with difficult subject matter in what is often misconstrued as a vapid literary mode. Fauset's manipulation of her love plot and Angela and Anthony's movements toward a loving relationship of equals reveals a nuanced cultural and social awareness in *Plum Bun*. Anthony's revelation of the true story behind his family is a familiar one to Fauset and her readers, inhabitants of Jim Crow America. Her inclusion of Anthony's true story and all its tragic details is a deliberate choice that intensifies the meaning and magnitude of her novel as something much more than a novel of manners. In his analysis of Fauset's *Crisis* travel essays, Totten describes how Fauset's "insertion of social questions into the travel essays contrasts with the banal details of travel and issues of respectability and highlights the oscillation between conservatism and cultural critique that informs her representation of African American mobility and identity" as evidence of the ways in which Fauset's nonfiction negotiated the complicated realities of life for African-Americans in Jim Crow, 1920s America (77). I contend that a similar dynamic is at work in Fauset's intentional plotting of *Plum Bun* as much more than a sentimental, domestic drama of

star-crossed lovers miraculously reunited through a series of dramatic coincidences, but rather a complicated argument against racial and gender oppression. Just as Totten notes “the contrasts she creates between the mundane details of travel and her more oblique references to social injustice produce an understated though compelling appeal to principles of equality and allow her to resist injustice directed toward herself and others” in her nonfiction, Fauset also creates stark contrasts between the romantic musings and missteps of Anthony and Angela and the racial violence and injustice that shape and inform both characters’ identities in the novel (80).

When Angela decides to reveal the truth of her own racial identity, she first asks Anthony to tell her his own story:

And sitting there in the ugly, tidy room in the sunshot duskiness of the early summer evening, the half-subdued noises of the street mounting up to them, he told her his story. An old story it was, but in its new setting, coupled with the fact that Angela for years had closed her mind to the penalty which men sometimes pay for being “different,” it sounded like some unbelievable tale from the Inquisition. (286)

After describing how Anthony’s mother, herself “A Brazilian with the blood of many races in her veins” had married a black man and relocated to Georgia, where “the iniquity of his [father’s] marriage to a beautiful and apparently white wife” was most dramatic and irrevocably irksome to the whites, Fauset spares no details in narrating the account of Anthony’s father’s lynching after his mother fends off the rapacious advances of the white magistrate’s son, Tom Haley (287):

“Someone warned my father,” said Anthony Cross wearily, “but he would have been taken anyway, perhaps mobbed and burned in the public square. They let him get into his house; he washed and dressed himself for death. Before nightfall the mob came to teach this man their opinion of a nigger who hadn’t taught his wife her duty toward white men. First they set fire to the house, then called him to the window. He stepped out on a little verandah; Haley opened fire. The body fell over the railing, dead before it could touch the ground ... Souvenir hunters cut off fingers, toes, his ears, - a friend of my grandfather found the body at night and buried it. They said it was unlike anything they had ever seen before, totally dehumanized. (289-290)

Hardly in keeping with her critics’ view of her writing as prissy and superficial, Fauset’s inclusion of Anthony’s father’s lynching corroborates critics such as Wall and Garcia who argue there is more substantive cultural work at play in Fauset’s fiction, especially her novel, *Plum Bun*. If Totten successfully argues, “The fact we find Fauset’s essays published alongside reports of lynchings and articles about racial violence in *The Crisis* underscores the Jim Crow contexts informing her travel writing,” it makes perfect sense that such a graphic and accurate account of lynching within the pages of her supposedly “sentimental” and “sophomoric” novel refute the tired, derisive critics of Fauset’s fiction through the years. Her novel’s engagement with the stark realities of white supremacy and racial violence are hardly subtle in her characterization of Anthony Cross and the atrocities his family endures.

Interestingly, in his study of depictions of racial violence in American literature, *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel*, Jerry Bryant delineates the categories of “Aesthetes” and the “Moralists” among writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Bryant argues the Aesthetes are the more radical forces in the literary world compared to the Moralists, whom he considers more conservative. Given the gravity and authenticity of Fauset’s depiction of Cross’ father’s lynching in *Plum Bun*, Bryant categorizes her as one of “the aesthetes [who] constitute the main school of “New Negroes” whose tendency is to give art priority over social concerns and to use social concerns to energize their art” (144). Bryant contends that Fauset and other Aesthetes like Jean Toomer “express an increased confidence in their African American identity and have freed themselves from the need to produce counterpropaganda and counterstereotypes,” criticisms often levied toward Fauset as an author of the African-American middle class (144). Bryant’s reading corroborates my own contention that Fauset’s comfort within her own gender, race, and class positions her as a far more forward thinking artist for which she is rarely given credit. The literal and figurative travels Fauset crafts for Angela and Anthony toward their mutual success in the public world of art and their private love relationship argue for profound advances in the opportunities for African-American men and women in the 1920s. Her willingness and ability to let her writing accomplish such important cultural work on its own terms via her aesthetic and rhetorical choices in *Plum Bun* that advance ideas of intimate and professional mobility as new means toward advancing civil rights and recognizing and ending racial violence should solidify Fauset’s creative contributions to the Harlem Renaissance.

The Emancipatory Trajectory

The significance of Paris as the final setting for Angela's presumably successful life as an artist and a wife echoes the trajectory of the other authors in this dissertation. Like Atherton, Wharton, and Phillips before her, Fauset imposes an eastward trajectory toward the increasingly cosmopolitan settings of New York City and Europe to suggest the value of such mobility in attaining freedom and autonomy. For Fauset, Angela and Virginia's movements toward the city signify "potential liberation, not from oppressive gender roles per se, but from dominant normative schemes that forge particular links among the categories of gender, race, and class" in terms of both professionalism and intimacy (Rottenberg 64). Angela and Virginia must negotiate their desires for both intimate and professional fulfillment throughout the novel, and Fauset deliberately moves the women to the urban openness and tolerance of Harlem and Paris to create opportunities for the characters to acquire agency and imagine and realize a more hopeful outlook for African-American women negotiating such desires in 1920s America.

Claire Oberon Garcia notes how "For African-American women, the Parisian imaginary was ... both firmly established but freshly tempting for black writers and artists examining their racial and cultural identities with new eyes" in the early decades of the twentieth century (32). Garcia insists "The first role of geographical and psychic dislocation as a necessary component ... [of narrative representations of African-American women on the move such as Angela Murray in *Plum Bun* is] to articulate both an artistic and cultural/political identity" (36). If perhaps Fauset's rosier vision of black women's far-reaching agency via intimate and professional mobility in *Plum Bun* is less grounded in reality than Fauset's personal experiences as a black woman in 1920s New

York, it is nevertheless hopeful and committed to a freeing of women from restrictive social constraints.

After all, she narrates a year of “free love” with Roger Fielding for Angela with no new tragic mulatta of her own as a result. Angela really escapes the relationship essentially unscathed, with no damning consequences for her transgressing protagonist. Jeanne Scheper describes “the many ways that black women’s movements are policed” (679) during this period. Yet, Fauset largely frees her novel’s protagonists from repression to more subversive and potentially empowering, pleasure-seeking exercises in mobility that suggest how women’s cultivation of an “ability to stay in motion, not just physically, but psychically [may effect] “a release from social strictures that fix us in false and limiting identities” an understanding of women’s intimate and professional mobility Fauset endorses throughout the plotting of her novel (Scheper 693). Recalling Fauset’s conflict and frustrations with Alain Locke and other fellow Renaissance thinkers and her relegation as a “misfit” out of step with these peers, her connection to Edith Wharton reemerges as a shared attempt toward an aesthetic ideal. “While *Plum Bun* obviously differs from a novel like *The House of Mirth* in its bifocal look at race in the United States, it, nonetheless, advances its own equivalent of Lawrence Selden’s ‘land of letters’ or of a society based on shared interests. To Fauset, ‘society’ had nothing to do with white values or a black equivalent to the Astor Four Hundred. Society grows from the relationship between moral and intellectual equals” (Goodman 145-146). Fauset’s focus on revolutionizing intimate and professional mobility for Angela (and even Virginia) in *Plum Bun* derives from her insistence on a shared and universal sense of what is “best” for all Americans.

Clearly, as a writer of fiction, Jessie Redmon Fauset had the ability and opportunity to imagine possibilities that she may yet to have experienced in her own life. Interestingly, Mason Stokes theorizes that Fauset's authorial rebuke of the "novel's most rabidly racist character," Roger Fielding, may actually be a not so veiled attack on W.E.B. DuBois' notorious history of mistresses and "free lovers" which Stokes argues includes an extramarital relationship with Fauset which apparently ended with her settling for a marriage in New Jersey, an interesting anecdote whereby Fauset's personal experiences with free love may not only inform her critique of it in her novel, but ironically, in reality, mirror more closely the self-effacing and retaliatory marriage of Helga in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* than the more triumphant marriage of Angela in *Plum Bun*.⁶³ Of course, whether Stokes' speculation is entirely accurate or not does not undermine the compelling reality that Jessie Redmon Fauset certainly invokes an arguably revolutionary transnational mobility in her novel to challenge the proscriptive racial and gendered expectations of the world in which she lived and struggled to be published. Through Angela's movements, Fauset "emphasizes the disordering but exhilarating experiences of mobility" for African-American women seeking to challenge the limits of race and gender (Totten 105). Far from being "out of step" with her Harlem Renaissance peers, like Elizabeth Ammons' describes Edith Wharton and her Modernist contemporaries, Jessie Redmon Fauset's fiction warrants less apologetic criticism and

⁶³ Stokes cites multiple letters between the two to surmise the nature of their relationship in "There is Heterosexuality: Jessie Fauset, W.E.B. DuBois, and the Problem of Desire."

more earnest accolades for her efforts to imagine an alternative cultural aesthetic through which a young, aspiring African-American woman can accomplish intimate and professional fulfillment through the universally liberating power of literal and figurative mobility.

Chapter Six: Conclusion:

Making the Case for a Moment of Mobility

In *American Road Narratives: Reimagining Mobility in Literature and Film* (2015), Ann Brigham complicates notions of mobility in America. Drawing on the theoretical work and new mobilities paradigms of twenty-first century human geographers such as Tim Cresswell, Sallie Marston, John Paul Jones III, and Keith Woodward, Brigham cautions us, “Because of its ubiquity in American culture, we think we know how mobility is foundational to an understanding of American identity. It means freedom, rebellion, or reinvention; there exists the promise of escape,” or so we think (4). Specifically examining road narratives which almost always invoke a westward trajectory that echoes Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier ideology,” Brigham challenges Turner’s theory by insisting the road narratives she examines “dampen, or at least test, Turner’s enthusiasm with their ambivalence” regarding Turner’s sweeping views of the democratizing and homogenizing value of the frontier for American national identity (Brigham 24).⁶⁴ Part of Brigham’s analysis aims to rethink and challenge the mythology of mobility in America as a fixed and always inherently liberating phenomenon.

In a similar vein, this dissertation recovers and revises late nineteenth and early twentieth century narratives of mobility that likewise challenge Turner’s traditional, paternalistic view of the frontier as a metaphor for American adventure and

⁶⁴ See Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893).

accomplishment. By intentionally reversing the trajectory of frontier mythology and mobilizing female protagonists eastward toward cities, rather than away from them, and often across the Atlantic, the novelists of this study subversively demonstrate “the ways mobility both thrives on and tries to manage points of cultural and social conflict” in terms of gender, race, and class at the turn of the twentieth century (Brigham 4). While much of this dissertation admittedly and necessarily relies on the traditional mythology of mobility as means toward agency and freedom, its emphasis on female protagonists’ participation in that liberation and the intentionally eastward trajectory applies Mary Suzanne Schriber’s theory that “transformations of travel into prose carried their [women’s] voices and opinions into ... creators of politics and culture, and women’s writing from accounts of travel into agents of cultural work” (7), to likewise challenge the mythology of mobility as a male-dominated endeavor, at least for a remarkable “moment” in American literary history when a variety of authors - two affluent white women, a privileged, Midwestern, white male, and a middle-class African-American woman all invoked the motif of mobility as a means of challenging myths of women’s vulnerability on the move and in the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Often unrecognized or undervalued have been Atherton’s, Wharton’s, Phillips’, and Fauset’s invocations of the urban landscape and transnational travel as mobilizing and liberating frontiers for women’s challenges to the often stultifying and limiting constraints of gender, race, and class within American culture.

Ultimately, this dissertation exposes the varying degrees to which these varied writers manipulate the narrative strategy of mobilizing the sympathetic daughter to leave home to seek and acquire her own, individual and unique longings for intimate and

professional fulfillment. Gertrude Atherton's *Patience Sparhawk* challenges assumptions about both New and fallen Womanhood and allows her protagonist a dramatic, triumphant conclusion where she is rescued from execution in the electric chair by her future husband after forging her way into the journalistic workforce. Edith Wharton kills off Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, but not Undine Spragg nor Charity Royall in *Summer* in a similar endorsement of mobility as a means toward agency complicated by an increasingly sentimental and idealized view of motherhood that challenges Wharton's conceptualization of mobility as a liberating force in the lives of women. David Graham Phillips writes an exhaustive novel of a young woman seemingly eternally on the move as an indictment of notions of the American "home," "fallen womanhood" and the "white slavery myths" of the Progressive era as impediments to women's liberation through mobility. And Jessie Redmon Fauset writes a novel of "passing" that invokes a profound, transnational mobility that challenges the proscriptive standards of New Womanhood and New Negro Womanhood and tests the limits of race and gender for women's personal and professional lives in the 1920s.

A closer examination of these novels through the lens of mobility aims to identify and recover an important, albeit fleeting, moment in American literary and cultural history. Recognizing how stories of fallen womanhood traditionally overemphasized and criminalized a woman's desire for intimacy, while stories of New Womanhood often scripted characters ultimately devoid of desire and companionship, the novels of Atherton, Wharton, Phillips, and Fauset examine and challenge these categories of womanhood in important, often overlooked engagements with mobility. Too often dismissed or demeaned for their conservatism, these authors warrant more attention

from modern literary scholars if we aim to “re-dedicate ourselves to the archival and interpretive tasks that are central to the construction and revision of literary and cultural canons” in twenty-first century literary scholarship (Burgett 67). In recovering Gertrude Atherton’s *Patience Sparhawk* and David Graham Phillips’ *Susan Lenox*, this dissertation seeks to participate in Annette Kolodny and Elizabeth Ammons’ calls to “immerse themselves in unfamiliar texts and traditions” (qtd. in Ammons 19). Additionally, the chapters devoted to Edith Wharton’s engagement with the intersections of mobility and maternity and Jessie Redmon Fauset’s advocacy of professional and intimate mobility for African-American women aim to challenge and revise hegemonic viewpoints which have historically privileged certain elements of Wharton’s fiction at the expense of recognizing some of her more conservative and complicated views and which have failed to recognize the extent of Fauset’s contributions to the Harlem Renaissance because of a flawed fixation on exaggerated views of her conservatism. Aware that recent works in mobility studies desire to “illuminate the shifting meanings and purposes of mobility ... [and] be skeptical means to question the ways that we privilege mobility as a cultural mythology” (Brigham 3), this dissertation also aims to question our modern tendency to resist acknowledging the importance of writers giving women access to and engagement with that mythology in American literature in order to do the cultural work of literally and figuratively expanding women’s horizons and opportunities at the turn of the twentieth century.

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Amy Simpson Birk

EDUCATION

Master of Arts in English (MA), University of Louisville, August 1996.

Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT), Secondary Education, University of Louisville, May 1996.

Bachelor of Arts in English and Philosophy (BA), University of Notre Dame, May 1994.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Bellarmino University, Louisville, KY. Adjunct professor, 2015-present; 2003; 1999-2000.

Holy Angels Academy, Louisville, KY. English teacher, 2014-2015.

University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY. Department of English, Teaching Assistant, 1998-2001.

Sacred Heart Academy, Louisville, KY. English teacher, 1996-1999.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Ashley/Rountree and Associates, Louisville, KY. Independent Contractor/Grant Writer, 2014-2016.

AWARDS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

Excellent Writing Program Instructor, University of Kentucky Writing Program, 2001.

Daniel R. Reedy Quality Achievement Award, University of Kentucky Graduate School, 1998-2000.

Professional Year Teacher Preparation Scholarship, University of Louisville School of Education Honors and Scholarship Committee, 1995-1996.