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Haley A. Larsen for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 31, 2013

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Abstract Approved:

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This thesis explores the electrified female subject in two novels, Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905). As cultural touchstones, two literary works that prominently feature electricity —Henry James’ story “In the Cage” and Henry Adams’ biography *The Education of Henry Adams* —provide a contemporary framework that structures my underlying interest in electrified social spaces occupied by women. In all of these works, I explore how female desire is characterized in terms of its electric charge. My major finding is that the electric configures promises (charged and magnetic ideals) while also representing the inverse of such freedoms. Because electric current is powerful but also invisible, the writers I examine see it as a potent modern energy that cannot be harnessed. Thus women electric with desire—and haunted by their states of un-fulfillment—are the subjects of my thesis.

In Chapter One, I offer a new reading of Wharton’s Lily Bart. Unable to reconcile her desires with the realities of the modern world, Lily’s downfall and ultimate suicide (described in heavily electric terms) reveal the false promises of electric ideals as those
ideals were addressed to the bodies and minds of modern women. In Chapter Two, I
argue that Dreiser’s Carrie is fueled by electric desires that propel her action in the novel.
However, because she is unable to articulate and achieve her electric dreams in the real
world, I suggest that Carrie’s persistent daydreams and visits to her rocking chair are
indicative of her awareness that what she desires will always remain unseen, invisible,
and as impalpable as electric current itself.
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Bright Lights, Big City: Electrified Female Desire in Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Haley A. Larsen, Author
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Bright Lights, Big City: Electrified Female Desire in Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser

Introduction

The opening sequence of Disney’s film *Fantasia 2000* features Gershwin’s 1924 concert piece “Rhapsody in Blue,” the popular American song that blends elements of classical piano and jazz. The sequence begins with a twilight-purple screen—obviously animated: pure, crisp Technicolor. Lulled by the music, a dark, fluctuating line straightens out to course along the screen. The pulse of the line matches the opening peals of the solo clarinet, guiding the eye suddenly upward, at a ninety-degree angle, to figure the side of the Empire State Building. The rising buildings are stacked and shaded, and as the cityscape takes shape, the clarinet trills through the opening notes—the well-known glissando—and a low bass line of brass comes in as support. The purple backdrop is cleanly lined with the New York City skyline, as if with a masterful Etch-A-Sketch.

As the music deepens, as the brass comes in more strongly as a guiding force, we zoom into the suddenly three-dimensional landscape, into a bedroom in a cramped apartment building. The floor is littered with records and sheet music, and as we crescendo to a forte, to a booming loudness, suddenly, a young black man with drumsticks in his hands jolts out of bed, late for work in the big city. As he rushes into town, the frantic and modern pace of the city—the noisy crowds echoed by the harmonic jitters of the music—becomes more and more obvious.
While the piano thunders, the brass roars, and the music rumbles with the life of the city—what Gershwin called a “metropolitan madness”\(^1\)—the young musician makes his way to the top of a building under construction, using his jack hammer and drumsticks to amplify the beat of city life. The rubato of the song, the way the tempo shifts without steady measure, mirrors the unpredictable measures of city life, the way it never holds still. Nora Ephron’s Kathleen Kelly from the 1998 film *You’ve Got Mail* describes the pace and change as, “a tribute to this city, the way it keeps changing on you, the way you can never count on it.”

And yet so many do count on the city. The Big City is a familiar, beloved American icon. It evokes hope and opportunity, and the promise of change in life lived fully—and Gershwin is its soundtrack. *Manhattan*, for example, Woody Allen’s 1979 film uses “Rhapsody in Blue” in its opening scenes, which feature classic Allen voice-over—the kind of neurotic, New York anxiousness he’s famous for—with black and white still shots of the city. As the song peals into its opening notes, the iconic cityscape looms large on the screen. It is a city Allen can’t stop talking about, cannot stop making movies about—and which his character in the film, Isaac, cannot stop writing about. It’s a place of contrast and inevitable shift, a city of darkness and light, of shadows and shining stages.

Desire for this place—this city—is evoked through these classic images: the immense buildings, street corners busy with pedestrians, taxi cabs on every street, the dense fog made famous by film noir, and the halos of gas lamps floating in the mist. The

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\(^1\) From Robert Cowen’s *Washington Post* article “George Gershwin: He got rhythm”
first—buildings, pedestrians, and taxis—are emblems of space and movement. The second—noir and gas lamps—are effects of light, the means by which those emblems become visible and acquire meaning for those looking. This intersection of people and visibility lies at the heart of my project.

This intersection of humans and their environment, the modern cities and the modern person—and for my purposes, the Modern Woman—is connected by the one specific technology: the enthralling and encompassing power of electricity. This encapsulating system—the electric current—runs through two melodramas from the first five years of the twentieth century: *The House of Mirth* (1905) by Edith Wharton and *Sister Carrie* (1900) by Theodore Dreiser, and serves as their crucial hermeneutic, the key by which both texts can be unlocked and understood in new ways.

This system moreover centers on the bodies of young women, who often try to engage the city’s promises but are intercepted in their pursuits by its chaotic crosscurrents. The following chapters argue that turn-of-the-century novels tend to illuminate women with this new power, electric lighting, and illustrate the effects of this illumination. In other words novels like Wharton’s and Dreiser’s give us women who are in the throes of this “metropolitan madness,” who traverse both the promises and pitfalls of the modern city. Their force in this space mirrors the energy that both *Fantasia 2000*’s music-scape and the opening notes of “Rhapsody in Blue” conjure, and brings to bear the singular intensity of the novel form, the art of literature. Electricity, for me, is the linking element that makes this “trafficking” all the more modern, all the more worth considering as a very particular type of madness. Instead of focus on the madness, however, this
thesis examines how women were expected to live, work, and display themselves at the center of the electrified metropolis.

What the city could both offer and take away from those within it was often represented by electricity, which in Wharton’s and Dreiser’s novels appears as a central motif. In *The House of Mirth* and *Sister Carrie* electricity tends to represent a more specific set of promises and pitfalls: those meant for women. The electric and the female weave together in these texts in complicated ways, and in order to better understand the connection, contemporary texts that explain this gendered energy—the female electric—provide a framework. One foundational text of this kind is *The Education of Henry Adams*, the 1918 autobiography by Adams that ruminates, in the chapter “The Virgin and the Dynamo,” on the ways in which electricity and the American Female were, in his and the cultural imagination at large, intertwined.

When Adams visited the Great Exposition of 1900, he was exposed to electricity for the first time. Entering rooms full of the “forces,” Adams learned about the automobile and locomotives, about engines and dynamos. Of the dynamo, the first model of an electric generator at the turn of the century, Adams states it “became a symbol of infinity…a moral force” (380). For Adams, a goddess symbolizes the dynamo’s power. As a converter of energies, the dynamo—like a superhuman figure—wields invisible strength. This metaphysical machine transfers the *force* of the world into the *power* of what is unseen, what is impossible to feel or sense. The visible forces that feed into the machine eventually become electric, and leave the machine with invisible power. In this new world, Adams’ formulas and calculations no longer add up, and his tools for
understanding seem inadequate. He sums up by saying of this new world at the Exposition that,

> In these seven years man had translated himself into a new universe which had no common scale of measurement with the old. He had entered a supersensual world, in which he could measure nothing except by chance collisions of movements imperceptible to his senses, perhaps even imperceptible to his instruments, but perceptible to each other, and so to some known ray at the end of the scale (381-2)

Here, the universe changes in some profound, invisible fashion—and Adams feels the failure both of his senses and his instruments. This system operates invisibly and self-contained. The conflation of the visible and invisible transforms the universe into what Adams calls “physics stark mad in metaphysics” (382). Ultimately, Adams finds himself “lying in the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900, his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new” (382).

The electric, in this historical moment, is unsettling. In order to best understand his feeling of “brokenness” when confronted with the reality of electricity, the difference between “force” and “power” must be understood. For Adams, “force” applies to those mechanisms that are recognizable and even measureable in the physical world: trains are a good example. Trains are forceful; they move with and embody physical force. Force is visible energy in motion.

Adams’ understanding of “power” provides the crucial opposite to “force.” Power applies to the metaphysical—what Adams conceives to be the dynamo’s abilities. Power is invisible. The dynamo takes mechanical, physical force and converts it into electrical power, which is invisible and seemingly magical. For Adams, electricity is power. And in this category, Adams makes the next move that helps to frame the main idea behind my
thesis. That is, Adams genders electricity as the Virgin—as the sum total of cultural forces that centralize around her figure.

To more clearly put this, Adams engenders electricity by correlating “her” to the Virgin, or, as he often words it, the American Female. The American Female, like a dynamo, converts worldly force into an invisible, mystifying power. She reigns, as he puts it, “goddess because of her force; she was the animated dynamo; she was reproduction—the greatest and most mysterious of all energies” (384). Thus the American Female—like electric power—works like the dynamo, because she is the converter of energies. See in this quote how the goddess—the metaphysical creature—is force because of her physical reality, her actual presence. Not invisible, women are the physical manifestation of an invisible world, reminiscent of the atmosphere at the Exposition’s changed universe. Women are, in other words, possessors of the dynamo’s mystery and strength. But here, this idea becomes complicated, because, as Adams puts it, “The idea survived only as art” (385).

In other words, Adams finds that women access this power in art. And furthermore, they only find this power in a specific artist’s work, like Walt Whitman’s, whom Adams names as one of few “American artists who had ever insisted on the power of sex, as every classic had always done” (385). Here, Adams reverts back to using “power” as a way of describing the extreme effects of sex on society. Viewing the sexual power of women—the Virgin, the idea that “she was reproduction,” that she embodies “all energies”—through a socio-cultural lens, the woman works as a metaphor for electricity, and vice versa. The power of electricity is gendered as female, and the
American Female engenders electric power. Women in art, then, enact this power. In the art form of the novel, and especially in the two novels my thesis concerns, the gendered electric is at play.

This engendered power, this modern notion of the Woman as not only forceful but also powerful represents a larger socio-cultural movement that understood the power of electricity as a dominating presence with the ability to alter the relationship between human beings and the physical world in invisible ways. Tim Armstrong’s 1991 essay “The Electrification of the Body at the Turn of the Century” deals with this critical terrain by examining what the title alludes to: the interaction of the body and electricity in the early twentieth century. While not specifically geared toward engendering electric power as female, Armstrong helps configure the larger framework of electricity as a power that controls, motivates, and threatens human beings in the socio-cultural realm.

Armstrong summarizes the cultural fascination with electricity at the turn-of-the-century as a “curious duality” of knowing electricity as, like Adams, force and power. Armstrong states that electricity,

was seen as duplicating the motive forces of the nervous system and perhaps even the ‘spark’ of life itself, but at the same time was by the end of the century becoming part of a network of power which transcended the scale of the human body and was already beginning to kill people (304 emphasis added)

Here, Armstrong explains electricity as both an animating force, one that acts like the human nervous system, yet also an alien strength: a transcendent power that is threatening and possibly fatal. The force of electricity resides in the body—in the “nervous system”—and is in this way, like Adams’ notion of force, physical and visible.
As a power, it “transcended the scale of the human body” and runs parallel to the physical world as an unseen energy. An invisible energy, Armstrong next discusses how electricity also symbolized desire at the turn of the century.

Armstrong argues that “the electrification of desire” (320) brings up a dangerous question that accompanies the charged realities of the turn of the century. Armstrong asks if all desire is electric, what is to prevent it becoming a free-floating energy, short-circuiting all the normal barrier of class and morality in order to follow its desired pathway? The answer, implicitly, is that such energies are not in fact ‘private’, that their control is a function of the modern state (321).

This question encapsulates a very modern problem: in an electrified world, where power runs invisibly around society, who has control? As Armstrong argues, the “modern state” maintains control. One of Armstrong’s best illustrations of this is the first use of the electric chair, in 1890. William Kemmler’s death—the first electrocution—characterizes, for Armstrong, one instance of the modern state wielding the powers of electricity over the state.

To bring these ideas together, I turn to Henry James’ story “In the Cage” wherein modern female desires along with issues of control and visibility come into play and offer a framework for understanding the importance of the female at the center of these electrified tensions. The tale, centered on a female telegraph worker, traffics in the main character’s fantasies about the real people who send messages from her station. She wonders about the relationship between two regular customers—Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen—and eventually, her desires drive her to take action toward getting to know Everard, with whom she falls in love. The love she feels, however, exists only in
her fantasies. After weeks of sending messages for Everard and Lady Bradeen, the central character—in her physical cage at work—starts to project fantasies onto the relationships she imagines between Everard, Lady Bradeen, and eventually herself. James’ story, about this female telegraph worker whose desires and fantasies escape the confinement of her work-cell, uses the invisible power of female imagination and desires to illustrate the energy of the electric—the telegraphs that she sends and interprets.

The telegraph, a system that uses the force of a wire to conduct the power of electricity in order to send messages, works as a metaphor for the movement of the central female character’s desires and fantasies that themselves run in and out of her cage. Her imagination mirrors the power of the electric telegraph. She imagines meaning that courses through the air invisibly as fantasy, but arises from the physical, the people she interprets and the wires that run between them. Thus, “In the Cage” suggests that “force” as physical and “power” as metaphysical are interwoven, and their connection circulates around human subjects—and more specifically, around the caged woman.

Power, in James’ framework, is characterized by the telegraph worker’s desires as well as the electrified messages she sends. Force is the embodied cage, the visible and physical setting in which she desires and wires messages. Moreover, the electricity that really runs through the telegraph wires also runs through gendered, cultural space—the unseen social constructions that place the woman in the cage. The text puts it this way, “The barrier that divided the little post-and-telegraph office from the grocery was a frail structure of wood and wire; but the social, the professional separation was a gulf” (229). This visible and invisible structures frame the girl. The central female figure sits, day
after day, “in framed and wired confinement” and yet, as the story illustrates, is also experiencing a “certain expansion of her consciousness” (232). She exists in the center—in the meeting place—of the physical (force, the visible cage) and the metaphysical (power, the invisible, her fantasies like the electricity that appears to “magically” transmit meaning).

The physical cage courses with the electricity that sparks modern communication (the telegraph wire that magically transforms current into language). The cage is metaphysically electric in the sense that the “social separation” that the caged woman’s place creates is invisible, an unseen power, but affects the visible, physical world. These pairings of the main figure’s physical containment and psychological expansion, as it were, continually render this relationship as charged like a telegraph wire. Important to this set-up is the gender of the central figure: as a female, her desires and fantasies are understood as electric in their invisible power. Overall, James’ story illustrates the tension that Adams explores by placing a female dreamer in an electric cage. James and Adams both understand electricity as a gendered, invisible power that is most closely related to the imaginations of modern, urban women.

Often stuck at the sounder, at the place where messages arrive, the main figure understands her environment as “the innermost cell of captivity, a cage within a cage,” (234). But as the text ultimately illustrates, though it is through the fog and smoke of James’ famed prose, the central figure explores what is invisible: the connections between her clients, the messages they send, and all the meanings she can identify. “In
the Cage” is as much about the physical structure of her telegraph station as it is about the power of her dreams and desires that go beyond physical boundaries.

Aware of the difference between her physical and visible realities and the invisible tug of her desires, the unnamed protagonist relies more on her imagination. The text becomes more obscure as she leans more and more into “the world of whiffs and glimpses, and found her divinations work faster and stretch further” (239). When she finally encounters the physical object of her fantasies—the literal man, Captain Everard, whom she desires—it is by seeing “What she wanted [look] straight at her” in an empty hall, under “the electric light” illuminating “the gilded and lettered board” (257). Here, electric light is the literal illuminator, as well as the metaphor the text needs to imply that the world outside her little cage is just as charged as the world within it—that the promises of her dreams within the cage have the possibility to be met here, outside of it, illuminated brightly, that Captain Everard might return the love in her fantasies.

And yet, the “real” world—the world under actual electric light—disappoints her. She projects her desires as fictions when the world, and more importantly Captain Everard, doesn’t meet her wishes, and she is “therefore reduced to merely picturing that miraculous meeting toward which a hundred impossibilities would have to conspire” (257 emphasis added). In other words, she can only fantasize about the rare occasion of meeting Everard. The story insists that she must keep “picturing” and creating “the vision” that so powerfully drives her—that the real world correlate for her desires, like electricity, is invisible and incommunicable. In creating such a vision, she makes “visible” her desires—but only in her imagination, where the vision remains invisible to
others. Female desire, therefore, is that gendered electric, is a promise (always, necessarily) unfulfilled.

So while electricity at the turn of the century constitutes a feeling of empowerment, it also tends to establish this feeling only in worlds that are outside of everyday realities. The power of electricity, then, alludes to power that does not exist in the real world—and therefore constitutes a pitfall of this modern energy. “In the Cage,” shows how female desires work like electricity in that they traverse invisible terrain, but have effects on the visible world. These effects, however, rarely establish concrete meaning, and this un-fulfillment constitutes the pitfall the power’s promise implies. In the end, the girl in the cage cannot realize her desires.

At all turns, the promise of life beyond the cage allures and imperils the telegraph worker, who mediates messages as well as her own desires. With the invisible power of electricity that cannot be contained or re-routed, the tale is ultimately one of modern frustration. In the end, the electrified cage, both safe and limiting, binds and enacts modern female desire.

For me, this concept of this electrified cage and the way it frames female subjects is the central interest and concern. While “In the Cage” is not a tragic text, by any means, it illustrates the nature of electricity as a series of real and metaphysical boundaries. Boundaries create cages, and create promises, and within limitation inspire the caged to dream. Electricity characterizes these boundaries in the modern city. Traversing the charged boundary between the real and the dreamt, the possessed and the desired, the seen and the unseen, female desires course like electric current.
As explored in this introduction, electricity provides a model for understanding modern female desires. In many instances during the modern era in literature, charged boundaries have tragic consequences. In other words, the promises these electrified boundaries seem to make usually lead, for women in the modern period, in the big city, to a confined set of consequences. These consequences are usually negative, and suggest an inadequacy of the visible world to make real the invisible desires of women. The promises and pitfalls of the city, then, both inspire and condemn modern women. Electricity charges this terrain.

My first chapter deals with the common, tragic narrative of the pitfalls women experience in the modernizing big city. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart lives in a city in remarkable shift. In a New York City increasingly electrified and modernized, Lily feels herself trapped between the old and the new, between the demands of traditional society (typified by her Aunt Julia) and the possibility of modern society (typified, though villanized by the nouveau riche, and the presence of the middle class). Lily, trapped in this transition, finds her desires incommunicable. The accompanying discontent from feeling trapped leads to tragic consequences when women realize this and react.

In Lily’s case, the consequence is death, as she can come up with no sustainable alternative to being married. Living and dying in the increasingly electrified city, she experiences multiple rungs of the social ladder, falling through each one as she fails to assert the freedom for which she seems to strive. Lily reveals the iconic state of upper-class femininity as one of cultural imagination. Lily recognizes the cage of her social set and unable to explore other lives, she overdoses on chloral. Electricity illuminates her
misery and her death, and the increase of electric presences—whether the literal light that illuminates her or a metaphor about her mental states—reiterates the gendered electricity this thesis examines. Fulfilling the circuit of electric power, Lily’s trajectory ends in modern darkness that proves her desires incommunicable. Lily’s electric arc throughout Book II sheds literal light on her final tragic moments.

Chapter Two explores the inaccessible imagination of Dreiser’s Carrie. *Sister Carrie* is often described as a text that, like *The House of Mirth*, concerns a time “between” cultural moments. Indeed, Armstrong discusses this and describes the novel as “a means of mediating between the old system, based on flame, and the new electrical technology” (309). Carrie, throughout the novel, traffics in the difficulty of communicating desires in this space. While Armstrong focuses on the electrification of accompanying character arcs—like George Hurstwood’s and Bob Ames’—I am more interested in Carrie’s dreaminess as a catalyst that bring electrical currents to life throughout the text. As a contrast to Lily, Carrie’s traversing through her electric dreams does not meet tragic ends. She is, in fact, rather successful by the world’s standard. But Carrie dreams of some elusive “more,” and pursues it within the cities of Chicago and New York. Her desire, like Lily’s, to live a life beyond the cage of her society illustrates the limits of the seemingly unlimited modern city.

Ultimately, my thesis explores the way Lily and Carrie confront harsh realities in the turn-of-the-century city. Despite the place—New York City—representing an endless sea of possibilities and dreams, Lily and Carrie run up to its limits, and reveal the city to be rather closed for women in many ways. In pursuing the promises of the city, then,
these women illustrate the way the city seems to be a large cage, one that is charged by that gendered power, electricity. And yet what Lily and Carrie have in common beyond their love of the big city is the way they dream about it, endlessly longing for something beyond what they’re given.

In their dreams for a different world, Lily and Carrie evoke what can be understood as an open system, one where women can dream of spaces that are not cages, nor narrative tragedies. The following two chapters explore provocative and fleeting spaces where electricity circulates as the power that illuminates and charges modern female desire, and figures the promises and pitfalls of the city for women at the turn of the century.
Chapter I
*The House of Mirth* Electrified: A New Reading of Wharton’s Lily Bart

The following chapter explores what is, until now, an unexplored critical arena in the scholarship of Edith Wharton’s 1905 *The House of Mirth*. The novel centers on Lily Bart, a stunning twenty-nine-year-old social elite who, because she will not marry, is in financial peril. While she courts men all around the social set, Lily appears determined to survive on her own or not at all. Unsatisfied with the available suitors—and bored with her social set at large—Lily depends on non-traditional relationships for emotional comfort and financial stability. When these relationships crumble, Lily falls unsupported into social ruin and the novel ends with Lily destitute, renting a shabby apartment, and finally, overdosing on sleeping medication.

Lily’s action in the novel is mostly in negation: her behavior is often related in contrast to the behaviors of other social female creatures, as what she does *not* do, the men she will *not* marry. Her dreams are, on the whole, unarticulated and ephemeral, and are, as a result, hard to articulate. Lily’s dreams remain mostly unwritten, only traceable by the anxieties they create in her, and by the belief they promote within her that what she desires is not of the world she inhabits. The following chapter examines Lily Bart’s illumination by electric light, and the way her nerves are jolted by the modern light she cannot adapt to. Armstrong’s statement about *Sister Carrie*, that the novel works as “a means of mediating between the old system, based on flame, and the new electrical technology” (309) is also a fitting description of *Mirth*, which concerns the problems that occur when an urban, female body transforms under electricity.
Scholarship on *Mirth*, Wharton’s first novel, covers a wide terrain of concerns that include questions of aestheticism, interior design, and female subjectivity. Written in 1905, *The House of Mirth* takes place during a period of American culture characterized by a new rapidity: a startling influx of new technologies, modes of communication, and increasing speed and visibility of individuals. All these modern traits remarkably influence the environment in which Lily Bart lives and dies. Despite decades of critical work, however, the overwhelming sense of modern shift in the novel is usually overshadowed by attention to Lily as an art object, or to her role as a tragic heroine swallowed by the effects of conspicuous consumption.

On a backdrop increasingly lit by electric lamps, infused with ringing bells and telephones, and traversed by speeding trains and whizzing motorcars, *The House of Mirth* is rarely read with an eye to its saturated world of technological change. In this chapter, I explore precisely this arena in this novel, and more specifically examine the effects of electric lighting on Lily in the novel. Such a study, this thesis argues, lends Lily’s character a new element of nuance that challenges past readings of her passivity.

Because most scholarly work that interrogates the character of Lily reads her as a failed woman, uncompromisingly and fatally wounded by her refusal to marry and aestheticized to the point of conspicuous consumption, Lily is often portrayed as a tragic character without question. Much of the scholarly work from over thirty-five years of *Mirth* studies examines Lily as a figure of art, or describes the Old New York society as fraying and expanding. Many scholars note the threats of a new social order—the nouveau riche infiltrating through marriage and clever investments—clearly articulating
the fall of tradition in the novel, but failing to account for technology as what may be the seeming replacement of it.

However, there is a new thread of Wharton studies that has begun to examine her body of work as more preoccupied with modern technologies than previously observed. Gary Totten’s 2009 collection *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors* is one of the first anthologies in all Wharton studies to include a section entirely devoted to “Technology,” contributing two new essays, by Totten and Carol Baker Sapora, which explore themes of technology in Wharton’s *The Fruit of the Tree* and *The Custom of the Country*. *The House of Mirth* is unmentioned in this category. Totten examines the way Wharton traverses the complex terrain of machine-age culture, exploring how the cultural and technological transition occurring in modes of production…create social positions for American women that are both exciting and threatening, and that ultimately depend upon class distinctions (239)

And yet he neither mentions, nor addresses, these tensions for Lily Bart, Wharton’s best-known woman character.

Sapora uses Wharton’s 1913 novel *The Custom of the Country* to illuminate the character of Undine Spragg as a female character effected by modern light and reflection. Giving evidence for the argument that Undine is “not…a real woman,” Sapora illustrates Wharton’s own precarious relationship to new light technologies, and especially electric lighting (284). It is the character of Undine who, rather than show us what society is, shows us what it *lacks* and “thus distinguish the cultural values Wharton deems must be preserved despite the glaring lights and dazzling reflections of modern technologies”
(285). While modern lighting and women are tied here, the connection has yet to be related to *The House of Mirth*.

Another essay that relates issues of women and technology is Deborah Zac’s “Building the Female Body: Modern Technology and Techniques at Work in *Twilight Sleep*.” By looking at the technological advances—specifically in medicine and body technologies—Zak argues that Wharton “saw the potential for certain modern methods to help foster the inner life of women” (130). And rather than adopt a fully utopian or dystopian view of the effects of technology, Wharton’s specific treatment of bodily technologies in *Twilight Sleep* suggests that women should “consider carefully how [new technologies] can be used without threatening positive self-development and agency” (131). In other words, Zac observes that Wharton advocates for critical thinking and reflective inquiry *by* women *about* the technologies that necessarily come into, and play a role, in their social lives.

Despite all of these insightful and powerful claims about Wharton’s literature—and specifically its female characters and interests in electric lighting technology—*The House of Mirth* remains curiously unnoticed. Mark Seltzer mentions in his 1992 book, *Bodies and Machines*, that the novel “involv[es] problems of personation and embodiment” and also takes up “these problems by way of a counterposing of embodied character and the automatisms that threaten to erode or to undo character and agency” (103), but only briefly applies these ideas to the text.

Despite the apparent critical absence of work in this train of thought on *Mirth*, Aaron Worth’s “Edith Wharton’s Poetics of Telecommunication” does consider the novel
and technology more closely. In his article, Worth examines three canonical Wharton novels, *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence*, and explores Wharton’s “conception of how cultures are threatened by, and assimilate, new forces and rival social organisms” through a complex analysis of “her treatment of the emergence and evolution of communications technologies” (97).

Worth specifically looks at *Mirth* as a text concerned with the re-centering of social forces in flux as new technology looms on the horizon. Ultimately, Worth illustrates how “Wharton’s fiction might indeed be said to mirror the archetypal trajectory of cultural responses to new media themselves” (117-8). Figuring his work with language from conversations about the history of communication technologies, Worth’s illustration of *The House of Mirth* is especially enlightening in its discussion of Lily as a kind of threatened center, and her death as “the failure of her nervous system” which Worth attributes to “the oppressive new autonomy of her nerves” (101).

Combining the nervous system and technological networks as similar threads of investigation, Worth makes an excellent case for the fears and anxieties that plague Lily throughout the text. As Worth puts it, “Wharton’s early novel is dominated by a central metaphor of organism—both individual and social—as network, a centrally-organized system of information flows” (98). This helpful analogy fuses many of the tensions that run throughout the text like an electric current, and provides an entryway for further study.

Wharton herself seems to note the preoccupation with technology and modernity in her life and writing at the very beginning of her 1933 autobiography *A Backward*
Glance. Wharton frames her life by the technology that developed during it when she writes,

That I was born into a world in which telephones, motors, electric light, central heating (except by hot-air furnaces), X-rays, cinemas, radium, aeroplanes and wireless telegraphy were not only unknown but still mostly unforeseen, may seem the most striking difference between then and now (7).

Here, at the beginning of what seems to be a rather guarded approach to a lifetime’s reflection, Wharton chooses to articulate the arc of her life within the realm of technologies and their leaping advances between 1860, when she was born, and the early 1930’s, when she writes this autobiography. Known as a particularly adaptable and modern woman—as well as an inhabitant of the elite Old New York—Wharton’s life spanned a period of rapid development in technologies that undoubtedly altered the way individuals, and societies, wrote, travelled, and worked.

Those who study Wharton’s life often draw from this quotation, and make their own claims similar to it by examining her personal interactions with technology. Wharton is described by Shari Benstock: “A thoroughly modern woman…enamored of motor cars, telephones, the telegraph, radio, gramophone and record player, high-speed transatlantic steamers, and paved roads” (33). While Benstock frames Wharton as “enamored,” other critics have noted more nuanced attitudes in Wharton’s life and work, especially concerning the high speeds of modern travel.

Nancy Bentley mentions a tempered ambivalence in “Wharton, Travel, and Modernity,” when she states, “For Wharton, the freedoms symbolized by travel are simultaneously the threats, personal as well as social, that she saw at the heart of
modernity” (160). Here, Wharton’s own attitude reflects Tim Armstrong’s understanding of electricity at the turn of the century as a polarity—defined by its range of being both promising and threatening, life-giving and fatal. Differences in opinion, like Benstock’s and Bentley’s, aside, critics certainly agree that Wharton was a “modern woman” concerned with the changes taking place at the turn of the century. And many critics also note that Wharton was highly adaptable—willing to engage in the modern moment by focusing and reflecting on it in her novels, essays, and travel writing.

As previously described, my own interests lie with better understanding Wharton’s 1905 novel *The House of Mirth* by applying the kind of knowledge gained from Benstock and Bentley about Wharton’s feelings toward technology. By coupling these ideas with the observations made by critics like Totten, Sapora, Zac, and Worth that read technological motifs as central to her novels, I hope to contribute to this ongoing conversation by paying attention to the tensions described in my introduction, all of which revolve around the problems and promises made by electric lighting at the turn of the century.

*The House of Mirth*, while certainly about Lily Bart, is also about the modernizing city as it adopted electric lighting. As electric light became more prevalent on the streets, city-dwellers reacted with excitement and trepidation—much like Wharton herself. Out in the larger sphere of the urban center, the electrified city was often viewed as unreliable:

compared with the flickering gaslights that were now extinguished, these new lights were resplendent. But as New Yorkers soon discovered, arc lighting, picturesque though it might be, was unreliable, now and again failing altogether and leaving Broadway in total darkness (Simon 81)
How much to rely upon this new light remained a constant question throughout the turn of the century, and the problems were not exclusive to the city—but to homes, as well.

In the domestic sphere, electric light was more often viewed as dangerous. A typically female space, the home was one of the last social spaces to become electrically lit, often for reasons concerning the appearance of the women as much as the house. In her first publication, *The Decoration of Houses*, co-authored with Ogden Codman Jr., Wharton and Codman state of the drawing room, a public-receiving space of the home, “the proper light is that of wax candles. Nothing has done more the vulgarize interior decoration than the general use of gas and of electricity in the living-rooms of modern houses” (128). The reliance upon candlelight as the standard, proper lighting form is clear here, and electricity is viewed as a “vulgarity,” a modern faux pas in modern homes. To clarify the effect of this vulgarity, they state, “Electric light especially, with its harsh white glare, which no expedients have as yet overcome, has taken from our drawing-rooms all air of privacy and distinction” (128). Here, the problems or pitfalls of electric lighting are clear: the “harsh glare” of the light challenges the “privacy and distinction” of a proper home. Electric lighting does, however, have its place in Wharton and Codman’s decorative schema:

In passageways and office, electricity is of great service; but were it not that all “modern improvements” are thought equally applicable to every condition of life, if would be difficult to account for the adoption of a mode of lighting which makes the *salon* look like a railway-station, the dining-room like a restaurant. That such light is not needful in a drawing-room is shown by the fact that electric bulbs are usually covered by shades of some deep color, in order that the glare may be made as inoffensive as possible (129)
The main issue with electric light, then, is the way it takes private spaces of the home, the salon and the dining-room, and makes them appear grotesquely public: as the railway-station or the restaurant. That electric light needs to always be muted—“covered by shades of some deep color”—reveals an underlying, decorative desire to keep the home free of glares and “offensive” light, to maintain the shadows of candlelight and, implicated from this, the right to privacy in the home.

These ideas about electric lighting—and specifically how it affects domestic atmospheres and social beings—carry over into The House of Mirth, which concerns, page after page, illuminated female subjectivity. Lily Bart, the heroine of the novel, is constantly cast in terms of light. When Lawrence Selden first glimpses her at Grand Central Station in the very first scene of the novel, she embodies social promise: she had never looked “more radiant. Her vivid head, relieved against the dull tints of the crowd, made her more conspicuous” (4). Lily stands apart from the crowd, a “radiant,” “conspicuous” figure who is still and silhouetted against the bustling throng of the station. Lily stands out—and it is often because of illumination or brightness that she does so.

In the tableaux vivants scene—the critics’ favorite and a well-known moment from the novel in general—Lily is also lit up. At a fashionable party, Lily and other women of her set pose in “living pictures”—or recreations of famous paintings. On display in this way, the women portray cultural ideals of beauty by adapting to a literal aesthetic. Framed in these recreations, the women are meant to become the subjects of the paintings—to contribute to an overall illusion. The tableaux “depend for their effect not
only on the happy disposal of lights and the delusive interposition of layers of gauze, but on a corresponding adjustment of the mental vision” (133). Thus, light and sight must interact in order to create the “magic glimpses” that the tableaux provide.

Lily, unsurprisingly, stands out in her presentation of Joshua Reynolds’ “Mrs. Lloyd.” She creates a “thrill of contrast” to the other tableaux when the curtain unfolds and, instead of appearing as “Mrs. Lloyd,” the “picture…was simply and undisguisedly the portrait of Miss Bart” (134). Rather than become the painting, the painting becomes a portrait—and this occurs through “the beams of her living grace” (134). Lily’s overall presence in her tableau, “beaming” in her “draperies” that lift her form and create the illusion of a “relief,” all illustrate the way that Lily stands out from her surroundings—and once again does so through illuminated distinction.

However, this illumination is not always received well by Lily, and the novel follows a pattern of Lily moving through different kinds of light, consistent in her movement between social promises and accompanying pitfalls. To reiterate the connection between women and electric light, Linda Simon’s *Dark Light: Electricity and Anxiety from the Telegraph to the X-Ray* reveals that, as electric lighting adapted to modern homes, “women worried that electric light would produce freckles; in any case, they found that they looked more attractive in the mellow glow of gaslight” (92). This exact tension is mirrored in the novel early on.

In her bedroom, after a long night of playing bridge and losing money at the outset of the novel, she sits before a mirror and is “frightened by two little lines near her mouth, faint flaws in the smooth curve of the cheek” (28). At twenty nine years old and
still unmarried, Lily is on the very precipice of social survival: she must marry in order to finance her lifestyle that far outweighs her only surviving relative’s, her Aunt Julia’s, monthly allowance. In many ways, the novel’s focus is precisely the anxiety Lily feels about the rigidity of social promises, the way she must prescribe to specific terms in order to find stability and success. Lily’s inability to remedy her circumstances is the main pulse of the novel. As she falls socially, the spaces she enters are filled with modern anxiety and electric light.

In this scene, at her mirror, Lily exclaims, “Oh, I must stop worrying! Unless it’s the electric light—” (28). Lily “reflected, springing up from her seat and lighting the candles on the dressing-table. She turned out the wall-lights” (28). This scene, early on, in which we see Lily alone and reflecting on her own image and circumstances, anxiety and electricity are tied together: her nerves and the lights that illuminate them are inextricably bound. As she peers back into her mirror after turning out the electric light and lighting her candles, “the white oval of her face swam out waveringly from a background of shadows, the uncertain light blurring it like a haze; but the two lines about the mouth remained” (28).

Throughout the novel, and like Simon describes of the historical moment, Lily tends to prefer the blurry, shadowy lights of candlelight to the stark brightness of electricity. Like Wharton and Codman Jr. prefer an element of privacy in modern homes, Lily similarly believes that candles are more suitable and display her more attractively. This preference seems to mirror her social behavior, which is obscure to others who cannot understand why Lily will not marry and establish herself financially through
social custom—why she will not follow social promises. But the tragedy of Lily Bart is precisely this obscurity. In a modern age increasingly lit by gas and arc lamps, wall-lights, and electric bulbs, Lily prefers the privacy of shadows. Lily’s preference for the old form of candlelight makes sense of a commonly examined Wharton motif: social Darwinism. Unable to adapt to the harsh glare of modernity, or perhaps unwilling to do so, Lily Bart’s light is eventually blown out. The presence of light in the novel causes her to make very deliberate choices about how she’ll be viewed, and control over the display of herself typically diminishes her anxieties—as when she puts out the wall-lights, or in her tableau, due to her “artistic intelligence,” decides to portray a “type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself” (134).

However, in the aforementioned scene, when Lily has replaced the glare of electric wall-lights with the “background of shadows” and the “uncertain light” of candles, her anxiety pervasively remains. And this pervasive anxiety fuels the action of the novel, leading Lily to deal with a number of suitors and finagle her financial situation with dramatic denial and desperation. Eventually, she ends up borrowing money from a friend’s husband, not expecting to be required to pay it back with sex. In another scene filled with modern anxiety, Lily’s desperate social situation is made starkly clear by glaring lights that illuminate her position when she meets with Gus Trenor.

After being accused of leading him on—of borrowing ten thousand dollars for the stock market, and mistaking it for her own money, Lily continues to accept cash from Trenor incognizant of its real origin—Lily becomes upset and asks Trenor to call her a cab home. “Hang it,” Trenor tells her, visibly upset, “the man who pays for the dinner is
generally allowed to have a seat at table” (145). Knowing her precarious position, but also realizing “this was the way men talked of her,” Lily feels “a throb” in her throat (145). Filled with a nervous anxiety that is measured by her steeliness, Lily is humiliated and angry. In the drawing room where this all takes place, “a general aspect of lamp-lit familiarity” and a large fire at first invite and comfort Lily, but then become threatening—the light itself spotlighting her failure to understand the money she’s received, and furthermore, illuminating the realization of how “men talk of her.”

As Trenor’s anger grows, he becomes aggressive and advances toward her, as if to take precisely what he wants from her. Lily is terrified: “Her heart was beating all over her body—in her throat, her limbs, her helpless useless hands” and she realizes, “she must fight her way out alone” (147). Threatened by Trenor and the surrounding gossip, Lily understands that she has to escape on her own, as un-illuminated as possible. As he utters his last threat, “I’m the only one left out in the cold!” the fire dims, “the flames had died out,” and he is defeated by her unwillingness to engage him (147). When Lily finally escapes—urging a servant to call for a cab—a voice inside her head “nerved her” and guides her to make innocent small talk with Trenor to appear normal for any possible onlookers (147). The throbbing returns as she leaves the house, “a mad throb of liberation,” and this nervous energy once again characterizes her position and the precariousness of it. Not electric, the light in this room is that of a glowing fire that dies out—an allusion, perhaps, to Lily’s own downward trajectory that increasingly hints at her own light-filled energy dying out.
As she leans her head against “the rattling side of the cab,” she utters to herself, “I can’t think—I can’t think,” as a “shuddering darkness closed on her” (148). Her mental exhaustion—symbolized by the “shuddering darkness”—marries the two themes together again: anxiety as the “shudders” she feels, and this time, a lack of light. To tired to even think, Lily succumbs to the dark in her anxiety. When she arrives at a friend’s house to recover, Gerty Farish, her friend, confronts “the shining vision of Lily Bart” (163). A glare of life, despite the recent attack, Lily maintains those same “beams of living grace” (134) from the tableau and “flashe[s] too sudden a light” into Gerty’s apartment (163). Lily herself is not dimmed, but she does ask for the fire’s warmth, and feels herself anxious for company: “breathing brokenly” like a “child whom silence has kept wakeful” (163-4). Lily feels the “blaze of her own misery,” and the “awful” strain of “sleepless”-ness (164). Gerty notes that Lily’s “nerve-centres were smitten” (165) and tries to help. Lily’s blazing sadness and anxious wakefulness color the scene and add to the overall motif I am observing.

These scenes are figured by two dominant themes in my reading: light and nerves. Once again, the two are woven together and conflate in a forceful effect that plays upon Lily’s body, and makes her stand out. She is both lit up and filled with an anxiety that, while physical, couples with a mental exhaustion, a feeling of being “burnt out.” While not always electric, understanding light as a force that illuminates female subjects—and illuminates their social condition—is an important underlying connection that informs my understanding of the electric in the novel when it crucially appears.
Electric light becomes more and more prevalent as the text comes to a close, perhaps as Lily’s tragedy becomes less avoidable, as more social promises are unmet, as more social pitfalls require illumination. Falling further and further into social obscurity, Lily leaves for a European tour with her friends, George and Bertha Dorset, only to be framed by Bertha as having an affair with George, to conceal Bertha’s own infidelity. Though innocent, Bertha publicly excuses Lily from the yacht, and on Selden’s arm, Lily sits down on a bench in deserted gardens.

This moment recalls an earlier scene in the novel when, after the tableaux vivants, Lily retreats with Selden to a garden. In that scene, under “the transparent dimness of a midsummer night,” in the “hanging lights” where Lily’s beauty “expand[s] like a flower in the sunlight,” the “strange solitude” that they are able to find together is figured in the beauty of a garden lit with natural lights. It is a “magic place” where “Selden and Lily stood still, accepting the unreality of the scene as a part of their own dream-like sensations” (137). In this dreamy state, the magical garden that feels like “unreality,” “it would not have surprised them to feel a summer breeze on their faces, or to see the lights among the boughs reduplicated in the arch of a starry sky” (137).

Here, in this magic, dream-like space—itself figuring a fantasy where the reality of the elite, social party seems far away—the unnatural lighting is not harsh, does not carry the brutality of Lily’s wall-lights. Instead, as quoted, the lights above them may as well be stars. This garden scene illuminates most beautifully the magic of the ideal for Lily: the space wherein social promises are felt, are fleeting, only glimpsed.
In the later scene, in the deserted garden that Selden and Lily find after her dismissal from the yacht, the space, natural enough as a garden, is artificially lit: “the electric lamp at the bend of the path shed[ding] a gleam on the struggling misery of her face” (219). Here we see Lily’s face—and specifically its tragic miseries—illuminated by electric light. There is nothing natural or beautiful in this garden, only the hopeless reality of a social promise that will not be kept; instead Lily’s misery characterizes the space, and the electric lamp illuminates social pitfalls. Tragically, Lily has failed to keep up with the pace of her set, and she is exhausted. At the end of the scene, she leaves, “like some deposed princess moving tranquilly to exile” (220).

A series of further social humiliations play upon Lily until she has exhausted her resources and moves to a rented room in a different part of the city. Eventually becoming a member of the working-class, Lily spends an entire year awaiting an inheritance check that will relieve her debt to Trenor, but seal her fate as broke and alone. Working as a social secretary for Mrs. Norma Hatch, Lily meets her employer “in a blaze of electric light” (273). This lower class, a space for workers, “blazes,” and Lily doesn’t have the power to dim the light. Lily is unaccustomed to this society one-or-two rungs down from her former station, and feels herself “behind the social tapestry…. in the working of the great civic machine” (276). Here, Lily’s perceptions are heightened by an awareness that she is seeing more than she’s ever before been privy to, and her understanding of society is increasingly shaped by metaphors about modern, fast machines. This world, which was until now invisible, shines with electric light: a class distinction that startles and jars Lily. Essentially seeing things newly illuminated, Lily once again prefers darkness, as she
“yearned for that other luxurious world, whose machinery is so carefully concealed that the one scene flows into another without perceptible agency” (301). Lily yearns for haziness and concealment, but must confront “blazes” and “glares” of modern, electric light.

Hitting rock-bottom near the end of the novel, Lily decides to go to see Bertha Dorset and confront her with the letters she receives that could blackmail Bertha into social submission, but on the way detours to Selden’s flat to, forebodingly, thank him for his kind words and guidance, and to say goodbye. Feeling “an intense longing to dispel the cloud of misunderstanding that hung between them,” Lily seems to prefer, for one of the first times in the novel, a modern clarity (305). Lit by Selden’s fire, she pauses by his desk, “where the lamp, striking upward, cast exaggerated shadows on the pallour of her delicately-hallowed face” (305). Once again in a space characterized by both the warmth of firelight and the “exaggerating” light of a lamp, Lily appears changed: “under the loose lines of her dress, how the curves of her figure had shrunk to angularity” (310). No matter what the light, as in the scene with her wrinkles in the candlelight, Lily seems to be fading away, always more obscured by an “intensified…blackness of the shadows which struck up from her cheekbones to her eyes” (310).

Warming herself before his fire, she tells Selden, “in her strange state of extra-lucidity,” fragmented but honest reflections on her fall from social grace (308). “I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else” she sadly remarks, her expression wavering (308). Lily claims she must say goodbye to “the Lily Bart you knew…. I am going to leave her
here” (309). Strangely parting in a silence filled with both life and death, characterized by “an imperishable flame” of Selden’s love, the “something [that] lived between them,” Lily leaves him (309). Thus, the light that so shadows and darkens Lily’s face is mirrored by an inner light, one that as “flame” is more like the candlelight that she prefers, and illuminates her last moments with Selden where she leaves him with the Lily he knew.

After her last moments with Selden, Lily walks to Bryant Park, “and she sank down on an empty bench in the glare of an electric street-lamp. The warmth of the fire had passed out of her veins, and she told herself that she must not sit long in the penetrating dampness which struck up from the wet asphalt” (311). Recalling that earlier scene in the garden where she feels the social pitfall, and we see it illuminated on her face, here she is completely alone—without Selden’s company, without the warmth of her past. Notably, one kind of light exchanges out to another: the harsh light of the street replaces the natural warmth of Selden’s fire—and Lily experiences the shift as a growing cold. The glare of the lamp provides no warmth and Lily realizes “the choral was the only spot of light in the dark prospect” (311). External lights mirror mental states. As night falls around her on her bench in the park, she observes “stray figure[s], hurrying homeward,” walk across her pathway, “looming black for a moment in the white circle of electric light” (311). She notices, in other words, the effects that electric lights have on other people, the way it causes their figures to “loom black” beneath light. While the electric light does illuminate figures in “white circles” and make their outlines visible, Lily realizes that this light—unlike Selden’s fire—provides no warmth.
When she returns home, Lily removes her dresses from her trunk and explores their contents, feeling that each holds “some gleam of light,” some memory from her past (317). Here, memories are cast as light, and mental states are once again understood as lit up. At the moment she finishes packing her trunk, she receives her inheritance check—the one that will barely cover her debts—and writes out almost the entire sum to Trenor.

Going through her trunk, the downtrodden Lily Bart recognizes that each dress represents a shining moment of her past, and recalls a rich and decorous life. As she sits in the boarding-house room, “she began to examine systematically the contents of her drawers and cupboard” (317). She removes each dress, finding “an association lurked in every fold,” each one holds “some gleam of light,” and she remembers her past (317). This emotional scene, wherein Lily remembers her past in her trunk of dresses leaves her in a state “of highly-wrought impressionability, and every hint of the past sent a lingering tremor along her nerves” (317).

This scene represents the final arc toward Lily’s ultra-lucidity that closes the novel. What it brings together is a connection between “gleams of light” and “lingering tremors” in Lily’s “nerves.” This connection between light and nerves is best characterized as electricity—the precise kind that characterizes Lily’s death, in which the “highly-wrought impressionability” of this scene is made glaring and threatening. Her past gleams, and her future is shadowy and fearsome: the contrast here sets up a neat correlation between social promises and pitfalls that are themselves characterized by the lights and shadows in this scene. Lily’s past—gleaming, full of promise—is figured by her dresses that are full of light, that represent a successful relationship of the beautiful
woman to her expectant society. Not meeting those expectations—falling from social
relevance in pursuit of something that is never quite clear, refusing to marry, neglecting
to pay her financial debts—Lily falls into an obscured darkness, figured by shadows and
darkness, by the simple fact that her dresses no longer gleam upon her body, but lie
crumpled in a dark trunk. The anxiety created by this contrast is itself characterized by
light: the static, frenzied power of electricity.

Though she is materially depleted, Lily feels a growing “sense of deeper
empowerishment” that stems from a feeling of decentralization: “of being something
rootless and ephemeral, mere spindrift of the whirling surface of existence” (319). These
exhausting thoughts take her over, and she feels “an immense weariness” but “it was not
the stealing sense of sleep” (320). Instead, Lily feels “a vivid wakeful fatigue, a wan
lucidity of mind against which all the possibilities of the future were shadowed forth
gigantically. She was appalled by the intense clearness of the vision” (320). The
profundity of this brightness, the vividity with which Lily’s exhaustion comes to life is
contrasted once again by her preference for the obscured and shadowed. What Lily is
“appalled by” is not the vision itself, but its “intense clearness,” the way her future has
become—like the underside of the social tapestry—so glaringly clear.

Like the tapestry, “she seemed to have broken through the merciful veil which
intervenes between intention and action, and to see exactly what she would do in all the
long days to come” (320). Finally illuminated in clear, without the possibility of escape,
Lily’s future comes into focus. In a moment of intense awareness, Lily “felt herself more
strangely confronted with her fate. The sensation made her brain reel, and she tried to
shut out the consciousness by pressing her hands against her eyes” (321). Here, rather than grip her mind or head, Lily blocks her eyes, her body’s source of light. Lily’s aforementioned “extra-lucidity” becomes burdensome, and not soon after, she experiences a profound moment of electrical interference in her mind.

Hanging near “the verge of delirium…so near the dizzy brink of the unreal,” Lily is exhausted and reaches for her chloral. When she tries to sleep, “every nerve started once more into separate wakefulness. It was as though a great blaze of electric light had been turned on in her head,” (321 emphasis added). The pervasive external light that has increasingly shadowed her physical body now rears its glaring effects in her mind, seemingly leaving no trace of shadow or darkness. Feeling “her whole past was reenacting itself at a hundred different points of consciousness,” Lily is in the midst of a glaring, modern crisis. In this moment of “supernatural lucidity,” Lily feels her chloral will be ineffective, and overdoses, longing for rest.

Attempting to escape the harsh light that recalls all her most brightly illumined moments of confrontation with the demands of modernity, her “mind shrank from the glare of thought as instinctively as eyes contract in a blaze of light—darkness, darkness was what she must have at any cost” (322). Her mind reacts like eyes confronted with sharp light, and recalls the previously discussed moment when she blocks her eyes against the “extra-lucidity.” In this moment, Lily no longer even desires a replacement of candlelight: she simply craves total darkness. Her mental and physical conflated, both states both too harshly lit up, Lily is desperate for the totality of darkness. In a final active motion, Lily blows out her bedside candle—an apt metaphor for the “extinguishing” of
her character that occurs just moments later, and a crucial physical action that mirrors her inner desire for darkness.

Elaine Scarry describes a 1970’s medical diagnostic tool—the McGill Pain Questionnaire—that worked to expand the professional vocabulary concerning “pain.” As an abstract concept, one that Scarry says remains so because it has no referent (Body in Pain 5), doctors searched for a new way to help patients describe the pain they felt with increased precision. In doing so, they collected specific adjectives to help create categories of similar pain. Of these categories, one is specified as “thermal,” and uses words like “flickering,” “pulsing,” and “throbbing” to describe in more specific detail the kind of pain one experiences.

This questionnaire, and the “thermal” category, helps make sense of Lily’s death, which is characterized by an electric and wakeful throbbing that sends tremors through Lily as the night wears on. Her nerves each alight with their own separate strength, and the specifics of the scene—the way it takes Lily pages and pages of restless, nervous energy to finally run out her reserves—illuminate the overt electrification of her body. Her pain is one of metaphysical exhaustion, best made literal by a precise description of powerful, modern electric light.

As she lay in wait for the effects of her chloral to take over, she reflects, in her lucid state, that “the drug seemed to work more slowly than usual: each passionate pulse had to be stifled in turn” (323). In this moment, as Lily falls asleep for the last time, it is as if all her stalwart and ambitious attempts to stay alive are flickering—and slowly blown-out, one at a time. The implication that Lily has been so alive is never more
apparent than in this scene, where her last moments of consciousness are captured attentively and patiently, slowed from the pace of the traffic outside her door, and finally flicker out to darkness.

Feeling more calm, resting more peacefully, Lily realizes “there was something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them” and this word, “which lingered vague and luminous on the far edge of thought” is lost as Lily falls asleep, “feeling gradually lost in an indistinct sense of drowsy peace” (323). This moment of clarity, notably taking place in the dark, leaves Lily with a feeling of directness, something that will “make life clear,” but is also “lingering,” “vague” and “luminous.” It is, in short, a word that mediates between the two kinds of light that cast Lily into obscurity: firelight and electricity. Out on the edge of her thoughts, Lily jolts awake only once, warmth returning as she falls back to sleep. This last, abrupt motion is like a final, flaming flicker or throb of electric current.

Aaron Worth states that “Lily’s death, significantly, is attributed to the failure of her nervous system; specifically, it is this network’s incapability of being centrally governed, the oppressive new autonomy of her nerves, which becomes intolerable” (101). I would add that this nervous system failure—the “intolerable autonomy” that Lily experiences—is also directly influenced and related to the electric lights that illuminate her position in her bedroom and gardens and, as I’ve noted throughout this chapter, also add to her anxieties by brightly illuminating them. That she feels electric light in her head amplifies these effects. The electricity is a feeling, a state of being, which represents her literal death.
Lily’s death suggests the conditions of modernity described in Georg Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” As Simmel puts it,

less harmful stimuli, through the rapidity and the contradictoriness of their shifts, force the nerves to make such violent responses, tear them about so brutally that they exhaust their last reserves of strength and, remaining in the same milieu, do not have time for new reserves to form (14).

The daily struggle to stay alive and important in the turn-of-the-century metropolis leaves Lily persistently engaged in work that exhausts her. The lights that illuminate her position are increasingly electric, often juxtaposed with the light—fire or candle—that Lily prefers but cannot keep central. As a reaction, her nerves experience this “violent response” of extreme exhaustion: with nothing left in her “reserves,” Lily’s nerves give out when shorted by the overdose of choral, the final sweep of sleep that overcomes her and gives her the darkness she craves. Having lived through profound social humiliations and the petty horrors of elite New York society, Lily has had “no time for new reserves to form” and without other options, succumbs to the desire to blow out her candle.

As a contrast to this electric light that glares in Lily’s final moments, the next morning, Selden—in a “mild and bright” morning filled with “sunlight slanted joyously”—makes his way to Lily in this natural lighting, unaware that she is gone (324). “He had found the word he meant to say to her…It was not a word for twilight, but for the morning” (324). This word, likely (and tragically) the same as Lily’s, is cast in terms of light, as having been found by Selden for the morning, and only realized by Lily in the lucid darkness after blowing out her candle. When he arrives to Lily’s boarding-house, “the irresistible sunlight” pours through closed blinds, and he sees “the semblance of Lily
— and her face, for the first time in his life, “neither paled nor brightened at his coming” (325). Here, Lily’s face is likened to the light that illumines it, the light that Selden always recognized within it, and notices now as a devastating absence.

This emphasis on the natural—instead of the artificial and electric—recalls those most beautiful scenes where Lily and Selden share their mutual “unreality” that leaves them in a space unspeakable and unknowable. This moment, the “joyous” morning of Selden’s return to Lily feels, for him, like that “magical” garden space they had shared before, and perhaps more tragically, feels like a social promise coming into being—one so glaringly contrasted to the aching, electric pitfall of the night before.

Notably, the electric is all but removed from this final scene wherein natural light and unspoken vows of love pass between Selden and Lily. With Lily gone, the electric seems to have gone away, as well, with her final presence the novel characterized as somehow beyond the light that so harshly defined her life. In The House of Mirth, the electric figures modern anxieties as fatal, and illuminates them with a stark clarity that leaves women like Lily Bart too exhausted to desire anything in the end, except darkness. Having appeared at the outset of the novel as “beginning to have fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life her for herself,” Lily is plagued with her financial reality, wondering “what manner of life would it be?” (39).

By not keeping the social promise of the marriage plot, Lily experiences the many devastating, brightly illumined pitfalls of her choice to be modern without embracing the electric. Her consistent desire for either candles or darkness, in the end, perhaps
illuminates the inescapable domination of electricity appearing in factories, homes, and
gardens at the turn of the century, despite lingering social desires for privacy and
distinction. In her last moments of exhaustion, her “angry rebellion” that so characterizes
her energy at the beginning has been expended, and she goes out, flickering like the lights
that so illuminate her position.

While Lily’s fate is sealed by the modern speeds that so outrun her, that leave her
unable to face the glaring, modern, electric future, *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser
illuminates the New Woman who is more suited to facing modern lights—yet still, like
Lily Bart, wonders “what manner of life” is possible under electric lamps?
Chapter Two
“A Waif Amid [These] Forces”: Sister Carrie’s Electric Dreams

This chapter examines Theodore Dreiser’s 1900 novel Sister Carrie. The novel centers on Caroline Meeber who, at eighteen, leaves the Midwest for Chicago, and from there works, dreams, and connects with men who can help her rise in social position. With Charles Drouet, Carrie learns to shop and act, and with George Hurstwood, Carrie eventually becomes an independent actress in New York City. Throughout the novel, Carrie dreams. Often in her rocking chair, her imagination rises far above her reality, and her desires color a world she wishes for. These desires often lead Carrie to pursue a new dream—and she gains success when pursuing her dream to become a famous actress. And yet the novel focuses on the way Carrie wants more, and how her desires always outrun her material reality.

This chapter examines this relationship between Carrie’s visible and invisible worlds—her material and imagined desires. Critics have long discussed the novel’s preoccupation with material culture and the visible world, while also lending much attention to Carrie’s dreams, which are invisible and vague and often referred to simply as a wish for more. Critics generally fall into two categories: focusing either on the material culture or dream worlds, but almost every critic, at some point, makes sense of the relationship between these two categories. Many critics use the reliance on one category to help illuminate the other. This thesis, as an extension of Chapter One, uses electricity to examine this relationship.
In her essay “Feminist Thing Theory in *Sister Carrie,*” Tracy Lemaster argues that “the term *thing* [is] used in reference both to material objects such as money and goods and to immaterial states such as the possession of money and its benefits” (np). For Lemaster, the prevalence of the word “thing” throughout the novel creates a relationship between the visible world of things and the invisible world of states of being, “things” that are felt but not seen. Carrie’s relationship to this complex notion of “thing,” illustrates that Carrie has a “complex and prolonged relationship to things, one she internalizes and nuances” (np).

Exploring Carrie’s “complex and prolonged relationship to things” is a project, as stated, that many critics undertake. Blanche H. Gelfant characterizes Carrie’s desire as a linking power between the material world and immaterial dreams. Gelfant posits that desire is a natural state conditioned by society—that Carrie is geared to always desire, but her desires are for material. Gelfant attributes this materialism, in part, to the advent of plate glass, which she argues took “the concept of shopping from satisfying to *creating* desire” (180 emphasis added). In plate glass, and in the streets of the city, Gelfant argues “Carrie sees what is not there except in imagination, illusion, or desire” (181).

Rachel Bowlby expands on similar ideas in her book *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola.* In her introduction, she states that department stores “utilized new inventions in glass technology….Visibility inside was improved both by the increase in window area and by better forms of artificial lighting, culminating in electricity which was available from the 1880s” (2). Dreiser’s attention to material developments in cities at the turn of the century certainly impacts Carrie, whose
experience in the material world alters her immaterial desires, and drives her to take to the streets to see window displays, and shop through the well-lit stores for the materials that catch her eye.

Critics tend to agree that department stores, places Carrie frequents in the novel, function as a meeting place of the material world and immaterial desires—consumer culture in the city, obviously, the meeting of stuff and desire for modern shoppers. As Philip Fisher puts it in “Acting, Reading, Fortune’s Wheel: Sister Carrie and the Life History of Objects,”

the window creates a polarized world of inside and outside, actor and spectator, rich and poor that would not occur if what were going on inside were simply unknown. All scenes become opportunities for self-classification in that they seem to invite you in and invite you to imagine being in while strongly reminding you that you are out (261).

In these windows, then, passersby experience the transition between the material goods they can see on display, and their immaterial desires and invisible feelings of “invitation.” For Fisher, the department store window allows consumers the simultaneity of feeling both “in” and “out” of consumer culture through a transition between visible and invisible realities.

These critics traffic in the experience of modern shoppers—and the way that social beings navigated the terrain running between the visible, material world and their invisible desires. In my attempt to understand this same relationship, I come back to electricity as the power that links these two realms. In Sister Carrie, there are several key scenes that illustrate the tension between what Carrie sees and what Carrie desires. Many of these scenes feature electric lighting that both creates and enacts invisible desires that
are mirrored by the invisibility of the electric currents that light social sites of consumer culture.

Consider the following scene from Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*: invited out for a night with her wealthy neighbors, the Vances, Carrie encounters a “wonderful temple of gastronomy,” and feels that “at last, she was really in it” (294). Here, Carrie—a Midwestern girl who has made her way to New York City—feels she has entered some new space: she has, perhaps, finally arrived in that “better” place she has spent much of the novel dreaming about. This feeling of being “in” harkens back to Fisher’s notion of department store windows as invitations to part of modern culture. Modern lighting, as the scene continues, appears to be the physical presence that creates Carrie’s immaterial reactions.

As Carrie makes her way through “lanes of shining tables,” she notices the electric lighting of the room. “Incandescent lights, the reflection of their glow in polished glasses, and the shine of gilt upon the walls, combined into one tone of light which it requires minutes of complacent observation to separate and take particular note of” (294). This “tone of light” is startling and new, illuminating a space hitherto unknown in Carrie’s mind. It reflects something that Carrie hasn’t yet seen realized in the real world—it represents, in this way, an atmosphere wholly unfamiliar to her, something she feels is better than where she’s been before.

And yet, as Carrie takes it all in, she cannot help but relate the fine materials she sees around her to their greater representation: of wealth, status, and class. Immediately following this promise of a greater sphere, the reality of its existence begins to appear. In
other words, along with the promise, comes the recognition of the pitfalls; accompanying the delight of this highly visible world are the insatiable desires it incites. Carrie feels “keenly aware of all the little things that were done….The air with which the [head waiter] pulled out each chair, and the wave of the hand with which he motioned them to be seated, were worth several dollars in themselves” (294). Here, Carrie relates the material to its cost, to its exchange value and worth. This higher sphere is more expensive; the finery that emanates throughout the room in that “one tone of light” represents the better world Carrie could only dream of until this point, when it becomes real and she feels “in” it.

Of course, she cannot enjoy the novelty of this reality for too long before she remembers “that flash [of] the other Carrie—poor, hungry, drifting at her wits’ ends, and all Chicago a cold and closed world, from which she only wandered because she could not find work” (295). In this “flash” of memory, itself characterized by the light Carrie finds so noticeable in the dining room, Carrie remembers what it felt like to be part of a “closed world.” Her memory also defines how she believes she got out of such closedness: wandering, drifting, due to the lack of opportunity. Carrie makes her way to this richly lit scene of decadence and elite American ideals through what seems like sheer luck, a drive fed by her desires.

Initially, Carrie finds her new state more promising than damning, because she sets up such a contrast between that memory—“a sad note as out of an old song”—and her current sentiment, “what a wonderful thing it was to be rich” (295). Electricity here
figures social promises, and gives the promise of empowerment. It seems to illuminate her desires, to make visible a place that is inviting and looks like what she’s dreamt of.

However, electricity also figures the pitfalls, the unrealizable status of these promises. The mirrors and lights actually create a playful illusion: “On the ceilings were coloured traceries with more gilt, leading to a centre where spread a cluster of lights—incandescent globes mingled with glittering prisms and stucco tendrils of gilt” (295). Centralized on the ceiling—the uppermost limit of the space—Carrie sees glaring light and prisms, instruments of reflection and refraction, spreading and intensifying the effects of light around the room. “The floor was of a reddish hue, waxed and polished,” here, the lowermost limit of the room is also described in its ability to reflect light. Finally, overwhelmingly, “in every direction were mirrors—tall, brilliant, bevel-edged mirrors—reflecting and re-reflecting forms, faces, and candelabra a score and a hundred times” (295).

These many illuminated surfaces are, then, actually limitations despite their appearance. The light in the room is indeed beautiful, but also saturating and pervasive. It not only reflects, it also “re-reflects,” making reality difficult to see through the glaring light bouncing off of every surface. This light blurs promises and pitfalls. The power of the light obscures boundaries and makes the space between the material and the desire, the actual space and what it represents, blur together in an overall wash of electric light.

Carrie ultimately interprets with “open eyes” the way
out of it all. In two long years she had never even been in such a place as this (295-296)

Carrie finds the scene “remarkable,” but only because she has never seen anything like it. The novelty of the scene represents, for Carrie’s “poor little mind,” the fact that she is ultimately outside of another set of experiences: she is not a part of this world, despite her sentiment just moments earlier that she was, “at last, in it” (296). Again, Fisher’s sentiment that department store plate glass creates simultaneous feelings of being “in” and “out,” Carrie’s ultimate experience in this gilded dining hall is colored by the tension between what truly exists there and what is illusively present from glaring lights. The brightness of the light, in its “one tone” makes the difference literally impossible to see.

Carrie experiences two competing notions of society here. At first, she feels herself admitted to a new, open world: she can see the grandeur of a higher class, and being admitted to the restaurant, she can imagine herself a part of that world, a member of that class. However, she immediately recalls her past—an image that reminds her of poverty, of the dissatisfaction that plagues the poor and working classes. She is reminded, in other words, of the ways in which the world is closed, in which social classes are quite stable, in which social divisions exist within strict boundaries. And in this scene, these notions are both illuminated and obscured by electric light.

In order to better understand the ways that social promises limit society—while giving the illusion of openness—recall the first scene of the novel, in which Caroline Meeber (Carrie) rides the train into Chicago. There are two promises made to the young woman who leaves home for the city: she will either “become worse” by way of adopting metropolitan values, or she will “become better” by leaning on others and “fall[ing] into
saving hands” (1). And yet the novel resists moralizing Carrie’s status as “better or worse” by casting her into an unforeseeable, and often, we find, very lucky future.

Carrie’s mobility, in other words, compels her forward into new and unexpected social spheres: from “waif amid forces” in Chapter One, we watch Carrie ditch the poverty of her working-class sister and brother-in-law to be kept by Drouet, work on the stage as a chorus girl, gain an independent income from her eventual “husband” George, and eventually move into trendy hotel life on the Upper East side of New York City as a famous stage actress.

This mobility, however, does not imply endless promise so much as it implies the illusion—like the lights of the dining room—of possibilities that appear to figure an open system. Carrie, by seeing the room and believing herself in it, cannot entertain the dream of “more” for very long before the pitfalls that accompany the promises makes themselves apparent. The vast amount of light, then, actually prompts Carrie to consider limitations. Electricity in this scene works to create an illusion of openness in the reality of closedness. Electricity is only the evocation—not the realization—of social promises. It is furthermore the illuminating power that hints at desire, but ultimately only reveals the unsatisfactory material. Carrie recognizes the promise—the beauty, the desirous—in the dining room. But she also recognizes the pitfall—the limitation, the way she is actually not “in” anything, has not achieved much by getting there.

Along with the promises clearly stated, the text of Sister Carrie also implies that social promises are indicative of limitation—although it may be tempting to read them as indicative of hope and opportunity, of openness. At the beginning of the novel, Caroline
Meeber leaves the Midwest in pursuit of the dreams inspired by the Big City and finds herself playing a range of feminine roles: sister, factory worker, kept woman, mistress, and actress. Within each role, the modern interference of electrical power metaphorically represents her larger struggle to convert her feminine energy into societal success. More than metaphorical, however, these electrical interferences are—in many moments—also literal. Through electric lighting in a series of social spaces (stages, dining rooms, factories, and city streets), Carrie’s subjectivity is shaped and altered by the modern power coursing through the city.

In order to understand this power, it is crucial to recall Henry Adams’ distinction between force and power, as discussed in my introduction. For Henry Adams, writing at the turn-of-the-century, electricity is a power: an invisible, metaphysical, almost-magical energy. Electricity belongs, therefore, to a world that isn’t necessarily physical. Instead, electricity figures the promise of empowerment without a real-world correlate. By this, I mean that electricity represents social success that simply feels like success: is not actually realized in the world. It’s the promise of the American dream; it’s the implication of the ideal. By contrast, force functions like a train: a physical, visible, tangible energy. Force is visible on city streets, felt in the passing streetcars, ridden into work, and stamped out by industrial machinery.

Unsurprisingly, *Sister Carrie* traffics in both of these energies, as critics point out and as this chapter explores. In terms of force, Carrie is riding a train in the first scene of the novel, learns the railway system in Chicago in order to get to work each day, and boards a train with Hurstwood to get to New York City. In all these instances, she is
literally, physically interacting with the Adams-ian notion of force. And yet, even this force alludes to another kind of energy—a more problematic kind of energy, power, as coded by electricity.

In my reading, Carrie’s dreams run parallel to her physical life in the city, and operate—like electricity—powerfully. While her day-to-day actions can be understood as her embodying of modern force, her dreams are better comprehended when understood in terms of the parallel invisible power. In her dreams for a different world, Carrie evokes an open system, one where women can dream up realities that they hope to eventually see realized, promises that cannot be broken. And yet, as electricity implies, empowerment isn’t always real. So, while electricity evokes a kind of social openness in its signification of promises in the urban setting, it simultaneously implies fantasy: that the promise made cannot actually be kept, cannot be upheld in reality and will persist only in the imaginary, the invisible, the immeasurable.

Electricity, as a power that makes the limitations of the promising world apparent, an ultimate fantasy, makes Carrie’s world look rather closed. Many critics argue that Sister Carrie is “like a closed system…in which the total amount of energy is limited” (Armstrong 311), and my interests lie, primarily, with examining where these limitations exist. As a whole, the novel works through a system that is “a means of mediating between the old system, based on flame, and the new electrical technology” (Armstrong 309). Sister Carrie often provokes, through its material obsessions, a hint at unseen powers, just like the dynamo creates an uneasy knowledge of invisible power for Henry
Adams. Force figures that material world, while electricity—and Carrie’s dreams—figure that metaphysical power, the fantastical, and the dream.

My argument holds that Carrie’s dreams are an example of Adams’ notion of power. I wonder what place women’s dreams can have in a material world, and in this question, fall back to Adams for illumination. Important to recall is that Adams believes electricity to be a gendered power—one embodied by the Virgin, the Female, the Woman. Carrie, in her different feminine roles and in her intermittent presence on the stage as a representation of modern desire, evokes this gendered power, and embodies the modern promises made to modern women figured by the presence of electricity. Her dreams, then, represent what lies beyond these promises. Her dreams suggest openness, even if they don’t realize or create it. And her dreams allow her to exist in the closed system without losing a modern, female hopefulness. Examining her dreams as electric, as an instance of power provides the opportunity to pay attention to several crucial motifs of the text that are often overlooked in scholarship. In order to acknowledge these underdeveloped themes from the novel, and to more closely examine the interplay of force and power, I turn to a few more important scenes to closely read these themes.

Perhaps one of the best-known symbols from Sister Carrie is the rocking chair. Carrie often sits in her rocking chair—an evocative symbol of domestic ideology—and dreams. This kind of static motion replays itself ceaselessly throughout the novel in moments where Carrie flees from the bustle of the city to muse on what she does not have. In my mind, the rocking chair functions as a space whereupon Carrie can feel the conflation of energies: the rocking chair, visible and physical, moves when Carrie uses
her physical body to rock it back and forth. In this way, the rocking chair—like a train—works forcefully, with realized energy that moves physical bodies.

I argue that it is Carrie’s insistent dreaminess that, like electricity, runs invisibly and parallel—as power—to the force of her rocking chair. While invisible, her dreams inspire the rocking motion—the force—that her body enacts on the chair. In this space, Carrie confronts the limitation of social, public promises by retreating to a private space where she can exhibit both force and power. Because “the rocking chair permits one to rest and move at the same time….the state is one of striking in-betweenness” (Fisher 260). In this space characterized by simultaneity, of being in two states at once, Carrie embodies the power of feminine ideals. But they can only be made physical, and forceful, through the repetition of force in her chair. To make her invisible desires feel real, to find any physical representation of them, Carrie rocks in her material, visible chair.

In her rocking chair, and through her dreams, Carrie invests her energy in the possibility of outside worlds—take the way she observes the dining room with the Vances as a leading example. The scene is overtly described as “noticeable,” as full of elements that are very much worth seeing in their finery and dazzle. But they are also extremely well lit: the finery and dazzle would have no effect in the dark. The incandescent light—relentless, unflickering—contrasts with the glow of the candles, which are less intense and more romantically reminiscent of social epochs gone by. The incandescent light works like power: it invisibly evokes the feeling of promise—that intoxicating stature of the social elite—but does not allow that promise to be realized.
Overall, the scene in the dining room is a meeting of social moments: those who were at the top of society in an era of candlelight have successfully integrated incandescent lamps and tools of reflection into their sphere—perhaps in order to keep their world contained, safely refracted and reflected for themselves, in closed dining rooms. While the light has changed—has perhaps become more infiltrating and illustrious—the social structure itself remains, and becomes more visible to individuals like Carrie who long to become a part of it. This society’s structural force, then, is what makes it so alluring: Carrie can see that world right there; but its power, what the electric lights actually illuminate, makes it unattainable.

In fact, when Carrie finally realizes success as a stage actress and feels “as if the world understood and trusted her….For her the doors of fine places seemed to open quite without asking,” she simultaneously feels unfulfilled; even though she lives with an ever-growing salary, “still her dreams ran riot” (416). Now actually a part of the luxurious society she has sought after, “She conceived of delights which were not—saw lights of joy that never were on land or sea” (417). Here, her dreams once again reach out beyond what she realizes in the real world. And the dreams—the “delights”—are characterized as “lights” of joy, evoking that lighted dining room and all the evocations of social promises that the powerful lights create.

Like the lights in the dining room, Carrie’s “face of longing” similarly inspires the feeling of promise. As Ames, the budding philosopher and electrical engineer with whom Carrie becomes infatuated late in the text, puts it: “[Carrie’s face is] a thing the world likes to see, because it’s a natural expression of its longing” (443). Ames names the
nature of the desire that plagues not only Carrie, but also draws her audience to her. As an engineer who studies electricity—that invisible power that incites desire—Ames recognizes the power Carrie wields before an audience, and implores Carrie to understand this power.

Ames sparks in Carrie a new way of looking at the world that considers the immaterial nature of desire. Taking in Ames’ philosophical conversation often confuses and distracts Carrie from what is otherwise a sea of thoughts committed to material pleasures, and as Ames passionately lectures Carrie, she “gazed without exactly getting the import of what he meant” (443). This is a significant reaction because it illustrates the way in which Carrie’s dreaminess and longing is so a part of her that it is not an act; it is not a face she puts on for the stage, but rather a feature of her character, of her “real” self that artistically translates to the stage.

Ames continues to explain his understanding of her longing by stating that the world is always struggling to express itself...Most people are not capable of voicing their feelings. They depend on others. That is what genius is for….Sometimes nature does it in a face—it makes the face representative of all desire. That’s what has happened in your case (443) Carrie’s visible, physical face—a kind of force as a physical reality—also elicits power.

Hers is the face of desire—a material representation of immaterial wants. The impact of this effect finally resonates with Carrie as Ames gazes at her, looking “at her with so much of the import of the thing in his eyes that she caught it” (443). Carrie has the face of a dreamer, and as a physical body, is the literal embodiment of immaterial dreams, desires, and ideals. In this way, Carrie is, like her rocking chair, a conflating space in which force and power interact.
Desire, here, is key. Carrie embodies ideals and Ames, the electrical engineer, recognizes this property of her character. Rather than merely appropriate Carrie as forceful, as a physical presence who is desirable, Ames understands that Carrie embodies—like his electric interests—a different kind of modern energy: power. Her desires, beyond her desirability, create this power and fuel her electric-seeming energy. Ames appreciates Carrie’s status, then, as a powerful, electrical current—capable of something beyond what the world offers.

In society, however, Carrie is expected to leave ideals behind and participate in a system of gains and losses, of exchanges and currencies, of closedness. Because she “gained” her expression—it is naturally hers, she “paid nothing to get it”—she is expected, by Ames and those who put her on stage, to give it back, to share it, to divvy it out. Others expect her to incite desires, to work as an electric bulb: illuminating for the sake of showing others what they desire. For Ames, her face transmits an aesthetic ideal that relates something of the real human condition. For the theaters, her face is profitable because society wants to look at it. In both models, however, there is a clear set of expectations that links Carrie’s gift to a kind of debt, and the idea that she “must do something” with her beautiful face.

Thus, Carrie’s longing, and her ability to inspire that longing in others, is put into a system of expectations that fall under a social notion of closedness: of indebtedness and necessary exchanges. That Carrie secures a stable, high income and a home of her own is not illustrative of openness, but rather of her success at participating in a series of exchanges in a closed world.
After a fight with her boyfriend Charles Drouet, and back at her station near the window, Carrie realizes a profound truth of the closed system in which she lives:

- she was...angered...that—her own injustice, Hurstwood’s, Drouet’s, their respective qualities of kindness and favour, the threat of the world outside, in which she had failed once before, the impossibility of this state inside, where the chambers were no longer justly hers, the effect of [Drouet’s] argument upon her nerves, all combined to make her a mass of jangling fibres (209)

In this scene, Carrie feels a profound anxiety that plays upon her “nerves” and leaves her feeling like “a mass of jangling fibres” (209). So, while it is in her fantasies of the elusive “more” that Carrie dreams up an alternative to the world she inhabits, in *Sister Carrie*, these dreamed-up desires flow in charged currents, they electrify the senses, and animate subjects by prompting them to action in search of fulfillment. Here, Carrie is a nervous system plagued by outside, “jangling” forces. Electricity is often characterized in this way, as a literal “jolt” to the system, as rendering the human body as a “mass” that is animated by outside powers.

At the turn of the century, the body became the “site” of modern anxieties. And modern authors like Dreiser write novels, like *Sister Carrie*, that “have a particular fascination with the limits of the body, either in terms of its mechanical functioning, its energy levels, or its abilities as a perceptual system” (Armstrong 5). Carrie’s body acts as a site of this kind, as a modern site of energy where forces and powers centralize and play out their effects. When confronted with the “impossibility” of her various relationships (209), Carrie’s dreams are confronted—her possibilities are limited—and the result is an electrified, “jangling” awareness of her body as nervous, as made up of electrified parts, a system run by changing amounts of energy.
Nervously electric in this way, Carrie is also electrically “lit up” by the external world in a series of places: in the first factory she works in, she is dimly lit and unsatisfied. Her visual capacity is also limited and confined by this factory space; “she had no time to look about, and bent anxiously to her task” (34). Working in the “dark, box-lined aisles” where she acts as a piece-worker, Carrie eventually experiences “relief from her own nervous fears and imaginings in the humdrum, mechanical movement of the machine. She felt, as the minutes passed, that the room was not very light” (33-34). Without light, Carrie is more at ease; her anxieties can be caught up in the force of the machine, rather than illuminated by bright lights. Without the full range of her sight, Carrie has to focus on one task and her only concern is “working fast enough” (34).

Busied by the factory work that uses her body as mere function in a long assembly line that acts as a “relief” to her sense of self as an individual, Carrie grows restless. She perhaps longs for the kind of individualizing distinction that drives her “nervous fears and imaginings,” the kind of classification that comes from being illuminated as an individual. After only a few days of work, Carrie takes up Drouet on his offer to give her nice clothes and a place in the city.

When she eventually reaches the stage, accepting an amateur acting job that Drouet finds for her, she gains confidence in being seen, in being the “acting” subject. With all eyes focused on her, and with theater lights set to centralize her figure, she embodies success through imitation. When she falters—a brief moment of stage fright—Drouet encourages her to push through, to “Go on out there now, and do the trick” (166). At this encouragement, Carrie feels renewed: she “revived a little under [Drouet’s]
electrical, nervous condition” (166). As he praises her and tells her to get back on the stage, she feels “her nerve partially return” and makes her way back out (167). With the presence of a powerful electric, nerves come alive and Carrie revives, as if jolted by an electric shock.

As she acts on stage, Carrie is continually revived and energized by the thought of the men who love her being in the audience, and when they praise her performance at the end of the show, “[her] eyes flamed with the light of achievement” (170). Carrie successfully acts her part on stage by feeling lit up, experiencing electrical, nervous energy. As she learns to use this electrical energy to her benefit, she gains continued success as an actress.

When she moves to New York City with George Hurstwood, she becomes increasingly attuned to the atmospheric quality of the city—the way the modernized, electric space of the city reflects the promise she feels in her dreams. And in the novel, this space takes on a Progressive class-based characteristic: a chasm between the “great” and the “small” (269). This chasm creates a similar void to Carrie’s dreams—and is also characterized by electric, charged lighting:

The great create an atmosphere which reacts badly upon the small. This atmosphere is easily and quickly felt. Walk among the magnificent residences, the splendid equipages, the gilded shops, restaurants, resorts of all kinds; scent the flowers, the silks, the wines; drink of the laughter springing from the soul of luxurious content, of the glances which gleam like light from defiant spears; feel the quality of the smile which cut like glistening swords and of strides born of place, and you shall know of what is the atmosphere of the high and mighty (269 emphasis added)

This view of the big city is both real—sensible through the flowers, the restaurants, the wines—but is also an atmosphere, something felt and experienced. And, in this
atmosphere, gleaming glances characterize the promising feelings that inspire Carrie’s hopes and dreams. Within the motif of the electric, there’s a sense of conflation between Adams’ two notions of modern energy: the physical force and the immaterial power. This conflation takes place more and more frequently as the novel progresses, and finally centralizes on Carrie’s body.

Carrie initially connects to the higher social sphere that she experiences in the dining room with Mrs. Vance through an electrical connection that is both physical and indicative of an intangible social promise: a door bell system in her building. Between the thin walls that divide their hotel-apartments, Carrie felt that the Vances “were, in a measure, refined and in comfortable circumstances” (282). This status leads Carrie to desire a connection with them, established by the push of a button at home: “One day Carrie’s bell rang and the servant, who was in the kitchen, pressed the button which caused the front door of the general entrance on the ground floor to be electrically unlatched” (282).

Mrs. Vance, having forgotten her key, uses the electrical ringer to gain entrance via Carrie. After this incident, they forge their friendship, with Carrie always aware of the Vances’ financial and material superiority. When they make their way to the dining room—that place which most glaringly represents the illusory nature of dreams, and the power of electricity—it recalls this initial “electrical” connection with Mrs. Vance. While in this brief moment, the electric represents a promise of upper class connections and social advancement, it ultimately leads to electrical un-fulfillment.
Electricity appears more frequently in the second half of the novel as Carrie’s interactions become more and more characterized by the power of her dreams, and less by the force of the world around her. Not only does she continue to visit her rocking chair as a space where modern energies converge, but she also experiences moments where her own identity becomes wrapped up in the electrical power of her dreams.

Eventually, at the height of her fame, her acting name—Carrie Madenda—appears in electric lights on the Broadway avenues of New York City. As this display of human longing—the face of desire, of the dreamer—Carrie not only performs the very act of desiring, but she also inspires others to dream up that elusive “more.” She is, in this way, both the energized and the energizing; the illuminated and the illuminating. She, like the dining room, both sparks and emanates light throughout her little world.

Consider the moment that Carrie’s name appears in electric lights as the culminating moment of her total electric illumination: “At Broadway and Thirty-ninth Street was blazing, in incandescent fire, Carrie’s name. ‘Carrie Madenda,’ it read, ‘and the Casino Company.’ All the wet, snowy sidewalk was bright with this radiated fire. It was so bright,” (451). Carrie’s name ablaze, her shining dreams seem realized and they light up the streets of New York City. The city, the electric, and the dream all blaze “so bright,” visible and attractive. Her name is “so bright that it attracted” the gaze of onlookers, and accompanying her name is “a large, gilt-framed, poster-board, on which was a fine lithograph of Carrie, life-size” (451). Carrie—both in name and stature—has been electrically illuminated. Both her name and her body are displayed in the “incandescent fire” of electric lights. Powerfully illuminated in this way, Carrie’s very
being takes on the same effect as electricity: the powerful energy that conveys other-worldly possibilities; that embodies the power of dreams in the force of a visible object.

At the end of the novel, she is an actress. She lives in the Waldorf-Astoria for free—an advertisement for the hotel and the glittering promises her fame now represents for all those who can see her. But none of this finery and dazzle satisfies her: “For these she had once craved….and yet she was lonely. In her rocking-chair she sat, when not otherwise engaged—singing and dreaming” (458). Something, some elusive more, remains unrealized. Under the shine and spark of electric lights, Carrie recognizes her lack. Similar to the way the shining dining room proved an illusive limitation, Carrie’s electrified status is unfulfilling. The power of electricity evokes that lack, and reminds Carrie that the social promise—“she saw the city offering more of loveliness than she had ever known”—is unrealized; “Amid the tinsel and shine of her state walked Carrie, unhappy” (459). The promise unrealized, Carrie is left at the end of the novel still dreaming. Saturated with desire, she is unhappy. The ideal, her desires, remain in her imagination, despite their bright electric blaze on the city streets.

Her name in lights, the dream appears fully electrified but remains unfulfilled. Toward the close of the novel, the text states “man has not yet comprehended the dreamer any more than he has the ideal” (458). Carrie’s dreams, and Carrie as dreamer, lie beyond comprehensibility, beyond the knowable. In this way, Carrie is like electricity herself: representative of whatever lies beyond the material, visible world. She exists only in imagination, only in fiction.
Electricity—a gendered power—figures both the promises and the pitfalls of the city for women at the turn of the century. Moreover, electricity creates frenzied, hectic, sizzling social power, and implies modern questions about subjectivity—and especially the position of the modern American woman. Previously relegated to the space of the domestic, women were suddenly in the city. There to work, act, shop, or marry, women experienced the city electric, the “metropolitan madness” of the modern world in flux. Their responsibilities in this city conflated with their past image as man’s object of pleasure: the stay-at-home wife, the organizer of parties and events, the hostess, the mother. But this image was not yet past—and as we know, continued to enclose women under more glaring spotlights both literal and cultural.

Women in the turn-of-the-century city were beneath so many lights: electric lamps in factories, the halo of gas lamps near Central Park, the flickers of candlelight in their bedrooms, the glare of noonday sun between buildings higher than the sky. But the electric functioned in new ways, revealing women and the electrified city as complicatedly interwoven through the symbolic, through what made their individual bodies iconic. Those who lived at the turn of the century—writers like Dreiser, for example—“believed, rightly, that they were developing new ways of looking at the physical universe…new ways of understanding man and society, new forms of expression for what they saw and felt, which were different from any that had gone before” (Bullock 68). This physical universe allows for trains and rocking chairs, but Carrie’s dreams still remain without space in which to be realized.
While the physical world was being rethought—as Adams and his contemporaries attempted to fathom the power of electricity—the metaphysical, the dream, the unrealized, were constantly in circulation because they seemed to be more like electricity than a train. In the space between the plate glass and the consumer, in the static motion of a rocking chair, the electric circulates. In *Sister Carrie*, this same power circulates in, through, and around Carrie as her desires electrify her world.

As a modern woman, still heavily influenced by her melodramatic tradition, Carrie keeps coming back to her chair, keeps returning to a space in which she can dream, uninterrupted. Carrie returns to this very known space, this space so defined by American culture as distinctly feminine and domestic, perhaps because she can channel force—the kind of physical, present movement—that her dreams seem to magically revolve around as power. In other words, maybe in the rocking chair, Carrie feels the more forceful presence of her ephemeral desires. Carrie’s rocking chair allows her to return to a safely defined space physically, while outrunning it mentally: to forcefully enact a typical female behavior (to rock in her chair) but to dream of other spaces that do not actually exist. To ruminate, perhaps, on what it means to see her name and form electrically lit-up on the streets of the big city as a shining component of the city-dreamscape she so longs to join.

The end of the novel leaves Carrie still dreaming: “she was still waiting for the halcyon day when she should be led forth among dreams become real….It was forever to be the pursuit of that radiance of delight which tints the distant hilltops of the world” (460). What Carrie cannot seem to realize in the text is the nature of her dreams as
necessarily immaterial and therefore continually pursued—and never reached. The final line of the text delivers the anxiety—the modern female anxiety—that will follow Carrie forever: “In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel” (460). What life is possible under electric light, then? A life blazing with desire; the modern woman electrified by the endlessness of her dreams.
Conclusion

An apt comparison to the restlessness and anxiety Carrie experiences in her rocking chair, awaiting that “halcyon day” where she will find her “dreams made real,” (Carrie 460) is, of course, The House of Mirth which ends in the electrically-charged death of Lily Bart. Both texts feature strong, complex female protagonists who traffic in the electrified “big city” of the turn of the century—and both women dedicate themselves to their invisible, often unarticulated, desires.

For Carrie, this trafficking is somewhat satisfying: she successfully weaves her way from the beginning of the novel from Midwest nobody to successful actress and City-living somebody, and uses the power of her dreams to translate her force into achievements: to, in other words, dream up a big fantasy—like wanting to become a famous actress—and then actually go do it, become the famous actress. As discussed, however, this triumphant achievement is rarely enough for Carrie, and we see the true power of her dreams always rocking against the force of her material, real success. The electric pulses that constantly remind her that something unseen and powerful lurks beyond her sight, then, always haunt her reality and incite her desires.

For Lily, the city proves a space without room for her desires. When her elusive dreams fail her—when a life without the necessity of marriage for financial stability proves impossible—Lily’s anxiety grows, and electric lights illuminate her precarious state. Unable to adapt to this modern light, and always displaying a preference for the dim lights of candles, Lily recedes into social obscurity. In this obscurity, however, her failure culminates. In the end, the strength of powerful electricity overcomes her, and she
dies. The electric she feels occurs both physically, as electric lights that glow above her head, and mentally, a feeling of light in her head.

It is only in the realm of the electric that Carrie and Lily feel the power of their dreams. That they will never reach their dreams in the turn-of-the-century cities they inhabit is yet another promise that these novels make—and perhaps the only one that they do not collectively break. In the larger cultural sphere from 1880 onward, as electricity grew in its prevalence, women encountered electricity in new and surprising ways that evolved and expanded social promises. As this thesis examines, the electric current and female desires, like social promises, configure an invisible realm of energy that enacts changes on the physical world. Electricity turns on lights; Carrie’s desire for a luxurious life is realized. And the big city’s atmosphere of energy and lights inspires dreamers to dream. As I’ve argued, this energy and women interact in curious ways that makes their interplay especially charged. Women in the electric sphere challenge modalities of social power by experiencing their invisible desires with modern force.

Electricity had perhaps never before been gendered as much as it was at a formal ball given by Alva Vanderbilt in the spring of 1883. Costumed to fit the modern moment, Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt—Alice—appeared as “The Spirit of Electricity,” in a dress lit up throughout the night by batteries she kept in her pocket. Embodying the power of electricity, Alice attended the ball with her elite social crowd, and her press photograph, in which she is elegantly posed like the Statue of Liberty, remains iconic of this historical moment.
Like Adams’ goddess who represents the invisible, surging power of the electric, Alice Vanderbilt’s gown, named “Electric Light” by its designer, illuminates a social desire to embrace and control modern energies. Centralized on a woman’s frame, this power is especially precarious and seems amplified. In the dress, designed by Maison Worth—the French fashion establishment *The House of Worth*—Alice blazes with confidence. Posed as the Statue of Liberty, she exudes modern American pride and gleams with control. The materials of the intricate gown include tinsel and metallic beads—surfaces meant to capture light and reflect it, making the gown glow and shimmer. The patterns, sewn in with beads and glimmering cords, glitter in the shape of lightning bolts and stars. Tiny electric bulbs line the dress, illuminating Alice’s curves, displaying her feminine figure. The effect is a quite literal display of social power centralized on the female body.

The dress, a modern feat that sews modern power—electricity—into a physical form of the elaborate costume, and in the competitive sphere of moneyed Old New York, was meant to outshine the other costumed-women in attendance. The scale of power here—the illustrious sheen of Alice’s presence—emanates in her proud stance, on her illuminated, feminine figure that harnesses the power of electricity.

Like a dynamo, busily converting energies, this photograph harkens Adams’ goddess figure at the Exposition. The World’s Fair in Paris that ran from April to November in 1900, the Exposition displayed and celebrated the past while beckoning a bright future. Among the most famous exhibits was the *Palais de l’Electricité*, an electric center from which the energy of the rest of the festival circulated. In this exhibit, Henry
Adams found himself baffled by and enamored with this invisible power. With over fifty million viewers throughout its stay, the Exposition revealed electricity as the new modern energy, the power that was finding its way into businesses, homes, and even onto the body, as Alice Vanderbilt illustrated years before in 1883.

“The Spirit of Electricity” was also a name given to part of the Electric Palace exhibit at the Exposition in 1900. As described by the Hachette Guide,

At night the whole façade is illuminated with the changing lights of its 5,000 multicolored incandescent lamps, its eight monumental lamps of coloured glass, the lanterns of its sparkling pinnacles and its phosphorescent ramps. At the top the Spirit of Electricity, driving a chariot drawn by hippogryphs, projects showers of multicoloured flames….The Palace of Electricity is designed not only to delight the eye. This enchanted palace contains the living, active soul of the Exhibition, providing the whole of this colossal organism with movement and light (Jullian 82-3)

This description of the exhibit attributes the life of the entire fair to the energy that enlivens the Palace of Electricity. It is more than a spectacle; it is the “soul” of the World’s Fair, the animating power. This energy flows throughout Paris as an immense power: “a single touch of the finger on a switch and the magic fluid pours forth” (83). Electricity makes the city come to life; “everything is immediately illuminated, everything moves” (83).

When Walt Whitman sang of the body, when Henry Adams found a goddess in the dynamo, electricity was the only energy adequate to portray the artist’s desire for the invisible, the elusive, and the immaterial. When attempting to channel this power, Wharton and Dreiser turned to female dreams in the modernizing city. Their female protagonists live in electrified cities, stroll streets radiating with fire signs, and feel the power of electricity coursing along their nerves. And this electrification of the female
body alludes to the dreams that enliven their desires, the immaterial ideals that, though
they fill them with hope, leave them unsatisfied in the end.

What this power calls to life, however, is a persistent, contagious idealism. Incited
by flashing lights, the twinkling of ballrooms, and the refractions of light in mirrors, this
idealism coursed through the air of the big city. A woman attuned to this air might feel
her own body illuminated and unnerved by an inner flashing, an anxious throb. Electric
light caught in her eye and seemed to remain there, to ignite the glimmers of hope that
something invisible and energizing, something magical, lay just beyond what she could
see.
Works Cited


