

ELECTRIC MODERNISM

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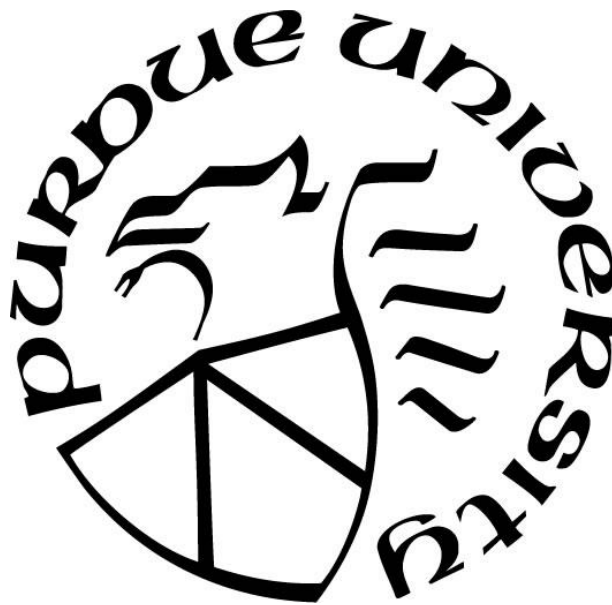
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation traces invocations and theories of electric power in modernist literature by women, showing how four modernist authors—Edith Wharton, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), Olive Moore, and Jean Rhys—deploy electricity in their fiction and highlight its varied and contradictory cultural meanings. Modernist literature by women leverages the open and strange impressions from the era of what electricity might mean, so that authors might make their own arguments about where artistic impulses originate, how homes would change when they became wired, how modernization would change modernist art forms, or why some social spaces gleam brighter than others. Edith Wharton and Jean Rhys highlight cultural and class system dynamics with their electric metaphors and electrically wired settings, in which they fuse mental states with modern atmospheres. H.D. and Olive Moore explore how women experience artistic inspiration, as either a transcendent space of unlimited possibility for the former, or as proof of the limitations of gender for the latter.

ELECTRIC MODERNISM: AN INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I explore moments in modernist fiction by women when electricity becomes an undeniable force for profound change, a harbinger of a new and strange modern life. In Hilda Doolittle's (H.D.'s) 1935 novella *Nights*, for example, a female artist named Natalia feels, desperately, that in order to become a successful artist, she "wanted the electric power to run on through her, then out, unimpeded by her mind" (51). Decades before, at the end of Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth*, the exhausted and downtrodden Lily Bart overdoses on chloral and then, quite suddenly, feels "every nerve" in her body waken separately; in her anguish, she feels "as though a great blaze of electric light had been turned on in her head" (321). In a haunting nightmare, Sasha Jansen from Jean Rhys's 1939 novel *Good Morning, Midnight* dreams that the entire world has been reduced to "an enormous machine" with "innumerable flexible arms" (187). Electric lights illuminate the ends of these arms, casting judging eyes into the dark night. Finally, in Olive Moore's 1930 novel, *Spleen*, a frustrated modernist painter and Impressionist forcefully pushes back on artistic tradition, claiming that electric light is the "salvation of Art!" (157).

I explore in the four following chapters how the modernist women authors above incorporate electricity into the modernizing worlds their fiction portrays as a force of dramatic, palpable change in women's lives—in both their external environments and across the mental states and emotions they experience. It might promise sexual emancipation and artistic novelty, as it does in H.D.'s and Moore's works. Or it might bring devastating psychological confusion and terror, as it does for women in Wharton's and Rhys's fiction. But all of these authors avoid making such simple arguments about electric power, as cleanly animating or nerve-numbing. Instead, they highlight the conflicting and contradictory powers of electricity without deciding

on any final, lasting definition of it. Because of this, these modernist authors continually showcase the ways technological innovations are as social as they are mechanical.

As Jennifer Lieberman puts it, “electricity seemed so powerful...because it was uniquely multifarious” (4). Sometimes, electric power resides within a woman’s own body, illuminating her mind and pulsing through her veins. In H.D.’s *Nights*, for example, the electric isn’t just a metaphor for immense feeling—it’s a tangible presence when a young man tells his lover, “your fingers are full of the most terrific electricity. I’m frightened” (86). At all turns, each of the following chapters illustrates, the four authors use electricity in its full, confusing, and conflicting connotations to test the boundaries of human experience—of women’s psychological and physical experiences in the modernizing world. They also showcase the many dimensions and cultural connotations of electric power: to maim or empower, to enliven or electrocute, to inspire or horrify. For Edith Wharton, electricity is an infiltrating danger, changing both New York City and the minds of those living within it. But even as it torments Lily Bart, for Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, electric power—and the modern world it stands for—represent slowly expanding social freedoms. For H.D. and Olive Moore, electricity is life’s animating force in their nonfictional works, where they pen modernist aesthetic theories that wonder how artistic inspiration enters the human mind and how an artist might channel that energy to create something wholly new and unique. For Jean Rhys, electric lights are both tangible presence and atmospheric tone, painting the landscapes of modern cities in which desperate women find themselves haunted by the shadows of modernity.

In the four chapters that follow, I argue that paying attention to these authors’ portrayals of modernizing spaces by closely reading their various references to and invocations of electric lights and electric power reveals a modernist preoccupation with the interplays between the

external world and the interiority of character. If modernism, as a literary movement, was keenly attuned to the individual and their psychological realities, then a close reading of electricity in modernist novels by women reveals ongoing pressure to understand the boundaries between the self and the larger world. As an infiltrating, animating, or mood-altering force, electricity troubles the line between a woman and the world around her. In *The Senses of Modernism*, Sara Danus writes that “generally speaking, the modernist period is marked by an ideology of a partition—between technology and its effects on the one hand, and the ostensibly free activity of the artistic mind on the other” (35). Indeed, as she points out, the “split” between the arts and techne has existed well before “preromantic times” (35).¹ In my dissertation, I explore the way electricity’s multiple and contradictory cultural definitions allow it to function both as a conduit to better or innovative artistic forms and practices (as in Moore and H.D.) *and* as that “partition” between woman and society, between life and death, and even mediating between pain and pleasure.

As a cultural phenomenon, electricity also takes on the “new significance” of technologies in the modernist era that Danus explains: “if technology had commonly been seen as an extension of the human body or as a matter of skills, it now began to acquire a new significance; indeed, technology was henceforth understood in stark contrast to everything human and corporeal” (36). However, as my dissertation shows, electricity confusingly runs across categories; in the novels I study, it is both an object and a feeling, a danger and an

¹ Danus helpfully contextualizes critiques of “technological determinism” by Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Gilles Deleuze, quoting Deleuze’s formula that holds that “machines are social before being technical. Or rather, there is a human technology which exists before a material technology” (41). These theories problematize the deeply held cultural view that electricity could be autonomous, could define itself or be self-explanatory. Indeed, as my chapters show, the multiplicity of electricity’s meanings suggest that social responses and mass media forms, especially advertising, helped to “invent” the idea of electricity just as much as its scientific inventors invented its many applications. In all, I avoid making statements that ascribe inherent meaning to electricity outside of its social contexts and endeavor to show the extent to which electricity is a cultural artifact of modernity.

everyday reality. As Linda Simon summarizes, “newspapers frequently reported electrical fires and accidental electrocutions....Because incandescent light had a different quality from gas, some people worried about becoming blind by reading by electricity” (91). As early as 1890, electricity was used to execute criminals; after William Kemmler’s electrocution in 1890, *The New York Times* wrote: “It was so terrible that the word fails to convey the idea” (Simon 220). Even in benign ways, electricity posed a threat: “Women worried that electric light would produce freckles; in any case, they found that they looked more attractive in the mellow glow of gaslight” (Simon 92). Electricity was also an inspiration, showcased at World’s Fairs and International Expositions starting as early as the 1870s. The surprise and delight of electric exhibits at these events sparked the cultural imagination. Electrically illuminated canals, colorful light shows, moving sidewalks lit up by glimmering lights—electric lights held a captivating power on audiences around the world. The seemingly boundless applications for and astonishments of electricity were breathtaking; as one *Cosmopolitan* article put it: “the same mighty, subtle, delicate, formidable agency and mastery permeates the atmosphere that encompasses the universe...and all this is but one breath of the all-embracing vital air, one sparkle of the surf that is the boundary of oceans, the great deeps beyond, unfathomed, but one may believe not unsearchable” (qtd in Simon, 254).

Holding all these dimensions at once, enveloping so many layers of meaning and evoking such varied responses, electricity shows up as much more than a material object or setting piece in modernist novels. More than the lamps in drawing rooms or the streetlights illuminating modern thoroughfares, electric lights shine and spark throughout modernist fiction as a profound energy that has the power to influence characters’ moods: from how a woman worries over wrinkles around her mouth or how red streetlights transform a young chorus girl into an amateur

prostitute, to how deeply a sexual connection can be felt between lovers. My chapters showcase how, for these authors, the physical is the psychical—and traces how they each use electricity to show how the material world interacts with, gives shape to, and sometimes profoundly alters, one's internal mental states. Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), Edith Wharton, Olive Moore, and Jean Rhys all suggest, through their portrayals of it in their fiction, that electricity changed how women would experience modern life.

In their nonfiction essays, diaries, and letters, each author ruminates on the social changes wrought by modern technologies from telegraphy to the radium bomb. As historian David Nye puts it, “the sober conservation of energy no longer seemed necessary in a world where the power supply seemed unlimited” (164). In their fiction, as I show in close readings within each chapter, these authors play out the technological changes they saw in their real modernizing worlds within imagined, modern cityscapes of their stories—including New York, London, and Paris. Even in the remote reaches of a Mediterranean island of exile, Moore's Ruth can't escape the wired, electric, and continually modernizing world. They use fiction, in other words, to explore what's possible in a world where every day new impossibilities seem possible, where modern technologies seemed to reconfigure human understandings of, and relationships to, the self and to others. From bustling city centers to serene island settings, the modernist women authors I study here suggest that modernity's energies, and especially the advent of electrical technologies, had profoundly altered norms in communication, speed, and travel — in the daily experiences and affective responses women would have to the modernizing world around them.

Electricity sparks and blazes in some of the strangest moments in literature by both men and women. And everywhere it appears, different dimensions of electrical power follow. It is, of course, the unnamed source of animating life force in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*;

there, lightning conjures the “blasted stump” that inspires Dr. Frankenstein’s horrific experiments. In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Margaret Fuller suggests the metaphysical powers of electricity in her claim that a woman’s “especial genius” is “electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency.” Walt Whitman famously sings of “the body electric,” and of the “mad filaments” of a woman’s body, a poetics of human existence that uses electricity to conjure both the raw physicality and intellectual curiosity of human beings. For William James, the ideal woman—beautiful, charming, and interesting—and indeed, the best “American type,” is a personality he calls “bottled lightning,” a total embodiment of natural electric energy that renders the body tireless and the mind free of anxiety. Texts from Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Premature Burial” (1844) to Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s Court* (1889) feature electric experiments. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle uses electricity in “Crabbe’s Practice” to stage a fake death, where a supposed corpse can be reanimated and promise a physician the notoriety he desires. Electricity animates dystopian and fantasy worlds in H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and Edward Bellamy. In Stephen Crane’s 1898 novella, *The Monster*, the “shimmering blue of the electric arc lamps” in a small town of New York illuminate the fluidly changing, modernizing crowds that live within it. In Theodore Dreiser’s 1900 novel *Sister Carrie*, the titular woman, upon her rise to higher social status, walks into a dining room lit entirely by “one tone of light” created by electric “incandescent lights” and the dizzying reflections of those lights in ceiling-high mirrors. For these turn-of-the-century authors, electricity renders the world a rapidly changing place, which invites some lucky social beings into its glow while casting others out into social (and often literal) darkness.

In literary modernism, electricity takes on other connotations. In the opening lines of Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” the light that makes the cafe “clean and

pleasant,” is an electric one: “an old man...sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light” (29). That clean light creates a space that “some might need,” a respite and a safety from the anonymity and loneliness of 24-hour bodegas and dimly lit homes. *The Great Gatsby* distills Jay’s desire for Daisy into a glowing green light at the end of a dock; the ceaseless glow throughout the day and night suggests an electric current that flows, “born back ceaselessly,” alongside that memorable evening tide. For D.H. Lawrence, electricity is sexualized in the male and female body, in and between lovers, as in *Women in Love*, when a young woman releases “a dark flood of electric passion” from her lover and into herself. In a dynamic power balance, Lawrence writes “she had established a rich new circuit, a new current of passional electric energy, between the two of them, released from the darkest poles of the body and established in perfect circuit. It was a dark fire of electricity that rushed from him to her, and flooded them both with rich peace, satisfaction.” In Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, the unnamed narrator steals electricity from the city’s grid system to light his room, which he has wired with over a thousand light bulbs.

These are some of the most recognizable and best-known invocations of electricity in literary history. And many scholars have wondered about the curious presence of electric power in modern literature for a long time — especially in late-nineteenth century texts. As Sam Halliday’s study of texts by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, and Mark Twain shows, artists and scientists, at the turn of the twentieth century, used electricity to help them reimagine the human body and its relationship to the wider world. Laura Otis unpacks the “membrane-model” of the human body, which “reflect[s] both scientific fears of infection and nationalistic fears of infiltration” and “bases identity on resistance to external forces” (7). Enda Duffy has argued that “with the coming of the global energy economy, and the age of oil and electricity, the subject’s

own energy became an obsession” (211). Electricity, as an energy that was found inside the human body as well as seemingly everywhere outside of it, from lightning storms to telegraph stations, seemed to bridge the gap and to somehow flow between bodies and minds as easily as it flowed between wires or across the Transatlantic Cable. For Paul Gilmore, electricity in American Romantic texts, from Poe and Emerson to Whitman and Fuller, “figure[s] this kind of subjective universality, a kind of embodied transcendence” (5). In fiction, authors can take electricity to new spaces, make it represent new kinds of power or potential beyond scientific and technological reality at the time. Indeed, as Halliday has argued, electricity was “deployed” in late-nineteenth century literature as a “leitmotif”—and in its wide-ranging invocations, electric power became “far removed from those [settings] in which it was technologically applied, and where science could scarcely demonstrate its actual presence” (2). As Lieberman explains, “the association between electricity and modernity was not as natural or as obvious as it might seem from the perspective of our electronics-obsessed age. The correlation evolved over decades as *fin de siecle* writers revised the spiritualistic symbolism” into “new depictions of electricity as a symbol of industry or complexity” (5). The cultural and literary imagination, in other words, took electricity and its mysteries to new and strange places, where it could prompt questions from the profound, concerning the very nature of human existence, to the seemingly mundane: what would a woman look like under electric lights?

Fiction, as Halliday, Lieberman, Gilmore, Tim Armstrong, Richard Menke, Mark Goble, Mark Seltzer, Sara Danius, and Pamela Thurschwell have all explored, is a space where authors have historically entertained and explored cultural and scientific theories (and fantasies) about electric power. As Lieberman puts it, “Writers seized upon this emblem because it already had a rich aesthetic legacy and because its new industrial applications correlated this energy with

interconnection and action at a distance” (Lieberman 5). Historians Ernest Freeberg, Linda Simon, David Nye, Julie Cohn, and Carolyn Marvin have also studied cultural histories of electricity, where the artistic imaginings of literary authors, painters, and photographers begin to inform the wider cultural and social imagination about electric power as at the heart of modern life. Indeed, as Cohn puts it, “from telegraph wires, to railroads, to gas pipelines, to highway systems, to the Internet, networked technologies have heralded modernity for...two centuries. Electrification, from the very beginning, was nothing if not modern” (3). In their accounts of electrification processes, these historians illustrate the very blurred lines between what the general public believed electricity did do and what they believed it potentially *could* do.

Newspapers, magazines, and advertisements likewise perpetuated these blurred lines. Halliday explains that “electricity complicated distinctions between oppositions such as life and death, matter and spirit, physical and metaphysical, abstract and concrete, natural and artificial, and functioned as a sign for paradoxical amalgams in each instance” (6). As I show in my chapter on Wharton and New York City, for example, articles from the long-standing medical journal *The Lancet* both championed and forewarned against the awesome powers and potentials of electricity: “The New Street Danger” and “The Dangers of Electricity” coexist alongside articles such as “On the Application of Electricity in Medical and Surgical Practice” and “Electricity in the Modern City.”² In 1893, an architect wrote that “Incandescent electric light is the acme of all methods of lighting” (qtd in Nye 96). But historian Nye points out the dangers of these innovations: “telephone and electric lines could cause shocks, short circuits, and fires. The telephone could ring at 3 AM” (96). Modernism “thus works within a radically altered scientific

² These titles come from volumes of *The Lancet* ranging from 1894 to 1898. “The New Street Danger,” *The Lancet* 145:3728 (1895): 360-361. “The Dangers of Electric Lighting,” *The Lancet* 156: 4030 (1900): 1518. H. Lewis Jones, “On the Application of Electricity in Medical and Surgical Practice,” *The Lancet* 155:3993 (1900): 695-699. Thomas Commerford Martin, “Electricity in the Modern City,” *The Lancet* 138:3 (1894): 198-211.

field; a world...which seems to have dissolved into elegant paradox” (Armstrong, “Vibrating World” 121).

How was it possible that one energy could come to represent so many opposing forces and so much profound power—from coursing through city streets and illuminating drawing rooms to connecting and disconnecting individuals from society, electrocuting a living body or re-animating a long-dead corpse? What, more simply put, are the limits of electricity in modernist literature? In my dissertation, I draw on this strong foundation of scholarly research and cultural histories of electricity to shift our gaze from the frequently invoked electrical references in literary history—Whitman’s “body electric” being the go-to reference—to look at a diverse range of modernist women authors. By juxtaposing analysis of the American Naturalist Wharton and Imagist poet H.D. to the experimental and psychological prose of Rhys and Moore, I suggest that they use fiction to take electricity to extremes in search of the seemingly non-existent boundaries of electric power. What they often end up showing, my dissertation reveals, are not the limitations of electric power, but the limits of human life, of an artist’s imagination, of a woman’s emotional and psychological capacities.

While previous scholarship has explored so many references to electricity in literary history, many women authors are missing from this foundational analysis. Many scholars, like Armstrong and Halliday, reference Margaret Fuller’s theories about women’s power as a key touchpoint in the history of electricity, but center their readings on Henry Adams, Henry James, Ezra Pound, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Thomas Edison. Caleb Smith starts his brilliant essay on gender and electricity with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s line from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: “Liberty—electric word!” to illustrate how many authors, like Stowe and Walt Whitman, use an electric vocabulary to “picture a self freed from fixity and self-enclosure” (111). But Smith’s true

focus is Henry James's 1898 short novel, *In the Cage*. Armstrong devotes a section in his 2005 book *Modernism, Technology, and the Body* to exploring "technologies of gender," though his reading is centered on Oscar Wilde's *Salome* and not on any modernist literature authored by women. This isn't to fault their research, but rather to point out the curious gap—that male authors are often the ones we've critically turned to when looking at the effects of and definitions of electricity in literary history.³

Lieberman's 2018 study of electricity in *Power Lines: Electricity in American Life and Letters, 1882-1952* is the first to devote a whole chapter to a woman author's treatment of electric theories in her fiction. She argues that Charlotte Perkins Gilman "fosters a hybrid understanding of electricity," by invoking a complex "blend of evolutionary and electrical prejudices" in *Herland* and other texts, ultimately presenting a fully networked image of society as an "electrical utopia" (93). As much more than metaphor, electricity in Gilman's work (along with, Lieberman argues, Edward Bellamy's) takes on the "sinewy" connotations of the human body, in which "Gilman and many writers of her era construe power lines as 'nerves' and 'tissues'" (94). Throughout this large body of scholarship on electricity in literature, Lieberman is the first to draw attention specifically to what a woman writer does with these tensions. As Armstrong's work on *Salome* and Lili Elbe shows, critics have been invested in the intersections of gender and electricity. But to date, there has not been a fuller study of how women modernists—like those I survey here—deal with historically masculine discourses of science and technology, or their arguments about how these traditionally masculine discourses create the

³ In her 1995 book *The Gender of Modernity*, Rita Felski asks "How would our understanding of modernity [be changed] if instead of taking male experience as paradigmatic, we were to look instead at texts written primarily by women? And what if feminine phenomena, often seen as having a secondary or marginal status, were given a central importance in the analysis of the culture of modernity? What *difference* would such a procedure make?" (Harvard University Press, pp. 10). This foundational question has inspired ongoing modernist examinations of the literary canon and of what topics we focus on when we look at writing by women.

diverse and imbalanced social tensions that women keenly experience in the novels I read in each chapter.

As many of these scholars show, the technological and scientific fields concerning electricity were, throughout the early twentieth century, still coded as masculine spaces, where men were considered to have more knowledge of the human mind and body, but also to be able to wield more control over the social spaces—cities, roads, homes—where electric lighting was installed throughout the first few decades of the century. Most of the names of doctors and inventors that we align with these emerging fields today are men: electric light’s key inventors and distributors, Tesla, Edison, Westinghouse; and those psychologists who first theorized how electric power would change society, A.D. Rockwell, George Beard, and Georg Simmel. My dissertation, building on this bedrock of literary criticism, represents the first study of how modernist *women* authors write about and explore the scientific and technological theories of electric power in their fiction, not as a masculine area of inquiry but as a modern innovation that yielded effects on everyone in society.

I see my dissertation as a logical extension of this body of scholarship that has long wondered about electricity in modern literature. My dissertation argues that Wharton, H.D., Rhys, and Moore all see electricity as a modernizing force that would and did impact women’s lives in different ways than it did men’s lives. As my chapter on Rhys’s fiction shows, electric streetlamps and modern lighting systems blatantly illuminate the physical and psychical discomforts, the systemic social inequities, endured by women in the working and lower classes—as they do in *Good Morning, Midnight*, when a young woman tells her friend that “the light in the workrooms isn’t so good. Sometimes your eyes hurt so much that you can hardly open them” (134). H.D. and Moore both understand electricity as having the potential to inspire

new modern arts and make possible entirely new artistic forms and genres. Gender plays a key role in each of their theories. In Moore's *Spleen*, for example, electric light becomes a sign of a bright new future; for male artists, but not necessarily for female artists, it is the "salvation of Art!" (157). For H.D., artistic impulses are electric, and as such, can reach *any* artist, regardless of gender, as my chapter explores. Wharton, for her part, through the overt comparison she draws between Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, suggests that a fully modernized and electrified world might have more opportunity in it for a woman like Ellen than any era before. By showing the diverse deployments of electricity across Wharton's, H.D.'s, Rhys's, and Moore's works, I hope to illustrate a wide-open terrain of yet-undiscovered moments in literary history where we still have something to discover about electricity and how modernist women authors thought about its potential and its power.

The above snapshots from the novels I discuss in this dissertation reveal the vast cultural and scientific dimensions of electricity, and how modernist women authors deploy such dimensions to galvanize their fiction with modern tensions between the individual and society, the mind and the body, and the past and the future. In strange and captivating moments throughout each novel, electricity seems to take on a character all its own—becoming a profound power that runs in and between bodies within a fictional society, as well as a key hermeneutic that runs between novels as thematically and formally diverse as *The House of Mirth* and *Spleen*. Across the following four chapters, I explore how these modernist women authors map electric power's slow crawl from mysterious innovation to everyday reality during modernity. Each article explores nonfiction and fiction works in depth to trace their invocations of, and theories about, electric power. My dissertation explores key moments like those I've listed above to suggest that there's something magical, odd, and deeply meaningful about electric lights in

modernist fiction. These lights, far from being a mere incident or feature of a novel's settings, help give shape to the very structure or form of these authors' modernist experiments. As Sam Halliday, an early literary critic in studying electricity in fiction, puts it, electricity in literature is "simultaneously a means of representation and an object of representation in its own right" (2).

This perceived ability of electricity to shift states—to be both a physical presence and spiritual energy—is explained by Paul Gilmore: "electricity was simultaneously and variously conceived of as a material fluid, as a spiritual medium, as a disembodied force, and these various conceptions supported considerations about the relationship between physical vitality and electricity, as it came to be seen as identical to or analogous with both the nervous fluid and life itself" (6). While some of these texts, like *Spleen and Nights*, are more experimental compared to the more linear and plot-driven *The House of Mirth*, what I argue across my dissertation is that across the broad category of "modernist literature by women," there are many unexpected invocations of electricity, and electric lights specifically, as both representations of women's internal mental states, social anxieties, and sexual energies *and* as objects "in [their] own right," as a lamp in the drawing room or a street-light casting shadows. In all these invocations, electricity carries the weight of metaphysical and scientific meanings across centuries of psychical research and artistic wonder. Across my close readings of their novels, I show how these modernist women authors both question and perpetuate cultural fantasies about electric power.

In my chapter on Edith Wharton, I explain how for Wharton, who was in many ways herself entrenched in Old New York society, electricity is an infiltrating force that was slowly but radically altering social life in turn-of-the-century New York. In *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, electricity is both the system and everywhere in the system, from the city

streets and shops to her characters' own bodies and minds as “undercurrents” of thought, as “throbbing” headaches, as electric shocks and flashes of epiphany. Put more simply, electricity offers Wharton a way to think about systems in a layered way: as both technological and material reality of a historical moment and as an apt metaphor for the ways that systems produce character. For Wharton, electric lighting would play a profound role in New York City — not just as a key innovation of a historical moment, but also as an infiltrating force that would help to determine how well any individual might “fit” in a modern world. In my readings of Lily Bart, Newland Archer, and Ellen Olenska, I show how Wharton’s treatment of electricity suggests a modernist ethos more committed to a project of decentering and questioning than of simply recording and centering a singular view of New York in the early 1900s.

My second chapter explores how, for the modernist poet and novelist H.D., the mind of a modern artist must work like an electric receiving center—a telegraph station, where inspiration can flow and spark between their mind and the “impressions” that circulate around works of art, like the Charioteer of Delphi. In his book *Telegraphic Realism*, Richard Menke argues that the advent of telegraphy drew “attention to how ‘thought’ was transmitted in the flows of an electric network” and how such an understanding of thoughts as material substance “could inspire new considerations of what consciousness might look like outside the human mind” (7). My chapter demonstrates how H.D., inspired by technological theories of electric wires and flows of power, begins to theorize artistic inspirations as a material that flows in and out of the human body. I show how her aesthetic theories from an early set of experimental essays, *Notes on Thought and Vision* from 1919, inform her 1935 novella, *Nights*, in which she follows the curious artistic endeavors of a young woman who believes she can turn her body into a wire, or a conduit, for artistic and sexual impulses to run freely.

This desire to become a conduit for pure artistic energy was shared by many modernists, and my third chapter focuses on Olive Moore's version of it. In Moore's collection of nonfiction essays *The Apple is Bitten Again*, she theorizes, drawing on scientific and medical thought at the time, that electricity is the animating force of life. But women, Moore sardonically tells us, are less adept at regulating the electric forces of their own bodies—and therefore less able to break free of their biological bodies and reproductive capacities to become truly original artists. In her 1930 novel *Spleen*, I show—similarly to how I do in my H.D. chapter—the ways that Moore's own theories about art and energy make their way into her fiction. In *Spleen*, I argue, Moore's central character, a woman named Ruth who has given birth to a physically and mentally disabled son, struggles against the gender role that seems to bind her only to reproductive creation and not to artistic originality. A male artist Ruth meets while raising her child claims that electricity will forever change art in the modern world, and my chapter unpacks this strange exclamation as inherently tied to Moore's misogynistic beliefs about art, potential, and the value of human life to make "something new."

Finally, in my fourth chapter, I show how Jean Rhys deploys electric lights in her novels to illuminate social inequities in modern cities, where women navigate both figurative and literal darkneses in the 1930s. Like Wharton, Rhys dramatizes the way electrification had wholly changed modern cityscapes. From electric streetlamps, well-lit lavabos, and red neon bulbs, to bustling cinemas, deserted streets, and shabby hotel bedrooms, Rhys casts alterity under the "strange" lights of modernity, where her destitute women—and their strange mental states—might finally be recognized. In my reading of *Good Morning, Midnight*, I make new connections to the historical context of the international exposition she evokes, illustrating how knowledge of the actual 1937 technological exhibition reveals Rhys's deeper understanding of how

technological innovations had infiltrated Paris. Under these strange lights, I argue, Rhys uses her fiction to highlight the endless torment that modern society wrought for undervalued and mistreated women.

In her essay *Modern Lighting*, Elizabeth Bowen writes:

All day...our tone of living is conditioned for us: rain-light, sunlight, penetrating foginess, or a metallic sunlessness that lets nothing through....But past twilight, we can create circumstance. In the smaller visible world we enlarge personally....We can arrange our lighting. We work like sculptors upon these blocks of pregnant darkness rooms have become. We can control shadow: place, check, and tone light. The response from a light-switch...personal as a perception (26)

Electric light renders the authors I cover in my dissertation artists who can “work like sculptors” on their surroundings, who can finally wrest control away from the sun and the night for their own purposes. This is a power that H.D., Wharton, Rhys, and Moore all deploy as they use lighting to craft modern settings and moods where the psychical becomes the physical, where they, through their characters and their prose, “sharpen perception for us to the foremost, most brittle pencil-point” (Bowen 26) and show us new dimensions of electric power in modern literature.

Reading electricity in modernist women’s literature, I ultimately argue, opens up for us new ways of reading a text’s settings and its characters’ interiority—and of understanding how these authors thought about the interplay between exteriors and interiors. This reading of electricity suggests new ways, therefore, of studying what makes a text modernist. My dissertation shows how these authors use electricity to help them excavate the inner thoughts of individual women, to trace the telepathic connections between minds, and to highlight how social systems create profound and lasting gender inequities.

In a 1968 advertisement, a young blonde woman in a white bodysuit is silhouetted in shadow, half of her shapely form illuminated by a bright light. “Electric woman” is the headline, in a large, bold serif font, with stacks of tiny midcentury body copy that states, among so many other things, “Without electricity a girl might as well live in the dark ages. But with it, watch her shine” (Nye 186). By paying attention to the electric when it appears in the aforementioned modernist novels, I suggest we don’t just track a prevalent theme. We witness one of modernity’s central preoccupations from these modernist writers’ perspectives, as they wonder how electricity might forever alter the way women live their lives. Would it lead a woman into a new, modern life where she might “shine”? Electricity holds so many opposing meanings—of life and death, of human and machine—and in these polar tensions, it invites Wharton, H.D., Moore, and Rhys to seek out the limits of those tensions, and to newly illuminate the boundaries between a woman and everything wildly changing all around her in modernity.

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ELECTRIC LIGHTS IN WHARTON'S FICTION

It's clear from her 1897 nonfiction work, *The Decoration of Houses*, that Edith Wharton considered electric lighting an infiltrating modern force that was slowly changing her world. As she puts it, "electric light...with its harsh white glare, which no expedients have yet overcome, has taken from our drawing-rooms all air of privacy and distinction" (128). Electric lights, in Wharton's decorative schema, challenged two things she prized: private space for respite from the social sphere, and the unique, character-making touches that make one home distinct from another. Electric light, in other words, blazes too brightly—it threatens interiority by removing privacy and character. That would make such interiors, for Wharton, unlivable. In this chapter, I explore how Wharton's sentiments about electric lighting inform the way she writes electricity into two of her novels that concern the intimate and interior spaces of Old New York as they modernized: *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Indeed, in both of these novels, electric light infiltrates not only the private domestic spaces of Lily Bart and Newland Archer; it also eventually infiltrates their minds and thoughts and causes them to question their fitness for modern society, whether they, like Wharton, will find modern spaces unlivable.

Wharton's anxieties about electric light—that it would forever alter, and in her 1897 opinion essentially *ruin* interior, private space—were echoed in the larger social conversations about electric lighting at the time. As I show in this chapter, Wharton's two aforementioned novels help us see contemporary reactions to the slow creep of electricity into city spaces. These include public streets, shops, and factories, as well as domestic spaces, where the confrontation between the private, interior space for reflection and peace clashes with electric lighting technologies that, Wharton would argue, should only be used in highly trafficked public spaces.

The proper role for electric light, she claims, is to illuminate public and utility spaces like “passageways and offices” where it is a “great service” (128). Used in the wrong way, however, electricity “makes the salon look like a railway-station, the dining-room a lit restaurant” (129). There’s a uniquely domestic danger to electricity, here, in which a rush to embrace “modern improvements” actually renders the home a public space—far from the intimate, meaningful spaces Wharton thought those spaces should be. Wharton’s sentiments toward electricity’s infiltration of New York City—as that harsh and ruining glare—map onto larger cultural anxieties about how electricity would change the world. Wharton’s Old New York society, which she viewed as a tightly bound network of power, was increasingly interrupted by innovations like electrical lighting. And these two novels about people searching for safety and continuity in *fin de siècle* New York showcase how little Wharton thought that such a life, such stability, would be possible in an electric city.

In contrast to harsh electric lighting, Wharton suggests that it’s “the soft, evenly diffused brightness of wax candles” to which the “subtleties” of a room and its art “owe half their expressiveness” (129). In her decorative schema, Wharton clearly positions electric lighting as a transformative energy in a home: it can make intimate spaces appear gauche and public; it removes “expressiveness,” once again threatening the distinction that gives any home its unique character. And she was not only a proponent of such design principles; she lived by them and designed her own home around them. In the home she built for herself and her husband Teddy Wharton at the turn of the century, The Mount in Lenox, Massachusetts, Wharton tucked her own private bedroom (one she did not ever share with Teddy) behind a maze of other rooms, accessible only through a private hallway, bordered only by Teddy’s private closet. For Wharton, the home and the bedroom should be a dedicated private space, away from busy streets and

modern social life. Indeed, it was in this tucked away bedroom—one filled with windows, but no overhead lights—that Wharton began writing *The House of Mirth* in 1904. By 1905, as historian David Nye points out, fewer than 10 percent of homes were wired for electricity and electrical lighting. Much of this had to do not only with the relative newness and costs of such technologies but also with sentiments like Wharton's, which reveal an anxiety that electricity would transform the safe, private, and quiet spaces of home into modern, bustling spaces more resembling a crowded "railway-station" or "restaurant" than a haven from modernity's frantic pace.

Wharton herself was interested in how social moments, and the technologies in them, could shape an individual life. Indeed, in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, Wharton 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). For Wharton, "then" and "now" become specific eras of meaning: time before modern technology and time after it. Scholars have paid much attention to the way Wharton herself related to the modernization of New York City and the wider world she loved to travel. Shari Benstock, for example, calls her "a thoroughly modern woman...enamored of motor cars, telephones, the telegraph, radio, gramophone and record player, high-speed transatlantic steamers, and paved roads" (33). Others, such as Nancy Bentley, describe Wharton as more ambivalent than enamored: "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). Critics certainly agree Wharton was highly adaptable—willing to engage in the modern moment by focusing and reflecting on it in her novels, essays, and travel writing. Scholars have studied the

ways that “Wharton wrote exuberantly of ‘the wonder-world of nineteenth century science’” (Singley 90), and a recently published website run by Wharton scholar Sheila Liming (edithwhartonslibrary.org) is dedicated to carefully archiving what remains of Wharton’s library at The Mount.⁴ That library, slowly rebuilt over the last few decades, is filled with voices from science, politics, the arts, philosophy, psychology, and literature.

The advent of electricity created fertile ground for cultural thinkers, like Wharton, as well as sociologists, medical professionals, and philosophers to consider how a single technology might impact the larger social landscape. And this kind of thinking inspired larger systemic observations, in which thinkers from all disciplines would imagine entire societies networked together in wholly new ways, as new work by Jennifer Lieberman has shown. Her 2019 work, *Power Lines*, traces references to electrical power and wiring systems in American literature, from Mark Twain to Charlotte Perkins Gilman and beyond. Her work includes no readings of Wharton’s work, however, and thus I see my intervention here as both relating to and expanding on some of Lieberman’s observations. In this chapter, I argue that we can observe how Wharton begins to record such thinking—imagining Old New York as a networked system of people and power—in her 1905 novel *The House of Mirth* and see how her thinking had evolved along these lines by the time she wrote *The Age of Innocence* in 1920. Broader cultural discourses of electric lighting and of electric power give Wharton a new way to think about and represent social power as a literal modern energy in these novels. Electricity, specifically, lends her a vocabulary to explore profound transmissions of human energy, new conceptions of bodily autonomy, minds filled with “wakeful” nerves and throbbing desires, and a closed social network being infiltrated

⁴ Liming’s 2020 book, *What A Library Means To a Woman* follows the archival history of Wharton’s library in sharp detail, offering deep insights to the kinds of works Wharton was reading, annotating, and sharing with her close social circle throughout her literary career.

by modern forces. In both novels, Wharton drives home her lasting Naturalist argument: that Old New York society was a closed system of profound power, one that focused its energy on self-sustaining action and would forcefully remove any threats to the system's network. But it could not sustain itself in modernity.

Indeed, as historians such as Nye point out, modernization made more public spaces more available to more people—and electricity played a key role in such shifts. The “alluring vision” of the modern city attracted more rural American emigrants than immigrants at the turn of the century (Nye 165). Ernest Freeberg, Linda Simon, Tim Armstrong, and others have explored how the modern city changed not only to draw new American demographics into the city, but also how the modern city electricity introduced wholly new ways of experiencing the city:

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, there was a shift away from cooperative group amusements and toward more public forms of amusement.... Electrification did not cause these developments, but it certainly enhanced them. Without electricity, motion pictures would have been virtually impossible to film or to project, and movie houses would not have been lavishly lighted. The amusement park would have had no lights, no loudspeakers, and only a few of its rides. The world's fairs would've closed at dusk. There would have been no radio, no flashing signs along the Great White Way, no alluring vision of the night city, no trolley rides to the country (165)

Thus, even as Old New York's tight network attempts to remain closed to outsiders, its boundaries were consistently weakening to infiltrating forces.

In her two aforementioned novels, Wharton stages this anxiety of infiltration as Old New York gives way to the modernizing forces of the early twentieth century. For her, electric lighting is as threatening as the *nouveau-riche* had become to the infamous List of 400, which contained New York's finest families in a literal list of who's who. The list, as wealth and status stretched to newcomers at the turn of the century, would grow—those who'd been on it for decades feeling their social boundaries pervaded by new forces. I read these infiltrations as

parallel forces, suggesting that Wharton's keen attention to electricity in both of these novels is not merely a consequence of her careful recording of historical moments, but is an intentional and thoughtful reflection on the ways technological changes leaked into individual bodies and minds, creating wholly new mindsets and modern sentiments about time, history, identity, and place.

Indeed, in these novels, Wharton examines the interplay between larger social powers and the individuals who experience them in modernizing cities, and how such an interplay generates profound anxiety for characters like Lily Bart and Newland Archer. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart struggles not to find a suitor (of those she has plenty), but a domestic partnership and home where she can safely and reliably reside in the quickly evolving New York City society in which she has been born, raised, and expected to thrive. In *The Age of Innocence*, set in the 1870s and following Newland Archer's life from bachelorhood to marriage and into his old age, Wharton frequently alludes to the evolving technological landscape that surrounds Newland and informs his ideals and definitions of home, love, and safety. In both novels she uses electric light to illuminate Lily's and Newland's anxieties about modernity and typifies those anxieties as a clash between the candlelit societies each was raised in and the fast-changing world in which each feels increasingly lost and confused. By exploring how each of these novels characterizes and deploys allusions to electric lighting, I argue that we can better understand how Wharton thought about the role of the individual in larger social systems.

In these novels, Wharton calls on the medical and scientific language of electricity to record how electricity moves from the city streets into the human body. She frequently alludes to trembling nerves and throbbing headaches, to profoundly bright lights, and to epiphanic moments of shock that rattle mind and body. In these characterizations, electric light becomes a

creeping force that moves from the city into the individual mind and body; electric energies circulate in Wharton's novels not only in the electrified city, but also within the minds of her characters, illuminating their anxieties about the modernizing world. What Lily of *The House of Mirth* and Newland of *The Age of Innocence* share most is their anxiety—the way they long, sometimes desperately, for the past because they're so nervous about what the modern American future means for their social lives. Wharton stages these anxieties as directly tied to electrification processes, and, as a result, problematizes the cultural narratives that would suggest electric lighting was a sign of unquestionable progress that would wholly benefit both the social body and individual within it. In this way, we see Wharton not only recording cultural and material history, but exploring how that history shaped individual minds as well as larger cultural discourses about progress and modernity. In both novels, Wharton responds to these narratives of electricity's potential by illustrating its limitations and short-comings—the way the promises of the city's modernity do not come true for Lily or Newland.

In addition to using electric lighting as a sign of cultural narratives about progress, in *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton also uses electricity as a *literal* material presence in modern life. She showcases it shining on bright city streets, in ballrooms, hotels, and offices, where it heralds New York's ongoing modernization. She also shows electricity in more intimate and interior spaces: the bedroom, the home office, eventually infiltrating even her character's minds and bodies. In these many evocations, Wharton not only records the very real spread of electric power through urban space at the turn of the century, but also uses contemporary discourses of electricity's mysterious powers, and its increasing presence in the landscapes (both mental and physical) that she explores, to question the boundaries between individual and society, self and other, and past and present. Wharton uses electricity, as a sign of

modernity, to experiment with a modernist literary technique: exploring the internal imaginative landscapes of individual characters.

In other words, Wharton uses a discourse of electricity to investigate both individual and social landscapes and to trouble the boundaries between character and setting much in the same way modernists like Virginia Woolf would do in the 1920s. In my view, this makes Wharton a modernist, rather than the “novelist of manners” or strict realist she is often studied as (Zak 111). Lynn Tillman has argued that Wharton’s “ideas were modern...but she was far from being a card-carrying modernist” (156). But others, like Yair Solan, have suggested that “The broad classifications of realist, naturalist, and modernist are insufficient in describing” Wharton’s novels (145). It’s best, perhaps, to read Wharton as a writer who blends literary genres to high effect. For while her “content may not be as radical or her form as experimental as that of Woolf, Lawrence, or Eliot, she does engage directly with concerns about women’s bodies in the technological age” (Zak 112). Indeed, Wharton’s treatment, exploration, and representation of cultural narratives about electric power at the turn of the century, and how those narratives might influence individual lives, suggests a modernist ethos more committed to a project of decentering and questioning than of simply recording and centering a singular view of New York in the early 1900s.

Scholarship on Wharton’s work has long celebrated her fictional prose as a deft recording of history and culture in a precise historical moment. *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* are Wharton at her best: each is filled with meticulous and precise detail that brings to life the material realities and felt social experiences of turn-of-the-century New Yorkers with nuance, wit, and ironic narration. But beyond mere recording of a moment, for Gary Totten, Wharton has “the ability to perceive the deeper cultural significance of material phenomena” (2).

Totten, Deborah Zak, and Carol Baker Sapora have each posited Wharton as a cultural observer who connects material lived experiences with her character's interior and mental states. These "imaginative landscapes" of intellectual and mental inspiration are shaped and profoundly influenced by the material world in which they circulate. Far from simply cataloguing her fictional spaces with the period ephemera, Wharton uses such materials to give a full picture of a precise historical moment. And just as she seems to collect material objects into her scenes, she also collects diverse perspectives and arguments about culture within her characters. Deftly moving between third-person narration and the interior turmoils of her characters, Wharton continually stages the tensions between inner and outer, between the mind and the material world that influences it. All of these elements "hel[p] us to see how Wharton embraces fluid rather than fixed notions of culture" (Singley 495).

In other words, Wharton doesn't just "reproduce metaphors" about the material and technological world in her stories. As Tim Armstrong puts it, speaking about some of Wharton's American peers, authors at the turn of the century "generate a world pulsating with energy" precisely due to new technological inventions that made the world feel more energetic and empowered than it had previously felt before (19). For Armstrong, "electric lighting and the development of the utilities and grids which supported it" create "more than just a technological shift" (21). These electrical innovations sparked profound cultural shifts, including what Jennifer Lieberman has called "systems thinking," or a new way of thinking about the systemic relationships between economics, society, and class in the nineteenth century. These are the cultural tensions Wharton responds to in her novels about two characters, Lily Bart and Newland Archer, who struggle to adapt to the modern world that confronts them, who are anxious about how they fit into the systems they can see at work in modernity.

Perhaps because of these anxieties about their fitness for modern society, both Lily and Newland long, at times desperately, to escape the social systems they feel themselves subscribed to; in the end, neither finds a new system. This is nothing new in Wharton. As Singley argues, Wharton's novels are "obsessed with vacillating tensions between stultifying social conditions and frequently imagined but seldom executed escapes from such environments" (496). As Singley suggests, Wharton's characters rarely escape their social conditions, and Lily and Newland are not exceptions. Instead, both feel themselves increasingly overwhelmed by social responsibilities, including in the realms of the financial and romantic. Newland ultimately chooses to constrict himself back into his social set and prescribed role by marrying May Welland; Lily, however, does not fulfill the social expectations put on her—and faces dire consequences. Electric light, appearing at key moments in the conclusions of both novels, demarcates the past from the future, marking the modern moments that Newland and Lily fail to meet. By using electric light to illuminate the profound desires and deep anxieties of her characters, Wharton highlights the profound way an individual's life could be reshaped by social power. While scholars such as Armstrong have pointed out that, at the turn of the century, many sociologists worried that an individual's desires might short-circuit social systems and lead to all kinds of deviancy and devolution, Wharton asserts, at the end of both *Mirth* and *Innocence*, the ultimate overpowering of the individual by the electrified social system—illuminating the power of the social network over individual sparks of resistance.

Rather than make Lily or Newland brutish examples of Naturalism, as Wharton's peer Frank Norris does to his titular character in his violent novel, *McTeague*, Wharton's violence is more subtle; these novels do not blame Lily or Newland for their submission to social forces, or imply that their submissions to cultural norms necessitate shame. This is perhaps what makes

these novels modernist. By reading Lily and Newland side-by-side, as twinned examples of Wharton's finesse in character building and cultural recording of New York's social forces in the late-nineteenth century, this chapter argues that, for Wharton, the turn-of-the-century posed *impossible* questions of identity for those who experienced it. Positioned precariously at the cusp of what Wharton configures as a new world, Lily and Newland are two not-quite-modern characters, who, under the bright glare of electric lights, see their worlds changing in ways they know they are, tragically, in the wrong generation to enjoy. Even as these novels seem to memorialize Old New York, detailing both its beauties and sometimes hideous truths, neither is an elegy or sentimental romance about the past. Instead, I read both as modernist portraits of characters increasingly shocked and confronted by the modern world. Newland Archer clings to the rules and laws of the traditional, even as he feels that world suffocating him and his desires for a different life. Lily Bart seems perfectly suited for only slightly different cultural and familial circumstances. As a product of her historical moment, however, she will become a tragic victim of modern social power; when Lily fails to adapt to a fast-changing New York financial landscape, there's simply nowhere else for her to go. In this precarious position, readers cannot hold them responsible—in the strict, tight worlds Wharton binds them to—for these failures. By reading Wharton's New York as a tightly controlled system of power, filled with individuals who are surrounded by that power, but cannot access it for themselves, Wharton suggests a systemic, rather than individual, culpability for such failures. It's through the language of an energetic, evolving social system, one newly illuminated with electric power and lights, that Wharton evokes this stratified world.

In *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, electricity is both the system and everywhere in the system, from the city streets and shops to her characters' own bodies and

minds as “undercurrents” of thought, as “throbbing” headaches, as electric shocks and flashes of epiphany. Put more simply, electricity offers Wharton a way to think about systems in a layered way: as both technological and material reality of a historical moment and as an apt metaphor for the ways that systems produce character. For Wharton, electric lighting would play a profound role in New York City — not just as a key innovation of a historical moment, but also as an infiltrating force that would help to determine how well any individual might “fit” in a modern world. She shows us that these complicated individuals were not simply cogs in larger social machines, but were little networks wholly unto themselves. Indeed, Wharton’s systems thinking was not just about the ways large systems would impact individuals, but also suggests that the individual self was a network within a network, a chaotic energetic field where electricity might run, diffuse and distinct simultaneously, where wakefulness might be experienced not as a sum total experience, but inside every nerve, where the mind might become a space that could be illuminated with modern epiphany.

Electric Connotations at World’s Fairs and in New Diagnoses

In the second half of the nineteenth century, world’s fairs and exhibitions staged the powers of electric light as “spectacle and sport,” but also as a symbol of social progress: “these expositions allowed millions to envision an electrified city of the future, a man-made environment that was orderly, elegant, and saturated with light” (Freeberg, 114). An 1873 article in *Popular Science Monthly* had posed the question of electricity’s power, “Is Electricity Life?” As Linda Simon points out, the article’s author, Henry Lake, painted it a benevolent, protective energy: “It is eminently social, and nestles around the form it inhabits....[it] is ever ready to diffuse its beneficence” (qtd in Simon, 49). And part of its perceived nature lay in the way it seemed to open up cities to new people and new possibilities. “Comply with electricity’s

conditions,” one writer put it, “then but turn a key, and the servant of all life will be present in light and power” (Freeberg, 14). Electric lighting promised more hours for productivity and for play in the city: “the new technologies looked...like ‘benevolent agencies,’ capable of giving men and women more control over their lives than any generation had ever known” (Freeberg 14). As Nye points out, “regular public electric lighting first appeared in the late 1870s as a spectacular form of display in city centers and at expositions and fairs” (165). Department stores, theaters, exclusive night clubs, and even “the wealthiest homes” began embracing Edison’s electrical incandescent light systems, which weren’t simply one-off innovations, but entire systems of wiring and lighting that could create the spectacular light-ways and blazing streets found in New York and Chicago.

But electricity, at this same time, was also increasingly associated with anxiety and hysteria. Silas Weir Mitchell, George M. Beard and A.D. Rockwell, for example, penned medical and scientific theories of electric power at the turn of the century which came to be treated as “the standard texts on electric medicine in the 1870s and 1880s,” and throughout their careers, posited theories of “American Nervousness” that could be directly linked to the shocking and “debilitating effects of modernity” (Armstrong 15). As Rachel Maines describes, doctors and scientists at this time “estimated that as many as three-quarters of the female population were ‘out of health,’ and that this group constituted America’s single largest market for therapeutic services” (5). Beard termed the commonly occurring nervous exhaustion brought on by the strains of modern life “neurasthenia,” which became the *most* diagnosed psychiatric ailment in the final decades of the century. Women, in particular, seemed to require overt medical attention for their neurasthenia. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” famously illustrates

a woman undergoing a rest cure for neurasthenia in the late nineteenth century. Wharton herself was prescribed a rest cure after illness and what her doctors called a mental breakdown in 1898.

Electricity, in particular, was at once a cause of increased anxiety and the potential cure for it. Modernization was often pinpointed as the root cause of neurasthenia in medical and psychological texts from Oliver Wendell Holmes and Mitchell. As Mitchell puts it in his essay “Wear and Tear, or Hints for the Overworked” from 1872, in which he blames women’s “remarkably sensitive” nature as evidence for their propensity for diagnosis, “it is sad to think that the demands of civilised life” make a woman’s weakness “unavoidable” (438). Maines traces the many electric vibratory devices that entered the medical, and later, public markets as treatments for women’s “hysteria,” at the same time that narratives about the dangers of electricity circulated across the country, warning consumers of the dangers of the currents flowing through their streets and homes. As a therapeutic energy, electricity might be harnessed to keep social order by keeping women out of ill-health; as an infiltrating energy, electricity might cause all kinds of new social ills and overstimulation.

Across these many contradictions and connotations, electricity simultaneously symbolized order and control, chaos and the unknown. It also symbolized cultural fears and excitement about its potential to change society. In many historical narratives—including newspapers, magazines, and in the displays and advertisements for ongoing World’s Fairs—the electric light became synonymous with progress, societal advancement, and human evolution toward more powerful states. For example, articles from the long-standing medical studies journal *The Lancet* both champion and forewarn against the awesome powers and potentials of electricity: “The New Street Danger” and “The Dangers of Electricity” coexist alongside articles such as “On the Application of Electricity in Medical and Surgical Practice” and “Electricity in

the Modern City.”⁵ From popular history, such as Linda Simon’s *Dark Light* and Ernest Freeberg’s *The Age of Edison: Electric Light and the Invention of Modern America*, to the more strictly academic, such as Tim Armstrong’s *Modernism Technology, and the Body*, Mark Micale’s *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940*, and Mark Seltzer’s *Bodies and Machines*, scholars and historians have studied the relationship between modernist thinkers and modernity’s electric innovations. In all these texts—late-twentieth or twenty-first century reflections—authors explore the many ways that electricity took on an identity all its own as the pharmakon of the modern age: both a cause of and cure for modern anxiety. By reading Wharton through this academic lineage of research, I argue that electricity, as a technology and system in Wharton’s narrative worlds, reveals the boundaries of social power even as it seems to reinforce the power of those boundaries.

In the following sections, I first read *The House of Mirth* as informed by her sentiments about “harsh” electric light, by reading the novel as a slow but eventually deadly infiltration of electric power into Lily Bart’s environment and mind. Then, I read *The Age of Innocence* in much the same way: as a careful tracing of the slow electrification of New York City, noted by Newland Archer’s close perspective that the novel likewise carefully traces. By the end of that novel, we can see how Newland’s world has been all but pervaded by electric and modern technologies and lighting systems. But by the time Wharton wrote *The Age of Innocence*, 15 years had passed, across which Wharton had continued to observe the proliferation of electrical innovations; by then, her systemic views of New York had expanded and evolved. By juxtaposing Lily Bart, who experiences an electrically infused death, with the less damning

⁵ These titles come from volumes of *The Lancet* ranging from 1894 to 1898. “The New Street Danger,” *The Lancet* 145:3728 (1895): 360-361. “The Dangers of Electric Lighting,” *The Lancet* 156: 4030 (1900): 1518. H. Lewis Jones, “On the Application of Electricity in Medical and Surgical Practice,” *The Lancet* 155:3993 (1900): 695-699. Thomas Commerford Martin, “Electricity in the Modern City,” *The Lancet* 138:3 (1894): 198-211.

outcome lived out by Newland Archer in Wharton's later novel, we can see not only Wharton's evolution in her thinking about society but also in her sentiments toward electric light—that it was not only a technology that might transform interior spaces of the home and mind, but also one that might light the way to modern life.

Illuminating Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*

The House of Mirth is a novel about the tolls of modern life on a young woman's body and mind, and Wharton uses a scientific vocabulary of electricity's impacts to reveal, in exacting language, the extent of these tolls. While the word "electric" appears just 9 times in the text, "nerve" or "nerves" appear 24 times, almost always in reference to tremors (4) or throbs (15) in the body. There are 22 instances of "shock" and 96 uses of the word "mind." There are 9 references to "energy." There are 249 uses of the word "light," and 58 of the word "dark." I argue that Wharton uses an electric vocabulary—infused with medical and psychological language about the human mind and modern body—to give shape to Lily's particularly modern predicament. Lily seems fixed into a tight framework in which her nerves, her mind, and her body will undergo profound confrontation.

This vocabulary is both technological and modern, and strains of scholarship in the last ten years have explored how Wharton treats technological histories in her novels. For Gary Totten, "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). Carol Baker Sapora illustrates Wharton's treatment of new light technologies, and especially electric lighting, in her analysis of *The Custom of the Country* (284). It is the central character of that novel, Undine Spragg, who, rather than show us what society is,

shows us what it *lacks* and “thus distinguish[es] the cultural values Wharton deems must be preserved despite the glaring lights and dazzling reflections of modern technologies” (285). Deborah 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, Totten, Sapora, and Zak suggest that rather than an outright champion of electric lighting technologies, Wharton advocates for critical thinking and reflective inquiry *by* women *about* the technologies that necessarily come into, and play a role, in their modern lives. Lily seems unable to perform such mental work.

Indeed, Lily’s mind is not the highly adaptive one Wharton implies she needs to thrive in modernity. Take, as a key example of this, Lily’s Aunt Peniston’s home, where she lives. It is stiflingly bright: “The house, in its state of unnatural immaculateness and order, was as dreary as a tomb, and as Lily...wandered into the newly-uncovered glare of the drawing-room she felt as though she were buried alive in the stifling limits of Mrs. Peniston's existence” (99-100). Under such lights, Peniston’s home does not feature the “evenly diffused” and “soft” light that Wharton felt was so essential to domestic spaces in *The Decoration of Houses* (128-9). Lily, forced to live with her aunt after the death of her parents, inhabits a domestic space that is neither warm nor welcoming; this anti-domesticity is heightened by the glaring and cold electric lights of Peniston’s modernizing house, run by a woman obsessed with efficiency and cleanliness. Those “vivid” and “concentrated” lights are “not needful” in the domestic space (*Decoration of Houses* 129). That kind of light, for Wharton, removes all the “privacy and distinction,” and will be the

kind of light that, throughout the novel, threatens Lily's privacy (via her innermost thoughts) and her distinctive character (what makes up her social identity). The lighting in Peniston's home, revealed early on as an affront to Lily, clues us into the precise weakspots in her constitution that Wharton will continue to expose throughout the text as Lily moves through gardens, hotel lobbies, and city streets. In each confrontation with that infiltrating electric force, Lily longs for a less confronting and more habitable world of dim, diffused lights—the lights of a private, distinctive home and not of the modernizing American city.

This positioning—of a woman ill-fit for modernity at the heart of the modernizing city—makes Lily tragic. First published in 1905, *The House of Mirth* takes place during a period of American culture characterized by a startling influx of new technologies, electric lighting chief among them, as well as new modes of communication, such as the telegraphy and wireless telegraphy. The novel takes us on a material tour of New York, starting with the “radiant” Lily, with her “vivid head” capturing Lawrence Selden's attention in a crowded, hot railway station (*Mirth* 4). From scene to scene, in lush detail, Wharton's precise prose depicts an intensely saturated world of technological change and offers a portrait of *fin de siècle* New York City as a whole new world lit by electric lamps, ringing with bells and telephones, and busily criss-crossed by speeding trains and crowded streets. In fact, the opening scene configures Lily standing precariously still in a bustling and crowded Grand Central Station, asking Selden if there is “a quieter place” they might steal away for tea (5). Among the throng, Lily is an “arresting” individual, a dazzling and distinct woman. In fact, in early drafts of the novel, the story was titled *A Moment's Ornament*, marking Lily as both the perfect product of her social moment and as the beautiful, distinctive object that so arrests Selden's gaze. But under the wrong lights, like the furniture in *Decoration of Houses*, Lily will slowly lose the air of distinction that makes her so

alluring. She will soon be swept into the speeds of her modern city and story, and will struggle to keep pace.

Indeed, the first few pages of the novel are a flurry. Lily seems to flit and pulse with modern movements across town. After taking tea with Lawrence Selden and running into Simon Rosedale—a member of the nouveau-riche who *owns* the building of bachelors that houses Selden—Lily “sprang into the rescuing vehicle,” and rides to catch an afternoon train. Soon after boarding, she meets a third man, yet another suitor, Percy Gryce. As she walks to settle herself comfortably in his sights, “the train [gives] a lurch,” and puts her directly in his path (18). These first few scenes configure Lily in a state of immense speed and evolving expectations for marriageable women. In such a state, surrounded by male admirers both well within and on the boundaries of Old New York society, Lily is “a skilful (sic) operator” (20). She maneuvers all these shifting scenes with the finesse of a well-trained social subject. But we soon learn that for all her lovely appearances, Lily struggles with a deep anxiety about her place in the social circles that she can tell are rapidly evolving around her. From her waning beauty to her desires for a less conventional life, Lily will struggle to adapt to modernity’s demands.

Consider this example, from early in the novel: After a long night of playing bridge, Lily returns to her bedroom to find that she has lost over three hundred dollars and sits down at her writing desk to calculate her financial standing. “Her head was throbbing with fatigue, and she had to go over the figures again and again....of course she had lost—she who needed every penny” (27). Characterized with the contemporary language of nerves and neurasthenia, Lily “throbs” with financial and social anxieties. She “sat before the mirror brushing her hair” and “was frightened by two little lines near her mouth.” “Oh, I must stop worrying!” but immediately questions, “Unless it’s the electric light!” She springs from her desk to light candles and “[turn]

out the wall-lights” (28). As she “peer[s] at herself between the candle flames,” her face appears “waveringly from behind a background of shadows.” Yet even in this “uncertain light blurring it like a haze...the two lines about the mouth remained” (28). The electric, modern light has shown her a truth she can’t ignore—wrinkles that suggest her slow descent out of the bustling marriage market, her narrowing hopes for an advantageous match. Critically, her bedroom resides in Peniston’s glaring, modernizing home. Where we might expect a bedroom that meets Wharton’s own decorative specifications—a private space for safety and repose—Lily’s bedroom is instead the site of pervasive electric anxieties.

This scene in the mirror echoes larger fears about electricity from the time. As I show in my chapter on Jean Rhys, these were also fears that persisted for decades; in her novels, young women examine their faces for signs of aging or depression in the harsh lights of public restrooms. Lily’s fear that those “lines about the mouth” might only appear under electric lighting was a common sentiment, shared by many women at the turn of the century. At that time, popular electric arc lights were installed in many homes, but their lighting was imperfect—often flickering to create a “disorienting strobe effect” (Freeberg 18). Like the arc lights of the time, the electric light in Lily’s bedroom likely would “cast an unforgiving spotlight on the human face, exposing every wrinkle, blemish, and stray hair” (Freeberg 28). In fact, historical research suggests that some women, after a bad experience like Lily’s under such lights, “vowed never to be seen near electric light again” (Freeberg 28). And though Lily wants to blame the harsh electric lights for creating an illusion of age and wrinkles, even those warmer, diffusive candles still reveal her “lines.” Once she’s seen herself under electric lights, in other words, Lily’s view of herself—of her age, of her increasingly dire social situation—is changed. The modernizing world, one she doesn’t feel fit for, can’t be ignored. Instead, it will become a

haunting presence throughout the novel until she cannot outrun it anymore.

This brief, feverish moment that occurs at the outset of the novel reiterates a contrast between the natural lighting of candles and fire, and the harsh, artificial light produced by electricity. For GE lighting expert Matthew Luckiesh, there was a natural association between “warm yellow light” and the human soul; “the clear white light” of artificial electric lights couldn’t possibly compete (Freeberg 279). As I discuss in my chapter on Jean Rhys’s novels, street lights in her works have uncanny and unsettling effects. If warmer lights humanize, the “clear” and cold lights of electric street lamps tend to glare and shock. This is perhaps why Wharton expressed, in *The Decoration of Houses*, that electric lights must be shaded in order to lose their offensiveness. But there are no shades in Lily’s bedroom, or on the park benches where she sits late at night. Instead, there are garish spotlights that spark dissociative episodes for Lily, in which she becomes unrecognizable to herself. The mirror scene, an early and brief moment of Lily’s anxieties under electric light, anticipates many more moments in the novel where Lily will be confronted with electric lights and simultaneously experience anxiety about her appearance or social position. She experiences such moments in her bedroom, in that intimate domestic space, as well as out in the city streets, in parks and shops.

In fact, Wharton leverages continuous disorientation under electric lights to stage the larger unraveling of Lily’s social standing. Twenty-nine years old and unmarried, straining society’s limits and patience, Lily is surrounded by suitors at the outset—Selden, Rosedale, and Gryce. But she cannot seem to find the right partner or imagine a viable future with any of them. Wharton scholarship suggests that it is Lily’s inability to embrace the infiltrating forces of modernity that leads to her downfall. Nancy Bentley, Donna Campbell, and Nina Baym have all noted the threats of a new social order that pervade the text, especially in the *nouveau riche*

suitors and bachelors who chase her. In these analyses, they clearly articulate Wharton's interest in the fall of deeply-rooted social customs in the novel, but often fail to account for technology as a key modern tension that highlights precisely how these customs haunt characters like Lily as clear markers of a quickly-fading way of life. As I argue, the electric lights that surround her are precisely the kind of infiltrating force that, more than the men who court her, will shape her psychological state and her ability to fit into a modern world.

Indeed, Lily's mistake is believing she can persist under hazy candlelight when the world around her—the world of the stock market and real estate, of well-timed investments and advantageous marriages—is increasingly lit with stark, electric clarity. The severity of her naivety is heightened when she picks up the married Gus Trenor from the train station to bring him to Bellomont, and appealing as a damsel-in-distress, provokes “indignant sympathy” from him, so much that he agrees to invest money for her in stocks. Though this looks like a moment of security for Lily's fears, “She was too genuinely ignorant of the manipulations of the stock-market to understand [Trenor's] technical explanations, or even perhaps to perceive that certain points in them were slurred” (85). Lily's specific ignorance is rendered in terms of a dim and obscuring light: “the haziness enveloping the transaction served as a veil for her embarrassment, and through the general blur her hopes dilated like lamps in a fog” (85). Adrift in a fog of modern anxieties and financial concerns, Lily vaguely hopes that Trenor will help her, despite what is clear to readers: that this moment entraps Lily, puts her at Trenor's mercy. Lily's preference for the diffuse and vague will, the text foreshadows, lead to disastrous results.

If Lily's general confusion about modern finances is rendered as the fog in the previous scene, later scenes play out similar imagery to trace the increasing infiltration of these electric lights into Lily's life, as having increasingly dire effects on her social standing. The stark and

damning clarity of her wrinkles in her bedroom eventually becomes a lasting clarity that makes Lily stand out like a sore thumb in society. For example, her jealous cousin Grace Stepney's gossip—she has heard about Lily staying out “well after the lamps were lit”—causes their Aunt Peniston to refuse Lily a loan she desperately needs, a punishment for Lily “mak[ing] herself so conspicuous!” (27). Electric lights illuminate evolving boundaries of social propriety, and Lily, at times exhausted, at times defiant, brazenly skirts them. In a later scene, exhausted from the gossip and debt trailing her, Lily sits down on a bench in deserted gardens and “the electric lamp at the bend of the path shed 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 once again. Electric lights continually shine on Lily, making the fate Wharton has selected for her ever more stark. In her final attempts to secure stable social relationships, Lily “had the odd sense of having been caught up into the crowd as carelessly as a passenger is gathered in by an express train” (233). Compared to those earlier scenes in which Lily was a smooth, witty, and “skilful operator,” in the bustling train station, she is eventually passive, “caught up” by modern speeds, illuminated in her tragic trajectory by those blazing, modern lights.

Lily's high social standing eventually dissolves until she becomes a member of the working class—a social space filled with jarring electric lights—where she works first as a social secretary for Mrs. Norma Hatch, whom she first meets “in a blaze of electric light” (273), then, more desperately, as a milliner in Madame Regina's shop. In her tedious work as a milliner, Lily sits in a crowded room with 19 other women, all “with their fagged profiles, under exaggerated hair, bowed in the harsh north light above the utensils of their art” (282). As she moves through the city, now so fallen from her once stable and rich social position, Lily notes the way it has changed: “The day's task done, she dreaded to return to her narrow room, with its blotched

wallpaper and shabby paint; and she hated every step of the walk thither, through the degradation of a New York street in the last stages of decline from fashion to commerce” (287-288). Lily notes the modernizing New York as one in “decline,” one as unrecognizable to her now as her own reflection was in her bedroom mirror just months before. It’s in her lowered class position that Lily feels she finally clearly sees “behind the social tapestry...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 trains, machines, and technology. After falling even further, “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, again, yearns for haziness and concealment, but is increasingly confronted with “blazes” and “glares” of modern, electric light. This is a systemic view, too. Through the glares of electric light, Lily sees her social world as a machine, and this view renews her anxiety about her role within that “great civic machine.”

Plagued by these anxieties, 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” (311). Here, the streetlights are cold, contrasted with the warming light of fire from a hearth, the heart of a welcoming domestic space. Lily sits under that cold full blaze, yet another reminder of her lack of stable domestic space, against the day’s medical warnings that would tell her “too much exposure to the new light would cause eye diseases, nervous exhaustion, and freckles” (Freeberg 27). Yet there Lily sits, seemingly drawn like a moth to a flame, beneath the modern lights on the modernizing streets she feels compelled to roam. As night falls around her, Lily observes “stray figure[s], hurrying homeward...looming black for a moment in the white circle of electric light” (311). The imagery recalls contemporary observers’ comments about the new

lighting in Madison Square Garden in the 1880s: “people look ghastly” under electric light, they said. “Like so many ghosts flitting about” (qtd in Freeberg 27). In such a system, Wharton implies, there is no warmth of community for Lily, only “so many ghosts,” those haunting specters of the electrified city to which she cannot assimilate.

That glaring, cold electric light eventually becomes an internal mental state for Lily, who is finally unable to keep out these infiltrating modern forces. When she returns to her shabby apartment, she 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 made material, and Lily seeks an illuminating, energizing exchange from the “gleams” of her past. But at the moment she finishes packing her trunk, she receives her final inheritance check—the one that will barely cover her debts—and writes out the entire sum to cover her debt. In a moment of doom, 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). This eye-mind connection recalls late-nineteenth century optical experiments. Lily experiences an electrically “heightened self-consciousness” that “acts almost like the electricity or chemicals in Johannes Muller’s experiments, in which the application of electricity to the optic nerve or the ingestion of narcotics causes uncomfortable sensations of light” (Saltz 41). The result is not only a metaphor about social power overcoming Lily’s individual body, but a physical, bodily pain that suggests electricity’s literal power to enter the body and alter it. Soon after having this revelation, Lily experiences a profound moment of technological intervention, where the line between a modern mental state of crisis and the very real physical effects of electric lighting on the eyes and body blur dramatically.

Hanging near “the verge of delirium...so near the dizzy brink of the unreal,” Lily reaches for her chloral. But 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). Lily’s reaction is pathetic: “her poor little anguished self shrank and cowered in it.” In that great blaze, Lily is once again silhouetted under the incandescence of electric light—this time, however, the light is not from her bedroom vanity or from the lights in the park and garden. The electric light has fully infiltrated her mind and consciousness and has a profoundly destabilizing effect. In this crisis of interiority, the material world becomes her internal mental state. Lily “cowers” under modernity’s glaring lights, “her whole past was reenacting itself at a hundred different points of consciousness,” and she feels her “mind shr[i]nk from the glare of thought as instinctively as eyes contract in a blaze of light” (322). Once again establishing that eye-mind connection, Wharton characterizes Lily’s mind as an eyeball constricting as a reaction to “a blaze of light,” no doubt the kind of electric blazes that have haunted Lily throughout the novel.

Scholars have recently paid a lot of attention to this scene. For Laura Saltz, Lily’s experience, though frightening and ultimately deadly, is evidence of her “expanded vision,” evidence of her final understanding of the larger social system in which she’s part. As Hanna Huber puts it, the scene reveals “the frayed nerves that result from Lily’s destructive cultural surroundings” (2), where we can see how the larger social system, and the modern forces moving through it and her, have “fri[ed] her system” (2). For Aaron Worth, Lily’s death is the final failure of her nervous system. If the novel uses electricity to showcase the effects of systemic power, here we see Lily cowering—mentally and physically—against that power. While she may be “seeing” more than ever, with her mind behaving as an optic nerve, she is also suffering under

that expansion. Such a detailed and painstaking scene highlights Wharton's keen attention to scientifically informed realism, to Lily's material surroundings, and Wharton's own investigations of precisely how the electric energies of modernism, as social power, might enter and infiltrate Lily's body—might prove to her, finally, that she is as unfit for a modern world as she feels.

As Lily waits for the effects of her chloral overdose 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). Lily, rendered as a pulsing and throbbing body and mind, again reads as a neurasthenic exhausted by the strains of modern life that Beard and Rockwell found so damaging to a woman's constitution. In fact, it was Beard who said that the neurasthenic patient was like “an electric light attached to a small dynamo and feeble storage apparatus, that often flickers and speedily weakens when the dynamo ceases to move” (qtd in Simon, 152). The blazing light in Lily's mind, that “passionate pulse” of her body suggests Lily is the dimming light, weakened by her “feeble” energy reserves. Indeed, Lily “flickers” in her last moments. Her final living act is a jolt awake to blow out her bedside candle, suggesting once more that Lily's nostalgia for a candlelit, hazy world is no match for the modern, electric world for which she's found herself totally unfit.

In Lily's electric death, Wharton shows a cascading view of systems within systems. She suggests that social systems weren't the only revelation in modernity. The individual self was more complex and more complicated, was itself not a perfectly networked and closed system on which energies circulated, but a network within a network, a chaotic energetic field where electricity might run simultaneously diffuse and distinct, where wakefulness might be experienced not as a sum total experience, but inside each and every nerve, where the mind

might become a space that could be illuminated with modern epiphany. Indeed, Lily's psychological crisis begins after she "had an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung" (276). Lily's lightbulb in the mind, like our popular metaphor today, suggests an epiphanic moment: her realization of the deep, interconnected webs of power that make up her social position. Overwhelmed by the gravity of her social precarity with a new awareness of the intricate system that has placed her in such a state, the novel ends with her desperate attempt to numb the power of that realization with prescription chloral.

By tracing Wharton's continued invocations of electric lighting and power in *The Age of Innocence*, I demonstrate her ongoing fascination with modernization, and explore the way she traces the infusion of electric energies into New York society as a parallel force of modernization that could and would profoundly change the social subjects.

Mapping Electricity Across *The Age of Innocence*

In her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Age of Innocence* (1921), Wharton uses references to electricity to mark the passage of time across a lifelong love affair between Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of his wife, May Welland. The novel sweeps across decades of time, tracing their lives across social tensions and historical changes. Crucially, the novel casts a knowing backward glance at the 1870s. While Wharton wrote the novel at the start of the 1920s, she plants her characters firmly in the decades before all the public changes—modernization, urbanization, global war, and a deadly flu pandemic—that she, by 1920, had experienced herself. In *The Age of Innocence*, electric power remains an infiltrating force, as it was in *The House of Mirth*. And here, it's one that Wharton traces from the novel's opening in 1870 all the way through the early twentieth century when Newland, the novel's central subject

and main perspective, is a grown man, widowed, and wondering what his life would have been like had he taken another path.

Here, I explore how allusions to electricity setup Newland as a social subject tempted by the alluring and seductive promises of the modern, embodied by Ellen Olenska, who, herself likened to electric shocks in the novel, threatens to infiltrate the tightly knit network of Old New York as Newland's mistress. Throughout the novel, Ellen functions as a shock to the social system, and her modern perspective—the way she thinks about divorce, her Bohemian home, and her desire for freedom—entices Newland and draws him toward her in a years-long love affair. Ultimately, Newland chooses a socially sanctioned marriage to May Welland, who resides safely within the social network from which he longs to break free. Thus, I read him as less modern and cultured than he thinks himself; Newland's narrative authority is clearly undermined by his indecisiveness, his confusion not only about how to think about a modernizing world but also about which woman he'll devote himself to.

While many scholars have explored the tensions in this epic love triangle, few readings of *The Age of Innocence* have explored how Wharton's evolving sentiments about technology map onto this love story and characterize how and why Newland, Ellen, and May make the choices they do. In fact, looking at electricity contributes to a new evaluation of the novel's central love triangle, especially how Newland thinks about May and Ellen as representing different pathways for his life. Despite obvious comparisons of them—May is the virginal bride with long blonde hair; Ellen is the dark-haired Bohemian foreigner, escaping an abusive Italian husband—I suggest that the women are far less opposed than they seem. In fact, both May and Ellen seem to have a much more mature grasp on modernity's coming changes, and how they'll affect Old New York, than Newland has at any point in the story. Attention to the way each woman is tied

to modern imagery—of technology, of power—also undermines the easy-seeming contrast between the women set up by the novel and until recently widely accepted and furthered by critics.

The narrative voice of the novel helps establish Newland's perspective as both central and as deeply flawed in the novel. While most of *The Age of Innocence* is told from Newland's perspective, the novel's grander omniscient narrative voice reflects on the long historical span of the novel and remarks on the greater social system that envelopes the story's characters. This narrative voice, in contrast with Newland's subjective and therefore limited perspective, offers insights about the titular "age" the novel concerns and the Old New York society it so often skewers with precise criticisms. It also frequently criticizes Newland himself. It is this ironic voice that imparts the clearest view of Old New York society as a closed network—an entrenched system of custom and tradition that will go to extremes to keep itself closed from outsiders and from possible openings that might permit an inhabitant, like Newland, any form of escape. As an extension of my argument about *The House of Mirth*, I claim here that *The Age of Innocence* is not only interested in recording a particular moment of history in Old New York. It is also principally concerned with how Old New Yorkers perceived themselves as being threatened by outside, modern forces.

Newland finds Old New York society extremely suffocating but comforting. Throughout the novel, we learn that he is plagued by boredom with the "old way" of the Old New York society of which he's a member, and this boredom is the key trait he shares with Countess Ellen Olenska, the married woman with whom he is in love. His engagement to Ellen's young and beautiful cousin, May Welland, further deadens him and makes him feel trapped within convention and custom, which he longs to throw off in favor of a more adventurous life. His

desperation for something novel and modern is contrasted with the suffocation he feels in the rigid social life he has grown up in: “the taste of the usual was like cinders in his mouth, and there were moments when he felt as if he were being buried alive under his future” (99). But Newland is also deeply conflicted: even as he longs for the modern, he simultaneously revels in his present moment—in the comforts, privileges, and pleasures he enjoys as an affluent, educated, white man in New York City’s elite social circles. Even in his most comfortable social position, Newland constantly worries over his boredom and frets that his life, too comfortable, will also be too boring.

Ellen, a stark contrast to Newland in just about every way, is vibrant, curious, and profoundly uncomfortable with her social position. She is filled with a “mysterious authority” and has eyes “full of a conscious power” (43). After fleeing an abusive marriage in Italy, she reappears in New York as an odd but alluring modern woman. Everything about her appearance, from her long, dark hair to her fashionable European clothing, contrasts with the quieter, younger May Welland to whom Newland is engaged. As Newland surveys Ellen’s first night back in New York, in the opera box where she is as on display as those on stage, he balks at her difference from the crowd: “the way her dress (which had no tucker) sloped away from her thin shoulders shocked and troubled him. He hated to think of May...being exposed to the influence of a young woman so careless of the dictates of Taste” (11). Here, Ellen is that dangerous, infiltrating “influence” who Newland fears will taint or damage May. And as they reminisce on shared childhood memories, Ellen remarks, “I see everybody here in knickerbockers and pantalettes,” in her “slightly foreign accent.” Newland “was shocked” at her “misplaced flippancy” and the “unseemly...picture” she paints of the very society before which “her case was being tried” (11). Despite his internal protestations that Ellen’s modern presence will poorly affect May, it is

Newland who is most anxious about her differences and how different she seems from the rest of society.

Indeed, Newland's anxieties about Ellen bely a deeper fascination with her embrace of the modernizing world—of new viewpoints on marriage and divorce, of exposure and study of modern artists and decoration, and of attitudes toward social customs and traditions. So, while he is initially shocked in a manner of being horrified or embarrassed for Ellen's commentary, her modern stance on social issues and desire for freedom allures him. He can't help but agree with her views on the boring, predictable social lives of Old New York. Take, for example, Ellen's offhand comments "on the evening of the momentous dinner" meant to invite her back into that tightly knit, vastly protected, Old New York society (43). In "the drawing-room in which New York's most chosen company was somewhat fully assembled," as Ellen faces the opportunity to re-establish herself among family and friends, she instead makes small but continuous gaffes that suggest her failure to assimilate; she's simply too odd and foreign. Flying in the face of custom and manners, Ellen straightforwardly states to Newland, as they sit together after their meal, that the esteemed Duke in attendance is "the dullest man I ever met" (45). As a woman characterized as "brilliant" and "radiant" throughout the novel, this contrast between her brilliancy and the Duke's "dullness" is as plain a contrast as "modern" and "old," as Old New York and the *New* New York that Ellen dangerously represents in her cosmopolitan, bohemian Otherness. Weeks later, at yet another dinner party, she tells Newland that the most esteemed family in their social set has a boring, even "gloomy" home—and her "words gave him an electric shock, for few were the rebellious spirits who would have dared to call the stately home of the van der Luydens gloomy" (51). Instead of fearful disgust, Newland instead feels it was "undeniably exciting" to sit with her and hear her opinions. Indeed, he's drawn to her and the modern life she represents:

“He longed to question her, to hear more about the life of which her careless words had given him so illuminating a glimpse” (45).

Ellen’s bold statements are an “electric shock” to Newland’s deadened, numb body and mind; in the larger novel, she represents the threatening shock of the new and modern to a closed society hellbent on maintaining strict boundaries. Ellen herself is rarely shocked: “surprise seemed the emotion that she was least addicted to” (82); when Newland makes an unannounced visit, Ellen hardly seems shaken and he muses on her “apparent incapacity for surprise” (117). After the messiness of her attempted divorce and abrupt return to New York, Newland feels that “It was precisely *the odd absence of surprise* in her that gave him the sense of her having been plucked out of a very maelstrom” (82, emphasis added). Even as Ellen has moments of happy delight, such as when she discovers a social custom she’s unfamiliar with, like sending flowers, she still manages to be the one who surprises and shocks Newland. When she makes a vague reference to the yellow roses Newland has been sending her anonymously, “his heart gave a leap of surprise” (83); she surprises him more than once with bold statements, like she does at the Van der Luydens, and unexpected telegrams filled with earnest disclosures as their affair unfolds.

Eventually, after marrying May and falling into the steady, expected rhythms of life with her despite his ongoing affair with Ellen, Newland finds himself experiencing a brand of surprise that feels more like numbness: “It surprised him that life should be going on in the old way when his own reactions to it had so completely changed” (143). In his marriage with May, he feels a distinct lack of newness and surprise. In fact, under the glow of a lamp in his office, “the lamplight full on her clear brow,” Archer has a realization: “he would always know the thoughts behind [her eyes], that never, in all the years to come, would she surprise him by an unexpected

mood, by a new idea, a weakness, a cruelty or an emotion” (207). May will *never* surprise Newland, and in this way appears to be fully illuminated to him, whereas Ellen’s very mention or presence offers reprieve from his trancelike life. She is the mystery and continual surprise in life, embodying the “electric shock” that sparks their love affair. Reading Ellen as an embodiment of shock and surprise offers us a chance to more deeply read the most famous line of the novel, in which Newland tells Ellen during a rapturous carriage ride, “each time you happen to me all over again” (200). As the shock of the new and modern, Ellen is tied to that rapidly evolving world that Newland seems only willing to dream about—one he regards with full wonder but frustratingly refuses to pursue or move into. In the novel, then, precisely because Newland does not embrace his love for Ellen, break off his engagement to May, and pursue a different life, Ellen’s role in his life is reduced to that of an infiltrating force who threatens to break apart an established Old New York family by becoming Newland’s lover. She is, like electricity, a sign of modern life and changing social roles. As in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton treats modernity as a force complicatedly challenged and questioned by Old New York society. Unlike Lily Bart, however, Countess Ellen Olenska does not cower or shrink in the face of modernity—she is emblematic of it. She is a rebel in red velvet who lives, unabashedly, in an odd, Bohemian home just off of the best neighborhood street.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Ellen is her refusal to act pensive or apologetic for her husband’s, the abusive Count’s, behavior. Instead of made smaller or quieter through abuse, she is radiant and alluring—and is repeatedly likened to the brilliance of natural, candle, and electric light. Unlike the distinct references to electric lights or candlelight in *The House of Mirth*, which I’ve argued signify the slow creep of modernity through Lily’s society, the references to light that are tied to Ellen are more mixed in *The Age of Innocence*—perhaps a

sign of Wharton's own adaptation to and familiarity with modern lighting by 1920, when she wrote the novel. Instead, Ellen shines with all kinds of power. For example, in a field of snow, Archer sees Ellen as "the flash of the red meteor" (93) running free. In another moment, she seems to "beam on him" (109). His memories of their earliest attraction take place during "lamplit hours" in her Bohemian home (110). At a social event, Ellen outshines all the other women in the room: "everything about her shimmered and glimmered" (115). In another moment, "groping" at her in the darkness, longing for connection, Archer sees her as "a single arrow of light" tearing her way toward him (120). During an argument, Newland watches as "a short of white radiance of anger [runs] over her like summer lightning" (115). Throughout the novel, it's less the type of light than its intensity that characterizes Ellen as a powerful force in Newland's world. As a flashing meteor or arrow of light, she's an awe-inspiring beacon of modernity that blazes through the dull life Newland feels trapped within.

As a foil for Old New York, as a dangerous force of the modern that threatens to infiltrate 5th Avenue and the Archer family, Ellen has also frequently been analyzed as an apt foil for Newland's eventual wife, May. Newland himself perceives each woman as a clean-cut "type" with May as the virginal, simple-minded wife and Ellen as the enticing, mysterious mistress. In other words: the limitations of Archer's imagination about a woman's life and identity likewise limit how the novel, written through his perspective, presents the women to us. But a close study of the electric language of the novel reveals that May and Ellen are much more similar than different. Both women are, Wharton's ironic narrator suggests, keenly aware of the adaptations modernity will allow them. And they are aware of Newland's limited understanding of them as individual women.

Rather than viewing May as a bolt of lightning or a gleaming meteor—like Ellen, who heralds the unknowable modern future—Newland thinks of May as a statuesque emblem of the traditional society she, and they as a married couple, are fated to uphold. Archer frequently deems her “Diana-like,” and after their wedding, feeling assured of her social position on Newland’s arm, her happiness was “shining through like a light under ice” (135). Perhaps the best characterization of May comes, however, at a weekend archery tournament, in which May’s well-trained skills are on display. Emerging from her preparation tent to the crowd with “Diana-like aloofness,” May takes her position on the field as Newland and other male onlookers comment on her perfect posture. Newland thinks that no one else there “had the nymph-like ease of his wife when...she bent her soul upon some feat of strength” (147) but feels contempt upon hearing other men comment that despite her perfection at the sport “that’s the only kind of target she’ll ever hit” (148). But, as the novel’s events unfold, readers realize the men have clearly underestimated May, the truly gifted “archer” of the novel. Despite Newland’s feeling that “May’s ‘niceness’” was nothing more than “the curtain dropped before an emptiness,” and that he “had never yet lifted that curtain,” the novel clearly showcases May’s skill not just in archery but in targeting Archer himself and getting what she wanted. May is the most successful social subject in the novel: perfectly positioned to take aim and win. She does so on the field and in her marriage.

And May furthermore uses Newland’s limited perspective, his underestimations of her, to her advantage. One of the most important cultural definitions of Victorian middle-class womanhood that persisted into the twentieth century, Alex Owen argues, “was the notion of innate female passivity, a negative attribute constructed in opposition to so-called masculine will-power” (7). At the end of the nineteenth century, women, particularly white women in the

upper middle classes, were defined as frail, sensitive, and weak. As a result of cultural understandings like these, middle-class white women often became targets of “protection” narratives surrounding their emotional, psychological, and physical stamina in modernity—measured by how well they could weather the cultural changes brought about by modernization and industrialization. Such is precisely the false narrative Newland creates around May. And May uses such a narrative to her advantage, gleaming through a seemingly impenetrable layer of ice—a carefully crafted veneer that betrays not the empty niceness Newland worries is there, but a deep social awareness and cleverness that allows her to appear innocent of machinations.

For decades in critical work on *The Age of Innocence*, scholars accepted and perpetuated Newland’s perspective on May as the sum of her character. But recent studies have not only questioned Newland’s reliability as a narrator but also the positioning, by both the narrator and Wharton, of the two women, Ellen and May, as obviously contrasting types. As Margaret Jay Jessee puts it: “readers are given Newland’s perceptions of May and Ellen, not as who they actually are, but as his desire situates them” (49). Even as the novel configures Ellen and May as opposite types, “the result is not a novel that maintains these dichotomies. Instead...[the novel] interrogates binaries by repeatedly throwing into question distinctions between what is actual and what is Newland’s misperception” (Jessee 38). Similarly, Sevinc Elaman-Garner believes the novel “interrogates the image of True Womanhood” through both the text’s “subtle indictment of this womanhood” and the “ironic tone in the language that describes [May’s] marriage to Newland” (7). In other words: the surface-level readings that Newland (and even past scholarship) provides of Ellen and May are insufficient. By acknowledging the way the novel characterizes Ellen as a modern, infiltrating threat through references to electric energy, we can also see how the novel characterizes May as keenly aware of such threats and a deft dispeller of

them; after all, it is May's perfectly-timed lie to Ellen that she is expecting Newland's baby that causes Ellen to take finally leave New York, to end her affair with Newland. That Newland never realizes May's machinations suggests not only his fallible perspective, but also calls the novel's narrator into question.

Indeed, as Shari Goldberg has recently written, "Wharton's narration is no narrator. Wharton's narration is no individual. Wharton's narration is what opens the door to Newland's mind, what plumbs his depths but also dredges his shallows, what displays them for the reader, working beyond the character's capacity for self-awareness" (106). Working through a deeply biased narrative perspective—what Goldberg calls a narrative "double consciousness," that reveals Newland's many "shallows"—uncovers what I read as Wharton's greater project in the novel: to put Old New York's systems of logic and scrutiny under a spotlight, and thereby reveal its innerworkings and its many failures. Rather than Wharton's own voice, the narrator of *The Age of Innocence* might be read as a willful critic of Old New York, anticipating and counting down its demise alongside the demise of Newland's affair and, accordingly, his perceived freedom from social customs. Wharton carefully times this slow infiltration of modern power into this old system through a detailed weaving of electricity as an infiltrating power that reveals weak spots in Old New York's social network.

Electric lighting, still an "Arabian Nights marvel" rather than new technology in the 1870s where Wharton starts the novel, provides a perfect parallel threat to Ellen: new, unknowable power that most certainly destabilizes Newland (if only briefly), but also threatens to lay bare the unseen violence and machinations of that Old New York system. If Tim Armstrong is right that electricity can represent the power of desires to short-circuit social boundaries, then Ellen and Newland's love affair is precisely the kind of modern threat that Old

New York and May (well-trained to uphold that system for her own benefit) must prevent. This is exactly the story—of a threatened system powerfully re-establishing itself—that Wharton writes.

The novel's repeated references to electricity suggest that it's an epoch-making innovation, one that Newland himself uses to map time and modernity throughout his life. For example, when waiting at the train station to meet Ellen after years apart, in the midst of their love affair, Newland ponders the breach between his current moment and what the future may hold. As Wharton would in her own autobiography a decade later, Newland casts his reflections through a technological lens:

the gas-lamps were lit in the big reverberating station. As he paced the platform, waiting for the Washington express, he remembered that there were people who thought there would one day be a tunnel under the Hudson through which the trains of the Pennsylvania railway would run straight into New York. They were of the brotherhood of visionaries who likewise predicted the building of ships that would cross the Atlantic in five days, the invention of a flying machine, lighting by electricity, telephonic communication without wires, and other Arabian Night marvels. "I don't care which of their visions comes true," Archer mused, "as long as the tunnel isn't built yet" (199)

Once again showcasing the way material culture gives shape to imaginative landscapes, Wharton imbues Newland's mind with dizzying thoughts of modern time and change. The future is a mystical "Arabian Night" fantasy, full of those "marvels" that Newland doesn't "care" about in his present moment. As he ponders the fast-paced, changing city around him, he longs for a stillness in the train station: "as long as the tunnel isn't built yet," Newland can safely encase his affair, and his desires for another life, within that impossible imaginative vision. Like Lily Bart, stilled in the bustling train station at the outset of *The House of Mirth*, Newland is likewise placed in the heart of a modern public space, longing for that quiet, still life to which he is accustomed.

Compare this early scene, of Newland's disbelief at the marvels-to-come in modernity, with the end of the novel. After his wife May's death, Newland looks back across the arc of his life and believes "he had missed: the flower of life" by not building his life with Ellen; "the chances had been too decidedly against him" (243). Despite this painful realization about the sheer power of social forces to keep him in place, he considers that his desire for Ellen has become "abstract...she had become the composite vision of all that he had missed" (243). As he thinks of May, their family, and the life they built, "he honoured his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways" (244). Newland is characterized by this painful nostalgia—which makes his attention to electricity all the more interesting and makes it a sign of the modern world he felt himself too far away from. In a more modern world, and if he had been a more modern man, he might have left May for Ellen and forged a different kind of life. But by longing for "the old ways," as a product of the Old New York social system, he represents instead only a modern-leaning mindset, in which he can anticipate the possibilities and the marvels of modernity but cannot hope that those marvels are made possible in his lifetime. Newland prefers the imagination—that fantasy of "all he had missed"—to the reality, and the social consequences, of going after it in real time.

Newland's material environment also links him to electric power. Lost in reverie, Newland ponders the gravity of change between generations, staged in a room Wharton decorates with electric lamps beside old writing desks and aging photographs. As he gazes around his study in the home he's shared with May, he notices "pleasantly shaded electric lamps" coexisting beside "the old Eastlake writing-table that [Newland] had never been willing to banish" (244). The nostalgia for his own historical moment not only sits beside, but is illuminated, by the more modern life he feels he never lived. Within these tensions of time,

where historical eras lie together in his home office in the juxtaposition of electric lamps and memories of the past, he considers “his first photograph of May...beside his inkstand” (244). Beside her, a photo of their daughter, Mary, counterposes the old with the emerging modern, as in her posture, pose, and clothing, she takes on “the altered fashion” of her time,” and “led a larger life and held more tolerant views.” Newland, in his common refrain, thinks, “There was good in the new order, too” (245).

Newland’s characteristic musing is interrupted by the click of the telephone—another sign of his modernized office—upon which he ruminates: “how far they were from the days when the legs of the brass-buttoned messenger boy had been New York’s only means of quick communication” (245). Speaking with his son on the phone—Dallas, who is working in Chicago—he thinks, “Dallas seemed to be speaking in the room,” as the strangeness of their long-distance phone call is tempered by time. He reflects that those “Arabian Nights” marvels he once dreamed of, such as “long-distance telephoning,” have eventually become “as much a matter of course as electric lighting and five-day Atlantic voyages” (245). The modern has been infused into Newland’s daily life. These changes, Wharton suggests, have also shaped the younger and more modern generation as, without reference to any novelty, Dallas invites his father to visit Europe with him on one of these speedy, cross-Atlantic voyages as a simple matter of business.

Across these musings on technologies that have defined his life and relationships, Newland seems to travel time in the scene without ever leaving his comfortable chair. He mourns May, wonders about Ellen, and considers the future for Dallas and Mary, whom he refers to as “the new order.” In these ways, Newland’s musings suggest a slower, less epiphanic rush of electricity into New York, especially when contrasted with the violent ending of *The House of*

Mirth, in which Lily's electric epiphany results in her untimely death. Newland's vacillation from thinking of electric lighting and other "marvels" as Arabian Night fantasies to his eventual home office being filled with those tools he once imagined as modernity's magic reveals a similar technological evolution to that which we find in Wharton's nonfictional works — her texts on decoration, her letters, her autobiography.

In the final chapter of the book, Newland and his son Dallas are in Paris—and Dallas plans to visit his Aunt Ellen. Desire once again pervades Newland's consciousness, and an aching scene of possible reunion between him and Ellen is tinged with electric hints of modernity, of time that has passed, of "the flower of life" that Newland believes he's missed as he walks the Parisian streets near her home:

The day was fading into a soft sun-shot haze, pricked here and there by a yellow electric light, and passers were rare in the little square into which they had turned. Dallas stopped again, and looked up. "It must be here," he said, slipping his arm through his father's with a movement from which Archer's shyness did not shrink; and they stood together looking up at the house. It was a modern building, without distinctive character, but many-windowed, and pleasantly balconied up its wide cream-coloured front. On one of the upper balconies, which hung well above the rounded tops of the horse-chestnuts in the square, the awnings were still lowered, as though the sun had just left it (252-3)

While Dallas enters and spends the afternoon with Ellen, Newland remains on a bench outside the "modern building," as dusk falls. Down in the glow of "a yellow electric light," Newland looks up at Ellen's balcony. There, his mind again moves through thoughts of technology, time, and change. And his desires, it seems, are not to see Ellen again, but to keep her safely secured, in that old memory, as the "composite vision" of the different, modern life he did not choose. Silhouetted by these modern changes—the electric lights of the street, the chic apartment facades—Newland tells Dallas he won't go up to visit; "Say I'm old-fashioned," he tells him, "that's enough" (253). In his final choice to remain in the old way, using a phrase that calls upon their history together and also his reasons for not acknowledging their affair at the end of their

lives, Newland seems to root himself firmly in the past, even as he looks longingly at all the possibilities modernity might have given him.

Conclusion

Evidence from her personal library and from her personal letters suggest that Wharton read William James's essay "Psychical Research" from 1897, in which he posits the idea that "to no one kind of mind is it given to discern the totality of truth" (301). In a digitized copy of James's essay, accessible through Liming's archival website of Wharton's library, I was able to view Wharton's annotations on the text. Next to this passage, Wharton uses one of her common markings: a straight line down the margins to mark the text around a specific passage. In this essay, Wharton marks where James describes his belief that the truth about the human mind likely lies somewhere between or beyond the opposing discourses of the medical academics and the spiritualists. He cites research into "animal-magnetism" as a "flagrant example," of this binary, stating that within celebrated scientific groups "facts were stoutly dismissed as a pack of lies by academic medical science the world over, until the non-mystical theory of 'hypnotic suggestion' was found for them" (302). That Wharton flagged this passage suggests that she was compelled by the idea that the truth of the human mind could not be summed up by a single field or discipline. It perhaps also means that, in her novels, she would use language of the mind and body, and of the nerves, to evoke both mystical and non-mystical dimensions of the human experience, and of the cultural discourse of what was possible to experience, think, and feel in an electric, modern world.

Scholars are in general agreement that modernity was "a set of formative energies" that informed the writing of men and women; as a period of profound change across social, cultural, political, and economic worlds, modernity is often viewed as "less an epoch than a tempo"

(Bentley 225), a pace, a speed that altered the ways art could be and was produced. The immense changes that came with the turn of the century—like those that Newland Archer uses to frame his experiences—configure a world of rapid change, of impossible marvels becoming mundane daily reality. “The completion of the Panama Canal , the Ford ‘Five Dollar Day’ (1914), the first transcontinental telephone call, the sinking of the ocean liner *Lusitania*, the opening of the first birth control clinic, and U.S. entry into World War 1” (Miller 1)—also heralded in a generation of women writers like Wharton, who, as Elizabeth Ammons writes, looked to literature “not simply as money-making professionals, but as artists” (270).

In a world lit by electric lights, Lily Bart becomes keenly aware of her precarious social position—and longs for a more stable, quiet, comforting life. In a world where electricity makes the marvelous possible, Newland Archer can sense the modern life he might have with the bohemian, rebellious Ellen. They both feel their world being changed before their eyes as electric lighting moves onto their streets, their homes, and at times, into their minds. They feel, in their minds and on their streets, the effects of modernity’s changes. While Lily’s electric epiphany precludes a modern crisis and death, Newland experiences the slow movement of electricity into his society—so that by the end of his life, what was once an impenetrable Old New York society is now totally changed, infused with the new, less anxious about its boundaries, even as Newland remains committed to the ones that will keep him from Ellen. After all, for Newland, that’s perhaps the only way he can allow his imagination the freedom to fantasize freely about what might have been. By contrasting Lily’s responses to modernity with Newland’s, we see more than the gendered dimensions of possibility in the modernizing Old New York; we also glimpse Wharton’s own changing attitudes, evolving across the first decades of the twentieth century, toward modernity’s infiltration of society.

In other words, and as this chapter argues most generally, Wharton uses electricity to map the coming of modernity, as a slow infiltration of new powers and energies into Old New York society. And in these two key novels, she uses her characters' willingness to embrace electric technologies as a metric across which they can be measured in their adaptability to modern life. Across her depictions of these anxious not-quite-modern people, Wharton shows us cities increasingly lit by the promises of an electric, progressive future. Taking up cultural conversations and sentiments about electricity, Wharton examines how the electrification of modern life was not a simple narrative of progress, but instead a complex web of consequences and changes that would shape how modern individuals understood the social systems they lived within, as well as the modern bodies—and minds—in which their complex, electrifying consciousnesses resided. Indeed, Wharton was “skeptical of modern utopian notions of progress” (Zibrak 6); in these novels, she embraces a more nuanced portrayal of modernity's changes—not a utopia, but the real world, infused (and perhaps, at times, infiltrated) by new powers of electricity.

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ILLUMINATED ABJECTION IN RHYS' FICTION

In his 1889 painting “Evening Illuminations at the Paris Exposition,” Impressionist painter Charles Courtney Curran depicts a captivated crowd, their attention focused on the multicolored glow of electric arc lighting at the exhibition. The lights are almost sublime: pastels of gold, blue, and pink shine in a glowing rainbow more ethereal and spiritual than technological. The painting keenly captures a range of social reactions to these new lighting technologies; in the crowd, some spectators hold umbrellas up to shield their eyes, while others gaze intently ahead. In the left-center of the frame, a young woman in fine dress sits perched on a man’s shoulders, leaning eagerly toward the sight. Her ornamental hat is a flowery, hovering counterpart to the brilliant electric display. There, held above the crowd, she is visually parallel with the electric lights in the evening sky; her wonder at the sight literally elevates and emboldens her to rise above the throng. The painting captures a wondrous moment when Paris, *La Ville Lumiere*, makes good on its reputation as the world’s City of Light.

Paris has long been heralded as the City of Light, “a display case of modernity,” for the rest of the world (Garcia, np). It was a central hub of scientific advances throughout the Enlightenment, eventually undergoing what Patricia Garcia calls an “unprecedented urban makeover” throughout the nineteenth century. Sewage systems, cleaned and rehabilitated catacombs, and new architectural feats in iron and glass appeared across the city. It was the first city to truly embrace artificial lighting systems on a grand scale. At the 1878 Exposition Universelle, a celebration of the end of the Franco-Prussian war, Parisians “installed arc-light ‘candles’ designed by Russian refugee Pavel Jablochhoff” (Freeberg 19). These lights “provided the first demonstration of electricity’s potential to transform the urban night” and made gaslights elsewhere around the world, especially in the United States, look “yellow, muddy, and petty” in

comparison (Freeberg 19). As historian Ernest Freeberg puts it, Jablochhoff “had turned a few blocks of Paris into ‘the most magnificent spot in the world’” with electric lighting (19). At the 1889 World’s Fair in Paris, electric lights dazzled crowds from the top of the Eiffel Tower — while colorful fountains made a bright, modern spectacle of the newly popular electric arc lighting, the same magical moment depicted in Curran’s painting. Electric lighting became a symbol not just of modern innovation, but also of national power and global prowess.

By the 1930s, however, the initial spectacle and wonder of electric lighting displays had ebbed; modernized Paris was brightly lit and seemingly more tightly controlled with cleaner systems for inner-city travel and efficient waste management. But post-war Paris was also filled with profound dangers and penetrating darkness; “the rational, enlightened Paris coexisted with a darker, unexplainable, and ungraspable metropolis” (Garcia, np). As Paris careened toward another war, the contrasts between electric light and spreading darkness would become more dramatic and more dynamic, especially in the fiction of Jean Rhys. For the modernist Rhys, Paris was a city of imperfect, flickering, and strange lights that amplified the disorienting and alienating effects of life in a violent, ever-shifting era: modernity. In her novels, we find that lights are not only part of the realistic settings in her modern Paris, but that many lights—street lamps, vanity lights, and poorly wired electric lighting in hotels—work together to create a traumatizing atmosphere that is keenly experienced by her sensitive female characters. It’s within this atmosphere that Rhys makes her strongest arguments about how modern life would haunt and torment modern women.

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, for example, the novel’s central character—a poor and lonely woman named Sasha—takes a man back to her darkened hotel room for the evening. But the room, wired with electric lights, heightens her utter and all-encompassing loneliness:

We kiss each other fervently, but already something has gone wrong. I am uneasy, half of myself somewhere else. Did anybody hear me, was anybody listening just now? 'It's dark in here....Just a minute, I'll fix it.' The switch in my room works either the light near the bed or the one over the curtained wash-basin—it depends on how far the knob is pushed. But it is always going wrong and doing one thing when you expect it to do another (177-78)

The language of the scene highlights Sasha's modern state of alienation from her surroundings and from herself. Things are either "going wrong" or already "gone wrong;" she feels "uneasy," torn apart with "half of myself somewhere else." Here, Rhys invokes the fragmented modern subject—a broken or bruised mindset, a pervasive feeling of dissociation and anxiety. She furthermore ties that anxiety to the room's lighting, triggered by a knob that should offer relief—to quickly remedy the confusion and fear of a dark room—but fails to serve its purpose. The wiring seems shoddy; a single switch works two lights, the knob "is always going wrong." Once the light finally goes on, "the room springs out at me, laughing" (178). The lamp, both when it will not turn on and when it finally does, contributes to an ominous mood and terrorizing setting in an already traumatizing scene: Rene, the man Sasha has returned home with, assaults her in her bed and leaves her with a bleeding mouth. Sasha, despite having modern illuminative technology at her fingertips, can't conquer the darkness in which she is so often left alone to worry.

In this chapter, I argue that Rhys's special attention to lighting and lights in scenes like this one is not incidental but fundamental to the way she depicts modernity and its effects on women's minds and bodies. When lights won't turn on, as Sasha's hotel room lights in the previously mentioned scene, women are left in darkness; at other times, electric lights transform spaces, like Sasha's room, into judgmental "laughing" spaces that taunt and mock them, or gleam in nightmarish visions of the future. Rhys uses references to electric lighting to create that whole system—a modern atmosphere filled with dark spaces, judging eyes, and menacing

technological monsters—in which her characters are trapped. In a recent article, Anna Jones Abramson has argued that modernist novels like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are “atmospheric texts,” in which atmosphere—created by weather, in her argument—is not a feature of the text, but makes up its very structure (352). I argue in this chapter that *lighting*, and specifically electric lights, conjure a modernist structure in Rhys's 1930s novels about women who find themselves trapped in transitory social and physical spaces. Indeed, lighting becomes a language in Rhys's novels, one that she uses to communicate all kinds of epiphanic, confusing, and alienating moments in modern life, and to illuminate with shocking realism the traumatic patterns endured by women like Sasha in the modern world.

Rhys scholarship, such as that by Sue Thomas, has invoked Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection from *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* to understand the predicament faced by Rhys's women characters. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva claims that the “object has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*” (1). Abjection, as a state of being or a way of not-being, haunts and troubles the boundary between selfhood and the outside world. As Kristeva puts it, abjection is caused by exactly “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Rhys's women characters, in their various roles as mistresses, amateur prostitutes, and desperate employees in lower class positions, reside in abjection. While Kristeva writes about abjection as something that “besets” her, for Rhys, this state of existence goes on and on, to traumatic ends, in her novels. I argue that Rhys uses electric lighting—electricity itself a category-bursting concept—to cast a bright spotlight on the state of abjection that her characters experience in modernity, not as a frame of mind or a state of existence from which they might eventually emerge, but as a constant state of psychological exhaustion and terror.

Traumatic Spaces as Modern Spaces

For the women in Rhys's novels, the modern city is neither a solution to their problems nor a site of progressive social opportunities. In her 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark*, for example, a poor chorus-girl named Anna Morgan experiences London as a nightmarish space, filled with shadows and dark passageways. Displaced from her home in the West Indies, Anna continually falls ill in the gray, cold London winter and lies in bed thinking about "that story about the walls of a room getting smaller and smaller until they crush you to death....And about the rows of houses outside, gim-crack, rotten-looking, and all exactly alike" (30). Modern cities, in Rhys's fiction, loom with strangers, are haunted by dark alleyways, and cause an ongoing, traumatizing feeling of paralysis, like Anna experiences when she "felt as if there were weights on my legs so that I couldn't move" (31). The very spaces meant to encourage ongoing movement, rapid speeds, and leisurely repose from modern life are the same that entrap Rhys's female protagonists in perpetual anxiety.

This traumatic relationship to space is illuminated, literally, in Rhys's novels with electric, gas, and other lighting systems. I argue that Rhys invokes lighting not only as an incident of the settings she creates but also as a structural presence that gives shape, mood, and emotions both to people and their environments. The results are "atmospheric texts" in which Rhys showcases the ways that modernized cities were not emblematic of the dreams of a (literally) brighter future, but were instead, for the women in her novels, nightmarish and dystopic. "It got dark, but I couldn't get up to light the gas," Anna thinks at a bleak moment in *Voyage*, recalling other times in her life when she felt immobilized by pain and fear, "I couldn't move" (31). In passages like this one, Rhys practices what Anna Cottrell calls a "poetics of ambiance," in which "her characters reconfigure agency as a matter of affective response" to their material and atmospheric surroundings (72). Whether through their own illnesses or lack of

access to better, healthier, and cleaner surroundings, Rhys's women cannot "get up" to turn on the lights around them. Instead, they lie in darkness.

While few critics have explored lighting and darkness, specifically, in Rhys's works, many have explored how Rhys creates relationships between places and emotional states in her novels, and how architectural and Gothic elements, such as walls closing in on characters, contribute to overall feelings of confusion and terror. Cathleen Maslen, Patricia Moran, Maren Linett, Sue Thomas, David Armstrong, E.L. Johnson, and Emma Zimmerman have all studied how Rhys represents trauma and emotional turmoil in her fiction, and how such mental states are mirrored by the settings of her novels. Indeed, the "Parisian street architecture" in *Good Morning, Midnight* "reveals not only the claustrophobia of the room, but of Sasha's life itself" (Zimmerman 82). Many scholars point to the uncanny or haunting aspects of Rhys's novels and the troubled characters they follow. Emma Zimmerman, for example, argues that "although the uncanny is often associated with the ghost story or Gothic genre, it functions in Rhys's work as a feature of everyday life" (75). Others, such as Jennifer Mitchell, Sara Ahmed, Andrew Kalajidan, and Paul Ardoin have explored how Rhys represents happiness and joy as a fleeting, ever-elusive, or tantalizing state of mind that her female characters long to experience for themselves, but can never seem to reach either in their minds or in their physical surroundings. This is often attributed to the fact that Rhys's women rarely find themselves enjoying the calm of a stable environment; instead, Rhys's women move, sometimes erratically, through transitional spaces such as hotels, cafes, dimly lit streets, shops, cinemas, and dance halls.

The hotel in Rhys's novels—the exemplary transitory and liminal space that is the main setting in Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight, After Leaving Mr. McKenzie*, and *Voyage in the Dark*—has received much critical attention. Neither public nor private, the hotel is an "in-

between space” typified by nearly constant interruptions of privacy and feelings of unease or danger (Zimmerman 79). In *Architectures of Hurry: Mobilities, Cities, and Modernity*, Phillip Gordon Mackintosh, Richard Dennis, and Deryck W. Holdsworth illustrate how modern spaces — such as the hotel, street culture, and bus systems — are ruled by mobility and “hurry,” a perpetual forward motion out of one space and into another. The modern hotel, for these scholars, exemplifies modernity’s “obsessive march forward,” its pace that “must go on because any place of arrival is but a temporary station” (3). For Rhys’s characters, however, the modern hotel becomes a space of perpetual entrapment.

In other words, the modern hotel—as a space designed to offer temporary space, primarily for rest and leisure—instead becomes the space that women like Julia, Anna, and Sasha are forced to continually re-enter as long-term residents. It thereby extends and compounds their abjection. Deborah L. Parsons, Carolyn Brucken, and Joanna Elaine Pready have explored the gendered dimensions of hotel life in the twentieth century. Maureen Montgomery argues that though they represent potential freedom for women guests, hotels were still often read as spaces of licentiousness and promiscuity. In Rhys’s novels, as Thacker puts it, “a hotel room is only ever a kind of temporary halt,” because Rhys’s women characters “never really occup[y] anywhere” (193). But hotel rooms are also a curious trap in these novels, where “temporary” discomforts and anxieties become a permanent state of mind, a never-ending cycle of pain and insecurity. Where there should be at least a temporary respite, in other words, Sasha, Anna, and Julia instead find cold and damp rooms, filled with flickering lights and stained walls. Thus, “the hotel, together with railway stations, department stores and cinemas, is a space of modernity...[that] highlight[s] the shortcomings of modern times” (Zitzlsperger 472). Rhys uses assumptions from the cultural imagination about modern spaces, like the hotel or the salon, to

reveal the “tarnished and cast-off versions of those establishments” (Armstrong 178)—to more resolutely reveal systemic failures that place Rhys’s women into the abusive and precarious social positions they inhabit. In other words, Rhys deconstructs modern spaces to show the many ways that the luxuries, pleasures, and innovations of a modern hotel did not extend to every guest, and to highlight the inequities her characters experience. These inequities—the women’s various entrapments in manipulative relationships, sexually abusive, and traumatizing social roles—are all highlighted under electric lights.

Generally, across these readings of emotion and place in Rhys’s work, scholars agree that for Rhys, modernity is an inherently haunted epoch, one that fragments female subjectivity. Some authors read this fragmentation as a breaking down of patriarchal spaces and barriers—offering an ultimately freeing experience of self-exploration and expression. Maroula Joannou, Louis James, Emma Short, Mary Lou Emery, Regina Martin, and Jess Issacharoff have all explored how Rhys explores the traumatic aspects of modernity. Others, such as Maren Linett, point out that Rhys’s novels are filled with scenes in which her female characters experience these fractured mental states as traumatic, terrifying, and existential. Indeed, as Linett puts it, there’s an “overly optimistic” tendency in scholarship on Rhys’s novels to overlook the “unsavory but fundamental helplessness” of Rhys’s female characters (437). I’m of the same mind as Linett, and I read the traumatized mental states of characters like Anna not as evidence of a woman breaking free from social norms by working as a chorus-girl in London, but as a woman resolutely trapped by a social structure that requires her to live a desperate, traumatizing lifestyle. Such a reading also echoes Imogen Free’s 2020 assertion that Rhys’s women are trapped “in this difficult bind of agency and victimhood, of structural awareness and individual subjugation” (213). Like Sasha and Julia, Anna is relegated to a social position that requires her

helplessness as a feature, not a bug, of her existence. For Rhys, as both Linett and Free argue, such helplessness isn't a character flaw meant to condemn the women, but rather a position her characters experience that allows Rhys to highlight profound social inequities, the way that abjection looms and lasts as a permanent state of being in modernity. Indeed, lighting in her novels allows her to highlight this abjection. By casting literal lights and dramatic shadows onto power imbalances, unfair social dynamics, and sexual expectations that continually traumatize Sasha, Anna, and Julia, Rhys reveals not their weaknesses, but the social inequity that both creates and exploits those weaknesses.

All three women share the same specific social position, one rife with injustice, which Sue Thomas explores in depth: that of the "amateur" or *non*-professional prostitute. Thomas explains that "in early twentieth century Britain, Rhys's protagonists would have been classified as 'amateur' prostitutes (called 'straight girls' by prostitutes) or 'sexual free-lance' women" (67). Thomas pulls quotes from contemporary reviews of *After Leaving Mr. McKenzie* to illustrate that Rhys's characters, like Julia Martin, aren't just disdained for their sexuality within the novels but also by critics of the novels. She quotes a contemporary review that claims Julia is little more than "paid mistress to one man after another" (84). Beyond a role that highlights sexist and misogynistic social injustices, however, the position of the amateur heightens the stakes of her characters' helplessness—it makes their abjection blatant under modernity's lights. As Thomas argues, nothing troubles or blurs social boundaries like a sexually active, unwed woman.

Throughout my close readings of each novel, then, I showcase how reading the tension between darkness and electric light in Rhys's novels reveals how Rhys uses environments and moods to lay bare social inequities and the unjust social dynamics that lead Anna, Sasha, and Julia into abusive sexual and psychological relationships with manipulative men and women.

Armstrong points out that the modern settings of Rhys's novels stage the "fragmentation and often tragic reformation of individuals who are exposed to the post-industrialized entity that was Paris" (Armstrong 178). In line with both Linett and Armstrong, I argue that Rhys's novels are less about exploring the ways a social system might break down and therefore offer freedom to modern women. Instead, they centrally concern the traumatic experiences that occur when a society fails to meet the most basic needs of its people. Rhys uses a dedication to key details in her settings—including references to red electric lights, bright cinema screens, and dark hotel rooms—to make this social argument.

Contemporaneous psychologists and thinkers, such as George Simmel, argued that modern life—its pace, its technologies, its urgency—put an unfair strain on all people, but especially on women.⁶ As I argue, it is precisely the modernization—especially the electrification—of these spaces that amplifies their discordant and alienating effects on the "amateur" women in Rhys's novels. Electric lighting, then, serves not only to illuminate modern life but to amplify the traumatic effects of it for women outside of the protections offered by the upper classes of society. Yet few scholars have explored the technological elements of Rhys's novels. Emma Short, Andrea Zemgulys, Rishona Zimring, and Nicole Flynn each explore the technologization of the body in Rhys's novels. For example, Zimring argues that the heavy makeup and cosmetics worn by female characters in Rhys's novels give her characters a shield that is "both a protection against and an assimilation of the shocks of modernization; it signals a *technologization* which is a hardening of the body" (230 emphasis mine). In Flynn's analysis of *Good Morning, Midnight*, "we see the protagonists' liminal space in society transformed into a liminal space between human and machine" (63). Rhys's women experience new technologies as

⁶ See my chapter on Wharton for more on Simmel, George Beard, and A.D. Rockwell.

a harbinger of more pain to come in modern life. Electric lights, as my close readings go on to show, amplify the effects of this emotional and psychological desperation.

This chapter attempts to bridge these scholarly subfields that explore trauma studies, modern spaces, and technology in Rhys's novels. Through a close reading of how Rhys lights the settings of her novels, we can see the specific ways she believed modernity antagonized modern women with electric and neon lights. Rhys shows us not only the dark, uncanny shadows of modern cities. She also showcases electricity's many failures: the way it flickers and burns out, in many ways mirroring the flickering and burned out mental states of Sasha, Julia, and Anna; and the ways it profoundly illuminates, and lays bare, the terrorized mental states and discomforts of a transitory, unstable modern life. In other words, Rhys uses a language of lighting systems to create a direct relationship between the dingy modern city and the abjection her female characters endure.

Reading Technology in Rhys's Fiction

In *Rhys Matters* by Wilson and Johnson, the editors suggest that, until the publication of their collection in 2013, Rhys studies were either "broadly introductory" or "focused on a single theme" (5). I'm adding to their call to "inaugurate a new series of conversations and debates on Rhys's work" by considering how she uses references to lighting to represent modern city spaces as alienating and reductive; to suggest that by their very material reality, modern spaces were not conducive to the kinds of mental and physical respites and reflections her female characters need in order to flourish. Instead, her characters are at odds with, and often feel victimized by, the modern spaces they navigate. Electric light, I show, plays a key role in making modern spaces the unwelcoming, alienating, and even uncanny spaces they become in Rhys's fiction. As harbingers of the modern world, in which Rhys's women feel increasingly cast-off and trapped

in traumatizing social roles, electric lights exacerbate the women's anxieties about the coming future at the same time they highlight that future's inevitability. In this way, Rhys's novels seem to meet Kristeva's claim that "all literature is probably rooted in a version of the apocalypse" wherein "identities...do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy....altered, abject" (207).

In the following sections, I argue that Rhys uses cultural narratives and modernist dictums about unrelenting progress and newness to show how socially impossible they were (indeed, they'd leave many people, like Sasha, Anna, and Julia behind). She also insists that they were, necessarily, exhausting and traumatizing. To live in a world that insists on your consistent progress when all you feel is confusion, to slip from relative comfort and domestic dreams into the ill-defined and ill-kept hotel world of glaring hallway lighting and dashed hopes for lasting romance — these are the shadows that haunt the modernist ethos to innovate, to keep always moving forward. And these are the cultural narratives, the stories circulating in modernized Paris and London that Rhys challenges in her representations of their gaslighting effects.

I read *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931), and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) as novels preoccupied with the consequences of modernization, and particularly the electrification of public spaces such as hotels and cafes as having a set of unique consequences for women in precarious social roles. Indeed, many of Rhys's female protagonists are women trapped in financial insecurities, without family or community networks, which leaves them to rely on strangers, usually men they haven't known long, for money, safety, and comfort. These novels are not lessons in propriety or condemnations of women without reliable social networks, à la Henry James's *Daisy Miller*. Instead, I argue, Rhys invokes cultural narratives about class and place to question the humanity (or lack thereof) in modernizing social systems. By invoking electric light in key moments, Rhys illuminates the social class or

propriety of a certain space, and of those circulating within it; by doing so, she holds the space—not the women trapped inside it—accountable for modernization’s damaging effects. She uses lighting, then, as a “marker of modernity—the spectacle both of the bright light itself and of the modern life it rendered relentlessly visible” (Cottrell 66). Through this illumination of modern life and of women’s lives within it, Rhys subtly rewrites historical and cultural fantasies about the processes of modernization and the atmospheric realities of modernity.

Flickers of Light in *Voyage in the Dark*

Rhys’s 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark* is bookended by a haunting memory, an image of darkness and light, in Anna Morgan’s mind. Lying sick in bed early in the novel, Anna seems delirious as she falls into a memory triggered by her dank surroundings: “yellow light came in through the slats and lay on the floor in bars” (31). In a narrative move typical of Rhys’s work, it’s unclear whether the yellow light Anna sees is explicitly in the room with her in the present or is, rather, a light only in her memory. She recalls being “home when I had a fever...I couldn’t move” (31), even as she lies in bed, in the present moment, also sick and seemingly unable to move again. The “slats” and “bars” created by the yellow light conjure a simple tension between light and shadow, but also suggest the caged existence Anna feels she lives as a chorus-girl and amateur in Post-war London.

Severed from her childhood home in the West Indies, Anna finds London itself a dark and homogenous contrast to her sun-filled memories of light, fruit, and open skies. The colors of her home “are red, purple, blue, gold, all shades of green. The colours [in London] are black, brown, grey, dim-green, pale-blue, the white of people’s faces” (54). In London, “there was no sun but there was a glare on everything like a brass band playing” (41). In the West Indies, by contrast, Anna tells a man she’s just met “The shadows the moon makes are as dark as sun-

shadows” (53). Rhys’s prose lyrically and meaningfully inverts relationships between sunlight and brightness, between night and shadow. The moon becomes a luminous shadow-maker that creates “white roads” on the water she remembers traversing as a girl (54). In London, by contrast, everything is cast under brassy, glaring, muted tones of light. Light and dark make the contrast stark in Anna’s descriptions, and in her memories. They also deepen the novel’s frequent allusions to such contrasts not as incidental, but as critically colored by Anna’s mind—a vibrant imagination that feels caged and constrained by the new grey environment in which she finds herself, an adherence to modern literature’s interest in the contrasts between interior and exterior, between the individual’s experience and shared reality. We can read the novel’s title, then, “as a beckoning to dive into the dark, forgotten recesses beneath society’s dominant discourses in order at least to recognize the lives that have been so violently relegated to subtext” (Perlucci 151).

So many of Anna’s memories are clearly trapped within those “dark, forgotten recesses” of her own mind. For example: Anna recalls looking back off of a boat at “the lights of the town bobbing up and down,” which was “the first time I really knew I was going,” (32). This traumatic memory of leaving her home island for London mirrors other moments later in the novel when Anna realizes she is pregnant: “the bed was heaving up and down and I lay there thinking ‘it can’t be that’” (164). Exhausted and ill, Anna dreams of a boat and a deck she’s trying to walk across to get back on land: “the deck was heaving up and down, and when I woke up everything was still heaving up and down” (165). Haunted by those bobbing lights on the water—her last memories of home and connection, her first feelings of rootlessness on the sea—Anna experiences waves of fear and pregnancy nausea in the same terms. As she sits in a small, clean room to receive drugs to induce an abortion, Anna once again feels “the earth heaving up

under me” (177). In these allusions, Anna’s “dark” memories filled with those “lights of the town,” create a stark contrast between the life she knew and the modern life she now feels she can only endure.

In the end of the novel, Anna lies in bed horribly ill from the quinine she has been given to induce an abortion, and the contrast between light and dark becomes almost hypnotic: “The room was nearly dark, but there was a long yellow ray coming in under the door from the light in the passage. I lay and watched it” (183). In her room, her friend Laurie and housekeeper Mrs. Polo wait for a doctor to arrive, worrying about the severity of her bleeding. But Anna is not worried; she is dissociating in the dimly lit room as the prose of the novel shifts into a stream of consciousness that flows randomly with her “giddy” mind. In a dissociative state, she hears a doctor tell her roommate, “She’ll be all right...Ready to start all over again in no time” as “the ray of light came in again under the door like the last thrust of remembering before everything is blotted out. I lay and watched it and thought about starting over again” (187-188). As in Rhys’s other novels, as my next close readings show, the final image of the novel returns to previously established motifs—here that ray of light under the door—to suggest an inescapable circularity of traumatic experience. The effect is a collapsing of linear time and a suggestion of ongoing trauma in the modern city. Rhys uses light as memory and as literal presence to create a psychological and physical mood, a totalizing environment of trauma. This image, of rays of yellow light shining under the door, connects back with the opening imagery of the novel, in which Anna lay sick, in bed, looking at the light under the door. Here, the moments seem to collapse in that wash of circulating memories and confusion; readers understand that, in this final moment of “starting over,” Anna won’t *renew* as much as she’ll *continue* to repeat the damned existence she has been living throughout the novel.

Ultimately, the imagery of darkness and light make up the key tension in the novel, in which a young woman wanders the darkness of modern London and the light-filled memories of her childhood in the West Indies. The novel is a voyage in the shadows, punctuated by flashes of light under the door, those haunting thrusts of memory and remembering. While there is a somewhat linear series of events that take place, the novel's vacillations between light and dark function more as a series of light-filled vignettes which showcase Anna as the modern female subject, silhouetted by the modern darkness all around her. Metaphors abound, but I want to suggest that Rhys deploys darkness—and Anna's voyage through it—as much more than metaphor. Darkness and light make up these detailed settings, with a literary precision, to clarify that Anna's anguish is not only something she experiences in her mind. Her physical life persists in this darkness; under real lights in the taxi cab or in the hallways outside her closed door, Anna experiences physical sensations as well as psychological reactions. As such, Rhys shows that the psychical is the physical; that the interior is the exterior. "Something about the darkness," Anna thinks, "has a meaning" (57). Here, Rhys's subtle argument that light creates emotional states that are experienced throughout the physical body, echoes William James's 1884 essay "What Is an Emotion?" In that essay, as Enda Duffy summarizes, "James sides with the physiologists by insisting that an emotion is first experienced upon the body, and that the emotion is one's sensation of that experience....one's feeling of one's visceral energy" (214). In *Voyage*, Anna experiences her own "visceral energy" as it is influenced by the surrounding electric world.

Her lonely voyage in the dark sets the stage for my other readings of Rhys's novels, in which the contrasts between light and dark, especially moments of bright lights flipping on or rooms becoming suddenly dark and terrifying, suggest that Rhys held a career-long fascination with the multiplicity of meanings that she could explore between darkness and light—and how

electric light, specifically, could help her amplify the traumatizing effects of modern life on downtrodden women. If in H.D.'s *Nights*, electric energies become an empowering sexual force that allows a woman to experience profound pleasure in her body, in Rhys's novels, that same power is inverted—electric lights, here, instead highlight the ongoing sexual victimization of women like Sasha, Julia, and Anna. In both instances, modernist women authors leverage the multiplicity of cultural and medical meanings of electricity to explore human experience and women's sexuality, but they do so to vastly different ends.

Judgmental Red Lights in *After Leaving Mr. McKenzie*

At the outset of Rhys's 1927 novel *After Leaving Mr. McKenzie*, Julia Martin delays opening her final letter, and payment, from Mr. McKenzie. She knows she's about to experience a "seamless transition from the role of lover" to becoming an amateur prostitute, "financially dependent on her role as amateur" (Mullholland 97). In bored despair, Julia "lay down on the bed, lit a cigarette and watched the lights coming out in the Palais de Justice across the river like cold, accusing, jaundiced eyes" (*After Leaving Mr. McKenzie* 13). Out on the city streets at night, the streetlights are "hard and cold, like ice" (16). And her "shabby" hotel room has a "sombre and one-eyed aspect because the solitary window was very much to one side" (3). In general, as a poor woman who relies on sexual relationships for any income, Julia feels surrounded by constant social judgement in the form of menacing watchful gazes (3). She sees that "one-eyed aspect" of her hotel room; she spies the "cold, accusing, jaundiced eyes" of the streetlamps. All around her, modern society looms as a pervasive judge. In my reading of the novel, I explore how Rhys establishes a relationship between electric lights and the judgmental gaze of a society that Julia increasingly feels she has no real place within to argue that Julia feels judged by modern life itself. Electric lights, as a key sign of a modern society and city, become a key

reminder, an ever-present one, that Julia doesn't have a stable home, relationship, or identity to hold onto in the rapidly changing world around her.

No matter where Julia goes, the accusing lights, and that penetrating modern gaze, seems to follow and critique her. Moving between Paris and London as her finances tighten, she reconnects with an old contact, George Horsfield, whom she asks for financial assistance. Between his eagerness to sleep with her and her anxieties about her appearance, they end up fighting in the streets late at night. Mr. Horsfield knows "if all this had happened in the daylight he would have been shamefaced" but the "deserted street" is "shabby," like Julia's dank hotel room and her worn-out clothing, and is also filled with "red-lit hotels" (33). This setting, a red-light district, a "cheap refuge for lovers, was the right background," George thinks, for their quarrel (33). Here, Julia is likened to the shabby street; like the red lights around them, Julia's dependence on her role as an amateur prostitute threatens to reduce her own status to that of "cheap refuge" — a place, rather than a person, where George can pay for pleasure. These allusions to run-down settings and red, shameful lighting attach themselves to Julia, marking her with the signs of her desperation.

The novel continually suggests that while George can take "cheap refuge" in hotels or with Julia, Julia herself will not escape, but only find further entrapment. For example, George pulls her onto another street, and into a theater, where "the lights went out" and a film plays on a bright, white screen (33). For George, the dark cinema is a respite from their awkward conversations about Julia's discomfort and embarrassment; it's a welcome distraction. Then: "the noise of Julia blowing her nose jarred him like a light turned on suddenly in a room in which one is trying to sleep" (34). Here, in a surprisingly comedic moment, Julia is a shock of discomfort for George—her runny nose a likely sign of both her ill constitution throughout the novel and her

heartbroken emotional state from losing the steadying company and financial support of Mr. McKenzie. Julia is once again likened to the shabby spaces she inhabits. Lights, this time, signal not the red glow of the shabby hotels, but Julia's glaring lack of propriety.

Back in George's hotel room, George becomes a voyeur: "in one of the rooms opposite the light was on and he saw a young man and a girl embracing each other passionately" (36). In this part of town — the shabby, red-lit part — he thinks "you couldn't get away from that kind of thing for a moment" (36). "That kind of thing" becomes an unspoken reality of the novel, one that creates a tense atmosphere from which Julia can't escape. George even awkwardly offers Julia money, which she accepts without protest. This monetary exchange signals the start of a sexual transaction, but George thinks "he did not want to make love to her. That had all gone when she had started to cry and sniff in the cinema" (36). Julia's obvious discomfort—illuminated by theater lights, described like a light turning on—breaks the "mood," and turns the exchange of money from one of sexual power to one of pity. Throughout these moments in the shabby hotel room and dark cinema, the contrasts between bright lights and dark surroundings serve to create a similar contrast between how George and Julia experience these social spaces. In the glow of these lights, we see first Julia's discomfort and embarrassment; then her mood heightens the awkwardness, and George becomes anxious, too. As their ambivalent affair unfolds, it's clear that Julia longs for a stable, quieter life that doesn't require her ongoing movements between hotel rooms and strange men, a world that doesn't repeatedly require her to slip from a role as lover to mistress to amateur prostitute.

These references that connect Julia to lights do more than draw simple associations between herself and the unwelcome effects or associations that these lights have: to herald a space of ill-repute, to showcase an obvious shabbiness, to shine light where it is not wanted, or to

shine it in shadowy spaces meant to remain darkened. These lights also do more than illuminate Julia's embarrassment. They also cast others into relief, those who are very much unlike her and George: those who *enjoy* being seen in the light. They create distinct social contrasts between who is rich and who is poor, who is fine and who is shabby — those who can pay for comfort, and those who are paid to create or provide comforts at their own peril.

Lighting, as a language of the novel, showcases the disparities between men's and women's experiences, even as they exist in the very same spaces. Unlike George, who "hated the feeling of intimacy," and therefore pays for access to Julia and women like her, for Julia "pleasure is a zero-sum game, usually belonging to the other," or the male patron, rather than to herself (Frost 164). Julia only experiences pleasure askance, as "excessive, off-kilter, or something fleeting...that is gone forever" (164). This is because, as Laura Frost argues, "Rhys's characters exist in a world where women are expected to provide pleasure" rather than to keenly experience that pleasure themselves (188). It is also because of Julia's entrapment in the state of abjection. Julia's inability to access pleasurable feelings heightens her anxieties and makes the stakes of every relationship, especially her loss of Mr. McKenzie and her uneven relationship to George, feel more tragic than the men ever register them. This is also why, toward the end of the novel, Julia feels increasingly dissociated and desperate—and where she is again cast under a series of red lights that compound her feelings of shame.

Rushing out onto the street to avoid her depressing hotel room after dark, Julia finds "the street was a dark tunnel" lit along the way with glowing lamps. She and George end up together in a restaurant that "was long and narrow," and lined with "red-shaded lamps" on every table (103-104). After dinner, they go dancing in the red-light district, taking a "narrow staircase" into the dance hall. Trapped in the characteristic loops of trauma that haunt Rhys's women, Julia

finds herself in repetitive scenes of narrow spaces, red glowing lights, and cramped settings where her body rubs up and bumps against others. These dark, narrow passages glowing with red lights compound both her status as an amateur and her anxieties about ageing. She's obviously a poor fit for the very space society has carved out for "that kind of thing." In the dancehall, for example, table lamps exaggerate her anxieties as an elderly man leans over her table, "his face was all bones and hollows in the light of the lamp striking upwards, like a skeleton" (107).⁷ Her reaction is a "horror-stricken expression," yet she agrees to dance with him and rises from her table. The lamplight renders the man a "cadaverous" and uncanny spectre of Julia's modern anxieties: he is old, he is hollow, he expects a transactional dance with her, and she feels forced to submit. For Kristeva, "the corpse...is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life," and here, Julia—in horror, confronting the cadaverous man—feels her own abjection grow. The glow of the lamp on the table exacerbates, even highlights, this moment of horror.

These anxieties grow into paranoia as George and Julia return to her boarding-house, where she will be thrown out if she's caught bringing a man home. As they climb the stairs in the darkness, hoping to hide George's presence from the landlady, Julia becomes increasingly afraid and ashamed. George brushes against her in the dark, and Julia starts yelling out "Who's that? Who touched my hand?" (118). In a dissociative state, Julia forgets where she is and who she's with. A panicked George wonders "there must be an electric switch somewhere" (118). By turning on a bright light, George hopes to stop Julia from making another scene—as if lighting is the solution for both her mental anguish and his growing shame. Before he can find the switch, however, the boarding-house landlady flips on the "lights on the landing" and doors open all

⁷ Like in my reading of Lily Bart's experience under streetlights at night in my chapter on Wharton, the imagery here recalls contemporary observers' comments about how electricity impacts appearance: "people look ghastly" under electric light, they said. "Like so many ghosts flitting about" (Freeberg 27). Here, Rhys shows how the cafe table lights render the old man a monstrous specter of Julia's inevitable future.

around them (119). The foreboding landlady, “a young and good-looking woman,” who counterposes the older and shabby Julia, reassures her: “you need not be frightened, you know. There are no dark corners in my house. I don’t allow dark corners in my house” (119). Julia, who has dwelt in the darkness only to avoid the judging streetlamps and association with the red-lights in the “cheap” parts of town is, in this moment, fully illuminated in her shame. “Nothing matters,” she thinks. “Nothing can be worse than how I feel now” (120).

George, by contrast, has an epiphanic moment in the bright light of the boarding-house: “the strangest understandings, the wildest plans, *lit up* his brain — together with an overwhelming contempt for the organization of society” (120, italics added). As the lights go on in the boarding-house, so too does George’s mind “light up” with a new awareness of social structures. Similarly to Wharton’s Lily Bart, who experiences a moment in which she “had an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung,” (172) this illuminating moment for George is one where he finally recognizes the pleasure economy in which he’s circulating with Julia—and how unfair it is to her. He also seems to realize, troublingly for the first time, Julia’s humanity: “suddenly he saw Julia not as a representative of the insulted and injured, but as a solid human being” (122). If the red neon lights of dance halls and dingy hotel lighting have served to compound Julia’s shame and reduce her to a stereotype as an aging, desperate amateur prostitute, these same lights, for George, finally illuminate her individuality and her humanity. If the language of lighting is a structure the novel uses to make meaning, it is also a language Rhys uses to reveal social structures—and lay bare their vast injustices. The same lights that Julia only sees as the judging eyes of modern society never focus on—or judge—George in the same way. Electric lights, then, may illuminate the same basic modern spaces, but they highlight far different social realities.

As George walks home, overwhelmed and confused at the evening's events, he comes across a cat whose eyes "in the light of the streetlamps...shone, yellow-green, rather malevolent" (122). The scene feels Prufrockian: foggy, yellow tones, a slinking cat. And like Eliot's anxious, wandering modern man, George walks the street alone in shame, pondering its vast structures and the way they so strangely and perfectly mirror the social structures in which he's trapped with Julia. For the first time, George feels himself seen by the judging eyes of the city, this time embodied by a slinking cat whose eyes glow from the streetlamps. He ends their relationship soon after.

As the novel unfolds in its final section, the imagery from the first two sections—of streetlamps, judging eyes, looming darkness—repeats with increasing intensity. The novel ends ruminating again on the Parisian streets: "The street was cool and full of grey shadows. Lights were beginning to come out in the cafes. It was the hour between dog and wolf, as they say" (138). This saying, which refers to the twilight hour as day melts into night (*l'heure entre chein et loup* in French) also refers to a psychological term of mental twilight, "hypnagogia,"—the moments between waking and sleeping, or consciousness and unconsciousness. This threshold consciousness is a moment where lucid and dreaming thoughts often confusingly blend, causing waking nightmares or dreamlike delusions. After Julia's confused outburst in the boarding-house, this final reference to the liminality and confusions of these twilight spaces suggests that most of Julia's experiences happen not just in liminal physical spaces, but in hauntingly liminal mental spaces, too. Lighting marks the transition: the hour when the cafe lights turn on and the daylight wanes mirrors Julia's shifts through relationship statuses—from mistress to lover to amateur—and through mental states in which she shifts from hoping she'll find a lasting connection and stability to returning to a helpless, hopeless state and fears for her future.

Here, the final image of the novel amplifies this precarious psychological state, leaving us with the image of Julia walking the streets at twilight as she undergoes these cycling emotions and states. If street-lamps help to form the “judging eyes” of society in *McKenzie*, Rhys takes things further in *Good Morning, Midnight*, where menacing lights follow a young woman, Sasha Jansen, through both waking and unconscious nightmares in modernizing Paris. In that novel, Rhys illustrates the traumatizing effects of modernity’s cultural and technological innovations on women in precarious social positions. For Sasha, electric lights eventually become the harbinger of a fast-moving, violent world in which she fears she will never find peace.

Strange Encounters in *Good Morning, Midnight*

Good Morning, Midnight follows the wandering, fragmented thoughts and experiences of a young woman, Sasha Jansen, as she traverses post-war Paris. She moves through cafes, lavabos, hotels, streets, and restaurants as she loops through haunting, traumatic memories of her past and, in her present, meets disturbing men, such as the commis voyageur, who spark in her mind dissociative episodes in which she longs to disappear, become invisible, or run away. As Maren Linett has pointed out, Sasha is clearly experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as evidenced by thoughts that loop, emotional states and moods that violently fluctuate, and those dissociative episodes in which Sasha seems to mentally leave reality as she’s overtaken by traumatic memories and fears. In my analysis here, I show how Sasha’s repeated focus on the lighting around her reveals how Rhys uses electricity to compound or amplify the dissociative effects of Sasha’s PTSD, amplifying the traumatizing effects of the social role Sasha is expected to play. Modern Paris forms the perfect backdrop on which Rhys can stage the traumatizing and terrorizing effects of what it means to be a modern, unmoored woman. For Sasha, modernity’s rapid technological advancements are tied to her social position, as they suggest an unending and

inevitable cycle of abuse and confusion to her—a world that continues to evolve in ways she cannot accept or adapt to. As such, for Sasha, modern technologies wield profound power in her conscious and her unconscious mind—filling her nightmares with images of a Fascistic future she can’t outrun.

The novel is bookended by two nightmares in which Sasha moves through a maze at an international exhibition, a global event heralded for displays of modern technologies and wonders. Jess Issacharoff explains the historical context of the event: “Paris’s 1937 International Exposition of Arts and Technology in Modern Life,” was an exhibition “in which national and imperial identities were bolstered and celebrated” (111). In her first dream of this exposition, Sasha wanders out of a bustling London tube station, surrounded by signs with red letters: “This Way to the Exhibition,” seeming to push her and point her toward a modern future. “But I don’t want the way to the exhibition” she says, “I want the way out” (13). A man with a steel finger points her toward the Exhibition; another man, in a long white robe, menaces her, his face dripping with blood, chanting “murder” repeatedly until Sasha herself joins him and shouts herself awake. A body turned to metal, another body bleeding from the head—this nightmare imagery suggests Sasha’s fears of effacement and dissociation in modernity; indeed, throughout the novel, she states that she feels evermore like “an automaton,” rather than a real person (10). The result of entering modern spaces, she fears, will be a violent end to her own selfhood, because she does not feel she has the strength—or social status—to ensure her safety in a modernized society. These fears are made more distinct and tangible by the physical signs of modernity and technology that Sasha is surrounded by in her real, waking life.

Awake in her room, Sasha thinks “I believe it’s a fine day, but the light in this room is so bad that you can’t be sure. Outside on the landing you can’t see at all unless the electric light is

on” (14). It’s on that landing where the man staying next door to her, who wears a “white dressing-gown” like the menacing man in her nightmares, frequently “parad[es]” around. To Sasha, he is “the ghost of the landing,” and under the electric light on the cluttered and dirty floor, his ghostly presence amplifies and haunts her. As she repeatedly states in the novel, “the light makes everything seem strange” (137). Rather than clarifying, then, the bright electric lights of her hotel home blur the lines between man and ghost, between dawn and daylight—making “everything seem strange.”

Her hotel room, in general, amplifies the discordant effects of modernity, of modern life more generally, on her psyche. Following the light switch failure in the aforementioned scene, in which Sasha and a gigolo, who has come to her room to rob and assault her, move confusedly in her dark room, Sasha says “I fumble with [the switch] for some time before I can get the lamp near the bed going. Now the room springs out at me, laughing, triumphant.” The light has finally switched on; the moment should be a relief. Instead, the light renders the room a monster that taunts her as it springs out of darkness into an unreliable brightness, triggered by unreliable switches. Even with the lights on, Sasha cannot establish a safe or comforting space, or even see herself clearly, which further compounds her fears of effacement and terror. As she says in one moment, as she gazes into a mirror in her bathroom, “I go to the glass, look at myself, stare at myself, make a grimace, look at my teeth. Damn this light—how can I see to make-up properly in this light?”

From her hotel bedroom to the city streets, Sasha longs for better light under which to see herself and her surroundings while she simultaneously dreads the strange images and realities that may await her once a light is switched on. Out on the street, after watching a film in a cinema, Sasha says “the streetlamps are lit. I’m glad of that. If you’ve got to walk around by

yourself, it's easier when the lamps are lit" (16). Under properly working streetlights, Sasha feels more at ease and perhaps safer. This is one of the effects that public lighting had on the creation and eventual expansion of city nightlife that historians like David Nye and Ernest Freeberg have noted. But even as she traverses well-lit streets, she feels that she is repeating traumatizing patterns, "walking in the night. Back to the hotel. Always the same hotel.... Always the same stairs, always the same room," (32). Seemingly trapped in these looping mental states, she feels that her life, "which seems so simple and monotonous, is really a complicated affair of cafes where they like me and cafes where they don't, streets that are friendly, streets that aren't, rooms where I might be happy, rooms where I never shall be, looking-glasses I look nice in, looking-glasses I don't" (46).

As the novel unfolds, it is those spaces filled with "crude, cruel light" that most make her feel unwelcome and compound her anxieties (69). In fact, in one of her strangest flashbacks, a story she tells her friend Lise, Sasha explains how streetlights have exacerbated her humiliations on at least one occasion, when "standing by a lamp-post in dead silence, waiting for the bus" with a man whose advances she has refused, "My drawers fall off." While the incident would be embarrassing at any time, Sasha is spotlighted by lamp-light, made highly visible in her shame. Lise herself dreads finding work outside the cabaret where she sings because "the light in the workrooms isn't so good. Sometimes your eyes hurt so much that you can hardly open them" (134). These women know the discomfiting, even damning, effects of modern lighting on their lives.

Yet Sasha hopes to find a well-lit space that might offer her some clarity: a beautiful image of herself in a bathroom mirror, for example. Throughout the novel, she seeks lighting that can make her feel beautiful or help her to see, and therefore interpret, other people more clearly.

But in all these instances, even bright lights reveal more confusion, more discomfiting self images. She revisits public bathrooms or lavabos with “good light” and “resplendent” lighting near the nicer parts of the city, simply to look at herself in the mirror, but doesn’t like the aged image of herself she confronts. She purposely takes the gigolo to a cafe with “bright light” because she is “only curious to see what he looks like” (77). As they walk together on the street, the gigolo “pulls [her] under a lamp-post and stares” at her face, seemingly looking for clues about her identity or nationality; the street all around them is completely dark, as even “the lights in the bars are out” (79). Looking into her face, the man claims “mais c’est complètement fou. It’s hallucinating” (79).⁸ Under modern, electric light, identity wavers; no one can get a clear picture of themselves or their companions. Indeed, Sasha hopes she can find any lighting that will offer a clear picture. But under the streetlamp, she becomes strange to the gigolo and unrecognizable to herself. To connect once again to Kristeva’s theory of abjection, the abject creates the feeling of uncanniness: “Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing” (2). Electric light spotlights this abjection and amplifies its effects.

The same lights that obscure Sasha also make dingy hotels look much nicer than they are. In other words, the street lighting creates a kind of hallucination, or imperfect illusion, of reality. Sasha warns the gigolo she walks with that these hotels “look all right by this light, but they’re not so comfortable. Try something more modern” (80). By “modern,” Sasha likely means an updated hotel where the lighting, as well as the furnishings, will be more consistent and comfortable. As Emma Short argues in her analysis of 20th-century travel guides and hotel directories, “the specific type and location of [hotel bedroom] can reveal a great deal about a character’s consciousness or state of mind, as well as their socioeconomic background” (139).

⁸ This can be roughly translated as “it’s completely crazy.”

Short points out that electric light (abbreviated as “Elec.L.” in amenities listings) often set apart the most luxurious and expensive hotels in the late 1890s. But 30 years later, innovations like electric light—poorly kept up—would become signs of dilapidated hotels. This may be why Sasha, at one moment, utters “I want a light room,” while bemoaning the fact that all rooms in her hotel are the same—they’re all equally dingy and dark (36). As Short points out: “Rooms at the front of a hotel, with a better view and more light, tended to be more expensive than rooms at the back of a hotel” (137). The hotel where Sasha stays, by contrast, is neither expensive nor surrounded by nice views. To want a “light room” is to want a space, mental or physical, much nicer than anything Sasha can afford.

The modern city of the novel is full of spaces, especially houses on the streets with no hotels, that exude modern power precisely because of how well lit they are. Indeed, modern life holds many promises—of nicer, more brightly and beautifully lit spaces—but Sasha knows, in her social position, such spaces are inaccessible. This is perhaps why, in her waking life, she feels tormented by ill-wired switches and why, in her nightmares, she feels taunted by the signs that point the way to modernity. Even if she joins the throng marching toward modernity in her first dream of the exhibition, she worries there is nothing there for her but more disappointments, more hallucinations, and more electric light that will fail to illuminate her with clarity. In fact, she begins to *expect* ongoing trauma as a fact of her life.

The end of the novel signals not an acceptance of this trauma, but Sasha’s resignation to a modern life that will only cause her continual pain and confusion. Toward the final scenes of the novel, Sasha has her second nightmare, in which “all that is left in the world is an enormous machine, made of white steel” (187). Modernity left unchecked has rendered everyone an automaton; the exhibition, full of technological wonders, has overtaken the entire world. This

vast machine, in Sasha's nightmare, is covered in "innumerable flexible arms" and some of these arms end in eyes while others "have lights" at the end of them (187). The arms with lights, she says, "are all extraordinarily flexible and very beautiful," reaching across a dark gray sky that "terrifies" her (187). Sue Thomas argues in her essay "Jean Rhys Writing White Creole Childhoods," that "Rhys frequently uses the machine as metaphor of the degeneracy of a misogynistic industrial modernity and the discursive regimes that underpin it" (215). However, while scholars have explored how the machinic imagery of Sasha's nightmare aligns with techno-fascistic developments in Europe at this time, little attention has been paid to the strange flickering lights that seem to act as disembodied, all-seeing eyes. As I argue, in her careful depictions of strange lights and glowing technological eyes of the exhibition, Rhys meticulously unravels cultural fantasies about modernity and in their place, suggests a haunting and monstrous vision of modernity as a vast machine that no woman can elude.

The 1937 exhibition was, in many ways, an "ode to progress," filled with installations, art galleries, theaters, spectacles, museums, attractions, and technological showcases all designed to herald the awesome powers of modernity (Laurent 53). Indeed, at the 1937 Exhibit, the same one Rhys fictionalizes in Sasha's nightmare, Raoul Dufy—a French impressionist painter—had been hired to create an enormous mural to "promote the role of electricity in the life of the nation, and especially to highlight the leading societal role played by electric light" (Laurent 67). His final mural, *La Fée Électricité*, was a huge installation on a concave wall that offered a "visual encyclopedia of electricity," a history of electric innovations, including representations of the major inventors themselves. But the centerpiece of the work was the fairy—"a gigantic female allegory" surrounded on all sides by "enormous machines" and "electrical apparatuses" designed to marry the artistic depiction of electric power with its machinic realities (Laurent 60). For

Dufy, “the idea was for machinery, the hardware of science and technology, to be secondary to people” in his mural (Laurent 69). This state-sponsored celebration of electric power perhaps explains Sasha’s nightmare of coming fascism; in the beautiful artistry of a mural, Dufy offers a palatable, sanitized history of electricity. He highlights its awesome powers—of beauty, light, and hope—and elides the powerful cultural history Rhys’s novels evoke.

For Sasha, in stark contrast, there is no art at the exhibition. There are no female allegories or celebratory technological feats. In her nightmare, there is only a looming, alien machine-monster that looms over “the whole world,” that takes up all the space and leaves her with one dominant psychological need: a desperation to escape. Her nightmare, then, is an alternate history of the exhibition, a detailing of the abjection of modernity rather than a celebration of its supposed triumphs. Unlike Dufy, Sasha does *not* see art and technology working in tandem; she sees only the strange, confronting eyes—that modern, judging gaze—as it overtakes her world. Far from identifying with that powerful fairy at the center of the artistic mural, Sasha herself becomes the lone female figure at the exhibition, rendering herself a female allegory of horror at modernity’s changes. Indeed, both her dream-self and her waking self keenly experience the feeling of alienation by all those around her who seem to follow the same signs that she desperately tries to ignore or disobey.

When she wakes from this nightmare, Sasha is once again deeply disoriented. The prose of the novel becomes more disjointed, following Sasha’s interrupted and frantic mental state. Her mind cycles through events in a non-linear wash of emotions, and we realize the reason for her distraught state: Sasha has had this nightmare of unforgiving, inescapable machinery after Rene, the gigolo, has assaulted and humiliated her in her dark hotel room. After she fumbles for the light switch, Rene pushes her onto the bed, assaults her, takes some of her money, and leaves.

The effort of comprehending her pain, of understanding exactly what has happened under those strange, failing lights in her hotel bedroom, exhausts her: “this is the effort, the enormous effort, under which the human brain cracks” (188). The profound imagery of a brain breaking under stress, now compounded by a violent assault, help explain why Sasha cries at his departure. But she is confused, wondering: “did I cry like that because I’ll never sing again, because the light in my sale cerveau has gone out?” (189). *Sale cerveau*, translated as “dirty brain,” suggests Sasha’s feeling that her brain, dirty and dingy like her hotel room, has indeed cracked under modern pressure; that like the failing, unreliable lights in her poorly kept hotel bedroom, her own light—her mind—has “gone out.” This experience mirrors Lily Bart’s feeling of having a light in her mind; like Wharton’s heroine, Rhys’s tragic female figure also feels her light “gone out,” leaving her in darkness. Wharton’s end for Lily seems almost gracious by comparison to Rhys’s end for Sasha, who does not die from this anguish, but instead, like Anna, will “continue,” in her abjection.

Sasha remains in a dissociative state as the menacing *commis voyageur* from the landing, the strange man in a white dressing-gown, appears in her room, with “his mean eyes flickering” (190). This description of his eyes, both as “flickering” and “mean” recalls the novel’s many allusions to electric lights, and most especially to those haunting technological modern eyes on steel arms in her nightmare. As such, the *commis* functions, here, as the final composite image of her modern anxieties, of the confusing images she has seen in hypnagogic states: in his white robe, he recalls Sasha’s mental image of him as the menacing ghost from the lobby, where the electric lights make everything seem strange. He becomes “a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles” (Kristeva 4).

Rather than cower or scream, Sasha reaches out to him, saying “Yes - yes - yes . . .” as the final refrain of the novel (190). Critics have read this final series of affirmations as either Sasha’s embrace of her final effacement or, more troublingly, as a sign of her clear consent to the *commis*’ advances. Linett, by contrast, reads her “yes”-es as a moment of final resignation, in which the cruel and violent life she has come to expect finally arrives; the trauma Sasha has come to expect from modern life has come around yet again. Indeed, by saying “yes,” Sasha affirms the *commis* as the ultimate and inevitable modern horror she has been anticipating. I agree with Linett that the scene is one of numbness and fear. What’s more, Sasha is brazen enough—even in this moment of profound confusion and weakness—to “look straight into his eyes,” into those mean and flickering lights from her nightmare, now embodied by the *commis*. “The abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject,” Kristeva tells us (5). Yet it also, “at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it *is* none other than abject” (5). In this final scene, by looking into the electric eyes of her own “pulverization,” the burning out of her metaphorical light, Sasha recognizes her abjection as herself. Confronting the gaze of these glowing, nightmarish eyes, Sasha “finds the impossible within.”

Conclusion

In the three novels I’ve explored here, Rhys positions modernity as both obscuring and alienating, and she deliberately uses electric lighting—both resplendent and unreliable lights—to amplify the abjection of her women characters. Modern Paris, in so many narratives from this time, was heralded as the hub of modern civilization, a city filled with the promises of an evolving and idealistic artistic life. Sasha instead experiences the blunt trauma, the brain-

cracking pressure, of the limitations of those promises. In modernizing cities, both Paris and London, Sasha, Anna, and Julia find themselves surrounded by modernity's innovations, by relaxed social and sexual conventions, by the nightlife so celebrated as a feat of modern innovations in entertainment and recreation—and find that life is at best, vacuous, at worst, deeply traumatizing. In the face of modernity's promises of a lively, vibrant life, they all experience only the same-old disappointments and endlessly repeating cycles of trauma. Sasha, at the close of *Good Morning, Midnight*, affirms this traumatized mental state as her impossible reality: a waking nightmare, in which all she has dreaded and feared in her darkest anxieties seems to have actually come true.

In her 1919 essay “Modern Fiction,” Virginia Woolf tells us that “the novelist has to have the courage to say that what interests him is no longer ‘this’ but ‘that’: out of ‘that’ alone must he construct his work. For the moderns, ‘that’, the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology” (156). Rhys's attention to the “darkness” of modernity—both in its physical places, the modern city, and in the interiorities and minds of her characters—displays that particular modernist “courage” to shift narrative interests from the known to the unknown, from what could be observed in a shared reality to the strange, psychological realities of women like Anna, Sasha, and Julia. It's in that same essay that Woolf tells us, “life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo” (154). Using streetlamps, well-lit lavabos, and red neon bulbs, in bustling cinemas and shabby hotel bedrooms, Rhys casts abjection under the “strange” lights of modernity, where these women—and their strange mental states—might finally be known—and where modernity's ugly shadow, its endless torment for some kinds of lives, might finally be illuminated.

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WIRED MINDS IN H.D.'S FICTION

In order to “make it new,” modernist writers and artists sought to actively break the forms of the past, to short-circuit existing artistic patterns in pursuit of new ones. For H.D., Hilda Doolittle, the specific type of mental energy required to create modern literature is both profoundly gendered and curiously electric. I argue in this chapter that in her nonfiction essays and journal entries, she pens theories of mental energy that take the act of “short-circuiting” patterns quite literally, and she adopts the language of electric power, energy, and force to explain her understanding of how the human mind receives artistic inspiration. Put another way, H.D. posits modernist theories of art that employ the language of electricity to push boundaries and question artistic limitations. By examining how she defines and describes the mental state she imagines necessary to create modern literature, I also consider how she thought of the relationship between creative potential and the mental energy it requires, as well as, more broadly, how she defines the power of the female mind and imagination in modernism as electric.

This chapter posits that H.D. held a lifelong fascination with the ways electric powers might enliven the artist’s imagination by tracing her use of electric language across her 1919 collection of essays and journals, *Notes on Thought and Vision*, her 1935 novella *Nights*, and her 1941 journals written during World War II air raids she lived through while abroad. In her theories, she ponders what powers, if any, could free a woman’s body from maternal expectation, and she imagines the ways that modern women might resist viewing their bodies only as vessels for children and instead imagine them as the potential conduits of complex artistic and electrical impulses that lead to new futures. In *Nights*, for example, she imagines a woman’s body as a wire on which electric and emancipatory powers might freely run. In the end, H.D. seems to

suggest that, by channeling modernity's energies, the female artist might pursue a life not defined by her gender—by motherhood or wifehood—but a life of free artistry and imagination, where anything might be possible. If electric power could help women break artistic patterns, H.D. hints, it might help them shatter social expectations, as well.

In my reading, H.D. finds artistic possibility within the multiplicity of connotations electricity held in the early twentieth century: it was an emancipatory energy of limitless potential that might allow women who could embrace it the chance to experience their bodies as modern, unknowable, and sensual. But it was also dangerous. As a seemingly limitless power, electricity was linked to fears about control and autonomy, as scholars like Tim Armstrong, Richard Menke, and Paul Gilmore have explored. Armstrong writes of the “duality in electricity,” that it was seen both as “duplicating the motive forces of the nervous system and perhaps even the ‘spark’ of life itself” while it simultaneously “transcended the scale of the human body and could kill” (14). He, like Menke and Gilmore, claims that electricity and literature work together to play out the meanings and possibilities of this duality: “modernist texts are electrical, plugging into a scientific rhetoric which channels flows of energy and information” (19). My chapter shows the ways H.D.'s texts, from *Notes on Thought and Vision* to *Nights*, “plug in” to the electrical discourses of her time, giving her space to posit her own theory of electricity as a distinctly modern power that inspires her own work as a modernist poet and novelist, but also allows her to “plug in” to a wider, collective modernist mind where she might inspire, and be inspired, to continue pushing artistic boundaries. This reading requires a shift in critical perspective, where I read H.D. not first-and-foremost as a poet, but as an intellectual, a scientific theorist, and an artist who defined her own artistic work against the definitions thrust upon her by her early mentor and friend, Ezra Pound.

H.D.'s Legacy in Scholarship

Indeed, poetry has long held the center of H.D. studies. With her first publication, *Sea Garden* in 1916, H.D. became one of the most resonant and creative poets in modernism and in the Imagist movement which Pound named after her, and assigned her name to, with Richard Aldington. As Brian Broadhead Glaser points out, H.D. “transformed her gender identity from a liability” at the beginning of her career, “into a source of originality and freedom” (91). While much critical attention has recently unpacked the detrimental effect Pound’s legacy has had on obscuring H.D.’s own, and especially how we study her, critics are still slowly moving out of the key themes and tropes frequently noted and studied in her work: most popularly, themes of Greek mythological influences and poetic form. Because we still often read and teach H.D. through her poetry, it’s easy to think of her as exemplary of womanly prose with her floral vocabulary and nature-driven imagery. But as Miranda Hickman has pointed out, H.D. leverages natural imagery—of rocks, storms, and crashing waves—to “develop a rhetoric of violence” that continues in her later work (38). This violence, Hickman tells us, is H.D.’s argument for “emancipatory transformation” (39), created through a “poetics of the sublime that features transformative violence” and functions as a “welcome avenue toward renewal and greater knowledge” (38). I argue that H.D. develops an electric language in her essays, journals, and novella, in which she argues for the necessary and transformative violence of modernist thinking to break with the past and invite innovative, dangerous artistic endeavors.

Thanks to work by Glaser, Hickman, and others, such as Rebecah Pulsifer and Matthew Kibble, we can now appreciate that by the end of her literary career, H.D. “had become, as a woman, a central figure in a masculinist group of modernist writers, and she had extended its phenomenal experimental reach” (Glaser 91). Indeed, as my reading of *Notes on Thought and Vision* illustrates, H.D. thought one of electricity’s key powers was the creation of a telegraphy

between minds—a kind of telepathic artistic connection—that would invite genderless minds to partake in artistic inspiration together, in a “psychosphere” where everything feels possible. Reading electricity in her works allows us to see more depth behind this claim—that H.D. worked in multiple “masculinist” spaces of modernist thinking, even in scientific thinking, and with her theories of electricity’s power to connect minds and bodies, she also “extended” cultural narratives of electricity into the art, poetry, and literary worlds.

Her essays and fiction remain underexplored, perhaps due to their sporadic publication history. *Nights*, the novella I discuss in this chapter, for example, was most recently published in 1986 by New Directions, and is often left out of critical conversations about H.D.’s prose. This is perhaps “because it displays dimensions of H.D.’s work and thought not easily assimilable to many current and salient critical narratives about her work” (Hickman, “Sparse and Geometric” 328). These themes include, for Hickman, the erotic and the scientific, and she claims the dearth of “thought about the erotic in H.D.’s work” (328) should be a call-to-action for future scholars to explore H.D.’s treatment of the erotic, of the modern, and of the sexual female body beyond its capacity for childbearing and motherhood. In the following sections, I take up this call by reading H.D.’s fascination with electricity as crucially connected to her understanding of the power of the erotic female body, of human (even genderless) sexual feelings and experiences, and of modernist art in the early twentieth century.

H.D.’s Electric Theories of Mind in *Notes on Thought and Vision*

While traveling the Scilly Islands with Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman), the English modernist and editor, H.D. began working on a short series of essays called *Notes on Thought and Vision*. She had just survived the 1918 Spanish flu and experienced complications giving birth to her daughter Perdita—two harrowing physical experiences that, I suggest, inform this

early text from her career, in which she considers how artist's minds create new works. In sum, the text contemplates creative forces and whence they originate, and she posits the blunt violence, even the sublime violence, of artistic inspiration on the human subject and on the modern world.

Specifically, she defines and discusses "brain work," which she defines as a kind of artistic genius, of being receptive to literal vibrations and pulses that emanate from works of art. Pondering the Delphic charioteer, she posits a telegraphic theory of the mind: "If we had the right sort of brains, we would receive a definite message from that figure [the Delphic charioteer], like dots and lines ticked off by one receiving station, received and translated into definite thought by another telegraphic center....We want receiving centres for dots and dashes" (26). Here, H.D. connects the ideal modernist mind to an electrified receiving center, where the pulses of art come into the mind like morse code. This model of a telegraphic mind becomes overtly electric as she continues to define the state of mind an artist must occupy to "make it new":

two or three people, with healthy bodies and the right sort of receiving brains, could turn the whole tide of human thought, could direct lightning flashes of *electric power* to slash across and destroy the world of dead, murky thought. Two or three people gathered together in the name of truth, beauty, over-mind consciousness could bring the whole force of this power back into the world (27, emphasis added)

The receptive telegraphic mind takes on those violent powers of electricity: lightning flashes with the capacity to both "destroy and slash," while also opening up a field of access, for the telegraphically connected artist, to plug into a state of consciousness that she calls "over-mind." Matthew Kibble summarizes this state as "a transcendent, ecstatic state of heightened consciousness and artistic inspiration" (42).

In positioning the artist's mind as a tightly controlled network, like a telegraph, but simultaneously as having the power of destructive "lightning flashes," H.D. leverages the multiplicity of electricity, its diverse connotations of being both uncontrollable and networked, powerful enough to shock but productive in its effects. And she does so to illustrate that necessary, transformative violence she believes will "slash" away the past and make room for new arts. Put simply: H.D.'s telegraphic mind destroys in order to create. That it might only require "two or three people" with "healthy bodies" and the "right sort of brain" to "turn the whole tide of human thought" suggests the sheer power she devotes to an electric over-mind; she positions such a healthy, receptive mind at the epicenter of modernist creation, even as she positions this type of mind as somewhat singular and unique.

In these musings and theories, H.D. explores wider cultural fascinations during the rise of electricity, as internal consciousness—thought, ideas, impulses—increasingly became understood as a material reality. Electricity, especially the electric telegraph, offered explanations for how minds might be connected telepathically. As Hilary Grimes summarizes: "if electrical impulses could be sent through the air to transmit telegrams, scientists theorized that telepathy was also possible—thought waves could be sent out and received by distant bodies and minds" (29). Earlier connotations about electricity during the Romantic period invited writers and thinkers to "imagine aesthetics as a sensuous experience of the individual body embedded in specific social situations" leading to the "suspension of the individual in a sense of a larger whole" (Paul Gilmore 6). Scientific thinking between 1870-1920, Tim Armstrong explains, "exists in close relation to psychic research: scientific writers had deep interests in borderline phenomena" and the burgeoning field of Spiritualism took hold, in which the "universe pulsating with hidden forces" made it easy for an individual to "slide effortlessly from

personal emanations to X-rays” (“The Vibrating World” 122). Modernism, generally, was “a moment of intense curiosity about mass consciousness, common mind, and crowd psychology” that Rebecah Pulsifer calls an “intellectual union” or “collective cognition” (155-156). H.D. “insists on the materiality of cognition” as Pulsifer puts it. In my next section, a close reading of H.D.’s novella *Nights*, I argue that beyond the materiality of thought, H.D. insists on the electrical qualities of artistic inspiration. As Grimes writes, many modernist thinkers imagined that “minds could touch other minds telepathically, just as machines could touch other machines to transmit messages electrically.” (29).

H.D. explores the line between telepathy and telegraphy in her novella, where creative, electric energies drive a woman artist to emotional and sexual extremes. I argue specifically that H.D. funnels these ideas about electric, creative energy into her character, Natalia Sanderson, the boldly sexual and ambitious artist at the center of her 1935 novella, *Nights*. I read Natalia as “the right sort of receiving [brain]” per H.D.’s 1919 definition in *Notes*: a dedicated female artist who works “in the name of truth, beauty, over-mind consciousness,” and attempts to “turn the whole tide of human thought” with her electric imagination and creative works. I argue that *Nights* similarly ponders the artistic value of the creations and artistic output that an electric mind brings to life.

The Electrified Female Artist in *Nights*

The following reading of *Nights* argues that H.D. extended her early theories of aesthetic energy and women’s writing in her fiction during the 1930s, and that she continued to see electricity as a central motif to those theories. Natalia, the main character of the novella, seeks definition of these things for herself, as she longs for an absent husband Neil, has an affair with a man named David, ruminates on her bisexuality and relationship with Renne (Neil’s sister), and

ultimately commits suicide as a result of her perceived inability to fulfill her creative and sexual desires.

No research has been published on H.D.'s fascination with electricity at the time of this writing, and *Nights* is absent in most modernist surveys and anthologies. Scholars have, though, investigated how H.D. treats technology and technological advancement in her works more broadly. Dancy Mason suggests, summarizing critical discussions of technology in H.D.'s works, that "discussions of H.D.'s own engagement with technology often focus on her condemnation of machines of war," and haven't often investigated other ways H.D. treats technology in her fiction (92). Recently, Mason, Susan McCabe, and Matthew Kibble, have, however, explored H.D.'s seeming belief in the potential positive relationships between modernity and its technologies. Each of these scholars suggests that technologies, for H.D., seem to offer redemption, spiritual transcendence, and the possibility for freedom.

Electricity, as both a technology itself and a power that allowed other technologies to run, fascinates Natalia precisely because of its enigmatic and binaristic power. It is found both within and beyond the human body; it could be used to destroy or create life; it might appear naturally in the skies as chaotic lightning flashes or controlled in a lamp on the ceiling. In all its various capacities—as uncontrolled force, as controllable power, electricity becomes crucial to H.D.'s conception of a sexual female body that desires emancipation through transcendent sex that both empowers and shocks the bodies it runs through. By looking at the ways H.D. weds the erotic to the electric in *Nights*, I argue that she aligns two discourses—sexuality and electricity—so that she might glimpse the aesthetic possibilities of modernism for modern women writers.

The novella teems with allusions to electric power as both metaphor and physical explanation for how Nat makes sense of an intimate network of complex sexual relationships.

The story continually fuses the erotic female body—Nat’s sexual, flesh-and-bone body—with the radiating powers of electricity as much more than metaphor. Nat’s body and mind become quite literally electrified in the novella, as she courses with energies and anxieties seemingly beyond her control. *Nights*, then, posits a relationship between the electric and the erotic that illustrates H.D.’s continued fascination with and exploration of spirituality. A fictional attempt to make clear what she meant by an “over-mind consciousness” in 1919, *Nights* suggests that transcendent aesthetic power is made possible by modernization’s new electric technologies, and furthermore hints that women writers can access transcendent experiences through electric energies—which become fleetingly accessible during sex. Kibble helpfully contextualizes the “over-mind” as “an explicit criticism of the idea that artistic or intellectual activity involves the suppression of sexual activity” (43). It is, instead, “a realm beyond individual embodied experience, a place where personal differences, social contexts, and material determinants...seem to be erased” (Kibble 44). While I show in the following chapter that Olive Moore was fixated on gender as the essential barrier that would keep women from participating in artistic movements, H.D. argues quite the opposite: in the “over-mind” state of being, “a body is not mapped in terms of its reproductive organs” or constrained, in any way, by the identities that Moore claims are dictated by biology. The over-mind, that space of genderless transcendence, allows H.D. to imagine a wide-open, fully charged world where she can fully participate in art as a person as unlimited as she perceived electricity to be. Indeed, by paying attention to the electric imagery in *Nights*, we glimpse one way that H.D. imagined or continued to develop her theory of an “over-mind consciousness” in the 1930s, by defining it as crucially connected to the electric, sexual female body.

Nights is a two-part novella. Part 1, a long prologue by an editor, is authored by H.D.'s pseudonym, John Helforth, a man with "scientific training a reader, travelling-salesman and general under-paid, overworked utility man to a publishing form of semi-popular scientific brochures" (5-6), who edits Natalia's work, the "shelf of manuscripts she left," after her death (4). At the behest of Nat's friend and sister-in-law Renne, who trusts John to write an honest and emotionless account of her work, he embarks on composing an introduction to Nat's texts so that her fiction and journals might be posthumously published. Renne specifically hopes his scientific background will result in a rational framework for Nat's strange texts. But he finds himself unable to articulate the unique power of her manuscripts.

In his introduction, which constitutes the same length as Nat's manuscripts to follow, he describes her past relationships, travels, and aesthetic style. He praises her "a woman with a gift, an unquestionable talent," as he questions his interpretation of her work: "I, who could follow the intricacy and daring of the sheer technique of her writing, found it impossible.... Her battery was surcharged." Here, John figures Nat as an artist with a "surcharge" of artistic energy as he also figures her writing as curiously electric: "She was presenting truth, or what she saw as truth...not as a photographer, a journalist, or even a portrait-painter or a dramatist, but in some other medium. She seemed to work actually in...electricity. Is that, I ask you, the medium for a novel?" (22). Here, John asks the central question of *Nights*, and perhaps of modern fiction more broadly: what medium can possibly capture the chaotic energies of modernism? Can electricity, perhaps, be the medium modernism needs to "slash...and destroy the world of dead, murky thought" (*Notes* 27).

For John, Nat's written works are the result of an electric energy that flows through her body and onto the page, making her a curious medium of that modern energy: "She becomes

merely an automatic recorder...a sort of scientific lyricist" (24). As a "mere" vessel for extant creative energies, Nat's body takes on its own kind of passive energy: she becomes the way, the wire or conduit, that permits modern literature to flow. She becomes that individual who, in the over-mind state, can actually start to "*direct* lightning flashes of electric power to slash across and destroy the world of dead, murky thought" (*Notes* 27, emphasis mine). Using the language of electricity, H.D. is able to represent the seemingly opposed powers—the polar tensions—of the artist's mind and body in Nat as both a passive vessel and an active agent who can "direct" lightning flashes. This is an ego-less action, though it requires her participation; this is the modern artist who gives herself over, fully, to that mission to "make it new."

Indeed, John suggests that one of Nat's goals as a modernist writer was to use her own erotic body to channel and direct external creative energies and thereby allow a purer art to make its way to the page. Helforth imagines an artistic process he can't quite comprehend, in which Natalia receives inspiration, lets it run through her without changing it, and then releases, or directs, its full power into literature. Such a process mirrors the telegraphic impressions H.D. argues can be gathered from the Delphic charioteer in *Notes on Thought and Vision*. Whether the impressions that Natalia collects have any critical value as a text, John tells us, isn't the point. His fascination, and it seems H.D.'s ultimate goal, is not to present that finished product, but to revel in the electrifying aesthetic experience that such art permits. The aim, then, is to model, through Natalia, how H.D. imagined her own self, as an artist, to receive and then share artistic inspiration. The goal, in the "common, de-individualized psychic plane that guides creative thought," the over-mind state, is to become the pure artist, a "permeable subject" unencumbered by the casual or mundane (Pulsifer 158). In this state, where that openness to artistic, electric impulses "amplifies, rather than reduces, a subject's creativity" (Pulsifer 158), a woman artist

can leave behind the social identities that would relegate her to submit to the labels and names of the social world—like H.D.’s own title of *Imagiste*, given to her by modernist literature’s Fathers.

In Part II of the novella, Nat’s manuscripts make central the tension between artist and critic, or woman and mentor (two tensions that H.D. knew well herself, having written with Pound the critic and worked with Freud as a kind of analyst and mentor) by exploring the power of consummation between individuals. By using sexual energy and orgasm to showcase the power of the erotic female body, Natalia illustrates one way to access transcendent aesthetic states or the “over-mind.” And the way H.D. presents Natalia’s sexuality links back to the erotics of *Notes on Thought and Vision*. As I’ve previously stated, H.D.’s view of sexuality as central to, rather than sublimated by, the artistic process contradicts Freud’s theory of sublimation in key ways, which Kibble explains: “Sublimation became the theory of a selfless, self-denying sacrifice to a conservative culture,” in which sexuality is little more than “a reproductive function which serves the demands of patriarchal culture” (48). But “H.D. refuses to gender the body” and implies that the “over-world energy”—that space the artist plugs into—“is both an erotic and an artistic force” (Kibble 48). Indeed, the over-mind state allows Nat to orgasm, to become “permeable” to the forces of the electric world. Rather than self-denial or sacrifice, Nat experiences profound pleasure in becoming the willing wire for energies to run through. Indeed, H.D.’s criticism of Freud’s sublimation here is a “liberation of female sexuality from functionalist biological discourses of reproduction” (Kibble 48). H.D. refreshingly frees herself, and her readers, from those obsessive “biological discourses,” which is the discourse in Olive Moore’s *Spleen* that condemns her female artist, Ruth, to a sexless, pleasureless existence of

self-imposed exile. In contrast, Natalia is a vibrant, vibrating exemplar of H.D.'s over-mind—she is the ideal modernist artist and thinker.

Fascinated by the enigmatic powers of electricity to simultaneously connect and disconnect bodies, Nat becomes a wire on which energies, be they sexual, electric, or creative, might run without interruption: “she wanted the electric power to run on through her, then out, unimpeded.” Natalia’s main desire in the text is to become the medium for transcendent powers, what John calls her capacity as an “automatic recorder.” In tying electric powers to the erotic female body, H.D. evokes a haunting anxiety, a cultural excitement, shared among early twentieth century writers and scientists: that electric power and sexual desire both had the potential to traverse uncontrolled throughout bodies and minds, to haphazardly connect or break apart social bodies. Indeed, Natalia doesn’t want sex for children—she wants it for her own artistic experiences: her “dislike of childbearing is suggested most explicitly when we find that her realm of ‘holy radium’ and vision consciousness contrasts with what she considers the ‘casual, tiresome things’ of life, among which she places the process of having children” (Hickman, “Sparse and Geometric, 336). Natalia’s selfishness makes her powerful but also dangerous to society, and her suggestion that motherhood is tedious compared to the heights of over-mind consciousness runs counter to social narratives and biological arguments that tell her to sacrifice her sense of self in favor of a fixed, acceptable social identity. In other words, society demands that Natalia be passive in all the right ways, but never in that self-fulfilling, erotic way that allows her access to the over-mind or permits her access to a greater and more open space where her de-personalized, genderless identity is free to morph and change.

In her embrace of that over-mind state, Natalia represents a threat to social order. As Tim Armstrong argues, “desire and bodily energy is configured in electric terms” in modernism, as

forces that are deemed, by medical and scientific discourses, as needing to be controlled and regulated by the state (26). As I show in my other chapters, especially on Edith Wharton's work, George Beard and A.D. Rockwell's medical transcripts from the late-nineteenth century reveal social and political systemic uses of electricity: to treat disorders like hysteria and mania (mostly in women) and to electrocute (mostly male criminals). Electricity's duality—to cure or kill, based on the desire of whoever controlled its forces—constitutes “a disciplinary framework which seeks to regulate human energies within a set of external and internal practices” (Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body* 31). On the backdrop of developing cultural notions of electricity's duality, H.D. creates Natalia a female artist who enacts control by assuming passivity, who gives full power to her art by acting as a wire, who hopes to allow electric energies to reach their full potential, who—perhaps most radically—takes immense sensual pleasure in the process. Rather than giving us a woman's body that experiences sex only as a pathway to motherhood, *Nights* “scrape[s] off the flesh by way of electrified, eroticized female bodies” (Hickman “Sparse and Geometric” 337), and shows us the “*transpersonal*” space of the over-mind, where the electric sublime does not deny the self, but allows the self, instead, to expand (Pulsifer 160).

At all turns, Nat's material body acts as a medium for non-material flows of power and sex, as she lets electric energies run in and through her body and mind without interference. Nat's manuscripts, labeled as chronological nights, detail nonlinear memories and diary-like entries from various love affairs in which she experiences her sexuality as electric, and longs to find ways to channel that energy aesthetically. Lying in bed with David on Night 2: “the room was patterned with light from high-powered arc-lamps outside.... as the radium gathered electric current under her left knee, she knew her high-powered deity was waiting. He would sting her

knee and she would hold muscles tense, herself only a sexless wire that was one wire for the fulfillment. She was sexless, being one chord, drawn out, waiting the high-powered rush of the electric fervor.” (51 emphasis added). Here, like the “surcharged” battery John deems her, Nat’s body becomes a model for the way electric energies might fill up a body. She is a “sexless chord”—the porous, keen body, awaiting the “rush of the electric” to inspire and consume her. Her orgasm is rendered as a moment of the sublime: both violent and transformative, the electric and erotic energy “crept up the left side, she held it, timed it, let it gather momentum, let it gather force; it escaped her above the hip-bone, spread, slightly weakened, up the backbone; at the nape, it broke, distilled radium into the head but did not burst out of the hair. She wanted the electric power to run on through her, then out, unimpeded by her mind. She would be a spirit” (51). This electrified definition of orgasm becomes a network of power that Nat carefully navigates and controls; she both allows it and directs it. The release renders her a vibrating wire, a head pulsing with radium, that atom-bursting energy obsession of H.D.’s fellow modernists. By actively assuming passivity as their conduit, she hopes these powers will not break her but instead allow her to transcend her physical body and create new arts.

But electricity’s potential for death and destruction haunts her, and as her obsession with her electrified body grows, so too does her awareness of how close such an obsession will bring her to death. If electricity could enliven bodies, it could also shock and electrocute them; such language courses through *Nights* as Nat vacillates between life and death. On Night 3, “She saw no force for it but death, and as the aura of radiant life sped through her, she saw that she was not so much healed as shocked back, re-vivified, for fresh suffering” (53). For Nat, life increasingly becomes a series of electrocutions and revivals; her otherwise limp body is repeatedly animated by an electrified “aura” (53). And electric power comes not just from her own body, but from

other bodies, too. “You make me get into all sorts of lights, vibrations,” she tells David (57). She describes the way he continually breathes into her, as if reviving her from death: “she felt herself go cold, static; electrocuted, dead corpse. She felt death creep in” (73). The image is almost Frankensteinian; the electric sublime animates, kills, and reanimates her. On Night 8, David breathes into her mouth, tells her: “your fingers are full of the most terrific electricity. I’m frightened” (86).

Across these strange nights, and in the disconnected narrative she weaves around them, Nat vacillates across identities that connect her to electric technologies: a battery, a wire, a force in the text. These transcendent sensations become both her own literary obsession (something she cannot stop writing about), but also an experience, a rush she cannot stop seeking: “She could not explain that it was a thing between them, the wire he was, the wire she was, the positive and negative, or something of that sort, nor discuss it in electrons” (86). If Helforth wondered whether the modern novel could find its medium in electricity, Nat rejects that idea as inexplicable, her sexuality lying somewhere beyond words and “electrons.” The artistic and sexual experiences she seeks are inherently fleeting, accessible only when energies momentarily align perfectly within herself or between her body and her lover’s. Nat’s and David’s bodies configure parallel lines or wires, for example: “She wanted to lie, parallel with a ceiling and she wanted to be a parallel, running to infinity and never touching that twin other-line. She wanted David there. But she must be free” (90). Here, these parallel wires relate to one another as poles—positive, negative—that can run to infinity, never touching but crucially interconnected in a spiritual, magnetic relationship.

In other words, Nat increasingly craves that over-mind state: the disconnected connection that only electricity can make possible. She wants freedom while she simultaneously wants

David. Using electric language of poles and never-touching parallel lines, H.D. foregrounds Nat's desires as electric—as impossibly tantalizing, an addiction and obsession Nat will chase to her own death. On a frozen lake, in the final entries of *Nights*, Nat's apparent suicide by drowning uses the same imagery of parallel lines, this time carved by ice-skates onto the frozen surface of a lake. The lines, Nat's skates, run across that surface unimpeded, until they reach a hole in the ice. Presumably having skated straight into the freezing water, Nat's obsessive chase of this state—"she wanted to be a parallel, running to infinity"—is the last image of the manuscript. The final image on the page is a lone piece of punctuation, a floating em-dash in an incomplete sentence. One half of a parallel line that, in this story, runs to infinity rather than end in a period. Though capping a tragic, female suicide seems to map neatly onto literary tropes from Naturalism and Realism, the em-dash is not a period. While previous critics have suggested that Nat's suicide is an "erasure of the feminine through suicide" (Friedman qtd in Hickman 338), Nat's death is far more complicated than that. With the em-dash, H.D. suggests that Natalia achieves that eternal "over-mind" status. In the end, "Natalia's sexual transport...involves a drive toward bodilessness, the transmutation of something solid into intense running currents of energy" (Hickman "Sparse and Geometric" 335).

Analyzing the mid-sentence, mid-scene ending of the novel, that hovering single em-dash, Helforth writes in the "Prologue" that Natalia "had to choose definitely between the sugar-coated 'happy ending' school of writing, and the back to the pig-sty erotic realism...She chose neither" (29). That Natalia actively "chose neither" in her fiction about the soaring potentials of her electric, sexual body suggests that her desires, and perhaps her modernism, were necessarily inarticulable in the forms available to her; the limitations of existing genres for women's fiction—the "happy ending" or existing modes of realism—were insufficient for her stories.

There was no way for her to articulate her over-mind consciousness on the page; so we get an em-dash instead. Thus, Nat's disappearing act has less to do with a feeling of limitation or inaction—that she doesn't have choices—than her recognition that the available choices are not enough for her. Indeed, despite her untimely end, *Nights* exists as proof of Natalia's work to make herself the wiry channel through which new modernist forms might emerge—and Helforth claims she has indeed made something new.

In the "Prologue," Helforth attempts to define Natalia's prose for its strange, new contributions to literature: she writes with "the blatant lightning-realism," that "wanted the realism of white lightning (27). Here, her very prose "slashes" away that "murky" old world to make a new "lightning-realism," what I'm calling an electric sublime. Helforth uses that metatextual layer to name her own prose, to claim her desires: H.D. herself "wanted the realism of white lightning"—wanted to somehow translate that electric sublime onto the page, by becoming a permeable, pure artist who makes a pathway for it into language. Nat's project, then, is an electric modernism.

Just as Part II of the novella centralizes the tension between the woman and her mentor or sexual partners, the entire novella, through Helforth and Natalia, offers two experiences of electric modernist experimentation: we have the logical reader and critic, Helforth, and the chaotic, sexual writer, Natalia. The novella portrays an "unimpeded" flow of electric desires in Nat's manuscripts, and allows the artistry of her manuscripts to remain free and mystifying, while also framing her within Helforth's critical analysis that opens the text, the work that attempts to understand her artistry. By juxtaposing these two accounts, H.D. configures yet another set of parallel lines: the critic and the author. In their own magnetic relationship, Helforth and Natalia configure the tension between a desire to understand modernist art and a

desire to evade such knowledge to maintain the inarticulable nature of some experiences and some kinds of consciousness. The female erotic body, coursing with electric power, is ultimately free to direct “lightning flashes” of electricity out of the text toward the reader, who finds himself unable to fit her work into existing patterns. He must therefore create new paradigms for his understanding, rather than fitting Natalia into existing patterns. For Helforth, this is the act of creating a new formal term: “lightning-realism.” For H.D., who works across these textual layers, this is the fictional representation of the over-mind, of that electric sublime and of modernist art more generally.

Electricity in the War-Time Mind

In April 1943, in the midst of continued German air raids in London, H.D. participated in her first-ever public event as a poet: a sold-out poetry reading. It was a star-studded affair, with T.S. Eliot, Vita Sackville-West, Walter de la Mare, and others reading from their works; the queen herself attended with princesses Elizabeth and Margaret. The *Times Literary Supplement* ran a story on the event, publishing a paper despite profound material scarcity, remarking that lovers of the arts might make poetry a light in the blackouts of war: “a burning-glass through which . . . the whole English people catches alight and breathes the sacred fire of poetry” (*Times* qtd. in Debo 81). As Annette Debo suggests, this event “once again made poetry relevant, in a moment in which the practical reigned and art was neglected” (81). If her previous works in *Notes on Thought and Vision* and *Nights* function as ways of defining and experimenting with her theory about modernist states of mind as electric, in later works—short essays written in the early 1940s—H.D. continued to draw on the language of electric power and lighting technologies to characterize a modernist literary aesthetic powerful enough to spark new forms of artistic innovation.

Just two years before her first public reading, living in the darkness of air raids and subsisting on meager war rations, H.D. wrote a short essay in which she articulates a sentiment that matches the overall message of the 1943 reading—that poetry might be a light in the darkness of war—with a considerably philosophic and electric bent. “Blue Light,” written as a short journal entry, opens with an encounter with her lamp: “I tangled myself in the cord of my reading-lamp, a major tragedy, last night but this morning Louisa herself unscrews the cap and mends it. It is working again” (119). Ruminating on life under constant Nazi attacks on the city, bombings that made H.D. and her companions constantly fearful (“the only real thing now, is the buzz-zz-zz of the enemy wings overhead”), her possessions, like her reading-lamp, water bottle, and blackout lantern become emblematic of small comforts within the larger, oppressive environment of war (119).

On the seemingly endless barrages of war, H.D. writes, “We can’t stand it any more. But we do stand it” (120). And it’s within such exhausting environments that, she suggests:

if we can sustain sanity and detachment and discernment, we are each of us, in a singular and privileged position....We may make discoveries that the human mind has not yet, so far, been in a position to make, about the human mind....This sets a sort of fire burning. It is a blue fire, burning it is true, in a vacuum, but it is fire (120)

H.D. here again, as she does in *Notes*, likens the artistic mind to sparks, lights, and fires. In the 1930s, blue light lanterns were introduced and used across London during air raids. With the lantern’s filter, a regular yellow or white glowing electric bulb could be dimmed, making a blue-light that German bombers couldn’t easily track or see from the sky; “the goal was to render the city invisible, to erase the electrified landscape” (Nye 40). The sudden desire to darken, rather than light cities, was a profound cultural shift, especially in cities like London that had, for years, enjoyed public lighting that made nightlife safer and more social. As David Nye puts it, “this was a historic reversal. For 100 years, from the advent of gas lighting until the early 1930s, cities had

increased their levels of illumination...because illuminated cities felt safer and more modern,” but by the time the war started, “the electrical system and anything it illuminated became potential targets” (39).

Surrounded by a newly emerging narrative about electricity during the war—suddenly, the electrically lit city is a liability, rather than a liberating force—H.D. theorizes, as she did in 1919, about the ways modern technologies were like the energies of the artist’s mind. Rather than the electric telegraph, the blue light lantern becomes her focus in essay “Blue Light,” where she imagines the lantern she uses to write each night as a metaphor for artistic thought, a way to think about thinking and reason as “human mind-voltage”:

We have a blue-flame in our skull, rather like the blue-slide of my black-out lantern. There is a blue light, if you slide the little catch, on the electric torch, one way; there is the white or yellow light when you slide it in the opposite direction. It is like that. The white or yellow light is the ordinary light of human reason, the usual human mind-voltage. The blue light is for extra occasions; I switch on the blue when I go out in the black-out (120)

The “black-out” H.D. refers to is not today’s definition of a *failure* of lighting grids and electrical systems. Instead, she alludes to this wartime “intentional act of hiding illumination” (39).⁹ A blackout, then, was an intentional shuttering of technological progress, of modern cityscapes, and of any signs of modern human existence. In her metaphor about the human mind and lighting technologies, however, H.D. makes the blue-light filter not a defense mechanism, but a powerful switch in the human mind that might lead to discovery of new thoughts, ideas,

⁹ In 1942, L. C. Porter, the Coordinator of Blackout Activity of the General Electric Company, reported on American technological developments in lighting technologies to aid in war blackouts and “prevent enemy bombers from locating targets at night” (361). Specifically discussing blue lights, Porter writes the “eye focuses more sharply on red than blue,” and explains that both blue and white light are easier to detect across wider expanses, such as rooms or streets, and therefore “the War Department issued a directive that blue illumination would be no longer used for blackout purposes” (366). While the American perspective was that England “has by now solved most of” the problems facing blackout lighting challenges, Porter states “conditions and equipment are vastly different in America” (371)—which perhaps explains H.D.’s reliance on a blue-light lantern in 1941, as tests for colored lights were still being conducted. See: Porter, L. C. “Blackout Lighting.” *Journal of the American Society of Naval Engineers* vol. 55, no. 2, May 1943, pp. 361-373. Reprint from *General Electric Review*, December 1942.

and arts. For her, the blue-light lantern becomes the perfect metaphor for mental energies—and the larger modernist state of mind she meets on the streets of London during the war:

There are blue lamps everywhere. There must be these high-powered cerebral minds at work everywhere. Now, I feel quite alone, cut off; I write because the little blue flame in my skull needs me in order to burn. I write anything as just now, 'I tangled myself in the cord of my reading-lamp' and then let the words run along. What are the words? I do not stop to consider them. I feel simply a click, as it were, and that other-mind is burning in my mind (120)

This is a slight revision to her previous thinking, in 1919: Rather than an artistry shared only by a small elite, those “two or three minds” with the power to “direct” lightning flashes of new ideas into the world, H.D. recognizes the power of minds all around her to go to work on new ideas; she now believes there are blue lamps, and “high-powered cerebral minds” working everywhere. Here, H.D. invokes again that “collective cognition” of modernist thinking from *Notes* (Pulsifer 156), but due to the war, she feels “cut off” from accessing those transcendent, collective spaces where she might work in tandem with the inspiration freely flowing from others. Though she feels the “burn” to write her thoughts, this mode of creation is not the same as the feverish, inspired creation of her previous “over-mind” state.

This “burning,” is also crucially different from the act of intentional or artistic writing, which H.D. positions as something more active and deliberate than the stream of consciousness that flows from her blue-lit mind in her journal. It is, instead, a kind of basic survival, a necessity to continue creating and processing, even during traumatic times. When her colleagues write from the United States to ask, “what are you writing?” while living abroad during war, she feels unable to answer the question. What her American friends believe about writing cannot account for the work she has penned during the war in that “high-powered” state of her blue-lit mind:

[T]his is not writing. They will not understand that this is burning, that this is a flame in the skull, and that this flame must meet another flame, other flames, as the electric-torch picks out, in the damp and dank and murk of our London streets at night, the distant steady, strange little gleam of another distant electric torch,

coming or going or crossing a street or climbing onto a bus. It is black, unutterably, the human consciousness. But maybe where it is most terribly dense, this blackness, there will be more opportunity for those lights to show” (120)

Drawing on the imagery of war-time blackouts, H.D. flips the relationship between light and dark. Lights still signify the activity of a human population. But rather than make the light the damning target of an air raid, H.D. positions the light, the “strange little gleam,” as proof of humanity thriving. It is this proof of her fellow human consciousnesses bobbing along in that “unutterabl[e] black,” night, the electric-torches and “other flames” signaling that other minds are hard at work, too.

In fact, this community of other minds— “this flame must meet another flame,”— becomes critical to H.D.’s theory of mental, artistic energy. To survive bleak times, “where it is most terribly dense,” H.D. seeks out other lights, other minds, burning with new words and ideas (120). She democratizes her earlier theory of mind by recognizing the mental powers of all those around her. And thus, her theory of the modernist state of mind becomes a flame, a flickering light in the dark, strengthened by the presence of other lights making their way. In “Blue-Light,” H.D. shares a universalizing modernist aesthetic of the states of mind inhabited by those living through war—she hopes their suffering is not without purpose, whether artistic or historic: “I am thinking of those blue-lights, burning in skulls, burning out bodies that have become baffled with conditions of the simplest living. I am thinking of others who have said, we can’t bear it but who go on, because of the immense adventure of going on where the human mind has not yet penetrated, making a path in the pitch-black night” (120). H.D. longs for a community of thinkers, of minds that light the way or “make a path” toward new human experiences.

Scholars often describe the “baffling” realities of modernity, those described in scientific and medical texts by writers like Georg Simmel, A.D. Rockwell, and George Beard in the late nineteenth century, as well as the traumas of the World Wars, as evidence of the claim that “the

shock of change is intensified” at the opening of the twentieth century (Armstrong, *Modernism* 1). The second industrial revolution, which Armstrong places 1870-1920, brought new technological systems, including electrification, which “subordinates the individual to large-scale systems” (2). Such subordination renders the individual mind a mere piece of a bafflingly large system. But in “Blue Light,” H.D. makes a case for the electric powers of the individual mind, independent of the larger system—which has been blacked out for safety. The single minds glowing in the dark become their own sources of power and light. In other words, H.D. reasserts the power of the individual within the profound and complex systems that evolved in modern, globalizing society.

In the same month she wrote “Blue Light,” H.D. fell horribly ill. Her doctor diagnosed not a fever but “an under-temperature,” to which H.D. responds, in candid diarist style, in a piece called “Tide-Line” with another curious theory of mind: “I have probably been feeding my blue-brain (that part of my mind that does my living for me) too much.... But...I am in both dimensions at the same time” (121). H.D. rationalizes blue-light state of mind as the cause of her illness as she suggests that too much time spent in the electric, high-powered realm of consciousness not only inspires new artistic vision but also causes bodily weakness. Such a connection recalls Natalia’s violent swings between electrocution-like sleep and vivid reawakening in *Nights*. H.D. also returns to a discussion of the individual in the larger system as she contemplates the lighting in her apartment: “My desk-lamp is flickering and now I try the other lights and they all pulse and beat as if about to go out at any minute; some power-house in trouble” (121). As an interconnected system of wires and lights, one lamp in flickering distress signals a larger issue with the overall “power-house.” Perhaps imagining her own body and mind as a similarly networked system, H.D.’s mind, as part of an ill body, likewise flickers in distress

as she attempts to access both her ordinary mind and over-mind at the same time: “the 4th dimensional world, the world of dream, of vision, of the blue-light, as I call it, high-powered thought, and the ordinary world come together” (121). Even at risk of bodily illness and prolonged suffering, H.D. seeks electric power, the “blue-light” of her higher consciousness, of that transcendent over-mind state.

Throughout “Tide-Line,” H.D. uses the language of realms, worlds, and colors to communicate her evolving vision of modernist mental states. The “ordinary world,” as in “Blue Light,” is “the yellow light of the torch.” And she introduces a fusion of the “ordinary” and “high-powered” states of mind: the “intermediate world,” combines blue and yellow mental states to become “the green world of rest, grass, trees, the level surface of the sea between tides” (121). These mental states ebb and flow across “that relatively infinitesimal strip of wet sand,” leaving behind trails of treasures: “hidden beings and plants,” which harken back to the natural, color-filled language of her first poetry publication, *Sea Garden* (1916). “When the tide of ordinary thought recedes,” she writes in 1941, “it can show these strange creatures, a phosphorescent jelly-fish, a star-fish, some trail of rare plant torn from a tropic sea-bed, a pebble of cornelian, coral-branch, or amber. Those unusual treasures are the findings of the 4th dimensional mind, the inspirational mind or dream mind, but while we live in this world, we cannot sustain that way of thinking, that way of vision for long” (121). Left behind on the tiny strip of human consciousness, H.D. imagines the stuff of dreams and “high-powered thought” as treasures and trinkets an explorer might encounter and attempt to connect or collect. But this process is frustratingly ephemeral—it cannot last long because of its sheer power, the demands it makes on the individual. Like a message in the sand, “the high-powered image cannot be sustained. It is drawn slowly back to the deep sea of universal thought. We must sadly watch it

go, or more sadly watch it die, stranded above the tide-line” (121). Like Natalia’s glimpse of electric transcendent power in her sexual experiences, and like those glimpses of lamps in the dark streets of London, the modernist state of mind faintly glimmers for H.D.—it is light-filled, transcendent. It inspires the individual to seek it, but never hold it for too long. Taken as a representation of the fleeting powers of an artist in the throes of inspiration, the promises of modern art—new, strange, wholly different from past forms—hold an elusive but tantalizing power that both attracts and resists the artists who seek it, in that electro-magnetic relationship H.D. articulates across her life’s work.

Conclusion

In her posthumously published work, *Bid Me to Live*, H.D. once again invokes the language of electricity and blue flames in the mind. Julia, the novel’s central character, a writer, considers her artistic value: “There was her writing, simply the uneven lightning of her lines reached in long, short lines across paper. Sheet lightning. Blue lightning. She had been struck by lightning” (55). The ferocity of her words on the page take on the power of lightning, echoing H.D.’s 1919 suggestion that the “right sort of brain” would have the power to direct flashes of lightning onto the page, to change the course of human thought and history. Like Natalia, whose art and body are fused by electric energies, Julia is “struck” by electric power; the language echoes Helforth’s name for Nat’s experimental, modernist works as “lightning realism.”

Julia wonders, because she is a woman, whether her work will assume any lasting historical meaning: “Why did the poems matter? They were so much fireworks, escape. And why all this escape? Why this vaunted business of experience, of sex-emotion and understanding that they made so much of? It might be all right for men, but for women, any woman, there was a biological catch and taken at any angle, danger.” Here, Julia gives voice to those underlying

gendered and aesthetic questions that haunt *Nights*: How to understand the “fireworks” of a “lightning realism,” a disavowal of Freudian sublimation in favor of an over-mind theory, a transcendent and electric sublime that concerns itself, so much, with “this vaunted business of experience.” A woman’s experiences, sexuality, and emotions, she suggests, don’t have aesthetic value in a world that makes such experiences “all right for men,” but limited and kept away from women. Julia’s anxious questioning evokes the “biological catch” of motherhood that *Nights*’ Natalia refuses, that Olive Moore obsesses over, via her failed female artist, Ruth, in *Spleen*. Julia, however, identifies a glitch in the system where she might find freedom, a weak spot in the social circuit, where she might find value in her thoughts and her writing: “There was one loophole. One might be an artist” (135-36).

Across decades of fiction, poetry, and memoir, H.D. invokes the language of electricity to make sense of women’s desires to become artists. For Julia, the “fireworks” of artistry give women an escape from the “biological catch” of motherhood. The novel suggests that Julia’s poetry does indeed have meaning in its “uneven lightning,” and that her work both offers experimentation and newness. In *Nights*, Helforth imparts such lasting, historical meaning onto Natalia’s work by recognizing its “lightning-realism,” and exploring why Natalia actively chose the parallel lines of her visionary consciousness and experimental artistry over the choice to become a mother or even an artistic realist. H.D. wonders whether women modernists could escape the limitations of artistic and social definitions to, like their art, make new identities and categories of existence. She also suggests that her own artistic experiments might influence the next generation of women writers to follow her along those parallel lines to inspiration.

In *Notes*, H.D. tells us: “My sign-posts are not yours, but if I blaze my own trail, it may help to give you confidence and urge you to get out of the murky, dead, old, thousand-times

explored old world” (*Notes* 24). In this chapter, I have argued that H.D. uses electricity as a literal “blaze” of power and energy in her prose, meant to shock and surprise others—and to inspire future artistry so that it might confidently break free of the “thousand-times explored old world.” And she continually references the power of electricity as a modern force that might reform social categories and reshape artistic possibility in modernism. In her fiction, H.D. introduces characters, such as Natalia and Julia, who are artists or creators grappling with the relevance of their ideas and the novelty of their art. Electric modernism—as lightning flashes on the page and electric pulses in the artist’s body—suggests freedom and newness, successful efforts to “make it new,” that can be accessed by women through the “loophole” in the system where they might, even briefly, experience the electric sublime as artists, freed from the constraints of the world in the transcendent over-mind space, where everything becomes possible.

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UNCREATIVE ELECTRICITY IN OLIVE MOORE'S *SPLEEN*

"Women are not born with creative souls. They are born with values and emotion." So says Olive Moore in the opening lines of her biting essay "Woman as Uncreative Artist." Throughout it, Moore questions women's ability to make "new" arts, arguing that biological imperatives to reproduce doom all women to "uncreative" life. After all, Moore suggests, had artistry really been "essential to her nature," woman would "write on the kitchen table! Paint on the kitchen walls!" (286). Moore thus rejects arguments about social conditioning and limitations, dismissing the idea that culture gives shape to identity. Instead, she insists that we are born with certain "prerogatives" and biological imperatives (386). She makes essentialist arguments, claiming that a man, with a "sewn-up body and thicker blood-stream," "makes his surroundings and colors them," while a woman "takes on the colouring of her surroundings" (387). To make such claims, Moore uses scientific and medical language about the human body—including the electrical energies that run through it—to lend credence to her essentialist ideas. She leverages contemporary scientific language to define the biological, spiritual, and artistic dimensions of human creativity as physical entities that can be measured. For example, she defines the "soul" as "a combination of magnet and electricity; of the family of electro-magnetic fields" (408). By tying the human soul to definable, measurable scientific properties, Moore suggests that intellectual life and artistic inspiration are not mysterious forces, but knowable, embodied physical realities that determine one's abilities and potential. It's almost too simple. As Rebecah Pulsifer puts it, for Moore "cognition may be invisible, but it is not immaterial" (163).

Electricity, with its long history of moving in and through medical and scientific discourses, becomes a way for Moore to argue that the "human soul" is not ephemeral, but

knowable; not an undefined energy, but a measurable combination of defined forces. To know these measurements, and these forces, is to know a man's—or a woman's or an animal's—worth. Invoking modern, medical theories of vitalism, Moore claims “The weak, the old, the drunken, the dissipated, drop their souls at the first shaking...Soul and vitality go hand in hand. Then has a healthy horse ten times the soul of a normal man” (*Collected Writings* 407). Maren Linett points to the blatant ableism of such a passage and shows how *Spleen* is informed by similarly ableist thinking. Linett shows how both texts illustrate Moore's “clear antipathy to disabled and unproductive human beings” (Linett 163). I argue in this chapter that Moore uses electric medical discourse from the early twentieth century to attempt to validate and give credibility to her dangerous views.

In both her essays and her 1930 novel *Spleen*, Moore invokes a discourse of electricity—from the “electro-magnetic” soul in *Apple* to the power of electric light in her best-known novel *Spleen*—to validate her claims about the definability of the human soul and body, about a person's worth, value, and abilities. She also makes broad, essentialist claims about who can and cannot create art. Women lack the “thicker blood” of men, she says, and such a lack makes art a “masculine prerogative” that women cannot achieve; Moore likewise claims “For the creation of Art is needed universality, curiosity, impersonality” — more traits she implies that women, because of their biology, will never have (*Collected Writings* 386). Despite some trends in scholarship to read Moore's views as satirical or her tone as intentionally confusing—for example, Pulsifer's claim that “the notebooks' intense concision makes it difficult to interpret the speaker's stance on the subjects presented” (162)—I argue instead that Moore means precisely what she says, no matter how much we disagree with, or are shocked by it today. In “Woman as Uncreative Artist,” she consistently uses essentialist language to limit women, as if reproductive

organs equate to, or determine, mental or psychological states. Using twentieth-century scientific theories of nerves, Moore argues that all human beings are governed by their “nerve centres” or “Local Brains,” and she implies that women’s “nerve centres” are less powerful and less adept at regulating modern life than are men’s. This is an argument she essentially picks up from late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century narratives of neurasthenia and anxiety—perpetuated by physicians and psychologists from William James to George Beard. Indeed, in this chapter I show that Olive Moore leverages existing misogynistic and ableist cultural narratives and beliefs about electricity and electric power to lend further credence to, and scientifically justify, her own misogynist and ableist claims.

A Short Literary Review

In both *The Apple is Bitten Again*, the larger essay collection in which “Woman as Uncreative Artist” appears, and her earlier novel *Spleen*, Moore shares and perpetuates dangerous ideas: that a biological female person cannot be an artist; that any person’s artistic ability and potential is determined by biological sex; that physical disability necessarily implies intellectual disability; and that disability, of any kind, is grounds for excluding or discriminating against others. These are difficult, sometimes enraging texts to read—perhaps for that very reason, to grapple with the unsavory elements of modernist aesthetic theory and culture, scholarly interest in Moore is growing. The earliest sustained study of Moore’s work was Renee Dickinson’s 2009 study of Moore’s novels and Virginia Woolf. Since then, there has been a steady stream of published articles and book chapters devoted to Moore’s work, most especially to *Spleen*.

Some scholars, like Erin Kinglsey, place *Spleen* into the modernist tradition by noting themes that overlap with other women writers of the time. Kingsley focuses on immigration and

displacement, comparing Moore's novel to those by Jean Rhys: "*Spleen* offers an immigration tale in reverse, fleeing the center of empire to a peripheral space." There, as an outsider, Ruth experiences "vestiges, however slight, of the racial othering so famously suffered by Rhysian heroines when they make the reverse journey of the periphery to the center" (142). My own dissertation concerns both Rhys and Moore, but I would argue many of the overlaps Kingsley notices end there. Rhys, as that chapter shows, consistently uses references to electricity to trouble boundaries, to blur identity, and to make the anguish of her female characters known. Moore, on the other hand, elides the lived experiences or psychological trauma of her characters in favor of harsh categorizations and blunt boundary making. Renee Dickinson and Benjamin Hagen both compare Moore's approach to humanity with Virginia Woolf's, arguing, in the latter case, that both authors share a "cosmic indifference" to their characters, which allows them to make broad gender and social critiques. For Hagen, "Moore renders Ruth's initially undesired pregnancy as a struggle not only with cultural scripts...but also with creation writ large" (185). Indeed, Moore's tone—her "indifference"—seems to be her point, a way for her claims, especially in *Apple*, to give an air of logic, legitimacy, and objectivity.

Johanna Wagner provides an empathetic reading of Ruth, pointing out that despite Ruth's doctors deeming her the victim of pregnancy-induced hysteria, "Ruth's hope for something new is neither hysteria nor madness, rather it is the general hope of modernity that acts as an antidote to the monotonous—and sexist—cycle of life that she has come to resent" (49). Ruth is indeed filled with modernist impulses, even if she doesn't have the freedom that Moore gives Uller to explore modernist artistic practices, as a result of those impulses. Moore uses essentialist views on gender, the same she later develops in *Apple*, to put Ruth in an impossible situation, a "double bind" in which Moore entraps all women (Linett 156).

Linett describes this trap: “[women] are confined to reproduction, their only route to thinking and acting, with their scope limited to the domestic sphere; if they refuse that role, seeking to transcend the domestic, the most they can aspire to is the imitation of men” (156). For Moore also binds Richard, Ruth’s disabled son, into a limited existence where, within *Spleen*, he is evidence of her “clear antipathy to disabled and unproductive human beings” (Linett 163). Richard, who Linett reads carefully to showcase Ruth’s deeply troubling perspective, is an amalgamation of things Ruth disdains: he is “depicted as both monstrous and feminine,” as “insentient,” and even, in a particularly cruel moment in the novel, “null.” As Matt Franks puts it, “rather than destabilize the distinction between able-bodied and disabled subjects, or redeem disability as productive rather than stagnant, Ruth’s aesthetic practice severs disability aesthetics—which she is free to use for her own purposes—from lived disability in the form of her son, whom she reifies in eugenic terms of degeneracy and unproductiveness” (119).

Puslifer reads Moore’s cognitive theories from *Apple* alongside other modernist works, like those of H.D., which seek to understand the nature of human thought and artistic inspiration. While she points out that both H.D. and Moore “imagine super-human cognitive structures...to explain what they understood as the interconnectedness of minds and the world” (158), she likewise points out the problematic inequality at the heart of Moore’s thinking: “*The Apple is Bitten Again* is chiefly about writing, both as recursive process that involves thought, drafting, and revision and as *inequitably accessible* cultural practice” (emphasis added 162). As I show in my chapter on H.D., she perceives her “over-mind theory” as one accessible by men *and* women, even a non-gendered space, where though an individual needs “the right sort of brain” to receive

artistic inspiration, they are not limited by their gender.¹⁰ But for Moore, gender always gets in the way, limiting a woman's ability to achieve anything beyond the domestic sphere.

Vitalism and Modernity

Moore's view of the human soul as "electro-magnetic," helps explain this connection she makes between the soul and vitality. Vitalism, or the study of such timeless philosophical questions as "What process or substance allowed will to produce motion? What were thought, feeling, emotion, and self-awareness? What and where was the human soul?" has puzzled thinkers and scientists for millenia (Simon 11). Yet starting in the sixteenth century, with Elizabeth I's physician, William Gilbert, who coined the term "electrics" "to refer to any substances with properties of attraction and repulsion" (Simon 12), the study of these critical questions became bound up with the idea of electric energy as a magnetic, animating, or otherwise mysteriously organizing force of life and thought. Isaac Newton, Luigi Galvani, and Alessandro Volta all contributed to the field with their experiments that stimulated nerve systems and hypothesized about the presence of electrical pulses and energies stored within animal bodies, and later, in human bodies as well.

From the earliest experiments in Vitalism came the interchangeable use of "magnetic" and "electric" to refer to the push and pull of energy throughout a living body. "Animal electricity" became the term for electric energy within the body leading to, in the nineteenth century, a general cultural belief as well as ongoing scientific and medical practices, that sought to channel this energy, to understand where it was in the mind and body, and how to create more

¹⁰ Even H.D., with her more emancipatory views on electrical power and the telegraphic "over-mind" space, seems to share some of these ableist views, such as with her claim that only those with "healthy bodies and the right sort of receiving brains" can access the over-mind space. Rather than gender, H.D. emphasizes health and strength as necessary traits of a person who can access a transcendent artistic mindset. See *Notes on Thought and Vision*, pp. 27.

of it. Indeed, there was a nineteenth century “fascination with the application of electricity to the human body, for medical, scientific, and... legal purposes” (Armstrong 14). George M. Beard, the physician who popularized “neurasthenia” or “nervousness” as a new modern medical condition, which mostly affected women, also believed “there is a limited quantity available” of electric or animating energy, to each human being (Armstrong 14). Tim Armstrong explains that Beard’s beliefs about the human body, “as powered by a fixed reservoir of energy” was a critical, cultural idea that stuck, as it “implied a bodily economy” (17) that could be measured, defined, and treated by any number of medical or non-medical devices, tinctures, and expensive treatments.

In modernist literature, that “economy” or circulation of electric power in and among social bodies takes on new dimensions. Armstrong reminds us that “literary texts do more than simply reproduce such metaphors. For a range of modernist writers, electro-vitalism provides the energies of modernity; a science both of the body and... of literary transmission” (19). For modernists like the futurists, who “saw the body as constantly extending,” to Pound, Stein, Yeats, Lawrence and others, the body is a site of energies in flux, a site of definitions flowing in from so many scientific discourses: “evolutionary biology, Vitalism, and the new physics” (Armstrong 90). Moore is not unique in her application of scientific understandings of the human body in her writing. But unlike so many of her modernist peers, Moore leverages not the open terrain of electricity’s potential to spark new connections between minds, to enliven corpses, or to energize sexual bodies. She intentionally selects the dimensions of electrical science and philosophy that will allow her to perpetuate old, sexist ideas in a modernizing world.

Moore, like many physicians in the nineteenth century, argues that women are incapable of regulating the electricity within their own bodies. In fact, for Moore, this general, stereotypical

argument about a woman's weakness, of those trendy neurasthenic symptoms from decades before, help her argue that women are incapable of making art because they're too weak to even *behold* it. In *Apple*, Moore quotes Rebecca West's "The Strange Necessity," in which West compares reading *Ulysses* to holding a "blazing jewel," a metaphor for "this deep and serene and intense emotion that I feel before the greatest works of art" (West, qtd in Moore's *Collected Writings* 392). Laura Cowan shows that West "compares her appreciation of art to a 'blazing jewel'" five times in "The Strange Necessity," tracing the way West "continually describes her experience in terms of illumination.... [Virginia] Woolf also chooses metaphors of light and illumination to portray art's ability to order life's chaos" (100). And yet, in contrast to West and Woolf, Moore uses light-filled experiences to highlight what she thought of as shortcomings and failures of women who experience art—in particular, their weakness and even death in the face of these powerful, modern energies. As Moore puts it, in the presence of "Sistine-Chapel-King-Lear works of art," women are unable to "digest" the experience, like "Jonah swallowing the whale. And all this on merely beholding it. Imagine what would happen," she writes, "did they produce it. One lady after another dying of undigested columns and coloured electric bulbs 'which have overflowed the confines of the mind and become an important physical event'" (393).

For Moore, a woman's physical and mental inabilities to consume artistic experiences lead to death; no wonder, in her line of thinking, they also cannot create it. In her sexist thinking, which obeys the essentialist medical discourse of the early twentieth century, those "coloured electric bulbs" simply stimulate women too much. Indeed, in 1869, in Beard's first paper on neurasthenia, he used light as a metaphor for a "symptom of fragile nervous force" (Simon 152). He writes that the neurasthenic patient, four times more likely to be a woman than a man, is "an

electric light attached to a small dynamo and feeble storage apparatus, that often flickers and speedily weakens” (Beard qtd in Simon 152). Moore extends such metaphorical thinking here, tying a woman’s mind to metaphors of the inability to “digest” the powers of art, and the “coloured electric bulbs” to “overflow” that limited economy of her mind and body. For West, the image of a woman overflowing with artistic impressions is exciting, a “physical event” that feels pleasurable—it is not unlike H.D.’s notion of the over-mind as a space of profound artistic inspiration and stimulation, as my previous chapter shows. For Moore, however, that energetic overflow is so overwhelming for a woman, it kills her.

Women also cannot create art, in Moore’s mind, because “art is desire, control, finality. It is a spiritual-organic urge comparable to the rising sap in tree and man. Its seed, the intensity of its vision. Its womb, the mind” (390). These terms, like “control” and “finality,” especially, are ones Moore aligns with masculinity. While she does tie art to that “spiritual-organic urge,” it’s clear from her beliefs about Vitalism that Moore thinks of those spaces—the spiritual and the natural, so often coded as feminine spaces—as inherently male or masculine, where men can handle the “intensity” of such urges due to what she believes is their stronger inherent nature. Her argument that the “womb” of art is “the mind” is the obsessive belief that likewise haunts Ruth, in *Spleen*, who believes that her pregnancy should be happening in her head, rather than in her uterus. Throughout *Spleen*, as my close reading shows, Moore deploys electricity in its most limiting and misogynistic connotations to entrap both Ruth and Richard within her own definitions of what makes a modern body able and artistic.

Ruth and the Vitalist Soul

If H.D. suggests that an “over-mind consciousness” might grant access to greater artistic insight, Moore studies the human mind to find that little more than biological impulses govern

human lives. In *The Apple is Bitten Again*, Moore uses the “Local-Brain” as her chosen term for the unconscious mind—as whatever keeps organs running or wounds healing naturally. The “automatic Local-Brain” contrasts what she calls “Conscious-Intelligence movements...directed by our brain or various nerve centres” (406). But after reflecting on the powers of the unconscious mind to run basic bodily processes, Moore claims, “watching our own activity, invention, organization, we find them but a copy of such inventions in the vegetal world. From which we may deduct that all plants and all the microscopic world and the ultra-microscopic world...is ruled by the same means and laws” (406). For Moore, then, the human body and mind are less mysterious than they are replicas of nature’s existing patterns, in which “all experience lead[s] to the same conclusions (406).

Such a claim, of humanity’s helpless and heedless repetition and obsession with mimicry, contextualizes the opening of her 1930 novel, *Spleen*, in which “goats with long purple udders and sly drooping faces passed, trailing a strong smell of goat” (111). This elliptical first sentence, governed by the stink of repetition, leads into an elliptical novel in which repetition haunts Ruth, who longs to create something new and innovative, who disdains woman’s ability to give birth as mere *reproduction*, and views her own pregnancy as little more than a senseless, repetitive act. For Ruth, pregnancy is an unconscious action undertaken by her nervous system; if she can become conscious of the process, she seems to believe, she can control it—and create something new, unlike all women before her who merely reproduce themselves. But her desire for this control comes less from her artistic dreams or adherence to modernist aesthetic dictums, and more from her disdain for repetition, her seething hatred of sameness, boredom, and biological constraints. It comes from a place of self-loathing, in other words. Perhaps unsurprisingly, preoccupied as she is with anger and shame throughout the novel, Ruth fails, on many accounts,

to become an innovative artist. Yet Moore stacks the deck against her, creating a woman who is doomed to fail, rather than one who might push back against the medical-scientific narratives that her doctors and Moore place around her.

Despite Ruth's many protestations, she repeats the same old patterns that haunt the opening of the novel and haunt her artistic mind: "How well she knew it all. Morning and evening she had seen them pass, the same woman with angry pointed cries, the same stick, the same blows, possibly the same petticoats, the same children grown to grandchildren, the same goats perpetually renewing themselves, replaces, undulating, docile, the same purple udders...the same acrid smell of goats passing" (111). As Franks argues, "Moore establishes a leitmotif of repetition as arrested development—as the proliferation of sameness over and over. Crucially, Ruth's path throughout *Spleen* is to remove herself from this cycle by separating herself from [her disabled son] Richard" (119). Part of Ruth's goal is to become an artist, and she seems to believe artistry will set her apart from all the other mothers in the world. But for Ruth, the udders always get in the way. The biological "catch" of motherhood cannot be overcome, both by Ruth's own mental work, which Moore implies is too weak to truly innovate or break free of old patterns (because she's a woman), and by Moore's fictional conceit, which will not allow for such a transcendence.

In addition to her definition of the soul as electro-magnetic in "Woman as Uncreative Artist," Moore also uses emerging wave theory to newly define the Vitalist soul: "what I have ignorantly called soul-molecules and soul-atoms might more accurately be called soul-waves and wavelets, or soul-vibrations and second-vibrations: the ether waves, the light vibrations. When a man dies, he does not give up his soul. He gives up the last insignificant remains of a polluted vitiated element that would not keep a rat alive" (408). In such blunt definitions, Moore suggests

a vision of the human body that curiously aligns with H.D.'s Natalia. While Nat imagines her body as a vessel for electric energies, and her ultimate desire is to let those energies run "unimpeded" through her, Moore here defines the body as just such a vessel. But H.D. infuses such a vision of the human, sexual body with vibrant energy and seemingly unlimited potential; Moore uses negative, almost horrifying imagery to this body as "insignificant," "polluted," and ultimately weaker than a rodent. For Moore, the soul is charged by purely biological and electric powers: the soul is not spiritual, but physical. "What to-day we carelessly call spiritual" is little more than "those invisible magnetic and electric powers which...migrate from place to place according to physical laws, circulate, create currents, storms, disturbances, always under normal conditions" (409 emphasis added). The human body, in Moore's *Apple* then, is not animated by a spirit or soul but instead by electric forces easily explained by scientific theory.

Ruth, the exemplary Uncreative Artist, will fail not because she attempts to escape, or at least meaningfully challenge, the scientific definitions that she has internalized, but because her creator traps her inside a brutal world, where nineteenth-century gender essentialism takes on a modernist, electric vocabulary: a woman is little more than an ever-draining battery, a flickering light. In my next section, I show how Moore contrasts the failed, uncreative Ruth with a male doppelganger: Hans Uller, a post-Impressionist painter, who believes that electricity—the same force that so limits Ruth's soul—is the Salvation of art and of himself.

The Male Artist and the Salvation of Art

When Ruth asks Uller, a German abstract painter, to paint her a romantic scene of men drinking wine and playing cards under dramatic shadows, "a sight of which she never tired" (157), he accuses her of "upholding the barbarous and insanitary customs of her ancestors," of perpetuating a heedless repetition of the past (157). He accuses her, in other words, of being an

Uncreative Artist—a woman doomed to imitate men, the masters of the past, but never to create anything new, herself. Uller, in stark contrast to Ruth, “had cursed the whole damned School, shouting loudly for electric light: the salvation of Art.” (157).

There are many possible readings of why electric light might represent “salvation” to Uller. Most obviously, electric light sets free the artist to paint at all hours, opening up new hours that might be devoted to creative work. As historian David Nye points out, “electric light was superior to other forms of illumination.... Painters, artists, and others whose work required accuracy and true color relations found it better than gas lighting for their purposes” (139). Jane Garrity also explains Uller’s fascination with electric light, claiming that his shouts “captur[e] the spirit of experimentation associated with modern art, for his reference to light suggests not just electricity but the brilliantly saturated palette of the Post-impressionists that was in vogue during this period” (305). While Ruth longs for a romantic scene of men drinking in chiaroscuro lighting, à la Whistler, “Uller upholds the creative genius of Turner—the British Romantic landscape painter known for his engagement with brilliant chromatic hues” (Garrity 307). While Garrity suggests that such a comparison reveals “women’s limited access to artistic education and professionalism,” I suggest, instead, that Moore is simply doubling down, again, on her misogynistic views that Ruth is incapable of “digesting” modern arts, let alone creating them.

Electric light also, for Uller, “aired, exposed the darkness and rubbish accumulated through centuries of candlelight” (157). Under the bright shine of electric lights—the same light he demands be strung along a terrace that Ruth prefers to keep in the dark—Uller finds cultural opportunity to shed the “rubbish” of the past in the name of “Art.” His tirade also reveals his own disdain for repetition and arrested development in the art world:

Rows of red white and green lights glaring down in hard icy stare on the tables
and a gramophone blaring any popular tune of the moment: and let the whole

island in to caper to it and drive the *tenebrosi* and their sham picturesque that quickened the heartbeats of english (sic) spinsters back to the darkness of the Michelangelos (the curse of art, that man!) let loose over europe (sic), and from which, thank God, they were slowly but at last emerging (157).

For Uller, electric light illuminates a future filled with artistic possibilities. With rows of bright stringed lights “glaring down,” he longs to drive away the “popular” arts and the artistic “darkness” of those who merely repeat Michelangelo and “let loose” a movement toward new aesthetics. His biting, unforgiving anger toward the past mirrors Moore’s own frustration in *The Apple is Bitten Again*, including her denunciation of Michelangelo: “No sooner does life become settled than it sags from a Michelangelo (already bad enough) to a Carlo Dolci, a Canova, a Sargent” (358). By using essentializing claims and absolutes, Uller and Moore give voice to the urgency, impatience, and frustration they believe fuels modern art and experimentation. But they also reveal such a discourse to be dangerously limited in scope, even as it makes grand claims of freedom, truth, and beauty. In other words, their cries for modernity betray beliefs about who should be able to create it, often denigrating entire categories of people, like women—those uncreative artists, in Moore’s mind—and disabled people, like Richard.

Indeed, Uller is “Moore’s brash, progressive, alluring, yet chauvinistic and often misogynistic artist figure” (Hagen 186) who functions as “both the mouthpiece for gender progressivism and an important source of gender injustice” (Garrity 291). While it may be tempting to read Moore as intentionally staging Uller and Ruth as doppelgangers to reveal the unfairness that Ruth endures as a woman and mother, I argue that Uller’s view was culturally sanctioned at the time Moore wrote it and that Moore herself agrees with him. Electric light may very well be the Salvation of Art—but never for Ruth, and never for anyone other than a man, with the strength and vitalism, to not only digest inspiration but then make something of it in new arts. As the novel shows, Ruth can’t even understand, or appreciate, Uller’s non-

representational arts as contributions to the modernist art movements she herself longs to be part of. She is like those pathetic dying women from Moore's fantasies of female weakness: confronted with "coloured electric bulbs," Ruth would die from overstimulation.

Ruth as Uncreative Artist

Living abroad in Italy, Ruth observes scenes like the purple, pregnant goats in the novel's first paragraph as nightmarish scenes that compound her anxieties and feelings of isolation. But within that isolation, she also sees moments of striking beauty: "all a grave smoky blue in which the terrace, the sands, the sea, left the sky only where the stars began" (*Spleen* 156). She also repeatedly expresses a desire for the romantic and nostalgic lighting of gas lamps and candles, rather than the garish glow of electric lights: "Lisetta was always urging on her more light, was always repeating that the electric light from the house would be extended to the terrace. But [Ruth] would have none of it. She loved her lamp" (156). On the backdrop of antiquated beauty, those "smoky blue" views off her terrace, Ruth, despite spending most of the novel longing for novelty, instead longs for the comfortingly blurred images and scenes of the past—scenes she can romanticize under candlelight, which would be ruined under a harsher glow of "more light." If Uller loves electric light because it blasts away the past, Ruth likely hates it for the same reason.

Watching a group of men play cards by candlelight, for example, she notices "a candle lighting one side of their sun-dried faces in strong Ribera effect cast heavy shadows down their long Spanish noses" and their tumblers of "heady scented Forian wine.... caught the candle's eye and shone like dull topaz lamps" (156). Ruth interprets the scene as a Romantic painting, the same one she asks Uller to recreate (or reproduce) for her: heavy shadows, strong wine, dim lighting. In her mind, the scene becomes like a painting on her wall. She sees the same images,

same lighting, “every night,” playing on “one theme” (157). Here, repetition is not the stink of undulating udders that so powerfully haunts the opening of the novel and so dramatically sparks her anxieties. Instead, her repeated observations of the men playing cards reveal an artistic sensibility at odds with her creative desires to make something new and strange: “Such was her idea of art: a pretty trick of ready-made shadow and a ready-made masterpiece ready to the artist’s brush. It pleased her” (157). Ruth doesn’t, after all, long for newness or understand the impulses of modern art to pursue the strange and unfamiliar. She does, however, enjoy the feeling of superiority that such fantasies of creating “something new” give her.

Take, as example, her ruminations on her pregnancy, when “she noticed for the first time how large she had become” (131). As Ruth despairs in her bathtub, staring down at her growing belly, she suddenly has a revelation:

Woman was a witch filled with a great and terrible power over mankind....
Woman’s thunderbolt. Miniature gods with life and death in their hands for the
dealing.... And they did not know it. They denied their terrible power because
they ignored it. *But she* was going to use her power. If I am to create, she told the
eager creature in her mirror, I will create. Only of course something new.
Something different. Something beyond and above it all. Something worth
having. (133 emphasis added)

Even as Ruth recognizes the power of reproduction, she places herself in a unique and special category, in opposition to other women. She assumes and claims other women ignore and deny their potential for creative power, suggesting she alone is intelligent and special enough to take control over reproduction, to control its end result toward “something beyond and above it all”—attempting to make herself another exception to the laws of reproduction, and to the laws that govern Moore’s fictional world and philosophical constructs.

When Ruth meets with a social group at Mrs. Saffron Oake’s home years in the future, to discuss art and modern society, for another example, she’s enthralled by a young woman she meets who, for Ruth, typifies “the modern girl the newspapers spoke so much about. Keen-eyed,

fleshless, arrogant. [Ruth] liked it. It was new to her. It had promise.... young women had a certain hard fleshless courage. They had promise. It was new to her and interesting” (227). These elliptical sentences, haunted by the same repetitions that horrify Ruth at the opening of the novel, envelope Ruth’s burning desire for modernity’s promise of newness. The young girl she considers is brave, bold, and strange to her. But while “[t]here was a novelty and certain glamour about the new young woman...was she altogether satisfying? Had she attained anything not previously attained?... She would grow old and leave the world exactly as she found it” (229). Ruth questions the value of novelty: does newness necessarily change history? She also unwittingly repeats her creator: echoing Moore’s questions about any woman’s ability to fulfill the promise of “novelty” and influence the world with any new arts or thoughts. Ruth ponders the “bind” she finds herself in: “one was expected to be different. What they called being different had an especial social value. It acted on others as a charm. She was shocked. She could not understand. Now, it seemed, the emancipated woman wanted no children. Women kept their figures and their jobs...How monstrous! she thought, understanding not at all. How mean” (230). Once again, like Moore, Ruth perpetuates the idea that even the women who are “different” are “monstrous” and “mean.” They do not enjoy the same Salvation that Uller seeks from electric light; instead, in Moore’s constricted modernity, these women only continue to perpetuate old stereotypes. Once again, Ruth’s desire to break the rules only goes so far as her imagination—which is constricted as much by social and cultural misogyny as by the similarly flawed frameworks Moore has written and created around her.

Apart from her willful ignorance of Richard’s subjectivity and her desire for Uller to simply satiate her desire for old forms of art, Ruth’s ultimate failure perhaps lies in her interpretation of modern art, which makes her Moore’s Uncreative Artist, or “Jonah swallowing

the whale.” While being party to Uller’s creative process seems to open an opportunity for Ruth to see patterns being broken by new artistic representations of modern life, what she continually sees instead is strangeness and discomfort she cannot recognize as art. Like her questioning the modern girl’s historical value, Ruth questions the validity or usefulness of Uller’s art—even as Uller and Richard find excitement in his experimentations.

The summer Richard turns seven years old, Uller comes to the island and Ruth buys a wheelchair cart for Richard so they can sit with Uller as he paints. Richard “seemed never to tire of staring at the bright-coloured patterns” of his wheelchair, of Uller’s “circus-tent taste in shirts,” and of the “new bright pattern[s]” that cover Uller’s canvases (169-70). Richard, showcasing what seems to be a conscious appreciation of the modern artist’s techniques, “would lie watching Uller at his easel with a catlike intensity of concentration following the ladling on of colour” while Ruth, enamored with the “soberly respectable Old Masters,” can only view Uller’s technique as clunky: “Uller seemed to pat and plaster his colour on the canvas with a trowel. More like a master-mason than an academician” (170).

Watching Uller paint, Richard seems to attempt speech for the first time, and to express his excitement for Uller’s “bright or shining” arts on which he devotes “that stare of hard concentration, that will-to-know look that came in his eyes” (170). As Ruth watches Richard watch Uller, she “would suddenly feel that only speech and movement were lacking and that he was not” (170). Interestingly, Richard’s appreciation, curiosity, and excitement for modern art seems, against all of Ruth’s previous observations about his limitations and disabilities, to humanize him and suggest more to his intellectual abilities than Ruth has previously allowed herself, and readers by proxy, to notice. This calls into question Ruth’s reliability as a mother and as the viewpoint through which readers experience Uller’s art, Richard’s movements and

behaviors, and her own actions. Ruth, unable to appreciate modern art, also often fails to see Richard's abilities, which are on display here: he can clearly appreciate modern art, focus on the artist's easel, and express excitement.

The novel notes other moments where Richard expresses abilities that Ruth can't account for—and I argue her reactions in such moments can be compared to her reactions to Uller's art, as evidence of her refusal to see value in strangeness or novelty. When Richard is 17 years old, for example, he moves his wheelchair for the first time, with "some sudden instinct of self-preservation" in which he swings his legs, stiffens his spine, and rocks his chair back and forth in a motion that mimics walking; Ruth describes it: "it was a strange and unreal sight.... It was so nearly a walk" (171). At age 22, Richard is surprised as Ruth moves through a doorway: "he gave a high sudden laugh" and she felt that he "recognized her" (172). She mimics his sound back to him with a mocking air and observes "a look sly and alert came into his face. He listened.... stared at her face, at her mouth, stared and stared" (172). As he stares, Ruth becomes frightened as she realizes "he was not merely a thing dumb, pitiful, deformed, but something evil, monstrous, and unreal" (172). In these moments, Ruth consistently denies Richard an outright moment of humanity: in his ability to express himself vocally, he is "unreal" and even "monstrous." Ruth's refusal to reshape definitions of humanity to fit Richard mirrors her refusal to understand Uller's works as modern art.

Discussing modern art with Uller, she realizes "he could explain the wherefore of each of his brush strokes. His compositions were mathematical problems correctly resolved. As clear and as difficult" (176). But when Ruth observes him at work, as in the aforementioned scene where Richard focuses on color and patterns, Ruth only sees ugliness: "watch him at work with that mason's trowel of his. All that which to her was.... static, dazed with heat, held erect and leaning

on it: was to him nothing short of an eruption. His cypresses were agitated as a wave, willful, tormented. Ugly, she thought” (176). Ruth’s insistence on stable, “erect” reality breaks down on Uller’s canvas, resulting in modern art—with all the modern sentiments of breakage, instability, and roughness—that Ruth cannot recognize as valuable in its novelty. Ruth’s definition of artists as “gentle-spoken creatures, diffident silent” does not fit Uller, whom she finds insolent and proud (177), just as her definition of viable humanity doesn’t fit Richard, who she finds “deformed” and even “evil.” Her criticisms, I argue, can be read not as a failure of Richard’s humanity or of Uller’s art, but as Ruth’s failure to redefine categories that she sees as unchanging and “erect.” Her failure, in other words, to be a modern thinker.

Moore seems to entrap Ruth as a self-fulfilling prophecy; a way to play out, and thereby prove, her outrageous claims in “Woman as Uncreative Artist.” In other words, it feels like a doomed project to attempt to find anything redeeming in Ruth, so designed is she to serve Moore’s purpose. Entrapped by the discourses of electro-vitalism, Ruth “as indeed most people, saw only what she had been taught to see” (177). She “liked what she called her blindman’s ways; her ability to find anything with her eyes shut” (156). Indeed, Moore configures seeing “only what she’d be taught to see” as a form of blindness: a stubbornness that Ruth views as an “ability,” that actually shuts out novelty and newness, that keeps her from seeing Richard’s developments as marks of his intellect and that limits the way she interacts with him throughout his life. This “blindness” also maps to her disdain for the modern, electric lights that both Lisetta and Uller want to install in her home and patio. In all instances, Ruth prefers to stay in the metaphorical darkness—those shadowy scenes she so loves from Whistler and the Romantics.

Moore uses these aesthetic tensions, between light and dark, and between dullness and bright colors, to further stage Ruth’s obedience to her social and cultural training, or what Moore

would determine is her biological imperative to only imitate and reproduce. Uller's painting, *The Modern Blue Boy*, depicts an Italian woman holding a baby boy from the island, named Giovanni. The painting is not a realist representation of Ruth holding Richard, or of Mary holding Christ, but of non-representational imagery—of mother and son-like figures—that metatextually addresses the central themes of the novel. Ruth and Giovanni pose for Uller on the island, as he “made many sketches” of them, and he eventually paints a series of mother and child images (199). Curiously, Ruth is the “subject” of the painting, even as Uller uses modernist techniques to estrange the real image into impressions, but she cannot understand the artistry of his choices. Linett argues that Uller's use of bright blue colors to paint leaves, stones, and people “emphasizes the text's distinction between reproduction and creation. In allowing Uller to combine his absurd colors to create art, while Ruth's absurd ideas about the new creature she will birth result in a deformed baby, Moore replicates the long-standing gendering of monstrosity” (155). Indeed, Uller is free to paint with vivid, bright colors and to embrace the ways modernity will facilitate his artistic growth and success. He is free to embrace the electric light as salvation not only of electric art, but also of himself, while Ruth toils under the feeling of entrapment and exile.

Years later, at the Tate, Ruth stands before a reproduction of *The Blue Boy*: she “knew that they were now valuable these tortured fierce-looking paintings which she had watched him at work upon and found so strange” (228). She considers the many interpretive narratives told by Uller's biographers and art critics who wonder about the role she played in his life—to them she is little more than “an Italian woman he seemed to have met in the year spent in Italy prior to the war” who appears in “several of his later canvases,”—the figure of a mother with a child in her lap. As she stares into the canvas and at “the blue distorted child,” she wonders about her own

disabled son and the role she has played in his life: “Have I repaid my debt? Or was there never a debt to repay but in her willful mind?” (229). What Ruth considers to be her “debt” to society is unclear: was it that she gave birth to a disabled son? That she kept him in exile? That she has, at this point in the novel, left him behind in Lisetta’s care so she might return to London? Her fixation on the boy, and not the mother, in the painting suggests that what haunts her is not her own identity but the one(s) she writes onto her son. It also suggests Moore’s continued inscription of her as biologically doomed to fixate on her own reproductions and on the past rather than the future. Here, Ruth looks at a reproduction of her reproductive process, and wonders about her own value as someone who reproduced a “distorted” child. She thinks not about contributions or novelty, but about debts and the past.

Moore’s Rules for Modern Life

In her nonfiction, Moore calls for a revolution in family life: “Deliver the child from the tyranny of the parent: the parent from the tyranny of the child...Family means that there has got to be a victim. And fortunate indeed that in which there is but one!” (*Collected Writings* 377). At the end of the novel, Ruth leaves Richard. Although she has plans to return, her original exile and lasting shame—the way she relegates Richard to a life of isolation—continue to haunt her to the novel’s final move. If family life ensures victimization, *Spleen* binds both Richard and Ruth to yet another rule of Moore’s modern universe: both are victims of her failed artistry, in which she cannot throw off the past, like Uller does, for the salvation of Art, even as she longs for a more modern future. Instead, she revels in well-worn Romantic arts, the dusky views off her terrace, and her desire for Uller, the artist, to simply recreate old scenes for her to get lost in. All this, even as she claims to loathe boring human cycles of repetition and reproduction. *Spleen*, then, to use Linett’s phrasing, stages “women’s aspirations to transcend biology and step into the

shoes of the artist” across Ruth’s many conflicting desires. Moore ultimately dooms those desires to fall back into the stench of repetition. Even Ruth’s own thoughts contain the circular, repetitive patterns that cannot break in favor of newness or novelty. She both longs for and doubts the validity of artistic novelty; in her cycles of shame and stubbornness, she perpetuates only more repetition and not the newness she longed to find in herself or in Richard.

The novel ends with another repetitious throng: not the purple udders of goats from the introduction but “a procession of unemployed” passing by her in Trafalgar Square (230). Having come from the Tate Museum where she has once again viewed *The Modern Blue Boy*, where the painted child “stared from the walls of a great gallery” (216), Ruth considers a vivid memory of Richard from the afternoon she left him on the island: “lying asleep in the shade of the rock on the hot yellow sand under a cloudless sky” (230). This memory, of the moment she realized that traveling to Milan would make her “free” of Richard for the first time since his birth, surprises Ruth as she considers how peaceful—and human—he looks bathed in sunlight. She sees him anew: “to the end of life, it seems, one may find oneself looking at familiar things for the first time” (212). For the first time, Ruth has escaped repetition in favor of meaningful novelty.

Seeing Richard in this new light—the light of her approaching freedom—she reads no “menace” in his peaceful face, wonders if “he will not know that I am gone? For that matter had he ever known that she was there?....How well he looked! Who, seeing him asleep, could believe?” (213). Even as she seems to recategorize him in this moment, as peaceful and nonthreatening, she reinvokes her definition of him as nonhuman: “rootless, null, unproductive” (213), perhaps to justify leaving him. Sensing her own freedom on the horizon, it’s not surprising that Ruth absolves herself of the harsh and uncompromising categories that would deem her strange, an exile, a bad mother—but neither she, nor Moore, absolve Richard. As the novel puts

it, “she thought of the squalor...the dreariness of poverty, the dreariness of gentility, the limited outlook of one, the limited outlook of the other, the decaying world closing in on the new life, and everywhere people being so splendidly brave about nothing, about nothing at all. What could she, she asked, what could she have told him?” (231). Wondering how Richard would fare in such a throng—in that dreary human procession toward death, another doomed framework Moore bestows around Ruth— Ruth “no longer reproached herself” (232) for her decision to raise her own blue boy in the sunlight of an island, away from the stink of repetition that haunts her so profoundly, even as she briefly escapes back to London.

Conclusion

As I’ve argued in this chapter, Moore leverages the most limiting aspects of electro-Vitalism to entrap Ruth and Richard inside a world where they will play out the rules of the modern universe, as Moore herself interpreted them—with virtually no movement or space for questioning those laws. As Garrity puts it, “the text uses the trope of reproduction to interrogate gendered ideas of bodily normalcy and to explore the narrative implications of the idea of pregnancy as a model for women's experimentalism” (289). Garrity suggests that Ruth attempts to overcome such a binary by considering her mind, rather than her womb, the seat of her aesthetic abilities:

In displacing her pregnancy from the body to the mind— “I think I carry my womb in my forehead” ...Ruth not only repudiates the long-standing view that women are governed by their reproductive physiology, but also simultaneously aligns herself with the rhetoric of innovation that is the founding impetus for modernist aesthetics (289)

But while Garrity admits that “Ruth's vision runs tragically aground as the physiological fact of her pregnancy and birth to a deformed child competes with, if not eclipses entirely, her aesthetic program” (289), there is something more fixed in this narrative that Ruth can never escape:

Moore's unforgiving rules of modern life. While Moore may indeed stage the question of a woman's ability to create modern art or to transcend biological limitation, she does so as a cruel tease, in a text that is ultimately more determined and defined than open to possibility. Moore ultimately asserts a sexist and essentialist biological reality around Ruth, framing her per Moore's own definitions of the electro-magnetic soul and her Local Brain theory. This is a modernist invocation of electricity not for radical possibility or unlimited transcendence, but to reassert limitations from the past. Moore ultimately uses electric discourses to keep old definitions, those tired and insistent gender essentialist narratives, just as they are, as limiting as ever before.

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CODA: MODERN, ELECTRIC SELFHOOD

Virginia Woolf's 1930 essay, "Street Haunting," in which a writer leaves home in pursuit of something strange and exciting, troubles the boundary between the woman writer and the world around her. It does so using references to modern lighting, centering the tension between brightness and dimness as a key experiential and atmospheric feeling that the wandering writer uses to understand her sense of self, her awareness of other selves, and her impulses to write down her thoughts.

The essay opens with a writer's desire to leave her home for a pencil, which is really "an excuse for walking," and she marks the required hour and season in which this excuse is best spent, paying specific attention to the way lighting creates unique opportunities: a winter evening "gives us the irresponsibility which darkness and lamplight bestow. We are no longer quite ourselves" (247). In the specific darkness of a winter night, the concreteness of selfhood gives way to something "irresponsible" —that is, not socially sanctioned or otherwise easily accessible to the upper-class woman subject. It's on this backdrop of a dimmed winter night that Woolf finds remarkable beauty conjured by "islands of light," similar to H.D.'s language of thin bars of sand in the seas of consciousness. Woolf draws on the language of light—characterized by "reddish yellow light—windows," "points of brilliance burning steadily like low stars," and "lamps" (248)—to construct a modern cityscape at night, a landscape of "the bright paraphernalia of the streets" she can wander as a flaneuse (249).

At first, it's only by withdrawing from well-lit spaces, Woolf suggests, that this writer can encounter the unfamiliar. Light, then, makes others and the self known. As she enters the "duskier chamber" of a darkened boot-shop, she asks the memorable question of the essay, announcing the arrival of otherness: 'What, then, is it like to be a dwarf?'" (249). If under

lamplight Woolf claims “we are no longer quite ourselves,” then the “duskier” lighting of the shop offers an experience with something that is not part of the self, something strange and new. Darkness, the absence of bright lights, obscures the knowing Woolf can do in the boot shop.

In the dusky boot shop, Woolf encounters a female body that shocks her, a body she calls “deformed,” and “shabbily dressed,” but that is also strikingly similar to herself: the woman has a normal appearing, even aristocratic, foot. In the boot shop, then, the dwarf-woman’s status is complex and complicated; she becomes more than she initially appears. Once returned to well-lit streets, however, she once again becomes “a dwarf only” to the writer, who uses lighting conditions to determine the true identity of others (250). But her complicated selfhood is contagious: when Woolf’s writer returns to the street, herself emerging from the darkness of the boot-shop into the lit street, she finds that the woman “had changed the mood; she had called into being an atmosphere” in which, suddenly, Woolf sees a strangeness on those familiar streets which, before experiencing the dusky shop, she had not seen (251). For a self so easily dismissed by her observer, the “dwarf only,” exerts a measurable power: she conjures a new mood, changes the streets with a new atmosphere that fills the scene—and the writer’s imagination—with revelations and mysteries. Even in the light, now, the unfamiliar and the unknown loom.

Woolf’s writer experiences light-filled revelations there on the street, surrounded by a new mood and atmosphere: “a sudden flare is brandished in our eyes; a question is asked which is never answered” (251-2). In the “twinkling of an eye,” all sorts of imaginings and fantasies suddenly become possible; her mind begins decorating imaginary homes and purchasing extravagant jewelry. Even these daydreams are brilliantly illuminated: “the lamps are burning very white in the deserted streets,” as the reality of the street remains, “it is a perfect winter’s evening; we are walking to the Strand to buy a pencil” (252, 253). These swings back-and-forth

between the daydream and the street, the other and the self, the imagined and the real, are mediated by the changing lights on the street. “We are streaked, variegated, all of a mixture; the colours have run.... Am I here, or am I there?” (253). The street scene recalls those foggy, halo-lamps of the modern atmospheres from Rhys’s Paris and Wharton’s New York; in London, Woolf’s pencil-seeking writer, experiences a modernizing city ablaze with electric power. On these streets, the blurriness of the self—the way she occupies so many places and stories at once—becomes, by the end of “Street Haunting,” a larger blurriness of all selves, an atmosphere of modern lighting in which selves become more porous to the impulses and strangeness of the world outside themselves.

Woolf describes this permeability this way: “into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others” (“Street Haunting” 258). This elusive freedom—a mind that can “briefly” escape its boundaries to “put on” the minds of others—recalls H.D.’s telegraphic theory of mind, in which all impressions can be collected and experienced in the artist’s mind and work, brightly illuminated or crucially dimmed, to spark innovation.

On arriving home from the streets, Woolf’s self “which has battered like a moth at the flame of so many inaccessible lanterns, sheltered and enclosed,” closes off again, no longer open and accessible as it was in the shifting lights of the winter evening on those public streets. She returns into a safe, enclosed interiority (259). Here, Woolf renders selfhood both the moth and the flame, what is within the lantern, and what flutters outside of it. The imagery recalls those blue-light lamps H.D. sees on the streets of London; the “battered,” fluttering self conjures Wharton’s Lily Bart, who feels that electric blaze inside her head. In these light-filled

explorations of modern woman's selfhood, Woolf shares with the authors I've studied in my dissertation a fascination with the ways new lighting technologies redefine the boundaries of the self: of the woman artist, of the social subject, of the wife and mother—and of the women who refuse, or long to escape, such categorical thinking. In their treatments of lighting and darkness, of the electricity that amplifies modernity's power and changes, modernist women writers define the “self” as crucially mediated by those static telegraphic wires, emanating lamplight in the fog, the Vitalism of the human soul, and the flickering power of a single electric bulb. To be seen under such a light, to be filled with such power, was not just electrifying. It was, to these writers, what it meant to be modern.

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