

A Portrait of the Lady in Modern American Literature

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Poor Little Rich Girl

Edited by

Aimee Pozorski

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-0574-X
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0574-2

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank, first and last, the contributors to this collection. I thank most especially M. J. Martinez, who worked on this volume not only as an author, but also as a copy editor and project manager. This volume exists because of M. J.'s commitment to the work.

I thank the Central Connecticut State University Department of English and the MA Program in English. We are a program that thrives because of the integrity of the students, the passion of the faculty, and the dedication of the staff. Thank you in particular to Dr. Stephen Cohen and Dr. Eric Leonidas, who worked all those years ago to get the program off the ground, and to the graduate studies committee composed of Dr. Stuart Barnett, Dr. Heidi Hartwig, and Dr. Melissa Mentzer. Thank you to Dr. Glynis Fitzgerald, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the School of Graduate Studies at Central Connecticut State University, for keeping us all on track.

We thank Cambridge Scholars Publishing for taking a chance on a collection of essays that focuses on graduate work in particular. Collaborating with the publishers, I have experienced this work not only as a research project but also as a teaching project, allowing me to mentor the contributors who were my students at graduate level. Most of them have long since graduated and gone off to serve as teachers and mentors in their own right. Because of the relationships we built over the course of two, three, five, or even ten years, this has become a passion project. We are all friends here. You can sense that in the volume you hold in your hands.

In the final stages of this project, we had the surreal experience of working with Mr. Jean Paul Gaultier, who gave us permission to use for the book's cover a photograph of one of his stunning wedding dresses. We thank him enthusiastically, as well as The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, especially Linda-Anne D'Anjou, who elegantly guided the permissions process with Mr. Gaultier.

Finally, I thank my family: Eliot Krzysztof Jones, who was raised among stacks of books dedicated to the study of American modernism, and Jason B. Jones, who has played a role in the emergence of this volume since 1998, when we first met.

CHAPTER ONE

POOR LITTLE RICH GIRL: A PORTRAIT OF THE LADY IN MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

AIMEE POZORSKI AND M. J. MARTINEZ

The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui.

—Kate Chopin, 1899

Kate Chopin's 1899 masterpiece *The Awakening* features a protagonist, Edna Pontellier, who struggles within the confines of traditional marriage and roles for women. A free thinker seeking liberation from the social constraints that bind her, Edna is offered two models in the novella: one, a happy homemaker and mother in the figure of Madame Ratignolle, and the second, Mademoiselle Reisz, an unmarried, passionate artist who freely pursues her musical talents. When Edna sees Madame Ratignolle with her children she reflects that she does not aspire to the "domestic harmony" of the Ratignolle family; on the contrary, the entire vision instills in her a sense of "appalling and hopeless ennui"—a sense that she could not happily carry on in the role of wife and mother; a sense of stasis and discontent above all else.

This collection considers, from the perspective of close reading and gender theory, the many characters in modern American literature like Edna Pontellier: women who live comfortably, and who are socially mobile given their economic status, but who are otherwise unhappy in their assigned roles as mothers, wives, and mistresses. The collection title recalls the famous moniker of a twentieth-century American icon, Gloria Vanderbilt, who eventually made her name in the designer jeans business, but who became famous almost at birth as the heiress to a family fortune

and the focus of a custody battle, during which the press dubbed her “Poor Little Rich Girl,” pointing out her wealth, first and foremost, but also the sense of *ennui* that seemed destined to follow her through life. As Donal Lynch, writing for *The Independent* in 2016, said, “The very name Vanderbilt was a byword for Gatsby-esque glamour and mystery and Gloria seemed as though she were drawn from literature. Truman Capote had based Holly Golightly on her, for heaven's sake.” In this way, Lynch seems to suggest that the character and life of Gloria Vanderbilt read like literature, with the poor little rich girl both the focus of curiosity, empathy, and even a bit of envy.

As we argue throughout this collection, the figure of the woman who seems to have everything—beauty, money, social standing—but who nevertheless suffers perpetually takes her place at the centre of the modern American literary canon. Perhaps notably, men have authored many of these women in their attempts to depict the alienation and anomie at the heart of the American experience during the modern age. A review of the criticism discussing canonical modern American literature reveals that scholars who take up a feminist or class-based reading of modern American fiction are more interested in reclaiming the lost voices of American women writers, which has since led to recovering such important modernists as Kate Chopin, Mina Loy, and Zora Neale Hurston. However, no literary scholar seems to have taken an adequate feminist approach to the figures of the rich woman—the “poor little rich girl”—in such canonical novels as Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), among others. This collection reveals how, in all of these modernist works, there appears a “poor little rich girl” who remains paradoxically at the centre of the novel, but who is nevertheless reduced to the shadows in the literary criticism surrounding the novels themselves.

As a result of this critical oversight, we believe that these essays can contribute significantly to the fields of modernism and literary studies by offering a new way to read old or canonical writers. As such, this project engages current research in the fields of feminism and literary modernism in order to argue for a repositioning of the pervasive figure of the rich girl in these canonical texts. While individual scholars may have taken up individual and isolated readings of one novel or another in this light, our collection offers a broader sense of the tradition seemingly dependent upon the figure of the woman. Rather than use feminism as a tool for reclaiming lost authors’ voices, we are looking in new ways at a literary

canon dominated by men nevertheless obsessed with the power and ultimate downfall of a wealthy woman.

In this way, our collection attempts to continue the feminist work of Bonnie Kime Scott, whose 1990 edited volume *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* is dedicated “To the forgotten and silenced makers of modernism,” and includes vibrant and often overlooked women modernists like Djuna Barnes, Willa Cather, Nancy Cunard, H. D., Dorothy Richardson, and Sylvia Townsend Warner, to name only a few. However, it also goes on to look at how canonical male authors have represented modern women. Exemplary cases include entries on James Joyce (“Stephen’s Interview with His Mother”) and D. H. Lawrence (“Cocksure Women and Hensure Men”). Scott’s *Reconfiguring Modernism: The Women of 1928* (1995) extends this conversation and plays a key role in moving modernist scholarship away from a focus on men and onto the women so central to the field. After taking up such central authors as Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce, Scott provides a closer look at Djuna Barnes, Rebecca West, and Virginia Woolf, continuing to shift the conversation about gender and modernism to the women writers themselves.

Lisa Rado’s *Modernism, Gender, and Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach* (2015) also looks at the relationship between gender and modernism in literature, but, in focusing on the cultural milieu that informs a written work, does not emphasize the kind of close reading that we hope to emphasize here. Via close reading and feminist theory, Kathleen Wheeler’s 1994 “*Modernist*” *Women Writers and Narrative Art* considers Willa Cather, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Jean Rhys, Katherine Mansfield, Stevie Smith, and Jane Bowles as self-conscious writers in a new tradition who “offer opportunities for an imaginative response of a sophisticated kind, opportunities for an unusual degree of self-awareness concerning the possible ways in which reading can presume upon, distort, and even impression, as well as liberate, a text” (10). In so doing, Wheeler, like Scott, asks critics to reconsider modernism with women’s voices as central to the emergence of this ground-breaking tradition.

For this reason, in addition to Scott’s early work that looks at how a few male modernist authors view representations of women, we also borrow heavily from the insights of John Carlos Rowe’s *The Other Henry James* (1998), which does for James what we would like to do with this collection: to read the canonical (largely male) modernist writers with a renewed focus on what their generally overlooked women characters can tell us about the values of the time. *The Other Henry James* questions the

legacy of James as a realist novelist who was nonetheless an aesthete on the surface, appearing to uphold the status quo. Rowe's approach, guided by queer theory, proposes our reading of "gay Henry James" as an author function that allows him to take biography out completely if he so chooses. According to Rowe: "Whether James's works are part of the patriarchal ideology of Victorian culture or constitute modes of resistance to the gender stereotypes of his times remains a crucial question for scholars and theorists, in part because James continues to occupy such a central position in the history and theory of the modern novel" (1998, 101). In other words, Rowe wonders what it would mean to read James's novels, not as reinforcing the gendered divisions of Victorian culture, but rather calling into question those very gender norms that place women in the home and men at the centre of culture itself. In looking at James's "literary representations of gender," we can see how he worried about the effects of a patriarchal order—not only on the women he represents, but also on children and other marginalized figures. While we may presume that Henry James epitomized bourgeoisie privilege, he may in fact have represented otherness as a way to dismantle our value of the bourgeois subject position from within his literary texts. In fact, this privilege could be used to describe such authors as Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Michael Cunningham—as men writing women—as well as the upper-class white women authors such as Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton, who also projected their frustrations onto their protagonists. What is interesting for us is that this figure cuts across racial lines as well, with Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston, two prominent African American women authors, also wondering through their respective heroines what happens when a woman seems to have amassed everything and still remains unhappy.

Extending Rowe's reading of James, the essays in this collection consider the vexed relationship between class and gender as represented in canonical modernist works by Chopin, James, Wharton, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Hurston, and Richard Wright. Looking at representations of class and gender differences in modernist texts, we argue, inevitably raises questions about the emergence of modernism in the twentieth century. While the primary texts we consider here are canonical, we hope to raise new questions about the emergence of a literary tradition, such as what the motif of the "poor little rich girl" tells us about the emergence of modernism generally. Finally, we will ask—and hopefully come closer to answering—via readings of Larsen, Hurston, and Wright, how the tradition (modernism) and the figure (the vulnerable woman) are reflected not only through gender and class considerations, but also through race and racial difference. How can we theorize these

explorations of difference as central to the emergence of modernism itself?

The figure of the poor little rich girl addressed in this collection appears throughout American literature from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. In doing so, it presents a trajectory of the social and moral codes that have persisted, and analyses the ways in which these codes have shaped the lives of the “poor little rich girl”: a girl who, to anyone watching from the outside, would assume she is on her way to fulfilment, but who in actuality struggles with the anomie, alienation, and sterility central to modernism itself, despite the outer appearance of bliss.

The collection opens with Aimee Pozorski’s essay “Julia’s ‘Constitution’: Paint, Pow(d)er and Politics in *The Tragic Muse*,” placing Rowe’s reading of James alongside the psychoanalytic discourse of acting and role-playing. At first glance, the character Julia Dallow might be dismissed out of hand for knowing nothing about art, but on a second reading she also plays a critical role in calling attention to women’s aspirations in the political arena. Pozorski suggests that calling attention to Julia’s “constitution” not only refers to her womanly ways, perhaps even weaknesses, but, more provocatively, reminds us of her desire to play a role in the public sphere.

In chapter two, “Reopening the Door to Romance: A Reading of Edna Pontellier,” Tara Ehler examines the suicide of Edna Pontellier, the wife of a successful businessman and a seemingly devoted mother. Set in the late nineteenth century, the novel explores the role of women in southern America. Edna seemingly has it all with her status, wealth, and family. However, as she experiences an “awakening” in the novel, she becomes dissatisfied with the sheltered life she lives and, ultimately, commits suicide. Critics have interpreted Edna’s suicide as a rejection of patriarchal society and as liberation, while others see her failure to choose an identity within her society as creating an untenable situation that she can neither negotiate nor survive. Ehler demonstrates through close reading and new historicism that Edna’s suicide is largely a result of her overly romantic worldview. Her lack of focus on her independence and art and her fixation on the perfect love story ultimately become her undoing. In contrast to the idea that Edna is unable to break free of patriarchal bonds, she does break these boundaries, but is still unsatisfied, indicating a deeper flaw in her fundamental character that is a result of her adhering to strict moral and social codes. Additionally, this paper will introduce the idea that Edna is a romantic figure in a naturalist text, and thusly her suicide can also be read as a critique of romanticism.

Also in conversation with romanticism, particularly Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Robert Treu in “Surviving

Edna” takes a Bakhtinian approach to reading the ending of Chopin’s *The Awakening*. Asking why we would take for granted the fact of Edna’s suicide in the end, he implores readers to leave the question open, anticipating Chopin’s anticipation of the emergent modernist moment that complicates a readers’ desire for an ending, no matter how bleak or hopeless.

Moving the conversation beyond a discussion of Edna Pontellier, Emily Kane focuses on the peripheral characters of *The Awakening*. In her essay “*The Awakening* and Female Representation,” Kane examines the novel through these “other women” as seen in contrast to Edna. Each woman falls into half of a binary archetype, particularly those of whore/Madonna and fool/genius, and many expand into two archetypes at once. Kane finds that the novel apparently fails its feminist litmus test in the constantly unfriendly view of the other-woman; in setting up rivalries between women for love and appreciation (from men, or from the greater Louisiana Creole high society), the women’s own misogyny soon reveals itself. However, when love and appreciation have a place in relationships between women, Edna’s regard of the other-woman changes and becomes harmonious rather than discordant. This chapter ultimately argues that representation is as important with secondary as it is with primary characters since it allows minor figures the same depth of personality that shows they exist as “more than tokens, obstacles, or caricatures for mockery.”

In “Acquiescence to a Hieroglyphic World: Newland Archer and May Welland’s Defeat in Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*,” Kristin Klemeshefsky expands gender and class beyond the female position and examines both the oppression felt by May Welland and Newland Archer. Speaking to a similar time period, *The Age of Innocence* examines the unforgiving urban environment and the relevance of the same southern moral and social codes of *The Awakening* in *The Age of Innocence*. While critics often argue that May Welland develops into the tenacious, tough, and complex heroine of the novel and that Newland Archer is a victim of the Old New York society, forced to sacrifice his own desires in order to stabilize his place against a fixed backdrop of money, manners, and matrimony, Klemeshefsky argues that both characters, in different ways, acquiesce to their culture and create unrealistic portraits of one another in order to justify it, despite having opportunities to shape their culture. Individuals are not forced to completely sacrifice one existence for the other; yet, these characters do in order to be complicit in the society they both scorn. In an attempt to uphold societal obligations and their marriage,

they refuse to honour their own feelings of independence and develop skewed versions of one another that help in maintaining their lifestyles.

Melanie Perry continues the idea of acquiescence in her essay, “Semiotics, Signs, and Silence in *The Age of Innocence*,” where she similarly argues that May Welland reigns supreme as the archetype of a proper Victorian ingénue who is richly rewarded by society in exchange for her unquestioning submission to its norms and mores. While generations of critics have dismissed May as a vapid shell of a woman who is merely a product of an oppressively patriarchal and hierarchical society, Perry proposes that May is actually a master strategist who astutely and discreetly manipulates Old New York as a means to achieve the ends she desires. Further, Perry shows that Edith Wharton’s characters rely primarily on very specific and socially-dictated non-verbal signs and signals to govern their delicate social hierarchy, discussing how the characters navigate society under such precarious conditions, to what degree manners and propriety play a role, and what sacrifices the characters are willing to make in order to maintain these rigorous standards. It is through conforming to the semiotic system of signs and silence that May is able to achieve societal success, while those who do not honour those boundaries are ultimately cast out of society.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, many Americans found it imperative to maintain a sense of traditionalism in the wake of the First World War in order to preserve nationalism. During the period now known as the “Roaring Twenties,” many Americans looked to gain optimism after the war. In doing so, further distinctions between classes were drawn as those with wealth looked to flaunt it and develop legacies of familial wealth. In “‘Within and Without’ Indeed: Investigating Observations of Femininity in *The Great Gatsby*,” Chris Moore suggests that the representation of women in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* is more nuanced than previously recognized. She explores previous interpretations of the key female characters and takes into consideration not only how the women are depicted by Fitzgerald but also the degree to which one may identify the line between the author’s intentions and biases and his narrator’s. Despite what some have suggested or implied, such a review reveals that the novel isn’t employing misogyny as a strategy, since the apparent misogyny in the novel demonstrates immaturity juxtaposed with contemporary social biases—factors that lead to obscured understandings of characters such as Daisy, Jordan, Myrtle, and Catherine. Similar to Perry’s argument, the women in these novels are able to strategically defend themselves in a male-dominated America.

However, what Moore calls an “obscure understanding” of female characters, Billy LoRusso calls a “threat.” In “Submerging the ‘Other Races’: A Close Reading of Race, Class, and Gender in *The Great Gatsby*,” LoRusso examines how Fitzgerald applies the language of race to various underrepresented groups, especially women and members of the proletariat, in ways that have not yet been fully understood. While in Moore’s argument the men seem unaware and misled by the women’s strategic defence against a patriarchal world, LoRusso argues that the men see female defence as more of a deliberate, and thus offensive, effort to rise. LoRusso examines how Fitzgerald uses racial prejudices to demonstrate a sub-textual fear, not only of the uprising of women but also of African Americans and the working class. These “races” threaten the book’s dominant ideologies, thus inspiring a sub-textual fear that the dominant patriarchal figure will be oppressed in their favour. Further, LoRusso draws on cultural studies methods, exploring the submissive status of women in the novel in order to link its fears to the eugenicist movement of the late nineteenth century.

In her “Couture and Pretty Little Fools: Myrtle Wilson as a Constructed Delusion,” Laura Sobolewski takes an in-depth look at Myrtle Wilson, a woman and also a member of the lower class. Therefore, she acts as a prime example of a member of the “other race” that LoRusso argues threatens the dominant ideology as she attempts to rise above her status. Sobolewski finds that the majority of literary criticism centred on *The Great Gatsby* focuses on the primary characters alone and excludes a thorough dissection of Myrtle. What little discourse there is devoted to her expands upon her dogged desire for her individual upward social mobility, in contrast to a focus on the individual’s place in society as a social construct beyond their control. Sobolewski argues that Foucauldian and Hegelian theories offer an interpretation of Myrtle as a multifaceted character with both flaws and attributes, but nevertheless a character ultimately doomed to fail because of her low social status and gender, never able to truly rise above a dominant group that will help to protect the status quo.

Jennifer Vignone further explores this idea in her essay “Beautiful Little Fools: Rigidity in Class and Gender Roles Begets Social Impotency” in order to highlight the extent to which members of the lower class and lesser gender (female, in this case) are doomed to fail when trying to rise above. She argues that there is little means to break the “old money” versus “new money” stigma or for women to challenge a patriarchal society. Inspired by Daisy Buchanan’s famous line, “I’m glad it’s a girl. And I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world,

a beautiful little fool” in regard to her daughter, Vignone explores Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* through the lens of gender and class as it effects the social development of the characters in 1920s America. Vignone examines Fitzgerald’s world that presents a culture fixated on the superficiality of class and gender. However, she argues that it is both the men and women who are the “beautiful little fools” that Daisy describes early on in the novel. This socio-gendered prejudice creates a society lost and impotent for the future development of culture. This rigid perception of gender and social class prevents any mobility and generates a stagnant upper class and an impotent lower/middle class.

In “Poor Little Rich Gal as Femme Fatale: Staging the Female Antagonist in Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal*,” Susan Gilmore examines the theatrical valences of poor/rich, girl/woman, and pro/antagonist and how these dual identities’ performances may be necessarily transgressive in ways that supersede legal and social codes. Her essay draws attention to the way the entwined themes of the “poor little rich girl” and the “suffering female body” play out on the modernist stage through an examination of Sophie Treadwell’s play *Machinal*, which brings together journalist-playwright Treadwell’s interests in female criminality and victimization. Treadwell employs expressionist techniques to craft what has been called a feminist “Adding Machine” (referencing Elmer Rice’s 1923 play). *Machinal* propels its “Young Woman” protagonist through a series of allegorical and deeply ironic episodes, charting her course from a clanging mechanized workplace, “To Business,” to claustrophobic marriage and maternity, “Domestic” and “Maternal,” and to “The Law” and “A Machine,” which stage her final trial and electric chair annihilation. Gilmore’s article considers the ways in which Treadwell figures the suffering female body in this play as a violated *and* violent site of resistance, however forcibly such bodies may be made to submit. Gilmore employs the “femme fatale” and “female antagonist” to get at this character’s cuts-both-ways lethality towards self and spouse, gender and sex, and the social and bodily terms to which she’s been sentenced. She explores the performative elements and vanishing points in Treadwell’s rendering of Helen’s story in the context of two prior works by modern women playwrights, Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles* (1916) and Mina Loy’s *The Pamperers* (1916), for the seen and unseen femme fatales they feature.

Some may consider Clare Kendry in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* a femme fatale and antagonist, as she is beautiful, seductive, and leads to dangerous predicaments for both herself and her friend, Irene Redfield. Ultimately, she falls from a window at the end of the play in either a successful suicide as a result of her inability to cope with her conflicted identity or a murder

on the part of Irene, who sees her as a threat to her marriage and state of being. In “What If Clare Was Not Dead?: How Nella Larsen’s *Passing* Shows the Inability to Outrun Yourself,” Sarah Sherman utilizes Perry Carter’s definition of intersectionality and her ideas of mobility in regard to identity so that it becomes more than a racial text. By viewing this text through a combination of close readings and psychoanalytic theory, Sherman applies Candice Jenkins’s idea of innate identity to discuss the idea that not only is blackness an innate part of a person, but that sexuality is as well. However, both can pose obstacles in the attempt for upward mobility in society. Clare eventually proves that, even with status, she cannot shed her race or gender, causing her confliction. Irene, on the other hand, cannot remain true to her blackness or gender without looking enviously at those, like Clare, who can seemingly move beyond it. Ultimately, Sherman argues that Irene’s attempts to transfer and kill her homosexual desires for Clare are futile as she still possesses these inherent desires within herself.

Also invested in the idea of “moving beyond” or, in her phrasing, “forward motion,” Heidi E. Eilenberger argues in “Miss Quentin and Forward Motion in *The Sound and the Fury*” that, despite the stasis that pervades William Faulkner’s text, he gives us a glimpse of what the future may bring through the figure of Miss Quentin. According to Eilenberger, “Quentin, the succeeding generation, seems to be the only one willing to fight against her ostensible fate for a new, unknown future. Resisting familial forces, she does as she desires and fights to live freely in a world that denies the reality of change.” In so doing, Eilenberger argues that Faulkner showcases the need for progress via a new generation—one that rejects the stagnancy of the present in its refusal to accept the truth of their decline.

In “The Four Faces of Motherhood: Caddy Compson as Mother in *The Sound and the Fury*,” Jennifer Lavoie continues to look at Faulkner’s representation of women by examining the role of Caddy Compson as a mother figure in *The Sound and the Fury*. Lavoie believes Caddy is portrayed as the mother figure with four distinct representations of motherhood depending on the family member in question: through her brother Benjy, Caddy is the nurturing mother, but with Jason she is a disciplinarian; for her brother Jason she becomes the Oedipal mother; however, with her only real child, Miss Quentin, she is absent. Part of a wealthy family, the Compsons have seen their prominence in society deteriorate, though they still have an established name to sit on. As the mental and physical health of her parents deteriorates, Caddy assumes this motherly role. Using Sigmund Freud’s and Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic

frames, Lavoie proposes a close reading of *The Sound and the Fury* to examine Caddy's role as the mother figure and the impact she has on her three brothers and only daughter. However, her submission to a mother role causes her to fail as she gets older, becoming pregnant with a child that ends up as seemingly lost as she is. As both girls are forced to grow up too fast, Lavoie shows the role of mother as stifling and debilitating with generational repercussions.

However, mothers can also recognize their own misery and make attempts to prevent the same ill fate from falling on their children. In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* it is a grandmother who makes attempts to save her granddaughter from the cruelties of the world that befell her and, subsequently, her daughter. In "Nanny's Influence: The Cycle of Slavery and Self in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Erin Dayton examines Janie Crawford's quest towards self-fulfilment as influenced by her grandmother, Nanny. While most critics solely focus on Nanny's past as a former slave and her subsequent emphasis on material goods, it is imperative to look at the relationship between the two women more closely. It is because of Nanny's influence that Janie is able to be an independent woman who finds out about "living fuh [herself]" (192) at the end of the novel. The relationship between grandmother and granddaughter simultaneously frees and suffocates Janie and her views of the world. Ultimately, it is the driving force behind Janie's self-awareness, especially as Nanny creates an environment in Janie's youth that is ignorant of racism, and which allows her to be a free and independent woman.

Yet, it would seem that no matter how far in time humanity moves forward, the traits of "free" and "independent" are just as alluring as they were in the past; thus, these women continuously find themselves conflicted as they succumb to a patriarchal society that puts women into traditional gender roles, while simultaneously longing for a sense of individuality and liberty. In "'Being a Mother is Insane': Cunningham's response to Gilman and Woolf," M. J. Martinez brings the collection full circle by considering a nineteenth-century American text side by side with a twentieth-century American text, particularly through the mother/wife figure in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*. In its entirety, Martinez argues, *The Hours* details the mental toll that gender performativity has on three women across the twentieth century. Focusing primarily on the character Laura Brown and her obsession with Virginia Woolf, Martinez argues that not only does Laura respond to Woolf as an author, which largely drives her story, but that Cunningham responds to "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a

means to represent the debilitating nature of being a mother and wife. In her essay “A Map for Rereading” (1980), Annette Kolodny asserts that readers should reconsider how readers approach texts in response to Harold Bloom, who believed, “a poem is a response to a poem, as a poet is a response to a poet, or a person to his parent” (451), and that all critics perform “misreadings or misprisions” when approaching a text (452). Therefore, as Martinez argues, Cunningham responds to both Woolf and Gilman in order to show the social pressures and forces upon women, which in even the most “ideal” of circumstances can be dangerous. Painting a trajectory from the 1920s until the 1990s, this essay shows how Cunningham insists that societal constraints placed on women persist across time.

The essays in this collection consider, from the beginning of a literary period to its end, the ways in which men and women of the time responded to the call for women to be “pretty little fools”—responses that range from performance to ennui to acts of suicide. In so doing, these essays call attention not only to the importance of literary reevaluation but also to a sensitive reading of all women and men—literary or otherwise—who feel trapped within a social order, who aspire to achieve something greater, or who feel compelled to perform a different gender identity altogether. This collection is for them.

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CHAPTER TWO

JULIA DALLOW'S "CONSTITUTION": PAINT, POW(D)ER AND POLITICS IN *THE TRAGIC MUSE*

AIMEE POZORSKI

Artifice is the strength of the world, and in that same mask of paint and powder, shadowed with vermeil tinct and most trimly pencilled, is a woman's strength.

—Max Beerbohm (1894)

Within the past decade a new school of literary criticism has emerged to situate Henry James as a socially-conscious writer at the end of the nineteenth century—a writer who worried about questions of gender roles, sexuality, class, and ethnicity. Given this new way of reading James, it may be surprising that Julia Dallow, his ambitious female politico in *The Tragic Muse* (1889–90), has not received more critical attention. Julia Dallow, with her strength of constitution, constitutional commitment, and mask of paint and powder, points up the psychic difficulty of both embodying and confronting a woman's strength.

After decades of criticism establishing James as an aesthete and critic of bourgeois English "philistinism," contemporary literary critics Christopher Lane, Joseph Litvak, and John Carlos Rowe, to name only a few, have put forth a "new" and "other" Henry James.¹ John Carlos Rowe, for example, writes in his introduction to *The Other Henry James* (1998) that he wants readers to imagine a Henry James who is:

more attentive to questions of class, race, gender, and sexual preference relevant to the changing social order of his time. This other Henry James is no longer the master of the modern novel, the willful inheritor of the great tradition of English and American letters, but often a baffled and conflicted man struggling with the complex realities of his age. (36–7)

In Julia Dallow, James's questions of gender "relevant to the changing social order of his time" and his aestheticist critique of bourgeois English philistinism seem to coalesce. Further, like Miriam, but also like a true English politician, Julia is continually acting. Her entire universe is a stage. Julia lives as if in a masquerade—a "womanliness" masquerade as Joan Riviere called it in 1929. She personifies both James's concern with the limited opportunities available for women at the turn of the century, as well as his loathing for those who do not value the aesthetic enterprise that grew out of the "great tradition of English and American letters."

Early in the novel we discover that Julia Dallow had been married to an indifferent politician before she pushed Nick Dormer—her new "political" interest—to be the parliamentary member for the aptly-named Harsh. Gossiping in the art gallery in the opening scene of the novel, Nick tells his mother that Julia, "makes charming presents; but ... it isn't *her* taste. It's her husband's ... The beautiful objects of which she disposes so freely are the things he collected for years laboriously, devotedly" (1998, 21). Here, the differences between Nick and Julia are immediately apparent: Nick is an "aesthete" who finds Julia's "generosity" with her late husband's beloved objects despicable. Julia, conversely, thinks of "art" as "odious" (79) and a frivolous waste of time. Further revealing his scorn for the ease with which Julia gives these things away, Nick continues: "No such enlightened collection of beautiful objects has been made in England in our time" (21). Very quickly, Julia's ignorance of the merits of art is emphasized; here, it is contrasted with Nick's appreciation not only for the late Mr. Dallow's "enlightened collection of beautiful objects," but also for the works on display in the gallery.

Later, when Nick tries to discuss their differences with Julia (after all, he is the aspiring but untalented artist, and she is the politician who thinks art is "odious"), the differences between Julia and her late husband also become clear. Julia says: "'I'm different altogether. Why should it always be put upon me when I hate it? What have I done? I was drenched with it before'" (280). Here, Nick detects in Julia's blush:

the uncalculated betrayal of an old irritation, an old shame almost—her late husband's flat inglorious taste for pretty things, his indifference to every chance to play a public part. This had been the humiliation of her youth, and it was indeed a perversity of fate that a new alliance should contain for her an oblique demand for the same spirit of accommodation, impose on her the secret bitterness of the same concessions. (280)

Nick's perspective ought at least to be questioned here. On the one hand, Nick is right: he is very much like that "old irritation" because of his taste

for pretty things (which he knows Julia cannot tolerate) and his "indifference to every chance to play a public part." But, on the other hand, he is also intellectually inferior to Julia, and she threatens him with her social awareness and worldly knowledge. Perhaps Nick is less than reflective in his interpretation of her reaction in order to protect himself from this potentially shattering self-knowledge. As a result, Julia strikes him as simply a manipulative and "rude" woman who is insensitive to the plight of the artist or art collector (68).² The "other" Henry James, however, has created in Julia a woman clearly frustrated by a lifetime spent searching for the venue for a public life and a legitimate medium in which she can use her talents and fulfil her desires.

In his 1908 preface to *The Tragic Muse*, James wrote:

What I make out from furthest back is that I must have had from still further back, must in fact practically have always had, the happy thought of some dramatic picture of the "artist-life" and of the difficult terms on which it is at the best secured and enjoyed, the general question of its having to be not altogether easily paid for. To "do something about art"—art, that is, as a human complication and stumbling block—must have been for me early a good deal of a nursed intention, the conflict between art and "the world" striking me thus betimes as one of the half-dozen great primary motives. (1)

Given the tradition in which he was writing, it is not surprising that James chose politics to represent "the world" in opposition to the more admirable "artist-life." This tradition began as early as 1811 with the public spectacle of the Prince Regent. The political and social climate that followed consolidated an opposition between politicians and artists, and offered a wealth of opportunities for artists to make politicians a target for jokes and outright attacks regarding their cultural ignorance.³ Benjamin Disraeli's *Vivian Grey* (1826) and Edward George Bulwer-Lytton's *Pelham: The Adventures of a Gentleman* (1828) are two once-popular accounts of both the indifference and the acting associated with the ruling class. Disraeli, for example, characterizes Mr. Toad's career in the House as being as "correct as his conduct out of it. After ten years' of regular attendance, the boldest conjecturer would not have dared to define his political principles. It was a rule with Stapylton Toad never to commit himself" (1906, 69). Additionally, when discussing the question of "representation" and politics, Grey himself asks in conversation with a Lord: "What, after all, in this country is public life? Is it not a race in which the swiftest must surely win the prize; and is not that prize power?" (32–3). According to Disraeli, himself the leader of the Conservative Party from 1847–68, the life of

politics involves little more than a refusal to commit to anything and a race to win power. For Disraeli, like Bulwer-Lytton, “representation” is understood only in terms of politics, even though it is clear that for these men representation involves not only their subjects, but also how they act before their world, which is, for them, a stage.

Bulwer-Lytton’s eponymous hero Pelham, for example, discusses quite candidly the masquerading and acting aspects of politics. Pelham recalls his acquaintance, Lord Vincent, and: “how very different he really is to that which he affects to be in the world: but so it is with everyone—we are all alike the ancient actors: let our faces be ever so beautiful, we must still wear a mask” (1972, 79). And, after Pelham himself is elected into the political arena, he identifies, or confesses, the reason for his success. Pelham explains that he “found” himself the “fairly” chosen member for the borough of Buyemall only “after the due quantum of dining, drinking, spouting, lying, equivocating, bribing, rioting, head-breaking, promise-breaking, and—thank god Mercury, who presides over the elections—*chairing* of successful candidateship” (144). According to Disraeli’s and Bulwer-Lytton’s exaggerated accounts of the successful politician, then, one needs only a good mask in order to have a good time.

I want to point out here that Julia Dallow defies this tradition. I will concede that she *is*, for all intents and purposes, a philistine in James’s view, as early in her support of Nick’s candidacy she calls him “odious” for saying that he is fond of the arts (1998, 79). But, in keeping with the character of Olive Chancellor in James’s *The Bostonians* (1885–6), she is also a conscientious and well-informed politico, an ambitious and desiring woman. While in the opening chapter of the book Nick says that Julia “doesn’t care a rap about art. It’s a fearful bore looking at fine things with Julia” (20), she is also described as “awfully clever” (20), an indisputable point in connection with her worldliness.

Two additional sociological accounts of politics in the nineteenth century describe the characteristics of politicians similar to those in Bulwer-Lytton’s and Disraeli’s fiction. These descriptions are also important relative to Julia’s role in *The Tragic Muse* because they underscore how *males* were trained to act in their political roles in the nineteenth century. Twentieth-century readers who have benefitted from eighty-five years of women having the vote in England may forget how radical a character such as Julia is for even aspiring to participate actively in the political arena.

In *People in Politics*, Richard Rose explains that “young Englishmen” were immersed in education that “involved the incidental learning of ways to shape their behavior in order to meet the expectations of those around

them" (1971, 97). He also describes the political role as negotiating "ideas about what people expect to do in different kinds of political situations and what others expect of them" (97). Similarly, Henry Fairlie observes in *The Life of Politics* that politics in Britain is "convincingly presented as a humane pursuit, fit to engage the whole life of the whole man, the supreme art of a highly civilized and polite society. It is the life that matters" (1968, 11). Although Julia is not a man, a fact that characters in *The Tragic Muse* repeatedly note, she, too, has engaged her whole life and person in the role of politician through being someone's financial backer and hopeful wife.

I have dwelt on such depths of representations of the political life in England in the nineteenth century because they point out crucial intersections between "art" and "the world" or "politics" that lie at the heart of *The Tragic Muse*. Particularly, the intersections are evident in Julia's role as aspiring politician, or, more pointedly I suppose, the aspiring *wife* of a politician, because she also spends her lifetime acting this role. When Julia tells Nick about the carriage she has arranged for him, Nick "noted now afresh and with pleasure, that her lack of unction interfered not a bit with her always acting" (1998, 71). Remarkably, Julia doesn't show any signs of reverence to her self-assigned office, but she is nonetheless acting. In this way, Julia is similar to Miriam; the difference, however, is that Julia must marry Nick, or another politically talented man, in order to realize her ambition. Because of women's thwarted goals in nineteenth-century English culture, her ambition is voiced through—and made compatible to—the ambitions of other women who are uneducated, indifferent, or uninspired. That "ambition" is to get married. Whereas Julia obviously is not a young Englishman raised to become a politician, she was raised to marry and support a politician. And for all the sympathy that James's narrator grants Nick—the conflicted aesthete struggling to find his identity beyond the overwhelming urges of his mother and Julia—in the final analysis, Julia's position may warrant more sympathy.

Yet, because of her very association with politics, Julia serves as the ideal scapegoat for the traditional "Master" of English letters. She is linked with the Philistines, with rudeness, and with domineering mothering. After all, from the very first chapter, Julia is connected closely with Nick's mother, Lady Agnes. Neither one of them appreciates art: while Julia finds it repulsive, Lady Agnes describes what she sees in the gallery as "dreadful" (19) and "indecent" (22). Further, both Lady Agnes and Julia push Nick into politics; and Lady Agnes occupies an empty home of the Dallows during Julia's engagement to Nick. For these reasons, Julia may also be "read" as a conniving, self-centred, destructive force hovering over Nick. According to Nick, Julia "desired no experience for the familiar ...

and indeed the cause of her interest in him was partly the vision of his helping her to the particular extensions she did desire—the taste and the thrills of great affairs and public action” (103). The phrase that Nick links to Julia—“desired no experience for the familiar”—is intriguing in this context. Coming from Nick, the aesthete, this seems to echo Pater, Huysmans, Moore, and Wilde, who wrote about the allure of living to experience “the new.” Yet, the phrase simultaneously separates her from those who have an “aesthetic sensibility”: she wants to be a part of “the great affairs and public action,” far from both the familiarity of home and the newness of art. Conversely, Nick “merely” wants to paint in his studio. Nick wants to be “behind the scenes,” looking at objects while painting them—and Julia wants to be watched and heard.⁴

Another of Nick’s reflections on his relationship to Julia, which further underscores the difference between them, calls forth more powerfully Julia’s potential to emasculate him. When looking out the window at Harsh, Nick realizes that, in addition to the “level lands of Harsh”:

[a] great many more things of which these were the superficial token, were Julia’s very own to do with exactly as she liked. No word of appreciation or envy, however, dropped from the young man’s lips, and his mother presently went on: “What could be more natural than that after your triumphant contest you and she would have lots to settle and to talk about—no end of practical questions, no end of urgent business? Aren’t you her member, and can’t her member pass a day with her, and she a great proprietor?” (159)

With this statement, Nick realizes that Julia has both used and owned him to her own ends. His reaction incorporates James’s wordplay on “her member,” as both Julia and Nick worry about Julia’s potential to usurp Nick’s social power. As Nick wonders in response, “*Her* member—am I hers?” (159).⁵ And when Nick’s mother answers by saying that Julia owns the place and he represents it, after all, Nick counters with:

What a droll thing to “represent,” when one thinks of it! And what does *it* represent, poor stupid little borough with its strong, though I admit clean, smell of meal and its curiously fat-faced inhabitants? Did you ever see such a collection of fat faces turned up at the hustings? They looked like an enormous sofa, with the cheeks for the gathers and the eyes for the cushions. (159–60)

Clearly, Nick wants to “represent” life in art, not people in a political system, who are as aesthetically unappealing to him as an overstuffed sofa! For Nick, representing Miriam Rooth in a painting as she would

appear on stage is the greatest achievement. What does this do to the view of Julia's goals, however? *Is* she simply a philistine for wanting to "represent" the "curiously fat-faced inhabitants" of Harsh to the exclusion of "art"?

Nick himself questions the role of art in society, as well as the possibility that politics also offers or represents "great ideas." While viewing the great works of the artists Titian, Rubens, Gainsborough, and Rembrandt, he "found himself calling the whole exhibited art into question. 'What was it after all at the best and why had people given it so high a place?' he asked himself" (392). It must be noted here that Nick himself reports that he is an untalented artist and critic, and may *need* Gabriel Nash's sensibilities to set him straight, but Nick's is also a serious question contemplated by the serious artist in crisis: What *is* his value in a society in which his very closest allies—in this case Lady Agnes, Peter Sherringham, and Julia Dallow—question his very worth? What follows this is a contrast in Nick's mind between the value of art and the value of politics. Here, it is clear that Nick respects Julia and her interests more than he does the ideal aesthete, Gabriel Nash. Nick thinks:

The human force producing them [the polished, toned object before him] was so far from one of the greatest; their place was a small place and their connexion with the heroic life casual and slight. They represented so little great ideas, and it was great ideas that kept the world from chaos. He had incontestably been in much closer relation with them for a few months before than he was today: it made up a great deal for what was false and hollow, what was merely personal, in "politics" that, were the idea greater or smaller, they could at their best so directly deal with it. (392)

Nick struggles to see art's impact on life here and wonders what would be more effective in keeping the world from chaos through ideas. The objects at which he is looking are a "poor and secondary show" (392). At one time, however, when he considered the "public" life with Julia, he found these art objects more "useful" when in the depths of "political despair." They, for him, contrasted the false, hollow, and personal ends in politics. Art objects, Nick learns, can repair life's inadequacies, but paradoxically cannot repair his life in politics.

Because of Julia's influence, Nick is, in fact, unable to convince himself of the inadequacies of politics. Later, he discusses with Nash his "care for the public weal" and questions art's use for the public in order to get a more persuasive answer than he could provide for himself. With an answer that prevents Nick from "trying this question over again," Nash explains that "there were more ideas, more of those that man lived by, in a

single room of the National Gallery than in all the statutes of Parliament” (393).⁶ What is significant here, I think, is that Nash shuts down the possibility that “politics”—even the “art of politics”—has any life-sustaining impact. As Nash points out, people cannot be sustained on bread and beans alone (393).

Because of Julia’s impact on Nick’s life and thinking—the resonance of her “envelope of association, or memories and recurrences” (even though they “had no great density”)—she cannot be read as “a kind of monster to wish to go on stage” (138) any more than can Miriam Rooth. But surprisingly, the position of women in nineteenth-century England, as interpreted in the work of a more socially sympathetic Henry James, has been explicated largely through the character of Miriam: a “real” actress who has dedicated a lifetime to her craft. According to Rowe, “Miriam Rooth escapes the satire James elsewhere levels at ‘career women’” (76). “In a host of ways,” he continues, “Miriam Rooth is a magnificent example of what the New Woman can do once she has freed herself from the delusions of romantic love, nineteenth-century femininity, national character, and family heritage” (76).⁷ What is so fascinating about Julia, however, is that she too has freed herself from delusions of romantic love and nineteenth-century femininity, though she is seen as much less of a “success” than Miriam. In Nick’s estimation, Julia is considered rude and at times overbearing: certainly not Nick’s image of a docile nineteenth-century woman. And clearly she seeks to marry for “politics,” not love. But in the end, the last word about her is that “it is very true there has been a rumour that Mr. Macgeorge is worried about her—has even ceased at all fondly to believe in her” (492). Julia, like Miriam, “acted” her way toward a career and associated herself with men who have power. Julia, however, not only “failed” to marry, but also failed to meet the expectation of Mr. Macgeorge. Despite her struggles, Julia is still judged on the final page according to the standards of heterosexual marriage. Why, given her intellect—Miriam is called “blank” and “vacuous” at every turn—does Julia *seem* to suffer such a dissatisfying fate in the hands of her author? Is it her association with the British Constitution? Is it because she has chosen politics—the laughing stock of nineteenth-century British high culture—over art?

Julia not only “chooses” the constitution over culture and art, but, for the purposes of the novel, she *is* the constitution. Since she makes politics and the British Constitution her lifelong pursuit, it should be no surprise that Nick is momentarily confused when Mrs. Gresham says, “I believe there *are* to be some people to dinner; rather an interference, isn’t it? Julia lives so in public. But it’s all for you ... It’s a wonderful constitution”

(167). First, the irony of Mrs. Gresham's statement cannot go unnoticed. Clearly, the dinner is all for *her*, as it was intended to satisfy her desire to live in the public eye. Nick at first thinks Mrs. Gresham's phrase "it's a wonderful constitution" is "a retarded political allusion"; after all, he has no reason to believe that she could possibly be speaking about Julia's altruism in having the dinner for him, and therefore assumes it must be about the government's constitution. Moments later, however, he realizes that "the intention of his companion has been simply to praise Mrs. Dallow's fine robustness" (168). Mrs. Gresham, Nick grasps, is referring to Julia's personal qualities—her energy, strength, and health. For Mrs. Gresham, Julia Dallow is considered a thing like the paper constitution: dinners, temporary houses, and cushy positions in government. More specifically, she is a thing that provides for others. The possibility of Mrs. Gresham's "retarded political allusion" also points out the Victorian discomfort with the British Constitution, given the multiple drives at reform, thereby making Julia an easy target for contempt. Without thinking, as well as without being particularly well-informed on political issues, Nick answers absently, "The British? Wonderful!" (168). As James may have known, the Victorian Constitution was facing a crisis at the turn of the century that eventually peaked in 1906. The problem was that the "constitution" had come to mean different things to different political parties. According to G. H. L. Le May's explanation in *The Victorian Constitution*, "the argument from majorities pointed in one direction, the argument from interests in another. In one important respect, the crisis was more serious than it had been between 1830 and 1832. Then the unquestioned prerogative of the Crown was an accepted means of resolving a political deadlock; now the prerogative was a matter of dispute" (1979, 189).

But perhaps James was unaware of this. According to Percy Lubbock, James's letters indicate that "the world with which he sought to identify himself was a small affair, by most of our measurements. It was a circle of sensibilities that it might be easy to dismiss as hypertrophied and over-civilised, too deeply smothered in the veils of artificial life to repay much patient attention" (1991, 12). Granted, Lubbock is a critic who knew the "old" much better than he knew the "other" Henry James, but I think it is worthwhile to note here the place at which these two schools of James criticism potentially coalesce: Julia Dallow. Certainly, James may have been so "smothered in the veils of artificial life" that he knew more about aestheticism than he knew about the state of the constitution—much like his own hero, Nick Dormer. But as Rowe has elegantly pointed out, there is too much social commentary in James's novels to label him wholly

ignorant about social problems.⁸ According to Rowe, James can be located “in terms of the more important influences on the development of critical theory as a social, rather than primarily aesthetic or literary, theory” (1998, 3). Julia Dallow, then, “represents” part of James’s social theory, and she serves as a sounding board—and opposing view—to his aesthetic theory. For James, women need more options than “*Parasitism, & Prostitution*—or *Negation*” as Mina Loy would phrase it twenty-four years later in “Feminist Manifesto” (1996, 154). But “politics” is a problematic choice, especially if it excludes the love of art and involves Pelham and *Vivian Grey*-like indifference.

In *Caught In The Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*, Joseph Litvak interprets through *The Tragic Muse* how the “metaphor of the author as prostitute leads to the notion that the authoring of metaphors is a kind of prostitution in its own right ... *The Tragic Muse* can claim a revisionary novelty, for it interprets the patriarchal trope of genealogy and the (ambiguously) feminist trope of prostitution not as mutually exclusive, but as virtually identical” (1992, 267–8). For example, Miriam Rooth, the onstage actress, is, like the politician, overexposed, pandering to appetites of an insatiable audience.⁹ But clearly Julia does her “work” on the stage too, considered to be prostituting herself without an “appropriate” mate through whom she can work. A crucial difference with Julia, however, is that while the readers of this drama view her this way, Julia’s public does not. As Nash points out, the contemporary theatre is—like “the droll things” of Harsh—representative of a “site of degrading intercourse, of an oppressively close and insistent physicality: the philistine modern audience is notable primarily for its sensual overindulgence” (in Litvak 1992, 249). Litvak is another contemporary critic who looks at Miriam’s acting and how it functions in *The Tragic Muse*, but apparently to the exclusion of the characterization of Julia. Julia is a self-made woman/politician who consistently enacts spectacles and lives her life onstage: when entertaining dinner guests, when speaking to Nick in private, and when visiting London (1998, 167, 170, 239).

After Julia “intrudes” (270) on Nick’s portrait session with Miriam, for example, “her eyes had a strange light he had never seen before—a flash of fear by which he was himself frightened” (271), and she bolts out the door into her carriage, and shouts for “Home!” (272).¹⁰ Julia is upset, not out of jealousy over Miriam, but over “art”—both Nick’s passion for it and limitations within it—and she eventually declares that she cannot marry him. What is significant about Julia’s spectacle is that it functions just as Litvak says it ought: by generating an “unruly sideshow liable to cause further embarrassment for those forces in the novels (whether