

Dangerous Domesticity

Gossip and Gothic Homes in Edith Wharton's Fiction

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Abstract

In the United States of the late nineteenth century, the home was increasingly discussed in terms of privacy and the domestic was viewed as a protected “feminine sphere.” Focusing on the work of an author almost synonymous with the literary depiction of homes, Edith Wharton, this article questions domestic myths of the US home. As a vehicle for its critique, it relies on a mode of communication that is firmly located in the domestic sphere and yet destabilizes its premises of privacy and sanctity: gossip. By analyzing the depiction of homes and the reliance on “idle talk” as both content and narrative technique in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell,” The House of Mirth, The Custom of the Country, and Summer, the article shows how Wharton exposes the feminine sphere as a dangerous place. To this end, she combines elements of Gothic fiction that subvert the domestic ideal with depictions of homes that are porous to gossip, which both uncovers abuses and invites them. Concentrating her attention on female protagonists (rather than enfranchised white men), Wharton paints a drastically different picture of the home and the possibility of shielding the private from economic or public concerns than evoked in contemporary legal and journalistic discourses.

Keywords

Gossip, narration, domesticity, privacy, Gothic fiction

From her early short stories to her breakthrough success *The House of Mirth* (1905) and through to later works like *Twilight Sleep* (1927), Edith Wharton’s fiction has become almost synonymous with the literary depiction of homes. Scholars have returned repeatedly to Wharton’s biography and her nonfictional texts to account for the central presence of houses in her varied accounts of culture in the United States.¹ Taking this connection in a novel direction in

her reading of Wharton's design guide *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), Susan Fraiman uncovers Wharton's de-sentimentalization of houses and her decoupling of the private sphere from feminine or sentimental values so persistently associated with the home.² This article argues that Wharton continues and even intensifies this critique of the home in her fictional writing. Her short stories and novels not only prominently feature elaborately described houses that build the backdrop of social conflict, but rather centrally revolve around failed homes, or more specifically, homes that fail women.³ Her fiction's combined use of Gothic elements and gossip structures—both of which evolve around transgressions of spatial and personal boundaries—drives this critique.

The "Gothic ambience of Wharton's stories"—among others evoked through "suffocating houses" (Hoeveler 102)—is most overt in Wharton's early ghost stories, yet traceable even to her New York novels of manners and New England novellas. Following this trajectory from "The Lady's Maid's Bell" (1902) through *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913) to *Summer* (1917), this article argues that Wharton's fictional work goes even further than her *The Decoration of Houses* in divorcing homes from domesticity. Kathy Fedorko's pioneering *Gender and the Gothic in the Fiction of Edith Wharton* first proposed a connection between Wharton's ghost stories and her realist novels. For Fedorko and others, the Gothic mode allowed Wharton to "utter the unutterable" (Fedorko, *Gender* ix) and to "articulate what realism cannot" (Fedorko, "Edith Wharton's Haunted Fiction" 104n8).⁴ Accordingly, Fedorko sees "The Lady's Maid's Bell" and *The House of Mirth*, for example, as texts in which "silence rules" (85) and in which the Gothic heroine must confront her dark double before turning into a metaphorical ghost herself. This article, in contrast, is less invested in silence than in the open secrets and innuendo encoded in gossip's excess of speech. Furthermore, it addresses the centrality of "Gothic mansions" rather than "Gothic heroines" throughout Wharton's fiction in the context of contemporary debates about domesticity and privacy. It contends that Wharton continually stresses the porousness of homes and the subsequent invasions of privacy, and thereby questions contemporary assumptions about the protected and protecting domestic sphere. To account for gossip's relevance in this context, this article explores gossip's role in the debate about the right to privacy and its structural connections to fiction, before offering a reading that highlights the role of Gothic gossip—that is, gossip that lays bare the Gothic dimension of homes—in Wharton's twisted tales of dangerous domesticity and invaded privacy.

Women's Homes and the Right to Privacy

As central to Wharton's fiction as the lavish descriptions of interiors is the depiction of the intimate lives of white women, the social group most closely associated with domesticity in US-American culture. Her attention to women's economic and legal precarity makes Wharton's writing particularly topical at the turn of the twentieth century, which was a time of intense debate about the home's protective qualities in the face of large-scale changes in white middle-class perceptions of privacy. Economic developments during the nineteenth century had led to the proliferation of "separate spheres," which contrasted the home with publicly lived economic life. At the same time, public interest in questions of privacy was fostered by urban dwelling and growing mass media. In this context, lawyers Samuel Warren and Louis D. Brandeis published their influential *Harvard Law Review*-article, "The Right to Privacy" (1890), in which they claim the home as the most fitting metaphor in their case for privacy as a property right. This sentiment is echoed in E. L. Godkin's "The Rights of the Citizen: IV—To His Own Reputation" (1890), which considers "man's house as [. . .] the outward and visible sign of the law's respect for his personality as an individual" (65). The focus on "a *man's* house" is crucial as it accounts for the sole attention to protection against outside forces. For feminist author and social activist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in contrast, domestic privacy is threatened from within: the home is either too crowded (with family members, for the poor) or too "invaded" (with servants, for the rich) to function as a true sanctuary (38–39). In her 1903 treatise *The Home: Its Work and Influence*, Gilman therefore calls the "privacy of the home" a "domestic myth" (38).

Gossip's Mode and Influence

Against the backdrop of this legal and cultural debate, Wharton's fiction focuses on protagonists who—unlike the white male subjects of Warren and Brandeis's arguments⁵—have no independent legal claims to their domestic surroundings and accordingly receive little protection from it. To stress the permeability of the domestic sphere as well as the vulnerability of women as its primary inhabitants, Wharton relies on gossip as a mode of communication, which by definition "negates and conflates the dialectics of inside and outside in its movement between the private and the public realms" (Bastin 24). Precisely this transgression of boundaries had originally prompted Warren and Brandeis to argue for a (man's) right to privacy

because it had become easier and more profitable to distribute information that men “had previously supposed had never got beyond [their] domestic circle” (66). Wharton rejects the distinction between inconsequential “personal gossip” and consequential printed gossip. To this end, she incorporates different forms of gossip in two distinct, yet mutually enforcing modes into her writing. As a plot element and subject matter, gossip poses a danger to women’s social status. As a literary device of knowledge management between text and reader, gossip fosters an atmosphere of intrusiveness and speculation on the one hand and on the other becomes a preferred narrative technique to allude to domestic violence.

Gossip lends itself to this dual use of containment (keeping women in their place) and exposure (revealing secrets homes are supposed to keep) due to its dual connection to domesticity and semipublic knowledge of uncertain truth value. Deborah Cameron, for example, asserts that oral gossip is one of the significant female-coded modes of communication that are “confined to the space of home” (3). Importantly, gossip “thrives when the facts are uncertain, neither publicly known nor easily discovered,” and usually relies on “evaluation or interpretation,” however implicit (Merry 275).⁶ Its questionable truth value connected with its tie to the domestic make gossip valuable for literature “as subject and as narrative technique” (Spacks 10). As an element of both story and discourse, gossip invites conjecture and allows the story to address issues it cannot name outright. It becomes an especially fruitful device in Wharton’s work because it touches upon many of her most central concerns, including the economic aspects of private lives, the mechanisms and group dynamics of social status, as well as the function of homes. Crucially, gossip becomes increasingly more relevant in direct proportion to the strictness of the distinction between public and private life, Ronald de Sousa argues; the “‘private’ sphere is often a euphemism for the freedom of men to abuse women and children,” he asserts and argues that this “is the area that gossip alone can crack” (30).

For women, gossip’s uses vary from bonding to ostracizing and from silencing to exposing in the four texts addressed in this article, reflecting differences in social context and the concomitant understanding of and access to homes and domesticity. Yet regardless of whether the reader follows a servant’s account of her mistress’s abuse in “The Lady’s Maid’s Bell” (1902), witnesses the rise and fall of a young woman’s place in high society in *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913), or fills the narrative gaps in a story of incest in *Summer* (1917), close attention to gossip as domestic counternarrative to public discourse reveals the complexity of Wharton’s argument against

the contemporary celebration of domesticity as embodied by genteel white femininity. Enhanced by Gothic descriptions of domesticity's dark side—and playing on Gothic's central theme of “women who just can't seem to get out of the house” (DeLamotte 10)—the combination of gossip between characters on the one hand and gossip as narrative technique on the other allows Wharton to expose the gendered dangers underlying the domestic myth of the home.

Gossip, Ghosts, and Gothic Mansions in “The Lady's Maid's Bell”

In the ghost story “The Lady's Maid's Bell,” gossip is repeatedly used as a plot element, yet it is primarily important as a narrative technique to crack the facade of an upper-class marriage. The story introduces the reader to one of Wharton's rare female first-person narrators, a young maid named Alice Hartley. She has just recovered from typhoid when she is offered a job at a house, which others describe to her as “not a cheerful place,” but rather “big and gloomy” (499).⁷ Two children and the former maid have died there, and its atmosphere is compared to a “vault” by the lady making the job offer (499). These Gothic elements set the stage for a story structured by gossip, which “arouse[s] in readers the kind of intense interest in personal detail that gossip generates” (Spacks 10). More specifically, Hartley's focalization and her focus on the inquiry into the secrets of the new household serve as an example of “investigative gossip” (Ayim 87), in which “the gossip is constantly sifting through the information [. . .] and judging what is truth, what is falsehood, and what needs further investigation before judgment can be passed” (91). This underlying inquisitive drive of Hartley as the story's narrator is emphasized through the sharp contrast with Hartley as a protagonist who describes herself as “never [. . .] one to get my notion of new masters from their other servants” (500) or “not being one to ask questions” (501). Yet denials like “I made up my mind to ask no more questions” (503) are quickly followed by more inquiries (five on a single page in this instance) and comments on her findings as well as on the motivation behind her curiosity. Hartley is, for example, quick to characterize her new employers in ways that point beyond their positions and status or even their role in Hartley's life. About her new mistress she says, “I thought her wonderfully forbearing; but to a gentleman as free as Mr. Brympton I dare say she seemed a little offish” (506). Thereby she lays the groundwork for her inquiry into the matrimonial issues at the heart of the story, which is told entirely from her perspective. Even more gloomily, she introduces her new master to the reader upon a chance encounter in the middle of the night by stating, “I met him coming up the

stairs in such a state that I turned sick to think of what some ladies have to endure and hold their tongues about” (505). Marital rape is thus put at the forefront of this ghost story not through anything the reader witnesses, but through Hartley’s conjecture and speculations. Readers are forced to address the abusive relationship between husband and wife in the tale of a secluded house whose quality as “home” is disputed early on by the way it is talked about by people who range from the servants who work there to a former colleague Hartley meets on market days. The servants, for example, “let drop” enough about their master for Hartley to “see it had been an unhappy match from the beginning” (505). An acquaintance she meets in town tells her that a friend of hers once worked at Brympton, and she “told [her] nobody could stay in the house” (507). Even as Hartley acknowledges that she “knew” that her acquaintance “was an idle gossip,” their conversation nevertheless “stuck in her head” and makes her “heart [sink] lower than ever as [she] drove up to Brympton in the dusk” (507).⁸

Similarly influenced, readers are also dragged into imagining (or acknowledging) increasingly disturbing scenarios as bits and pieces of private information are unveiled. Hartley, still projecting her fears onto the “gloomy house”—or “respond[ing] to the atmosphere of his house” as is typical for the Gothic heroine (DeLamotte 16)—rather than addressing the spousal abuse it hides, shares her thoughts with the readers in support of her—and their—growing suspicions: “There *was* something about the house—she was sure of it now . . .” (507). Similar blanks signaled by the three dots at the end of a sentence keep “creeping” into the narrator’s witnessing of the unfolding story, as when she is “puzzled [. . .] that it was always the maids who left . . .” (508) or feels like “the ground fell away from [her] . . .” (517). These ellipses, particularly at emotionally charged moments, invite the reader to join Hartley’s “putting together” of different scenes that she “had noticed and suspected” (510) and thus to complement the narrator’s conjecture with their own. In the end, the former maid’s ghost manifests itself before the narrator’s eyes. As Hartley follows the apparition out of the house, the story ends abruptly, when the eponymous, defunct bell—rung by the ghost—calls her to her dying mistress’s bedside.

Thus, the story’s visible events are accounted for in terms of the supernatural. More dreadful, however, remain the unspoken incidents between husband and wife, with whom the reader has been entrusted as the narrator’s confidante. While nothing is explicitly shown, the first-person narrator’s allusions to spousal abuse drag the reader into a confidentiality not unlike that between two gossipers, who form a private story from scant public evidence. The gossip by subordinate women within the story combined with Hartley’s “gossipy” focalization thus complement the ghost story in ways quite similar to

gossip's usual role as a domestic counternarrative to public discourse. Through the reliance on gossip rather than its supernatural aspects, Wharton's tale thus bolsters Barbara Patrick's argument that Gothic fiction by American women "address a world in which things *are* [rather than seem] frightening [. . .]; the evils explored are social evils, systematically perpetrated against women" (74). As singular as Hartley is among Wharton's heroines as a first-person narrator and servant, the tale overall fits a pattern in Wharton's work, which extends beyond the supernatural. The notion of "fragments of life transformed into story" (Spacks 3), which underlies the narrative, as well as exploration of a defunct Gothic "home" as one of the "social evils" of the domestic myth, make "The Lady Maid's Bell" strikingly similar to some of Wharton's later work, even as they translate the appearance of actual ghosts into figurative forms of haunted houses.

Appearances, Speculations, and the Absence of Homes in Wharton's New York Novels

Wharton's New York novels are well-known for their descriptions of lavish interiors, their contrasting of new and old money through taste in decoration, and their uses of spaces to characterize its occupants.⁹ Even in these novels' more luxurious environments, however, houses can become dangerous and oppressive to their occupants, who—like the women in "The Lady's Maid's Bell"—are not property owners. Thus, the one luxury that consistently eludes the white female leisure-class protagonists remains that of experiencing dwellings as places of privacy and repose.

The opening pages of *The Custom of the Country* accentuate how the novel's heroine Undine Spragg and her nouveau-riche family, who have relocated from the Midwest to New York City to cultivate their daughter's lofty social aspirations, do not belong in their (rented) domestic surroundings. Their hotel room is filled with at least three "gilt" objects and other gaudy articles, yet it "showed no trace of human use" (3). In this lavish but impersonal setting, Wharton's description of the mother as a "wax figure in a show window" (3) emphasizes how even in this supposedly private scene, everything and everyone is ready to be put on display. Undine is thus introduced in a manner both strikingly different and yet very similar to Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*. Brought up in the social strata Undine still desperately tries to gain entrance to, but an orphan where Undine is the spoiled single child of well-to-do parents, Lily exudes an easy familiarity with manners of how to conduct oneself in public

and in private. Wharton emphasizes her singular qualities by first showing her through the eyes of the adoring Lawrence Selden and his prolonged musings about Lily's delicate beauty (5–7). Lily's and Selden's conversation, laden with humor and innuendo, stress how at ease she is with the company of men, whereas Undine's first act in the narrative is to misinterpret the old-fashioned dinner invitation of the man who will later become her second (and first publicly known) husband (5–6).

Despite the differences between the two heroines concerning social status and communicative skills, there are two important common denominators. On the very first pages, both novels stress the importance of gossip for the rise and fall of their heroine beyond Wharton's general tendency to "treat gossip as a social force and link it with the operation of finance" in her New York novels (Spacks 181). Undine is introduced via a conversation about gossip, when Mrs. Heeny, who "know[s] everybody" and who claims that those who do not know her "ain't in it" (5)—meaning the fashionable society Undine wants to gain access to—provides the ambitious young woman with detailed information about the homes, histories, and habits of New York's first families (4–6). The reader's first encounter with Lily is through Selden's inner monologue, which positions Lily as an object of gossip as "he could never see her without a faint movement of interest: it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation" (5).

Additionally, both novels begin by portraying their heroines as women adrift: Undine is introduced in a hotel room, whose transient character is stressed by way of contrast with Undine's dinner invitation to a home in Washington Square, which symbolizes stability and tradition in the novel. Lily, in turn, is met by Selden at the station waiting for a train to a friend's summer home. While Selden also is at this transient place, returning from the pursuit of a potentially illicit affair, the focus of the first pages of *The House of Mirth* is on his speculations about Lily's travel routes and companions. As with Undine, Lily's restlessness is presented in contrast to someone's permanent home, Selden's bachelorette apartment. His home in particular is presented in a way that corresponds with Warren and Brandeis's legal considerations (fittingly, since Selden is himself a lawyer) concerning the sanctity of the home: when Lily and Selden arrive, a servant has cleaned the room and prepared cake, but is no longer present to disturb their privacy (8); the cleaning woman is in the hallway outside the flat (15); the blinds are down, the door is locked, and the rooms themselves are messy but cozy (8–14). They serve as private living spaces rather than semipublic places of entertainment (in contrast, for example, to Lily's and Mrs. Trenor's experience of Bellomont). The flat and especially its

library are also, in accordance with Wharton's convictions regarding interior decoration, in all its details reflective of his personality. Selden and Lily discuss his collection of books, which he chooses not for their worth, but because he is "fond of" them (12). Lily draws attention to this male privilege of putting personal pleasure above appearances, when she states during her visit: "How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman" (8).¹⁰ The scene's focalization is crucial to the novel's depiction of women's privacy and connects *The House of Mirth* to the "The Lady's Maid's Bell" via the usage of gossip as narrative technique. Before detailing this connection, however, the novel's depiction of Lily's lack of home ownership and resulting vulnerability to gossip warrants close consideration as it lends credence to her spontaneous exclamation.

"Winged Furies": Fatal Gossip in *The House of Mirth*

As indicated by Selden's early speculations, gossip is the driving force within the narrative, which "records the rise and fall of Lily's social position as dictated by the unstable currency of gossip" (Bentley 190). The events unfolding immediately after Lily's exclamation foreshadow the volatility of her social position and connect it to the gendered access to domesticity. Upon leaving Selden's apartment at the Benedick, Lily not only runs into the despised Wall Street mogul Simon Rosedale (a potential husband), but also a cleaning lady by the name of Mrs. Haffen. As the woman stares at her, Lily becomes aware of her vulnerable position: "Lily felt herself flushing under the look. What did the creature suppose? Could one never do the simplest, the most harmless thing, without subjecting one's self to some odious conjecture?" (15). The novel answers these rhetorical questions in the negative. Assuming Lily to be Selden's lover, Mrs. Haffen later tries to blackmail Lily with letters she found in Selden's trash. Regardless of their sender—the letters turn out to be written by Lily's rival Bertha Dorset—the letters in the trash attest to Selden's carelessness concerning the privacy of women and his unquestioned conviction that the home guarantees privacy to him. In the feminine "gossip economy" (MacDonald 181), his trash becomes highly valuable. The letters offer potential income to Mrs. Haffen and an opportunity for Lily to trade her damaged reputation for Bertha's by exposing the latter's affair. Lily's heightened sense of gossip's destructive potential is manifest in her reference to "the volcanic nether side of the surface over which conjecture and innuendo glide so lightly till the first fissure turns their whisper to a shriek" (103).

Even as Lily decides against using the letters as a defense, her treatment of them illuminates the entanglements of gossip and Gothic homes. Having made herself suspicious by appearing at Selden's apartment, Lily and Mrs. Haffen meet again at yet another person's apartment to trade the letters (and with it, the potential for gossip). Their encounter is set in the drawing room of Mrs. Peniston, the aunt who has taken in Lily after she has been orphaned (103 f). Lily is thus acutely aware for the duration of their "duel" that they might be interrupted—and thus made the object of speculation—at any moment (105). Indeed, Mrs. Haffen leaves just in time, before Mrs. Peniston returns. In the short interval between both conversations, Lily wonders: "But how destroy [the letters] so effectually that there should be no second risk of their falling in such hands? Mrs. Peniston's *icy drawing-room grate shone with a forbidding lustre*: the fire, like the lamps, was never lit except when there was company" (84; emphasis added). Company and thus public scrutiny, however, is precisely what Lily tries to avoid in handling this intimate affair. Yet Mrs. Peniston's return not only interrupts Lily's withdrawal to more privacy upstairs. Her aunt also delays Lily's consideration with a demand for gossip about a wedding she had recently attended. The conversation quickly turns from gossip about third parties (the Van Osburghs) to speculations relayed to Mrs. Peniston about what people were "quite sure" about and "had heard" regarding Lily's plans to marry Percy Gryce (108). Admonished by her aunt for not serving her purpose of *disseminating* information about either herself or the Van Osburghs, Lily finally excuses herself to go to her room to *destroy* information. She finds her own room—over whose decoration she had no influence and which "seemed as dreary as a prison" (108)—however, to be as unsuited as the rest of the house. Here "she could burn a few papers with less risk of incurring her aunt's disapproval" (108). "A few" pages, however, will not suffice and "less risk" is still more than Lily can afford. She wants to ensure that "there should be no second risk" at all of these private matters becoming public. Thus constrained, Lily projects the oppressiveness of the situation onto the room itself: "Once more the *haunting* sense of physical ugliness was intensified by her mental depression, so that each piece of the *offending* furniture seemed to thrust forth its most *aggressive* angle" (109; emphasis added). In this environment of domestic terror, Mrs. Peniston's earlier account of the wedding (collected from different gossip sources) inflames anew Lily's resentment toward Bertha, and her spreading of gossip about Lily: "[it] had revived the vision of Bertha Dorset, smiling, flattered, victorious, holding her up to ridicule by insinuations intelligible to every member of their little group. The thought of the ridicule struck deeper than any other sensation: Lily knew every turn of the allusive jargon which could *flay its victims* without the

shedding of blood” (109; emphasis added). As her agitated mood changes her perception of her domestic surroundings, so do her surroundings in turn influence her eventual decision to keep the letters. Hindered in her initial impulse to destroy the letters by her lack of access to a truly private space, Lily becomes unwilling to let go of her power over Bertha Dorset as the oppressive, Gothic environment alerts her to her extremely precarious social position.

This scene, which exposes Lily’s lack of domestic privacy, foreshadows the downward spiral of her living conditions initiated by yet another strand of gossip—one whose threat Lily uncharacteristically underestimates. Lily ultimately loses her inheritance because her aunt relies on Grace Stepney, an “obscure cousin” (100), as her “purveyor [. . .] of information” (120). Lily assumes Grace “admired her blindly” like the novel’s other spinster, Gerty Farish. The narrator, however, clarifies: “Grace Stepney’s mind was like a kind of moral fly-paper, to which the buzzing items of gossip were drawn by a fatal attraction, and where they hung fast in the toils of an inexorable memory. Lily would have been surprised to know how many trivial facts concerning herself were lodged in Miss Stepney’s head” (120).

The personification in “buzzing items of gossip” in connection with references to entrapment and death (“toils,” “fatal attraction”) mirror the increasingly Gothic description of houses and reflect the growing danger of gossip. The sheer number of times that gossip and rumor become topics of conversation between characters further strengthen this impression as the novel progresses. When Lily’s concern about her vulnerability to blackmail grows, her contemplation of illicit talk darkens to match the narrator’s already weary perception of gossip. After a particularly harrowing experience—Gus Trenor’s attempted sexual assault—Lily envisions “Furies [. . .] always there in the dark corners, and now they were awake” (145), which in the sobered state of the next morning “were now prowling gossips who dropped in on each other for tea” (149).

Ultimately, “the pursuing furies [which] seem to take the shape of Bertha Dorset” (288) provoke the loss of financial capital (most of her expected inheritance) and social capital (her reputation) and thereby force Lily to live in increasingly public and impermanent circumstances. Significantly, before her public death in a boardinghouse, where several people see her corpse and an anonymous “[s]ome one” offers their opinion on the supposedly merciful events (316), Lily visits Selden’s apartment for one final time. The scene contrasts her living conditions unfavorably with Selden’s continued ability to retreat unhindered to privacy. The contrast in circumstances years after the novel’s opening scene evokes Lily’s early exclamation concerning Selden’s male privilege: “How delicious to have a place like this all to one’s self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman” (8).

The novel's progression of events retrospectively validates Lily's earnest sentiment. Selden, however, misconstrues the flippant comment in this early scene as coy humor, which sets a precedent for his repeated misinterpretations of Lily's character and actions as well as the gossip he hears about her. Nonetheless, large parts of Lily's story are conveyed to the readers through Selden's limited perspective and his equally limited access to the unfolding events. He repeatedly bases his assumptions on secondhand knowledge, such as his lengthy musings in the introduction to Book Two, which casts doubt on Lily's conduct. Rather than functioning as a confidante of the heroine from whom they are often kept at a considerable distance,¹¹ readers hence may take a position as part of the "mob" bemoaned by Lily, for whom the upper classes "were all huddled" to be "gape[d] at" (55). The truth of Lily's quip on women's misery, like that of many other utterances, becomes clear only much later,¹² as the deep entanglement of gossip, rights, risks (both financial and social), and metaphorical homelessness unfolds its full meaning over the course of events that ultimately lead to her death.¹³

Gossip thus offers not only fodder for scandal within the story, but provides a key narrative technique as "we come to see Lily as she is seen by others" (Felski 91). Sometimes what is not seen, however, is as important. When Lily finally parts with Bertha's letters and thus destroys evidence of gossip's shadow economy and of women's lack of privacy, she does so in the male-coded privacy of Selden's apartment (241). This crucial scene—like their fateful first meeting at the Benedick—is focalized through his perspective. As he had before, he misses the significance of the moment. Distracted from her inner turmoil by her outer features, "he fancied that he saw her draw something from her dress and drop it into the fire; but he hardly noticed the gesture at the time" (302). Enmeshed in the gossip about her and oblivious to his own privileges, Selden cannot fathom the significance of Lily's seizing this rare moment of privacy. Tellingly, it is nonetheless Selden whose perspective we share upon Lily's death shortly after. As the distance between the narrative voice and his inner monologue implies, his comments present one last misinterpretation: "gradually, his troubled vision cleared, *old hints and rumours came back to him*, and *out of the very insinuations* he had feared to probe, *he constructed an explanation of the mystery*. [. . .] That was all he knew—all he could hope to unravel of the story" (320; emphasis added).

After Lily has lost her social standing due to false rumors about an adulterous affair and after her body has succumbed to the loss of protective domesticity, old gossip condensed into Selden's slanderous thoughts bring about the final violation of her character.

“Fine Old Mouldering House”: Escaping Domesticity and Gossip in *The Custom of the Country*

The Custom of the Country is conspicuously absent from the scholarly canon of writing about Wharton's use of the Gothic (Drizou 126), a neglect that might, among others, be traced to the trajectory of the novel's heroine, Undine Spragg, who is a much less tragic figure than Lily Bart. Nevertheless, she is similarly entangled with the gossip economy and presented by Wharton in equally precarious domestic surroundings. As society's doors open and close for seemingly random reasons (figuratively evocative of the literal thresholds of Gothic fiction), Undine's contact with gossip is much more direct than the mediated ways in which it enters the homes of her husbands. Ralph Marvell, for example, is feminized through his inability to build "his castle," as Warren and Brandeis refer to a man's house (220), as he lives first with his grandfather, then in an apartment paid for by his father-in-law. He is nonetheless confronted with society's talk about his private life precisely in the manner that Godkin, Brandeis, and Warren had laid out for male victims of gossip, namely by reading yellow press newspapers: he "was absently unfolding [the Sunday paper], when his eye fell on his own name: a sight he had been spared since the last echoes of this divorce had subsided [. . .] a grim fascination tightened his hold and drew his eyes back to the hated head-line" (269). Undine, in contrast, is seldom shown reading the papers, even as she is their object more often than her husband. Instead, servants and acquaintances (primarily her manicurist Mrs. Heeny) inform her *personally* of what is said and written about her. The immediacy makes the impact more directly felt within her domestic circle from which it also originates. To emphasize the personal character of such slights, Wharton routinely shows Undine in domestic settings, in which she must acknowledge that she has been "cut off" and is denied entrance for reasons that are often revealed only much later. In Paris, for example, her future mother-in-law (they have not met before) flees the room as Undine enters to call upon a mutual acquaintance. As a friend explains to her the day after, the Marquise was "very much upset. She somehow heard your name [. . .] she thinks she has reason to feel badly—they all do" (256). Shortly before this scene, the arrival of a new woman among their set makes Undine afraid of the "one drop of poison distilled from the envy of a narrow-minded woman," who would watch her through "the searching lens of ampler information," make others also see her in a different light, and thus ruin her newfound position in this multinational community of upper-class travelers (246).

When she meets her first husband, Elmer Moffatt, again among this set,¹⁴ their conversation begins with his allusion to her recent divorce, when he states, “I saw by the papers—” (259). The pause indicated by the dash leaves open what account exactly he read and what he thinks has happened. Indeed, facts for Undine play as little a role as they had for Lily, and therefore the question of libel or slander so important to legal scholars becomes irrelevant to their concerns. The legal assumption that gossip becomes truly consequential only if “it attains the dignity of print” (Warren and Brandeis 196) is exposed as false, or at least culturally biased. In contrast to the legal focus on printed matters, Wharton’s texts ascertain that oral gossip is not only the foundation for “violation by publication,” but that even without the printed extension, word of mouth can and does violate women’s privacy and lead to “special damage” (the exception to the “oral rule” in Warren and Brandeis 217)—even if this does not apply to the loss of a business contract, but “only” the loss of a marriage prospect or the decline of an invitation.

Undine finally emerges as a much more successful speculator in her own reputation and marriageability, and a much more ruthlessly economic thinker than Lily. Her eventual success, however, depends at least partially on the love of a man who is equally ruthlessly economic in his actions and, unlike Selden, able (and willing) to live by his own moral codex (and therefore able to remarry Undine). Undine, as a repeatedly successful divorcée, represents the “ability to trade upon a represented self” (Bentley 189) when she actively seeks out public places as opportunities to put herself on the marriage market. She is thus a type of woman who “has stepped from the domestic sphere into a public and commercial world, there to offer herself as a means for the intimacy and eroticism that are sanctioned only in the home” (189).

The reason for Undine’s rejection by high society is thus the same as the reason for her ultimate success: she has no concept of home in the sense of a space that sanctions certain actions and excludes others. From the initial hotel in which she is dependent on her manicurist to translate the relevant pieces of gossip to her restless traveling between European destinations after her divorce from Ralph Marvell, Undine’s relation to “homes” is tenuous. This lack of attachment to feminine values of domesticity is the one main dividing factor (money is the other) in her second and third marriage with men who value their ancestry and the spaces connected to their families and heritage beyond their market value. For Undine, who prefers “showy places” (230), in contrast, “private and public” are “thoroughly and shockingly interfused” and the “consequence of the division of masculine and feminine spheres is finally not separate spheres at all but, in the figure of Undine, a monstrous combination of

home and market” (Voloshin 101–02). Undine sums this up in her assessment that “Every Wall Street term had its equivalent in the language of Fifth Avenue” (337). With this “new money” attitude, Undine is certainly not portrayed as a sympathetic character. Most critics judge her in severe terms and speak, for example, of her “*moral failure* [. . .] epitomized by her inability to distinguish ancestral tapestries from the furnishings in a base hotel” (Hellman 89; emphasis added). Nonetheless, Wharton stresses that more conservative, “old-money” concepts of the domestic sphere that adhere to a stringent distinction between public and private offer no alternative either. Undine’s third husband’s Hôtel de Chelles is described as a “fine old mouldering house” (300), in which her marriage, which started out “more nearly like what she had dreamed of than any of her previous experiments in happiness” (301), quickly turns oppressive. Undine soon realizes that her husband Raymond de Chelles “seemed to attach more importance to love” and to his family. For Undine this means “a corresponding loss of independence” (301), which makes her seek a “refuge from the extreme domesticity of her new state” (303). Her situation worsens as Raymond takes her to Saint Désert, another remote family property that represents the typically “decaying” and “bleak” house of Gothic fiction (Botting 2):

Everything in the great empty house smelt of dampness: the stuffing of the chairs, the threadbare folds of the faded curtain, the splendid tapestries, that were fading too, on the walls of the room in which Undine stood, and the wide bands of crape which her husband had insisted on her keeping on her black dresses till the last hour of her mourning for the old Marquis. (307)

Like other Gothic mansions that symbolize the “spatial and temporal separation of the past and its values from those of the present” (Botting 2), Saint Désert frightens and alienates Undine. She thus joins the line of female protagonists stuck in threatening houses over which they exert no control and from which they receive neither comfort nor protection.

Undine, however, is exceptional insofar as she manages to escape this fading and failing home by remarrying her first husband, who, like her, has little regard for either domesticity or privacy. The novel has little sympathy for Elmer Moffatt’s swindling and speculating character. Yet uprooted like Undine herself from any familial past or long-standing social concerns, he is singularly unfazed by gossip about Undine. Their shared itinerant lifestyle offers no glimpse of the Gothic terrors awaiting Wharton’s other female protagonists. This departure from the rule in the novel’s final act, however, should not

distract from the overwhelming similarities that shaped the majority of the novel's plot and tone. Until this final resolution, Undine represented Gothic fiction's traditional female protagonist as she combined the "wanderer and the prisoner" (DeLamotte 18), simultaneously pushed perpetually forward (and away from familial protection) by the gossip about the social set she admires and impeded and figuratively imprisoned by the gossip about her. Before her final triumph, Undine thus resembles not only Lily, but also Charity Royall, the protagonist in Wharton's second New England novella (after *Ethan Frome*), *Summer*. Unlike Undine, however, who rejects domesticity by seeking a third divorce, Charity has no similar means of social and financial capital and therefore does not escape the confines of a house (and marriage) that curtails her freedom and threatens her safety.

"Folks Here Say": Gossip and Domestic Abuse in Summer

The novella *Summer*, an "anomaly" in Wharton's oeuvre (Ammons xiv), introduces another orphan who is at least metaphorically homeless, yet one from decisively different social circumstances than Lily Bart. Descending from what the people from the small New England town of North Dormer refer to as mountain people, Charity has been informally adopted into the household of the community's prominent lawyer. Once again, Wharton confronts her readers with a house that offers no refuge. Sick upon her arrival, Charity "opened her eyes to the cold neatness of the room that was afterward to be hers" (14). This lack of domestic warmth and comfort is only exacerbated as Charity grows older. While Charity sees herself as "ruling" the house, she says of her "power" within the domestic sphere that she "knew what it was made of, and hated it" (14). The house is "cheerless and untended" (14) and "sad," a place where both occupants "sounded the depths of isolation" (15). What makes this home truly Gothic, however, is not this general gloom, but something far worse: as the first chapter hints at and the final one confirms, the home is also an incestuous one representative of that "typical Gothic obsession, [which] blurs the distinctions between two kinds of love" (DeLamotte 22). An elderly female confidante of Charity alludes several times to sexual exploitation, but cannot bring herself to utter the actual words. Instead their conversation, like those in New York's high society, are filled with pregnant silences and code words, which protect the facade, not the person. Already in the first chapter, Charity mentions a "terrible occasion," upon which "old Miss Hatchard had said to her [. . .] My child, you must never cease to remember that it was Mr. Royall who brought you down from the mountain" (5–6).¹⁵ When Charity

in a flashback informs Miss Hatchard of her decision not to attend boarding school as arranged by the older woman, but to stay with the by now widowed Mr. Royall, Miss Hatchard's reaction hints at something unspeakable. After Charity's declaration, "I guess Mr. Royall's too lonesome," the two women share an innuendo-laden exchange:

Miss Hatchard [. . .] leant forward, resting her hands on the arms of her mahogany armchair, with the evident desire to say *something that ought to be said*. [. . .] 'the fact is, it's not only—not only because of the advantages. There are other reasons. You're too young to understand—"Oh, no, I ain't," said Charity harshly; and Miss Hatchard blushed to the roots of her blonde cap. But she must have felt a vague relief at having her explanation cut short, for she concluded [. . .] "Of course I shall always do what I can for you; and in case . . . in case . . . you know you can always come to me . . ." (15–16; emphasis added).

The same night, Mr. Royall tries to enter Charity's bedroom, declaring himself "lonesome" (17), just as discussed by the two women. Charity manages to rebuff him by evoking his dead wife, but after the episode she "slipped into bed, cold to the bone" (17). The phrasing connects this moment of intrusion and the associated threat of violence to her very first conscious feeling inside the "red house" and thus cements the house's inhospitality.

When Charity comes to Miss Hatchard for help, insisting that she either wants to leave or have another woman in the house, the older woman can only suggest: "The . . . housework's too hard for you, I suppose?" (19). Blanks and unspoken implications instead of a direct address of her situation condemn Charity to uphold the facade and to continue living in a place of exploitation and dependence. Her continued victimization does not result from a lack of knowledge among her friends and acquaintances, but from a lack of acknowledgment. Gossip is therefore among Mr. Royall's main tools to control Charity's conduct as his transgressions—even as they might be "known"—would not have the same punitive consequences as the discovery of hers:

What she most feared was that the inevitable comments should reach Mr. Royall. Charity was instinctively aware that few things concerning her escaped the eyes of the silent man under whose roof she lived; [. . .] she had always felt that, on the day when she showed too open a preference, Mr. Royall might, as she phrased it, make her "pay for it." (40)

He eventually makes her pay by making her his wife. Gossip, however, functions as a controlling mechanism beyond Mr. Royall's immediate influence. All major decisions in *Summer* are, in fact, shaped by gossip or the consideration of how to avoid gossip. Being talked about is the main motive for Charity even as the novel tries to depict her as a free spirit, "highly attuned to nature" (Hall 12). She refers to her hometown's "cramped setting of hypocrisy" (68), her fellow townspeople's "mean curiosities" (102), and the "harsh code of the village" (155), and notices how in Miss Balch's, who is her rival for Harney's affection, "pretty thin-lipped smile there lingered the reflection of something her neighbor had been whispering about" (127). Charity further recoils from "vile suggestions" (77), wants her actions to remain "hidden from inquisitive eyes" (100), and ponders how her actions "might excite conjecture" (112). In addition to Charity's own encounters with gossip, the narrative (and the town) rely on gossip as a communal affair, whose effect Max Gluckman, in one of the seminal studies on gossip, defines as, "maintain[ing] the unity, morals and values of social groups" (308). Accordingly, crucial information in *Summer* is conveyed via vague references to absent people's conversations, such as "Why, I presume so . . . from what she said . . . Didn't you know?" (141), "The folks here say" (141), "he had been vaguely spoken of" (111), and "said to have been staying" (111). These references have a double effect on the action and how it is perceived. First, they stress the cohesion of the townspeople and Charity's looming exclusion from their community as gossip, "in the form of a common interest and shared assumptions [. . .] will tend to strengthen that bond [between gossipers] by creating an intimacy that is dependent on its exclusivity" (Taylor 40). The phrasing of the above quoted lines implies that Charity had not been included in the spreading of this "shared" information ("Didn't you know?"). Second, such interjections point to the relevance of secondhand information ("folks here say"), in which plausibility trumps truth value. This epistemological uncertainty shapes the reading process as the narrator never corrects or evaluates the "facts" presented in this way by the novel's minor characters. Moreover, the interjections emphasize gossip's potential as a means of social control. Mr. Royall makes good use of this potential as he explains in detail the spreading of a (false) rumor concerning Charity's nightly visit to Harney to dissuade her from choosing the young architect (presumably, over him) (72–75).¹⁶ Mr. Royall reveals this information in their shared home, which makes this disclosure (or thinly veiled threat) even more unsettling for Charity, because "where people know that others gossip, the very social pressure from which privacy presumably insulates us is unleashed" (Schoeman 72). Social pressure is thus introduced into precisely the place that should shield against it.¹⁷

The whole novel indeed stresses the irrelevance of houses (which fail to become homes) to Charity's safety: "the red house" is from the beginning depicted as a kind of cage, where her own power scares her due to its connection to incest; the home she meets with her lover Harney—"a little deserted house on a slope in one of the lonely rifts of the hills" (84)—is not only "*said to be haunted*" (84; emphasis added), but can furthermore be trespassed on by anyone at any time, such as Mr. Royall (132); the mountain people from whom she descends and to whom she tries to return after detecting her pregnancy have no homes; the library, at which she temporarily works, is described as "her prison-house" (7) and feels to her like a tomb; she "wondered if he felt any deader in his grave than she did in his library" (7). Her lover, in contrast, is an architect and painter of houses, who is visiting his aunt in the remote hinterland of New England to take stock of the decaying architecture. He is thus marked by an odd mixture of distance from his observed objects and fascination for them, both of which Charity lacks. Harney can move freely between different houses, make them his objects, and then escape the growing whispers about his affair with Charity simply by withdrawing to his club in the city. The club marks the starkest contrast to Charity's living situation as it is a male-coded, somewhat transient space without any family "baggage" and a place that does not limit mobility (as there are similar clubs in all major cities). At the same time as it supports the freedom of its occupants, however, it also guarantees maximum privacy as only members may step in. Untouched by the potential gossip of domestic servants and fellow club members because of his independent economic (and thus social) status, Harney embodies the "right to privacy" discourse's ideal male subject. His public life does not stand to suffer from his private transgression, unless they reach a commercial level of dissemination. Harney's story ends with unimpeded mobility and privacy. Charity's story ends "in the cold autumn moonlight" at the doorsteps of the red house, late in the evening of the day of her wedding to Mr. Royall (190). The novel thus ends with the Gothic imagery of a young woman led into an old decaying house in a remote place, while "the lateness of the hour and the season suggest the bleakness that awaits her" (Hall 14). The bleakness of this outcome is ensured to no small extent by the town's whispers about her conduct. "They say" and "didn't you know" will most likely haunt Charity beyond the legitimizing marriage and continue to ensure her presence in the dreaded red house. Wharton's novella thus accentuates a direct link between domestic spaces, sexual abuse, and the gossip that enables it.

Conclusion

Across two decades and three different narrative formats, Wharton relies on a combination of Gothic gloom and pervasive gossip to address the issue of privacy and domesticity in her fiction. Gossip stresses the porousness of homes as it uncovers what goes on behind closed doors. Simultaneously, gossip draws attention to the kind of talk against which a woman cannot shield herself simply through retreat. Through a focus on female protagonists, Edith Wharton thereby paints a picture of the home, the connected ideals of domesticity, and the possibility of shielding the private from economic or public concerns that is drastically different from the assumptions about homes' characteristics, which underlie contemporary legal arguments by the likes of Warren and Brandeis and journalistic treatments, such as Godkin's "The Rights of the Citizen." Positioning herself equally against such legal arguments, which neglected considerations of gender, and against cultural and literary traditions that idealized domesticity and white femininity while disregarding legal and economic concerns, Wharton's fiction offers case studies in the precarious position of women and the subsequent insecurity afforded by houses and homes. *Summer* might be the most explicit illustration of the discrepancy between male and female ability to extract privacy from the domestic sphere. Yet the contrast is similarly stark between Lily and Selden, Undine and her husbands, or Mr. and Mrs. Brympton in "The Lady's Maid's Bell," where the remoteness of the home ensures that gossip about his abuse of his wife never travels as far as he does. In all cases, the lack of privacy is underlined by descriptions of homes that belong to the stories' "villains," while also "embodying a vaster, vaguer threat" (DeLamotte 16). Systematically, then, Wharton's Gothic depiction of homes, houses, and decor amplifies her illustration of the devastating effects of gossip upon women's lives and the similarly disturbing circumstances gossip is able to reveal and conceal. Like Gilman's treatise, Wharton's fiction thus offers a stark contrast to the dominant myths of the domestic sphere and forces readers to address the dangers, rather than freedoms, of homes.

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Notes

1. This article draws in parts on the work of Susan Fraiman, Beverly R. Voloshin, and William E. Modellmog, who have in their different ways addressed issues of homes, privacy, or domesticity in Wharton's work. The arguments put forth here, however, differ from Fraiman's through their focus on Wharton's fiction. Voloshin, who discusses in detail *The Custom of the Country*, relies on houses—or more specifically hotels—to make the case for her economic reading of Undine as “the female capitalist” (102) rather than the reevaluation of domesticity. Modellmog's reading of *The House of Mirth*, finally, starts from a similar premise as this article, namely that “the novel's central conflicts—organized around terms that are both domestic (‘home,’ ‘marriage’) and legal (‘rights,’ ‘ownership,’ ‘personality’)—closely resemble those at the heart of legal debates over privacy” (340). Yet his unfolding argument concerns the question of (gendered) subjectivity rather than the problematized fragility of homes proposed here. Furthermore, none of these texts consider thoroughly the central role that gossip plays in these texts and in Wharton's treatment of the “the domestic myth.” An exception is Paul Ohler's analysis of *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* and their reliance on both commercial and social gossip, which, however, does not address gossip's relation to the domestic.

2. Another innovative recent study, which takes its cue from *The Decoration of Houses*, is Shannon Brennan's “‘The Queer Feeling We All Know’: Queer Objects and Orientations in Edith Wharton's (Haunted) Houses.” Brennan proposes a New Materialist reading of Wharton's spaces, which investigates “the capacity of things to unsettle” social and sexual practices due to “their status not merely as objects but as actants” (95). Like Brennan, I see important connections between Wharton's fiction and her guidelines on interior decoration concerning the understanding of privacy and publicity. Unlike Brennan, however, I am less interested in the status of objects as such, and more intrigued by the way (the threat of) gossip influences the perception of objects and the agency of spaces.

3. See also Diane McGee, who asserts that especially in her novels about old New York, “Edith Wharton points the way to changes in consciousness that are typical of the modernist period and that affect women [. . .] For various reasons, homes are problematic in both *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*” (81).

4. See Gary Totten for a concise summary of the scholarship regarding the “cultural critique that Wharton enacts through the Gothic” (249).

5. Their arguments thus anticipate Gillian Brown's study, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (1990), which proposes that while the home in the nineteenth century has been firmly established as a feminine sphere, it held tremendous importance for men, particularly economically active men. The home became the stable and secure center around which an increasingly speculative economy could circle. What Gilman calls myth, Brown refers to as the “domestic doctrine” (3).

6. For an overview of the etymological and cultural development and concomitant gendering of the term *gossip*, see Alexander Rysman's “How the ‘Gossip’ Became a Woman” and Bastin's “Pandora's Voice-Box: How Woman Became the ‘Gossip Girl.’”

7. “Gloomy” is used repeatedly throughout the story to describe the house, though Hartley in most cases modifies the descriptor, as in her arrival scene (“There were no lights in the windows, and the house *did* look a bit gloomy” [500]) or her later explanations of returning from her walks and errands (“It was not a gloomy house exactly, yet I never entered it but a feeling of gloom came over me” [506]).

8. Other details relayed via hearsay include Mr. Brympton’s whereabouts (“We heard he was cruising with a friend in the West Indies” [514]), providing further fodder for rumors about his (sexually) deviant behavior.

9. For example, Maureen Howard, who calls *The House of Mirth* a “very ‘housey’ novel” (139), Hellman’s chapter on Wharton’s “War on the Interior,” or Carol Singley, who approaches the social changes depicted in *The Age of Innocence* through the lens of taste and social capital.

10. This is not a new situation for Lily, as McGee’s reading asserts: Lily “has had no real home and little knowledge of domesticity. In her childhood, dining meant dining out, entertaining, or lunching on leftovers from a party the night before [. . .] Lily comes from a ‘turbulent element’ rather than a home, marked by a ‘chaos’ of constant visitors and social engagements [. . .] Later, after her father’s death, Lily is literally homeless, as she and her mother ‘wandered from place to place, now paying long visits [. . .] and now vegetating on cheap continental refuges” (64).

11. Modellmog also notices that “the narrative voice has alternately revealed and concealed the nature of ‘the real Lily Bart,’ and these modulations indicate a relationship between the novel and the discourses it employs that is more complex than mere commentary or critique” (354). Yet he never connects this narrative form to the gossip economy, which he notices—at least covertly through his discussion of Lily’s “public identity” (347)—at work on the novel’s content level.

12. For an insightful study of the relation of gender, social hierarchy, and language as “one of the institutions most potent in protecting the social order from the challenges to its authority” in *The House of Mirth* and other New York novels, see Elsa Nettels (91–100).

13. Whether her overdose should be read as an accident or suicide is widely debated. An accidental overdose seems to be more likely considering the theme of badly calculated risks, which runs through the novel (cf. e.g., 59, 68, 83–86) and includes the events leading up to her death, which are presented in terms of financial speculation: “She knew she took a *slight risk* in doing so [. . .] But after all that was but one *chance* in a hundred: the action of the drug was *incalculable*” (250; emphasis added). Also insightful in connection to this article’s concerns is Modellmog’s reading of Lily’s death as “less [. . .] a case of victimization and more like Wharton’s own act of evidentiary destruction, preserving her character’s privacy” (340).

14. Undine and Elmer had married in Apex City, when they were both still teenagers—a local paper called her “child bride” at the time (71). Mr. Spragg had ensured the annulment of the marriage, which had henceforth been kept a secret. Elmer’s arrival in New York therefore initially becomes a source of dread for Undine, as she fears being “found out” (73).

15. The same quote on page 19 retrospectively clarifies that Charity was referring to the night of Mr. Royall’s attempted intrusion (and threat of rape) as “that terrible occasion.”

16. Mr. Royall’s argument about gossip, however, loses some of its impact as Charity had already considered the consequences of her nightly visit to Harney and in the end decided against entering his home not because of a fear of gossip (at least, she will not admit to that), but because of her reluctance to sleep with him just yet: “In every pulse of her rigid body she was aware of the welcome his eyes and lips would give her; but something kept her from moving. It was not the fear of any sanction, human or heavenly; she had never in

her life been afraid. It was simply that she had suddenly understood what would happen if she went in" (68).

17. Not even churches offer sanctity. Dr. Merkle, another character who uses information conveyed via gossip to manipulate Charity, is put in a position of power over her because she had "heard all about the wedding from the minister's chore-man" (188). The pawnbroker demands a much higher prize for Charity's brooch, since she knows that Charity is now both financially better off and a better target of blackmail.

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