Going No Place?: Foreground Nostalgia and Psychological Spaces in Wharton's The House of Mirth

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Introduction: Siting Lily Bart’s Family System

Edith Wharton is well known for her ability to illuminate class and gender consciousness in her penetrating accounts of New York City elite society in novels such as The Custom of the Country (1913), The Age of Innocence (1920), Old New York (1924), The Mother’s Recompense (1925), and Twilight Sleep (1927). But her most successful novel of the changing shape of urban desire and identity focused through domestic tragedy is The House of Mirth (1905). It is, above all, a family tragedy.

The heroine of Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth is Lily Bart, a young woman raised to embody the specific virtues of the wealthy and fashionable class in turn-of-the-century New York City. These virtues are beauty, pliability, and dissimulation. Lily’s tragedy is that she begins to understand that these virtues are actually trade qualities in the marriage market for which she has been groomed. But her realization comes too late for her to adapt to the changing ideals of family, environmental, and socioeconomic systems. Her final self-reflections set her marriage problems in relief, against a backdrop of her two primary problems: her lack of a stable home and a supporting family.

What makes this novel so extraordinary is the complexity of her emerging understanding that her idea, and her ideal, of home and family disable her forward movement. Lily is in constant motion between various temporary homes, yet she never feels at home. Throughout the novel, her inability to adapt, to commit, or to change is structured by these three interlocking systems: family, environmental, and socioeconomic. Lily Bart’s slide from riches to rags can be tracked through a close attention to the novel’s vivid portrayal of her changing access to both imaginary, idealized homes and actual, realized homes. The power of the novel comes not from Lily’s function as a mere symptom of historical and economic pressures, but from the complex narrative and affective processes by which she negotiates homes and their loss or collapse.
The arc of the plot is suggested by Lily's movements between and her relationships to a series of homes, none of which are formally hers: Lawrence Selden's bachelor's flat, Gus Trenor's upstate mansion, Lily's Aunt Peniston's New York City mansion, Nettie Struther's tenement flat, and Lily's boarding house room. From the beginning of the novel, Lily Bart is between homes. While waiting to travel to Gus Trenor's mansion, Lily visits Selden's bachelor flat. There, she considers her uncomfortable marriage status and lack of personal fortune. At the Trenor's Bellomont, both Percy Gryce and Lawrence Selden court Lily, but she remains aloof. Lily's return to her permanent base at her Aunt Peniston's New York City mansion—where she has lived since the death of her parents—is marked by her reflections on her increasing risk-taking and an alternate family system. In the final scene, and in her final boarding house home, Lily has an epiphany of the meaning of home and the (temporary) stabilization of identity.

Scout in a shadowy society, Lily Bart is emblematic of economically determined speculative logic. These readings promote the idea of markets and consumption as driving forces in the marriage market replicates the alienating effects of industrial capitalism, these are not the only factors impinging on Lily's identity. What is missing from these accounts is the notion that Lily is a character who acts like a "possible person," a human being who is much more than a "deployed" theme. In this essay I develop Rosemary D. Babcock's assertion that richly drawn characters like Jane Eyre are plausible mimetic characters. Babcock argues in "The Enigmatic Jane Eyre: A

Differentiation Story without Family in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre," (200: Jane Eyre is "a possible person who exhibits the characteristics of an individual who participates in the interactional world of her various family groups" (183). Thus, I avoid generalizing that Lily is a syndrome that is cracked at the end of an ideological whip. My aim is to read Lily's home sites that force her to negotiate with the present by being a memorialized past consists of a three-tiered system of family, environment, and socioeconomic.

This essay argues that Lily's displacement and transition from home to can be understood in a new frame by examining and comparing the different that the narrator articulates Lily's nostalgia, or more precisely, her nostalgia Wharton uses nostalgia in The House of Mirth as a way to fuse personal present experience. Nostalgia is not a simplification or an abstraction of the Instead, it is a complex feeling for the past that recruits memory, environment experience for decision-making. Nostalgia is an imaginative feeling that em during the collision between the past sense of self and the present sense or it helps characters (and narrators) negotiate the past and present during on moments of psychosocial and socioeconomic shock. In my analysis, nos integrates the individual with other systems, so it accounts for not only the ecos system that seeks to commodify her, and not only the environmental system of houses and streets that form the elemental setting of her idea of home, but all family system—Lily's biological parents, her relatives (such as Mrs. Penist her circle of friends, and elite society comprise her family. My goal is not to read these three systems, but to prove that they are inseparable. Themat symptomatic privileging tends to reduce the complexity, synthetic nature identity-altering mechanisms of affect in complex novels like The House of I By paying attention to emergent systems—interlocking systems that overl uneven ways—I claim that physical dislocations and disruptive experience registered through the feelings of nostalgia, and these feelings inform Lily's ide Simply put, Lily's feelings of nostalgia for an ideal home are imagined the her existence in commercial, social, and family environments. Lily's nostalgic profoundly original and profoundly human. The whole of these systems is g
than the parts, and so we gain a new perspective on Lily by attending to the site where these systems overlap, are made visible, and are felt: the home.

In order to read for Lily’s desire for home, and in order to describe how these systems overlap, this essay relies upon the language of Family Systems Theory, which provides a particularly useful way to frame the feeling of nostalgia as it connects to home and environment. According to William C. Nichols and Craig A. Everett in *Systemic Family Therapy* (1986), the central tenet of this theory is that people do not exist “in isolation from other human beings, or apart from networks of social relationships” (1). The importance of viewing the family system as a process, says John V. Knapp in *Reading the Family Dance* (2003), is that the family “becomes the source of the matrix of identity, rather than only the individual character” (14-15). Identity problems, continues Knapp, have “causes” that are not so much generated by a “person construct or single event,” but rather by the “emotional process that links people and events,” and also places (15). More specifically for this essay, Family Systems Theory offers a useful way for analyzing Wharton’s representations of cultural codes and disruptions to family relations, especially the tension between family morphogenesis (change) and family homeostasis (stability). Family Systems Theory focuses on process and relational organization, rather than on reduction. This is because, as Nichols and Everett note, Family Systems Theory emphasizes the porosity of organizations, even when they desire to be closed (68-71). Boundaries between the systems are crucial: “boundaries serve to regulate the flow of information and feedback to the systems so that a family with ‘closed’ boundaries would allow limited information to come in and would restrict the outward flow of information” (70). Lily Bart’s biological and extended elite family represents an isolated system, but not a closed system. For example, Simon Rosedale’s rise to prominence in the novel is proof that entry is possible; this uneven overlap of these environmental ecosystems, or the way they are nested, has a critical influence on a character’s ability to adapt. And the and folds created by these overlapping systems are narrated according to constrict as two helpful categories of Lily’s nostalgia: superficial aesthetic structures (background nostalgia) and deeper, embodied phenomenological ones (foreground nostalgia).

I want to infuse the family systems paradigm with two approaches that will us to recognize nostalgia as a preeminent feeling that is fundamentally com imagination. The first is the philosopher Edward S. Casey’s updating phenomenological conception of nostalgia. He states in “The World of Nostalgia (1987): “when we are nostalgic, we wish to re-enter, per impossibile, the world that has effectively vanished from our lives and of which we are pai reminded by its extant traces” (365). What this means as it applies to yarning for a past home is that, as much as Lily wants to re-experience in mansions as a life-world, she cannot. The reason is that she never experi these places as a total world, only as a series of details and scenes. And as we see, the narrator controls Lily’s nostalgia by representing her memories of discrete snapshots. She is nostalgic for a previous Lily, a younger Lil; is excited and anxious over transient homes and financial limbo, rather th older Lily who does not have a set of family relations to protect her from economic instability. During the experience of nostalgia, imagination b sense of the past that never was. And “just where perceiving and remember us—and they always do fail us to some significant degree,” says Casey, no steps in (367). Lily’s desire to be a previous self is complicated by her mem packing and unpacking between homes; displacement is her condition. Naysays Casey, “is a unique mode of insight into a world that has become irretri past and that arrays itself, as we remember it now, in a plenitude of places” These ideas help us consider that Lily’s nostalgia cannot be reduced to a par place, nor can it be reduced to an isolated mental image: it requires a deter place and memory and imagination.

The second approach to nostalgia that is relevant to Lily Bart is ba cognitive neuroscience ideas of the experience of feelings. Theorizations of no
have changed since the word’s invention in 1688 by a Swiss doctor, Johannes Hofer, but his emphasis on the displacement from one’s home and an uneasy feeling of longing are still relevant to current theories of mind, and they are relevant for siting the sufferer with actual, invented, or borrowed (mental) images of place, then, in general, the Swiss doctor’s theorization was prescient. Hofer’s nostalgia had three characteristics: it connected the sufferer to place, it “afflicted imagination” (381), and its intensity arose due to memories of, or “frequent contemplations” of the home (384). In fact, current research in cognitive neuroscience indicates that feelings arise from a reciprocal system of ongoing experience processes combining with ongoing image memories. In Looking for Spinoza (2003), the cognitive neuroscientist Antonio Damasio says that feelings arise from the perception of one’s body plus “the perception of thoughts with themes consonant with” the feeling — in Lily’s case the theme is the home (85-6). Emphasizing desire and external changes to lived environment helps us to consider that nostalgia is a feeling of displacement that connects memory and place through the body. In short, these two approaches reinforce the idea of emerging, embodied systems. Together with Family Systems Theory, phenomenological and cognitive ideas of feelings allow readers to see Lily’s nostalgia as a management device that aids her as she adjudicates transitions and dislocations in modern New York City.

Lawrence Selden’s Flat: Boundaries and Background Nostalgia

For example, Lawrence Selden’s bachelor flat represents a home that Lily desires and fears, and it launches, or catalyzes, her nostalgic reflections on her present condition. She wants the independence it conveys — she wishes she had the income to afford such a place — and yet she does not want to commit to marrying someone who merely has a flat at his disposal. We begin to see Lily’s desires and fears through Selden’s eyes. The novel opens at Grand Central Station, where Selden sees Lily and he speculates on her beauty. Lily then takes the risk of walking with Selden while she waits for the next train, and she decides to take the further risk of visiting his flat. Inside Selden’s bachelor apartment, Lily conflates her lack of a “place” with the elite status of being a player in the elite New York marriage market:

“How delicious to have a place like this all to one’s self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman!” She leaned back in a luxury of discontent.

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Selden was rummaging in a cupboard for the cake.

“Even women,” he said, “have been known to enjoy the privileges of a flat.”

“Oh, governesses—or widows. But not girls—not poor, miserable, married girls!”

Wharton is famous for using houses and domestic space as analogs for character development and domestic space, and this scene reveals Lily’s feelings as they are catalyzed by Selden’s flat. In fact, this scene provides the novel’s plot in miniature: two spatial ownership and courtship in turn-of-the-century New York have characteristic Or, restored in terms of affect and literary style: the crises of spatial restrictivity and gender inequality are written as a crisis of feelings. This crisis reveals her desire to escape from Mrs. Peniston’s mansion, and it demarcates the fluctuating boundaries between these two characters.

Nostalgia arises during moments of shock or displacement or exile — especially when the idea of home is under threat. The claim that Lily Bart has a home easily turns into a foundational question: does she have a home? This quest part of the novel’s strength: we are never sure if she can be at home even when she is. The homes that she inhabits continually shift, and so rather than on a circumscribed definition of home, we come to understand that home as an idea is in constant movement. In the above scene, Lily Bart’s home is threatened primarily because this is an extremely risky courtship move: two unmarried individuals are under the elite social family rules of chaperonage, yet the without supervision. If Lily is seen (which she is by Simon Rosedale), her reputation, and, within her family, will be damaged. It is through mechanism of seeing that these two might be caught, and so visual framing de-further attention. As Lily approaches Selden’s flat during their walk, we get an image of the building’s name and its facade: “Ah, yes—to be sure: The Ben What a nice-looking building! I don’t think I’ve ever seen it before.” She it across at the flat-house with its marble porch and pseudo-Georgian facade. The building’s appropriate exterior opens up her desire to enter Selden’s home and escape the heat, and to secure a safe place to rest with a friend who is part of her extended family. Lily’s keen observation of the marble and the pseudo-Georgian facade mark the building as part of her knowledge of her environment.

Family Systems Theory explores the role of enmeshed relations, a process that helps us to read Lily’s relationship with Selden and with the flat via eye contact and verbal dissimulation. Salvador Minuchin first described how couples are enmeshed in his seminal Families and Family Therapy (1974). In Family Therapy Concepts and Methods (2006), Michael P. Nichols neatly summarizes the by stating that “[two people in love agree to share their lives and future]...
expectations: but a period of often difficult adjustment is required before they can complete the transition from courtship to a functional partnership. They must learn to accommodate each other’s needs and preferred styles of interaction” (175). Lily and Selden are not married, but they are courting— unofficially—and the scene reveals how they are accommodating each other through body movements, perceptions, and their discussions of their personal situations. In this scene both Selden and Lily reinforce the normal range of behavior in terms of their family system. Selden attempts to soothe Lily’s “luxury of discontent,” but he performs the reply from the cupboard, out of her sight. So, when he says that he “even know[s] a girl who lives in a flat” (7). Lily responds by stating that she knows such a girl, her friend Gerty Farish, and she smiles “a little unkindly” for Selden to see as he emerges from the cupboard (7). Then she says, “but I said marriageable—and besides, she has a horrid little place” (7). Their performance is just that, a performance or masque of manners. Selden’s body language and his turn from Lily’s gaze forecast his inability to commit or to cross boundaries later in the novel, when they again meet in his flat. Lily’s nostalgia for home and idea of home—her own home—explores and manages the boundaries and hierarchies that have much to do with the interior of Selden’s flat.10 Ironically, she desires certain design elements (neither horrid nor little) that may aid her prospect in the very game she finds distasteful.

We must also consider the possibility that Lily’s “luxury of discontent” is heightened because the boundary between these two restricts open communication. This would mean that at least one of the two is disengaged. Michael P. Nichols claims that the more rigid the boundary, the more autonomous a person becomes, but the penalty of this arrangement is that when mutual support is needed, the system comes under extreme stress (174). The end of the scene enables some degree of resolution as to how to interpret the boundary between these two, and further, as to how Lily’s nostalgia helps her to negotiate Selden’s home. They discuss the possibility of marriage to each other sardonically. Lily presents her problem, one that Selden is familiar with, namely, that she is “horribly poor—and very expensive” (10). Throughout The House of MIRTH, the language of finance replaces the language of emotional attachment because this sort of dissimulation enables communication but softens the inherent instability of morphogenesis through marriage. And beauty is not merely the characteristic of Lily’s face; beauty is conveyed via surfaces: of buildings, interiors, and clothes. Before Lily leaves, she says that “if I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself” (12). Selden asks “if then why go?” Lily replies that “it’s part of the business,” the marriage business (12-3). The background luxury that Lily mentions is related to the background façade of Selden’s building and its shabby yet genteel facade. Her nostalgia is a self-reinforcing feeling in which she desires the way Selden makes her feel; this nostalgia is a background nostalgia, a feeling that rein-}
reinforcing and convenient background nostalgia that Lily experiences at Selden's flat enables her, then, to continue her "business."

**Bellomont and Memories of Home: Background Cracks**

After leaving Selden's flat, Lily takes the 5:30 train to Rhinebeck, a posh town on the Hudson River, where the Trenor's Bellomont is located. After a late-night game of bridge, Lily returns to her room—another home away from home, and perceives Bellomont's interior through her philosophy of luxury. The hall that she passes through on her way to her room "was arcaded, with a gallery supported on columns of pale yellow marble." The walls form a background for "all clumps of flowering plants," and the crimson carpet shows a scene of several dogs dozing "luxuriously" before the fire. "Such scenes," the narrator says, "delighted Lily, when they gratified her sense of beauty and her craving for the external finish of life" (24). The narrator tells us that "her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury," and this luxury was "the background she required; the only climate she could breathe in" (25). Bellomont is a comparative master-image against which her ideas of success and failure are set. The concept of luxury informs her sense of self; she believes that she is enmeshed within a system of luxurious surfaces. The dresses and the jewelry form part of her ecosystem as does the gallery through which she passes; further, they are examples of background that reinforce her epistemology. That Bellomont is not her actual home is more to the point. Lily believes that she is part of the very background she sees. So, she sees it as part of her entitlement—she was once at home in the background of luxury. "But," the narrator continues, "the luxury of others was not what she wanted . . . Now she was beginning to chafe at the obligations [luxury] imposed" (25).

Wharton uses a mirror in Lily's room as a narrative device to penetrate Lily's feelings and memories of home. Lily's mental worry over her liminal status has left a physical trace on her face (two lines), and the mirror brings this image into focus. This realization causes Lily to remember "how her mother, after they had lost their money, used to say to her with a kind of fierce vindictiveness: 'But you'll get it all back—you'll get it all back, with your face . . . The remembrance roused a whole train of association" (28). This association bears more scrutiny because it opens up Lily's consciousness in a way that we did not have access to while in Selden's flat. The image of her parents' home that she recalls is one of cyclical and fragmented movement:

A house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was "company"; a door-bell perpetually ringing; a hall-table showered with square envelopes which were opened in haste, and oblong envelopes which were allowed to gather dust

A Return to Selden’s Flat:
From Background to Foreground Nostalgia

Lily’s own choices and conduct are illuminated by her nostalgic reflections, and increasingly tend toward morphogenesis. After Bertha Dorset abuses Lily while they are vacationing together in Europe, she returns to New York with innumerate surroundings her. Further, Lily finds that Mrs. Peniston has died leaving her $10,000 from her estate, barely enough to cover her debts with Gus Trenor. In a restaurant, Lily arrives at a plan to exact revenge on Bertha Dorset and recover her name and her chances at marriage. The narrator’s passive portrayal of the plan reinforces a detached awareness of feelings and surroundings:

[It was exhilarating to think that she had actually a reason for hurrying home. To p
her enjoyment of the sensation she decided to walk . . . One of the surprises of her curtailed state was the discovery that time, when it is left to itself and no definite day is made on it, cannot be trusted to move at any recognized pace. (297 emphasis)]
This "unoccupied state" is Lily’s most vulnerable state. Deep reflection into where "the victory lay" is compounded by her "ineffectiveness" (296). Her family has manufactured her way of interpreting: "inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was" (296). Nostalgic reflection has the effect of turning her attentions from the background of luxury to the foreground of "two antagonistic forces": "material necessities" and "moral scruples" (296). When she reflects on the forces surrounding her, not simply the background luxury, as earlier, she admits that she is unaware of them: "she had never been able to understand the laws of a universe which was so ready to leave her out of its calculations" (27). But her family system is part of this universe—a larger system that has boundaries, codes, and hierarchies that she is not permitted to overrule. As she had said, much earlier, to Selden: "a girl must, a man may" marry according to the rules (12). In the restaurant, Lily realizes that the background of luxury is best viewed without deep reflections. These nostalgic reflections on her loneliness lead her to her "final decision," a decision that enables her to escape being "stranded in a great waste of disoccupation" (297).

I consider that Lily’s ability to bring concepts and ideas to the foreground in which nostalgia helps her to consider change, or morphogenesis. The problem is that Lily’s decision to plan her revenge leads her to opt out of her family system altogether. Morphogenesis is necessary for the arc of any family, but not all changes enable progress. Family System Theory makes use of the difference between "first-order change" and "second-order change" to explain the asymmetrical development in systems under stress. Nichols and Everett say that first-order change refers to corrective changes to re-stabilize or maintain function (130). Second-order change alters the very nature of the system; they are much riskier, and they may lead to "runaway" systems (uncontrollable, destructive) rather than "spiral" systems (one that is chartable) (256). Lily’s plan is a radical second-order change that is the result of her realization that her position in her family system is not sustainable. I want to turn to cognitive science ideas next in order to see how Lily’s "disoccupation" and "unconscious" thinking is what enables readers to understand her changing nostalgia—and her morphogenesis. The development of the brain’s knowing is based on an interlocking system of connections between the individual and the environment that form a coarse map of "sites" the body in relation to environment—and to memories of past body/environment relations. Lily’s map is developed through her luxurious environment meshing with how her family treats such environments. But, when Lily is on the street, between homes, she is thrown outside of her known system: these places

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do not match with her idea of luxury. Her pseudo-self is dissolving under this s of nostalgic reflection. As her own family system marginalizes her, she reacts attempting to change the dynamics of the system. This decision is aided by her continual presence outside of any home—on the street. Luxurious surfaces catalyze nostalgic reflections of home; exterior places like the street and the anonymous restaurant catalyze nostalgic reflections on foregrounding forces. When her identity is under stress due to a collision between the environment and her memory, nostalgia floods her perceptions. Her "unconscious" nostalgia enables her to focus on her stranded, disoccupied situation. Feelings, says Damasio, are part of the body way of surviving, but they may be notoriously bad advisors that lead to prejudiced reactionary thinking (40). Lily’s foreground nostalgia leads to a risky decision—second-order change that escapes the background nostalgia that is reactionary a suppresses necessary morphogenetic change.

On her way to Mrs. Dorset’s house to exact her revenge, a sudden rainstorm forces Lily to alter her plan. She decides to take an electric car, but before she reads one, "a vague memory stir[s] in her" (298). She remembers that Selden’s bachelor flat is located on the side-street onto which she has turned. Her recollections Selden let loose a torrent of nostalgic desires: "the recollection loosened a thre of benumbed sensations—longings, regrets, imaginings, the throbbing brood the only spring her heart had ever known" (299). The plan, I believe, is bei “machined” by the ongoing experience of her environment. Ecosystem collides with Lily’s memories of being on this street once before.

Once inside the flat she is "assailed by a rush of memories" (299) of hers in a world that is now lost—even though Selden’s flat is unchanged. Here glimpse Lily’s realization brought on by foreground nostalgia. Selden is confounded by Lily’s clear-eyed knowledge that now she knows that she has been a "ser or a cog in the great machine [she] called life," and when she "dropped out of she found [she] was no use anywhere else" (303). The narrator conveys Selde surprise: "what was it she was planning now?" Lily tells Selden that he may see her "again for a long time," and that he must say good-bye to the ""Lily B [he] knew," the Lily who lived in and through background nostalgia (302-4). Lily foreground nostalgia helps her to manage her experiences and decisions that not corroborating with the old map of her self.

Just before she leaves Selden’s flat she understands that her identity is be shaped by her highly reflective foreground nostalgia: "she understood now that: could not go forth and leave her old self with him. That self must indeed live or his presence, but it must still continue to be hers" (304). Lily wants to separat
memorialized, older, version of her self, from her newer, more reflective self. But she realizes that her consciousness is a continuity of experiences. Lily is conscious of her thought process in this scene. Her thoughts connect to feelings for Selden and place in a way that indicates that she is applying newer criteria to her ideas of her identity. These criteria represent Lily’s presence in the here-and-now and also the feeling of herself as she was in the past, the past “nostalgia,” to use Casey’s verb form (World 365). Lily’s insights are learned via her interaction with the systems of her surroundings and her continual processing of those memories of and feelings about those systems. These systems of social relations, economic transactions, and elite New York families have always been part of her identity. But now she is reflecting on how the mechanics work, and where she fits. Her nostalgic feelings for Selden and the meaning of the return to his home catalyze her further reflections in such a way as to help her begin to understand the “laws of the universe” and its “calculations”(27). Her insights come at great cost: her identity is dissolving through this feeling and reflection. Lily tells Selden that she “shall feel safe” through her friendship with him—a connection through feelings, a connection that, by analogy, is a holding place for her imagination. Lily’s nostalgia is not merely a reflection to help her begin to understand the “laws of the universe” and its “calculations”(27). Her insights come at great cost: her identity is dissolving through this feeling and reflection. Lily tells Selden that she “shall feel safe” through her friendship with him—a connection through feelings, a connection that, by analogy, is a holding place for her imagination. Lily’s nostalgia is not merely a feeling for a younger Lily, her nostalgia has become a way of thinking about her past, present, and future. And this way of thinking is now enabling her to adapt to new experiences. These realizations help her to change her plan: Lily destroys the letters by surreptitiously burning them in Selden’s fireplace.

Nelle Struther’s Alternative Family System

When Lily leaves Selden’s flat she leaves behind the ashes of the burned letters and the ashes of her old self. Her new self is analogous to the idea of the solid-self, that is, a self that is imagined by an individual in which inside reflections and outside behaviors are congruent. This does not mean that tension and discord are abated, however. Increased morphogenetic pressure makes self-reflection more difficult—which in turn makes further change riskier. This reciprocal relationship comes to a stop and then fragments when Nettie Strutter encounters Lily.

While resting on a bench in Bryant Park, just outside the New York Public Library, Nettle Struther attempts to rescue Lily. Nettle’s kindness is evident from the fact that, at first, she does not recognize Lily: “‘Excuse me—are you sick?’—‘Why it’s Miss Bart!’” (307). Even though Nettle’s arm supports her back, Lily reacts negatively to her “shabbily-clad arm.” Lily tries to excuse her own disheveled appearance with “‘I’m only tired—it is nothing’” (307). But then “she adds involuntarily”: “‘I have been unhappy—in great trouble.’” This is an important admission of need. Indeed, Lily’s pseudo-self (the old Lily) would have allowed this honesty, especially desiring to converse with someone of her family system. But Nettle is not completely outside the family system. In Struther, Lily remembered, was aided by Gerty Farish’s charitable work. Lily’s “involuntarily,” the only way she can account for this new way of speaking, then invites Lily to her tenement flat.

Inside Nettle’s “warm” kitchen, Lily sees the domestic sphere that she lacked, supporting family with a young child. Nettle urges Lily to hold her girl in her arms. She does so and feels the baby “sinking deeper, and penetrating with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered into her and be a part of herself” (310). This experience both comforts and weakens her baby’s trust complicates her emerging calculations for the future. The baby—background, but something new, wholly unintegrated into her view of the universe. In this moment of weakness, Nettle’s compliment falls like an anvil: “‘Would be too lovely for anything if she could grow up to be just like you?’” (311). Lily recognizes that her body may have other opportunities besides being a “screw or a cog” in the marriage market. Lily responds to Nettle’s question honestly in the negative, but then self-corrects: “‘Oh, she must not do that should be to come and see her too often!’” (311). Her breakthrough is that her body is her one constant and potential home: her body is beginning to register or comprehend both the world around her (Selden’s home, Nettle’s home), and her imagination as they influence her actions (proprioception). Her body has been under the influence of her mother’s philosophy of the body—the box background, as object for trade. This boundary-crossing (both environment and body) shocks her into managing her present experience by fleeing. She did not bargain for this sort of change—indeed a second-order change. Nettle’s praise of Lily is exactly the one thought that horrifies her because it reminds her that her beliefs and values reinforced her pseudo-self. Lily does not hear a compliment only irony: Nettle wants her child to grow up to mimic a failed morality and personality in a failed family. Her new self is unable to accommodate this idea; is starting to imagine a new system. Both the family home (with its warm small size, its “miraculously clean” condition) and the presence of a baby (the one in the novel) gives this feeling to her through a body-environment interac

James L. Machor comments on this scene in Pastoral Cities (1987) to draw out the importance of the pastoral element of Nettle’s home (205-6). This scene is rather than a marginal plot point, however. It loads sentiment with seriousness as far from simple even as—it reaches for emotional poignancy.
characteristic of the pastoral countryside imported into Nettie’s kitchen does not frame the scene. Instead, the idea of a cohesive family system does.

The Boarding House: Imagined Home

After her encounter with Nettie’s family, Lily returns to her boarding house, where she is overcome with the “feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral,” a feeling of destabilizing nostalgia that enables both change and fear (314). Powerful feelings like nostalgia can destabilize our sense of self because they may catalyze memories and ideas that lead to destructive actions; and they may help us to reflect on inadequacy. This is what happens to Lily Bart as she considers her feeling of “being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years” (313).

The word “uprooted” indicates the negative feelings that nostalgia may generate. The narrator comments on Lily’s feeling as if to reinforce its importance: “that was the feeling which possessed her now—the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spindrift on the whirling surface of existence” (313-14). Lily realizes connections between people’s actions and her condition of rootlessness is caused in part by her parents’ rootlessness and that “she herself had grown up without any one spot of earth being dearer to her than another: there was no center of early pieties, of grave endearing traditions, to which her heart could revert and from which it could draw strength for itself.” And the narrator continues to take us deeper into Lily’s thoughts on her rootlessness and homesickness:

In whatever form a slowly-accumulated past lives in the blood—whether in the concrete image of the old house stored with visual memories, or in the conception of the house not built with hands, but made up of inherited passions and loyalties—it has the same power of broadening and deepening the individual existence. (314)

This passage defines nostalgia as phenomenological and reciprocal: materials, ideas, and memories inform each other, and thus home broadens and deepens identity. But notice how hard the narrator works to interpret Lily’s nostalgia. Are we to believe that Lily now has the capacity for this insight? We are beginning to understand that nostalgia is a device used by Wharton to bring Lily’s past and ourselves to believe that Lily now has the capacity for this insight? We are beginning to understand that nostalgia is a device used by Wharton to bring Lily’s past and present experience together, to a critical moment. Nostalgia here represents the home as an idea, not merely a concrete image, but rather a home built of past feelings, based on both “concrete image” and “inherited passions and loyalties.”

Wharton attends to the body moving through place and moving through memory to create a yearning, a desire for home that accumulates and relates reciprocally to Lily’s twin desires to act on her nascent solid-self and also to escape her “inherited passions and loyalties.” She visits her memories of home as a way to rewrite her autobiography. Lily’s insight is to realize that she is unfamiliar with herself. We can see how provocative this critical and autobiographical nostalgia is by examining the narrator’s emphasis on Lily’s mental state: “such a vision of the solidarity of these hands had never before come to Lily” (314). Lily is gaining insight through nostalgic feeling managed by the narrator. She cannot contain the imaginative home in her consciousness because it indicates her past errors. This conception of a house (“made up of inherited passions and loyalties”) is an “intense cleanness of vision” that appalls her with its power. Foreground nostalgia is not amnesiac, it a detachment from reality. In Lily’s case, it fosters the greatest moment of in her condition of liminality. Nostalgia enables her to see that morphogenetic possible, even within a boarding house home.

It is difficult to do justice to the power of Lily’s death scene, but I cannot without wondering what sort of shock the reader perceives, whose pulse race increases just as Lily’s pulse slows. Lily’s realization of her homelessness her decision to set her financial affairs in order, to try, to seem, to ready herself to continue building up her solid-self. But, she still must sleep in order to quiet “lucidity of mind” in which Nettie’s audacious continuity clashes with her overwhelming future possibilities that promise further detachment from the system she knows (315). She chances a few more drops of the sleeping medic in order to stop the dizzying foreground nostalgia that is giving her a “sense of kinship” with the world, and also making her tired (316). The chloral taking of she imagines that a baby is safely in her arms, possibly Nettie’s, possibly hers. Suddenly, she starts up “cold and trembling with the shock; for a moment she sees how provocative this critical and autobiographical nostalgia is by examining the narrator’s emphasis on Lily’s mental state: “such a vision of the solidarity of these hands had never before come to Lily” (314). Lily is gaining insight through nostalgic feeling managed by the narrator. She cannot contain the imaginative home in her consciousness because it indicates her past errors. This conception of a house (“made up of inherited passions and loyalties”) is an “intense cleanness of vision” that appalls her with its power. Foreground nostalgia is not amnesiac, it a detachment from reality. In Lily’s case, it fosters the greatest moment of in her condition of liminality. Nostalgia enables her to see that morphogenetic possible, even within a boarding house home.

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renewed and made modern; it is transformed into a critical device for mediating the urban world in which fragmented images of the past and shadowy visions of the future collide.

Notes

1 Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth (1905; New York: Modern Library, 1999). Future references to this novel will be to this edition and will be cited in the text.

2 Home and family are not the same in my analysis. Under consideration here is the idea that the home is part of the family system; and the family’s identity is powerfully informed by the home as both place and idea. I focus on the home’s importance to the feeling of nostalgia, making my synthetic approach place-based. Home as place is the site through which individual achievement and limitation are actualized. Further, home as place and idea has evolved historically, socially, and aesthetically, yet this evolution masks as much as it reveals. By family, I refer to the near and extended human kinship and social relations that frame affiliations. I will continue to develop these two terms in the body of this essay.


6 Rather than use pejorative notions of nostalgia such as Christopher Lasch’s (1991) idea that it is an abdication of memory, or Fredric Jameson’s (1991) idea that it is a split of the historical signifier from its signified, my theorization of nostalgia borrows from Svetlana Boym’s ideas of restorative and reflective nostalgia and from Andrea Deciu Ritvoi’s ethical nostalgia. Both Boym and Ritvoi theorize nostalgia as a critical and comparative mechanism of memory and culture. See Boym’s The Future of Nostalgia, and Ritvoi’s Yesterday’s Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity.

7 I rely on Casey’s phenomenological understanding of nostalgia and space because he considers the body’s experience of actual environments; Lily’s embeddedness in her family system, in her homes, is experiential. Future references to this essay will be cited parenthetically as “World.” Earlier ideas of the experience of place such as Gaston Bachelard’s topoanalysis or Michel Foucault’s heterotopanalysis emphasize an understanding of a dreamscape (Bachelard) and a set of powerful, but abstract, forces (Foucault), but we must attend to the intervening middle ground Dolores Hayden’s ideas on the intertwined relationship between social space and spatial perceptions shed light on this gendered ground. She claims that history is embedded into urban landscapes and in places where memories cohere. Just as Lily wrestles with her attachments to people, she also wrestles with her attachments to place. See Hayden, The Power of Place (1997), especially chapter 2: “Urban Landscape History: The Sense of Place and the Politics of Space.”

8 Hofer’s term itself is a hybrid of two Greek roots: nostos—meaning return home, plus algia—meaning suffering; together, we get nostalgia’s common synonym: homesickness. Johannes Hofer, “Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia by Johannes Hofer, 1688,” Trans. Carolyn Kiser Anspruch, Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine 2.6 August (1934) 376-91. Future references to this work will be to this edition and cited in the text.

9 In Felicitious Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather (1986), Judith Fryer describes the structures of the houses as they relate to balance and order in The House of Mirth, especially 75-94. Avril Horner and Sue Zlonnik read Lily’s boundaries and enclosures as frames that lead readers to ambiguous conclusions; see Landscapes of Desire: Metaphors in Modern Women’s Fiction (1990), especially 17-32. Renée Somers reads interior spaces as commentary on power structures in Edith Wharton as Spatial Activist and Analyst (2005), especially 129-54. And in The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton: Gender, Class, and Power in the Progressive Era (2007), Annette Benetti examines background spaces and boundaries in terms of freedom, especially 116-24.

10 This is not the place to explore the specific historical, social, and economic problems facing women attempting to secure an apartment during turn-of-the-century New York, but it is clear that Lily is less mobile than Selden, perhaps less mobile than Gerty Farish and Nettie Struther. My ideas on apartment history have been influenced by Elizabeth Blackmar’s Manhattan for Rent.

11 Murray Bowen first distinguished between the solid-self and the pseudo-self in “Theorv in the practice of psychotherapy,” Family Therapy: Theory and Practice (1976). According to Dorothy Stroh Bucov and Raphael J. Bucov, a “person with the solid-self operates on the basis of clearly defined beliefs, opinion, convictions, and life principles developed through the process of intellectual reasoning,” while on the other hand, “the pseudo-self is characteristic of the person who makes
choices on the basis of emotional pressures rather than on the basis of reasoned principles," *Family Therapy*, 147.

Family systems theorists, literary critics, and neuroscientists use cognitive mapping to think about relational overlap and change. For Damasio, cognitive mapping is neurological—a vastly different scale than Jameson’s socially constructed cognitive mapping. For neuroscientists like Edelman, map formation is dynamic, and the connections shift and reassemble as differential growth occurs. This self-organizing system is epigenetic (key events depend upon prior key events) in terms of exterior and interior events, and so feelings are part of a cross-registering of the body’s reception of information and perceptual activity. Environmental information helps the system grow, the growth of which influences future development of the systems that comprise the brain’s activity, see *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire* 23–5. Using *Family Systems Theory* enables a correlation between neurological and social scales of mapping because both are reciprocally related in terms of the person/character who is part of that ecosystem.

**Works Cited**


