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by

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Introduction: Making Space for the Past; Representing the Modern Home

Culture has the potential of becoming a space for individual play and creativity, and not merely an oppressive homogenizing force; far from limiting individual play, it guarantees space…Perhaps what is most missed during historical cataclysms and exile is not the past and the homeland exactly, but rather this potential space of cultural experience that one has shared with one’s friends and compatriots that is based neither on nation nor religion but on elective affinities. (Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*)

Nostalgia, typically associated with sentimentality and regression, became a central theme of early twentieth-century American literature despite the period’s emphasis on progress and breaking from tradition. The characters of such novels often express a longing for the past as a consequence of the anxiety produced by the rapidly-changing social landscape. The past is idealized and signifies stability and security, characteristics considered markedly absent from modernity. However, while nostalgia has been considered by literary critics as a retreat from the present and condemned for shirking responsibility for current struggles, the writers in my study reveal nostalgia’s relationship to the present as far more complex than such criticisms have previously accounted for. Alongside its more complex reactions to progress, nostalgia can also be a conscientious rejection of modernity as it refuses to relinquish traditional values that threaten to be destroyed by industrialization. Critics have long since established that early
twentieth-century American literature is primarily concerned with the internal mind as opposed to the external features. Undeniably, psychological exploration is a concern for these writers, yet they also convey an acute preoccupation with material objects and their impact on emotional development, particularly those objects that inhabit the domestic sphere. I argue that early twentieth-century authors reveal the complex interplay of the psychological and material realms. I also argue that this interplay between the internal and external allows for the negotiation of modernity. The writers in my study—Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Willa Cather—feature the domestic space of home in their works. In fact, houses become so prominent in these novels that they nearly take on an importance equal to characters. In representing houses, these writers articulate the disruption of this primal location in ways that coincide with the proliferation of modernity and show how characters use the material objects that fill their houses to reestablish connections to the past as a way of responding to the present. By interrogating how modern consumerism has altered one’s perception of home and its relation to identity, as well as dramatizing this disruption within the physical houses of their characters, writers in the first half of the twentieth century reveal that nostalgia can be damaging if one chooses to retreat into the idealized past and disengage from the present, but nostalgia can also provide crucial insights into one’s culture and personal identity that allow for reconciliation, rather than alienation, of the past and the present. I suggest that material objects, particularly those found in houses, play a crucial role in shaping one’s conceptualization of history as they constitute a physical connection to the psychological notion of time, prompting memories that allow for reflection on the past in relation to the present. While some critics believe that nostalgia performs a primarily negative and conservative function that calls for the restoration of the past to replace the flawed present, I see nostalgia as being a potentially progressive impetus that can allow for imaginative production
within the present both in terms of art and identity formation in response to ever-shifting perceptions of history. Rather than a means of escaping the present or revising the present to conform to the ideals of the past, I argue that nostalgia can allow for acceptance of the present and assist in adaptation to social change by highlighting the gap between past and present so that one can negotiate a position from which he or she can learn how to integrate useful elements of history into modern life.

In the sections that follow, I discuss the various facets of my theory of nostalgia which expand the applications of the concept beyond just functioning as a regressive retreat from current conditions to an active engagement with the present which uses memories of the past as motivation. I begin by tracing the evolution of nostalgia’s definition over time to show that while past generations have privileged one aspect of the term over another, nostalgia has always signified the intersection of the psychological and the physical realms; I also develop my own account which connects the psychological concept of identity to material culture in the form of houses and confirms that acknowledgment of both elements of nostalgia is necessary for understanding its complex role in aiding the transition from traditional Victorian society to early twentieth-century modernity. I explore nostalgia from a psychoanalytic perspective and examine the relationship between the concept of home and one’s identity, arguing that writers of the early twentieth century represent characters’ homes as a reflection of their minds and convey how the conditions of a rapidly-changing modern culture posed a threat to the values associated with home—belonging, comfort, security—and resulted in a longing for a sense of self that was perceived to be lost. Material objects become a way for these characters to not only hold on to a tangible embodiment of the past, and ultimately a dwindling image of self, but also to create new identities that allow characters to thrive within modern society, a society which relies on
nostalgia as a way of transitioning from the past to the present and even uses nostalgia as a marketing strategy, allowing characters to be simultaneously traditional and modern. Finally, I explain the connection between authenticity and nostalgia, particularly at the turn of the twentieth century, as stemming from modernity’s perception of being inauthentic and responsible for the corruption of traditional ideals. I address the seeming contradiction that resulted out of such anxieties in which consumers enthusiastically purchased “authentic” reproductions produced in the present that sustained connections to a lost past, discussing how the characters of early twentieth-century novels use nostalgia not as a way of restoring an authentic past, but as a means of adapting to the present and conceiving of it as a new mode of existence inspired by, but not imitative of, the past.

The History of Nostalgia: Shifting Definitions

My dissertation defines nostalgia as an emotional response to both the loss of home, understood as a material object, and to the loss of time, understood as a psychological construct. I believe it is necessary to re-examine the implications of the physical world, particularly the impact of material objects, alongside those of the psychological dimension of nostalgia in order to understand how each impacts the other and how together these two dimensions constitute one’s relationship to the present. I argue that nostalgia is a response to the overlap of the physical and psychological realms since material objects function, in a sense, as “containers” of a lost time that attempt to preserve the past within the present. In making this claim, I retrieve a sense of nostalgia as formulated in its earliest history, that of Johannes Hofer’s definition of the term.

The term nostalgia, despite its long history as a literary trope and its continued relevance in theoretical discussions of the present, remains ambiguous as the implications of the concept have yet to be unpacked in their full complexity. The word nostalgia was coined in 1688 by a Swiss
physician, Johannes Hofer, who combined the Greek terms *nóstos* (return home) and *algia* (pain or wound) in order to describe the physical consequences of severe homesickness. Nostalgia was considered to be primarily a disease of the body. Rather than an affliction of the mind with which it is typically associated today, the cause of this affliction was diagnosed as the longing to return to a particular place, usually one’s home.

Despite his insistence that nostalgia was a physical illness, Hofer acknowledged that its symptoms appeared to be psychosomatic and that the psychological distress of nostalgia could be assuaged through a physical return to familiar surroundings. Hofer considered nostalgia to be a pathological condition and first noted symptoms in Swiss soldiers who were fighting abroad, students studying away from home, and domestic servants working in France and Germany. He observed that what began as a psychological “disease of an afflicted imagination,” (Hofer 380) an obsessive fixation on the longing to return to one’s home, often spread to the body and manifested itself in physical symptoms as well. Many of the patients he studied, all of whom were in some way displaced from their homes, exhibited physical responses to their homesickness ranging from nausea, loss of appetite, and fevers, to potentially fatal conditions such as brain inflammation, cardiac arrests, and suicidal tendencies. Though nostalgia was taken to be a serious medical condition, it was ultimately considered curable as treatments such as the use of leeches, opium, and purging of the stomach were often shown to ease the symptoms. The most effective remedy, according to Hofer, was the return of the displaced person to his or her place of origin.

Though it originated as a physical ailment, the definition of nostalgia evolved over the years and by the nineteenth century was considered to be less involved with the longing for a physical place, and more invested with a longing to return to a particular period of time. Between the
seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, a drastic change in the concept of time itself was taking place. Major factors in this shift were the implications involved in the development of the notion of revolution. Particularly after the French Revolution, the prospect for radical change and seemingly endless possibility led to increased emphasis on the idea of progress. People began to conceive of time in dramatically different ways and noted the present’s fragmentation from, rather than continuity with, the past. According to David Lowenthal, “During most of history men scarcely differentiated past from present, referring even to remote events, if at all, as though they were then occurring. Up to the nineteenth century those who gave any thought to the historical past supposed it much like the present….Even when ennobled by nostalgia or depreciated by partisans of progress, the past seemed not a foreign country but part of their own” (xvi).¹ This new way of thinking of the present as a breaking away from history and the consequent estrangement of the past seems to have precipitated the longing of nostalgia as it has confirmed the past as a lost object of desire.

¹ Lowenthal goes on to argue that from the nineteenth century up to the present we have considered the past to be a foreign country, one from which we are definitively separated, though this foreign past continues to influence the present. By imagining a substantial difference between our own historical moment and previous ones, a conception that simply did not seem to exist prior to the nineteenth century, Lowenthal claims that this separation accounts for our fetishization of the past, stating, “The past’s difference is, indeed, one of its charms: no one would yearn for it if it merely replicated the present.” See Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), xvi.
Also in the nineteenth century, industrialization and progressive ideals caused time to no longer signify just a relationship between moments, and one’s relationship to time was considered a determinant in his or her level of success both personal and financial. Essentially, time was money, and efficiency was considered to be crucial in the development of a productive, progressive society. One’s use of time became increasingly important as hours not used for a productive purpose were considered to be wasted time. During the American Civil War, military doctor Theodore Calhoun noted nostalgia in American soldiers, but unlike Hofer he attributed this to a weakness of character rather than a bodily illness and suggested that those who suffered from nostalgia were lazy daydreamers who ultimately used their time inefficiently.²

As a result of this growing obsession with time and its relation to progress, the concept of nostalgia as a longing for a place was overshadowed and seemingly fell by the wayside since nostalgic desire appeared to transcend the loss of one’s physical home. Critic Linda Hutcheon has noted this shift and claims that unlike Hofer’s curable homesickness, “Nostalgia was no

² Svetlana Boym further explains the shift from Hofer’s more spatialized version of nostalgia to that of Calhoun’s temporal conception, claiming, “If the Swiss doctor Hofer believed that homesickness expressed love for freedom and one’s native land, two centuries later the American military doctor Theodore Calhoun conceived of nostalgia as a shameful disease that revealed a lack of manliness and unprogressive attitudes.” Therefore, this change not only constitutes the movement from a primarily spatial to a temporal concept of nostalgia, but also nostalgia’s development into a negative quality rather than its previous character as being proof of one’s strength of devotion to his or her homeland. See Boym, The Future of Nostalgia (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 6.
longer simply a yearning to return home…People who did return home were usually disappointed because, in fact, they did not want to return to a place, but to a time, a time of youth. Time, unlike space, cannot be returned to—ever; time is irreversible. And nostalgia becomes the reaction to that sad fact” (para. 8). Svetlana Boym, author of arguably the most comprehensive study of nostalgia, *The Future of Nostalgia*, agrees that nostalgia has become almost exclusively associated with time:

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. (xv)

Thus, the shift from a spatial to a temporal explanation for the pain of nostalgia radically changed its definition from a physical condition to a primarily psychological one, a distinction that has remained to this day.

**Twentieth-Century Nostalgia: Negotiating Modernity**

In line with recent literary scholarship on nostalgia, I argue for a conception of nostalgic longing that may be understood as potentially productive and progressive, rather than simply regressive and conservative. Beyond simply focusing on the past, nostalgia allows for critical insights into the present that permits one to determine what elements of history can ease the transition into a new era. Though some critics in the twentieth century have sought to expand the definition of nostalgia, I believe the crucial role that it plays in allowing one to adapt to and accept the present has not been fully explored. In making this claim, my work takes issue with
Jean-Francois Lyotard and Frederic Jameson, both of whom have provided influential accounts, despite their differences, that emphasize only the negative qualities of nostalgia.

Perhaps the most well-known discussions of nostalgia and its relation to modernity actually emerged out of postmodern critical theory and some critics like Jean-Francois Lyotard argue that the comfort provided by nostalgia ultimately inhibits exploration of meaning and creative potential in modern art. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard discusses the condition of postmodernity, but he ends up more fully characterizing modernism in order to show what postmodernism is not. Lyotard cites the distinguishing feature of postmodernism as the end of metanarratives, comprehensive theories that attempt to explain cultural phenomena, and he claims that modernism was unable to produce such a condition. He states that “Modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure” (Lyotard 81). For Lyotard, then, modernist literature is essentially a nostalgia for metanarrative presence and unity, a state that he claims postmodernism has been able to transcend. It is the “recognizable consistency” of modernism, the adherence to guidelines that fulfill a reader’s expectations of the novel’s form, which expresses nostalgic longing for unified meaning. Postmodern art conveys the sublime, the impossibility of direct reference, in its fragmented, incoherent presentation. Lyotard insists that modern art mourns the loss of certainty and presence and clings to these ideals in its form through a familiar novelistic structure that provides comfortable resolution, while postmodernism celebrates the loss of these ideals in favor of a more liberating style of art.
that promotes possibility. In his view, nostalgia constitutes modernism’s failure, and is a condition not to be examined, but to overcome.  

Frederic Jameson in his book *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* agrees that nostalgia is crucial in differentiating modernism from postmodernism, but he implies that Lyotard has misinterpreted where that nostalgia lies. For Jameson, it is postmodernism that is nostalgic as late capitalism has in effect caused contemporary culture to lose a sense of historicity. He notes the emergence of so-called “nostalgia films” and explains that they are “in no way to be grasped as passionate expressions of that older longing once called nostalgia but rather the opposite; they are a depersonalized visual curiosity and a ‘return of the repressed’ of the twenties and thirties ‘without affect’” (Jameson xvii). Instead of modernism’s longing for the past, Jameson’s nostalgic postmodernism is a longing for a sense of historical consciousness for the present that expresses itself through depthless images that mimic the style of a historical period rather than examine the content of that era. Similar to Lyotard’s theory of nostalgia,

3 I believe Lyotard makes the distinction between modernism and postmodernism a bit too easily. To say that modernist writing is characterized by forms that provide unity and solace seems to be a) a metanarrative in itself and b) highly debatable. In light of an author like William Faulkner who employs a variety of narrative techniques in his work that in no way provide simple or straightforward understanding, it seems difficult to assume that if a text can be recognized as a novel and employ some recognizable literary conventions that it fails to interrogate those forms and the epistemological beliefs out of which they emerge.
Jameson views nostalgia as being a primarily negative consequence of an unsatisfying aesthetic mode.⁴

Though Lyotard and Jameson are often juxtaposed against one another in the debate concerning the value of postmodern cultural productions, what seems to unite these theorists is the fact that they both view nostalgia as being negative and cite nostalgia as disrupting the possibility for representing the past in any sort of meaningful way. I position my theory of nostalgia in opposition to both Lyotard and Jameson in order to claim that assuming nostalgia to be negative and always regressive is a reductive conception of the term, one that ignores its full complexity. Nostalgia seems to be neither entirely regressive nor completely progressive, but instead maintains an uneasy position in which it embodies both qualities simultaneously. Inherently, nostalgia is about looking backward and imagining a possibility for a return to the past, yet this has as much, if not more, to do with the present and figuring out a way to work through it in relation to the past. The longing to go back in time to an idealized past is a response to modernity and its destabilizing effects and can be viewed both as a retreat from the difficulties

⁴ Like Lyotard, Jameson’s argument seems too restrictive in his delineation of modernism versus postmodernism. Arguing that postmodern art has no affect is the type of generalization that Jameson laments in his discussion of the nostalgia film, which he claims stereotypes rather than complicates notions of history. In addition, the level of historical consciousness in modernist art is debatable to an extent because in literature in particular, history is not depicted necessarily in a realistic or informed way, but often through idealization as a response to an unsatisfactory present.
of the present as well as a way of reflecting on the present and conceiving of ways to reconcile one’s current moment with the lessons gleaned from history.

Nostalgia is a recognition that modernization comes with negative consequences, but both Lyotard and Jameson seem to underestimate the potential role of nostalgia in revealing insights into how cultural change is perceived in the present. Lyotard claims that to long for coherence and narrative presence ultimately constitutes the failure of modernism as a literary movement. He argues that modernist form reflects metanarrative authority and implies that a literary text can consolidate the fragmented condition of modernity into a cohesive whole. However, modernist form does not, and cannot, provide a completely unified, cohesive narration, but instead mourns the loss of the possibility for absolute unity and attempts to find a way to respond to that loss. I argue that writers in the first half of the twentieth century do not oversimplify the modern present or compensate for its complexity through a consistent form. Rather, they acknowledge modernity as distinct from previous cultural periods and strive to expand accepted notions of novelistic form to reveal what elements of the present are compatible with the past and what elements constitute a definitive break from the past. Similarly, Jameson suggests that postmodernism fails to provide any meaningful connection to the historical past. He believes that postmodernism relies on superficial representations of the past that reinforce contemporary society’s limited and idealized notions of history. Again, the nostalgia film seems to recognize that it cannot directly represent the past, and it mourns that fact by attempting to respond in a way that does not pretend that direct historical referentiality is possible. Instead, it highlights and interrogates contemporary perceptions of the past and reveals insights into the present and the contemporary subject’s relationship to history. Rather than pretending that reality is separate from the ideal, or that the ideal is not subject to reality’s constraints, nostalgia attempts to negotiate a space
between them that acknowledges the impossibility of a complete return to the past while using that inevitability to continually imagine ways of dealing with the present.

Unlike Jameson and Lyotard, critics Linda Hutcheon and Svetlana Boym both argue that nostalgia has the potential to be beneficial in understanding the relationship between the present and the past and, therefore, their theories have been crucial in developing my own explanation of nostalgia, but my own theory attempts to expand the parameters set by both Hutcheon and Boym. Hutcheon argues that nostalgia can be used to expose the overlaps and divergences between past and present, but she insists that nostalgia only has this capability when it is represented in combination with irony, with the implication that in the absence of irony nostalgia would be devoid of critical potential. Boym suggests a more complex view of nostalgia that grants it the authority to stand on its own as a culturally-productive analytical tool, but she ultimately imposes a binary view of nostalgia in which it can either be regressive, an attempt to replicate the past within the present, or progressive, a process to use the past as a means of improving upon the deficiencies of the present. My own theory of nostalgia attempts to reconcile the limits established by Hutcheon and Boym as I suggest that nostalgia has a more complicated cultural function in which it acts as more than just a counterpart to irony or as an either positive or negative way of re-shaping the present in the image of the past. I argue that nostalgia can perform a significant role in transitioning from past to present as a means of adaptation that does not exclusively privilege the past, but instead respects the distinctiveness of the present while acknowledging an indebtedness to history.

Linda Hutcheon, along with Jameson, admits that postmodern culture is nostalgic, but she does not consider this nostalgia to always be regressive in the negative context that he suggests as she believes that nostalgia can reveal crucial insights into the present. In her essay “Irony,
Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,” Hutcheon claims that nostalgia is bound up with irony, and the two exist simultaneously, but in tension with each other. She writes: “From a postmodern point of view, the knowingness of...irony may be not so much a defense against the power of nostalgia as the way in which nostalgia is made palatable today: invoked, but at the same time, undercut, put into perspective, seen for exactly what it is—a comment on the present as much as the past” (Hutcheon para. 26). In combination with irony, Hutcheon suggests that nostalgia can have a critical edge to it and not be just escapism or sentimentalism. However, it is clear that she gives preference to irony as the ultimate goal of postmodern aesthetics and sees nostalgia as being a necessary means to achieve irony’s critical potential.5

Mentioned previously, Svetlana Boym’s influential study of nostalgia is perhaps the closest to my theory in that she delineates nostalgia as having multiple functions depending on what aspects of the concept that the subject privileges. The most noted of her ideas in the book is her distinction between two categories of nostalgia: reflective nostalgia and restorative nostalgia. Boym explains, “Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost

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5 I like that Hutcheon’s definition of nostalgia allows for a critical function of this concept. The authors in my study all seem to maintain an uneasy relationship with nostalgia as they remain both wistful and comforted by the historical past, but also recognize the necessity of breaking down the barriers between past and present to allow for a more complex understanding of how to use the past to inform the future. Particularly in regard to the concept of home, nostalgia calls into question how we traditionally conceive of that term and seems to suggest that a re-examination of home is necessary to allow for alternative meanings that co-exist within an individual’s identity.
home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” (41). In this way, Boym seems to attribute qualities of positive and negative types of nostalgia to the reflective and the restorative, respectively, as reflection allows for gaps and ruptures while restoration creates a false sense of cohesion via a narration that attempts to account for such fragmentation. Rather than being deemed an affliction, as Hofer originally described it, nostalgia for Boym can be a conscientious rejection of progressivism as a modernist value and a way to potentially revise a culture driven by rationality and consumerism.

Though Boym’s explanation of nostalgia adds depth to the concept and complicates its role as a response to cultural change, a crucial difference between her understanding of nostalgia and my own is that her definition sets up an either/or binary of restorative versus reflective nostalgia while I believe novels of early twentieth century reveal another response to the present: adaptive nostalgia. Boym’s paradigm suggests that nostalgia can either constitute a longing to restore history or that history can be used to critique the perceived flaws of the present, but at a fundamental level both of these responses, the restorative and the reflective, privilege the past over the present. My own understanding of nostalgia suggests the possibility of another dimension of nostalgia, an adaptive function, which acknowledges and accepts the present as being both flawed and progressive and uses the past as a means of integrating traditional ideals into the modern world rather than relying on the past to reform modernity as though it is a condition to be overcome. Not only does nostalgia maintain a tense relationship to the present that fluctuates between regression and progression as a way of adapting to modernity, but it also reflects the creative potential in the present in that it can produce new modes of existing in one’s society, new identities that reflect shifting class structures, and new artistic and intellectual
innovations that respond to the relationship between the traditional and the modern. After examining several key texts that emerged during the early twentieth century in America, *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *The Professor’s House* by Willa Cather, texts that explicitly engage themes of nostalgia, I contend that these novels insist upon an ever-evolving role for the past within the present and reveal that materialism plays a key role in allowing characters to negotiate the modern landscape.

In all of the aforementioned novels, two important characteristics emerge in relation to the nostalgia present within these texts: 1) All the novels involve mobility as characters continually depart and/or are displaced, and 2) The characters of these novels, particularly those who are most nostalgic, get the unique opportunity to return to their pasts, typically in the form of coming into contact with a person or an object that represents that idyllic past for them. These people and things essentially act as substitutes for the past itself and all the happiness associated with it. As characters leave home or are left behind, they feel that something has been lost in the present moment, and they long to return to the past in order to attempt to retrieve it. Interestingly, when they are afforded the opportunity to recapture some lost moment from their pasts, each of these characters experiences as much, if not more, pain upon his or her *return* as they do from the initial departures. While it is obvious that the characters cannot literally be transported back in time, they each do, in a sense, return to the past in some surrogate form via their loved ones and their belongings that represent the past, and they find this reunion to be unfulfilling, leaving them with a sustained, rather than diminished, sense of longing. This observation, then, would seem to complicate the notion that nostalgia is simply a longing to return to the past and suggests that modernist longing may be the result of something beyond the inability to transcend time.
The concept of the nostalgic return in literature is not by any means exclusive to modernist narratives but stems from the work of Homer and his emphasis on returning home, and this theme of the journey, both physical and psychological, that dramatizes the confrontation between one’s past life and one’s present extends into twentieth-century literature. The Greek epic, the *Nostoi*—meaning “returns”—has often been attributed to Homer, but the *Odyssey*, the poem that follows the *Nostoi* in the Epic Cycle, is the most well-known example of a work that engages the theme of homecoming as the Greeks returned to Ithaca after the Trojan War. The term *odyssey* has become synonymous with the idea of an “epic journey,” one that is usually characterized by great struggles and tests of personal will. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus sets out on a ten-year journey home and is continually confronted with obstacles thrown at him by vengeful gods and temptresses, but it is his nostalgia that drives him to continue in order to reconcile with his wife and son. During the time that he is gone, things change greatly in Ithaca and the city is overrun by suitors looking to win the hand of Penelope, Odysseus’s wife. In fact, when Odysseus does return home, the place is virtually unrecognizable to him and he has to be convinced that he is truly in Ithaca. In addition, Penelope does not recognize Odysseus and it is only after he competes and wins a contest for her hand that Penelope believes that her husband has returned. Though Odysseus gets what he has longed for, this homecoming is more disconcerting than fulfilling for him as his conception of home has been ruptured by the actuality of his home’s unfamiliarity.\(^6\) The structure of the Homer narrative and its emphasis on the journey home

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\(^6\) Svetlana Boym concurs, stating, “…Odysseus’s homecoming is about nonrecognition…Odysseus’s is a representative homecoming, a ritual event that neither begins nor ends with him.” See Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 8.
became a common literary trope and was appropriated by a variety of modernists including Ezra Pound in *The Cantos*, William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*, and perhaps most famously by James Joyce in *Ulysses*. All of these works focus on the return home and reflect the uneasiness and disconnectedness that are experienced upon that return. Though home is supposed to provide comfort and satisfaction, it is the return to the place itself that seems to perpetuate longing and anxiety.

My work returns to Hofer’s original definition of nostalgia in order to re-introduce homesickness as a crucial part of understanding the longing of nostalgia and to examine “home” as a concept in which the material and psychological realms overlap. While time is certainly an important aspect of nostalgia, place seems to be an equally fundamental aspect of this concept that needs to be reconsidered. As mentioned previously, Hofer applied his version of nostalgia to victims of homesickness, but during the nineteenth century the definition shifted to a temporal loss, essentially a kind of “timesickness.” However, the emphasis on physical locations, movement between locations, and physical structures in modernist literature suggests that this longing is for something more than time itself. I believe that the pain, or *algia* of nostalgia stems not just from a longing to return home, but perhaps more so from the fact that “home” no longer *feels* like home anymore. Time impacts one’s perception of a place and makes it feel different even though it may not have changed physically. Nostalgia specifically longs not for an opportunity to go back in time, but longs for a place, or space, in which one can be outside or beyond the effects of modernity but still exist in the present. It seems natural that one would turn to home as a place of stability in an unstable present, but I suggest that the realm of the personal is just as subject to the consequences of modernity as is the public realm, and nostalgia mourns the loss of a place that has been perceived as being uncorrupted by capitalism.
Approaching Nostalgia Through Psychoanalytic and Cultural Studies Theories

I employ two primary methods of analysis in this dissertation, the first being a psychoanalytic perspective. Psychoanalytic theory enables me to explore nostalgia, and specifically the psychological wound that follows from a lost sense of home. I analyze how nostalgia confronts the traumatic impact of the abrupt social changes occurring in the twentieth century, changes such as the effects of World War I, anxieties about class mobility, and heightened consumerism. I examine the ways these changes in American culture and national identity impacted citizens on a personal level, as evidenced through the representation of character in modernist literature. Nostalgia is primarily a response to, or consequence of, what is discomforting or unfulfilling about the present. It involves a fixation, an obsession with the intersection of time and space, and acts as an interruption in the linear nature or narrative of history. In this way, nostalgia seems to be a psychological symptom resulting from a traumatic present. The early twentieth century is considered to be a turbulent transitional period, particularly in the United States, as a consequence of many factors—the shift from a primarily agricultural economy, World War I and the innovation in technological warfare, an increasingly complex sense of “American” identity due to a flood of immigration—. These de-stabilizing elements, for many, resulted in a blow to the psyche and traditional conceptions of knowledge and authenticity. It becomes significant that modernist writers explore the theme of modernity invading the domestic space of home in their work and highlight the identity crises that result within the minds of their characters.

The work of Sigmund Freud seems invaluable to this study primarily because of his preoccupation with the idea of departing and returning, and, in terms of nostalgia, departing from and returning to the past. One way in which Freud articulates the important role of “the return” is
in his influential 1919 essay “The Uncanny”. For Freud, the uncanny is ultimately the return of that which has been repressed and typically results in feelings of anxiety or terror. He describes the curious nature of the German word *heimlich* which means both “homelike, and familiar” and “concealment of that which should have remained hidden”. He states that “Among its different shades of meaning the word *heimlich* exhibits one which is identical with its opposite *unheimlich*. What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*” (Freud 156).  

In this way, then, the unheimlich, or uncanny, is that which is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. The relevance of this to my conception of nostalgia consists in the way I attribute the pain and anxiety of nostalgia to the sudden unfamiliarity or “unhomeliness” of home. Like Freud, I see this as being bound up with the concept of the self. He argues that in the development of the ego, one develops a “double” that serves a self-critical function or conscience in order to protect the “real” self from harm, and to take on the sense of being a separate and foreign projection of the self. Nostalgia not only shares this mode of strangeness of the familiar, but it also seems to take on

7 Freud illustrates his theory of the uncanny by using E.T.A. Hoffman’s story “The Sand-Man” and he focuses on the repetition of the theme of anxiety about losing one’s eyes. In the story, the protagonist, Nathanial, continually encounters a man who produces terror involving the threat of having one’s eyes stolen. He recognizes the Sand-Man over and over again, but instead of this familiar figure providing comfort, Nathanial is driven to madness as he associates the Sand-Man with the murder of his father. Freud connects this story to the Oedipal myth and suggests that the fear about losing one’s eyes is a return of the repressed castration anxiety, particularly in regard to Nathanial’s father’s death. See Freud, “The Uncanny” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 154-166.
the function of self-protection as reality is perceived as a threat to the fragile identity of the subject.

In my dissertation, I apply psychoanalysis to the characters of the novels in my study by focusing on the way that nostalgia becomes an attempt to reconcile the psychological doubling that occurs as they struggle between their past and present selves. The major characters of these novels seem to lead double lives, one life that represents the past and is typically regarded as an “authentic” self, and one life that represents the present self and conforms to societal changes and expectations. Freud’s theory of the uncanny seems helpful in understanding the apparent identity crisis that occurs within the characters when they confront the conflicting values inherent in the two sides of themselves. Most often, the anxiety and feelings of strangeness that characters develop occur when they are secluded within their homes, often the intersecting point of their private and public lives. Houses take on a sense of being “unhomely” as they reflect the unease of their owners’ minds and gradually lose their ability to provide comfort and security. The objects within the homes frequently provoke instances of the uncanny within the characters as they are reminders of the past removed from their context and situated in the present where they seem out of place. Despite the discomfort and sense of loss that often accompany these objects in the characters’ homes, the feelings of nostalgia prompted by them can simultaneously initiate a process of adaptation as the pleasant memories associated with the objects allow their owners to withstand the uncertainty of the present and thereby allow for an integration of past and present selves.

The theme of departing and returning plays a major role in another of Freud’s influential works, *Moses and Monotheism*. He claims that the act of departure is what ultimately allows for the return of a repressed trauma and illustrates this through his example of Moses leading the
Hebrews out of Egypt. He wants to explain the history of persecution of the Jews through this example and suggests that the repression of the murder of Moses keeps re-appearing in traces during the formation of Judaism and its interaction with the Christian religion. For Freud, then, return is not simply a familiar experience that is identical to the original moment, but it is always a blend of what is known in combination with that which is new or foreign. In terms of nostalgia, Freud’s work illuminates the way departure from home initiates a process of trauma that appears in repeated, often obsessive, preoccupation with a representation of the past that simultaneously demands and resists a return.8

The psychological connection between home and identity has perhaps been explored most prominently by ethnic studies theorists who examine the role of displacement in the development of cultural identification. They suggest that the security that coincides with a sense of belonging, a feeling of “at-homeness” is complicated when one is removed from his or her native land and must assimilate to a foreign culture. The effects of such dislocation include intense longing for

8 See Freud, Moses and Monotheism, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1939). Influential trauma theorist Cathy Caruth uses Moses and Monotheism to show how trauma cannot fully be understood by the victim in the moment itself, but can only be experienced belatedly and through engagement with an “other”, or witness. Caruth expands the concept of representation and states, “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence”. See Caruth, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) 18, 57-72.
one’s homeland or feeling an absence of home, a kind of cultural homelessness, so that separation from a place leads to alienation both from the external world as well as the self. This type of nostalgia, a desire to return to a sense of home that seems lost, or never even existed, is a longing for space, one in which a person can feel at home within a new culture. John J. Su in *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* devotes a chapter specifically to nostalgic homelands and connects the concept of the lost home inherent in nostalgia to recent scholarship on “place” as a set of social relations. He considers authors’ uses of nostalgia in contemporary literature to be an “ethical” practice in that their interest lies not in reproducing the past but in imagining “what might have been” in order to examine what is lacking in the present. He states, “Nostalgia…encourages an imaginative exploration of how present systems of social relations fail to address human needs, and the specific objects of nostalgia—lost or imagined homelands—represent efforts to articulate alternatives” (Su 5). He refutes the idea of nostalgia as promoting inauthentic experiences or a retreat from reality. Focusing on post-World War II novels, Su

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9 I share the view of Su’s text regarding the potential of nostalgia, yet he has a different sense of the role that home plays in nostalgia. Su argues that nostalgia stems from an ethical longing to imagine the idealized visions of past as being applied in a realistic way to the present. For me, the importance of home lies in the idea that an expanded notion of the term is necessary in the modern world with its disorienting effects. The comfort and security associated with home, as idealized as they may be, must transcend a simple, closed notion of home in favor of fluid, shifting conceptions that can be incorporated as part of an individual’s identity to sustain him/her in an unstable world.
argues that nostalgia acts as a catalyst for exploration of ideals to be applied to an unsatisfying present.

Although Su refers to nostalgia as a result of physical displacement and its role in formulating ethnic identity, I apply his theory to my dissertation by arguing that the negotiation between past and present that allows for cultural assimilation also arises when one feels separated from his or her own self as a result of societal change. Just as Su believes that cultural assimilation is a process of referencing one’s past and incorporating it in ways that supplement one’s present, I argue that nostalgia plays a crucial role in the determination of self as one adapts to present circumstances by contemplating which elements of his or her past identity are needed to provide satisfaction in the present and which elements should be left in the past. Unlike Su, however, I do not necessarily view nostalgia as an act of revision, which would imply that the present should be perceived in deference to the past. My own theory suggests that the present is not a condition to be fixed but should be considered an ever-evolving process that borrows from and enriches our understanding of the past in an attempt to reconcile whom we were with whom we are becoming.

In addition to applying psychoanalytic theory to the twentieth-century novels American novels in my study, I combine this approach with cultural materialism as I study this literature’s depiction of houses and other material objects as being imbued with nostalgia. The characters of these novels treat their houses as though they are impenetrable fortresses that could preserve their idealistic desires and protect their private lives from being infiltrated by the corruption and homogenization of modernity. The house and other material objects act as reminders of the past, and possession of these things is an attempt to access that past or at least establish a connection to it. Though the seeming goal is to find a retreat free from modernity’s influence, it becomes
clear that the private house is not impervious to the effects of capitalism. In fact, houses and other commodities are marketed as being authentic representations of a bygone era. As a result, the consumption of so-called nostalgia objects participates in the capitalist marketplace and sustains a longing for a place entirely separate from modernity. The preoccupation with houses and the values those homes represent seem to express characters’ wishes not for a return to a time prior to industrialization, but a place that exists in the present that can provide comfort amidst the rapid changes of society. Nostalgia, then, becomes a reaction to the fact that such an autonomous space does not exist and attempts to maintain a critical position, not outside of modernity, but through it.

The early twentieth century saw the emergence of an entire industry devoted to the production of houses and even whole communities were created and marketed as being nostalgic, or done in traditional styles. In addition, clothing, music, agricultural products, and other material goods signified connections to the past that could be bought and sold. By examining the preoccupations that characters seem to have with these commodities, I show that industries anticipated the anxiety that would emerge alongside the rise of modernity and capitalized on these insecurities. Objects that promised a return to tradition made industrialization more palatable to the American public by seeming to be untainted by modernity while operating within it. Despite engaging within and contributing to commodity culture, there still seemed to be a strong impulse amongst Americans to reject the rapid societal changes made in the name of progress. Cultural productions, particularly houses, in American twentieth-century literature reflect the attempt, but ultimately the failure, to create a place that was entirely free from the alienating effects of modernity.
My study not only employs psychoanalysis; it also uses cultural studies methodology in order to demonstrate the importance of understanding nostalgia as an issue that is at once psychological and material. The physical object, defined in this study as the early twentieth-century house, functions as a substitute for that which appears to be lacking on a metaphysical level. Perhaps the most compelling examination of the interrelatedness of subjects and objects is the work of Bill Brown. The originator of what he calls “thing theory,” Brown believes that “things” cannot be reduced to mere objects and actually have ideas attached to them. “Taken literally,” Brown explains, “the belief that there are ideas in things amounts to granting them an interiority and, thus, something like the structure of subjectivity…the modernist’s fetishized thing—excised from the world of consumer culture, isolated, refocused, doted upon, however momentarily—is meant to be saved from the fate of the mass-produced object,” (7-8). He believes that things do not simply amount to commodities to be bought and sold. Our interactions with things, he continues, are not necessarily determined by their practical functions, but by their ability to embody the values we project upon them in an attempt to unify the self. In early twentieth-century literature, houses become more than just part of the setting; they become sites of nostalgic longing and reflect the isolation of the characters within them. Although Brown asserts that the modernists focused on things in order to suggest that they were more than just commodities, I question whether things can ever be entirely “excised from the world of

10 Brown cites William Carlos Williams’s maxim regarding literary modernism “no ideas but in things” and suggests that the writing of this period dramatizes the interiority/exteriority dichotomy of things. See Brown, A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 9.
consumer culture” and suggest that they function as representations of the self as well as cultural commodities. Early twentieth-century writers reveal that while the conspicuous consumption associated with modernity seemed to pose a threat to traditional ideals, consumption of material objects also allowed people to cope with their anxieties and adapt to a new way of life by working through, rather than outside of, their present society.

Authenticity and the Acquisition of Identity

A crucial factor in conceptualizing nostalgia is the fact that this notion presupposes that there is such a thing as authenticity of experience since the present in its immediacy seems flawed in relation to the idealized past. Nostalgia is a reaction to the supposed inauthentic quality of the present, and particularly the consumerism driving the industrialization of American culture. Many people of twentieth-century society associated the loss of security in traditional ways of life that accompanied modernity with a loss of identity. Rather than seeing the changes caused by the new era as an evolution of self, some perceived such changes as a negation of self, the potential disappearance of who they essentially were. Abigail Cheever explains that authenticity remains a persistent concern in twentieth-century culture and implies that its centrality as a theme stems from a nostalgia for subjectivity that has not been entirely constructed by society: “For the most part, critics of recent narrative fiction and film suggest that in the absence of a singular and unified self, authenticity as well appears as an absence, as a lost purity for which the contemporary subject mourns” (16). Nostalgia becomes a way for the

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11 Cheever writes about authenticity in the context of post-WWII American literature and film. She argues that the second half of the twentieth century saw a shift in concerns about what it meant to be authentic as she notes the transition from a concept of the “phony” to what she terms
modern subject, particularly those characters of early twentieth-century literature that I examine in the chapters that follow, to respond to the crisis of adapting to cultural change while still trying to maintain a stable sense of self that can withstand such change. These characters struggle with the feeling that they must perform a role in public that feels shallow in relation to a perceived authentic sense of self that can only exist when they are alienated from society. They typically align the superficiality they feel with the consumer culture in which they live, which generates resentment toward modernity in general and leads to isolation and retreat into nostalgic memories. What these characters do not take into account is that a crucial element of nostalgia is the fact that it is an idealized version of the past, not the past as it actually occurred, so attempts to access an authentic sense of self through nostalgia, paradoxically, only lead to further inauthentic relationships to the present.

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a “real phony”. She uses examples from literature to illustrate her point by citing Haas, Holden’s headmaster in *Catcher in the Rye*, as a quintessential phony who conforms to societal norms and denies his true feelings, and she contrasts him with Holly Golightly from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* who is labeled a real phony because she “believes all this crap she believes” (Capote 29). Cheever believes, “A phony performs social norms that do not represent her authentic identity, while a real person is someone who is all authenticity, for whom there is no difference between a performative and authentic self. Holly, however, is like a phony in that her beliefs are perfectly in accordance with social norms, but she is real insofar as those beliefs are all she has.” See Cheever, *Real Phonies: Cultures of Authenticity in Post-World War II America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 15.
In the novels I examine, one of the primary ways that characters attempt to recapture an authenticity experienced as lost is through the acquisition of material objects that connote the tradition and allow the owners of these objects to hold onto pieces of the past amidst the bewildering anxieties of the present. The prevalence of early twentieth-century mass-production characterized the early twentieth century and became emblematic of a growing emphasis on progress and efficiency. However, in the midst of a cultural emphasis on homogenization and easily-reproducible products arose a competing interest in creating originals and unique material goods that could retain value in and of themselves. Miles Orvell addresses this obsession with “the real thing” that became prominent alongside the industrial impulse in America,

…the tension between imitation and authenticity is a primary category in American civilization, pervading layers of our culture that are usually thought to be separate, from commercial design and advertising to literature. More specifically, I argue in this book that a major shift occurred within the arts and material culture from the late nineteenth century to the twentieth century, a shift from a culture in which the arts of imitation and illusion were valorized to a culture in which the notion of authenticity became of primary value (xv).¹²

¹² Orvell notes how products were specifically marketed as being authentic or “the real thing” even though they were still easily-manufactured copies. He includes a photo of a 1916 advertisement in *Country Life* magazine for furniture that used slogans such as “just like original colonial furniture”, “They look antique”, and “They are reproduced from the finest examples of the old pieces.” See Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 165-167.
Though modernization threatened to completely sever the ties between past and present, material things that hearkened back to an earlier style or gave the illusion of embodying tradition became crucial in filling the psychological void left in the past’s wake. Orvell also cites the American identity crisis between longing for the past and the potential for the future that manifested itself particularly in architecture of the time. He claims, “This division may be found symbolized in American architecture: a neat reproduction of the colonial mansion—with some modern comforts introduced surreptitiously—stands beside the skyscraper. The American Will inhabits the skyscraper; the American Intellect inhabits the colonial mansion….The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition,” (Orvell 152). These seeming contradictions in architecture worked their way into the modern novel as well, and writers highlight houses themselves as well as the things within them to show how modern subjects attempted to fuse these hybrid material homes with their mental conceptions of home in order to maintain an authentic sense of self.

In examining the relationship between material objects and identity in early twentieth century literature, I clarify how complicated the role of nostalgia became during the period as it expressed both a longing for traditional authenticity and an endorsement of modern consumerism. I demonstrate how nostalgia as a protection of authentic American identity and traditional values was deemed incapable of entirely rejecting modernity, but it actively participated in the cultural logic of capitalism. As mentioned previously regarding Miles Orvell’s study of the American interest in “the real thing,” nostalgia itself became a cultural commodity and products were valued for their ability to conform to an illusion of authenticity. Elizabeth Outka in her exceptional book Consuming Traditions notes the marketing trend of attempting to promote items as being nostalgic, or hearkening back to a simpler time, while at the same time
presenting them as modern, or easily re-made or reproducible. This marketing strategy is what Outka refers to as the “commodified authentic.” Although this seems a contradiction of terms, Outka claims that it is precisely the paradox itself that was appealing to consumers. As she states, “The term does not imply a search for authenticity per se but rather a search for a sustained contradiction that might allow consumers to be at once connected to a range of values roughly aligned with authenticity and yet also to be fully modern (4-5).” She suggests that this commodified authentic became a way for people to more easily transition from Victorian-era values to those of modernity because it appealed to both their conservative and progressive tendencies. I argue that this logic of a sustained nostalgia that incorporates modernity became crucial in the early twentieth-century novel as writers attempted to maintain a critical position within modern society itself rather than outside of it; they expressed the longing for a space that

13 Outka emphasizes the relationship between cultural products and literary productions, claiming that they both sought to maintain the contradiction of the commodified authentic as she argues, “…developments in town planning and in architecture radically shifted the way communities were structured and the way houses were built, and the power of these transitions in turn spilled into literature, as novelists and playwrights depicted and savagely critiqued the move to construct apparently old towns and seemingly old homes. Yet surprisingly, the appetite for old-new hybrids was also shared by writers, architects, and consumers alike, who all recognized that the emerging power of commerce to produce nostalgic environments was a critical way to negotiate the difficult transition into modernity.” See Outka, Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism, and the Commodified Authentic (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.
would preserve a kind of middle ground that would neither allow tradition to disappear nor ignore the realities of modern society.

Beyond their function in perpetuating nostalgia for a lost past, and thereby a lost identity, material objects were also marketed as a way to actualize one’s potential to be an authentic member of upper-class society, a strategy that was particularly directed at women. While mass-produced objects were advertised as being traditional so that they promised a return to one’s lost past, these products also suggested that consumers could *transcend* their pasts and become the authentic selves that they desired. Lori Merish explains that the marketing industry appealed specifically to women in this regard and manufactured a link between being a “real” woman and the purchase of material goods:

> The feminization of consumption in the late eighteenth century partook of new ideas, derived from eighteenth-century pietistic Protestantism and the emerging political discourse of liberalism, about gender, women’s role in the public sphere, and the ‘civilizing’ power of an array of mediating material forms—including luxury commodities and the bodies of ‘refined’ and gracious women. (2-3)

Products constituted the authority of aristocratic tradition and mimicked styles that suggested old money affiliation as class became associated not only with wealth, but with respectability and goodness; consumption was expected as a requirement to becoming a good woman. Such implications are apparent in the novels that I examine as female characters are portrayed as being far more accepting of a commercialized modernity than the male protagonists who are depicted as harboring resentment toward these women. Consumption becomes a means for women of early twentieth-century society to establish an authentic sense of belonging within their culture as material possessions promise full possession of one’s feminine identity.
Chapter Synopsis

In my first chapter, I examine the first of three early twentieth-century American texts that explicitly exhibit nostalgia, *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton, and focus on her representation of the conflict between the longing for the comfort and order of tradition on the one hand and the fascination with the emergence of modernity on the other, a conflict that seems particularly relevant in regard to Wharton’s response to the devastation of the First World War. Even though Wharton’s novel takes place in the 1870s, nearly fifty years prior to the time that she was writing, her depiction of Old New York remembered from her childhood reveals her complex view of nostalgia. Though she clearly expresses nostalgia for the structural stability of the social hierarchy of her youth, she also points out how societal expectations could lead to suppression of free thinking in favor of an emphasis on obligation and tradition. While she does not directly address the modern cultural concerns occurring at the time the novel was written, Wharton ultimately points to nostalgia as a way of coping with the anxieties that accompanied modernity. She insists that adhering to traditions of the past is imperative for building a foundation that makes the chaotic present more manageable and facilitates cultural advancement. Wharton’s view of nostalgia is intimately connected with her interest in architecture and design principles. She argues that, like great buildings and monuments, a great society must draw upon historical precedent and integrate classic fundamentals with innovations specific to the present. The houses that are represented in *The Age of Innocence* reflect the tension underlying Wharton’s vision of nostalgia; while houses are used, particularly by the upper class, as an attempt to preserve the past and protect against threats to the social order that exist in the rapidly-changing world beyond this cultural microcosm, they also isolate their owners from the rest of society and keep them from adapting to present circumstances. Houses are meant to symbolize
the minds of their inhabitants and express the boundaries in place when forming an identity in relation to one’s past. For Newland Archer, the novel’s main male character, the boundaries between self and society, as represented by the study of his house and the outside world, respectively, are rigid and create personal conflict. He feels forced to choose a life that honors his past and his relationship with Ellen Olenska, the novel’s female protagonist, that reflects his “authentic” desires, or he must choose a life of responsibility with his fiancée, May Welland, that will provide for his future and fulfill his need for social approval. Newland’s identity crisis is initially prompted by the distinct differences between the two women’s homes and how they approach their relationships to the past: May decorates her home in accord with the traditions passed down from her parents, never veering from societal expectations, while Ellen defies convention and designs her home based on her evolving individual style. Through her characters’ relationships to the houses in which they live, Wharton identifies nostalgia not as a way of restoring an old way of life or revising the present, but as a way of negotiating the present by presenting which elements of the past should remain and which should not.

Chapter two focuses on *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and like *The Age of Innocence*, this novel depicts life of the New York upper class and the way nostalgia acts as both a way of upholding traditional ideals and escaping them. For Fitzgerald, nostalgia is primarily a motivational force that allows one to use fond memories of the past to adapt and improve oneself in the present. Unlike Wharton’s Newland Archer who, like herself, was born into the upper class, Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, like Fitzgerald himself, works to become a member of the social elite and uses nostalgia as a way to confirm his sense of belonging. It is through Gatsby’s acquisition of-- and engagement with-- material possessions that he expresses his longing for an aristocratic past of which he was never a part. His house and the objects within it are meant to
authenticate Gatsby’s status as a traditional upper class gentleman because these material goods, though mass-produced in the present, are meant to be associated with Old World affluence and prestige. Essentially, for the right price Gatsby is able to buy the identity he has always wanted and become the man he always felt he was meant to be, a man worthy of his beloved Daisy Buchanan. The novel ultimately expresses Fitzgerald’s ambivalent feelings about capitalism; modernity’s increasing emphasis on material wealth opened the way for social advancement as one could earn his or her status instead of being born into privilege, yet Fitzgerald also recognized that such a system exploited those without access to opportunities to enhance their wealth and left them morally degraded and desperate, as evidenced by his depiction of George Wilson. Although it is through the consumption of objects marketed as being nostalgic that Gatsby is able to lay claim to traditional ideals, his tragic flaw, as Fitzgerald presents it, is his belief that these objects will allow him to actually repeat the past and his idealized romance with Daisy instead of allowing him to integrate the past with the present and accept that time has changed the nature of their relationship. Fitzgerald suggests that in order to establish one’s identity in the present it is necessary to negotiate a balance that allows his characters to maintain a connection to the past, as well as break with tradition in order to re-invent themselves. In the novel, material objects facilitate this process as they embody memories of the past but allow their owners to become someone new simply by possessing them. Fitzgerald does not endorse Gatsby’s claim that the past can be repeated nor does he reject Gatsby’s taking advantage of modern consumerism. Instead he sees the potential of capitalism as a way of attaining one’s goals, but he recognizes that it is nostalgia that makes integration of one’s ideal self into present reality possible.
The third and final chapter concludes with an examination of *The Professor’s House* by Willa Cather, a novel which highlights the role that nostalgia plays in the creation of art as well as the creation of identity. Instead of focusing on New York high society like Wharton and Fitzgerald do, Cather examines Professor Godfrey St. Peter’s family and their interactions in their old and new houses along Lake Michigan. In particular, the novel concentrates on the influence that the Professor’s academic protégé, Tom Outland, has on the family and how they respond to the loss of him in battle during World War I. Cather’s concerns lie with the role that nostalgia plays in promoting creative inspiration and the production of great art. Despite her insistence in her non-fiction essay “The Novel Démeublé,” the unfurnished novel, that literature has been too cluttered with material objects and their descriptions to allow for the play of emotions necessary for artistic expression, in *The Professor’s House* Cather shows that materialism is crucial in providing comfort that allows for imaginative exploration. Professor St. Peter conveys his nostalgia for his life as a young father and scholar full of promise, and he clings to the old house and the possessions within it that remind him of his past. Tom’s excavation of the Blue Mesa cliff dwellings leads him to long for the lost Indian culture that inhabited them, and possession of the artifacts from their homes becomes a way for him to feel affiliated with these people. Material objects perform two functions in Cather’s novel: they commemorate the past and provide access to a time that no longer exists, and they inspire creative production in the present. Cather implies that nostalgic loss is imperative in the creation of art because production becomes a way of invoking past emotional experiences and adapting them so that they can exist in the present. Physical objects act as reminders of the past and become constants against which one can process emotional reactions to the present. *The Professor’s House* also conveys Cather’s nostalgia for life in which domesticity and intellectual
expression were inextricable. With the proliferation of consumer culture came a division between the domestic realm (as being primarily feminine) and the intellectual realm (as being primarily masculine). The Professor attempts to keep these two aspects of his life separate and resents his domestic responsibilities as taking away from intellectual pursuits. Cather reveals, however, that it is when St. Peter is most engaged in his family life, particularly through his friendship with Tom Outland, that he is the most intellectually productive and able to complete his life’s work. Finally, Cather reveals that nostalgia becomes a means of integrating past and present to allow for the creation of a new identity. This is particularly evident in Tom Outland who cherishes his memories of his time on the Blue Mesa but is able to slowly let go of it enough to adapt to the changing modern world. Tom ultimately embraces modernity and becomes an inventor so that his technological advancement can impact the future. However, upon his death, the St. Peter family appropriates Tom’s identity using him as a nostalgic object that means something different to each of them. Cather raises questions of public consumption of history and a collective American identity and asks whether public access to objects from the past contributes to historical consciousness or erodes historical specificity. Significantly, members of the St. Peter family are concerned that the construction of the house museum, Outland, will lead to a distortion of Tom’s image once his identity, as represented by house and the objects within it, becomes accessible to the general public, yet the St. Peters themselves revise and contradict each other’s conceptions of Tom to fit with their individual relationships to the past. Cather concludes that while direct knowledge of history is not possible except through personal experience, she suggests that interaction with objects that inspire nostalgia for the past prompts contemplation of personal identity in relation to collective identity, a process imperative for negotiating the present.
Backward Glances and Distant Homes: Edith Wharton, Nostalgia, and the European Cultural Tradition

Edith Wharton has been understood as a nostalgic writer, one who often turned to the affluent New York society of her childhood as subject matter for her writing. Wharton’s tendency to avoid representing the conflicts and turmoil of her own present moment in favor of depicting the subdued, privileged, and at times even trivial world of her youth led readers and critics alike to refrain from seriously considering her work, particularly within the context of literary modernism. Alfred Bendixen has noted objections to Wharton’s work that are common among critics:

Some complained of Wharton’s essential conservatism—her apparent indifference or disdain for the working class, her nostalgia for a more civilized past, her devotion to the trappings of upper-class society. Others objected to her lack of literary experimentation, her preference for old-fashioned realistic modes such as the novel of manners instead of the more radical forms of structure that marked the modern novel. Edith Wharton seemed stereotyped as a writer who would appear increasingly out of touch with the sensibilities of the twentieth century. (vii)

In this sense, Wharton’s nostalgic sensibility was viewed as being primarily negative and has often led to her omission from the American modernist canon due to her seeming incapacity and unwillingness to represent the complicated post-World War I present.
More recently, critics have sought to reconsider Wharton’s writing as more progressive, more political, and ultimately more consistent with the work of her modernist contemporaries. Such critics have claimed that Wharton presents the world of her affluent upbringing in order to critique its emphasis on material wealth, status, and restrictive social codes. Jennifer Haytock, for one, emphasizes Wharton’s complicated relationship to modernism:

Wharton concerned herself closely with the ideas of modernism: the break from Victorianism, the impact of World War I on the individual and society, the isolated self, the possibilities and limitations of language, and the nature of the artist and the artist’s role in society—it is on these last issues that she differs most from modern writers, and these differences are the source of her greater unease with the modernist movement. (1)

Others have noted Wharton’s representation of more “modern” women in her texts, ones who flout traditional feminine roles in favor of more empowered positions within society. Even the formal conventions of her work have been reassessed as being more experimental than she has

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15 Haytock refers to Amy Kaplan’s assessment of Wharton’s “uneasy dialogue” with modernism despite her objections to certain aspects of the movement such as breaking from the past and overemphasis on form. See Kaplan, “Edith Wharton’s Profession of Authorship,” *ELH* 53 (Summer 1986): 433-457

16 See Jamie Barlow, “No Innocence in This Age: Edith Wharton’s Commercialization and Commodification.”
previously been given credit for and reflect characteristics associated with modernism. For instance, Betsy Klimasmith argues that Wharton’s Pulitzer Prize-winning, and most nostalgic, novel *The Age of Innocence* returns to the past in order to revise more traditional notions of time: “Although some do not consider Wharton part of the modernist canon, the novel experiments with memory and time based on the author’s interest in science and her experience during World War I. It is not simply escapist nostalgia, but both reinforces and disrupts the historical novel form” (557).\(^\text{17}\) In this light, Wharton returns to the past in order to experiment with the potential of modern literature to simultaneously reflect the ruptures of time and memory that emerge with modernity and represent the persistence of a historical connection that continues to inform the present. Although assessments of Wharton’s nostalgia have been divided into these two opposing paradigms—regressive or progressive—I argue that to qualify her work as one or the other is reductive. Indeed, what is crucial to examine is how nostalgia functions in her work, especially in relation to Wharton’s role as a writer during the early twentieth century. I suggest in what follows that Wharton collapses the binary between regressive and progressive by representing nostalgia as a tension between the traditional and the modern that reflects her ambivalent attitudes regarding modernity and literature’s place within it.

\(^{17}\) Klimasmith notes Wharton’s interest in the modern theories of time that emerged after World War I, particularly those of Henri Bergson and Albert Einstein and claims *The Age of Innocence* collapses distinctions between public versus private time and tradition versus transcendence, effectively becoming a work that “both maintains and subverts the historical novel’s form” (“Salvaging History: Modern Philosophies of Memory and Time in *The Age of Innocence*,” *American Literature* 80 (September 2008): 557).
The question of nostalgia and the cultural politics of nostalgia can best be approached through her representation of home. For Wharton, the concept of home was a complicated one, as I show in the first section of this chapter which focuses on Wharton’s lifelong belief in the connection between architecture and cultural authority. In *The Age of Innocence* the complicated conception of home becomes evident in her preoccupation with places, the houses of the characters Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska in particular. While Wharton’s depiction of her New York childhood home has been cited by some critics as a sentimental journey back to her idealized youth, this return is not without its share of anguish and disillusionment. Wharton maintained a unique position as an expatriate American writer living in Europe briefly in her youth and then settling in France permanently in her adulthood. In the short time that she lived abroad in her childhood, Wharton became completely captivated by European culture, in particular its architecture and landscapes. Upon returning to New York, she found her American home seemed to pale in comparison to the grandeur of what she had seen in Europe, noting particularly a lack of beauty and strength in American architectural structures. This architectural sensibility and a keen eye for beauty continually made its way into Wharton’s work, first in her non-fiction book on interior design, *The Decoration of Houses*, and later in her fiction, perhaps most apparently in *The Age of Innocence*.

In the second section of the chapter, I show how great attention is paid in the novel to the way in which characters’ homes are extensions of themselves and the society in which they are situated. Wharton ultimately reveals that houses embody the complicated nature of nostalgia. While these physical structures are meant to protect tradition and keep undesirable entities out, her writing demonstrates that these structures simultaneously imprison the characters within them and prevent them from engaging meaningfully with anything beyond their own front doors.
Houses function almost as museums that nostalgically preserve memories of the past and provide security from the instabilities of the modern world, but these structures, as Wharton’s writing makes clear, also isolated their owners as they retreat into memory rather than adapting to the present.

_The Age of Innocence_ reflects Wharton’s own conflicted position as a post-World War I writer who is simultaneously intrigued and horrified by the modern world. Living in France for much of her adult life, Wharton was profoundly affected by the devastation of the Great War, and she notes that one of the most excruciating consequences of this conflict was the loss of some of France’s most beautiful architectural works. She believed that the demolition of these structures signaled the demise of the European cultural tradition and its power. Admittedly, during this tumultuous post-World War I era, Wharton represents in her novels not the loss and uncertainty of the present, but focuses on the entitled and privileged classes. Readers have construed the focus of her writing as a tactic of escapism, a refusal to engage with the complicated present, a longing to return to a world without the knowledge of the atrocities of World War I.

However, I argue that Wharton’s nostalgia is more complex than this, particularly in section three of my chapter where I discuss her sense of art both as a means of reviving a waning connection to European cultural ideals and as a commodity within the marketplace. I discuss how Wharton’s novel promotes the possibility of the twentieth-century artist’s return to a privileged and valued position within society like those artists of prior generations. This nostalgia for art as an impetus for cultural cohesion and social change could ultimately provide a new role for the artist in the post-World War I world. Additionally, I reveal that Wharton’s interest in the marketing of her novel and her active acknowledgment of her work as a product to
be bought and sold are evidence that, despite being perceived primarily as a nostalgist from whose work contemporary concerns were absent, she participated in and was accepting of modernity just as much as her contemporaries were. As Alan Price argues, in her real life Wharton was very actively involved in finding ways to help those devastated by the Great War: “No other artist did so much to alleviate suffering among the refugees from Belgium and the occupied provinces of northern France or was able to enlist such a variety of fellow artists in such a broad range of projects to raise money for the war homeless” (219). 18 While Wharton seems to yearn for a release from the anxieties of the present, she does not wish to “return home” to the New York of her youth. Instead, her novel reflects a longing for the order and structure she

remembers from her upbringing in order to recuperate the disorder and uncertainty threatening her beloved European culture. The upper class society in which she grew up thrived on strict codes of behavior that helped to reinforce one’s elite status. Although such a system bred classism and the exclusion of those who did not adhere to its social mores, Wharton believed that the aristocracy’s emphasis on tradition garnered from classic European antecedents could be incorporated into the modern world to provide a foundation on which the present society could advance. In other words, Wharton’s object of desire is not old New York, but New Europe. Wharton, as I discuss below, is not as interested in restoring an old way of life, but in transforming the current one, and using traditional ideals to do so. Unlike what Svetlana Boym terms *restorative nostalgia*, which suggests a longing to replace the present with an idealized version of the past, Wharton revisits her past in an attempt to recall the comforting elements of her upbringing and adapt them to the present as a way of easing the transition into modernity.

Section four of the chapter contends that Wharton’s interest in nostalgia collapses distinctions between tradition and progress in favor of a sustained tension between these two concepts, and this act of negotiation manifests itself in Wharton’s text in her depiction of the library as a space for reflection. The novel interrogates the usefulness of boundaries between public and private life and shows that even the site of the library as a place where one contemplates his or her most personal thoughts is still impacted by societal pressures and expectations. It is within the library that Newland must continually adapt his identity by nostalgically looking to his past with Ellen and figuring out ways to be content in his present life with May. Although the library might be initially viewed as a way for Newland to escape his responsibilities or dwell in an alternate existence resembling the past, he does not and cannot
linger there forever, and instead the space functions more as a vantage point from which he can understand and improve his current life by looking through the lens of the past.

The final section of the chapter examines Newland’s assessment of his life at the conclusion of the novel and explores gaps and overlaps in the concepts of idealism and reality. Rather than lamenting the life he chose or regretting what could have been, Newland realizes that he was content with the life he lived. What makes this possible is his differentiation between his “real” life, the life of his imagination, and his actual life, the life that gained meaning in comparison with his “real” life. It is nostalgia that allows Newland to understand what will make his personal fulfillment possible in that his memories of an idealized past can sustain him when his actual life seems dull or lacking. Just as Newland understands that an actual return to his past life with Ellen is neither possible nor desirable for him, Wharton suggests that the world of the past that she depicts in her novel should not act as a replacement or a goal for modernity, but can reveal insights about life post-World War I and provide ideas about how to thrive within it. The Age of Innocence does not ignore, but actively responds to Wharton’s modern present as she turns to the past in order to recall the signifiers of order and stability from her youth: old New York’s strict social codes and the authority of European culture. In examining Wharton’s novel, I employ both psychoanalytic and cultural materialist approaches in order to define nostalgia as a response to both a psychic disruption of the characters’ concepts of home as well as physical manifestations of the past within the actual houses in which the characters live. Ultimately, Wharton’s interest in architecture manifests itself in the construction of her novel, and reflects her ambivalent relationship with modernity as she turns backward to examine the physical and social structures of her childhood acknowledging both the limitations and uses of tradition within the context of the post-war world.
Wharton’s Architectural Foundations

Though old New York is the background for much of Wharton’s work, the vividness with which she articulates the intricacies of this society seems to emerge in its relation to Europe and reflects how she conceptualized her two diverse childhood homes. Born into affluence and a preoccupation with social convention, Edith (Jones) Wharton was knowledgeable about the interests and fears of the New York upper class. As a member of the powerful Jones clan, other New York aristocrats looked to her family for guidance in maintaining status and material wealth. In fact, although it has never been definitively confirmed, the saying “keeping up with the Joneses” has been attributed to her family (Benstock 26). Yet despite their influential place within old New York, even the Joneses were threatened by potential financial hardships. Like many other affluent families within their society, Wharton chose to spend a period abroad in Europe while regaining financial stability, a decision that would profoundly impact her for the rest of her life. Travelling through Italy and France specifically, Wharton was mesmerized by the striking visual impressions of European architecture and gardens and the grandeur that these settings evoked, citing in her autobiography *A Backward Glance* that in contrasting New York and Europe she distinguished between ugliness and beauty:

> My visual sensibility must always have been too keen for middling pleasures; my photographic memory of rooms and houses—even those seen but briefly, or at long intervals—was from my earliest years a source of inarticulate misery, for I was always vaguely frightened by ugliness…The chief difference was that the things about me were now not ugly but incredibly beautiful. (29)

European architecture adhered to traditional structural principles but also allowed for aesthetic creativity, and from Wharton’s perspective this contrasted greatly with the unremarkable,
uninspired buildings she remembered from the United States. However, the extent to which she was changed by her introduction to European culture was not entirely apparent to her until she returned home to New York. The “inarticulate misery” to which she refers was essentially a lack of creative stimulation. Upon coming back to the United States with its emphasis on cultural homogeneity rather than innovation, Wharton’s nostalgia for the aesthetic pleasures of Europe overshadowed an appreciation for her native home.

With her affinity for aesthetics sharpened by her stay in Europe, Wharton’s homecoming to New York was a shock as the place in which she grew up suddenly seemed unfamiliar and lacking in sophistication by comparison. This realization occurred for her most clearly when observing the architecture of New York and its homogenous structures that were, from her perspective, devoid of style and significance. Wharton recalls her first impressions upon her return home, stating, “I did not know how deeply I had felt the nobility and harmony of the great European cities till our steamer was docked at New York” (Backward 44). The awe-inspiring structures that she had left behind in Europe influenced how she saw what she described as the “little low-studded rectangular New York, cursed with its universal chocolate-coloured coating of the most hideous stone ever quarried, this cramped horizontal gridiron of a town without towers, porticoes, fountains or perspectives, hide-bound in its deadly uniformity of mean ugliness” (Backward 55). Though Wharton spent the remainder of her youth in New York and was very involved in old New York society, she longed for the creativity and beauty of the short-lived European home she had left behind. She lamented what she saw as Americans’ lack of both cultural innovation and capability to create structures that would inspire for generations to come. As Louis Auchincloss has noted in the introduction to A Backward Glance:

There was always an ambivalence in her feelings toward New York. On the one hand she
loved it for the very completeness of her understanding of it and for the richness of the material with which it supplied her...On the other hand she resented the smallness of its imagination, the dryness of its appreciations and its ever turned back (or at the most its condescending smile) towards everything that made life worthwhile to her. (xi)

Wharton’s time in Europe as a child seemed to give her a new vantage point from which to closely examine her New York home and prompted her to continually reflect on the unrealized potential of an unfulfilling present and the foundations of the past as the means of raising the standards of American culture to those of her beloved Europe. In one sense, Wharton’s emphasis on improving the cultural taste of Americans can simply be labeled as elitism, an affirmation of a class system based on exclusivity and prejudices. However, Wharton’s ambivalent attitudes about New York can be understood as a rejection of modernization with its detachment from tradition in favor of consumerism.

Memories of her influential time in Europe manifested themselves in a lingering interest in the construction and arrangement of architectural structures, and her first published work was a popular non-fiction book on interior design, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). Along with her friend and co-author Ogden Codman, Wharton argued that modern interiors were all too often cluttered with excessive decoration and ornament, and she ultimately called for a return to the architectural principles of the great European constructions so that those fundamentals might be applied to the interiors of American homes. Wharton argues:

modern architecture and decoration, having in many ways deviated from the paths which the experience of the past had marked out for them, can be reclaimed only by a study of the best models...Once this is clearly understood, it will be seen that the supposed conflict between originality and tradition is no conflict at all. (*Decoration* 11)
For Wharton, an absence of ties to a cultural past often resulted in a kind of aesthetic schizophrenia that would confound rather than inspire, and undoubtedly would not withstand the test of time. This influential non-fiction text was one of the first on interior design and the interest surrounding the book ultimately helped lead to the development of interior decorating as a profession. Wharton’s interests in blurring the line between interiors and exteriors and elevating the importance of maintaining connections to cultural antecedents eventually made their way into the construction of her fiction as well.

At least some of Wharton’s devotion to place, particularly in her fictional work, can be attributed to the influence of her friend, and fellow expatriate, Henry James. In James’s work, there consistently seems to be a connection between physical structures and their impact on the psyches of his characters, a connection which Wharton explored in her own writing. In his introduction to *The Age of Innocence*, R.W.B. Lewis discusses the importance of James in Wharton’s thinking:

> The exploitation of place as a basic fictional resource was something Edith Wharton had learned from James (and admired in Proust), and in none of her novels is her mastery of this resource more striking...It is a series of abortive efforts, finally crowded by partial success to move from the public and social to the private and personal—to find the *place* where Newland and Ellen can meet and mingle and communicate, to find the ground on which their love can be expressed. (xiv)

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Not only did James inspire Wharton to create hybrid spaces that blend exterior and interior life, but he also emphasized the importance of using the great literary traditions of the past to inform the direction in which new literature would head, a sentiment that Wharton blended with her own ideas about adherence to tradition in architecture. Liisa Stephenson also explains Wharton’s indebtedness to James as she argues:

Wharton, like James, follows Balzac’s example by conceiving of the novel as an architectural or constructed space: windows, thresholds, and furniture, as well as libraries and other interior spaces, figure centrally in her fiction...allow[ing] Wharton to articulate her central theory of the novel that literature, like architecture, must glance backwards before it can move forward. (1097)

The stylistic impression that James made upon Wharton’s work in terms of aligning writing with architecture is undeniable; however, she took the influences of those writers she admired and went beyond merely mimicking styles. Through her writing, a new vantage point from which to view the modern world that allowed her to see ways in which it both adhered to and deviated from tradition. Both in her writing and her personal life, she recognized that places had the capacity to leave an impression on the imagination that lasted long after departing from them.

Like other writers during the opening decades of the century, the impact of the Great War had a profound effect on Wharton’s thinking and her writing. Wharton remained in the United States for much of her adult life, living with her husband Edward (Teddy) Wharton in Massachusetts at The Mount, a home which she designed herself, but soon her privileged life would be encompassed by turmoil. While she travelled back and forth to Europe throughout her adulthood, the collapse of Wharton’s marriage, due to Teddy’s increasing mental instability, led her to return and settle in Paris permanently in 1911. Initially, Wharton was able to find solace
for her personal problems and felt reinvigorated by the European aesthetic pleasures surrounding her and her friendships. However, this escape from chaos was short-lived as the intrusion of the Great War shattered Wharton’s illusions of Europe as an impenetrable bastion of cultural tradition. Mary Carney observes, “It is poignant that the war intervened when Wharton had finally settled in a stimulating community and extricated herself from her difficult marriage” (110). In many ways, it seems that the carnage of World War I would prove to be the most devastating loss of her life, more so than the loss of her marriage, in that Wharton would witness the collapse of that which she had believed to be permanent and had informed nearly all aspects of her life, her European cultural home.

Particularly tragic for Wharton was the sight of the French monuments and buildings of her childhood memories reduced to rubble in the midst of warfare. To see the physical embodiments of a tradition which she viewed as culturally superior utterly destroyed by the war signaled for her the crumbling of the foundations upon which all great societies were built. More than just the fact that so many citizens were left homeless after their houses were bombed in battle, Wharton lamented the loss of such structures which reinforced intellectual and social life. This mourning for sites of cultural stability eventually made its way into her fiction. According to Annette Larson Benert, Wharton’s writings:

portray, rather literally, ‘man as a defenceless animal’ thrust not simply out of necessary shelter but out of the buildings and grounds that make human life and relationships possible…Wharton’s most substantial contribution to the literature of World War I…[is] the way she concretized her concerns, the realism with which she portrayed French civilization in the actual physical structures that the Germans threatened and destroyed. (“Edith” 323)
For Wharton, then, the demolition of physical objects severed attachments to the things which help ground identity and provide psychic stability, leaving those witnesses to this destruction disoriented, uncertain, and detached from their new nightmarish reality.

Like many of her contemporaries, Wharton felt devastated by the atrocities of the Great War and initially felt impotent in her ability to respond to the aftermath in any sort of meaningful way. Compared with her privileged upbringing, the present seemed an anomaly, a point of no return. Without a frame of reference to consider this new post-war condition, Wharton’s imagination seemed dulled and defeated. In her essay “A Little Girl’s New York,” published in 1938 shortly after her death, Wharton discusses this grim moment in her life and explains the disparity “between the customs of my youth and the world of even ten years ago [is] a mere crack in the ground compared with the chasm now dividing that world from the present one…Everything that used to form the fabric of our daily life has been torn in shreds, trampled on, destroyed” (356). As evidenced by her words, Wharton was less interested in creating her next literary work than she was simply in figuring out how to move forward from this catastrophe. Though she would represent World War I directly in her work several years later in novels such as A Son at the Front (1923), her first novel immediately after the war did not focus on the chaotic present, but turned back to the posh New York society of her youth and became what is considered to be her literary masterpiece, The Age of Innocence.

This decision to move away from the serious matters at hand, a fragmented and fragile modern world, in favor of an examination of the seeming trifles of upper class life and materialism may seem a strange one bordering on refusal to engage with the present, but Wharton’s motives make sense when one considers how this nostalgia functions in relation to her feelings of helplessness brought about by the Great War. In one sense, Wharton did merely want
to return to a world as yet untouched by the corruption of modernity. In order to resuscitate her creativity as a writer, which, itself, seemed yet another casualty of war, it became necessary for her to remove herself as best she could from a situation that defied artistic inspiration. She retreated to her imagination that had no memories of the war’s devastation and reflected on her relatively peaceful childhood. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton explains:

My spirit was heavy with these losses, but I could not sit still and brood over them. I wanted to put them into words, and in doing so I saw the years of the war, as I had lived them in Paris, with a new intensity of vision, in all their fantastic heights and depths of self-devotion and ardour, of pessimism, triviality and selfishness...But before I could settle down to this tale, before I could begin to deal objectively with the stored-up emotions of those years, I had to get away from the present altogether...I found a momentary escape in going back to my childish memories of a long-vanished America, and wrote *The Age of Innocence*. (368-69)

By retreating to the past through her literary imagination, she was able to transcend the restrictions of space and time to which she was bound in her real life and reconnect with her childhood self, one who was not jaded by the atrocities of the modern world. In this way, *The Age of Innocence* digresses from the present and represents a momentary forgetting of the all-too-immediate turmoil. The novel represents the restoration of inspiration that occurs in turning to the comfort of the past to allow for negotiation of the present. More than mere escapism, Wharton’s depiction of nostalgia brings forth those elements of the past which could help rehabilitate the fractured post-war present and provide a foundation upon which to build.

Though she was often disappointed by her old New York childhood in relation to her admiration for European culture, Wharton seemed to view her past home differently in the
aftermath of war, particularly in relation to its rigid social codes offering her a sense of comfort amidst chaos. As a young girl, she was irritated by the close-mindedness and lack of imagination of those within her society, but as an adult the memory of this adherence to convention was one source of stability that had not been obliterated in the otherwise tumultuous present. In her American upbringing, class consciousness and propriety were valued over creativity and passion. Wharton, for most of her life, maintained a degree of animosity toward her native country for its inability to rise to its full cultural potential. After the great European structures around her had been destroyed, these architectural monuments once having signified the unwavering endurance of cultural tradition, it became necessary for Wharton to momentarily find a sense of permanence elsewhere—in the consistent, albeit flawed, world of the New York upper class. She frequently casts a critical eye upon the society of her past in *The Age of Innocence*. After the Great War Wharton recognized that returning to her childhood home would be the only way for her to reaffirm her belief in the power of tradition and imagine the possibility for the greatness of European culture to persist amidst the damaging effects of modernity.20

Physical Structures as Reflections of Class Structure

From the very beginning of *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton focuses that attention on architectural structures as imperative to the understanding of the world in which her characters inhabit. The novel opens not with any of the characters, but with a description of a building—the Academy of Music in New York. The opera house acts as a crucial place for members of the

New York aristocracy to congregate. They do so not for the appreciation of music, but rather to see and be seen by their associates. Wharton establishes that this building performs a particular function beyond that of housing entertainment:

Though there was already talk of the erection, in remote metropolitan distances ‘above the forties,’ of a new Opera House which should compete in costliness and splendor with those of the great European capitals, the world of fashion was still content to reassemble every winter in the shabby red and gold boxes of the sociable old Academy. Conservatives cherished it for being small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the ‘new people’ whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to. (Age 3)

Immediately Wharton’s novel clarifies that the structures occupied by New York’s elite are meant to keep undesirables out and make those inhabiting these places feel privileged by having access to them. In addition, she shows that the value of cultural productions is always measured in relation to a European standard of beauty and that cultural authenticity and greatness come from imitating European styles.

It is at the opera where Newland Archer’s attention, as well as that of the rest of old New York, becomes focused on Ellen Olenska as she has dared to appear in public soon after her divorce. Newland is at first captivated by the vision of his young, beautiful new fiancée, May Welland, sitting opposite him in her family’s opera box, but he is soon distracted by the intrusion of the exotic and sensuous Ellen, May’s cousin who has just returned from Europe. Interestingly, the opera being performed on this evening is Faust, which foreshadows the central question of the novel: Will Newland “sell his soul to the devil” and disregard the codes of conduct set forth by his society, leaving May, the safe choice, in favor of Ellen, the woman whom he really loves?

The structure of the opera house seems significant in relation to the interaction of the characters
in that they do not choose where they sit, but they are assigned to their particular boxes, usually determined by familial association. Each group is confined to its specific space, far enough away from any other group so as to avoid any real interaction and allow for gossiping about the other groups within their field of vision. In this way, the opera production occurring on the stage becomes secondary to the performance occurring within the boxes themselves which gives the upper class viewers a kind of voyeuristic pleasure. At the same time, these boxes provide for a rather claustrophobic experience, the viewers being bound to such a small area always with the same people. Once again, with this scene Wharton foreshadows the “boxed-in” feeling that Newland experiences later when he can merely gaze at the object of his affection, Ellen, because he is too bound to the conventions of his society.

One of the most striking aspects of The Age of Innocence is the depth with which Wharton reveals her characters through description of their homes and the items within them. As a writer and an interior designer, she had long held the belief that houses were reflections of the people who inhabited them and vice versa. Lori Merish contends that the emphasis on material culture in literature extending from nineteenth-century domestic fiction was meant:

- to construct equivalences between material and subjective ‘refinement’—between commodity and psychological forms—while suppressing the marketplace orientation of ‘private’ life, often by advertising a distinction between home and market. Reinventing capitalist economic and commodity structures as the forms of interiority proper to ‘private,’ domestic life, these novels helped write into existence a modern consumer psychology in which individuals ‘express themselves’ through consumption and ‘identify’ with personal possessions. (2-3)

The characters in The Age of Innocence subscribe to such a philosophy in which possessing
traditional objects that signify sophistication will allow them to be sophisticated. The first home described in the novel is that of Mrs. Manson Mingott, the strong-willed matriarch of one of the most respected families in New York:

The cream-coloured house (supposed to be modelled on the private hotels of the Parisian aristocracy) was there as a visible proof of her moral courage; and she throned in it, among pre-Revolutionary furniture and souvenirs of the Tuileries of Louis Napoleon (where she had shone in her middle age), as placidly as if there were nothing peculiar in living above Thirty-fourth street, or in having French windows that opened like doors instead of sashes that pushed up. (Age 12-13)

In stark contrast to the ubiquitous “hideous” brownstones that were the fashion at the time, Mrs. Mingott chooses to build a light-colored house, one that reveals that she is known for not succumbing to trends. Her house gains its value in its expressions of nostalgia for older styles of architecture and decoration with its Parisian structure and souvenirs and its pre-Revolutionary furniture. By looking to the past, and in particular European culture, in the arrangement of her home, Mrs. Mingott manufactures an air of authentic nobility that rivals that of French royalty as she “thrones” over her own house as well as much of the New York upper class.

Occupying the opposite end of Fifth Avenue from Mrs. Mingott is Julius Beaufort, a relative through marriage, who is also known for his elegant home, particularly its elaborate ballroom. The Beauforts host a ball once a year on an opera night and the elite of New York always attend despite Beaufort’s questionable lineage and moral character. Like Mrs. Mingott’s home, the Beafort’s house is considered prestigious because of its incorporation of traditional elements:

The Beauforts’ house was one of the few in New York that possessed a ball-room (it
antedated even Mrs. Manson Mingott’s and the Headly Chiverses’); and at a time when it was beginning to be thought ‘provincial’ to put a ‘crash’ over the drawing-room floor and move the furniture upstairs, the possession of a ball-room that was used for no other purpose, and left for three-hundred-and-sixty-four days of the year to shuttered darkness, with its gilt chairs stacked in a corner and its chandelier in a bag; this undoubted superiority was felt to compensate for whatever was regrettable in the Beaufort past. (*Age* 18)

In this society, “old” is equated with “superiority,” as in the differentiation between old New York and new New York, and because Beaufort’s home hearkens back to a European aristocrat’s home, his dubious reputation is overlooked. Annette Benert suggests that “Because Julius Beaufort has married well, into the Mingott clan, and made money even better, most of New York society appears in his Fifth Avenue mansion either for the splendid balls or the Sunday evening indulgences that provide the young and restless with art and music associated with their highbrow conception of ‘Europe’ (*Architectural* 189). Rather than actually attempting to understand what makes European culture great, these wealthy Americans simply consume material replicas that are meant to substitute for actual “culture” and give the impression of sophistication.

Although Newland Archer, Ellen Olenska, and May Welland are the central characters of the novel, Wharton chooses to begin *The Age of Innocence* with descriptions of Beaufort’s and Mrs. Mingott’s respective homes in order to reveal the superficial world in which these characters live. This society is one based on custom rather than innovation, and any deviation from these norms leaves the transgressor subject to either provisional acceptance by the group or potential ostracization. Marilyn R. Chandler notes the function of these minor characters, stating:

Both Mrs. Manson Mingott and Julius Beaufort are marginal in certain ways while in other
ways are central and essential characters to this tight little clan...They establish the peripheral boundaries of acceptability and thereby help to define social territory. Furthermore, the two houses provide stable points of reference, each occupied by an ‘enthroned’ social power to whom the loyal, the dutiful, and the aspiring gravitate like bees to their queen. (160)

While Mrs. Mingott is perceived as being somewhat eccentric and Beaufort is rumored to be involved in some shady business deals, they each maintain a certain authority in their society in that they recognize the prestige associated with Europe. These characters seem to develop unique identities amongst the homogeneous elite as they paradoxically shape the character of affluent American culture through their devotion to European culture.

**Art as Nostalgia in Consumer Culture**

Newland Archer himself seems to strive for a distinct identity amidst his upper class associates and attempts to incorporate high culture into the superficialities of his day-to-day life, and this becomes most evident in the rooms he inhabits throughout the novel. While many around him devote themselves to less-intellectual pursuits such as buying the latest fashions and collecting garish decorations for their opulent homes, Newland prides himself on his appreciation for high culture as opposed to the crass materialism promoted by others of his class. Even before he marries May and moves into their new home, it is clear that in order to maintain his sanity within this stifling society Newland finds solace in a room that is all his own in which he is able to indulge in a deeper sense of culture than he can typically find among his old New York associates. When Newland is still living with his mother and sister prior to his marriage, he has the whole top floor to himself and uses this space as a place of reflection. After putting up with a tedious visit from the gossipy Mr. Jackson, “Newland Archer mounted thoughtfully to his
own study. A vigilant hand had, as usual, kept the fire alive and the lamp trimmed; and the room, with its rows and rows of books, its bronze and steel statuettes of ‘The Fencers’ on the mantelpiece and its many photographs of famous pictures, looked singularly home-like and welcoming” (Age 42). This description of Newland’s study appears a stark contrast to upper class New York which is neither home-like nor welcoming, particularly in regard to those deemed outsiders like Ellen Olenska. For Newland, having a place to revel in the pleasures of culture is crucial in allowing him to maintain his position within his society while still allowing him to momentarily escape its insularity and pettiness.

Though Newland struggles throughout the novel to find a balance between his commitment to upholding the values of his old New York upbringing and his longing for the passions that lie beyond its limits, he becomes increasingly torn in two opposing directions by his love interests, Ellen Olenska and May Welland. Interestingly, it is after Newland first visits Ellen’s house that he becomes consciously aware that he is developing feelings for the cousin of his soon-to-be wife. Ellen’s house is small and modest compared to the homes that Newland is used to frequenting, and he recognizes the rundown neighborhood in which it is situated because he once wondered of his writer friend’s Ned Winsett’s house down the street, “if the humanities were so meanly housed in other capitals” (Age 67). He expresses a kind of dismay that the work of artists and writers are valued so little in New York and implies an admiration for European countries that do recognize the importance of culture. While sitting in her house waiting for Ellen to arrive, Newland is taken aback by its extraordinary nature and observes:

The atmosphere of the room was so different from any he had ever breathed that self-consciously vanished in the sense of adventure. He had been before in drawing-rooms hung with red damask, with pictures “of the Italian school”; what struck him was the way in
which Medora Manson’s shabby hired house, with its blighted background of pampas grass and Rogers statuettes, had, by a turn of the hand, and the skillful use of a few properties, been transformed into something intimate, ‘foreign’, subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments. (70)

Here, Wharton certainly conveys her belief in interior design as a deliberate and powerful art form rather than the haphazard collecting of expensive trinkets as she has Newland recognize not just the objects of the room, but more importantly their arrangement. Simply in the way Ellen has arranged the room gives Newland an impression of exoticism and passion—the two qualities of Ellen’s personality that simultaneously represent all that Newland desires and all that old New York perceives as a threat. When juxtaposed with Newland’s fiancée May, whose identity is characterized by her willingness to conform to the dictates of her society, Ellen’s “foreign” air becomes all the more apparent since the original and deliberate stylistic choices made about her house reflect an individuality that creativity that May does not possess.

After viewing Ellen’s home that reveals her unique personality, Newland doubts whether he will be as captivated by his life with May as he is during his short visit with Ellen, and his disappointment becomes evident when he envisions his future house with May. While she is beautiful and kind, May lacks imagination and is more concerned with obedience and propriety than introspection or desire. When Newland sees Ellen’s house, he almost immediately compares her methods of arranging her home to the way he imagines May would decorate hers. After Ellen’s home makes such a dramatic impression on him, Newland considers his future home with May:

The young man felt that his fate was sealed: for the rest of his life he would go up every evening between the cast-iron railings of that greenish-yellow doorstep, and pass through a
Pompeian vestibule into a hall with a wainscoting of varnished yellow wood. But beyond that his imagination could not travel. He knew the drawing-room above had a bay window, but he could not fancy how May would deal with it. She submitted cheerfully to the purple satin and yellow tuftings of the Welland drawing-room, to its sham Buhl tables and gilt vitrines full of modern Saxe. He saw no reason to suppose that she would want anything different in her own house; and his only comfort was to reflect that she would probably let him arrange his library as he pleased—which would be, of course, with ‘sincere’ Eastlake furniture, and the plain new bookcases without glass doors. (70-71)

Newland assumes that May will merely mimic the styles of her parents rather than choosing to arrange her home, and ultimately her life, through any determination of her own. In this moment, Newland acknowledges for the first time that life with May might not satisfy him on an intellectual level and foreshadows that the house he will eventually share with her will often seem like a prison.

The contemplation of the two women’s homes tells as much about Newland as it does about his love interests. Unlike Ellen and May who are devoted to their respective ways of life, Archer vacillates between these two extremes, never fully able to commit to either of these inclinations within himself. As much as Newland would like to believe himself to be more cultured than others within his society, he is too tempted by the comfort offered by the structure of the New York upper class to fully engage in the bohemian lifestyle. Ultimately, it seems that Wharton portrays Newland’s ambivalence about venturing away from tradition as symptomatic of an increasingly modern world and characteristic of many within her own society, perhaps even herself. According to Judith Fryer, “Wharton’s linking of Newland Archer’s preferences in tasteful decoration to ‘sincere’ Eastlake is, then, a devastating criticism: he is a man of ‘taste’
rather than a man of principle—or at least, he is a man whose principles are determined externally, according to taste” (121). Wharton implicitly poses the question of whether Newland is actually “sincere” about his conviction to lead a life beyond superficiality and conformity or whether he simply wants to be perceived as an enlightened man of substance. Newland understands all too well how harshly those in his social class judge people who transgress against the codes of propriety and he pushes those limits only so far as to appear cultured in a socially acceptable way.

Although it would be easy to dismiss Newland as a weak-willed, ineffectual quasi-intellectual, Wharton does not seem to want The Age of Innocence to be a novel of a man’s failure to develop an individual identity. Instead, she offers that this is a story of how Newland negotiates the conflicted sides of himself and in the process learns who he is. It becomes not detrimental but necessary for development of Newland’s identity that he vacillates back and forth between the two potential outcomes for his life. He needs Ellen to show him what May is not, and vice versa, so that he can understand himself in relation to both of these women. Of Ellen’s influence on him, Newland says, “She was rendering what might prove the first of their mutual services by making him look at his native city objectively. Viewed thus, as through the wrong end of a telescope, it looked disconcertingly small and distant…Far down the inverted telescope he saw the faint white figure of May Welland in New York” (Age 75-77). Once he leaves Ellen’s house, however, he reverts to his old way of thinking: “As he went out into the wintry night, New York again became vast and imminent, and May Welland the loveliest woman in it” (Age 79). Hermione Lee attributes Newland’s perpetual anxiety to a larger sense that Ellen is a constant reminder that his narrow-minded society will prevent him from having the type of fulfilling life he could lead in a less restrictive environment. As Lee argues:
[Newland’s] unstable identity is connected to a tension, which is at the heart of this book, between America and Europe. It is made clear that Newland’s “new” ideas, his critique of his society and his susceptibility to Ellen are all linked to his attraction to European society and culture...The curious reappearance in the plot—it’s weakest strand—of the French secretary with whom Ellen Olenska may or (more probably) may not have had an affair, keeps up the contrast between Parisian intellectual liberty and New York philistinism and parochialism. (575)

Newland’s assessment of his life becomes progressively more neurotic the closer that he gets to Ellen Olenska, and this seems to stem from a kind of preemptive nostalgia in his realization that if he chooses to fully accept a life with Ellen or a life with May, either way, he will have lost a part of himself. His refusal to fully commit to either way of life, an unrestricted life of alienation or a non-stimulating life of comfort, allows him to maintain a psychological middle ground from which he can eventually learn what he can accept in his life and what he cannot.

This process of re-evaluation that Newland goes through is one that Wharton implies is necessary on a cultural level, particularly in light of the devastation of World War I from which the world was recovering at the time that she wrote *The Age of Innocence*. She had always felt that Americans could learn a great deal from studying the ways of the Europeans, but seemingly, for the first time, she acknowledged that an aspect of American culture (primarily its resistance to change) could be a beneficial influence for Europe. While taken to the extreme this resistance could lead to such damaging effects as prejudice and willful ignorance, at its best this quality could aid in preserving tradition and solidarity. As both a woman and a writer, and in a larger sense as a human being, Wharton believed that in order to live in the modern world it was
necessary to identify any positive aspects of experience and to incorporate those qualities and make for a more manageable present.

Wharton does not call for an actual return to the ways of the New York upper class, but instead employs nostalgia to understand what was best and most comforting about her upbringing in an attempt to apply these benefits to modern society. This idea is most apparent in Wharton’s depiction of Ellen Olenska’s longing to re-integrate into her old New York home after living in France for so many years. After seeing Newland’s surprise at the eccentricity of her new home, Ellen says, “How do you like my funny house? ...To me it’s like heaven” (Age 72). She goes on to say, “I like the little house...but I suppose what I like is the blessedness of its being here, in my own country and my own town; and then, of being alone in it” (Age 72-73). Ellen loves French culture, but she also loves returning home to her native New York, so she attempts to incorporate her cosmopolitan spirit into her new home. Just as Ellen helps him see old New York for what it is, Newland tries to warn her that her homecoming may not be as welcoming as she thinks it will be, saying, “New York society is a very small world compared with the one you’ve lived in and it’s ruled, in spite of appearances, by a few people with—well, rather old-fashioned ideas” (Age 109). Although Ellen comes back home after her divorce in order to feel a sense of comfort and belonging amongst her family and friends, it is her unconventional home and lack of concern for societal norms that cause her to be perceived as an outcast.

Wharton’s novel laments the position of the artist with political ambitions in American culture and suggests that those who are motivated to imagine a better world through cultural works are often rendered impotent by a society unresponsive to the arts. One of the most interesting insights that Wharton makes in The Age of Innocence comes through one of the minor
characters in the novel, Newland’s “clever” friend, Ned Winsett, who represents the Bohemian artist struggling to get by in the superficial world of old New York. Wharton acknowledges the difficulty of making a living as a writer in the United States because, she believed that unlike the Europeans, Americans do not value professions in the arts as being respectable. Winsett lives in the same “unfashionable” neighborhood filled with artists and writers as does Ellen in a “dilapidated wooden house” (Age 67), and is marginalized just as Ellen is as an eccentric. He is forced to take a job as a journalist for a women’s magazine because he is “a pure man of letters, untimely born in a world that had no need of letters” and his one literary published work was “destroyed by the publishers (as per contract) to make room for more marketable material” (Age 123). Though Winsett and Newland share an interest in intellectual pursuits, Winsett notes that Newland’s inherited wealth and status provide him with an opportunity to make a difference in the world: “I’m down and out; nothing to be done about it. I’ve got only one ware to produce, and there’s no market for it here, and won’t be in my time. But you’re free and you’re well-off. Why don’t you get in touch? There’s only one way to do it: to go into politics” (Age 123).

Newland can see that there need to be significant changes made within his society, yet he explains that a gentleman cannot maintain his reputation if he goes into the gritty world of politics. While she expresses nostalgia for a culture in which art is revered as being fundamental to building a great society, Wharton also believed that art should not exist outside of the marketplace but as a valued commodity within it.

Although Wharton expressed dismay that an increasingly industrialized society responded more to reproductions and superficial trends than to original art and innovative design, in her real life she made it her business to avoid the trap of the starving artist that she depicts in *The Age of Innocence*. While in some ways she feared and despised the modern world, especially when it
came to her profession, she actively embraced and participated in a marketplace which ultimately impacted and indeed brought to an end the traditional ideals that she returns to in her novel. Unlike her character Ned Winsett, Wharton was a shrewd businesswoman when it came to the marketing of her novels and was very involved in ensuring that she was adequately compensated for her literary work. Jamie Barlow suggests that “Wharton’s progress and acclaim as a literary professional, which have been the primary justification for a continuing academic focus on her work, are complicated by the recognition that for her ‘professional’ also signified financial success” (47). In the world in which Wharton wrote, one could either value art or wealth, but

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21 Barlow’s central argument is that Wharton was able to achieve the level of commercial success that she did because women in the marketing, film, and theater industries adapted her work and created buzz for her novels. The benefit was mutual as these professional women achieved acclaim and financial gain based on Wharton’s established reputation. Barlow argues that most critics have tended to focus on Wharton’s literary reputation and have glossed over her indebtedness to the business savvy of her female contemporaries. Barlow claims, “Not only were Wharton’s income and status positively affected by the film studios’ acquisition of the rights to her work during her lifetime, but, with the release of these films, as well as eighteen adaptations produced from 1951 to 2000, her novels have also been republished, in some cases after being out of print or circulation, and a significant number of the plays adapted from her novels and short stories have been restaged, consistently demonstrating her influence as a successful literary professional.” See Barlow, “No Innocence in This Age: Edith Wharton’s Commercialization and Commodification” in *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture*, Ed. Gary Totten (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 54.
seemingly, never both. Some could consider Wharton to be a “sell-out” in that she consciously thought about her work as a product that could bring her personal financial gain rather than only as work meant to inspire and enlighten others. However, her insistence on getting paid well for her novels was also a way of rejecting the previously accepted notion that writing was not serious work and had no redeeming value in an American culture more interested in materialism than intellectualism. Though her work was typically characterized as being conservative and critical of modernity, Wharton’s manipulation of the modern publishing industry reveals that she was willing to engage fully in the commercialization of her art when it suited her purposes.

Wharton certainly wrote _The Age of Innocence_ to help work through her personal sense of loss after World War I and to ground her after the catastrophic upheaval of her European home, but it is crucial to understand that at least part of her motivation for writing this novel was that she knew it would sell. As Lee asserts:

Escapism is not the whole motive behind _The Age of Innocence_. The writing of this novel was a strategic professional move, reviving her reputation as the author of _The House of Mirth_ after seven years without a big novel on ‘old New York’ themes, and at a time of high expenditure on her new houses, when she needed another best-seller…So a novel which markets itself as a historical escape into a vanished era is deeply bound up with her current feelings about her native country. (566)

Like Wharton herself, many people felt traumatized by the effects of industrialization and the aftermath of war at the time the novel was written, and she knew that the public would welcome a respite from the bleak uncertainty that cast a shadow over the modern world. Ultimately, she longed for comfort with the writing of _The Age of Innocence_, and while the novel provided mental relief from her anxiety, from her childhood she learned that money could be a tangible
form of comfort and security as well. Financial success meant an opportunity to rebuild for Wharton, rebuilding her literary reputation and literally building new homes that would facilitate a rejuvenation of her imagination and make writing possible again.

In order to ensure that her novel would bring her the success she desired, Wharton knew that advertising would be key in promoting her work and nostalgia became an essential marketing tool in achieving her goal. As Elizabeth Outka notes, the marketing of nostalgia was popularized at the beginning of the twentieth century as advertisers sought to appeal to consumers by promoting products as being traditional although they were produced in the modern marketplace. Prior to its publication as a novel, *The Age of Innocence* was serialized in *Pictorial Review* magazine to attract interest for the impending book and use Wharton’s prominence to increase readership for the periodical. Interestingly, *The Age of Innocence* was marketed alongside a book by popular romance author Kathleen Norris called *The Beloved Woman*. While Wharton’s novel did have a certain modern edginess to it with its controversial theme of adultery and its critique of American culture, it was marketed in *Pictorial Review* almost exclusively as a nostalgic story meant to evoke memories of a quaint past. Norris’s novel, on the other hand, was portrayed as being modern and cutting edge in relation to *The Age of Innocence* even though her work was more sentimental and less literary than Wharton’s was. Particularly in the advertisement illustrations, images of *The Age of Innocence* depicted characters in antiquated outfits and positioned in old-fashioned stances that hearkened back to an earlier time, whereas illustrations for *The Beloved Woman* portrayed women dressed in modern styles with more youthful appearances. Of these stark contrasts, Edith Thornton suggests, “As the juxtaposition of text from *The Age of Innocence* beside a youth-oriented advertisement for Ivory Soap demonstrates, nostalgia and currency, the old and the new, the realistic and the
melodramatic, were well suited to the magazine’s agenda of gathering a mass readership” (43). Although the magazine somewhat distorted the nature of both novels it was promoting, Wharton seemed to raise no objections; she allowed the nostalgia of her work to be emphasized if it meant that the book could revitalize her career.

Wharton’s next step was to end a long relationship with Scribner’s, the publishing house that had promoted her work up until the writing of *The Age of Innocence*. Though nostalgia remained crucial in marketing the novel, Appleton used a slightly different tactic than that used by *Pictorial Review*. Lee explains:

The move to Appleton in 1919 meant that [Wharton] was now with a firm which, though a solid conservative establishment, would market her more aggressively than Scribner’s had. The advertisement Appleton ran for *The Age of Innocence*…marketed the book both for scandalous subject matter and as an escapist wallow in a vanished era…She made no objection any more (as she had in 1905 to Scribner’s presenting *The House of Mirth* as an exposé of New York society) to this kind of advertising—after all, her reasons for changing publishers were to ensure big advances, competitive marketing and high sales. (592)

In order to attract the largest number of readers, Appleton promoted the book both as nostalgic (to entice a more conservative audience) and progressive (to grab the attention of young, modern readers), virtually guaranteeing that everyone could relate to the novel in some way. For a novel that implies that the consumerism of American society relegated high art and culture to practices of daydreamers and eccentrics, it seems a paradox that in the very production of *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton participates within the very marketplace that has allegedly stripped culture of its significance. Although in the novel Ned Winsett claims that there is no market for his
writing. Wharton proves that nostalgia sells, and art that expresses a longing for a traditional way of life becomes valued in a post-war culture going through the uneasy transition to modernity.

Like her protagonist, Newland Archer, Wharton maintained ambivalence between tradition and progress that ultimately expanded the possibility of what an American writer could be in the post-war period. Robin Peel notes the sustained tension between the modern and the conservative within Wharton’s writing: “On the one hand her interrogation of early modernism is informed by an antipathy to change, but on the other it is informed by a developed aesthetic recognition that all art, including literature, has evolved and must evolve, if it is to be vital and serious” (12). In her refusal to choose between an impoverished Bohemian life and a wealthy superficial life, Wharton actively creates a new role for the modernist writer, a role that acknowledges the benefits of looking both backward and forward in order to interpret the present. Particularly after writing *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton depicted writers in her novels in order to revise and complicate the nature of her profession. Lee believes Wharton’s characters “provide two models for a literary American: a reclusive, cultured, antiquated privacy; and an energetic involvement with the modern world and the market-place. Wharton acted out both roles. In her late years, the dominant image was that of the private recluse; but right to the end of her life she was also engaged…with literary deals, arguments, compromises and successes” (670). It seems that Wharton’s initial goal in depicting writer Ned Winsett in *The Age of Innocence* was to acknowledge the sad prospects for the professional writer in America. However, she eventually used his character as an impetus to actively change the direction of her own career and create a market for her writing that proved one could make a living in the arts without sacrificing the integrity of his or her work.
In order to promote an interest in the arts, Wharton realized that she could not convince people to appreciate culture for its own sake but would have to emphasize its usefulness for both conservatives longing to escape the misery of the present and progressives wanting to break from tradition. In *The Age of Innocence*, Newland admits that political action is no longer a viable option for a respectable man. In his view, culture remains the last bastion of hope for those who are dissatisfied with their society. Winsett acknowledges just how faint this hope is when he says:

Culture! Yes—if we had it! But there are just a few little local patches, dying out here and there for lack of—well, hoeing and cross-fertilising: the last remnants of the old European tradition that your forebears brought with them. But you’re in a pitiful little minority: you’ve got no centre, no competition, no audience. You’re like the pictures on the walls of a deserted house: ‘The Portrait of a Gentleman.’ You’ll never amount to anything, any of you, till you roll up your sleeves and get right down into the muck. That, or emigrate…God! If I could emigrate…(*Age* 124)

He suggests that short of moving to Europe, Americans cannot experience the benefits of a strong cultural tradition because they are unable to recognize art as anything but decoration rather than substantive work. As if in reply to Winsett, Newland thinks to himself:

Emigrate! As if a gentleman could abandon his own country! One could no more do that than one could roll up one’s sleeves and go down into the muck. A gentleman simply stayed at home and abstained. But you couldn’t make a man like Winsett see that; and that was why the New York of literary clubs and exotic restaurants, though a first shake made it seem more of a kaleidoscope, turned out, in the end, to be a smaller box, with a more monotonous pattern, than the assembled atoms of Fifth Avenue. (*Age* 124-125)
Even though Newland is more open-minded than others of his class, he too is doubtful that
culture can be taken seriously in society and has yet to prove effective in getting gentlemen like
himself to think “outside the box” and challenge the status quo. In this way, “home” becomes a
comfortable retreat from responsibility that promotes a smallness of imagination and distrust of
anything that challenges that convention.

In addition to The Decoration of Houses, Wharton achieved acclaim for another of her non-
fiction works, French Ways and Their Meaning, which glorified France’s appreciation for
culture and seemed primarily directed toward Americans. Rather than calling for the United
States to adopt the ways of the French, in the book Wharton seems more directly to ask
Americans to acknowledge another set of social practices beyond their own narrow existences.
Though French Ways and Their Meaning is more of a reference work outlining French customs
and history, these lessons make their way into The Age of Innocence and it is significant that both
books were written shortly after the end of World War I. Michael Nowlin observes, “French
Ways and Their Meaning and The Age of Innocence, in obvious respects so qualitatively
different, are in fact complementary cultural nationalist texts…uniquely interesting for the way
in which they underscore the shared assumptions and anxieties of both ‘traditionalists’ and
‘modernists’ about America’s need for ‘culture’ at the moment of America’s ascendancy to a
position of global power and influence” (90). Wharton both laments the dwindling connection
conservative America has to European culture and sympathizes with the youthful Bohemian
movement that yearns to restore that relationship. In the uncertainty of the modern social
landscape, she argues that a reassessment of the ideals that made European culture great could
provide a foundation for new and creative ways to be imagined to improve American society.
Toward the end of the novel when Ellen returns to New York, ironically to keep Newland at a distance and prevent him from joining her in Washington, having this temptation just beyond his reach is nearly unbearable for Newland. He asks Ellen to meet with him at the newly built Metropolitan Museum of Art because he says it is “somewhere [they] could be alone” (Age 308) despite it being a highly public place. Though Newland wants to discuss their relationship, Ellen is momentarily preoccupied by a display of “Cesnola antiquities,” a collection of ancient artifacts barely recognizable. Of these objects, Ellen says, “It seems cruel...that after a while nothing matters...any more than these little things, that used to be necessary and important to forgotten people, and now have to be guessed at under a magnifying glass and labeled: use unknown” (Age 310). Ellen foreshadows the fate of her relationship with Newland, which, despite its vitality, is immediately so important but is destined to become as antiquated as the objects of this lost civilization. She laments that anything worth having cannot last and will eventually exist only in memory until that too begins to fade.

The remnants of a bygone era that Ellen focuses on in the museum can be linked to Wharton’s acknowledgment that the society of her childhood depicted in the novel is its own lost culture. Having experienced the atrocity of war and the increased mechanization of modern culture, Wharton felt that there was huge chasm dividing the pre- and post-war worlds. She felt that the bridge that could connect these generations would be a cultural one, but, much to her chagrin, this link had already been severed. When discussing this cultural disconnect in her autobiography, Wharton states:

The really vital change is that, in my youth, the Americans of the original States, who in moments of crisis still shaped the national point of view, were the heirs of an old tradition of European culture which the country has now totally rejected. This rejection...has opened
a gulf between those days and these. The compact world of my youth has receded into a past from which it can only be dug up in bits by the assiduous relic-hunter; and its smallest fragments begin to be worth collecting and putting together before the last of those who knew the live structure are swept away with it. (Backward 7)

Just as Ellen is saddened that the artifacts in the museum exhibit are now obsolete, stripped of their significance, Wharton looks back her past and its traditions and confirms that such order is absent in the modern world. The creator of Thing theory, Bill Brown, states that things are more than mere objects and contain ideas within them, so for Wharton, her attention to material possessions in her writing, and her life in general, signifies her need to preserve a sense of the cultural past in the face of modernity. In The Age of Innocence, Wharton excavates these remnants of her youth both to confirm that they existed and to question whether these memories have any application in relation to modernity.

In reflecting on the objects at the museum, and the customs depicted in Wharton’s novel as a whole, the artifacts evoke a sense of the present as much as they do an air of the past. While they inevitably reveal information about the society in which they existed, such cultural artifacts show the extent to which the present has diverged from the past and act as a reminder that our own time has evolved from these origins. Lee explains that Wharton and her characters recognize the fragility of their own present moments, arguing, “As they contemplate these relics of vanished civilisations, they think both forward and backward in time. Newland imagines, wistfully, that ‘some day’ this will be a great museum; Ellen sadly contemplates the ‘small broken objects’ from the past...Now the weight of the war pushes down on Wharton’s writing; the wiping-out of an entire civilization is all too possible, and the whole world seems full of ghosts” (583).
Although the specters of the past mark the disappearance of the precursors that led up to our own time, even their absence maintains a presence within the generations that follow.

Wharton’s depiction of the environment of her past should be understood as an attempt to resurrect these images and objects in the present; the novel offers these representations in order both to re-invigorate a modern world depleted of structure and to preserve her memories before they disappear. *The Age of Innocence* becomes a tangible testament to this bygone era, something that, like the objects in the museum, can exist long after the culture itself has vanished. Gary Totten emphasizes that Wharton’s writing reveals how her attention was drawn to “things” throughout her whole life as he declares, “Wharton’s metaphorical transformation of her earlier memories into a piece of exotic bric-a-brac, and her portrayal of the ‘incidents, habits, [and] traditions’ of her youth as archaeological artifacts of ancient dress and furniture, are striking reminders of the connections between material objects and cultural meaning in her life and work” (1). For Wharton’s characters, things, often within the houses as well as the houses themselves, become physical embodiments of the owners’ outward expressions of inner identities. Like Wharton’s beloved European monuments that immortalized the subjects who inspired them, her characters seem to express a longing to leave something behind that substantiates their existence.

While objects can theoretically help connect one generation to another, when that thing is valued for its ability to increase status or to fill an emotional void rather than its own inherent worth, that link between cultures is a weak one at best. When works of art, in particular, become part of the marketplace, they have the potential to become detached from the cultural tradition out of which they emerged. However, Wharton maintained an ambivalence about producing writing to be bought and sold because she believed that the mass-marketing of her novels might
diminish her status as an artist and distance her from her cultural predecessors, but she also felt that the consumption of her art could actually help maintain a waning connection to tradition within modernity. According to Karin Roffman, Wharton was troubled at the prospect of her art becoming just another commodity and she expressed this through her representation of the museum in *The Age of Innocence*. Roffman notes, “For Wharton, the work of writing, like the museum space, is simply too closely tied to acquisition, and her unwillingness to talk about her writing as work to friends and her hesitancy to call her war-relief efforts work are reflected in her developing analysis of the museum space, which becomes a metaphorical work space in her fiction” (213). The implication here is that the museum does not provide a place in which its cultural objects allow for reflection, but instead they become a source of “usefulness” and acquiring information. Wharton’s uneasiness about art as a product to be consumed is interesting in light of her willingness to market her own writing and ensure that she could make a career out of her creativity. Her position on the production of cultural work was definitely a complicated one, but it reveals the struggle within modernist artists to maintain artistic integrity while working within a system that would inevitably assign monetary value to their creations.

The Library as a Site of Nostalgic Reflection

One of the crucial questions that *The Age of Innocence* implicitly asks is how distinct should the boundary be between public and private life? Even further, the novel questions whether the boundary has collapsed in the modern world. Particularly for the upper class characters of the novel, there appears to be a huge range in the amount of exposure that people have. Privacy appears to be a luxury that most are unable to attain. The wealthiest and most prestigious of Old New York, such as Mrs. Manson Mingott, are bound to their homes almost entirely and refuse to engage with the rest of society, instead ruling over it from afar. Similarly,
the van der Luydens, the most influential and respected of all the rich New York families, lead a reclusive existence, attend almost no social engagements, and invite a select few to visit them in their own home. It is as though their social authority comes from their ability to withhold their presence from others, and they are valued because they appear so rarely in public. Fear seems to motivate these figureheads, fear that in the outside world they will lose the control that they easily maintain within their homes. They exhibit a lack of interest in the changing world outside and stick to their own comfortable customs, never noticing that they have virtually become prisoners in order to preserve their status. While the most distinguished members of New York society have the luxury of privacy in their homes that would allow them to foster creativity and reflect meaningfully on their lives, for the most part they, instead, become stuck in stale routines and attend to trivial matters just to pass the time.

Though the most elite of New York attain privacy at the expense of any significant connection to society, most of them suffer from almost complete exposure and scrutiny by their peers. The entire society revolves around keeping up appearances and hiding one’s true feelings and intentions because of the knowledge that someone is always watching and judging. Even the homes of these wealthy families are not entirely safe from being observed by others as people are constantly entertaining and watching who goes in and out of each other’s houses. Ellen Olenska, having lived in Europe for years, is most bothered by the invasive nature of New York society when she wishes to speak to Newland about why she “ran away”. She exclaims, “One can’t be alone for a minute in that great seminary of a house, with all the doors wide open, and always a servant bringing tea, or a log for the fire, or the newspaper! Is there nowhere in an American house where one may be by one’s self? You’re so shy, and yet you’re so public. I always feel as if I were in the convent again—or on the stage, before a dreadfully polite audience that never
applauds” (Age 132). Ellen realizes that private moments allow one to be his or her self and create the freedom necessary to develop intellectually and emotionally. Under constant surveillance and without the privilege of exhibiting any genuine feelings, it is no wonder that most members of her society lead such superficial lives and have such narrow imaginations.

This moment when Ellen laments the lack of privacy in American culture highlights the fundamental problem in her relationship with Newland, a problem highlighted throughout the novel: they cannot find a place that will allow their romance to develop. The only occasions that allow them to be together are social engagements in which others are watching their every move. This “running away” that Ellen has asked to speak about with Newland during her stay at the van der Luyden’s secluded mansion at Skuytercliff seems to be an evasion of the curious eyes of New York gossips and an opportunity for her to finally be alone with Newland. The two decide to talk in the old patroon house adjacent to the van der Luyden’s villa. A Dutch patroon held many of the same responsibilities as those of a feudal lord, and despite being in charge of a large expanse of land, the patroon’s house in the novel is described as being a small, intimate cottage

in relation to the van der Luyden’s mansion that looms above it on the hill. Even though the space is modest, “the homely little house stood there...as if magically created to receive them” (*Age* 33) as its “shutters stood wide” (*Age* 132). The house is unique in that while it is hidden away in an isolated area it is open enough for one to freely see in and out through the bare windows. Though this setting seems the ideal place for Ellen and Newland to reveal their feelings for one another, they are not allowed the opportunity because they are interrupted by the arrival of Beaufort.

The possibility for a happy ending to the storybook romance between Ellen and Newland is defeated with the realization that they will continually experience intrusions from the outside world. Chandler suggests that the patroon house conveys nostalgia for a way of life that is no longer a reality in the modern world as she explains:

> The accoutrements of this room bespeak an older time and a simpler way of life. Like so many romantic heroes before him, Newland experiences a longing for something mythic, past, unrecapturable, and as he enters this anachronistic little structure he finds himself in a timeless moment that comes on him like a spell, sweeping away the complexities of his situation. But the simplicity of the patroon house is not of the “real” world. The freedom Newland and Ellen find in that tiny firelit room for ‘one brief shining moment’ vanishes with the appearance of Julius Beaufort and can be remembered only as a tantalizing but illusory promise or reminder of something lost...The spell is broken and Beaufort’s words serve only as a reminder that the ‘perfect little house’ in which they came close to a moment of consequential truth is a mythic place uninhabitable by mortals in a world of competition and commercial real estate. (172)
It would seem futile to pursue a relationship based upon passion and mutual respect in this world that values status and social acceptance above all else, yet Wharton suggests that as unattainable as a union between Ellen and Newland may be, their feelings about each other are real and sustain them in their imperfect lives.

Ellen and Newland do not consummate their relationship at the patroon house, but this brief moment of genuine happiness leaves an impression on both Ellen and Newland that lasts long after they leave Skuytercliff. Ellen mentions to May that the patroon house is “the only house she’s seen in America that she could imagine being perfectly happy in” (Age 191). Once Newland is back at home in New York, he anticipates enjoying a new shipment of books he had ordered, one of his few real pleasures in life, but is distracted until:

he lit on a small volume of verse which he had ordered because the name had attracted him: ‘The House of Life’. He took it up, and found himself plunged in an atmosphere unlike any he had ever breathed in books; so warm, so rich, and yet so ineffably tender, that it gave a new and haunting beauty to the most elementary of human passions. All through the night he pursued through those enchanted pages the vision of a woman who had the face of Ellen Olenska but when he woke the next morning, and looked out at the brownstone houses across the street, and thought of his desk in Mr. Letterblair’s office, and the family pew in Grace Church, his hour in the park of Skuytercliff became as far outside the pale of probability as the visions of the night (Age 138).

Despite his disappointment that he and Ellen’s “house of life” exists only in memory, Newland is transported back to this moment by engaging in an object, the book, that allows him to experience genuine emotions in his real life. Chandler discusses Wharton’s ability to represent the tension between the ideal and the real: “As surely as she evokes in her characters and perhaps
in her readers a longing for the simplicities of the frontier cabin, she also insists on the impossibility of that return to romantic simplicity as a way of life. She distrusts the romantic idealism even as she seems so powerfully able to share it...One must return to the great house and open the cottage only for an occasional vacation. If these conditions are ‘unreal,’ so is the attempt to deny them” (173). Though choosing fantasy over reality can prove dangerous and result in alienation, Wharton suggests here, as she does in writing *The Age of Innocence*, that indulging in the imaginary for a brief period can allow one to gain strength in order to address the present more effectively.

Acknowledging the possibility of a different life is a skill that most of Wharton’s characters lack, and, as a result, they condemn all others who challenge the authority of tradition and think for themselves. In conceptualizing an ideal mode of living, one becomes better aware of the insufficiencies of his or her own existence and gains the ability to critique problems so that they may be addressed. Old New York seems content not to question its code of conduct primarily because it refuses to consider alternative realities or recognize its own flaws. When May’s mother, Mrs. Welland denounces Ellen for adopting the ways of a “foreigner”, Newland thinks to himself, “Ah, no, he did not want May to have that kind of innocence, the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience!” (*Age* 145). Innocence is most often considered to be positive, a state of purity, but in the novel innocence is the barrier that prevents understanding and improvement of society. The time period of Wharton’s childhood can be considered the age of innocence due to people’s lack of imagination. Consequently, Wharton’s novel asks how the modern world will be characterized and if culture can lead to an age of insight.
Eventually, Newland and Ellen are able to admit their feelings for one another, at Ellen’s house, both acknowledging the impossibility of submitting to their emotions and starting a relationship but unable to cut ties completely. Newland, who pressures May to push forward the wedding date so that his commitment to her will trump his lust for Ellen, is completely devastated when Ellen seems to accept so easily the injustice of their situation. However, it is not that Ellen has passively accepted defeat, but instead she finds solace in the idea that their love can continue in her mind. She says, “I shan’t be lonely now. I was lonely; I was afraid. But the emptiness and the darkness are gone; when I turn back into myself now I’m like a child going at night into a room where there’s always a light” (Age 173). Ellen’s comparison of her imagination to a well-lit room conveys a place in which her feelings for Newland can remain intact, protected from the harsh outside world.

Shortly after revealing his love for Ellen, Newland marries May, with her family’s consenting to cut the engagement short; he also attempts to push all feelings for Ellen aside and settle into the role of a devoted husband. With every encounter that he has with Ellen, Newland’s sense of familiarity with his society becomes more disrupted as she offers a unique perspective from which to compare his own restrictive life. When vacationing at the summer home of May’s parents, he happens to catch a glimpse of Ellen standing in a pagoda house looking out at the ocean, and his sense of reality becomes particularly hazy. In watching Ellen, Newland is reminded that his real life exists back with May and her parents, and this vision of Ellen may as well be a dream. However, once he heads back to the main house, and his life with May, he realizes that something has changed because “Now it was the Welland house, and the life he was expected to lead in it, that had become unreal and irrelevant, and the brief scene on the shore, when he had stood irresolute, halfway down the bank, was as close to him as the blood in his
veins” (Age 218-219). In this moment, Newland’s definition of “real” has shifted from meaning “actual” to “meaningful”, and this one glimpse of Ellen with her back turned to him is more filled with meaning than his entire marriage to May. In terms of Newland’s reevaluation of his reality, Benert explains, “By linking the desire for relationship with what characters experience as ‘real’, Wharton creates a situation in which the fictional elements that have the most solid actuality—houses, rooms, dresses, dinners—seem increasingly ‘unreal’ because of the extent to which they inhibit intimacy and authenticity” (188). These objects, then, act as reminders of the reality that Newland cannot have in actuality, a fulfilling relationship with Ellen.

After Ellen moves to Washington, so as not to tempt Newland to stray from his wife, his nostalgic memories of Ellen predominate his mind to the extent that his public life becomes a source of alienation and confusion. The more entrenched he becomes in the routines of May and her family, the less familiar these rituals seem as memory begins to dominate over reality. Newland contemplates the unsuccessful letter he wrote to Ellen asking her if they can meet and realizes:

Since then there had been no farther communication between them, and he had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which she throned among his secret thoughts and longings. Little by little it became the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities; thither he brought the books he read, the ideas and feelings which nourished him, his judgments and his visions. Outside it, in the scene of his actual life, he moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency, blundering against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view as an absent-minded man goes on bumping into the furniture of his own room. Absent—that was what he was; so absent from everything most densely real and near to those about him that it sometimes startled him to find they still imagined he was
The trifles of Newland’s real life develop a kind of cartoonish quality in comparison with the feelings that he has for Ellen because he has no emotional investment in a world that once seemed comforting. Lee interprets Newland’s psychological disengagement from reality, claiming, “The repression of emotion produces a terrible sense of unreality; Newland’s ‘real’ life passes before him (as at his wedding) like a hallucination. The domestic becomes unfamiliar to him, the ‘homelike’ becomes fearful and ‘uncanny’. And the uncanny is closely related to the ghostly and the haunted” (582). While the customs that exist in Newland’s remain consistent, painfully so, Newland himself has changed due to Ellen’s influence and ends up leading a double life, performing a role in his public life in order to protect his private life with Ellen.

While Newland gradually loses touch with reality and instead chooses to live in his secret fantasy world, Ellen, as a representation of nostalgia, not only reminds him of his past, but also provides him with a perspective on the present. Because of his naiveté, Newland clings to the hope that one day he and Ellen can escape the critical eyes of their judgmental society and profess their love openly. Ellen understands, however, that she and Newland can never be entirely free from society’s influence and even if their relationship goes undiscovered, they will feel guilt for committing adultery. Newland reveals his uninformed optimism when he confronts Ellen while escorting her home on a carriage ride, saying, “I want—I want somehow to get away with you into a world…where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter” (Age 290). Surprised by his idealism, Ellen responds, “Oh, my dear—where is that country? Have you ever been there?...I know so many who’ve tried to find it; and, believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations: at places like Boulogne, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo—and it wasn’t at all different from the
old world they’d left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous” (Age 290). Though they both long for the freedom that is unavailable for members of the upper class, Ellen convinces Newland that attempting to ignore societal codes altogether does not result in freedom but personal degradation and alienation.

After being rebuffed by Ellen, the pressures of Newland’s real life begin to close in on him and even his library, the site of his nostalgic contemplation and daydreaming about Ellen, cannot replace meaningful social interaction. While the room provides Newland with a safe place where he can be himself, his separation from the rest of the world begins to wear on him, and he yearns to experience life beyond the boundaries of his own imagination. One night as May does needlework in the library to be close to her husband, Newland seems to reach his breaking point:

He had insisted that the library curtains should draw backward and forward on a rod, so that they might be closed in the evening… and he pulled them back and pushed up the sash, leaning out into the icy night. The mere fact of not looking at May, seated beside his table, under his lamp, the fact of seeing other houses, roofs, chimneys, of getting the sense of other lives outside his own, other cities beyond New York, and a whole world beyond his world, cleared his brain and made it easier to breathe. (Age 295).

Once again, Ellen’s influence has caused a disruption in his life, literally in his home, as the one space that provided him with an escape now seems too small in comparison with the world outside his window. The internal struggle within Newland is one that other members of his society are unwilling or unable to recognize—that seclusion in the home protects one’s way of life at the expense of a meaningful connection to the outside world.

The fact that Newland has specific instructions regarding the curtains in the library seems significant, and the access to houses through the windows continually plays a role throughout the
novel. In Wharton’s descriptions of houses, she nearly always mentions how the windows are adorned, from thick, bulky curtains to open shutters (like those of the patroon house where Newland and Ellen have their first secret meeting). Window coverings, like Newland’s, have the capability of allowing access to the intimacy of domestic life, but they can also conceal the private world inside the house. While he enjoys being hidden from the people who may pass by his window, he also craves knowledge of the world outside, a world beyond the scope of his own imagination. Many of the members of Newland’s class focus on collecting expensive furniture and trinkets to fill their interiors so that they do not need to concern themselves with what goes on outside their homes. This mindless consumption translates to psychological interiority that is empty of meaning and cluttered with trifles. Newland’s interactions with Ellen show him that he longs for more than a life filled with objects substituting for emotional fulfillment. Totten argues that “Wharton’s critique of such excesses demonstrates her ability to both participate in and critique class convention through the objects of material culture (the curtains acting as a sign of the cultural customs that Wharton hopes to probe beneath) revealing a complexity of thought in regard to material culture with which we have not always credited her” (8). Although throughout the novel she condemns the coveting of objects as vulgar displays of wealth, Wharton uses objects in her work to reveal the way in which they constitute or inhibit the possibility for emotional and intellectual growth.

It is certainly no accident that Wharton pays particular attention to Newland’s library because this particular space played an important role in her real life and signified an escape to another world. For her, this room of a house had the power to transcend time and space as one’s imagination could run wild despite the stifling restrictions that existed beyond its door. In her autobiography, Wharton recalls:
The old New York to which I came back as a little girl meant to me chiefly my father’s library…Out of doors, in the mean monotonous streets, without architecture, without great churches or palaces, or any visible memorials of an historic past, what could New York offer to a child whose eyes had been filled with shapes of immortal beauty and immemorial significance? One of the most depressing impressions of my childhood is my recollection of the intolerable ugliness of New York, of its untended streets and the narrow houses so lacking in external dignity, so crammed with smug and suffocating upholstery. (Backward 54-55).

Though at the time Wharton could not return to Europe and its aesthetic pleasures, the library of the house allowed her to return there in her imagination and provided a respite from the uniformity of life in New York. Unlike other rooms of the house, which were meant to impress visitors and conform to the most fashionable styles, the library became a refuge that allowed one to be whoever he or she wanted to be.

Initially, after marrying May, Newland’s library is the one safe zone in which he can forget about playing the role of dutiful husband, but a transformation occurs as he realizes how confining this exist can be. He has a violent reaction to the stifling environment specifically when May is present and he envisions how she is becoming a carbon copy of her mother, content to think and act by rote. Stephenson notes the shifting quality of the library as a space of contemplation and states:

The library in Wharton’s fiction is a space in which the self undergoes an enriching renovation of awakening…While Wharton’s library episodes are often scenes of tranquility or rest, these scenarios almost always involve men alone, either reading or thinking. When a woman is introduced to the scene, the library becomes a site of unpredictability or conflict.
The capacity for illumination in a library is the direct result of its heterogeneity, its inclusion of all realities or possibilities. As such, the library is a locus of modernist revisionism in Wharton’s fiction, particularly in terms of gender and class. (1100)

By destabilizing the library and its effect on Newland’s development, Wharton conveys the necessity of withdrawing into the imagination only briefly, so that one learns to adapt the lessons learned there when re-entering reality. Similarly to Wharton’s use of her past to navigate her present, Newland gradually breaks from the small, safe world of his library and longs to emerge in a world outside of himself.

Wharton skillfully shows the fine line between security and entrapment as structures change in relation to characters’ changes in perspective. Just as Ellen’s “funny little house” keeps her physically and psychologically distanced from the rest of the New York upper class, Newland’s library also disconnects him from his society. Chandler suggests that the spaces Ellen and Newland inhabit offer stability at the same time that they prove to be confining as she claims, “In these two characters Wharton demonstrates with unforgettable poignancy the double bind of civilized life: that we inevitably generate for our protection structures that eventually imprison us, that they become imprisoning precisely because we need them, and that altering these structures, stepping outside them or moving from one set of social structures to another is a heroically difficult task” (169). Even as she represents this difficulty in maintaining a balance between structured safety and freedom without boundaries, she suggests that struggling between these two extremes is necessary for recognizing the benefits of both states of being. Once one becomes aware of the pleasure in various experiences, it becomes possible to replicate such contentment in even the worst of circumstances.
While the “narrow houses” to which Wharton refers in her description of New York are literally houses that were close together and cramped, this choice of words also alludes to a sense of death, particularly in relation to the vitality she experienced in Europe. According to Susan Koprince, Wharton had used the trope of the narrow house in previous work, adapting Henry David Thoreau’s phrase from *Walden* in which he states that one’s ‘last and narrow house’ is the grave. Koprince goes on to argue that Wharton creates narrow houses to represent characters’ “death-in-life existences” (63).\(^23\) Just as Wharton’s return to her home in New York is akin to observing a desolate graveyard, Newland Archer’s library is transformed into a narrow house that reflects the death of his hopes and dreams. When Newland sticks his head out the window of his library simply in order to breathe, he symbolizes a man being buried alive, struggling to cling to life while being continually weighed down, in this case by expectations and restrictions.

\(^{23}\) Though I apply Koprince’s theory to *The Age of Innocence*, in her essay she examines Thoreau’s concept of the narrow house in relation to one of Wharton’s other famous novels *Ethan Frome*. She compares Wharton’s depiction of a desolate house that represents death to that of Susan Glaspell who creates a house reminiscent of a grave in her play *Trifles*. While these two novels take place in rural settings, I argue that even in the urban setting of New York City in *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton shows houses as reflective of the spiritual lifelessness of the characters that inhabit them. See Koprince, “The Narrow House: Glaspell’s *Trifles* and Wharton’s *Ethan Frome*” in *Disclosing Intertextualities: The Stories, Plays, and Novels of Susan Glaspell*, Ed. Barbara Ozieblo (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).
Ultimately, Newland chooses to accept his real-life circumstances filled with responsibilities over an illusory nostalgic life with Ellen that never delivers on its promise of fulfillment. With the realization that Newland will lose Ellen forever if he does not act soon, he attempts to tell May about his feelings for her cousin, but each time May prevents him, as though she cannot bear to hear what she already knows. The first attempt occurs in the library where “the sound of his voice echoed uncannily through the homelike hush” (Age 323) and May reveals that Ellen is heading back to Europe permanently. At the farewell dinner hosted at Newland and May’s home, Newland understands that despite his and Ellen’s attempts to keep their feelings hidden, all of old New York believes that he is having an affair with Ellen and they seem to have conspired in an attempt to drive her out of their society. After the dinner, Newland tries once again to admit to May how he feels about Ellen, but instead she announces her pregnancy and the fact that she informed Ellen of the news before she was even sure she was pregnant. It is clear that this information is the cause of Ellen’s abrupt decision to leave, and Newland understands that any possibility for a reconciliation with Ellen is now impossible. Donald Pizer describes Newland’s inability to turn his back on societal expectations: “And so, in the end, when Newland is driven by the imminent loss of Ellen to project a possible escape—to find at last the emotional equivalent of the fresh air he is constantly seeking in stuffy drawing rooms and closed carriages—the ‘old decencies’ he speaks for exert their greatest power in the compelling commitment represented by May’s pregnancy” (138). As much as Newland may desire to

24 Pizer argues that Wharton’s work should be considered within the context of American naturalism due to the novel’s emphasis on society’s stranglehold on Newland Archer. It has been notoriously difficult for critics to classify Wharton’s work, but I contend that because *The Age of*
follow his passion and reunite with Ellen, he is bound by duty and the fear of being ostracized in real life is not worth chasing a dream-like existence with her that will eventually fade.

In the final chapter of the novel, twenty-five years have passed and Newland is once again in his library reflecting on his recent trip to a reception at the Metropolitan Museum which immediately transports him back to the last time he and Ellen were alone together. While contemplating the simultaneous distance and immediacy of the past, “the vision had roused a host of other associations, and he sat looking with new eyes at the library which, for over thirty years, had been the scene of his solitary musings and of all the family confabulations. It was the room in which most of the real things of his life had happened” (Age 344). Wharton’s use of the word “real” here has a crucial double meaning in that the library has been the space where Newland has been continually brought back to reality when his daydreams threaten to advance too far, but it also alludes to his prior belief that the real moments of his life were those meaningful excursions that resided in his imagination that did not actually occur. In the library, _________________

the relationship between Ellen and Newland does, essentially, exist and becomes an interesting blend of the ideal and the real as Newland imagines the best possible version of what their love could be and experiences real emotions from these musings.

Nostalgic Desire: Negotiating the Ideal and the Real

More than just a lost love, Ellen signifies the loss of what Wharton figures as Newland’s true self; she allowed him a kind of freedom that he cannot attain living with May. His obsessive contemplation of the scene at the pagoda is less a desire to have Ellen than it is a desire to reproduce the sense of vitality that he felt with her. Newland acknowledges:

He was not sure he wanted to see the Countess Olenska again; but ever since he had looked at her from the path above the bay he had wanted, irrationally and indescribably, to see the place she was living in, and to follow the movements of her imagined figure as he had watched the real one in the summer-house. The longing was with him day and night, an incessant undefinable craving, like the sudden whim of a sick man for food or drink once tasted and long since forgotten. He could not see beyond the craving, or picture what it might lead to, for he was not conscious of any wish to speak to Madame Olenska or to hear her voice. He simply felt that if he could carry away the vision of the spot of earth she walked on, and the way the sky and sea enclosed it, the rest of the world might seem less empty. (Age 223-224)

Interestingly, Newland is less interested in seeing the actual Ellen than the place where she lives and suggests that he simply wants to be reminded of the feelings he experienced that were prompted by Ellen’s presence.

By the last chapter of Wharton’s novel, there is a sense that the world has changed dramatically since Newland was confronted with the news of May’s pregnancy twenty-five years
earlier. Newland thinks to himself about the marriage of his daughter, and remarks that “In a world where all else had reeled on its foundations the ‘Grace Church wedding’ remained an unchanged institution” (Age 345). Here, Wharton acknowledges the persistence of tradition in relation to a building as this physical presence has withstood the massive shift in societal conditions. The difference between the new generation and the previous one is perhaps most apparent through the depiction of Newland’s oldest son, Dallas, who has chosen to be an architect due to his love for art and beautiful buildings. Newland ponders how the men of this new era seem more devoted to taking an active interest in changing and learning about the world:

The young men nowadays were emancipating themselves from the law and business and taking up all sorts of new things. If they were not absorbed in state politics or municipal reform, the chances were that they were going in for Central American archaeology, for architecture or landscape-engineering; taking a keen and learned interest in the prerevolutionary buildings of their own country, studying and adapting Georgian types, and protesting at the meaningless use of the word ‘Colonial.’ Nobody nowadays had ‘Colonial’ houses except the millionaire grocers of the suburbs. (Age 345)

Wharton suggests that what characterizes young men at the turn of the century is their desire to focus on differentiating themselves from the previous generation rather than conforming to its traditions like those of Newland’s age.

One of the most significant realizations made by Newland in the course of his twenty-five year separation from Ellen is that he did not have a miserable life without her and actually led a content, albeit conventional, life. He makes this recognition and thinks to himself:

Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life. But he thought of it now as a thing so unattainable and improbable that to have repined would have been like despairing because
one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery. There were a hundred million tickets in his lottery, and there was only one prize; the chances had been too decidedly against him. When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture: she had become the composite vision of all that he had missed. (347)

For Newland, Ellen becomes a representation of complete fulfillment, the answer to all things in his life that were less than ideal, and he understands over time that no one can, or should, have all that they desire. Lack and loss ultimately allow one to imagine all the possibilities available in life, and these feelings eventually lead to personal growth.

In choosing not to follow Ellen, Newland becomes aware of those aspects of his conservative, structured life to which he is attracted, those things that make him what Wharton depicts as a civilized man. Newland concedes that his decision to stay with May was not a mistake. He insists, “Their long years together had shown him that it did not so much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty: lapsing from that, it became a mere battle of ugly appetites. Looking about him, he honoured his own past, and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways” (Age 347). The absence of regret he expresses in taking comfort in the traditions of his class reflects that of Wharton herself who was able to look back and see the value in the old New York that she often underestimated. Fryer links Newland’s negotiation of the positives and negatives of his society to that of Wharton, as she argues:

Archer might see ‘good in the old ways’ and ‘good in the new ways,’ but Wharton was well aware of repression of the self in the old ways and fragmentation of the self in the new. The attraction of the old here, despite the formidable allure of the sensuous ‘disorder’ of Ellen Olenska, is as the necessary counterbalance to war and death that Wharton needed as she
worked on this novel. Newland Archer, in fact, is exactly as important as a center in this novel as his room full of 'sincere’ Eastlake furniture is important in May’s house: *The Age of Innocence* is not really ‘about’ Newland Archer at all; it is about the little ‘hieroglyphic world’ in which he lived. (129)

Wharton returns to her past to interpret these hieroglyphics through the eyes of someone who has known the modern world, forging a connection between past and present to find a middle ground upon which she could find the strength to accept both.

The important concluding scene of the novel takes place not in New York, but in Paris, as Dallas has invited his father along on a business trip to Europe to see some Italian gardens, one of the sights that Wharton herself most admired. Once they arrive in Paris, Dallas states that he has contacted Ellen Olenska to tell her that he and his father are visiting and sets up a meeting at her house. When Newland hesitates, Dallas tells his father that his mother, on her deathbed, had revealed that she knew Newland had loved Ellen and had “given up the thing [he] most wanted” (*Age* 357). Prior to the meeting with Ellen, Newland wanders around Paris taking in the sights that Ellen had often talked about and he specifically makes a trip to the Louvre, because, as he had in the past, he longs to see a place that he knew Ellen attended often. In viewing the beautiful sites that Ellen had the pleasure of taking in every day, Newland remarks to himself that amongst the immediacy of these lovely places, her memory of her love for Newland was most likely “like a relic in a small dim chapel, where there was not time to pray every day” (*Age* 360). While Newland’s library acts as a confined space that allows him continually to reflect on images of Ellen, the buildings and landmarks of Paris do not act as barriers as the structures in New York do and instead promote engagement with others so that meaningful reflection becomes a collective rather than a solitary activity.
Newland’s trepidation about seeing Ellen again grows as he and Dallas approach her house despite the fact that in Paris there seems to be nothing that stands in the way of them rekindling their relationship. Newland describes her house as “a modern building, without distinctive character, but many-windowed” (*Age* 360). Although this building seems uncharacteristically drab compared with Ellen’s “funny little house” that impressed Newland in New York, what does seem consistent is that she seems to insist on inhabiting homes with windows that invite others into her world while allowing her to see the outside as well. Wharton’s text leaves open two possible explanations for this unexpectedly conventional home: either Ellen has lost some of her zest for life and part of herself in her separation from Newland, or that perhaps it is this separation that causes Newland to perceive her, and thereby her house, differently, and he no longer sees the idealized version of her. Despite Dallas’s prodding, Newland refuses to go inside and see Ellen, and when Dallas asks him how he should explain this to her, Newland replies, “Say I’m old-fashioned: that’s enough” (*Age* 361). Like the remnants of the lost civilization at the Metropolitan Museum, the romance between Newland and Ellen is depicted as being of a past age and having no place in the modern world. As Newland watches Dallas enter Ellen’s house, he says aloud to himself, “It’s more real to me here than if I went up” (*Age* 362). The implication is that his imagined relationship with Ellen has sustained him for most of his adult life, and he fears that an actual reunion with her may not live up to his expectations. Indeed, Wharton depicts this romance in the register of a nostalgic view of the past, rather than an actuality in the modern present. As confirmation that the opportunity has passed for Newland to pursue a life with Ellen, the shutters surrounding the windows on the balcony are closed by one of her servants, emphasizing the self-imposed barrier Newland has created between his actual life and his “real” life.

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Rather than celebrating Newland’s recognition that one cannot reside permanently in the past or pitying his inability to live fully in the present, it seems that Wharton invites her readers to acknowledge the necessity of maintaining the balance between the traditions that hold a society together and the carefree curiosity of the imagination. In the gap between the time at the conclusion of *The Age of Innocence*, the early 1900s, and the time that Wharton wrote her novel, 1920, is the Great War, which left the material connections to cultural tradition in ruins. Particularly in light of the disorienting effects of modernity, nostalgia becomes a bridge that uses the ideal aspects of the past to transition more fully into the present. Wharton rebuilds the structures of her youth in her novel in order to lay the foundation to rebuild the structures of her adulthood. By resuscitating her writing career, she hoped to restore her faith in the power of culture to stir the imagination and invigorate mundane reality through the pursuit of truth and beauty. While she always admired Europe’s embracing of culture and intellectual freedom, it is New York and its conventional reliability, a quality which she once deplored, that grounds her enough to adapt to the modern world instead of ignoring it. More than just a sentimental romance, *The Age of Innocence* revises the concept of an “age” as a period distinct from all others, and suggests that instead it becomes a source of inspiration to which later generations can return to inform their own present struggles.
F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Constructing of Tradition

Much like the Jazz Age, the period that he was able to articulate both with nostalgic longing and critical disdain in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s creative inspiration, which he associated with this era, died with the onset of the Great Depression after the initial success of his novel. While even Fitzgerald himself would admit in his collection of essays, *The Crack-Up* (1945), that toward the end of his life a crucial part of himself had been lost, the nostalgic sensibility he employed in writing *The Great Gatsby* is what brought him success. It was his ability to capture the spirit of the Jazz Age and romantic ideals such as the American Dream that made *The Great Gatsby* a triumph. Moreover, Fitzgerald suggested that it was necessary to restore a belief in possibility in order to remedy the aimless disillusionment of the Lost Generation. Wright Morris notes that Fitzgerald’s nostalgia, perhaps more than anything else, has the ability to unite people with a shared experience of the past:

That elusive rhythm, that fragment of lost words, that ghostly rumble among the drums are now, thanks to Fitzgerald, a part of our inheritance. Those who were never there will now be there, in a sense more compelling than those who were there, since they will face it, and grasp it, in the lucid form of Fitzgerald’s craft. Like Gatsby, he, too, believed in the green light, in the orgiastic future that recedes before us, leading by a strange circumambulation back into the past, back to those dark fields of the republic where the Big Two-Hearted
River flows into the Mississippi, and the Mississippi flows, like time, into the territory ahead. (26)

Just as the character Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* admires his neighbor’s devotion to his pursuit of love and his ability to reinvent himself in an attempt to achieve it, Fitzgerald’s nostalgia should not be regarded as his substitute for a failed reality, but as the inspiration to overcome the various failures in his life. For Fitzgerald, nostalgia is an emotional response that arises in the face of adversity or uncertainty and functions as a motivating force that allows one to adapt to one’s present personal and social circumstances. He was painfully aware that the past could never be replicated, despite Gatsby’s claims to the contrary, but he also realized that by periodically returning to his memories of the past and reminding himself of the ambition, the confidence, and the optimism that were very real elements of his identity, he could continue his quest to succeed as a writer. Beyond his own personal struggles, Fitzgerald explored the potential for nostalgia to ease the difficult transition from the past, in which tradition provided a secure cultural foundation, to the modern world jarred by the uncertainty of an entirely new set of cultural factors-- technological warfare, consumerism, and social mobility. Rather than disengaging from a past that no longer seemed relevant amidst such rapid social upheaval, Fitzgerald believed that nostalgia would permit him to consciously incorporate elements of the past into modern life and would alleviate the anxiety of being thrust into a new way of life seemingly unmoored from any stabilizing fundamental principles.

Nostalgia is an emotional response often evoked by material things, which act as reminders of the past, and in the first section of this chapter I discuss how Fitzgerald places particular importance on showing how homes in the novel reflect the role tradition plays in identity formation. *The Great Gatsby* represents the materialism of the post-World War I
generation and the way in which people’s possessions reflect how they want to be perceived; Fitzgerald conveys this most clearly in his depiction of Gatsby’s house. The construction of the home and the items within it are expressions of Gatsby’s nostalgia for an upper class tradition of which he was never a part. Gatsby purchases material objects that appear traditional in the attempt to be traditional and perform the role of an aristocratic gentleman. Nostalgia provides the motivation and the means through which Gatsby is able to move into a different social sphere in the attempt to attain Daisy, and he infuses his modern home with elements associated with an established tradition of wealth to affirm that he belongs within that tradition.

Although the American Dream, the idea that one has the capacity to realize his or her aspirations for success through sheer determination and hard work, is undoubtedly an important theme in The Great Gatsby, even more importantly Fitzgerald suggests that one should be less interested in achieving the American Dream and more concerned with continually finding sources of inspiration in order to prevent a kind of disillusioned paralysis. For him nostalgia’s most important role was in keeping his imaginative spirit alive. It is significant that the novel was written during one of the most difficult periods in Fitzgerald’s life. His marriage was falling apart and his drinking was spiraling out of control. The Great Gatsby seems to be a response to Fitzgerald’s struggle to maintain his waning sense of wonder or hope in a reality that threatened to destroy it. While one could contend that The Great Gatsby epitomizes the failure of the American Dream, I argue that Fitzgerald, rather, suggests that the novel is Gatsby’s attempt to replace reality with a nostalgically idealized version of the past, instead of using nostalgia to transition into the present, which leads to his defeat. Instead of striving for his dream to become reality, Gatsby’s wants reality to conform to his idealized, uncomplicated fantasy of perfection, allowing his imagination to run unrestricted by time and space. This is not to say that Fitzgerald
considers Gatsby’s idealism to be a flaw. In fact, he suggests that it is his hopeful ambition that makes Gatsby great. However, it is when nostalgia makes the present seem to be a source of misery, a futile point of no return in which the imagined past is privileged above all else, that such unbridled idealism imprisons the dreamer. Nostalgia for Fitzgerald is essentially a longing for an ideal state of being, an expression of one’s dissatisfaction with the way that things are in comparison with what they might have been. In conceptualizing the past as an imaginary standard of perfection against which one can measure the perceived flaws in the present, nostalgia allows for the distance necessary to observe reality critically and acknowledge that improvements can be made. With his own personal losses as well as his growing awareness of a post-war generation drowning in its own excesses, Fitzgerald posits that nostalgia, rather than ignoring reality, provides the motivation to persevere through it and continue the pursuit for a more fulfilling social order and personal existence.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald reveals his ambivalence between maintaining a connection to the past and breaking with tradition in order to reinvent oneself, and in the second section of this chapter I explore how the consumption of material objects in the early twentieth century became a way for consumers to purchase an “authentic” link to the past and, thereby, an authentic identity that would elevate their social status in modern society. An interesting phenomenon that coincided with modernity was the prevalence of the use of nostalgia as a marketing strategy, and products that were manufactured in the present were often promoted as being “old-fashioned” or “genuine” representations of the past. Elizabeth Outka provides a logical explanation for this seemingly paradoxical notion which she refers to as the “commodified authentic”: “The term does not imply a search for authenticity per se but rather a search for a sustained contradiction that might allow consumers to be at once connected to a
range of values roughly aligned with authenticity and yet also to be fully modern” (4-5). *The Great Gatsby* affirms the necessity for maintaining a balance between a reverence for the past and a desire to move beyond the past in order to embrace the possibilities of a new society no longer bound by outmoded ideals. Fitzgerald suggests that in the post-World War I world, nostalgia had the capacity to relieve the tension between fully transitioning into a modern world that promised the potential for social mobility and a longing to maintain the traditional values that modernity threatened to corrupt.

The concept of the self-made man and the prospect of constructing an image of success through sheer motivation appealed greatly to Fitzgerald; the idea that wealth could purchase status provided a possibility for a level of achievement previously reserved for those born into the upper class. However, he also realized that access to upper class society, a world based mostly on image, came at the expense of more traditional ideals such as integrity and sincerity. The emphasis on consumerism that characterized the Jazz Age conveyed that like any other product, one’s identity could be bought and distributed for consumption by others. While Fitzgerald celebrated the potential for growth provided by such an opportunity, he recognized the inherent inequalities in such a system that marginalized and de-humanized those without access to wealth. Though he viewed capitalism as a way for individuals potentially to bypass class restrictions determined by birth, Fitzgerald also expressed a nostalgic admiration for the security provided by a traditional class structure in which one’s position was immutable. He lamented that the values that he had always associated with the upper class—dignity, honor, and prominence—had been displaced in favor of an emphasis on wealth alone.

All of the homes in *The Great Gatsby* reflect the class status of their inhabitants, yet while social positions are fixed for the upper class Buchanans and the lower class Wilsons, Gatsby’s
house reflects his transitional status as it is neither fully traditional nor fully modern. His house conveys an aesthetic nostalgia in that it incorporates elements meant to appear traditional even though they are reproductions manufactured in the present. Because he is not a natural heir to any of the privileges of the upper class, Gatsby feels it necessary to mimic his idealized conception of the traditional English gentleman in order to pass as an “authentic” aristocrat. Through his house, he creates a setting that allows him to perform this role. In the final section of this chapter, I highlight how Gatsby uses objects in and around his home as a means of capturing the past as best he can. The novel suggests that nostalgia functions as a way of negotiating that transition from the Victorian era to modernity. The accumulation of tangible things that act as reminders of the past provide comfort amidst the uncertainty of the present. In his depiction of houses in the novel, particularly Gatsby’s home, Fitzgerald represents nostalgia, which I discuss in what follows, as both a critique of capitalism and an endorsement for it. Nostalgia functions as a rejection of modernity in favor of traditional ideals, but, as the novel makes clear, it is only through the consumption of nostalgic objects as part of the modern marketplace that one is able to lay claim to those lost ideals in the present.

Houses in The Great Gatsby and the Materializing of Aspirations

In The Great Gatsby, houses reflect the various ways in which their inhabitants respond to the social changes that marked the post-war era, ranging from Gatsby’s nostalgia for an idealized pre-war life with Daisy, and Nick’s sense of confusion and stagnation upon returning from the war, to Tom’s obsessive greed and moral emptiness. W.T. Lhamon Jr. asserts that the homes in the novel suggest an idealized standard of opulence meant to reflect on the owners themselves:

Each house exhibits the same themes and goals—goals which only the Buchanan mansion successfully approximates. And, of course, in personal terms, Tom Buchanan represents the
values these buildings are meant to house. The houses of *The Great Gatsby* manifest at a subtle, structural level the seeming variety but underlying unidimensionality that the novel postulates. (58-59)

Although Lhamon believes that the houses reveal a so-called unidimensionality, a single concept of success that is shared by all characters regardless of their social status, I argue that the houses of Gatsby, Tom, and Nick actually convey quite different views about nostalgia. Gatsby’s nostalgia becomes a way to escape the bonds of a traditional class structure that favors inherited status. He is able to rise socially because he accumulates enough wealth to purchase products that evoke a sense of traditional authority and give the impression that he belongs among the upper class. Tom’s nostalgia, on the other hand, attempts to reinforce a traditional class structure that prevents social mobility. He resents social climbers such as Gatsby and longs for the restrictions of class and race that marked the aristocracy of the past. Nick’s nostalgia functions as a way to bring forth traditional values into present modern life. After interacting with his Long Island neighbors, Nick becomes disillusioned by the corruption and lack of compassion within modern society and ultimately chooses to return to his home in the Midwest in search of old-fashioned ideals like honor and integrity that still exist in the present. These distinct versions of nostalgia experienced by the three characters inform the roles that they play within society, and the houses that they occupy reflect their perspectives on modernity.25

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25 As a result of his father’s lack of job security and the family being uprooted multiple times, the various houses in which he lived never made much of an impression on Fitzgerald, and he never received a great deal of comfort from his home life. He only seemed to understand the concept of home in comparison with the homes he admired and knew he was not fortunate enough to have.
Certainly, the most obvious example in the novel of one creating his image through his house is that of Jay Gatsby whose nostalgia functions as a critique of modernization, even as he actively participates in the marketplace in an attempt to buy his status. He uses not only objects, but also people at his elaborate parties to lend credibility to his performance as a traditional English gentleman. The carnivalesque atmosphere that Gatsby carefully constructs is entirely a nostalgic effort to reclaim his past with Daisy. Gatsby mimics the type of atmosphere that he believes Daisy desires. He rejects the modern notion that possessions are important only as status symbols and instead believes they can provide for the attainment of his larger goal, Daisy. Paradoxically, it is precisely modern society’s increased emphasis on material wealth that makes it possible for a man like him to become a self-made upper class gentleman and pursue his love for Daisy, a privilege which he would have been denied by traditional standards of inherited status. His nostalgia for an old-fashioned air of sophistication is expressed through his purchases and allows him to assimilate into upper class society. Gatsby’s parties are pure spectacle, and the

While his family was still considered upper-middle class, Fitzgerald’s own modest house was on a street adjacent to the more affluent neighborhoods in St. Paul, showing him the houses that were seemingly off-limits, just out of reach, to someone of his means, only adding to his inferiority complex. In describing the location of the house in which Fitzgerald spent most of his adolescence, Marilyn R. Chandler states: “Fitzgerald lived in a home—or rather a series of homes, for his parents moved every year or two for much of his childhood—on ‘the periphery of St. Paul’s finest residential street, ‘a row of brownstones that Fitzgerald later called ‘a museum of American architectural failures.’ “ See Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 218.
house becomes a substitute for the man himself as all of the guests recognize his lavish mansion but few have met the host who prefers to hide upstairs away from the action. The attendees judge him based on his home rather than his character, and part of the appeal of this for Gatsby is that despite all the speculation about whether he is a murderer, a spy, or a war hero, he gives the appearance that he is wealthy and a man to be envied. These guests whom Gatsby never meets are actually pawns in his game, in that they make his house an attractive stop on the Long Island social circuit, and he hopes that one day Daisy, his lost love, will be drawn back into his life like a moth pulled toward the blazing lights of his home. Despite his obvious financial success, Gatsby is not privileged enough to have full access to the insular world of East Egg because he had to attain his wealth as opposed to being born into it, so the best he can do is create a small-scale model of East Egg within his own home. In his first visit to Gatsby’s home, Nick remarks: “Instead of rambling, this party had preserved a dignified homogeneity, and assumed to itself the function of representing the staid nobility of the countryside—East Egg condescending to West Egg, and carefully on guard against its spectroscopic gaiety” (Gatsby 29-30). Not only does Gatsby dress the part of an East Egg blueblood, but his guests act in accordance with their own perceptions of the old money class, expressing their own longing for this same standard of superiority. Though Gatsby and his guests are members of the modern upper class composed of self-made millionaires, their nostalgia for a traditional, exclusive class structure that privileged inherited prestige is what guides their behavior.

Gatsby’s house itself has a history of incompatibility with its surroundings as the previous owner, a brewer, built it in a nostalgic effort to imitate a feudal manor but neglected to consider the dissonance between his home and the modern homes surrounding it. The house is considered a failure after the brewer was rebuffed by his neighbors whom he attempted to pay off in
exchange for them thatching their roofs with straw. In asking the neighbors to assume the role of peasants in relation to his grandiose mansion, the brewer establishes the house to affirm his nostalgia for a traditional class structure that is no longer relevant in the modern era in which the home was built—ten years prior to Gatsby taking ownership in 1922. Curtis Dahl argues that the architectural style of the house was typical for the wealthy of the time who attempted to flaunt a connection to traditional privilege through their newly-built homes:

- Imagined to have been built about 1912, ‘early in the “period” craze’ (89) it is a highly accurate caricature of the elaborate Châteauesque Style developed in the late nineteenth century by Richard Morris Hunt and Stanford White for the Vanderbilts and other enormously rich families of New York City, Newport and Long Island. Its large central bay (89), its high tower set asymmetrically on one side of its façade (5), its big postern (91), great arched doors, square towers (65, 91) and ranges of French windows (147) give it the eclectic, partly late Gothic, partly Renaissance, European flavor characteristic of the genre…Seen at night, its silhouette against the sky is ‘feudal’ (92)—a word with mixed connotations, savoring of foolish but generally harmless Sir Walter Scott romance yet hinting also of a European class system. (92)

Fitzgerald seems to shrewdly use the architecture of Gatsby’s house not only to reveal it to be an inherited blunder, one common amongst the nouveau riche trying to appear to come from old money, but also, as I would argue, to convey his conflicted views about the rapidly shifting class structure of the time from one privileging traditional familial bonds to one increasingly focused on material wealth.

Perhaps one of the most revealing rooms in Gatsby’s mansion that acts as a testament to his commitment to recreating the past through his role as an aristocrat is his library where Jordan
and Nick encounter the “owl-eyed” man perusing the books. The construction of the room itself, as well as the books contained within it, is deliberately meant to look traditional, and add authenticity to Gatsby’s persona as a cultured gentleman. It might seem to be a contradiction that one can be an authentic construction, can be something natural that is manufactured, but the concept of authenticity itself is an illusion. Nostalgia assumes that the past was authentic and the present has deviated so far from tradition that modern life must be distorted or false in comparison. However, nostalgia most typically conceives of the past not as it actually was, but instead idealizes it, longing for how it could have been if its flaws were erased. Therefore, the apparent contradiction between something being both authentic and a construction collapses since authenticity itself is a nostalgic ideal manufactured to broaden the gap between the past and present. Despite the fact that modernity was not any less real than the Victorian era, the substantial social changes that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century as a result of factors like industrial progress and war prompted a societal preoccupation with authenticity and maintaining values associated with a past that was perceived as lost. This preoccupation was particularly important for members of the upper class who wanted to prevent social climbers from infiltrating the “real” aristocracy, those who had been born into privilege. New money millionaires were perceived as a threat and labeled as fakes or phonies by the old money elite who had inherited rather than created their fortunes. Accusations of phoniness became a new form of class discrimination meant to reinforce traditional social barriers that had collapsed as wealth became the most important factor in becoming a member of the upper class. Aware of this stigma against new money, Gatsby is self-conscious about his status and actively constructs his persona by accumulating material things produced in the present that project an image of traditional affluence.
The library exemplifies Outka’s concept of the “commodified authentic” in that the items within it are purchased specifically to appear as though they are genuine remnants of the past when they are, in fact, reproductions manufactured in the modern era. Gatsby uses the library as a tactic to integrate himself into the materialistic modern world and does so by appealing to the traditional sensibilities associated with the aristocracy. As he and Jordan explore Gatsby’s house, Nick explains: “On a chance we tried an important-looking door, and walked into a high Gothic library, panelled with carved English oak, and probably transported complete from some ruin overseas” (Gatsby 30). While the library is impressive in its attention to detail, it is not in fact an authentic English library but it is purchased to imitate one, and its value comes from its nostalgic mimicry of an original. For Gatsby, age connotes value since aristocrats from the oldest wealthy families are the most respected, so he constructs an archaic library in his home. That he does not recognize any incompatibility in building an old-fashioned library in his contemporary

26 Bonnie Shannon McMullen argues that this focus on what Gatsby later refers to as the “Merton College Library” was inspired by Fitzgerald’s time at Princeton, a school which he referred to in This Side of Paradise as “lazy and good-looking and aristocratic—you know, like a spring day” (27), and his admiration for its connection to an intellectual tradition. She references Jeffrey N.A. Matthews who notes that Fitzgerald’s Princeton dining club, Cottage, “had built a new library modeled on Merton’s just after the turn of the century…Not only is the original Merton Library the oldest in Oxford, just as the college has claims to be the oldest, but it is ‘the oldest surviving purpose-built library in England.’” See McMullen, “‘This Tremendous Detail’ The Oxford Stone in the House of Gatsby,” A Distant Drummer: Foreign Perspectives on F. Scott Fitzgerald. Eds. Jamal Assadi and William Freedman (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 15.
home with its modern conveniences suggests the degree to which Gatsby’s commodified authentic aims to negotiate past and present.

The owl-eyed man in the library reveals that while Gatsby may not experience any contradiction between his status as self-made man and his claim to aristocratic privilege, his party guests are not entirely convinced that he is “the real thing,” a member of the upper class with ties to a tradition of privilege, and that perhaps behind the glamour there is no substance. This speculation about Gatsby’s authenticity reveals the modern proliferation of accusations of phoniness as a means of exerting social superiority over self-made entrepreneurs rather than an actual assault on Gatsby’s character. Once those who came from inherited wealth could no longer prevent the nouveau riche from infiltrating the upper class, associating new money with inauthenticity became a new form of class discrimination meant to protect the authority of the traditional aristocracy. Phoniness can be defined as insincerity, the compromising of one’s beliefs, with the goal of social gain or approval. However, Gatsby is completely sincere in his commitment to being Gatsby. He does not pretend to be like Tom Buchanan or others of the social elite in order to gain a reputation.

Gatsby’s ultimate desire is the love of Daisy, seemingly a more honorable goal than the acquisition of status and money sought by many in his society. In this way, he differentiates himself from those around him rather than simply mimicking social cues to improve his status. He is not being fake or compromising his beliefs simply to conform to his society’s standards; instead, he is becoming the real self he always imagined himself to be and uses his nostalgia to create that image in the present. His memories of the love he had for Daisy allow him to transition from a past in which “Gatsby” was an identity he only imagined for himself to a real version of a successful man of privilege in the present. The shifting social landscape, while
allowing Gatsby to embody the image of a sophisticated gentleman, never fully eliminates the
domination that the traditional upper class holds over the rest of society, and the discrimination
they employ to maintain that dominance merely changes from economic distinctions to a kind of
essential elitism based on the so-called inauthenticity of self-made wealth.

When Jordan and Nick discover the drunken man staring at the books in the library, he is in
utter disbelief that Gatsby went to the trouble to have real books on the shelves. Nick recounts
the owl-eyed man’s reference to the books as he exclaims:

‘Absolutely real—have pages and everything. I thought they’d be a nice durable cardboard.
Matter of fact, they’re absolutely real...It’s a bona-fide piece of printed matter. It fooled
me. This fella’s a regular Belasco. It’s a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew
when to stop too—didn’t cut the pages. But what do you want? What do you expect?’

He snatched the book from me and replaced it hastily on its shelf, muttering that if one brick
was removed the whole library was liable to collapse. (Gatsby 30)

Despite his admiration that Gatsby went to such lengths to create such an impressive facsimile of
a genuine library, even comparing Gatsby’s ability to orchestrate a believable performance to
that of theatrical producer David Belasco, the owl-eyed man makes apparent that there is a
skepticism regarding Gatsby’s credibility and that beyond appearances it could all be a
precarious illusion. In terms of Outka’s explanation of the commodified authentic, the marketing
of nostalgia was prompted by fear that tradition would be lost with the onset of modernity. Since
Gatsby has made such an effort to incorporate traditional elements in his home, the man whose
owl-like eyes suggest a penetrating social vision suggests that others regard Gatsby as insecure
about his status because resuscitation of the past has been associated with fear. Therefore, the
owl-eyed man assumes that Gatsby is probably a fake who uses his wealth to hide, and compensate for, whom he really is.

According to Marilyn Chandler, it is Gatsby’s attention to detail that makes his home too good to be true:

The very ‘authenticity’ of Gatsby’s library, the perfection of its completeness combined with the obvious fact that the books are unread and the room is unemployed for its ostensible purpose, once again reinforces the sense that this is a movie set fashioned by an expert master-designer who went to such lengths to create appearances that the surfaces even have interiors. But these interiors, like his house, are, for all their authenticity, false; they are surfaces in their turn. (230)

Unlike Chandler who suggests that the design of Gatsby’s house necessarily reveals him to be a fake, I argue that Gatsby’s character cannot be qualified by overly simplified categorization of him as either artificial or real. The interiors of Gatsby’s are not “false” but instead reveal the complicated transition occurring at the turn of the century as modern society struggled to hold on to traditional values while embracing modernity as best it could. The eeriness that results from the blending of the real with the unreal is an effect of nostalgia as things convey associations of the past and engender these ideas within the present, causing an apparent breach in the boundaries of time and space. The owl-eyed man’s reaction to the library stems from the fact that the articles of the room have been displaced from their original context in the past and superimposed in the present, an act that should not be possible and, therefore, leads to doubt. The library and its uncanny accuracy cast doubt upon Gatsby’s validity as an aristocrat as it is the effortlessness of the nobility, as conveyed by Tom, that lends credibility to one’s status, and the
sense that Gatsby is trying too hard to make his home compensate for his less than glamorous past is apparent to everyone but himself.

Although the guests who frequent Gatsby’s gatherings are somewhat suspicious that he might be an imposter desperately trying to forge his way into a higher class, they choose willingly to participate in the fantasy because they respond to the nostalgia that the parties evoke. These affairs are based on mutual manipulation as Gatsby uses his guests to build up his own image as a wealthy playboy and the guests take advantage of his generosity and the luxurious amenities in his home. Any reservations that the guests have about Gatsby’s character are put aside in the name of entertainment, and Nick mentions to his neighbor, “‘Your place looks like the World’s Fair,’” (Gatsby 52). Mary McAleer Balkum suggests that the carnival-like atmosphere of Gatsby’s house acts as a diversion from the reality that he is a fraud:

The house in which the parties take place is, like Gatsby, a copy masquerading as the real thing….Gatsby’s private version of the fair contains many of the features of the traditional, popular events, including the re-created foreign locale (his imitation French hotel), theatrical presentations (a full orchestra provides music each night), redundant quantities (books, stacks of shirts) and parties that feature a collection of ‘human oddities,’ from the elegant to the crude, the famous to the infamous, the wealthy to the working class. (143) Balkum’s assessment of Gatsby as a copycat rather than “the real thing” is too simple and I argue, instead, that Gatsby and his parties collapse the binary established by the old money upper class: traditional authenticity versus modern inauthenticity. The setting of the parties ultimately draws on the public’s nostalgia for Old World entertainment and amenities, and his guests find his events appealing because the parties stimulate people’s traditional sensibilities that threaten to disappear in the modern world. While it is evident that Gatsby’s guests embrace the modern
with their flashy cars and “hair shorn in strange new ways” (*Gatsby* 28), they also appreciate the “dignified homogeneity” (*Gatsby* 30) of his formal dinners and traditional forms of entertainment that include performances by orchestras, Italian tenors, and stage actors. These amusements are attempts to create the type of atmosphere that he thinks Daisy will want, but Gatsby retreats to the background amidst all the chaos patiently waiting for his past to return.

The sense that others have that Gatsby will falter in the presentation of his ideal self is evident in conversations about his past, particularly regarding his education, which he continually reiterates as a source of pride. Throughout the novel, he refers to himself as an “Oxford man” in an attempt to align himself with the intellectual elite and affirm that he has a rightful place among the upper class. He even has the affectation of calling people “old sport” to lend credence to the influence of his English education and take on the persona of the stereotypical English gentleman. He expresses his nostalgia for that traditional ideal that he associates with prestige and success and attempts to replicate the qualities of an aristocrat as a modern American man. However, Gatsby reveals later that he did not “attend” Oxford as a student but merely wound up there for a short time accidentally as a result of a clerical error once the war had ended. When Gatsby decides to confide in Nick about his life he states: “I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition” (*Gatsby* 42).27 For Gatsby, Oxford is the physical

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27 According to McMullen, Fitzgerald’s reverence for Princeton, and Oxford by extension, comes out in his depiction of Gatsby and his emphasis on academic tradition: “Thus prepared to be impressed, when Fitzgerald visited in the spring of 1921 he exclaimed categorically to Harold Perkins: ‘The most beautiful spot in the world is Oxford, without a doubt.’ His beloved Princeton
embodiment of all the qualities he aims to possess—superiority, success, and respect—and by creating an association to this ancient institution he believes he can prove his worth in the eyes of his peers.

Gatsby’s nostalgic reminiscing about Oxford is meant to validate his experience and impress his listener, in this case, Nick, but the past, on one level, to which he alludes is one which he never really experienced. Nevertheless, these stories do become “real” in the sense that Gatsby articulates them in the present and Nick bears witness to them. Nick suggests his own skepticism regarding Gatsby’s claim to the identity of a gentleman. As Gatsby is talking about his education, Nick senses a flaw in his presentation: “He hurried the phrase ‘educated at Oxford,’ or swallowed it, or choked on it, as though it had bothered him before. And with this doubt, his whole statement fell to pieces, and I wondered if there wasn’t something a little sinister about him, after all” (Gatsby 42). Like the library that threatens to collapse if a book is pulled off the shelf, Gatsby’s very being has a certain frailty to it as though any misstep on his part will demolish all hopes of getting Daisy back.

may have been ‘the loveliest riot of Gothic architecture in America,’ but it was a New World copy of an Old World original. Oxford was the real thing, and its architectural distinction and historical and literary associations made an even greater impact on Fitzgerald than Venice...Surrounded by this architectural transcendence of the temporal and material, Gatsby’s ‘heightened sensitivity to the promises of life’ finds a correlative.”” See McMullen, “‘This Tremendous Detail’ The Oxford Stone in the House of Gatsby,” A Distant Drummer: Foreign Perspectives on F. Scott Fitzgerald. Eds. Jamal Assadi and William Freedman (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 13-14.
Fitzgerald explores the idea that there is a certain element of pretense behind every supposed truth whether or not we choose to acknowledge it. The concept of success that all the characters of the novel aspire to is, in itself, an illusion, an idealized notion that defies the reality of human limitations, flaws, and unforeseen circumstances. Bonnie Shannon McMullen contends that even Oxford, the supposed standard of academic excellence, despite its merits, takes on a mythical quality that is antithetical to reality:

Oxford serves as a topos in *The Great Gatsby*, a criterion against which to measure American culture and values. Gatsby’s claim to have been at Oxford becomes a touchstone for truth in a novel that is continually asking us to reevaluate our conceptions of the real and the unreal. At the same time, there is an element of the unreal about Oxford. Its elitism has the power to offend, and the image of young men ‘loafing’ amidst ancient buildings and green lawns evokes its opposite, the darker side of a social and economic world which *Gatsby* dramatizes—the inescapable Valley of Ashes and the material and cultural Wasteland of Jay Gatz’s boyhood. (14)

In dramatizing Gatsby’s journey to embellish his conventional upbringing with details of his time at Oxford, Fitzgerald reveals the various manipulations of truth and fantasies that all the characters negotiate on some level, and their perception of Gatsby’s blending of the imaginary and the actual takes on an uncanny quality as they are reminded of the aspects of themselves that they too try to enhance with illusions.

The epitome of the entitled, old money playboy in the novel is Tom Buchanan, the husband of Nick’s second cousin, Daisy, who rivals Gatsby not only for Daisy’s love, but also in his longing to repeat the past. For his entire life, Tom has gotten everything he desires, using his money, his power, and force if necessary. However, the ease with which Tom is able to take
what he wants without ever having to work or struggle has left him with a void that he compulsively tries to fill with material possessions, women, and alcohol. He is incapable of being fulfilled because acquiring the things he desires carries no meaning for him and only provides a momentary satisfaction that must soon be replaced. The one thing that Tom cannot repossess is the glory of his youth, so each of his acquisitions seems an attempt to restore that feeling of dominance that was lost after his successful college football career ended. As Nick acknowledges: “I felt that Tom would drift on for ever, seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game” (Gatsby 6). Tom’s inability to cope with the reality that the best years of his life are over causes him to constantly assert his physical worth, via his strength, his money, and his possessions, in order to compensate for his spiritual and emotional emptiness. In a larger sense, Tom reveals his nostalgia in his conservative worldview and his fear that the aristocracy will have authority stolen away from them by the new money class and minorities. Juxtaposed against Gatsby who manipulates modern society’s emphasis on material wealth in order to gain access to the upper class, Tom is nostalgic for a prior class system in which birth determined status and those not born into affluence were barred from rising above their station in life. He exhibits what Svetlana Boym refers to as “restorative nostalgia,” the longing to recreate a way of life that has been lost or threatens to be lost as a result of a conspiracy by a perceived threat (41). Citing The Rise of the Coloured Empires by “a man named Goddard,” Tom’s mistaken allusion to the real-life book The Rising Tide of Color by Lothrop Stoddard exposes his racism and his belief that increased opportunities for minorities have corrupted society. Throughout the novel, Tom’s antagonism toward progress manifests itself through violence and destruction against those around him in the name of nostalgia and the protection of his ever-dwindling sense of superiority.
Although Fitzgerald portrays him as being arrogant, vicious, and amoral, Tom also signifies the quintessential embodiment of the traditional aristocrat, a confident, powerful man that less privileged men aspire to be. Tom’s authority has been inherited through birth rather than having to earn it through hard work and dedication which gives him an advantage that cannot be achieved by those who were not born into wealth. Thomas Dilworth argues that despite his obvious character flaws, Tom is portrayed as the novel’s physical representation of the idealized American man and that Fitzgerald draws his inspiration for Tom from a popular advertising campaign of the time, the Arrow Collar man, that capitalizes on a nostalgia for the traditional gentleman. Arrogant and morally bankrupt, Tom hardly seems to be the epitome of the modern man, but on a superficial level, Dilworth suggests, he fulfills the image of how authoritative men have traditionally been portrayed—handsome, physically imposing, and impeccably dressed. Dilworth claims:

As a former ‘football king,’ Buchanan corresponds to the athletic Arrow Collar type of the physically perfect American male, one who is also financially well off. Based largely on that commercialized image, Gatsby tries to be like Buchanan and the men of his set. Imaginatively, romantically, Gatsby is more appealing than Buchanan but he is false.

Buchanan is the real thing. Significantly, he got the girl, and he keeps her. (90)

Though Dilworth argues that Tom is more authentic because he looks the part of a gentleman and was born into his wealth, I contend that Gatsby is not “false” by comparison. Dilworth does not seem to account for the fact that Gatsby becomes the image merely represented by Tom and lives the aristocratic lifestyle wholeheartedly. In fact, Gatsby is far more “real” in his humanity and sincerity than Tom is, and Tom does not “earn” Daisy by virtue of his realness but because of Daisy’s superficiality and materialism. His peers reinforce Tom’s sense of entitlement because
he is perceived as having a more authentic link to nobility and, like the Arrow Collar ads, other men look to his image in hopes that they can imitate him and attain his level of prestige. While Fitzgerald certainly identified with both the characters of Nick and Gatsby, he begrudgingly recognized that Tom and his emphasis on tradition was a part of himself as well, and the creation of these men was a way of reconciling these diverging aspects of his own identity.

The Buchanans’ house is described as being like a fantasy, with its “French windows glowing…with reflected gold” and the “frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling” (Gatsby 6-7), emphasizing the illusion that both Tom and Daisy try to create about having a happy, fulfilling marriage. However, the Buchanans seem to overcompensate in their devotion to this fantasy and, as a result, the house takes on an eerie quality in which the things within it seem to have more life and substance than the people who live there. As Scott Donaldson suggests:

In a culture where pecuniary emulation predominates, the single most important object by which to declare one’s status is the house. In The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald masterfully discriminates between Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby, the rivals for Daisy’s love, on the basis of the very different homes they occupy on Long Island. And houses serve to define other characters as well, in particular Nick and Daisy. (204)

Just as Gatsby makes an effort to construct a traditional looking house to authenticate his status, the Buchanans’ home and their possessions are meant to convey a vitality that compensates for their lifeless marriage. The property is continually expressed in human terms: “a cheerful red-and-white Georgian colonial mansion,” “the lawn started at the beach and ran towards the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sundials,” “the groan of a picture on the wall” (Gatsby 6-7). On the other hand, Daisy and her friend Jordan Baker are portrayed more like objects, more possessed by than having possession of the things around them: “The only completely stationary
object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house” (Gatsby 7). Interestingly, it is when Tom enters the room that “the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor” (Gatsby 7). As much as Daisy wants to continue this charade, Tom’s powerful presence betrays this illusion of whimsical tranquility as the unreality of their domestic life is juxtaposed against the harsh reality of his infidelity and brutality.

Although material objects are used by the Buchanans to maintain the semblance of a perfect home meant to convey an air of traditional privilege, one object in particular, the telephone, reveals the intrusion of the modern, disrupting this façade by allowing outside forces to infiltrate the house. When Nick is invited to dinner at the Buchanans’ house, the telephone rings, and even though he does not know who is calling or why, he immediately senses a shift in mood and an impending dread. Nick explains:

The telephone rang inside, startlingly, and as Daisy shook her head decisively at Tom the subject of the stables, in fact all subjects, vanished into air…I was conscious of wanting to look squarely at everyone, and yet to avoid all eyes. I couldn’t guess what Daisy and Tom were thinking, but I doubt if even Miss Baker, who seemed to have mastered a hardy skepticism, was able utterly to put this fifth guest’s shrill metallic urgency out of mind. (Gatsby 12)

Here, the telephone is personified and takes on an identity of an uninvited dinner guest who intrudes on the party and becomes a substitute for the caller herself, Myrtle Wilson, Tom’s lover. At the time that The Great Gatsby was written, the telephone was becoming commonplace in most homes and altered the dynamics of time and space, lending an immediacy to
communication that did not exist prior to its invention. Eric Rawson argues that Fitzgerald explored the effects that the telephone had on society in *The Great Gatsby* and its role in altering people’s conceptions of reality:

The telephone erases personal distance, putting the user simultaneously in actual and virtual space. When using the telephone, one must imagine, even dream up, the image of the person on the other end of the line... The telephone makes distance available for action and has no business with the past. All is present with phone action just as all is present in Gatsby’s imagination. For Gatsby, the problem is not the gap between illusion and reality but the fading of the real into the virtual: ‘real’ distance on the human scale is made virtual by trains and automobiles, the past is virtualized by the memorializing function of the photograph and the phonograph, film makes reality itself virtual, and the telephone reduces the interlocutor to a synecdoche—a voice. (100)

As much as the Buchanans display their luxuries to add credibility to the illusion of a superior lifestyle, these same luxury items continually reveal the pretense that Daisy and Tom both try to sustain and act as ever-present reminders of the marital discord and hostility that lie beneath the surface. The effect, particularly of the telephone, on the characters of *The Great Gatsby* is that boundaries of past and present, here and there, essentially disappear and that omnipresence of reality has a haunting effect on the characters. Just as many of the possessions in the Buchanans’ home take on human characteristics, Fitzgerald draws attention to the personification of the telephone to show how the linking of humans and objects takes on a nostalgic function, lending familiarity to the material world and making the introduction of new technology into the modern world a less disturbing development. Simultaneously, however, Fitzgerald depicts the telephone as an agent of marital discord between the Buchanans and takes a critical stance against modern
technology which is consistent with his complicated, conflicting perspectives regarding tradition and progress.

Despite the fact that Fitzgerald is most often associated with the character of Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, in many ways he can just as easily be identified with the narrator of the novel, Nick Carraway, who occupies a middle ground from which he appreciates the glamorous grandeur of tradition as exemplified by the Buchanans but understands that tradition alone is not enough to sustain him in the modern world. The novel opens with Nick’s acknowledgment that one of his key characteristics is his refusal to judge or discriminate concerning the actions of others, but it is this objectivity that seems to prevent him from having solid beliefs of his own. He is the product of an established, moderately affluent, Midwestern family and up to his relocation to West Egg, he has done everything that a young man from a traditional aristocratic family is supposed to do. He attends an Ivy League college (Yale), he participates as a soldier in World War I, and he decides to learn the bond business like the other young men of his class. Despite adhering to all these traditions, Nick seems to be lost and alienated, simply drifting through life waiting for fulfillment to come. Rather than focusing on one goal or devoting himself fully to any endeavor, Nick aspires to be “that most limited of all specialists, the ‘well-rounded man’” (*Gatsby* 5) as there is more social value to being marginally proficient in several different areas. Interestingly, Nick explains this tendency in architectural terms and states, “Life is much more successfully looked at from a single window, after all” (*Gatsby* 5). However, throughout the novel, Nick literally and figuratively observes his society through more than one window as he is both drawn to and ashamed by those around him. As Chandler has noted: “The modern hero’s predicament is to ‘see too much’…he sees, in fact, through too many windows, cherishing a neutral and detached stance that makes him privy to multiple points of view but
depriving him of the luxuries of conviction and passion” (221). In his search for something to ground him, to calm his anxiousness that results from his involvement in the war, Nick looks outward rather than inward and considers the various routes to success that those of his community have taken, yet these conflicting models prevent him from developing a unique identity that allows him to distinguish the role that tradition can and should play in the present.

Nick’s unique position within the action of the novel is best reflected by the description of his house and signifies not only his ambivalence about the lifestyle of the Long Island upper class, but also his important role in providing the link between the two factions. Though he refers to his home as a “weather-beaten cardboard bungalow” its location is what gives it value and offers Nick a vantage point from which he can negotiate the two sides of himself that are represented by East and West Egg. A resident of West Egg, home of the new money and ostentatious excess, Nick describes his home in relation to the ones that surround it:

My house was at the very tip of the egg, only fifty yards from the Sound, and squeezed between two huge places that rented for twelve or fifteen thousand a season…My own house was an eyesore, but it was a small eyesore, and it had been overlooked, so I had a view of the water, a partial view of my neighbor’s lawn, and the consoling proximity of millionaires—all for eighty dollars a month. (Gatsby 5-6)

Like Gatsby, Nick, to an extent, is able to purchase status by renting a house that is near the opulent-looking homes of West Egg, but although he was born into a fairly wealthy family, Nick himself is not rich and can only afford the reputation which eighty dollars a month can buy.

Nick’s house has no distinctive character of its own, but it is suitable for him simply because of its connection with the elaborate homes around it. This relates to Nick’s position as the narrator, since he lacks a unique identity amidst the strong personalities he encounters but sustains a role
as part of the social scene because of his association with prominent members within the community. Not only does Nick’s house give him the advantage of access to the lives of his wealthy West Egg neighbors, but it also places him adjacent to “the white palaces of fashionable East Egg” (Gatsby 6) that border the bay and can be viewed from his home. These houses owned by the old money class, those descended from a long line of affluence, act as a reminder of the divide between East and West Egg and appear as a kind of mirage that the citizens of West Egg look to for inspiration. Significantly, Nick’s house lies on the periphery of the two Eggs, contiguous with both, but fully integrated into neither, and reveals the sustained tension Nick feels as he is pulled between these two worlds. Much like Fitzgerald himself, Nick appreciates the inherited tradition associated with the aristocracy, but he also admires the prospect of the self-made man who builds himself up by sheer will.

Although Fitzgerald primarily focuses on the way that members of the upper class use their wealth to consume nostalgia as a way of negotiating the changing social structure of the modern era, the novel also exposes the inherent problems of capitalist society in which the lower class, represented by George and Myrtle Wilson, do not have access to nostalgia and, therefore, have virtually no social authority whatsoever. Unlike the bustling, glamorous suburbs of Long Island that the upper class inhabit, the valley of ashes where the Wilsons live reveals the ugly underbelly of modernity and the way in which traditional forms of making a living are becoming increasingly outmoded. Unlike the beautiful communities of East and West Egg, the Wilsons live in a state of hopeless destitution along a barren stretch of road that separates affluent Long Island society from New York City. The area is a reflection of the spiritually drained and lifeless people who live and work there: “This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and
chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men who move
dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air” (Gatsby 16). Like the Buchanans, the
people of the valley of ashes are portrayed as being insubstantial, subject to the conditions
around them, yet while the Buchanan’s home has an animated playfulness to it, the houses in the
valley are bereft of life and seem on the verge of collapse. According to Robert W. Stallman, in
his description of the valley, Fitzgerald foreshadows the underlying lifelessness of the West Egg
social scene as well as the literal deaths of both Myrtle and Gatsby later in the novel:

West Egg is represented by dead houses—as though built by the ashes of that valley located
half-way between New York City and West Egg, where ashes take the form of houses. But
if West Egg represents the negation of life and East Egg, in the dynamic Buchanans and
their equally dynamic house and lawn, represents the affirmation of vitality, distinctions
between West and East Eggs become blurred on considering the fact that the East is
inhabited by such lifeless characters as Wilson, Voltaire, Nick Carraway, and the lively
Myrtle whose name, suggesting a graveyard vine, contradicts her presumed vitality. (137)

Despite the apparent disparity between the social classes of each of the communities in the novel,
what connects them is that they are all in various stages of decay that they attempt to conceal,
some more successfully than others. In order to sustain themselves, the socialites of East and
West Egg parasitically drain the life out of others with their greed and their obsessive need to
consume, and the valley of ashes is a by-product of this excessive extravagance.

The Wilsons’ house, particularly the garage as a symbol of the old-fashioned small
business, is an extension of George himself and an embodiment of his sense of defeat. He has
failed to provide for his wife, and his diminished self-worth has resulted from the increased
mechanization of modern society. When Tom takes him to meet Myrtle, Nick is surprised at the
stark desolation of the Wilsons’ home: “The only building in sight was a small block of yellow brick sitting on the edge of the waste land, a sort of compact Main Street ministering to it, and contiguous to absolutely nothing...The interior was unprosperous and bare; the only car visible was the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner” (Gatsby 17). Like the “yellow” brick of the garage, George is depicted as an emasculated coward in the presence of Tom and his overpowering masculinity, and in the eyes of Myrtle, her husband is as useless as the dust-covered cars that sit and decay in his shop. In contrast with her husband and the gloomy backdrop of the valley of ashes, Myrtle is portrayed as being an animated and striking presence:

Her face, above a spotted dress of crêpe-de-chine, contained no facet or gleam of beauty, but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering. She smiled slowly and, walking through her husband as if he were a ghost, shook hands with Tom, looking him flush in the eye...A white ashen dust veiled [George’s] dark suit and his pale hair as it veiled everything in the vicinity—except his wife, who moved close to Tom. (Gatsby 18)

Myrtle seems to be the only entity within this grim landscape that is impervious to its deadening effects, which makes her sense of entrapment in her dull house even more pronounced and makes it necessary for her to cling to Tom whom she hopes will pull her out of this depressing valley. However, as Stallman has noted, her apparent vigor is contradicted by her name and its connection to a plant that thrives in graveyards, as well as the fact that she is tragically killed at the end of the novel. The Wilsons exemplify Fitzgerald’s indictment of the dark side of capitalism as this system does not afford working class people like George the opportunity to actualize any sort of meaningful identity in a society in which respect and prestige are purchased with money. Myrtle is only slightly better off than her husband in the sense that she can dabble
in the world of the upper class but this occurs at the expense of her marriage and she becomes a commodity, using her sexuality in exchange for material comfort. Like Gatsby, Myrtle’s aspirations for a better life drive her to insinuate herself (through Tom) into the realm of the upper class, but it is precisely her involvement in this world that leads to her demise.

The apartment in New York City that Tom and Myrtle use for their trysts is emblematic of much of the modern era—beautiful but lacking any distinctive character—and reveals Myrtle’s failed attempt to completely ingratiate herself into high society as her efforts to imitate her conception of the perfect upscale socialite are undermined by her vulgarity and lack of taste. The home, “one slice in a long white cake of apartment-houses” (Gatsby 19) is reminiscent of the Buchanans’ mansion with its frosted wedding cake ceiling because it performs the same function. Like the mansion, the apartment appears to be beautiful and creates the illusion of a perfect marriage, but this love nest is, instead, the site of an adulterous relationship, one in which both parties use each other for their own personal gain. While Myrtle exerts control over the arrangement of the furniture and décor, as in his house with Daisy Tom periodically reminds his mistress that he has ultimate dominance over the apartment and their relationship as evidenced when he breaks her nose. Lhamon suggests that houses in The Great Gatsby are physical manifestations of the authority possessed by the people who own them:

Fitzgerald demonstrates social position most notably by his characters’ ability to order environmental elements: material space, time, and people. And the opening presentation of their three houses carefully places the novel’s classes: Buchanan’s power to control his world is greatest; Myrtle’s power, like her husband’s, is least (even though she is financed by Tom); and Gatsby’s power falls between the two (56).
Myrtle and Gatsby are connected in that their links to the aristocracy are manufactured by their conscious efforts to be authentic nobility whereas Tom is a natural heir to his position and does not have the burden of performing a role to achieve his status.

The interior of the apartment has been decorated by Myrtle who seems to mistake “gaudy” for “classy” as she clutters the space with an eclectic mix of material possessions, some old-fashioned and some distinctly modern, that she does not have access to back at home with George: “The living-room was crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it, so that to move about was to stumble continually over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles…Several old copies of Town Tattle lay on the table together with a copy of Simon Called Peter, and some of the small scandal magazines of Broadway” (Gatsby 20). The crucial distinction between the old money and new money sets is a level of taste, and Myrtle makes the mistake of simply compiling expensive things rather than making discriminating choices as to style and arrangement. In addition, her collection of tabloids and the “trashy” novel Simon Called Peter as opposed to classic literature or high art novels conveys her low culture affinities while posing as a sophisticated woman. As Ronald Berman claims, the disorder of the apartment is a direct reflection of Myrtle’s lofty dreams and her belief that the accumulation of things can satiate desire:

When we see Myrtle’s arrangements we see the inside of her mind. There are many things that are admirable about her but, like Gatsby, she has never understood essential models of style…Myrtle has tried to accumulate her social character. She has installed the tapestried furniture because it provides her with a self-image that is more grandiose than we might guess at first sight, when all she seems to have is carnal intelligence. (89)
Myrtle does not comprehend that although she has gained entrance into the upper echelon of society, she does not automatically become one of the elite, and as a result, her actual life does not match up with the idealized version of herself, one that she attempts to construct through the fashioning of the apartment.

**Authenticating Status through Objects and the Marketing of Tradition**

Material possessions themselves have no inherent meaning or value for Gatsby and owning them does not make him happy despite his great wealth and the power to purchase nearly anything that he desires. These objects are only potentially valuable if they can be exchanged for Daisy’s love, the one thing that cannot be directly bought. He thinks that the more possessions he has, the more desirable he will be in the eyes of his peers, so he collects furnishings, the shirts that he eventually shows to Daisy, and even the people who attend his parties. Gatsby tells Nick: “‘I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe—Paris, Venice, Rome—collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little, things for myself only, and trying to forget something very sad that had happened to me long ago’” (Gatsby 42). For the first time here, Gatsby indirectly tells Nick about losing Daisy, and his collecting of jewels, hobbies, and experiences corresponds to that loss as he obsessively accumulates to compensate for the one thing he cannot have. According to Balkum, acquisition becomes a way for Gatsby to attain the things that are symbols of the lifestyle that Daisy herself represents. She explains that collecting is:

a way to link the past and the present and, even more specifically, to restore the past to the present. Because collections of all types record what has transpired as opposed to what is to come, the activity of collecting is uniquely suited to serve as a vehicle for examining the interrelatedness of the past and the present...The urge to collect is the logical consequence
of a culture that gives objects a central place in the construction of meaning, value, and authenticity. (132)

As a collector, Gatsby is able to recreate, temporarily, a connection to his relationship with Daisy as his things act as tangible reminders of the world in which she inhabits, and he imagines that with each purchase he gets one step closer to attaining her.

Gatsby invests personal meaning less in expensive material possessions and more in two nostalgic objects that remind him of the past: a war medal and a photo of his Oxford years. One aspect of Gatsby’s life that is not embellished is his experience as a soldier during World War I, and it is precisely his involvement in the military with its ties to a tradition of honor that initiates the possibility of a relationship with Daisy. It is during battle that Gatsby is able to achieve a piece of the success that he had always dreamed of as he becomes a war hero and is finally acknowledged for his efforts. In discussing his military experience to Nick, Gatsby says, “Then came the war, old sport. It was a great relief, and I tried very hard to die, but I seemed to bear an enchanted life” (Gatsby 42). It is almost with apology that Gatsby explains how he failed to die on the battlefield as though his survival marred the acknowledgments he received for his service and prevented him from attaining the ultimate honor a soldier can receive. Unlike Fitzgerald, who never made it to the war himself, Gatsby and Nick were both involved in battle, and even though Nick’s upbringing was more privileged, it is Gatsby who is the more successful soldier. Gatsby’s military service also provides him with the opportunity to run in the same circles as Daisy, just as Fitzgerald met Zelda while stationed at a military base in Montgomery. Keith Gandal argues that the American military during World War I provided a unique opportunity for men like Fitzgerald, and Gatsby, to rise socially regardless of upbringing:

In short, the particular American mobilization for the Great War, with its new and very
particular methods for selecting officers—which Fitzgerald knew all about, as an officer in training at Camp Taylor—meant that a nobody like Gatsby could be chosen for officer training, and specifically promoted to captain, while still at camp, on the basis of his own measurable abilities, in the context of a new meritocratic moment. (135)

The fact that a man could become an officer based on his skills and efforts rather than his social standing during the Great War meant that he was not bound by his past and the concept of the self-made man, one who gained authority through sheer will, became a possibility.

Even though Gatsby’s war experience is one thing about which he tells the truth, he still feels compelled to show proof of his recognition in the form of objects meant to validate his association with esteemed traditions. For Gatsby, whose ideal self only becomes possible through others’ perceptions of him, his material objects make the moments they signify real and provide a lasting record that extends beyond the mere telling of them. Nick recounts how Gatsby produces evidence of his triumph in the war: “He reached in his pocket, and a piece of metal, slung on a ribbon, fell into my palm...To my astonishment, the thing had an authentic look” (Gatsby 43). In addition, Gatsby also keeps a photograph, a “souvenir of Oxford days,” (Gatsby 43) on his person at all times that is a visual testament that he was at the school. Though Nick is wary about believing most of what Gatsby tells him about his history, he cannot deny the accomplishments that are authenticated by physical tokens. According to Susan Stewart, souvenirs are inherently nostalgic material objects that bridge the gap between past and present:

We might say that this capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience is, in fact, exemplified by the souvenir. The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist
only through the invention of narrative. (135)

Souvenirs simultaneously satisfy and fuel our nostalgia to reclaim a moment to which we can never physically return in time. The function of a souvenir is to bring forth a piece of the past as tangible evidence that the moment existed, capturing it in material form and giving it immortality, but it also sustains a longing for the past and reminds us that the past is lost forever. For Gatsby, these physical tokens are reminders of the man he was and the man he hopes to become; they affirm his past and allow him to bring those events into reality through the act of storytelling. These two souvenirs—the medal and the photo—allow Gatsby to construct and cling to a story he tells himself about the past and seeks to bring meaning to a present rendered otherwise meaningless by sheer materialism.

Having shown how Gatsby finds meaning in personal souvenirs rather than material possessions, Fitzgerald depicts Gatsby’s money-making endeavors as a critique of the persistence of a class system in a modern, capitalist culture. It is necessary to have a way to finance his extravagant lifestyle and purchase objects that lend him the air of a traditional gentleman, all in pursuit of Daisy, but in the modern world in which wealth takes precedence over integrity, Gatsby engages in illegal ventures and simply sees these activities as a means of achieving his goal. He ignores the dishonorable measures he takes to go about it. He justifies his involvement in the criminal underworld by calling himself a businessman and views his work as promising rather than immoral. Nick accompanies Gatsby to a business meeting in New York City with Meyer Wolfsheim, the man known for fixing the 1919 World Series, and the description of their entrance into the city reflects how Gatsby views his business endeavors:

Over the great bridge, with the sunlight through the girders making a constant flicker upon the moving cars, with the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all
built with a wish out of non-olfactory money. The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world. *(Gatsby 44).*

Gatsby learns through his past with Daisy that the opportunity for self-fashioning is directly proportionate to one’s level of wealth, so crime becomes the only way for him to make the money necessary to achieve his larger goal of Daisy and the success she represents. Although this is Nick’s perception of the city, this scene mirrors Gatsby’s sense that every choice he makes drives him to continue hoping that he can possess Daisy once again and that if he can cross that metaphorical bridge into her world, tremendous possibilities await him. Ironically, the splendor and fantasy inherent in this description appear alongside the harsh reality that Gatsby is meeting a man who specializes in dirty business deals and the city’s seedy underworld. However, Gatsby chooses to see the “white heaps and sugar lumps” instead, and like many characters in the novel, any unpleasant elements that conflict with his idealized vision of his life are omitted. Fitzgerald was certainly captivated by New York City as a young man, and, like Gatsby, he saw it not for what it was, but for what it signified for his life:

> The ferry boat stood for triumph, the girl for romance. In time I was to achieve some of both, but there was a third symbol that I have lost somewhere, and lost forever…I knew that [Edmund Wilson] had an apartment where he lived with three other men, released now from all undergraduate taboos, but there was something else that was nourishing him and I got my first impression of that new thing—the metropolitan spirit. *(Crack-Up 24)*

The city became a great source of inspiration for Fitzgerald despite the reality of his financial struggles and rejections and after achieving success with his writing, he longed to return to the period when he was striving to become the man he always wanted to be. Though Fitzgerald does
not seem to condone Gatsby’s criminal actions, he sees something admirable in engaging in fantasy as a way of stimulating one’s reality, and through this character, he attempts to rekindle his capacity for wonder at a time in his life when it threatened to be lost.

Although Gatsby’s long-awaited meeting with Daisy begins at Nick’s house, it is imperative that she views Gatsby’s elaborate home as the site of their reconciliation as he attempts to conjure their love from the past through his new wealthy status. Just as everything in his life is a potential opportunity to reconnect with Daisy, Gatsby’s relationship with Nick provides him with hope that his goal can actually be attained since Nick is a crucial link between the two lovers. Gatsby’s plan of attracting Daisy to one of his parties has not been successful, so the fact that his new neighbor is related to his lost love provides a new avenue to explore. Gatsby indirectly asks Nick, through Jordan, if he will invite Daisy over to visit him, and Jordan explains: “‘He wants her to see his house…And your house is right next door’” (*Gatsby* 51). He does not want Daisy to see him, per se, because it is more important that she see his development that he is now the kind of man who can possess such an amazing home, and his house acts as a more impressive substitute that physically confirms his status. When Gatsby initially sees Daisy for the first time after five years, the reunion is not as idyllic as he has imagined it would be as his insecurities make the encounter more embarrassing than romantic. Once the meeting occurs and Gatsby awkwardly musters the courage to invite Daisy and Nick to his mansion, Gatsby immediately seeks her approval: “‘My house looks well doesn’t it…See how the whole front of it catches the light’” (*Gatsby* 58). Gatsby associates Daisy herself with the green light at the end of her dock across the bay and he prides himself on finally capturing her with his expansive house.

According to Hilton Anderson, the homes of the characters in *The Great Gatsby* allow the
owners and their guests to indulge in fantasy as a way of responding to the problems that take
place outside of them:

Whether the novel is a story of the failure of the American dream or simply a conflict
between socio-economic classes, the dominant symbol of success is the person’s residence.
That is why Gatsby insists that the tea party which is to reunite him with his long-lost love
must be held at Nick’s home... An examination of the various domiciles and the activities
that take place in them reveals that Fitzgerald was rather obvious in his use of these settings
to distinguish the socio-economic levels of the various characters, and yet at the same time
he was subtle in the manner that he used residences to keep the characters from knowing too
much about each other, and by presenting the more subtle differences through conflicts
which usually take place not in anyone’s home, but on neutral ground. (114)

Allowing a guest into one’s home in the novel is the equivalent of allowing him or her to enter
that person’s mind and how he or she conceives of an ideal self, and particularly for Gatsby, his
house is a nostalgic embodiment of himself that is meant to spark Daisy’s memory of their past
love but also transfer that love into the present now that he has risen socially.

Although Gatsby furnishes his home with antique décor that is meant to harken back to an
earlier time and express the image of an established gentleman, it seems that the interior of the
house provides no distinctive glimpse into Gatsby’s interiority. However, in another way,
Gatsby’s house reveals quite a bit about his own lack of cohesion in conceiving of the
relationship between past and present. As Gatsby leads Daisy and Nick on a tour of his house,
the narrator reveals his home as being a hodge-podge of historical periods and styles: “Inside, as
we wandered through Marie Antoinette music-rooms and Restoration salons, I felt that there
were guests concealed behind every couch and table, under orders to be breathlessly silent until
we passed through. As Gatsby closed the door of ‘the Merton College Library’ I could have sworn I heard the owl-eyed man break into ghostly laughter (Gatsby 58). There is a lack of cohesion amongst the “period” furniture in these rooms, and these are reproductions of actual historical artifacts that have been made specifically to appear as though they are old-fashioned. McMullen notes that while Gatsby attempts to convey his worldliness and attention to detail through his home, the mishmash of styles contained within it undermines the validity of this impression:

The very existence of a ‘Merton College Library’ in West Egg suggests an understanding that national boundaries are irrelevant where letters are concerned…Gatsby’s establishment, although it incorporates features of the international scene in its wider historical dimensions, fails to integrate these elements and is therefore essentially unsustainable. It is hermetically sealed from the world by Gatsby’s narrow and fanatical mission, and the many guests who come are only part of the production staged to impress Daisy. (17)

As evidenced by the imaginary guests holding their breaths as Gatsby gives his tour, this illusion of established wealth that he tries to sell to Daisy, the same illusion that he bought when he purchased his furniture, is one that constantly threatens to collapse because there is nothing to connect these competing styles to one another. Though the interior design of Gatsby’s house does not adequately express how he wants to be perceived, what it does reveal about him is that he does not have the capacity to recognize the boundaries of time, and he sustains a belief that the past can always be reproduced within the present.

Though he seems unaware of it, Gatsby’s efforts to force the past to co-exist harmoniously with the present result in his house conveying an ambiguous peculiarity amidst the grandeur and excess. Gatsby strives to recreate the idealized past relationship between himself and Daisy, but
he does not seem to take into account that Daisy does not value nostalgia in the way that he does, and she is very much a product of the modern world. The present itself seems to intrude haphazardly into Gatsby’s nostalgia for a traditional, historically accurate aesthetic and creates a tension between reality and fantasy. Continuing their tour of the house, Gatsby, Daisy, and Nick have their attention diverted from the luxury around them: “We went upstairs, through period bedrooms swathed in rose and lavender silk and vivid with new flowers, through dressing-rooms and poolrooms and bathrooms with sunken baths—intruding into one chamber where a disheveled man in pyjamas was doing liver exercises on the floor” (Gatsby 58). The appearance of Gatsby’s boarder Mr. Klipspringer, reminiscent of the owl-eyed man’s presence in the library, seems a bizarre anomaly that immediately calls into question whether he or the surroundings are imaginary. According to Berman, the disorienting effects of Gatsby’s house stem from the incompatibility of using objects to translate ideals: “Of course, Gatsby is imperfect: in spite of his idealism, his idea of the good life seems merely to be the acquisition of money, things, property…Gatsby is materialistic because Americans do not have many other alternatives. Material life offers one of the few recognized ways in which the American can express his idealism” (86). However, this reading seems to disregard that Gatsby sees wealth and possessions as means to an end, and these things only retain value if they can help him attain Daisy and the success that she represents. While his possessions end up distorting reality in his house, Gatsby has observed the way the aristocrats of Daisy’s world display their wealth to maintain their reputations, so he is simply following the example of those who appear to have accomplished that for which he strives.

Gatsby has constructed his entire identity around being the traditional gentleman figure that he believes Daisy wants and desperately seeks her approval, yet once he gets his wish and
she is actually present in his house, he begins to doubt the effectiveness of his performance. He has built up this visit in his mind, and while he initially seems confident that his house full of luxury items will impress his imagined Daisy, he is uncertain whether it is worthy of the actual Daisy. Nick perceives Gatsby’s apprehension and remarks: “He hadn’t once ceased looking at Daisy, and I think he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes. Sometimes, too, he stared around at his possessions in a dazed way, as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real” (Gatsby 59). Just as Klipspringer’s presence disturbs the cohesion of Gatsby’s nostalgic period décor, the juxtaposition of Daisy with Gatsby’s possessions reveals the way that reality is an ever-shifting concept within his house as past and present collide. Balkum explains that Daisy casts a new light on his home that disturbs its familiarity:

The actuality of Daisy, her sudden ‘realness,’ has several profound results. The first is the way her presence causes Gatsby to appear as if he is ‘running down like an overwound clock’ (93), an image that suggests the temporal nature of dreams, of desire, and especially of the objects that fuel desire…He has worked hard to create a setting for Daisy and to assemble the proofs of his worthiness. Instead, her arrival has the inadvertent effect of exposing first the unreality of his creation and then its crassness. (126)

As a real representative of the world that Gatsby tries to imitate, Daisy acts a reminder that his act, as well as her time with him, can only last so long and that perhaps he can never accumulate enough to satisfy her.

Gatsby’s final attempt to win Daisy’s favor through his possessions occurs when he reveals his elaborate collection of shirts, hoping that if he is able to “dress the part” of an old-fashioned aristocrat then Daisy will see him as one. The effect that the shirts have on Daisy is more
dramatic than he expects it to be as she seems to recognize that they are symbols of his success, his love and devotion for her, and their past. She is overcome with emotion as Gatsby continues to pile up shirts of every color and texture: “Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily. ‘They’re such beautiful shirts,’ she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. ‘It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such—such beautiful shirts before’ ” (Gatsby 59). Though her husband Tom certainly has his own extensive collection of expensive shirts, Daisy appears to be genuinely moved by Gatsby’s garments, or perhaps even more so by his love that they represent, showing that even though she is captivated by material objects she senses the genuine emotion behind Gatsby’s purchases, making them more meaningful. The shirts become a tangible measure of the extent of Gatsby’s desire as the mountain of shirts in numerous styles and colors becomes a testament to his love that Daisy can see and hold. Paradoxically, the way in which Gatsby expresses his authentic feelings is through a method of imitation in which he focuses on superficial qualities associated with tradition. According to Lauren Rule-Maxwell, the emphasis on clothing in the novel reveals how American men like Gatsby nostalgically fashioned themselves after their conceptualized image of the English gentleman and its association with privilege and authority:

Among the ironic portrayals in Fitzgerald’s works, the symbolic depictions of gentlemen’s clothing provide perhaps the most complex indictments of American materialism during the Jazz Age. These images symbolize a complicated engagement with materialism because they both celebrate and pass judgment on the way Americans, including Fitzgerald himself, fashioned themselves with cloaks of prosperity, thus reflecting an ambivalent negotiation of wealth and position on an individual and national level. (59)
Although Fitzgerald resented the wealthy and the ease with which they replaced their fleeting sense of morality with material possessions, he also believed that the manipulation of objects had the capacity to motivate those not born into affluence to strive for the values that these things signified.

Much of *The Great Gatsby* is devoted to exploring the effect of advertising on the characters of the novel, as well as Americans in general, and how they conform their identities to images, both nostalgic and modern, that are marketed as depicting the ideal American lifestyle. Whatever their social class, these characters are very conscious of the influence of the marketplace and mimic its tactics to essentially market themselves within the social sphere.

Fitzgerald became one of the first true American literary celebrities and, always conscious of the image he was projecting, both downplayed and exploited his reputation as a wild partier with an extravagant lifestyle, depending on which would gain him the most favor in that particular situation. While he considered himself an artist intent on creating a legacy for himself with his work, Fitzgerald also wanted to be rewarded financially for his writing. According to Bruccoli, Fitzgerald wanted not only the satisfaction of expressing himself through writing, but he also wanted the acclaim that he felt he deserved:

> Literature was a glamorous thing for Fitzgerald. He aspired to early triumph and the fame that went with it. Grub Street and la vie bohème were not for him. He was not prepared to starve for art or to endure neglect. Fitzgerald’s commitment to the dream of the literary life that has entertained many undergraduates was ingenuously immaculate. He knew he had talent; he wondered whether he had the genius to match his ambitions. (71)

Fitzgerald saw no discrepancy between art and business, and in fact, he believed that the two naturally went hand in hand as financial success was evidence of one’s impact on his or her culture.
Fitzgerald took a very active role in the marketing of his work, even using nostalgia as a selling point for his novel, making sure it would provide him with financial security because he associated money with prestige and, like Gatsby, believed that wealth would provide material authentication of his status as a great artist. He admitted often that he exerted little creative effort into many of the short stories he wrote, and they were simply produced to make enough money to sustain him while he completed more serious works of art such as *The Great Gatsby*. Just as he himself looked back to the Jazz Age longingly as a time of carefree indulgence, Fitzgerald knew that he could market his novel as a nostalgic return to a time unencumbered by the financial concerns of later years. He even wrote an essay entitled “How I Would Sell My Book” in which he describes a store window containing a figure reminiscent of the owl-eyed man in *The Great Gatsby* who is surrounded by copies of Fitzgerald’s book. One of the major literary influences in Fitzgerald’s life was John Keats, and he admired not only his poetry but also his business savvy. According to Rule-Maxwell, Fitzgerald looked to Keats for inspiration in cultivating a literary reputation that would ensure his writing would be immortalized:

Both Fitzgerald and Keats were highly conscious not only of the financial necessity of their literary production, but also of the ways in which the success of their production was tied to images of themselves as authors that existed as products in and of themselves within the literary marketplace. For both writers, these images were tied to upward-mobility narratives and projections of class identity. (61)

Fitzgerald believed that the sales of his work would both determine his status as an author and give him the opportunity to enter a higher social class that viewed material wealth as an indicator of authority. Ruth Prigozy explains that Fitzgerald took an active role in ensuring that his books would help enhance his public persona:
He was an expert judge of advertising, and directed his publisher where to advertise his books, and what kind of blurbs, if any, were to be printed on the jackets...So intent was Fitzgerald on controlling the public’s perception of him, that he wrote suggesting to [Maxwell] Perkins in 1933 how his new novel should be advertised so as to preserve the precarious balance he always sought between the popular figure and the serious writer. (5)

Like the characters of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald was obsessed with how he was being perceived by others as he knew that status is granted by how closely one is able to imitate the marketplace’s idealized standard of success.

Throughout the novel, characters constantly reveal their interest in mass media and the power that images have in creating ideals based on recognizable traditions that can be purchased in the modern world. Certainly, the most overpowering example of the effect of advertising is that of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg’s glasses that loom ominously over the valley of ashes conveying that one cannot help but see the endless images that bombard consumer society and that one will be judged by his or her adherence to these impressions. George Wilson even claims that the eyes of the billboard are the eyes of God, suggesting that religion has been replaced by marketing as the primary indicator for how Americans should conduct themselves. According to Berman, Fitzgerald interrogates the notion that abstract qualities can be bought for the right price:

The characters of *The Great Gatsby* see ideal forms of themselves in film and magazines. They are conscious, sometimes deeply and emotionally so, of advertisements. The narrative uses a highly intentional language of replication: ‘picture,’ ‘illustration,’ ‘advertisement,’ ‘photograph,’ ‘newspaper reports,’ ‘copy,’ and other things which continually argue that they are as ‘true’ as Gatsby’s photograph of Trinity Quad, and as ‘real’ as his father’s photograph of the great house on West Egg. But this language prepares us to understand
also that how we do everything is theatrical. There is hardly a character in the novel who
does not have an ideal self in mind, a self which is constructed or achieved. But the sense of
self—even dreams of selfhood—in this story are the products of ideology or market
enterprise. (8)

Rather than aiming for a sense of personal fulfillment through meaningful work or intimate
relationships, notions of success for the characters of the novel, and from Fitzgerald’s
perspective the post-war generation in general, were constructed based on models that infused
familiar archetypes from the past with modern styles as advertising promised that the
appearance of American ideals was sufficient for social acceptance. Upon reuniting after so
many years, Daisy seems to admire Gatsby’s awareness of style trends as she exclaims, “You
always look so cool...You resemble the advertisement of the man” (Gatsby 75-76). According to
Dilworth, this moment, along with Daisy’s rapture over Gatsby’s shirts, shows how attuned she
is to impressions of wealth produced by the mass media:

This scene and Daisy’s comment later about Gatsby resembling ‘the advertisement of the
Man’ emphasize that Gatsby’s vision is modeled on the conventional erotic ploy of
Madison Avenue, something Fitzgerald knew all about. Having worked four months in
1919 writing copy for the advertising agency Barron Collier, he understood perfectly the
symbolic rhetoric of advertisements: the right purchase gets you the right girl—the girl of
your dreams as a bonus, an accessory. Buy one, get the other free. (86)

Interestingly, Daisy never expresses her admiration for the man Gatsby is or for being the type of
man she sees in the ad, but instead is impressed that he resembles an advertisement, a copy of a
copy. Imitation rather than realization is the logic behind advertising, which plays off of our
nostalgia for familiar images such as the English gentleman or the Southern debutante, but the
characters of the novel reveal that this fantasy is one in which we willingly participate in order to have ideals to aspire to.

Negotiating Reality by Reclaiming the Past

Gatsby struggles to maintain the necessary balance between the idealized past and present reality, instead hoping that his imagined aspirations can displace his actual circumstances. His elaborate efforts to create the illusion of established affluence can only benefit him if they remain imaginary, and it is his belief that his dreams can be transformed into reality through sheer will that causes his world to begin to unravel. Ideals maintain their valuable status precisely because they cannot be realized but are nostalgically longed for, and prior to Daisy’s visit, he seems to believe that through enough dedication and manipulation the replica can become interchangeable with the original. Just as Daisy’s presence casts a vivid glow over the objects of Gatsby’s house, her illumination revealing a cheapness that Gatsby has never noticed in his possessions before, she also divests one of Gatsby’s most valued symbols of its meaning. When Gatsby acknowledges that he often looks at the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock, he is immediately overcome by a sense of loss: “Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one” (Gatsby 60). In associating the green light with Daisy, Gatsby incorporates it with the elusive qualities of his romance with her in an effort to reclaim them, but Daisy’s arrival drains the light of its significance, causing the opposite of its intended effect as Gatsby experiences feelings of loss for a second time. Richard Cohen affirms that Gatsby’s disappointment is a result of his own overly optimistic reliance on his dreams: “Failure is...
individual’s inability to transform that dream to the actual, for Gatsby’s desire is to recapture the romanticized pre-war past. Neither his mansion, his wealth, nor his careful plotting accomplish this fulfillment; instead, the unreality of the wish destroys him” (49). However, Fitzgerald does not seem to brand Gatsby a “failure” despite his unattainable goal, and suggests that there is something praiseworthy about using fantasy to supplement reality rather than replace it.

Not only does Daisy distort the impact of the objects that Gatsby has collected as a shrine to her, but also Daisy herself assumes a strange transparency when compared with Gatsby’s nostalgic image of the woman he loved back in Louisville. He has built up his imagined conception of her, of winning her back, so much that once he has attained her, she does not, and cannot, live up to his unrealistic expectations. Nick observes the uneasiness underlying the loving looks Gatsby casts back at Daisy:

As I went over to say goodbye I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby’s face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man can store up in his ghostly heart. (Gatsby 62)

Gatsby’s imagined Daisy is more immediate than the actual Daisy, and like his possessions that act as placeholders for the values they represent, the physical embodiment of her seems a hollow shell in relation to her presence in his mind. According to Bruccoli, Fitzgerald explored the concept of the muse and the link between her elusiveness and her capacity to motivate: “The girl
is the writer’s inspiration, but only when she is unattained. The satisfied artist is unproductive. Yet Fitzgerald was determined to pursue both love and literature because his idealized girl was an integral part of his ambitions” (76). For Fitzgerald, the most productive times in his writing career coincided with the loss of Zelda and like Gatsby, he was driven by his quest to recapture the feelings of his initial love for her, futile as the attempts may have been.

Like Fitzgerald, Gatsby’s upbringing provides fertile ground for his imagination as he feels that his ordinary existence does not match up with the extraordinary destiny that awaits him in the future, and his belief that ideals and reality are always intertwined through nostalgia affirms that he can become the aristocratic gentleman that Daisy wants. At seventeen, James Gatz creates his doppelganger, Jay Gatsby, and invents a means of escaping a conventional life through his new identity and aspires slowly to transform into his debonair alter ego. A description of Gatz’s childhood exposes the way in which, early on, dreams supersede the reality of his life:

His heart was in a constant, turbulent riot. The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the washstand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace. For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing. (Gatsby 63).

It is clear that this propensity for fantasizing is what leads to Gatsby’s conception in adulthood that the boundary between real and unreal is virtually non-existent as illusions form the basis for whom people become in reality. As Bruccoli has noted, “The most obvious romantic quality in
Fitzgerald is imaginative aspiration, the theme of all his best work. Fitzgerald and his heroes aspire to an emotional perfection, to a level of experience that transcends the ‘unreality of reality’ ” (118). Although Gatsby conforms to the superficiality of the upper class, he is different from the other characters in the novel in that he strives to transition from the imaginary to reality, akin to Pinocchio’s transformation from a wooden puppet to a real boy by learning the appropriate lessons and taking the right measures, whereas his peers prefer to dwell in the fantasy world, ignoring the complications of real life.

When the Buchanans are invited to one of Gatsby’s parties, he fails to impress either Tom or Daisy with the spectacle and its associations with traditional affluence and senses a strange distance between himself and Daisy despite their physical proximity. Daisy’s disappointment prompts Gatsby to stop throwing parties altogether, leading Nick to remark that “his career as Trimalchio was over” (Gatsby 71), and his home is transformed from a raucous circus blazing with light to a dark and deserted haunted house. Gatsby discusses his sense of defeat and explains that he and Daisy do not have the same emotional connection they had five years previously, and when Nick assures him that one cannot repeat the past, Gatsby replies: “‘Can’t repeat the past…Why of course you can!’ ” (Gatsby 70). Since Gatsby resides primarily in his own mind, as opposed to in the external world, his past is ever-present and his struggle is to bring forth that projection from himself and apply it to his real-life circumstances. Nick comments on Gatsby’s self-assured optimism not with condescension, but with reverence:

He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand…He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain
starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was. (Gatsby 71)

The nostalgia Gatsby expresses for his past romance with Daisy is about not only the loss of her, but also the loss of a part of his own identity with which he yearns to reunite, the part of him that was not yet a success but that was most hopeful about the possibilities of what he could become. Gatsby’s materialism allows him to realize the image of himself that he has idealized from the moment he lost Daisy as the objects that he accumulates project the impression of wealth and prestige that he associates with possessing her.

Gatsby’s plan to recreate the past is ultimately thwarted when Daisy is unable to admit that she never loved Tom, and this admission initiates the tragic events that take place when the characters’ lies finally come to the surface. The explosive confrontation between Tom and Gatsby that leads to Daisy’s revelation takes place, appropriately, on a day of stifling heat, signaling that the tension between them is about to reach its boiling point. There is a conspicuous juxtaposition between the whimsical nature of the Buchanans’ house, where the day begins, and the Plaza Hotel in New York City, where the harsh reality culminates in conflict. As in the opening chapter of the novel, the Buchanans’ house is characterized by its fantastic qualities and the objectification of people within the home: Daisy and Jordan once again float on the couch, Gatsby identifies Daisy’s voice as being “full of money” (Gatsby 76) and the Buchanans’ daughter, referred to primarily as “the child” rather than by her name, Pammy, is put on display like a pretty trinket. On the other hand, the hotel room is relatively free of objects and with few windows, it becomes like a pressure cooker, trapping the heat and the people within it, forcing them to face the truth that they are able to ignore in their own homes that are full of flashy distractions. Tom calls Gatsby’s credibility into question, revealing that Gatsby makes his money through illegal activity, and insults his house as a way of exerting superiority: “I suppose
you’ve got to make your house into a pigsty in order to have any friends—in the modern world’’ (Gatsby 83). Tom aligns Gatsby with vulgar modernity, as opposed to his own nostalgic conservatism, suggesting that the new money class disgracefully panders to gain acceptance via their money while aristocrats demand respect through their adherence to tradition. Tom and Gatsby both know that Gatsby’s wild parties are unappealing to Daisy, so this insult is meant to manipulate her into staying with Tom. It is easy for Tom, and ultimately Daisy, to judge Gatsby for his illegal business, but they ignore the fact that crime provides the only outlet through which he can buy the possessions to construct his ideal identity, and the corruption of his morality is a sacrifice he is willing to make in pursuit of a greater goal. The combination of Gatsby’s exposure as a criminal and the ridicule of his home cause Daisy to falter in her decision to leave Tom, and Gatsby realizes that he has lost his love again, left only with his “dead dream” (Gatsby 86).

Gatsby’s dead dream foreshadows the literal death of Myrtle, and eventually his own murder, as the two characters who have the strongest belief in the power of objects to substitute for legitimate status in the modern world have their hopes and lives extinguished. After her husband George becomes aware of her infidelity and decides that they will move out West, Myrtle is killed chasing after her dream in the form of Gatsby’s “death car” (Gatsby 88) that she sees Tom driving earlier that day. Moving away with her husband and unable to realize her goal of rising socially, Myrtle foresees a death-in-life existence for herself if she cannot hold on to Tom, the only one who can provide her with an escape. The vivid spirit that Myrtle conveys in relation to the valley of ashes proves only to be potential energy and in death “she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long” (Gatsby 88). Even in death, Myrtle is ultimately portrayed in terms of sexuality as it is noted that her breast has been left torn and hanging from her body in the accident, suggesting that a symbol that typically connotes life
has been severed from that association and instead signifies her role as an illicit sexual commodity. Initially, Nick and Tom believe that Gatsby runs over Myrtle and ruthlessly flees the scene, but it is Daisy who is the murderer, first of Gatsby’s hopes of reclaiming her as his own, and then of her husband’s mistress. It becomes clear that in her time of despair Daisy will turn not to her lover, but to her husband, as Gatsby pathetically stands in the driveway looking in the window of the Buchanans’ house watching their reconciliation take place. Gatsby realizes that this has been his position all along, an outsider looking longingly in at a world of which he is not a part, despite his efforts to appear otherwise. Gatsby’s pink suit corresponds to the “pink glow from Daisy’s room on the second floor” (Gatsby 92) and like an old keepsake put away for sentimental value, he knows that he has been relegated to a faraway place within Daisy’s mind.

After his disillusionment because of Daisy’s refusal to leave Tom, the only thing that seems to bring Gatsby any comfort is talking to Nick about Daisy’s house back in Louisville, and his nostalgia ultimately prompts him to hope that he can attain all the success that this structure signifies. When Nick visits Gatsby, who has kept watch over Daisy’s house until the wee hours of the morning, Nick comments: “His house had never seemed so enormous to me as it did that night” (Gatsby 94). The increased immensity of the house is partially due to the removal of all the props, both objects and humans, there for Daisy’s benefit, but also perhaps because Gatsby’s earnest intensity to realize his dream has diminished, shrinking his larger-than-life image. In reflecting on his initial romance with Daisy, Gatsby explains that he was captivated by the house in which she lived, so much so that he even plans on returning to the house and marrying Daisy there once Tom is out of the picture: “It amazed him—he had never been in such a beautiful house before. But what gave it an air of breathless intensity was that Daisy lived there—it was as casual a thing to her as his tent out at camp was to him...It excited him, too, that many men had
already loved Daisy—it increased her value in his eyes. He felt their presence all about the house, pervading the air with the shades and echoes of still vibrant emotions” (Gatsby 94). For Gatsby, Daisy represents all that he has been denied—respect, prestige, and access to the glamorous world of the upper class—due to his modest upbringing and lack of financial security, and he remarks that he “had no real right to touch her hand” (Gatsby 95). The fact that he is able to possess her sexually shows him for the first time that such ideals are attainable for someone of his means. Her house contains the essence of what Daisy is, and her status as a valuable commodity, one who markets herself as a respectable but exciting Southern belle, is what makes the house desirable. Gatsby sees her as he would any product that is in high demand, and it is this conception of her as a beautiful object that initiates his belief that things can become the values they represent. Once Daisy marries Tom and moves out of her Louisville house, Gatsby still insists that the house can retain her presence and the intensity of their romance so he visits the house while on leave from the army during Tom and Daisy’s honeymoon. However, he finds that it is not the place itself for which he longs, but he wants to return to the time when he and Daisy were in love. Initially, Dr. Johannes Hofer coined the term nostalgia in reference to severe homesickness, a disease caused by a longing for a particular place. However, the conditions of modernity with its emphasis on progress and efficiency caused a shift in the way that nostalgia was conceived of; changing from a spatial to a temporal loss. Linda Hutcheon explains: “Nostalgia was no longer simply a yearning to return home…People who did return home were usually disappointed because, in fact, they did not want to return to a place, but to a time, a time of youth. Time, unlike space, cannot be returned to—ever; time is irreversible. And nostalgia becomes the reaction to that sad fact” (para. 8). Gatsby is disappointed upon his return to Louisville because the house still stands, but he cannot go back to the past and love Daisy in the
way he did before, so he becomes obsessed with his futile mission to repeat the past. Much like Fitzgerald after Zelda’s rejection of him, Gatsby knows that any rekindled relationship can only be a cheap imitation of the original and that “he knew that he had lost that part of it, the freshest and the best, forever” (*Gatsby* 97).

With the eventual murder of Gatsby by the distraught George Wilson comes the realization that Gatsby’s efforts at manufacturing himself into an admired commodity within the upper class community by imitating traditional ideals are ultimately disastrous. Nick, as Gatsby’s confidant and neighbor, is the only one of his associates who acknowledges his value beyond the flashy parties and indulgent possessions, and claims, “You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together” (*Gatsby* 98). While Nick opposes Gatsby’s corrupt business affiliations and his at times shameless self-promotion, he understands that there is an authentic emotional depth to Gatsby that the Buchanans, and others of their status, do not have either because they have lost it amidst their obsessive consumption or they have traded it away in favor of the superficial illusion of stability. Unable to sustain the beauty of his ideal vision of a life with Daisy, Gatsby begrudgingly accepts the harsh intrusion of reality:

> He must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about...like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding towards him through the amorphous trees. (*Gatsby* 103)

George and Gatsby both die as a result of George’s vengeful rampage and seem to be two sides of the same coin: George is a man devoid of hope and drained by the bleakness of reality while
Gatsby is so consumed by his lofty aspirations that he tries, with abysmal results, to use them as a replacement for reality. Both men are casualties of the corrupt side of capitalism: Gatsby uses his wealth to play the game and he loses, whereas playing the game is never even an option for George who does not have the financial means necessary to participate in a society in which one’s material possessions authenticate status. Other than the owl-eyed man’s surprising arrival, perhaps still impressed with Gatsby’s “real” books, and Nick, the only other attendee of Gatsby’s funeral is his father. Mr. Gatz seems to be the only person to fully believe in his son’s potential for greatness, and like Gatsby, he uses an object to authenticate the veracity of this success: “It was a photograph of the house, cracked in the corners and dirty with many hands. He pointed out every detail to me eagerly...He had shown it so often that I think it was more real to him now than the house itself” (Gatsby 110). While the house still stands, after Gatsby’s death, it is depleted of its animating spirit, and only Mr. Gatz’s photograph is able to capture the house in its full meaning, acting as a testament to Gatsby’s ideal version of himself.

After Gatsby is laid to rest, having witnessed the depravity and detachment of the East Coast and its symbolic depiction of modern society, Nick makes the decision to return home to the Midwest, putting the disorienting summer behind him and hoping to recapture the traditional values of his upbringing. Although he initially leaves the Midwest in search of excitement and direction after the war, his experience in West Egg makes him nostalgic for the simplicity and boredom of small-town living. His memories of home are illuminated with a new vividness when seen in relation to the underlying murkiness of the East:

That’s my Middle West—not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that,
Nick has a newfound appreciation for the capacity of tradition to ground identity, and unlike aristocrats like Tom who use their family ties as a means of excluding the less prosperous, one’s heritage can instill a sense of belonging that can give him or her confidence to move forward in search of something greater. His nostalgia acknowledges, unlike Gatsby’s or Tom’s, that attempting to reject modernity entirely in an effort to repeat the past is a futile enterprise, but instead he longs to return to a world in which traditional ideals still exist and hopes to recapture these values in order to realize them in the present. While he expresses his disillusionment with the modern world and its lack of compassion, Nick’s quest is ultimately that of all the characters of the novel—the search for an authentic self—and a return home for him becomes a reconnection to his Midwest values that can sustain his hope that such ideals can still exist within a modern framework.

While the influence of tradition provides a source of comfort for Nick, one of the most valuable lessons that he learns from his experience with Gatsby is that despite his disgust with the moral degradation that has accompanied the rise of capitalism, it is precisely because of the modern emphasis on material wealth that the concept of the self-made man becomes a possibility. What Nick has lacked throughout his life is the motivation to aspire to something beyond his reach, preferring to follow the typical model of success for men of his age and class. As Nick leaves West Egg, he reflects on Gatsby’s “huge incoherent failure of a house” (Gatsby 115), but ultimately he does not deem his neighbor himself a failure and appreciates Gatsby’s longing to fashion himself into the man he hoped to be. A product of the modern world, Nick
turns to the distant past to consider how to reclaim the hopeful optimism for the future that all but Gatsby seem to have relinquished:

As the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (Gatsby 115)

Though the houses of the novel are grandiose and, in many ways, frivolous, they are not completely inessential in that they directly express the identities of the characters who inhabit them, and, like the untouched island on which these houses were built, the underlying foundation of these structures is what makes them meaningful. The image of the Dutch sailors traversing the waters around the island is appropriate for contemplating how inspiration is sustained as the choppy waves of life’s difficulties force us to be “boats against the current” (Gatsby 115) pushing forward in the hope of attaining the green light.

Of all the characters of the novel, it seems that Fitzgerald has the most hope for Nick who maintains a middle ground, as symbolized by his home in the Midwest, between Tom’s traditional stability and Gatsby’s ambitious imagination. The most important lesson that Nick learns from Gatsby is that in order to realize one’s full potential it becomes necessary to return to the past and its comfort in order to face the challenges of the present. However, Nick’s story also becomes a cautionary tale, showing that one cannot dwell in the imaginary forever or attempt to
replace reality with fantasy. Fitzgerald, in his later years, learned the necessity of maintaining a balance between one’s limitations and one’s aspirations and felt that as a writer it was his duty to negotiate how this state of limbo can be attained:

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise. This philosophy fitted on to my early adult life, when I saw the improbable, the implausible, often the ‘impossible,’ come true...Of course within the practice of your trade you were forever unsatisfied—but I, for one, would not have chosen any other. (Crack-Up 70)

Nostalgia is ultimately about the impossible, an attachment to that which can never be attained again. One could argue that Gatsby, then, is simply a fool for striving to recapture that which has been irrevocably lost. However, Nick, and Fitzgerald, implicitly claims that within Gatsby lies a wisdom which has been overlooked in the modern world stifled by its own disillusionment—that actively pursuing an ideal, whether attainable or not, prevents one from being imprisoned by life’s circumstances and restrictions and allows a person to grow and reinvent oneself, if only in his or her imagination. It is through nostalgia that one gains perspective on the present and can become aware of its relationship the past in order to actively attempt to invoke it in his or her contemporary moment as a means of adaptation. From his own experiences navigating the complex and often superficial world of the leisure class, Fitzgerald claims that his generation needs to be reunited with its lost capacity for hope, and through The Great Gatsby he shows that nostalgia becomes a way to reclaim the moments of our lives that are most meaningful and use them as the foundation to continually reconstruct ourselves and push the limits of what we can become.
The Material Imagination of Willa Cather: 
Commemorative and Generative Nostalgia

Since the publication of Willa Cather’s novel *The Professor’s House* (1925), critics have generally regarded the sentiments of nostalgic idealism and aversion to commercialism expressed by her protagonist, Professor Godfrey St. Peter, as a reflection of the author’s own feelings about modernity. Cather was often vocal about her political conservatism and her commitment to “authentic” art as opposed to commercial cultural productions and, like the Professor, she composed some of her work in a study that doubled as a sewing room in the upper level of a house belonging to the family of her close friend Isabelle McClung. On the surface, these parallels suggest that Cather shared St. Peter’s perspective of the world where one would either be forced to retreat into an idealized past or to learn “to live without delight” (*Professor’s 282*) in the grim modern world. However, I argue that Cather represents her protagonist’s relationship to the material world as more complicated than the views she expressed in her nonfiction works. Indeed, the airy, open spaces that she claims are necessary for good art in her famous essay “The Novel Démeuble” are not in opposition to, but rely upon material objects for their inspirational power in *The Professor’s House*. While *The Professor’s House* has been considered by some to be Cather’s bitter meditation on modernity and its presumed incompatibility with traditional ideals, I suggest in what follows that she uses nostalgia to explore intersections and overlaps—between creativity and the material world, the intellectual and domestic spheres, individual and collective identity—as imperative in order to “face with fortitude… the future” (*Professor’s 283*). In the first section of this chapter, I suggest that though
Cather certainly expressed nostalgia for an aesthetic practice free from the corruptive forces of consumerism, she also saw the potential of material objects to commemorate the past and generate creativity that would lead to the production of meaningful work in the present. Unlike Svetlana Boym’s definitions of nostalgia as restorative (attempting to reconstruct the past) or reflective (critiquing the present in light of the past), I believe that Cather reveals a different dimension of nostalgia that is simultaneously commemorative (preserving a memory of the past) and generative (allowing for the creation of something new in the present). While Cather’s views regarding material objects often specifically refer to their relation to “art” as a subset of creativity, I claim that in *The Professor’s House* she reveals that an understanding of nostalgia produced by such objects and its ability to inspire new creations should be expanded to encompass creativity in general, not just art; neither Tom nor the Professor produce works of art per se, but the nostalgia evoked by material objects that they value certainly leads to creativity that culminates in meaningful work, Tom’s mesa diary and St. Peter’s historical multi-volume work *Spanish Adventurers in North America*. Cather suggests that the fleeting nature of inspiration makes art a necessarily nostalgic pursuit since the creation of material objects expresses a longing for the meaningful moment that possessed the artist’s imagination. The transience of the creative process and its fulfillment are represented through the characters of St. Peter and Tom who go through periods of intense motivation and enthusiasm punctuated by moments of disillusionment and despair. The items they covet, Tom’s cliff dweller artifacts and the objects in the Professor’s study, are nostalgic in that they act as reminders of a lost past and they inspire the production of intellectual work that strives to forge a connection between the past and the present.
Section two extends the exploration of Cather’s complex relationship with materialism in relation to the issue of domesticity, particularly the way in which the domestic realm had been understood in the early twentieth century as a place of material consumerism and gendered female. As evidenced in the strained relationship between the Professor and his family of women, modernity has divided the concept of culture into two separate realms seemingly at odds with one another: the intellectual and the domestic. Furthermore, gender designations have been imposed on these realms as intellectual pursuits have been deemed masculine, while the domestic, accompanied by a rampant consumerism, has been labeled feminine. Throughout the novel, St. Peter enacts his nostalgic desire to maintain this binary as he sequesters himself in the upper level of his house in order to foster his creative spirit and avoid what he considers to be the trivialities of domestic life. However, Cather reveals that the Professor’s ability to create his life’s work, *Spanish Adventurers in North America*, is not disturbed by, but is, in fact, dependent upon his relationship to the domestic. Although St. Peter attributes much of his success to his friendship with Tom Outland, it is the renewed appreciation for his domestic life inspired by Tom that spurs the Professor’s creative energy once he allows domesticity to overlap with his intellectual life. Domestic material objects become sources of nostalgia for both Tom and the Professor in that they provide the men with a sense of comfort and belonging necessary for intense concentration and intellectual exploration.

In the final section of the chapter, I examine the construction of individual identity in *The Professor’s House* and analyze how Cather complicates our understanding of how nostalgia functions in response to modernity, not only as a conservative lament for lost possibilities like that expressed by the Professor, but also as a means of integrating past and present in order to constitute a new identity like that forged by Tom. Tom Outland seems to embody the
commemorative/generative definition of nostalgia that I see at work in Cather’s novel in that he personally uses material objects to transition from a reverence for the past to creative innovation in the present constituting an identity that is both traditional and modern. At the same time, Tom himself, as well as the possessions left behind after his death, becomes a source of nostalgia for the other characters in the novel as he reminds them of the impact he had on their lives in the past and allows them to create in the present. The generative nostalgic power of Tom and the material objects that composed his life is most evident in the Professor’s production of *Spanish Adventurers in North America* and the creation of the house called “Outland” by his son-in-law, Louie Marsellus, who aspires to become a new version of Tom in the present. Cather reveals that despite characters’ insistence that they know the “real” Tom, Outland means something different to each of them, which casts doubt upon Louie’s project of providing the general public access to Tom’s identity through his possessions in the Outland mansion. Issues of reclaiming an authentic self also present themselves in the contemplation of the Professor’s own identity as he laments the loss of “the realest of his lives” (*Professor’s* 264) when he leaves behind his carefree childhood for the responsibilities and complications of adulthood. By confining himself to the study in the old house and avoiding his family, St. Peter attempts to nostalgically produce an environment that will facilitate the resurrection of what he deems his authentic self. It is the emergence of Tom Outland, who exudes a youthful exuberance and is unburdened by family or any other social bonds, that seems to prompt this nostalgia for St. Peter. Tom is the embodiment of the man St. Peter could have been had he not felt the pull of his family’s demands, and Tom’s death becomes a tragic reminder of the death of St. Peter’s individual desires and inspiration. Cather examines the bond between identity and the material, a link transmitted through nostalgia, as the relation between St. Peter and his houses becomes *who he is*, a man divided between
loyalty to his family and their wants and needs (represented by their purchase of a new house) and loyalty to the old self he clings to that resents being replaced (represented by the old house).

Amidst her concerns with nostalgia and its impact on individual identity, Cather investigates how material objects—with their ability to convey a historical consciousness—contribute to a collective American identity. Just as St. Peter is preoccupied with cultivating a more authentic version of himself, *The Professor’s House* poses the question of whether interaction with “authentic” material objects can constitute a “real” American. The nativism movement in the early twentieth century placed emphases on birthright and primitivism as conditions of authenticity. Native Americans were considered to be “true” Americans because of their indigenous connection to the land and artifacts from their civilizations were valued as physical embodiments of American identity. With a renewed interest in original Native American artifacts came the consequence of mass market reproductions of Native Americana, particularly those that were imported, being labeled “inauthentic,” and thereby tarnishing the national identity. The Professor imposes these attitudes on his relationships with Tom and Louie and their connection to material objects. Tom gives remnants of the Blue Mesa, including pottery and turquoise jewelry, to the St. Peter family, and the Professor sees him as a genuine American explorer. Louie, on the other hand, provides lavish gifts and furniture for Rosamond, and St. Peter considers him a phony who uses his money to buy respect. The dichotomy between reverence for historical artifacts and modern consumerism arises again when Tom visits Washington to try to influence the Smithsonian to pursue an excavation of the cliff dwellings. After living in a small house surrounded by the tools and art of the indigenous people, Tom is appalled by the ugly uniformity and superficiality of modern society and views Washington as a far cry from the creative, complex world of the cliff dwellers. Ultimately, Cather calls into
question the extent to which the cultural past can be said to inhere within material objects and whether American identity is something that can or should be bought and sold in the marketplace. Is Tom a true American because he represents the “glittering idea[s]” (Professor’s 111) upon which the nation was founded, or is Louie a real American because he engages the capitalist practices that direct where the nation is heading? The Professor’s House examines the ways in which public consumption of history relies upon nostalgia, through the purchase of items or participation in museum culture, and asks whether such practices constitute a connection to versus a relinquishing of the past.

Creativity and the Material World

Initially, it might seem strange that Cather would write a novel focused particularly on an object, the Professor’s house, when she was so outspoken about her disdain for writing that emphasized materialism over emotion. In her famous manifesto, “The Novel Démeublé” (the unfurnished novel), Cather compares the composition of a literary work to that of designing a house and decries the realism movement and its overdependence on objects: “The novel, for a long while, has been over-furnished. The property-man has been so busy on its pages, the importance of material objects and their vivid presentation have been so stressed, that we take it for granted whoever can observe, and can write the English language, can write a novel. Often the latter qualification is considered unnecessary” (“Novel” 5). She suggests that description and recording of material things are antithetical to art as physical objects detract from the reader’s ability to intuit the psychological dimensions of the novel suggested by the characters and setting. Cather goes on to explain that her definition of true art requires a kind of sleight of hand on the part of the author who intimates rather than reports the world he or she invents:

“Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there- that, it seems to me, is

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created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the over-tone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself” ("Novel" 6). In this way, she champions not the thing, but a kind of nostalgia for the thing precipitated by its absence, as that which fuels the imagination and engenders creativity.

Cather certainly believed that consumerism contributed to a loss in artistic sincerity and expressed her nostalgia for creativity free from the homogenizing forces of the marketplace, but she was also fully engaged in analyzing the present through her work, particularly through her depiction of material objects as a response to modernity. John N. Swift explains that Cather was concerned about the status of art in an increasingly commercialized modern society: “In the final twenty-five years of her life, she deliberately cultivated a persona of pained alienation from the corrosive daily worlds of commerce, politics, and social struggle: a persona focused resolutely, if nostalgically, on the simple purity of great art” (175). This characterization, one shared by many literary critics, suggests that Cather retreated from the modern world and instead chose to live in an idealized past, out of touch when it came to concerns of the present. However, Swift himself recognizes “her escapism was itself an ‘expression of what is central and fundamental in her own age’” (176). For all of her conservatism, Cather was actively responding to modernity, both in her rejection of conspicuous consumerism and in her depictions of nostalgia for a society focused more on traditional values than on money. Her novel does not express the aversion to materialism suggested in “The Novel Démeublé,” for Cather envisions objects serving an important function as long as they did not encumber the free flow of emotion that she deemed crucial for her work.
Despite her insistence upon writing uncluttered by extraneous details and descriptions of material objects, in *The Professor’s House* Cather intentionally focuses on the home and the items within it. She does so to establish the emotional landscape of St. Peter himself. As James Woodress notes, houses seem to act as the central image that creates continuity between the Professor’s story, and that of his deceased protégé, Tom Outland: “Their use in the novel structures its disparate parts. What seems to some readers a disjointed work with a long self-contained story in the middle gains unity through houses as subject and symbol” (369).28 The novel opens with an unfavorable description of the old house that the Professor refuses to leave: “Professor St. Peter was alone in the dismantled house where he had lived ever since his marriage, where he had worked out his career and brought up his two daughters. It was almost as

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28 Woodress elaborates on the significance of houses in Cather’s life, particularly one belonging to her close friend Isabelle McClung: “The large preoccupation with houses in the novel has a considerable relevance to one aspect of Cather’s life…The removal from Willow Shade, her spacious and comfortable childhood home, had been a wrenching blow. Her departure for college from the cramped little house in Red Cloud was perhaps less traumatic, but she returned to it often in her affections and in her fiction. The loss of the McClung house in Pittsburgh was the most shattering experience of all. That house not only had been her home, but it also had been her refuge even after moving to New York. It was there too that she had worked in a sewing room/study at the top of the house, as the professor does in her novel. When the professor refuses to leave the old house and his study, it is not hard to believe that Cather was giving her fictional character an option that she herself had not enjoyed.” See Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 369-70.
ugly as it is possible for a house to be; square, three stories in height, painted the colour of ashes—the front porch just too narrow for comfort, with a slanting floor and sagging steps” (Professor’s 11). The novel begins at a point in St. Peter’s life in which the house reflects the disarray of his emotional state as he leads a “narrow” uncomfortable existence and feels spiritually dead, connoted by the “ashy” hue of the house. This death imagery continues when he reflects on how his French garden used to assuage the pain of his nostalgia, particularly when spending time with his friend and protégé Tom Outland:

In the spring, when home-sickness for other lands and the fret of things unaccomplished awoke, he worked off his discontent here…On this September morning, however, St. Peter knew that he could not evade the unpleasant effects of change by tarrying among his autumn flowers. He must plunge in like a man, and get used to the feeling that under his work-room there was a dead, empty house (Professor’s 15-16).

It is implied that the lower levels of the house, those devoted to his family life, were once alive but are now referred to as “dead” much like his connection to the family members themselves as he laments his inability to avoid facing the reality of his altered existence. By opening the novel with the unappealing and morbid descriptions of St. Peter’s house, Cather reveals the paradox inherent in nostalgia—the pleasure that derives from dwelling on the pain of the past. She shows that the Professor’s devotion to the old house, despite his dissatisfaction with it, is emblematic of his dwindling sense of self and his struggle to maintain it.

Even though St. Peter conveys his frustration about his life through his perception of his home, the house provides a sense of nostalgic comfort in that it remains constant when much of the Professor’s world is changing. His house is characterized by things that initially seem to be a source of discontent for St. Peter: “stairs that were too steep, the halls that were too cramped, the
awkward oak mantles with thick round posts crowned by bumptious wooden balls, over green-tiled fire-places” (Professor’s 11). While the Professor describes these features as though they are annoyances, they are consistent and have maintained their discomforting qualities over the course of time so they become things that he can count on, a kind of support in a shifting modern landscape: “Certain wobbly stair treads, certain creaky boards in the upstairs hall, had made him wince many times a day for twenty-odd years—and they still creaked and wobbled” (Professor’s 11). Interestingly, at one point St. Peter thinks to himself about the possessions he and his family have accumulated over the years and remarks: “He couldn’t say they were extravagant; the old house had been funny and bare enough, but there were no ugly things in it” (Professor’s 161). This seems to directly refute his observation at the beginning of the novel that his home is “almost as ugly as it is possible for a house to be” (Professor’s 11). Though objectively the old house may appear to be ugly and awkward, the sentimental values that the Professor attaches to the items within it, and their association with his memories, makes them beautiful. His house, once a nuisance, has become the physical embodiment of nostalgia. Faced with the uncertainty and rapid advancements of the present, St. Peter’s perspective on his home has changed it into an idealized testament to the past. It is the Professor’s interaction with these familiar objects that provides him with a foundation upon which his creativity can build as the mundane and the ordinary not only ground him in reality but also act as catalysts that push him to imagine a world beyond these physical boundaries.

In The Professor’s House, Cather reveals a more complex view of modern materialism than her sentiments in “The Novel Démeublé” suggest; she emphasizes the necessity of material things in the creation of art and only expresses an aversion to objects that clutter and inhibit the creative process. Undoubtedly, she was discouraged by much of the rampant consumerism she
observed as a consequence of modernity, but as Janis Stout points out, Cather was actively engaged in understanding the complications of her time through her art, and much of her work is consistent with, rather than divergent from, literary modernism:

If one of the main projects in Cather studies in the past two decades has been to reclaim Cather for modernism (to be sure, as a modernist with a difference), an even more hotly disputed one has been to consider her less in exceptionalist terms and more in terms of her involvement in, or even investment in, her culture. Both of these fundamental realignments of our understanding of Willa Cather, a writer more customarily regarded as a nostalgist and an aesthete devoted to Art with a capital A, are mediated by attention to material objects, both the objects among which she lived her own life and the objects that appear in her writings. (2)

I argue that Cather does actively engage in exploring the complications of modern culture and uses material objects as a means of negotiating the present, but unlike Stout, I believe that her role as a nostalgist is crucial in her investigation of modernity. Stout goes on to claim that Cather’s image as an out-of-touch elitist with a complete antipathy toward modern materialism has been greatly exaggerated:

Cather did participate in her culture, frequently by way of her enjoyment of the material goods that the burgeoning consumerism of the early twentieth century made available. The evidence afforded both by the biographical and textual thing-ness of Cather’s mind lays to rest the once prevalent conception of idealizing scholars and critics that she lived and wrote as an artist set apart from her culture in a kind of purity of aesthetic aspiration, indifferent alike to politics and material gain. (2)
Again, Cather does reveal an interest in investigating the political ramifications of her society’s interest in material objects, but she implies that it is necessary for the creator of any sort of intellectually expressive work to be set apart from his or her culture to a certain extent in order to generate the nostalgia and critical distance that make creative production possible. The creative process becomes the attempt for the artist to recapture a lost moment of inspiration and bring it forth into the present, an endeavor that occurs when he or she acknowledges an inevitable separation between his or her imagination and reality. Cather’s work prompts one to reconfigure prevailing notions of modernism’s relationship to nostalgia as one not independent from or in opposition to materialism, but one in which a kind of symbiosis exists that can ultimately lead to the creation of meaningful work.

One expression of the Professor’s nostalgia that exposes Cather’s theory of aesthetics is his French garden which represents his (and Cather’s) admiration for French culture and the inspirational quality inherent in objects. He refers to the garden as “the comfort of his life” (Professor’s 14) because it reminds him of when he was a young man living in Versailles where “he had spent the happiest years of his youth” (Professor’s 12). The act of creating and maintaining the garden over the years has been an attempt to restore the feelings he had in France and the sense of promise he felt at that point in his life. In a larger sense, Cather’s choice to show her protagonist’s appreciation for a French garden hints at her own reverence for French aesthetics and the significance of material objects rather than abstract concepts in creative production. In an interview with Rose Feld of the *New York Times*, Cather explained how French art is interconnected with and inspired by the items that compose the artist’s life:

The Frenchman doesn’t talk nonsense about art, about self-expression; he is too greatly occupied with building the things that make his home. His house, his garden, his vineyards,
these are the things that fill his mind. He creates something beautiful, something lasting.

And what happens? When a French painter wants to paint a picture he makes a copy of a
garden, a home, a village. The art in them inspires his brush. (“Restlessness” 71)

Cather reveals her nostalgia for work that is created organically from the objects that inspire it
rather than art that is self-consciously abstract because these material objects themselves
ultimately lead to the production of a tangible expression of lived experience, become a part of
our lives in our interaction with them, and transcend the personal in their ability to capture the
beauty of life itself.

The part of the house that provides the most insight into the Professor’s life is his study on
the third floor as this space has been the site of his intellectual achievements as well as his
contemplation of his disappointments. St. Peter’s “dark den” (Professor’s 16) has been a place of
solace, one in which he could escape the responsibilities of his everyday life and enhance his
intellectual life. Like the rest of the old house, the study is described in an unfavorable way but
one that is comforting to the Professor in its constancy:

The low ceiling sloped down on three sides, the slant being interrupted on the east by a
single square window, swinging outward on hinges and held ajar by a hook in the sill. This
was the sole opening for light and air. Walls and ceiling alike were covered with a yellow
paper which had once been very ugly, but had faded into inoffensive neutrality. The matting
on the floor was worn and scratchy. (Professor’s 16)

Although a brand new home has been built for him and his wife, St. Peter prefers to work and
reflect in his old study, telling Mr. Appenhoff, the landlord, that he rents the house “to have room
to think” (Professor’s 52) because of the memories attached to it and the pleasure he derives
from this shrine to the past. After most of his belongings have been moved to the new house, the
Professor holds on desperately to the familiarity of his study, the “one room still furnished— that is, if it had ever been furnished” (Professor’s 16). The word “furnished” is significant in light of Cather’s sentiments in “The Novel Démeublé” regarding the “over-furnishing” of the novel that clutters the mind and inhibits creativity. Cather suggests that the study, though composed of material things, contains an aura of “the thing not named,” an emotional resonance left behind in the wake of an absent object, in this case, the dead Tom Outland.

In her depiction of the Professor’s old house, particularly his study, Cather establishes a connection between nostalgia and materialism by showing how both physical and emotional reminders of the past are responses to modernity that simultaneously draw one into and separate one from that past. Bill Brown argues that The Professor’s House demonstrates how in a culture dominated by consumerism, one’s agency is determined by his or her access to material goods:

The novel’s eponymous subject (which is an object) designates material possession as the mode through which the modern subject struggles both to resist and to effect change. The novel can be summarized as the story of Godfrey St. Peter trying to retain some stability in his life by preserving his scene of reading and writing, maintaining the third-floor study in the empty house from which he and his family have moved. He rents the entire house in order to keep the things of his ‘dark den’ in place so that, ostensibly, he can complete the final volume of his Spanish Adventurers in North America. (128)

The Professor confines himself to his study, the place where he has immersed himself in the stimulation of his work, in order to avoid dealing with what he believes is a confusing and superficial modern world, but he also does so in an attempt to grow and emerge from his disillusioned depression. The result is that St. Peter feels trapped, unable to return to his past and unable to move beyond it. Cather’s use of the house, a physical object, reflects this tension as it
seems to embody and authenticate the fulfilling moments of the Professor’s life; however, because the house is a material thing with physical boundaries, its own objectivity, it emphasizes St. Peter’s insurmountable separation from his past and his feelings of alienation.

Despite feeling completely disconnected from his family, the Professor halfheartedly attempts to be a dutiful husband and father, even though it no longer brings him joy, and this fake persona is conveyed most clearly through his imitation study. St. Peter intentionally separates his false study from his real one: “Downstairs, off the back parlour, he had a show study, with roomy shelves where his library was housed, and a proper desk at which he wrote letters. But it was a sham. This [the third floor study] was the place where he worked” (Professor’s 16). Significantly, the “sham” study is on the lower-level of the house, the site of all interactions with his family, away from his true study where he reflects on his life and feels most comfortable. Although the Professor condemns his wife and daughters for being shallow and pretentious, he leads a surface life as well and plays a role that allows him minimum engagement with his family while still avoiding serious allegations regarding his indifference. The physical artificial study serves as a place marker for St. Peter himself connoting both his absence from and presence within the lower-level of the house. Maintaining the illusion of an active existence in the lower-level of his home allows him the freedom to inhabit his elevated position in his real study where he can hide amongst the objects of his past life and look down upon the family members who contribute to his disappointment with the present.

The Professor places so much significance on the things in his home that matter to him that he seems to become an object himself, an object of nostalgia that leads to the production of a work of art. St. Peter is described as being like a carefully-crafted sculpture: “His head was high, polished, hard as bronze, and the close-growing black hair threw off a streak of light along the
rounded ridge where the skull was fullest. The mould of his head on the side was so individual and definite, so far from casual, that it was more like a statue’s head than a man’s” (Professor’s 13). With this depiction of him as a statue, the Professor could be seen as just another object sharing the landscape of his French garden, a prop to create a pleasant scene. In some ways this characterization as a statue can be positive since there is something handsome and timeless about St. Peter’s form, so much so that it inspires his daughter Kathleen to make him the subject of her watercolor paintings. However, the Professor also seems more like a statue than a man because of his coldness, his distance, particularly from his family, and his status as a piece of artwork comes at the expense of his humanity. Interestingly, the more St. Peter retreats into his imagination in a nostalgic attempt to conjure the emotions of his youthful self in order to take control of his life, the more he seems like an object to those around him, a nearly lifeless entity blending into the background.

An even more obvious example of Cather’s merging of subject and object comes with her depiction of the Professor’s study and his relation to the “forms,” mannequins used for sewing dresses, which have become integral components of his workspace. The first form described in the novel bears a resemblance to the way St. Peter conceives of his wife, Lillian:

The one which Augusta called ‘the bust’ stood in the darkest corner of the room, upon a high wooden chest in which blankets and winter wraps were yearly stored…Though this figure looked so ample and billowy (as if you might lay your head upon its deep-breathing softness and rest safe forever), if you touched it you suffered a severe shock, no matter how many times you had touched it before. It presented the most unsympathetic surface imaginable. Its hardness was not that of wood which responds to concussion with living vibration and is stimulating to the hand, nor that of felt, which drinks something from the
fingers. It was a dead, opaque, lumpy solidity, like chunks of putty, or tightly packed sawdust—very disappointing to the tactile sense, yet somehow always fooling you again.

For no matter how often you had bumped up against that torso, you could never believe that contact with it would be as bad as it was. (Professor’s 17-18)

Although the form is described in a primarily negative way, it continually impels St. Peter to reach out and touch it because it looks soft and comforting. These soothing qualities of the form’s appearance prompt the Professor’s nostalgia for Lillian since these were traits she possessed earlier in the relationship before she became materialistic and distant from him. Because it is a physical object, the form becomes a way for him to literally hold onto the woman he once loved. Interestingly, just as the form serves to evoke his wife’s youthful femininity, her “deep-breathing softness,” it is also a harsh reminder of Lillian’s hardness and her superficiality. Just like the wife herself, the form is an object of desire for St. Peter, but both the woman and the object prove to be insufficient substitutes for the Lillian of the past and emit an uncanny quality, a simultaneous familiarity and discomforting unfamiliarity.

The second form that inhabits the Professor’s study seems to act as a reminder of his daughters Rosamond and Kathleen (Kitty), particularly Rosamond, and has a more predictable quality than “the bust”. St. Peter claims that the second form attempts to appear more easy and carefree than “she” actually is and that these qualities are contrived:

The second form was more self-revelatory; a full-length female figure in a smart wire skirt with a trim metal waist line. It had no legs, as one could see all too well, no viscera behind its glistening ribs, and its bosom resembled a strong wire bird-cage...When Augusta left it clad for the night in a new party dress for Rosamond or Kathleen, it often took on a sprightly, tricky air, as if it were going out for the evening to make a great show of being
harum-scarum, giddy, folle. It seemed just on the point of tripping downstairs, or on tiptoe, waiting for the waltz to begin. At times the wire lady was most convincing in her pose as a woman of light behavior, but she never fooled St. Peter. (Professor’s 18-19)

Just as the form was used to produce dresses for both of the Professor’s daughters, it also eventually allows St. Peter to produce his work since the mannequin evokes nostalgia for the young girls who have now grown up. The Professor imposes his pleasant memories of his daughters on the form, and having this physical reminder of his past in his study establishes a peaceful atmosphere that allows his creativity to flourish. Like the bust, however, the second form embodies negative qualities associated with the girls’ current lives alongside the gratifying nostalgia for their childhood innocence. While the form was used to make dresses for both of the Professor’s daughters, his description of it seems much more similar to his conception of Rosamond who, in his mind, is far more transparent than Kathleen. The form is lacking in substance in that it has “no viscera,” and St. Peter can literally see through it since it is made of wire just as he can see beyond Rosamond’s beauty to what he deems her vapidity. Rosamond puts great effort into appearing sophisticated, but like the form “on the point of tripping downstairs,” the Professor sees her as hulking and clumsy, “too tall, with a rather awkward carriage” (Professor’s 37). Despite the hollowness of the figure, St. Peter looks at the form with fondness and is reminded of when his daughters were girls playing dress-up for amusement. The form also has the effect of marking the realization that Rosamond does not seem to have matured beyond such childish games and continues to focus on her appearance instead of developing her mental acuity. In this way, the form encapsulates Rosamond’s essence as an eternal child and makes the Professor nostalgically long for his little girl of the past and pity his adult daughter in the present.
Cather suggests that material objects have the unique ability to bridge the gap between time and space, the psychological and the physical, allowing the subject to access both realms and make sense of his or her relation to each. According to Brown, things have the capacity to embody not just a moment, but to chart the passage of time for the life that they represent, and that the Professor’s forms are prime examples that chronicle the changes that occur within his wife and daughters:

We might say that, however much the form prompts the Professor’s fondest images of the past, even within the past its hardness disclosed what the Professor’s experience of the women in his life would come to be. Which is to say that in Cather’s fiction, it is not just history, but also futurity, that objects seem able to express; in this case, the relation between form and substance becomes the relation between image and reality, and between the past and the present. (128-29)

Though the forms existed when Lillian and Rosamond were younger and more appealing in the mind of the Professor, their materiality ultimately predicted what each woman would become: Lillian, hardened and impenetrable, and Rosamond, vacuous and childish. The forms convey a continuum of their subjectivity, constantly reminding St. Peter of both their ideal qualities as well as their very worst. Similarly, the Professor’s old house indicates the young man he was as well as the older man he has become. While a reminder of his intellectual progress and his creativity, the home’s bland, rundown appearance and specifically the study’s designation as “his shadowy crypt at the top of the house” (Professor’s 112) foreshadow St. Peter’s insistence that he is on the brink of death, both physically and spiritually. In her novel, Cather proposes that material goods are crucial in conceptualizing and managing the present in that they provide perspective by encompassing multiple periods of time; these material goods make it possible for
the nostalgic moments attached to them to perpetually exist within the present, but they also express the forward progression from those moments and anticipate a shift in how those objects will be perceived in the future.

Although the forms prompt disappointment regarding the current state of the Professor's alienation from his family, he refuses to have them removed from his study because he maintains that they are imperative for his creative process. When the family seamstress, Augusta, attempts to take the forms for her work in the family's new house, St. Peter vehemently protests, "You don't need her to make curtains. I can't have this room changed if I'm going to work here...They stay right there in their own place. You shan't take away my ladies" (Professor's 21). The Professor speaks of the forms as if they are people rather than objects because he has assigned them identities that represent the real women in his life. When Augusta contends that St. Peter has always resented the forms cluttering his workspace, he claims, "I never complained, Augusta. Perhaps of certain disappointments they recalled, or of cruel biological necessities they imply—but of them individually, never!" (Professor's 21). Unlike the women of his family whom they symbolize, the forms have remained consistent; they are impervious to change and have never disappointed him. The Professor clings to the forms because he believes the real women in his life are now beyond his reach and these objects seem to be the only tangible links to the family he once knew. Amidst the rapid changes in his current life that make his former one nearly unrecognizable, material objects become crucial in providing stability, a shore against which his imagination can flow.

It is not only the forms in the study that have become necessary components for St. Peter's work productivity, but the presence of Augusta herself has been a comfort on which he could rely as he seems to ascribe her the role of another object inhabiting the room. Just as the
Professor himself is compared to a statue, he describes Augusta in primarily inanimate terms: “He had often wondered how she managed to sew with hands that folded and unfolded as rigidly as umbrellas...She herself was tall, large-boned, flat and stiff, with a plain, solid face, and brown eyes not destitute of fun” (Professor’s 23). Other than her eyes which expose an underlying mischievous side to Augusta, no obvious signs of life emerge from St. Peter’s depiction of her, perhaps because he is inevitably let down by the people he cares for in the present and he objectifies her as a way of preserving the feelings of comfort she had brought him over the years that his family can no longer provide.

Augusta’s life is guided by rules and restrictions, as evidenced by her steadfast religious beliefs, and as a historian producing a chronicle of his research, St. Peter can juxtapose his creativity against her rationality. Like the forms that evoke nostalgia for the Professor’s early years with his family, Augusta also acts as a catalyst for memories of the man he once was:

How much she reminded him of, to be sure! She had been most at the house in the days when his daughters were little girls and needed so many clean frocks. It was in those very years that he was beginning his great work; when the desire to do it and the difficulties attending such a project strove together in his mind like Macbeth’s two spent swimmers—years when he had the courage to say to himself: ‘I will do this dazzling, this beautiful, this utterly impossible thing!’ (Professor’s 25)

Augusta’s very presence in the room, where St. Peter completed his Spanish Adventurers in North America and his ideas “were digested and sorted, and woven into their proper place in his history” (Professor’s 25), was a source of stability that allowed his mind to roam free, and his connection to her becomes a way for him to attempt to reclaim the inspiration that has dwindled over the years. Unlike the women of his family, Augusta has not changed, other than her greying
hair that the Professor notes with surprise, and because she has remained impervious to the
forces of his otherwise altered world, he aligns her with the forms more than the real female
figures in his life. Augusta, with her conservative traditionalism, can be viewed as though she is
a relic from a bygone world when compared with the Professor’s family who seem to have
thoroughly embraced modernity in which Augusta’s practicality and simplicity have been
replaced by self-indulgence and exhibitionism.

While the nostalgic objects that occupy the study ground the Professor in reality and
provide order so that he may work, just as important for his inspiration is the single window that
gives him a view of the world beyond the conventionality of his workspace and allows him to
reflect on the present in relation to his memories of the past. In “The Novel Démeublé,” Cather
suggests that windows are important elements of a room in that they allow for the de-cluttering
of that space and, by extension, the mind:

How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along
with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old
patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre, or as that house into
which the glory of Pentecost descended; leave the scene bare for the play of emotions, great
and little—for the nursery tale, no less than the tragedy, is killed by tasteless amplitude.
(“Novel” 6)

Although Cather calls for an emptying of the room in her essay, de-emphasizing the physical and
focusing on the emotional in creative work, the complex emotional state of the Professor in her
novel is revealed specifically through nostalgic objects, and, in fact, he refuses to let the contents
of his study be taken away. However, as much as St. Peter does cherish the material objects
inside the old house, equally important to his work is his vantage point of the world beyond his study that is facilitated by its window:

There was one fine thing about this room that had been the scene of so many defeats and triumphs. From the window he could see, far away, just on the horizon, a long, blue, hazy smear—Lake Michigan, the inland sea of his childhood... The sight of it from his study window these many years had been of more assistance than all the convenient things he had done without would have been. (Professor’s 29-31)

The view of the lake, a representation of the wonder and imagination of his youth, sustains him in times when he lacks motivation and signifies a sense of freedom from the mundane responsibilities of his adult life. Like the forms and the old house itself, the sight of the water that shaped the setting for much of his childhood is a comfort in that it is ever-present, always in the background as a nostalgic reminder of simpler times. The window allows the Professor the unique position of being both inside and outside, insulated in his intimate study while having a clear view of the world beyond it that can only occur through critical distance. Looking out the window while surrounded by objects that remind him of the past also allows him the opportunity to contemplate the fixed, resolved nature of these memories in relation to the mysterious expanse of the present. For practical purposes, St. Peter relies on the window to compensate for the faulty stove with its toxic fumes: “The window must be left open—otherwise, with the ceiling so low, the air would speedily become unfit to breathe. If the stove were turned down, and the window left open a little way, a sudden gust of wind would blow the wretched thing out altogether, and a deeply absorbed man might be asphyxiated before he knew it” (Professor’s 26). The window literally becomes a means of life and death since it both keeps him alive but threatens to kill him if the wind picks up, which suggests the power of the imagination to either uplift or consume an
artist. Cather implies that the perspective allowed by the window is crucial for St. Peter as a writer/intellectual, or for any creative endeavor, in reflecting on the present, objective world and creating his or her subjective response to it through the work produced. Such a connection between imagination and reality is facilitated by the bridging effect of nostalgia through objects as they revive emotional experiences of the past and allow those experiences to inform one’s understanding of his or her emotions in the present.

Even though his research on Spanish adventurers is a great accomplishment for which he receives acclaim, its completion in effect significantly severs the bond to the Professor’s source of inspiration, his carefree childhood, a bond that cannot be replaced with monetary awards. St. Peter considers the challenging years of academic work in nostalgic terms, referring to them as “those golden days” and laments that “the horse was gone” (Professor’s 32) and the creative drive that kept him going has vanished. Despite receiving the Oxford prize for his work and an accompanying five thousand pounds, his success precipitates a sense of defeat in that his intellectual fulfillment could not be maintained. When Lillian asks whether he would rather have spent his prize money on something other than a new house, St. Peter replies, “If with that cheque I could have bought back the fun I had writing my history, you’d never have got your house. But one couldn’t get that for twenty thousand dollars. The great pleasures don’t come so cheap” (Professor’s 33). Money cannot compensate for the loss of his creative spirit, his ability to express himself in relation to the world, and only manages to widen the gap between the solace of his youth and the detached impersonal quality of his present signified by his new house lacking in character and memories.

Cather suggests that artistic and intellectual inspiration is intimately connected to nostalgia in that the spiritual gratification provided by creating a work of art is inevitably fleeting because
the creation can only hint at the producer’s emotional response to the world and never actually recreate it as it was experienced. Adam Ellwanger argues that Cather’s novel reveals the centrality of loss to her aesthetic philosophy:

*The Professor’s House* suggests that we do need to reattune ourselves to the primary importance of the needs and desires of our bodies; but Cather also implies that to undertake this work in the hope of omnipresent bodily response to aesthetic objects might only exacerbate a deep and unfulfilled longing—a longing that aesthetic experience can satisfy only temporarily. (61)

Consequently, the writing of *Spanish Adventurers in America* simultaneously assuages and aggravates the Professor’s feelings of despair about his life. He derives satisfaction from giving his life purpose, but his eight-volume history acts as a physical reminder of the depletion of the emotional content of his mind. Cather makes a crucial distinction about how St. Peter attributes worth to the aspects of his life: he values things that allow his imagination to run free unrestricted by time constraints and social approval, and he abhors commercialism dictated by concerns about societal validation and the appearance of affluence that stifles one’s ability to develop a meaningful sense of self and engage in life’s pleasures that transcend monetary value.

The Professor’s own version of materialism is represented in relation to that of his family members for whom objects seem to possess little to no sentimental significance and are instead fairly disposable goods bought to evoke the admiration and envy of others until they are replaced by newer and better versions. The consumption of material goods is at the heart of the competitive rifts between the members of St. Peter’s family as they seek out various ways to fill emotional voids in their lives. At a dinner party at the Professor’s new house honoring an English visitor, Kitty’s husband, Scott McGregor, reveals his resentment toward Rosamond’s
husband, Louie Marsellus, primarily because of Louie’s continual emphasis on acquiring new objects that bespeak his good taste and business sense. Louie reveals that he and Rosamond are building a “Norwegian manor house” (Professor’s 39) that they have decided to name “Outland” after Tom, whose invention, the Outland engine, has paid for its construction. Other than financially benefitting from Tom’s death and using the money to create an ostentatious house, Scott is bothered by Louie’s seemingly trivial unintentional insult regarding the doorknobs chosen for the house: “You haven’t been out since we got our wonderful wrought-iron door fittings from Chicago. We found just the right sort of hinge and latch, Sir Edgar, and had all the others copied from it. None of your colonial glass knobs for us!” (Professor’s 39). Louie does not realize that the McGregors have recently bought glass knobs for their home, and his comment fuels Scott’s feelings of inadequacy, his sense that he must “keep up” with Louie both in terms of opulence as well as the approval of his father-in-law, St. Peter. Scott’s feelings of disdain for the Marselluses are returned by Rosamond who considers Scott, who is a writer, a sell-out because instead of writing literature, he crafts editorials and trite poems for a newspaper for the price of “twenty-five beans” (Professor’s 44). She looks down upon Scott because he is not a “serious” writer and he thinks of his craft in terms of dollars and cents as opposed to art created for its own sake. Rosamond’s aversion to art being perceived as a commodity seems to echo Cather’s own sentiments regarding commercialism, but Rosamond’s rampant consumerism and interest in status seem to undermine her moral opposition to commodification. While the Marselluses and McGregors assume a sense of superiority over each other, believing that their integrity is uncorrupted by money, it is evident that their rivalry centers on petty jealousy prompted by the display of material wealth.
For Cather, the mass production of material goods is an expression of an underlying nostalgia for meaningful creative work, but the marketplace generally strips these items of affect, the emotional quality that has the potential to make objects meaningful. St. Peter, unintentionally, becomes part of the rift between his daughters when he is chosen to accompany Rosamond on a shopping trip to Chicago because of his good taste and aesthetic sensibility, and he resents that she has a love for the act of shopping as opposed to an appreciation for the individual objects she purchases. Diane Prenatt contends that, in her novel, Cather makes a deliberate distinction between the objects that the Professor possesses versus those of his wife and daughters, claiming that in *The Professor's House*, “the city is a source for the commercial object which, however aestheticized, Cather views as only a poor substitute for authentic art, mistakenly valued by a society that has lost its artistic integrity” (204). Unlike the Professor’s objects that have unique “identities” and inspirational powers that link him to his past, the material commodities Rosamond owns do not have any sentimental value and only exacerbate the need to purchase more trivial items since they prove to be poor imitations of original creative work.

Kitty has developed bitterness toward her sister as well regarding Rosamond’s possessions that stems from her unrequited love for Tom who chose the more conventionally beautiful Rosamond over her. When Kitty breaks down in front of the Professor and admits her resentment toward her sister, he urges her to let her jealousy go, but Kitty responds, “I can’t help it, Father. I am envious. I don’t think she would be if she let me alone, but she comes here with her magnificence and takes the life out of all our poor little things” (*Professor’s* 84-85). Rosamond’s material objects overshadow those of Kitty just as Rosamond herself has inadvertently stolen the spotlight from her sister her whole life. Kitty notes that her envy of her sister manifested itself
only after Rosamond left home and married Louie: “When we were at home, Rosamond was a kind of ideal to me. What she thought about anything, decided it for me. But she’s entirely changed. She’s become Louie. Indeed, she’s worse than Louie. He and all this money have ruined her” (Professor’s 86). The only evidence that there is any of the “old Rosamond” left is that she becomes visibly upset when Louie asks if she still has the simple turquoise bracelet, a piece of Native American artwork rather than a mass-produced object, that was a present from Tom. This reaction seems uncharacteristic for the “new Rosamond,” who, according to her husband, “doesn’t care about intrinsic values. It must be beautiful, first of all” (Professor’s 107). Rosamond’s identity shifted from being an ideal (when she was with Tom) to reality (when she replaced Tom for Louie), and with Rosamond’s accumulation of wealth and objects she seems to distance herself from Tom, which Kitty sees as a betrayal of his memory.

It seems that much of Cather’s attention to materialism in her novel is used to highlight the lifestyle of the Professor’s family and the extent to which it differs from that of Tom Outland and the spiritual freedom he represents. In a letter to Pat Knopf, Cather once revealed her artistic inspiration for The Professor’s House:

In my book, I tried to make Professor St. Peter’s house rather overcrowded and stuffy with new things; American proprieties, clothes, furs, petty ambitions, quivering jealousies—until one got rather stifled. Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa, and the fine disregard of trivialities which was in Tom Outland’s face and in his behavior. (Writing 31-2)

Just like the window of the study that allows the Professor to mentally return to his childhood memories of Lake Michigan, Tom Outland reminds St. Peter of his youth unencumbered by the responsibilities of his later adulthood. As unappealing as many of the material objects of the
novel may be, they perform a necessary function of relegating Tom and his world to the realm of the ideal, making all that he represents an aspiration towards which the Professor, in particular, strives. The clutter of possessions throughout the novel reveals a significant element of Cather’s theory of art—that material objects (potentially even mass-produced ones if they create emotional resonance for those who are in contact with them) are useful when they set into relief and intensify the imaginative spirit, the thing not named, so that it can be intuited and interpreted by the audience.

In “Tom Outland’s Story,” the cliff dwellings that Tom discovers on the Blue Mesa perform a similar function to the Professor’s house in that the structures and the relics within them serve to emphasize the inspirational beauty of the physical landscape. When Tom first stumbles upon the Cliff City, he remarks at how orderly and cohesive the dwellings appear:

Far up above me, a thousand feet or so, set in a great cavern in the face of the cliff, I saw a little city of stone, asleep. It was as still as sculpture—and something like that. It all hung together, seemed to have a kind of composition: pale little houses of stone nestling close to one another, perched on top of each other, with flat roofs, narrow windows, straight walls, and in the middle of the group, a round tower...The tower was the fine thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something. (Professor’s 201)

The Cliff City is compared to a sculpture, a work of art, in that it has been carefully designed to fit in perfectly with its surroundings and convey a sense of permanence, the structure far outlasting the inhabitants who built it.

Like the Professor’s house and the forms that occupy his study, the cliff dwellings perform the function of commemorating a lost past, acting as proof that the civilization once existed. The tower that seems to be the focal point of the city suggests the presence of a defined center for the
culture of the cliff dwellers that structures how and where they create their homes. This central figure that gives the cluster of houses meaning is a feature markedly absent from the Professor’s world, one which he sees as lacking any sort of foundation or purpose: “The university, his new house, his old house, everything around him, seemed insupportable, as the boat on which he is imprisoned seems to a sea-sick man” (Professor’s 150). All the objects that once structured the course of St. Peter’s life have proven to be flimsy in relation to the demands of consumer society, so he feels as though he has been set adrift, grasping at the material contents of his study as a way of finding any solid footing in reality. The cliff dwellings, seemingly impervious to the ravages of time, are an expression of this lost civilization’s desire to establish order within the ever-changing natural world and physically substantiate a space within history.

Although the meticulously-crafted cliff dwellings convey a sense of stability and beauty that has remained frozen in time, perhaps their most important role is in highlighting the landscape of the Blue Mesa that surrounds them. Tom remarks at the allure of the Cliff City existing in perfect harmony with nature:

The really splendid thing about our city, the thing that made it delightful to work there, and must have made it delightful to live there, was the setting. The town hung like a bird’s nest in the cliff, looking off into the box canyon below, and beyond into the wide valley we called Cow Canyon, facing an ocean of clear air. A people who had the hardihood to build there, and who lived day after day looking down upon such grandeur, who came and went by those hazardous trails, must have been, as we often told each other, a fine people.

(Professor’s 213)

Like the window of the Professor’s study that allows for the inspiring view of Lake Michigan and lets in a fresh breeze to reinvigorate the room, the Blue Mesa seems representative of an
imaginative link to the past, and Tom develops a nostalgia for the Indian culture of which he was never a part. The Cliff City dwellers seemed to respond to their surroundings by constructing homes and fashioning tools and other objects that expressed their admiration for nature and captured its beauty within these material items that would remain long after the people themselves had disappeared. Earlier in the novel, the Professor makes a similar observation about the connection between nature and creative expression: “It struck him that the seasons sometimes gain by being brought into the house, just as they gain by being brought into painting, and into poetry (Professor’s 75). Cather suggests that the Blue Mesa, just like the flowers from his garden that decorate St. Peter’s house, becomes more real through artistic rendering and that artists create physical embodiments of their inspiration through the production of creative work as they focus on and capture the beauty of the natural environment that is continually shifting.

Cather establishes a crucial connection between inspiration and nostalgia when Tom, who is intrigued by the Cliff City from the moment he discovers it, is betrayed by Roddy and left alone in the ancient civilization to reflect on his surroundings. Upon returning from Washington, and having failed to convince museum officials of the Cliff City’s value, Tom finds that Roddy has sold all of the artifacts found in the cliff dwellings and refuses to forgive him, which prompts Roddy to leave the Blue Mesa for good. Despite feeling devastated by the loss of the artifacts and his best friend, Tom is able to fully appreciate the emotional power conveyed by the setting only in total solitude:

In a sense, that was the first night I was ever really on the mesa at all—the first night that all of me was there. This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole. It all came together in my understanding, as a series of experiments do when you begin to see where they are leading. Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify,
and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was possession.

(Professor’s 250-51)

With no more pressure to make the artifacts and the Cliff City mean something to the officials in Washington, Tom is able to reflect on what the Blue Mesa means to him and appreciate it on a purely aesthetic level. He experiences something akin to artistic inspiration when he labels the emotion that the mesa evokes within him as “possession,” which has a double meaning in that Tom feels like the Blue Mesa belongs only to him, at the same time that he also feels possessed by the landscape in that his physical surroundings have exerted control over him psychologically and created an imagined nostalgia for and kinship with the cliff dweller society that he respects so much. This mutual possession between subject and object seems to take place between the artist and his or her source of inspiration as he or she captures and takes ownership over the emotion conveyed by the object, but the object dictates the form that the creative rendering will take. The Professor experiences a similar symbiosis with the view of Lake Michigan that lies beyond his study window in that he owns the house that gives him this vantage point and the memories that the lake conjures, but it is the lake that has the power over St. Peter’s creativity in writing his books and controls his mood by taking him back to his childhood and exacerbating his feelings of nostalgia for his youth. Through Tom’s and the Professor’s relationships with the natural world mediated by physical objects, houses in particular, Cather suggests that the imaginative play necessary for creativity is prompted by connecting the subject to a past elicited by the object.

Cather forges a connection between experiencing art, particularly literature, and experiencing the natural world in that both allow for the expansion of the imagination and convey a sense of timelessness since their influence can remain constant even with the passing of
generations. Overcome by the joy he feels when he communes with the Blue Mesa in complete solitude, Tom compares his emotional response to that which he experiences when reading a great work of literature, particularly the classics with their connection to the pastoral tradition. After Roddy is gone, the only way Tom can describe what the mesa inspires within him is by referencing an encounter with a text: “For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion. I had read of filial piety in the Latin poets, and I knew that was what I felt for this place. It had formerly been mixed up with other motives; but now that they were gone, I had my happiness unalloyed” (Professor’s 251). Art, in the form of a material object, a book, allows for the transmission of the artist’s emotion in the same way that the spiritual fulfillment produced on the mesa is translated through the physical landscape. Tom explains later that the recognition of the connection between his excitement contemplating the mesa and that which he feels while reading Latin poetry actually inspires him to engage more fervently in reading and other intellectual pursuits: “It was the first time I’d ever studied methodically, or intelligently. I got the better of the Spanish grammar and read the twelve books of the Aeneid…Every morning, when the sun’s rays first hit the mesa top, while the rest of the world was in shadow, I wakened with the feeling that I had found everything, instead of having lost everything” (Professor’s 251). The visual wonder Tom experiences when he observes his beautiful surroundings prompts him to want to learn as much about the world as possible, and once he loses his concern for fulfilling societal obligations, he has more room in his mind to concentrate on appreciating the simplicity of nature and the comfort it brings him. The act of reading itself becomes a source of nostalgia for Tom as engaging in a book mentally transports him to the Blue Mesa:

I found I was reading too fast; so I began to commit long passages of Virgil to memory—if it hadn’t been for that, I might have forgotten how to use my voice, or gone to talking to
myself. When I look into the *Æneid* now, I can always see two pictures: the one on the page, and another behind that: blue and purple rocks and yellow-green piñons with flat tops, little clustered houses clinging together for protection, a rude tower rising in their midst, rising strong, with calmness and courage—behind it a dark grotto, in its depths a crystal spring. (Professor’s 252-53)

It seems significant that the texts Tom mentions are examples of the pastoral mode in that the cliff dwellers appeared to inhabit their own Garden of Eden complete with its own “Mother Eve,” and the pastoral is inherently bound up with nostalgia as it depicts an idealized state of simplicity, one that has apparently been lost.

Cather’s novel portrays how creativity, by its very nature, is bound to nostalgia because the produced object is a material representation of an emotional experience that has passed and can only be referred to indirectly. It is telling that Tom feels most motivated and creative when he suffers the devastating end of his friendship with Roddy and has failed to complete his mission of procuring an excavation of the Cliff City. Ellwanger explains that the dissolution of Tom’s social ambitions make way for his personal ones: “Paradoxically, these losses bring Tom closer to Cather’s exemplification of the interrelation of aesthetic experience and loss. Blake’s departure from the mesa facilitates a purer aesthetic experience of the mesa for Tom, because it allows him to find total solitude, a condition that promotes the singularity of the aesthetic encounter” (58). Without having to think about others, Tom is able to more fully re-connect with himself, and space is cleared in his mind “leaving the scene bare for the play of emotions,” the condition that Cather espouses in her formula for the creation of great work. However, like the Professor’s inspirational euphoria felt during the research and writing of his *Spanish Adventurers in America*, Tom’s spiritual awakening on the mesa is fleeting and his experience becomes the
nostalgic highlight of his existence: “Happiness is something one can’t explain. You must take
my word for it. Troubles enough came afterward, but there was that summer, high and blue, a
life in itself” (Professor’s 253). Interestingly, it is the creative process itself that is most fulfilling
for the artist in that he or she is making something rather than losing it. The work that results
from inspiration drawn from an emotional loss provides temporary relief for the artist, but it is
also a source of painful longing in that it draws attention to the fact that the inspirational moment
has passed. Nostalgia is the condition in which work is created since the production of an object
acts as a means of compensating for a lost emotional moment, but that loss seems to be
accentuated once the act of creating is completed and the object itself becomes its own source of
nostalgia.

St. Peter reveals that while one can never physically return to an idealized past, engaging in
the creation of, and reflection on, works of art can sustain a connection to a lost moment not as a
means of escape, but ultimately as a means of critiquing the excesses of the present and, perhaps,
to integrate the past with the present in the effort to forge a more inhabitable form of social life.
The Professor exemplifies such a need to keep a memory alive in his determination to annotate
Tom’s diary from his discovery of the cliff dwellings not only to reinvigorate his interest in
intellectual pursuits, but also to re-animate Tom after his death:

He had begun, in a desultory way, to annotate the diary that Tom had kept on the mesa, in
which he had noted down the details of each day’s work among the ruins, along with the
weather and anything unusual in the routine of their life…One felt the kindling imagination,
the ardour and excitement of the boy, like the vibration in a voice when the speaker strives
to conceal his emotion by using only conventional phrases. When the first of August came
round, the Professor realized that he had pleasantly trifled away nearly two months at a task
which should have taken little more than a week. (Professor’s 262-63)

St. Peter defers the completion of Tom’s diary because its conclusion would signal the end of his ability to interact with his deceased friend and the ideal of eternal youth and enthusiasm that Tom seemed to embody. Instead, the Professor maintains a relationship with Tom specifically by continually returning to an object, Tom’s diary, that becomes a desperate replacement for the young man himself. Ellwanger explains the hesitancy of the artist to interact with his or her own completed work by noting Tom’s unwillingness to return to his diary after it has been written:

The ‘backward’ movement of reading the record would be a nostalgic act that would only compound the distance that separates that past time from Tom’s present situation. To dissect this experience retrospectively would magnify the tragedy of its loss, for the primacy and totality of the experience is inviolable and irreducible—thus the threat of losing ‘the whole in the parts’. That one might lose the potency of the memory of the experience exposes an insidious cycle: while the singular aesthetic experience itself cannot be repeated, one can repeat only its loss through subsequent attempts to relive the original experience” (52-65)

Tom’s refusal of nostalgia to avoid re-opening the wound of his losses is similar to that of the Professor who does not want to actually return to his past, but he wants the comfort of objects associated with the past: “‘It’s not wholly a matter of the calendar. It’s the feeling that I’ve put a great deal behind me, where I can’t go back to it again—and I don’t really wish to go back. The way would be too long and too fatiguing’” (Professor’s 163). While art becomes a way to confront loss and harness the creative potential accompanied by such a void, the conditions that allow for the inspirational experience also have the effect of alienating the artist and constituting a crisis regarding personal versus social fulfillment.
Re-Shaping Domesticity, Re-Shaping Culture

Just as *The Professor’s House* conveys the Professor’s insistence on the importance of material objects to his creative work, the novel also reveals St. Peter’s resistance to allow his domestic life, a domain he associates with consumerism, to potentially disrupt the integrity of his intellectual life, and it is the arrival of Tom, a representation of nostalgia, that facilitates a fusion of the Professor’s domestic and intellectual lives and allows his creativity to flourish. Nostalgia allows for a critical perspective on the present through comparison to the past, and it is the entrance of Tom in the St. Peters’ lives that allows the Professor to appreciate his family life and the role it plays in supporting his work life. Tom experiences the importance of domestic ties for the first time when he adopts the St. Peters as his own family, and it is his appreciation of this bond that prompts the Professor to recall his own initial experiences of having a family and re-establishes their value to him in the present. Cather calls for a reconfiguration of the role that domesticity plays in modernity, emphasizing that the domestic sphere does not have to be at odds with the intellectual sphere and that nostalgia, in the form of material domestic objects, can promote creativity and provide for a more fulfilling intellectual life.

In St. Peter’s pursuit of a fulfilling academic career, he compartmentalizes the realms of his existence into two major categories, the intellectual and domestic, and as he gets older he takes greater pains to keep these elements of his life separate. Disenchanted by the shallowness and pettiness developed by his wife and daughters gradually over time, the Professor eventually seems to resent domestic concerns and implies that they inhibit his ability to create meaningful work. The study/sewing room at the top of the house becomes a refuge where he escapes what he believes are the issues of family life that take time away from his writing: “Fairly considered, the sewing-room was the most inconvenient study a man could possibly have, but it was the one
place in the house where he could get isolation from the engaging drama of domestic life. No one was tramping over him, and only a vague sense, generally pleasant, of what went on below came up the narrow stairway. There were certainly no other advantages” (Professor’s 25-26). Even though the study is described as being uncomfortable and impractical for the Professor’s purposes, it is a space that remains inaccessible to his family who demands energy from him that he could otherwise devote to his creative pursuits. Much of St. Peter’s discomfort seems to derive from his nostalgia for a world in which one’s work life remained outside of the home and could, therefore, be left behind at the end of the day. As a professor whose most serious academic work takes place within the same space in which he lives, he feels a constant pressure from both his family and his intellectual ambitions to fulfill responsibilities to both. Ultimately, the Professor’s study becomes a way of maintaining an illusion that he can work unaffected by domestic concerns within his own home by creating a symbolic and literal divide between himself and his family.

During his younger years, the Professor does not find spending time with his family to be unappealing, and it is in fact his devotion to them that creates a distraction from the work conducted in his study. He intentionally secludes himself in the upper part of the house because he believes his desire to produce his writing is naturally at odds with his desire to be a responsible husband and father. His need to prevent his inspiration from being interrupted is so strong that he refuses to venture downstairs to his domestic life even when the lamp he works by runs out of kerosene:

But sometimes he found that the oil-can in the closet was empty; then, to get more, he would have had to go down through the house to the cellar, and on his way he would almost surely become interested in what the children were doing, or in what his wife was doing—
or he would notice that the kitchen linoleum was breaking under the sink where the maid kicked it up, and he would stop to tack it down. On that perilous journey down through the human house he might lose his mood, his enthusiasm, even his temper. (Professor’s 27)

Although St. Peter loves his family, attention given to them becomes “perilous” to his creativity, his ability to achieve personal gratification for himself as opposed to fulfilling the obligations expected of him as a father. Even though he would never allow himself to abandon his wife and daughters in pursuit of a scholarly life, his insistence on reinforcing boundaries between the familial and intellectual aspects of his life is an expression of longing for his youth when he was unencumbered by responsibilities of those depending on him and his imagination was unrestricted by domestic concerns. The Professor’s old house is an extension of his mind, and like the study tucked away in a remote part of his home, he wants to keep his creative energy separate from thoughts of more conventional household matters in order to preserve a part of himself that threatens to become less and less his own.

While the Professor retreats to his study to escape the family itself, interestingly, the third floor of the house contains various domestic objects that act as reminders of his wife and daughters and become integral parts of his work space. The study doubles as Augusta’s workspace for several weeks out of the year, so her sewing materials, including the forms for making Lillian and Kitty’s dresses, are permanent fixtures within St. Peter’s office setting. It is not the Professor, but Augusta, who suggests that the domestic items inhabiting his intellectual setting are inappropriate: “Augusta had somehow got it into her head that these forms were unsuitable companions for one engaged in scholarly pursuits and she periodically apologized for their presence when she came to install herself and fulfill her ‘time’ at the house” (Professor’s 19). Augusta elevates the Professor’s work above her own and imagines that her materials help
decorate his home actually clutter his study and distract him from the intense concentration needed for his work. St. Peter, however, insists that the forms are crucial to his work life, and when Augusta states that a grocery boy will be transporting “the bust” from the old to the new house, he demands that the forms remain where they are: “‘You don’t need her to make curtains. I can’t have this room changed if I’m going to work here. He can take the sewing-machine—yes. But put her back on the chest where she belongs, please. She does very well there’” (Professor’s 21). The forms seem to perform a function that his real-life family cannot. Despite St. Peter loving his wife and daughters, they speak, move, and demand attention that diverts him from his work. The forms act as place holders that represent his family and the world that exists in the lower part of the house, but they are silent, inert, and they signify the comfort and support that is necessary for the Professor to create meaningful work. St. Peter acknowledges that the old study has become a place in which the domestic and the intellectual are interdependent: “I see we shall have some difficulty in separating our life work, Augusta. We’ve kept our papers together a long while now” (Professor’s 22-23). Through the shared third floor of the Professor’s house, Cather conceives of a hybrid space in which the domestic informs and becomes a part of the intellectual work created there. This hybrid space is mediated through nostalgia. While the women of his life are often too real and demanding of his time, the objects of the study, particularly the forms, allude to and idealize his family life, and provide comforting memories that put his mind at ease in preparation for his demanding creative work.

The importance of the Professor’s objects is parallel to the significance that Tom attributes to the domestic remnants he finds in the cliff dwellings as they provide the key to understanding the civilization that he holds in such high esteem. The discovery and exploration of the Cliff City provides Tom with a sense of purpose, and the careful cataloguing of each artifact provides an
indirect link to the people who used these things as a part of daily life. When Father Duchene assesses the findings from the cliff dwellings, he remarks at the way the tools and decorative items they produced suggest a sophisticated sense of artistry that sets them apart from other tribes: “I am inclined to think that your tribe were a superior people. Perhaps they were not so when they first came upon this mesa, but in an orderly and secure life they developed considerably the arts of peace. There is evidence on every hand that they lived for something more than food and shelter. They had an appreciation of comfort, and went even further than that…There is unquestionably a distinct feeling for design in what you call the Cliff City” (Professor’s 219). The implication is that what makes the cliff dwellers such a complex culture is that their domestic needs were intertwined with the aesthetic pleasure derived from creating materials to facilitate those needs and make life more meaningful. Prenatt insists that the novel reveals an inextricable link between art and domesticity that calls for a redefinition of how society determines that relationship:

As an extended ekphrasis, “Tom Outland’s Story” records Tom’s shifting perception of the importance of the cliff dwellings and their artifacts, demanding our judgment to shift as well as to accommodate the notion that domestic objects, the detritus of a vanished people, might constitute art, and that building a house or shaping a vessel to hold water might be an artistic act. If we look to the ekphrastic descriptions of Tom’s discovery of the cliff dwellings to inform our reading of the novel—to interpret the novel’s allegory or program—we come to understand that The Professor’s House is about people forming new understandings of domestic life and its objects (including houses) and of history and time.

(217)
Cather’s depiction of the cliff dwellers and their domestic handiwork as an expression of the inspiration they felt from their everyday lives and the land itself suggests her longing for a past in which domestic and intellectually creative pursuits were inseparable and formed more enriched lives for those engaged in them.

The hints of domesticity that make their way up to the third floor of the Professor’s old house end up providing the inspiration that makes his work meaningful; they remind him that the personal fulfillment achieved through his writing is supported by his family. St. Peter is particularly cognizant of these domestic influences during the holiday season, and is, consequently, most productive in his work during this time of year. He remarks that this period is one when Augusta’s presence is most felt within his work space: “Augusta had been with them often in the holiday season, back in the years when holidays were holidays indeed. He had grown to like the reminders of herself that she left in his work-room—especially the toilettes upon the figures. Sometimes she made those terrible women entirely plausible!” (Professor’s 100-101). Augusta has the ability to make the “terrible” forms seem more real and inviting than the cold, hard statues that they are, and the Professor is reminded of the qualities of his wife and daughters that suggest softness, nurturance, and security. Despite consciously removing himself from the holiday activities going on downstairs in order to make time for his work, St. Peter feels like he is engaged in the festivities indirectly. He suggests that his creativity benefits from the comfort of his wife and daughters’ holiday preparations:

In the early years, no matter how hard he was working, he had always felt the sense of holiday, of a special warmth and fragrance in the air, steal up to his study from the house below. When he was writing his best, he was conscious of pretty little girls in fresh dresses—of flowers and greens in the comfortable, shabby sitting-room—of his wife’s good
looks and good taste—even of a better dinner than usual under preparation downstairs. All the while he had been working so fiercely at his eight big volumes, he was not insensible to the domestic drama that went on beneath him. His mind had played delightedly with all those incidents... The most important chapters of his history were interwoven with personal memories. (Professor's 101)

By interacting more fully with happy memories and thoughts of his family as opposed to the family themselves, particularly during this hectic time of year, St. Peter is not burdened with his responsibilities and is instead given the freedom to devote his mind to intellectual pursuits. Although he perceives of his choice to distance himself from his family while he is trying to work as creating a boundary between intellectual work and domesticity, that line is transgressed by objects and memories that confirm the ever-presence of the domestic within his imagination.

Cather ultimately questions the utility of conceiving of the domestic as a realm excluded or separate from other divisions of modern culture—such as the intellectual, the political, or the economic—as well as the construction of femininity within that culture. Women, deemed the overseers of the domestic sphere, have also been regarded as the primary consumers of modern society, which was proof that the reach of domesticity had extended into the world of economics. Cognizant of the centrality of the link between femininity and consumerism, the advertising industry of the 1920s appealed to women by marketing consumption as an expression of female sexuality. Honor McKitrick Wallace explains that the marketing industry capitalized on sexualizing consumption as a way for women to express their independence: “In the 1920s, the advertising industry began to create a discourse that implicitly acknowledged female sexuality—legitimate or otherwise—and tied it to what was represented as a wholly legitimate desire for commodities... The female consumer of the late twenties was thus encouraged to dream ways
“out” of the house and to style herself after dangerous, seductive adulteresses who destroy both homes and empires” (146-47). According to Wallace, Cather supports the association of consumption with female desire and that in her work she aligns female spending with infidelity and promiscuity: “Cather connects eroticism, consumption, and technology to a critique of commodity culture...Moreover, we can ultimately see Cather’s oft-cited turning away from modernity as a rejection of the modern female consumer in favor of premodern ideals of femininity” (145). From this perspective, it seems that Cather expresses a nostalgia for traditional domestic ideals, such as restraint, selflessness, and simplicity, that she implies have been corrupted or lost altogether in modern consumer culture.

Wallace’s view is supported by Cather’s depictions of St. Peter’s wife and daughters whose obsessions with wealth and spending are often connected to an implied sexual infidelity. Lillian’s attention to material possessions conveys a sense of competition with her own daughters for the affections of her sons-in-law as a way of compensating for the gap between her and her emotionally absent husband. With the Professor’s attention lagging, Lillian gains a new sense of purpose by seeking the approval of Louie and Scott:

Yes, with her sons-in-law she had begun the game of being a woman all over again. She dressed for them, planned for them, schemed in their interests. She had begun to entertain more than for years past—the new house made a plausible pretext—and to use her influence and charm in the little anxious social world of Hamilton. She was intensely interested in the success and happiness of these two young men, lived in their careers as she had once done in his. (Professor’s 79)

For Lillian, the acts of collecting beautiful things and building a new house to show them off are entirely nostalgic attempts to reclaim the love she once felt for her husband so that she can re-
live the experience through her sons-in-law. The new house is a new start for Lillian, a chance to enter the second phase of her life and accumulate memories as she did in the old house except without, what she considers, the disruption caused by Tom Outland’s presence. Unlike the Professor who desperately clings to memories of his youth that he associates with Tom, Lillian accumulates new things in order to start over and exorcise Tom’s presence that haunts the old house.

Like Lillian, Rosamond’s intense interest in shopping and acquiring items meant to garner the admiration of others is often aligned with an air of promiscuity as it is insinuated that she is a careless consumer of both material objects and men. The family seems to attribute Rosamond’s increased materialism to the influence of her husband Louie and his extravagant nature, but, more importantly, she is judged harshly, particularly by St. Peter, because marrying Louie is deemed a betrayal of her deceased fiancé, Tom Outland. Although Rosamond is explicit about her disdain for Scott’s willingness to trade a “serious” writing career for one that makes money, not only Scott but also the Professor sees Rosamond’s hypocrisy in that she has effectively “sold out” by marrying Louie and by benefitting financially from her fiancé Tom’s death by inheriting the fortune earned from his invention, replacing her love for him with an object, the Outland mansion, ostentatiously designed by her replacement husband. St. Peter is surprised by Rosamond’s near obsession with consumption of new goods and feels as though witnessing his daughter’s seemingly-endless spending power is gradually sucking the life out of him. The Professor accompanies Rosamond on a trip to Chicago to help her pick out home décor items and returns to his wife insisting that she not use the phrase “to buy” because Rosamond’s “orgy of acquisition” has disappointed and exhausted him (Professor’s 154). Rosamond’s spending habits being referred to as an orgy connotes sexual impropriety on her part, a kind of lascivious
consumerism, that embarrasses and shames St. Peter. Whether to move beyond the loss of Tom or to fit into the sophisticated world which Louie inhabits, Rosamond conveys an indiscriminate attitude when it comes to purchasing material items that Cather links to sexual licentiousness and indiscretion.

Of the women in the Professor’s family, Kitty seems to have the most emotional depth and concern for things beyond wealth, but even she becomes preoccupied with affluence, and it is implied that there is a level of doubt about her fidelity to her husband, Scott. Kitty is overtly resentful of Rosamond’s garish belongings and her seeming air of superiority, but underlying this material envy is the persistent memory that Tom ultimately chose to enter into a romantic relationship with her older sister instead of her. On the way home from a dinner at the Professor’s house, Kitty and Scott are discussing whether Rosamond still cares for Tom, and it is implied that at one time Kitty revealed her own love for Tom to her husband: “‘Awful nice of you to have told me all about it at the start, Kitty. Most girls wouldn’t have thought it necessary. I’m the only one who knows, ain’t I?’”. When Kitty responds affirmatively, she emphasizes, “‘I suppose even then I must have had a feeling that you were the real one…You know you are the real one, don’t you?’” (Professor’s 109-110). By going out of her way to reassure Scott that he is the one she truly loves, she is not only trying to convince her husband but also herself that a relationship with Tom was not meant to be. Kitty simultaneously covets and disdains Rosamond’s possessions, and this ambiguity is expressed through her somewhat dubious romantic relationship with Scott in which his value is measured in relation to her nostalgic love for Tom.

While the females of the Professor’s family encompass qualities of the modern woman’s consumerism and sensuality, one might point to Augusta as an example of the premodern
femininity for which Wallace claims that Cather (as seen in her depiction of the Professor) longs. St. Peter interacts with Augusta just as closely, if not more so, as he does with his wife and daughters, and unlike his family members who perpetuate his anxiety, Augusta is always a calming presence upon whom he can rely. It is, after all, Augusta who saves the Professor’s life when the window blows shut and he is nearly asphyxiated by the gas from the stove, and he reflects just how indispensable she has been to his life: “It occurred to St. Peter, as he lay warm and relaxed but undesirous of sleep, that he would rather have Augusta with him just now than anyone he could think of. Seasoned and sound and on the solid earth she surely was, and, for all her matter-of-factness and hard-handedness, kind and loyal” (Professor’s 281). It is this virtue of fidelity that puts Augusta in sharp contrast with the Professor’s family, especially since it is she who is there in his hour of need and not his wife who has been in France with Louie Marsellus, a makeshift husband of sorts. Without a doubt, Augusta is not portrayed as being sexually (or materially) promiscuous like the Professor’s wife and daughters, but if she is to be championed as the ideal female in the novel this distinction is complicated by the fact that she seems to signify an absence of sexuality altogether. A devout Catholic spinster, Augusta is benevolent and moral, but she lacks affect, intellectual curiosity, and sensuality, feminine characteristics that St. Peter used to recognize in Lillian when they fell in love. Despite her admirable qualities that the Professor feels have been lost in modern times, Augusta, as a domestic figure, appears less feminine than genderless as in many ways she is as wooden and inexpressive as the forms she uses for her work.

Though Cather presents Augusta as a more healthy (albeit repressed) alternative to the materialistic women in the novel, an even more complex representation of domestic femininity is represented by Mother Eve. When Tom discovers the mummified corpse of a murdered woman
set apart from the Cliff City, he is intrigued by her mysterious demise and apparent seclusion from the rest of the tribe. Father Duchene offers a potential explanation for the young woman’s death that centers around domestic conflict: “‘Perhaps her husband thought it worth while to return unannounced from the farms some night, and found her in improper company. The young man may have escaped. In primitive society the husband is allowed to punish an unfaithful wife with death’” (Professor’s 223). Like the modern women in the Professor’s family, Mother Eve is associated with promiscuity and, like her imposed name implies, her transgression predicts the future of femininity and its propensity for careless consumption instead of fidelity.

Despite the brutality of a culture that would justify the act of murdering an unfaithful woman, Tom continues to idealize the Cliff City as though it is its own Garden of Eden, and Father Duchene supports this view of the tribe as being a superior culture: “‘Like you I feel a reverence for this place. Wherever humanity has made that hardest of all starts and lifted itself out of mere brutality, is a sacred spot...They built themselves into this mesa and humanized it’” (Professor’s 221). While they are valorized for their ingenuity and sophistication, such progress does not extend to their treatment of women who are looked upon as domestic possessions. Mother Eve herself, as a lifeless object frozen in a silent scream, is meant to become a commodity when Roddy makes the decision to sell the relics from the cliff dwellings to a German collector while Tom is away in Washington, and Tom is horrified by this seeming betrayal: “‘I’d as soon have sold my own grandmother as Mother Eve—I’d have sold any living woman first’” (Professor’s 244). Tom’s idealization of Mother Eve as a representative of the cliff dweller culture that he so admires is similar to the Professor’s preference for the sewing forms over his real-life family in that these objects signify a resistance to change from which humans are exempt. Mother Eve seems to confirm such an idea when Roddy explains that the
attempt to remove her from the mesa has failed and the coffin containing her body falls to the bottom of a canyon: “‘She refused to leave us. She went to the bottom of Black Canyon and carried Hook’s best mule along with her. They had to make her box extra wide, and she crowded Jenny out an inch or so too far from the canyon wall’” (Professor’s 244-45). Such agency on the part of an object reveals Mother’s Eve’s refusal to participate within commodity culture giving her an air of steadfast integrity. The scene interrogates whether a real-life woman in modern society is capable of such restraint. While she is punished for her alleged infidelity, Mother Eve is the only female figure in the novel that simultaneously embodies sexual expression as well as the virtue of faithfulness to her home as a rejection of modern consumerism, exposing the complications of adhering to restrictive cultural ideals of femininity.

Beyond connecting feminine promiscuity to rampant consumption, Cather highlights the Professor’s belief that too much involvement in the domestic sphere will ultimately corrupt him, leading him to prefer a homosocial, intellectually-based relationship with Tom over interactions with the opposite sex. His dealings with his wife and daughters only remind him of his alienation from them in that they are seemingly only interested in what he deems trivial concerns regarding spending and status. Florence Dore claims that The Professor’s House aligns St. Peter’s revulsion for consumerism with sexual obscenity, constituting a repression or rejection of male-female relationships: “This symbolic link between commercial and heterosexual vulgarity emerges in St. Peter’s attachment to his study. His refusal to inhabit the house he owns is the result of his desire to cling to the intellectual haven of his study, and his attachment to Tom, it seems, is a different expression of the same desire. St. Peter’s refusal of the new house, like the refusal to ‘translate Tom’ into the ‘vulgar tongue,’ is a rejection of profit” (58). By developing a close same-sex relationship with Tom, the Professor is desperately trying to hold onto a sense of
himself via a connection with someone he views as being like his ideal self, a brilliant adventurer without familial responsibilities to get in the way of intellectual pursuits. St. Peter ultimately chooses a relationship with Tom over one with Lillian as a way of avoiding a domestic intrusion into his sacred work life, and she vehemently resents the wedge that Tom has inadvertently driven between the couple: “It was not until Outland was a senior that Lillian began to be jealous of him. He had been almost a member of the family for two years, and she had never found fault with the boy. But after the Professor began to take Tom up to the study and talk over his work with him, began to make a companion of him, then Mrs. St. Peter withdrew her favour” (Professor’s 172-73). The rivalry that emerges between Lillian and Tom is a manifestation of the conflict within the Professor’s mind as he conceives of the domestic and the intellectual as inevitably battling for control of his attention and feels that he must privilege one at the expense of the other. His homosocial desire for Tom is an expression of nostalgia for a youthful inspirational purity that acts as a rejection of a domestic life that he feels has been tainted by the forces of consumer culture.

The Professor’s attempt to find meaning in his life by compartmentalizing his domestic and intellectual responsibilities is an oversimplification of the process necessary for his work productivity, one that requires an incorporation of these two aspects of his existence. This need to separate his public career life from his private home life is an expression of a traditional structure that upholds the notion that intellectual concerns gain their value by being juxtaposed against supposedly inconsequential domestic concerns. It makes sense that the Professor should convey a nostalgia for such a paradigm in response to his anxiety that modernity is being corrupted by commercialism enacted through the domestic sphere. What he fails to recognize, however, and what the novel explicitly makes clear, is this: when the domestic and the
intellectual overlap he is the most fulfilled, the most inspired, and the most stable. Richard Millington argues that St. Peter’s imposed isolation is not a rejection of the domestic but the creation of a space in which it is no longer restricted from his work life: “The Professor’s battle for his study expresses less his nostalgia for his brilliant, self-isolating career than his half-conscious fidelity to the mixed and intermingled form of meaning that has unfolded within it, an experience we might call, adapting [Lora] Romero, modernist domesticity” (73). Again, as the Professor insists, it is not the completed work itself that brings him fulfillment, it is the experience of producing the work that gives him joy, and that process relies not only on intellectual vigor, but domestic pleasure. Interestingly, the incorporation of Tom into the lives of the St. Peter family precipitates the most cohesive fusion of the Professor’s home and work life and initiates the most creative and satisfying years of his adult life:

St. Peter reflected that those first years, before Outland had done anything remarkable, were really the best of all…Oh, there had been fine times in this old house then: family festivals and hospitalities, little girls dancing in and out, Augusta coming and going, gay dresses hanging in his study at night, Christmas shopping and secrets and smothered laughter on the stairs. When a man had lovely children in his house, fragrant and happy, full of pretty fancies and generous impulses, why couldn’t he keep them? Was there no way but Medea’s, he wondered? (Professor’s 125-26)

Through the influence of Tom, the Professor is able to see his family in a new light and instead of considering them a hindrance to his work, he can appreciate them and see how they supplement his intellectual life. St. Peter’s allusion to Medea affirms his wish to preserve these moments forever, and such nostalgia increases over the years as his wife and daughters move further and further from his ideal domesticity. Tom, as a young man with no significant
relationships in his life, for the first time discovers a real family in the St. Peters, and in doing so he reminds the Professor that satisfaction in life cannot exist in the imagination alone:

Through Outland’s studies, long after they had ceased to be pupil and master, he had been able to experience afresh things that had grown dull with use...If the last four volumes of “The Spanish Adventurers” were more simple and inevitable than those that went before, it was largely because of Outland. When St. Peter first began his work, he realized that the great drawback was the lack of early association, the fact that he had not spent his youth in the great dazzling South-west country which was the scene of his explorers’ adventures.

(Professor’s 258)

Although the Professor refers to his absence of a connection to the land and culture itself that Tom has experienced firsthand, in a general sense he realizes that he has forgotten that he needs associations grounded in reality to authenticate his creativity. St. Peter’s relationship with Tom forges a crucial bridge between his academic life and his domestic life as the young man’s presence initiates the Professor’s nostalgia to reconnect with his family and re-live the days that he, like Tom, discovered the joys of domestic connection that fill a void that intellectual pursuits alone cannot complete.

Although Tom explains the intense happiness he experiences on the mesa when he is all alone, he seems to learn a lesson similar to that of the Professor that sustained fulfillment only happens in the presence of both domestic comfort and intellectual stimulation. Tom and Roddy take up residence in a cabin where they share the experience of exploring the mesa amidst their work duties herding cattle. Upon the arrival of Henry, a down-and-out drifter, not unlike Tom and Roddy themselves, in the absence of any other familial ties the three men form their own household that provides them with companionship and support: “Life was a holiday for Blake...
and me after we got old Henry. He was a wonderful cook and a good housekeeper. He kept that cabin shining like a playhouse; used to dress it all out with piñon boughs, and trimmed the kitchen shelves with newspapers cut in fancy patterns...We got to be downright fond of him, and the three of us made a happy family” (Professor’s 197-98). In this household, Henry takes on the traditionally female domestic role and performs the duties that provide a foundation for the men’s work lives. He provides an interesting counterpoint to Mother Eve as he is characterized as being vulnerable to temptation due to his weakness for alcohol, and he is bitten and killed by a snake. However, if her alleged promiscuity is true, Mother Eve is portrayed as a more defiant figure who resists domestic constraints while Henry occupies a more passive role. The homosocial bond between the three men provides an alternate form of traditional domesticity that offers the love and stability of a conventional family but attempts to avoid the susceptibility to consumerism and corruption often attributed to femininity and heterosexual partnerships. According to Greg Forter, the cabin is a unique location in which binaries are collapsed, both of masculine and feminine roles as well as domestic and intellectual pursuits: “The home is here a fantasized refuge of beauty, cleanliness, and nourishment that revitalizes one for work, while work itself comes to feel like ‘a holiday’ thanks to this revitalizing domesticity. The division between spheres of work (outside) and home (inside) is then dissolved by descriptions that emphasize the pastoral permeability of the cabin’s borders” (157). Life at the cabin becomes a

29 Cather’s depiction of the blurring of gender identities in the novel seems to stem from her personal views regarding the flexibility of traditional masculine and feminine roles. In her college years, Cather frequently wore men’s clothing, had a short haircut, and went by the nickname “William”.

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site similar to that of the Professor’s study, a space in which domestic relationships comingle with intellectual advancement to create sustainable fulfillment in which each fuels the other.

The masculine domestic life that exists on the mesa far away from centers of commerce and mass-production would seem impervious to the forces of consumer culture, but even in this idyllic locale the pursuit of material gain inevitably corrupts the relationship between Tom and Roddy. The cabin is portrayed as though it is outside of time and exempt from change: “It was the sort of place a man would like to stay in forever” (Professor’s 189). Arguably, the family structure at the cabin is weakened by the death of Henry, but even prior to Tom’s departure for Washington, Roddy seems to be looking out for his friend’s best interests and offering support. Once Tom returns from Washington after becoming disillusioned by the petty superficialities that seem to dominate the museum officials, he is shocked that Roddy would seemingly fall prey to the greed so rampant in the nation’s capital by selling the cliff dweller artifacts. Even after Roddy explains that part of the money he received is for Tom’s college education, Tom insists that the friendship is irreparably damaged and that the act of selling the objects is a crime against the cliff dwellers and the mesa itself. When Roddy asks if his motives count, Tom responds: “They would [count] in anything of our own, between you and me…If it was my money you’d lost gambling, or my girl you’d made free with, we could fight it out, and maybe be friends again. But this is different” (Professor’s 246). Tom chooses fidelity to an idyllic principle, represented by the cliff dweller cultural artifacts and the innovative culture that produced them, over his real-life relationship with someone who has loved and supported him, a choice that Tom continues to make later in life when he decides to join the French Foreign Legion and commit himself to the ideals connoted by participation in the Great War, a decision that leads to his death and turns his fiancée Rosamond into a “virtual widow” (Professor’s 45). The period that follows
Roddy’s departure from the mesa is one of intense enlightenment and happiness for Tom, but like all imaginative inspiration it is fleeting since Tom is forced to re-enter modern society and leave the cliff dwellers in the past.

The Presence of the Past: Nostalgia and Identity

One of the central themes of *The Professor’s House* is loss and the struggle to go on when one becomes disillusioned by the harsh realities of modern life, and Cather explores the effects that nostalgia can have on one’s sense of identity through her connected, but ultimately divergent, depictions of St. Peter’s and Tom’s attempts to reconcile the past with the present. She suggests that material objects are capable of resuscitating nostalgic memories and inspire creative production in the present. Nostalgia also allows for the integration of domesticity and intellectual life since it provides for a critical view of the present that allows the conventionality of home life to be seen in new, refreshing ways that fuel one’s inspiration. Perhaps the most complex function of nostalgia that Cather represents in *The Professor’s House* is its role in identity formation as characters’ responses to nostalgia dictate their ability to adapt and relate to the present. The novel poses crucial questions about whether the past can be transmitted successfully intact to the present and whether material objects facilitate or hinder the process of relating to such a past. Although the protagonist of the novel is Professor St. Peter, even more central to the novel’s theme is the character of Tom Outland and his tremendous effect on the St. Peter family. Even the very structure of the novel, “Tom Outland’s Story” occupying the section between “The Family” and “The Professor,” exposes the underlying crisis that Cather intimates throughout the text: Tom’s presence both establishes a more meaningful connection between the Professor and his family, and Tom also drives a seemingly irreversible wedge between St. Peter and the family. Cather uses Tom’s character to initiate an interrogation of nostalgia in general as
she ponders whether fidelity to a lost past can enhance one’s relationship to the present or if devotion to an ideal alienates one from reality. Cather’s representations of nostalgia in connection to materialism and domesticity reveal that though these relationships are complex, they ultimately privilege the past and suggest that the present is a burden to be overcome; in her depiction of nostalgia in relation to identity formation, however, Cather surpasses nostalgic conservatism by showing how the lost past cannot be recovered and that one’s identity relies upon understanding the present as a continual process of letting go of that lost past.

After his death in World War I, Tom himself functions as an object of nostalgia for nearly every character in the novel, and he ends up meaning something different to each member of the family. For Lillian, Tom is a reminder of the loving relationship she used to have with her husband, and the young man also marks the demise of that love. Rosamond is nostalgic for the loss of her true love, a man of integrity who valued life with no regard for monetary worth. Kitty remembers Tom as the love she never possessed, and thinks often about the joy he brought to her childhood. Certainly, it is the Professor who most mourns the loss of Tom as he harbors a near-obsession with his favorite student and close friend. St. Peter is devastated by Tom’s death because it is a painful reminder of Tom’s powerful ability to invigorate his intellectual work and of the death of his own youth, one that Tom seems to embody: “By the time he had got as far as the third volume, into his house walked a boy...a boy with imagination, with the training and insight resulting from a very curious experience; who had in his pocket the secrets which old trials and stories and water-courses tell only to adolescence” (Professor’s 258-59). By establishing a relationship with Tom, the Professor is briefly able to reconnect with his own adolescent self, one free to explore the world without being under the yoke of adult responsibilities.
Although Tom is able to so deeply impact the St. Peters in various ways, his identity as an object of nostalgia is reappropriated based upon the subjective meaning attributed to him by each family member, and this idealization of Tom threatens to strip away his reality and causes his loved ones to struggle to adapt to the present without him. Tom maintains a place within the daily functions of the St. Peter family, but as time passes from the moment of his death, the “authentic” Tom threatens to disappear. It is Scott McGregor as Tom’s close friend who acknowledges that his memory of Tom, as he was, is fading after Louie asks him to share some stories about Tom at a luncheon for electrical engineers: “You know, Tom isn’t very real to me anymore. Sometimes I think he was just a—a glittering idea” (Professor’s 111). Tom is remembered more for the principles and ideas that he represented as opposed to who he was, and after his death his identity only exists through memories, which are always potentially subject to misidentifications and inaccuracies. It is significant that Tom’s contribution to science that leads to the invention of his engine and results in substantial financial gain is referred to as the Outland “vacuum”. In many ways, Tom’s influence is characterized primarily by his absence because he can only act as a source of nostalgia since he is dead and no longer accessible to those who use him to provide meaning in the present. John Hilgart explains that Tom’s role as an ideal ultimately results in reducing him to what he primarily disregarded in his real life—financial gain:

The turning of Tom into ‘the Outland vacuum’ is the wryest and most conceptually telling translation, for St. Peter eventually accepts that the idea of Tom is now vacant of meaning for him, and that the larger space of meaning Tom signified is now empty. The translation which registers as the most impudent is the decision by Tom’s beneficiaries, Rosamond and Louie, to name the new house they are building ‘Outland’. In it will be Tom’s lab,
reconstructed. But the most pervasive manifestation of Tom is money—the model of empty self-referential signification—the evil twin of ‘the symbols of ideas’—and the destructive power of that money on the family. (396)

Throughout the novel, some characters seem to want to save Tom’s image from its association with wealth, but the result is that he just gets placed in an equally narrow mold that resists Tom in his full complexity. Each member of the family privileges his or her view of Tom over competing representations of him, for example when Kitty aligns her idea of Tom with her father’s and against that of Rosamond and Louie: “Now he’s all turned out chemicals and dollars and cents, hasn’t he? Our Tom is much nicer than theirs” (Professor’s 132). Paradoxically, the more meanings that the family invest in the memory of Tom, the more meaningless they render him as they focus on their longing for lost ideals instead of Tom himself.

Tom is identified almost exclusively with his idealism, but Cather complicates his character by showing that his nostalgic reverence for the past is accompanied by an interest in decidedly modern concerns that help him relate to the present. The Professor laments the growing prominence of science within academia and claims that the emphasis on progress and results has provided oversimplified solutions to the human concerns that deserve continual contemplation: “I don’t think much of science as a phase of human development. It has given us a lot of ingenious toys; they take our attention away from the real problems, of course, and since the problems are insoluble, I suppose we ought to be grateful for distraction. But the fact is, the human mind, the individual mind, has always been made more interesting by dwelling on the old riddles, even if it makes nothing of them. Science hasn’t given us any new amazements, except of the superficial kind we get from witnessing dexterity and sleight-of-hand” (Professor’s 67-68). Despite the Professor’s obvious antipathy toward such endeavors, he has only praise for
Tom who is, at his core, a scientist very interested in technological advancement. Furthermore, Tom’s prescience regarding the importance of his invention leads him to pursue a patent for it ensuring that he will be rewarded for his work, which would refute the conception that he has no interest in participating within the marketplace. Steven Trout adds that the blending of traditional ideals and contemporary concerns is most clearly represented by Tom’s participation in the Great War both as a soldier and as the inventor of an engine commonly used in war planes:

Outland’s ironic fate as a scientist turned cannon fodder (whose discoveries then facilitate the destruction of others) takes on still more significance when we consider that the two sides of the deceased inventor’s personality, his love of the past and his passion for science and technology, reflect the same dangerous mixture of nostalgia and modernity that characterized European armies as they entered battle in the summer of 1914. (166)

The real Tom’s existence as a modern subject is often overlooked in favor of his idealism, which, in turn, the Professor’s idealizes in order to justify his retreat from the reality of a modern consumer culture of which his student was undeniably a part.

While Tom is the novel’s representation of the idyllic hero, he is characterized most often in opposition to Louie who signifies modern commercialism and entrepreneurialism and essentially becomes Tom’s replacement husband for Rosamond. Although spending and consumerism are typically associated with traditional domesticity and, thereby, femininity, Louie is depicted as the force behind Lillian and Rosamond’s alleged corruption and superficiality, particularly according to Kitty and Scott. The Professor has a complicated relationship with Louie in that he ultimately believes him to be a good and generous person, but he can never completely accept him simply by virtue of the fact that he is not Tom. Part of a fundamental animosity toward Louie seems to stem from his relationship with Lillian in which he is developed as a rival to St. Peter for his
wife’s affections: “He liked Louie…He could trust Louie to take every care of Lillian, and nobody could please her more than her son-in-law. Beaux-fils, apparently, were meant by Providence to take the husband’s place when husbands had ceased to be lovers. Marsellus never forgot one of the hundred foolish little attentions that Lillian loved” (Professor’s 160). While Tom is blamed for creating distance between the Professor and Lillian, Louie only serves to widen that gap and push Lillian further away from the woman he once loved. Louie’s assigned identity as a destructive entity that infiltrates the St. Peter family only serves to enhance Tom’s persona as a figure who transcends the vulgar consumerism through which Louie seems to thrive.

Tom’s idealism is often perceived in stark contrast with Louie’s forward-thinking pragmatism and his ability to capitalize on Tom’s ideas, but Louie is nostalgic in his own rite and expresses this longing through material objects in an attempt to negotiate the present. It is easy to dismiss Louie as lacking the emotional depth to analyze his relationship to the past since he seems primarily interested in innovation rather than restoration. Ann Fisher-Wirth states that unlike Tom who makes it his mission to recover the Cliff City as a kind of paradise lost, Louie is not plagued by such a burden and seems blissfully detached from the past: “Louie has neither Eden nor the dream of Eden; he is paralyzed neither by melancholia nor by its lesser form, nostalgia” (30). However, such a view ignores the fact that Louie’s endeavor to create “Outland” is, at its core, a nostalgic act meant to resuscitate the past. In its very construction, Outland expresses Louie’s desire to appear aristocratic and hearkens back to European standards of beauty and affluence based on his description of the house: “‘We’ve been singularly fortunate in our architect,—a young Norwegian, trained in Paris. He’s doing us a Norwegian manor house, very harmonious with its setting, just the right thing for rugged pine woods and high headlands’”
Despite Louie’s insistence on the “harmonious” nature of Outland, Trout notes the seeming inconsistency of the house and those it is meant to represent: “Ironically, Louie the American entrepreneur cannot resist the ‘manor house,’ a title brimming with Old World aristocratic associations that fit neither the Marselluses, who exemplify the nouveau riche, nor Outland, the quintessential self-made man” (176). Although class structures have shifted in the modern world to allow for social mobility, the house exposes that nostalgia for traditional ties to upper class respectability have remained a persistent concern.

More specifically, Outland is a testament to Louie’s nostalgia not only to bring Tom back to life, but also to be Tom in order to gain the admiration of the Professor and live up to the reputation of his predecessor and become a reincarnated version of Tom that can once again exist in reality. Rather than expressing animosity toward his wife’s deceased fiancé, Louie repeatedly extols Tom’s virtues and expresses his gratitude for the fortune that he leaves to Rosamond. Louie’s wish to memorialize Tom through the construction of the house as a shrine to the young scientist is appalling to several members of the family, particularly to Scott who mocks the gesture, saying, “Outland, outlandish!” (Professor’s 43). Scott is perturbed by Louie’s seemingly misplaced nostalgia for Tom because Louie never met the man whom he so resolutely strives to resurrect through his home. Like the Professor and the rest of his family, Louie wants to appropriate Tom for his own purposes, to become the man Tom might have been had he survived and developed the business sense to reap the financial potential out of his invention. Elizabeth Festa points out that Louie meticulously considers every detail of the house as a potential relationship to Tom, and he even goes so far as to order house stationary with “Outland” emblazoned on it: “Correspondence from ‘Outland’ will ironically bring Tom back to life by allowing Louie to express himself through the mouthpiece of this idealized son” (92). In other
words, by possessing items that evoke Tom’s image, Louie hopes to be possessed by Tom and attain the level of respect shown to the deceased young man.

Beyond the opulently modern Outland mansion, Louie attempts a nostalgic connection to Tom through another material object, Tom’s precious Mexican blanket given to him by Roddy, which was given to the Professor as a token of friendship. It is Kitty who remarks how special the blanket was to Tom and how his choice to part with it is a testament to his gratitude for his relationship with St. Peter: “He wouldn’t have given it to anybody but you. It was like his skin” (Professor’s 130). The giving of the blanket to the Professor is an act of nostalgia in that it reminds Tom of his broken friendship with Roddy, and Tom tries to be the type of friend to St. Peter that Roddy was to him as a way of compensating for his ultimate rejection of his lost mentor. The significance of the blanket is further revealed when Louie discovers it in the Professor’s study and wraps it around his chest. He explains to St. Peter that Tom is a source of inspiration to him and he regrets never having met the man whom everyone so admires: “I never think of him as a rival…I think of him as a brother, an adored and gifted brother” (Professor’s 166). Enclosing himself in the blanket, an object that Kitty compares to Tom’s own skin, Louie attempts to play the role of his absent “brother”. Because Tom himself cannot return, Louie longs to become his surrogate, one who can fully realize Tom’s potential and take advantage of the opportunities that he never had a chance to experience.

As much as the Professor and his family focus on the distinctions that set Louie (as a representation of the present) apart from Tom (as a representation of the past), it becomes evident throughout the novel that the identities of the two young men overlap in crucial ways that reveal the tense, but undeniable, connection between the ideal and real. Just as St. Peter tries and fails to neatly compartmentalize his work and domestic lives, attempts to classify Tom as an...
idealistic hero who remains unchanged by the influence of modernity and Louie as a threatening opportunist obsessed with modern consumerism ultimately collapse. Swift suggests that Cather exposes the fluidity of boundaries that aim to separate ideals from modern reality:

Materialism and idealism blur at their points of contact; Louie Marsellus and Tom Outland trade moral places disconcertingly (who is the businessman, who the dreamer?); the Blue Mesa itself acquires final significance in its status as a commodity...[the novel’s] internal frustrations and contradictions can be understood, not so much through Willa Cather’s own personal increasing disaffection with modernity, but rather through the pervasive crisis of western liberal thought whose dimensions were emerging in the early twentieth century: a crisis having to do with fundamental ideas about political identity and the individual’s relation to property. (176-77)

Idealism provides the impetus for materialism as both Louie and Tom strive to possess elusive ideals through objects that convey a sense of permanence within a changing modern world that threatens to compromise those ideals. Consumption becomes the primary mode through which nostalgia allows for an enduring connection to traditional ideals and a critical stance from which to view modernity in its full complexity.

The relationship between individual and collective identity that Cather explores in The Professor’s House ultimately calls into question whether one can develop the ability to critically analyze history through proximity to objects from the past or whether such objects only accentuate the incompatibility of the past with the present. The Marsellus’s Outland is a testament to the idea that Tom’s life can be memorialized and understood by the general public through access to the possessions that composed his life. Louie explains that the house and its objects will act as a reminder of the contributions that Tom made to the world in his short life:
“We are going to transfer his laboratory there, if the university will permit,-- all the apparatus he worked with. We have a room for his library and pictures. When his brother scientists come to Hamilton to look him up, to get information about him, as they are doing now already, at Outland they will find his books and instruments, all the sources of his inspiration” (Professor’s 42). While the act of commemoration that Louie wants to create is meant to provide an awareness of the lost inventor, the possibility of such knowledge is ambiguous. How can a stranger understand the full depth of Tom and his character when even the people who actually knew him remember him in ways that distort and even contradict what he actually stood for? According to Festa, in a larger sense Cather is grappling with the issue of American identity and questions the utility of the modern museum, an institution that uses artifacts to create nostalgia in an attempt to generate interest in the past, as arbiter of historical knowledge:

*The Professor’s House* was published at the peak of the historic house museum movement and its plot and structure situate the collecting of Native Americana within the encompassing neo-colonial manifestations of the movement. Homes were privileged milieus for culture during this era; historic domesticities made the notion of an idealized past tangible by embedding the social values and aesthetic sensibilities of earlier Americans in the architecture and design of their homes and furnishings…After 1900, the movement was propelled by the belief that civic homes could shore up the increasingly tenuous boundaries of national identity and provide idealized premodern settings for visitors amid the deracinating effects of an emerging modernity. (74)30

30 Festa goes on to say that while those who condemn public access to cultural remnants of the past as means of buying access to a cultural identity claim to reject the corrupting influence of
While Outland is meant to provide visitors with an interactive experience with objects from Tom’s real life so that they might understand the real Tom, such an endeavor would only seem to contribute to his further idealization in that it would emphasize him as a heroic scientific visionary who died nobly for his country rather than a young man with both gifts and flaws. Like Louie’s expression of longing to be Tom by associating with remnants of his material life, his home Outland interrogates whether the public’s nostalgia to know the past can ever adequately replicate an experience of that past. Cather’s novel blurs the boundary between a nostalgia for the past and an engagement with the modern present, and a consequence of this merging is an acknowledgement that complete historical consciousness becomes an impossibility since the past is always shaped by a framework of the present.

Cather exposes a crucial conflict in terms of the role of the museum in modern society in that it attempts both to preserve the past intact and distinct from the present and to transfer consumerism, such attempts stem from an implied essentialism with effects that range from discouraging cultural awareness to outright racial and ethnic discrimination: “‘Outland’ serves a purpose similar to the neo-colonial house museums that persuaded immigrants to affiliate through the purchase of mass-produced objects. Indeed, the Professor’s critique of the Outland estate appears little different from that of columnist Dorothy Dix who wrote an essay in 1914 for Good Housekeeping advocating the eviction of the Jewish Levy family, the owners of Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, so that the house could be restored as a museum for its ‘rightful’ inheritors. See Festa, “Conveniently Situated Museums: The House Museum Movement and Modernist Interiority in Willa Cather’s The Professor’s House” Arizona Quarterly 67.1 (Spring 2011): 92.
history in a way that is easily relatable for a modern general public dissociated from that past. Just as Louie wants to fill his home with Tom’s things to memorialize the man himself, in “Tom Outland’s Story,” Tom wants the cliff dweller artifacts to be placed in a museum such as the Smithsonian so that the public can learn about the lost Indian culture as the founders of American identity. In addition, similar to Louie’s desire to become Tom through Tom’s objects, Tom himself insists that the Indian artifacts make him feel a part of the ancient culture: “Nothing makes those people seem so real to me as their old pots, with the fire-black on them” (Professor’s 119). The objects that composed the lives of the cliff dwellers act as substitutes for the people themselves, and Tom believes that this culture’s way of life could be beneficial for his own society. However, he is completely disenchanted after his trip to Washington and his inability to interest any of the museums in the artifacts. It is clear that these institutions do not value the cultural potential of the relics as the head of the Indian Commission tells Tom “his business was with living Indians, not dead ones” (Professor’s 226). The Commissioner’s implication is that the artifacts are incompatible in a modern setting and that dwelling on the historical past is not effective in addressing issues of the present, a sentiment that Tom finds appalling. Though the Smithsonian officials initially express interest in excavating the mesa, instead of pushing for legislation that would give them funds to support the project, they focus on promoting a bill that would provide appropriations for an International Exposition that would advance their careers and increase their salaries. Even though some officials in Washington suggest that the artifacts are too historically specific to bear relevance to modernity, such an idea is undermined when the artifacts are sold and reappropriated as commodities in the modern marketplace. Festa makes a comparison between the cabin where the Indian artifacts are kept and Outland indicating that they both reveal modernity’s effects on the dissemination of historical
knowledge: “Whereas “Tom Outland’s Story” showcases a cabin museum that proves vulnerable to the traffic in objects that characterizes modernity, the Professor’s narrative depicts a house museum, Outland, that capitalizes upon such permeability and mobility” (93). While Tom laments that the artifacts were not able to be preserved or to maintain value beyond their monetary worth, Louie celebrates the fact that Tom’s belongings transcend the time and place out of which they emerged and can be adapted for a modern audience. These two perspectives represent two distinct ways of interpreting the crisis at the heart of establishing a connection to the past within the modern world: a restorative nostalgia that aims to reproduce history as essential and beyond the reach of consumerism and corruption as it disregards the possibility for widespread public consumption, and a reflective nostalgia that allows for a more fluid understanding of the past but runs the risk of an unbridled cultural relativism that strips away historical specificity, suggesting that American identity can be bought and sold.

Cather seems to acknowledge the tensions surrounding preservation versus development of American identity, and such anxieties stem from the notion that this collective identity can be lost and is continually under threat of corruption. This assumes that there is an underlying essentialism when it comes to cultural identification since one must possess something in order for it to be taken away. Walter Benn Michaels articulates that cultural identity is inextricably bound to racial identity and that culture must incorporate both the learning about a given society and its practices as well as a kind of familial/blood relation to that group. In The Professor’s

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31 Michaels contends that American pluralism, particularly in the 1920s, simply functioned as a veiled form of racism and justified a nativist agenda meant to preserve a pure, unified American
House, Michaels addresses how the cliff dwelling Indians as native Americans constitute an untainted American identity, and Tom, because of his unique position, can be said to inherit an affiliation with this culture:

The ‘utterly exterminated’ tribe of The Professor’s House and the tribe ‘without culture’ that exterminated them represent, because the one biologically disappeared and the other culturally never existed, the possibility of an identity that, insofar as it is neither simply biological nor simply environmental, can be properly cultural. Neither by blood as such nor through education as such can Tom come into ‘possession’ of himself, but only through a process of what is essentially acculturation, a process imaginable only as a kind of education which is simultaneously a kind of blood affiliation. If Tom had really been related to Indians or if he’d grown up speaking Latin around the house, this process would have been impossible. (38)

Michaels claims that cultural identity, one’s beliefs and practices, was presented in opposition to an identity based entirely upon genetics, but American modernism supported the idea that one’s beliefs and practices were still ultimately determined by biological and racial associations that emphasized purity and alternative familial relationships that aimed to prevent racial mixing. Because Tom has “no other ancestors to inherit from” (Professor’s 242), he appropriates the cliff dwellers as his ancestors and explores the mesa learning as much as he can of this tribe of which he claims to be a rightful descendent. The Indians acquire their authenticity by virtue of the fact that they are extinct, proof that they did not engage in cross-breeding with other cultures and,

thus, have maintained racial purity. Paradoxically, the implication here is that for something to be completely real it cannot exist, and nostalgia, the longing for the lost thing, becomes an attempt to authenticate a present destined for corruption by connecting it to the perceived legitimacy of the past.

The threat of corruption that provides the basis for the emphasis on nativism that Michaels identifies in 1920s modernism is represented in Cather’s novel by Louie Marsellus whose undesirable traits are depicted in relation to his race. The novel reveals an underlying anti-Semitism on the part of the Professor who implicitly connects Louie’s business schemes and materialistic pursuits with his Jewishness. He refers to Louie as a “Jew,” focusing on his otherness and implying that he is not a “real” American, but is instead posing as one. The focus on Louie as being racially other only serves to further distinguish him from Tom and his connection to Native American culture. Even Louie himself expresses a sense of inferiority in relation to Tom and as Tom does with the cliff dwellers, Louie attempts to forge a familial bond with his lost “brother” in order to seem more culturally authentic in the eyes of his wife’s family. The negative associations attributed to Louie between his cultural practices within consumer society and his race as a Jewish man reveal a nostalgic longing for a homogeneous collective American identity that cannot exist in an increasingly diverse modern society.

Just as the nativist project of cultural purification is based on idealism that cannot be produced in the present, the Professor is only able to finally concede that the project of restoring his “authentic” childhood self is incompatible with reality when, ironically, the old house that seems to provide him with the will to live nearly kills him. He almost dies from asphyxiation, a fate that had long seemed a possibility, or inevitability, with the temperamental gas stove, one that could have been prevented years before but, just as in his decision not to open a window, he
chooses not to protect himself from death. When Augusta in her “matter-of-factness and hand-handedness” saves his life, forcing him back into reality, St. Peter acknowledges that despite his return to life, a part of him did succumb in the process: “His temporary release from consciousness seemed to have been beneficial. He had let something go—and it was gone: something very precious, that he could not consciously have relinquished, probably” (Professor’s 281-82). The young Godfrey St. Peter, as the source of both great pleasure and pain, dies once and for all and with it his hope to restore his lost past. He ultimately makes a commitment to maintain a stoic attitude toward life from that day forward as he believes pleasure is a luxury he can no longer be afforded in modern life: “He had never learned to live without delight. And he would have to learn to, just as, in a Prohibition country, he supposed he would have to learn to live without sherry. Theoretically he knew that life is possible may be even pleasant, without joy, without passionate griefs. But it had never occurred to him that he might have to live like that” (Professor’s 282). In giving up on the joys and griefs, St. Peter is relinquishing his entire emotional life, choosing mere existence over living. It is nostalgia, with its unique ability to reveal who one is through reminders of who one was, that has made the Professor’s life meaningful and has provided an emotional gauge for his pleasure and sorrows, and in letting go of the connection to his past he has become as empty as the old house where that past was created.

Though the conclusion of the novel can be viewed as bleak in that the Professor surrenders to his disillusionment with modernity, Cather seems to critique St. Peter’s perspective through her depiction of Tom, another idealist who laments the present but chooses to tackle it head on using his idealism to inspire a creation compatible with the modern world. The difference between the two men lies in their views of what nostalgia can and should do: the Professor’s
nostalgia attempts to reclaim the past in an act of self-defense against the distorting effects of consumer culture, and Tom’s nostalgia does not emphasize separation between but, rather, integration of past and present as a means of ensuring that the past can have continued relevance in the modern world. Like her view of material objects suggests, Cather implies that one can never possess the actuality of history in its entirety free from the context of the present and one’s subjective perceptions of it. However, interaction with objects from the past inspires one to contemplate history, albeit in a limited way, with an undeniable specificity expressed through an object’s materiality but one that also allows for the blending of personal and collective identity that makes understanding possible. For Cather, the novel, and art in general, functions similarly to history in its capacity to relate individual experience to universal human experience, but unlike history which focuses on events and is subsequently bound by time constraints, the novel is able to surpass history as its emphasis on emotions transcends time allowing for a more complete integration of the personal and the collective.
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