ABSTRACT

THE CRACKS IN THE WHITE CITY:
AN EXAMINATION OF SPECTACLE DURING THE GILDED AGE

By Shiloh Kuhlmann

This study traces the use of spectacle during late nineteenth-century American society. My examination of spectacle centers on two widespread models—the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the traveling circus. Using these two sites as models of the use of spectacle, I have investigated what objects and people tend to be displayed and how. This project traces how the sites of spectacle of the World Fair and the circus shaped American perceptions of class, race, and gender.
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Introduction

On May 1, 1893, the President of the United States, Benjamin Harrison, accompanied by
the Duke of Veragua, a lineal descendent of Christopher Columbus, opened the gates to the
World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago (White 44). Alternately named the “White City” or
sometimes even “The City of Aladdin’s Palaces,” the Chicago Exposition was designed to
surpass all of its World Fair predecessors. In part, the Exposition was a celebration of the
quatrcentennial anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of America (White 41). Six months before
the Exposition opened, the commemoration began with three days of dedication ceremonies,
parades, and fireworks along the streets of Chicago. One month before the Fair’s opening,
countries from around the world gathered on the streets of New York for a naval review (White
44). Significantly before the Exposition even officially commenced, the United States prepared
the world for the grandest exposition of all, the White City.

The competition for which country could host the best exposition was high. It was only
forty two years ago when England held the first exposition, the Crystal Palace in London, 1851
(White 21). The Palace measured 1,851 feet long and 450 feet wide. England organized the
Palace under four groupings: Raw Materials, Manufactures, Machinery, and Fine Arts. Made of
twenty acres of glass, the building cost one million to make (White 21). The Crystal Palace was
the marvel of its time. Every exposition since has upped the ante. Awards began to be given out
for exhibiting. More and more countries came to participate in each exposition. World Fairs
were held in all the great Western cities of the world: London, New York, Philadelphia, Paris,
Vienna, Florence, Munich, and Dublin. Expositions became the peaceful way for countries to
compete with one another; they were like a race to see who could put on the best show. By the
time of the White City in Chicago, “the art of exhibiting ha[d] grown into a science as exact in its
general rules and as far-reaching in its effects of civilization as its antithesis; the science of war”
(White 21). Rather than go to war with one another, great countries competed by hosting and
attending expositions.

The White City was designed to assert America’s power and growing worth to the world.
Structurally, the White City was four times larger than any previous world exposition (Shaw 6).
It stretched for 526 acres in Jackson Park, plus 80 more acres in the Midway Plaisance (White
60). Compared to the four divisions of the Crystal Palace, the World’s Columbian Exposition
had twelve. The Building of Manufactures was bigger than the entire Crystal Palace alone. At
the time the largest house ever built, the Building of Manufactures measured 1,700 feet by 800
feet. To walk around the building was to walk the distance of a mile. To walk inside, up every
floor, down every aisle, in all the galleries was to walk fifty miles. It would take a week, at eight
hours a day to see everything in this building (White 95). The total attendance to Chicago’s
Exposition (27, 529, 400) tripled the attendance to any previous American exposition, with the
Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia holding the prior record (9, 910, 966) (White 632). In size,
in attendance, in the abundance of objects exhibited, in every conceivable venue the World’s
Columbian Exposition appeared to be a world-wide success.

In his book, The Commodity Culture of Victorian England, Thomas Richards traces the
origin of spectacle through the commodity culture of Victorian England. In looking at the Great
Exhibition, the Year of the Jubilee, the patent medicine system, and early advertising, Richards
argues “the era of spectacle beg[an] with the Great Exhibition in England, 1851 (Richards 3).
Richards is clear to distinguish, though, that while he argues the era of the spectacle began with
the 1851 Exhibition in England, ostentation and spectacle had been used by the state before. His
point, however, is that this is the first time spectacle was used to display manufactured objects. Richards contends that in the beginning of the nineteenth-century, the commodity was not something that was represented. The commodity was simply a “conduit for money”; it was the thing itself (Richards 2). Simply put, you bought what you paid for. Whereas now, if a consumer were to buy a Kate Spade purse, the consumer is not only paying for the material it cost to make the purse, but also is paying for the label, the advertised spectacle, and its immaterial promises. By the mid nineteenth-century the nature of the commodity changes. Richards traces this change in the value of commodities to England’s Great Exhibition. The Great Exhibition was originally meant to express a labor theory of value to its attendees by displaying all of the materials and machinery required in the production process. However, inside the Palace, raw materials were displayed separately from the machinery, which remained separated from the products. By separating the products from the means of production and by spectacularly displaying individual commodities within a Crystal Palace, the effect of the Great Exhibition was to amaze and captivate its audience with England’s abundance and greatness without spectators having any idea of the labor behind the processes. At the Exhibition, often attendees did not even know who had invented what (White 57). Richards believed these sites of spectacle, especially the Great Exhibition, served several purposes for the British Empire:

- spectacle entailed the autonomous iconography of the manufactured object, the replacement of history by commemoration, the invention of a democratic ethos for consumerism, the constitution of a manageable consuming subject, a reshaping of language, [and] a mythology of abundance (Richards 251).

In other words, the exhibition helped to create commodity culture and its modern consuming subject.

More than forty years later, on the shores of Lake Michigan, America would announce its increasing prominence to the world in the opening of the White City. At the time of the Fair’s opening, the U.S. led the Western World in production; it exceeded Great Britain, Germany, and France in manufacturing (Davis 8). Three years prior to the Exposition, in 1890, the American western frontier was announced closed (Davis 8). Immigrants were flooding into the U.S. and the question of race became an increasing concern. America was also expanding its empire overseas, spilling its surplus goods into the countries of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. Women were circulating into the work force and clamoring for equal rights. Periodic depressions and financial panics swept across the cities. Despite all this apparent prosperity and wealth, the rift between the rich and the poor was growing even wider (Davis 8). It is in the midst of all this expansion and compression, prosperity and poverty, that America had to propose and answer the question as to what kind of nation it was going to be. The World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago was more than a collection of what America had to offer; it was a representation to itself, and to the world, a spectacle, displaying what it meant to be an American. The World’s Columbian Exposition offered, in just 526 short acres, a glimpse of the vast, prosperous, powerful American nation. What I am interested in exploring is what story the spectacle of the White City chose to tell.

Like Richards, I believe sites of spectacle, such as the expositions, functioned by creating the modern consuming subject. I believe they proposed a national ideology to their public through their representations. In particular, I am interested in exploring two sites of spectacle for my project: the Chicago Exposition and the traveling circus. Both areas are concerned with offering through their spectacular displays an interpretation of what it means to be American. This project is an investigation of what objects and people tend to be displayed and how. I have
focused my examination of spectacle through three separate lenses; I want to trace how the sites of spectacle of the World’s Fair and the circus shaped American perceptions of class, race, and gender. I’m interested in what the audience learns from the displays about their nation and themselves. How do these sites of spectacle affect the spectators, as they visually consume both objects and people on display? How does the spectacle work in shaping our consciousness and our desires—what we view and what we consume?

In his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord explains how the spectacle first arose, how it functions, and how commodity culture came to be associated with spectacle. Debord first notes that the spectacle only amasses in societies “where modern conditions of production prevail” (12). Industrialized, capitalist societies are then civilizations where spectacle is most prevalent. Debord believes spectacle prevails in these industrialized environments because of the separation that ensues; separation from each other, from the products of labor, and from the means of production (13). It is this loss of unity that causes the spectacle society. According to Debord, spectacle operates through a set of images; these images are detached from life and are only ever partially apprehended by the spectator. In this way, the images are false, an illusion (Debord 12). The reason why spectacle works as such a powerful force is because it appears as society itself (Debord 12). Through all its manifestations, such as news, propaganda, advertising, and entertainment “a prevailing model of social life” is offered up to the spectator (Debord 13). Debord claims that it is “by means of spectacle, [the] ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in self-praise” (19). The spectacle works as an instrument of power. By appearing as society itself, it can offer a world view, an ideology, while simultaneously appearing as an objective force.

In terms of how spectacle relates to commodities, Debord explains that commodities possess both perceptible and imperceptible qualities. The spectacle, by its nature, easily becomes a vehicle for commodities because of the way spectacle works, in that it replaces the perceptible world by a “set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as eminently perceptible” (Debord 26). We can see this happening in advertising. Take for example a pair of blue jeans. Perceptibly, they are just a pair of pants, but they carry imperceptible qualities as well. They are cool, stylish. If I wear Abercrombie hip hugger jeans, I will be glamorous. The jeans may only in reality cost ten dollars to make, but you pay fifty dollars for the coolness imbibed through their label. The jeans are advertised as sexy. A slim, blond, beautiful model slips herself into the jeans, and the spectator reads the implicit message that if she buys these jeans, she too will be beautiful. The spectacle has worked here by replacing the perceptible image of a pair of blue denim pants with the beautiful model, and flashy Abercrombie label, making the imperceptible quality of cool visible by means of advertisement. Debord believes we live in a world where commodity rules; “the world we see is the world of commodities” (29). Commodities have become less qualitative and more quantitative over time (Debord 29). Mass production is more important than quality production. Furthermore, it is Debord’s point that the necessity of products is no longer what we are concerned about. Instead, the overwhelming economic rule is boundless economic development (34). If we can’t find a market for our products in our own country, then we will have to find markets elsewhere. For Debord, real human needs have been replaced by pseudo needs, and the number one pseudo need is “for the reign of an autonomous economy to continue” (34). Free market capitalism is the dominant economic order.

At the time of the World’s Columbian Exposition, the United States was beginning to realize its increasingly prominent role in the world. America needed a site to showcase its
The spectacle of the Exposition was a means of relaying a view of America’s greatness, to both its own citizens and the world. Set up on a hill, by the beautiful waters of the Great Lake Michigan, the White City was meant to display to the world just how powerful the United States had become. But, like all spectacle, most of what was portrayed was illusory.

Four cities in the United States competed to host the Columbian Exposition: St. Louis, Washington, New York, and Chicago. Chicago was chosen because it seemed the most “American” city. Director General of the Exposition, George Davis, suggests Chicago was an ideal site for the Exposition. Davis claims, “In itself the phenomenal city—so gigantic, so young, so rich, strong, and powerful—is the very essence of American progress. It is so essentially the most distinctively American of the great towns of the United States, that many other cities seem foreign compared with it” (White 11). In simply choosing which city would host the Exposition, Americans were already concerned with what image of America they wanted the world to possess. Like Chicago, America saw itself as young, rich, strong, and powerful. Interestingly enough, the Director of Works, Daniel H. Burnham, chose New York architects to build the White City, rather than Chicago ones (Trachtenberg 274). Apparently, though Chicago was chosen as the most American city to host the World Fair, the commissioners still wanted the sophistication of New York present in the city’s architecture. Jackson Park was not even entirely improved at the time the site was chosen; it was still marsh, swamp land, and sand dunes. To build the Exposition, the land had to first be improved. The effect on native Chicagoans was to see the land literally transformed in the building of the White City: “Where was then a marsh, whose stagnant waters were divided but by hummocks of mud and sand, are now the clear flowing waters of the beautiful system of lagoons, and rising out of them, the walls of white palaces, the architectural triumph of modern history” (White 63). The builders of the White City transformed the wet, marshy land bordering Lake Michigan into a beautiful display of water basins and lagoons; the swampy American land was romantically converted into a Venetian city on the water. Improving the land of Jackson Park came to represent the taming of American soil. Preparing the land for the White City was like watching the first American settlers civilize the untamed land. Ironically, most of the architecture of the buildings of the White City was done in classical style; the constructors of the White City modeled the U.S. on Europe in an attempt to showcase America’s greatness.

The material used on most of the buildings of the White City was “staff,” which is composed chiefly of powdered gypsum and gives the effect of marble whiteness, though, in reality, it is only 1/10 of the cost of granite or marble (White 99). Though the White City appeared a city of beautiful, white marble, the real material used was a cheaper, less sturdy quality. The material used on most of the buildings, the very foundation of the White City itself, was an illusion; the White City was not made of white marble. Also, like any real city, the White City had its own newspaper and post office. The newspaper, The Daily Columbian, consisted of eight pages. The first five were the front pages of major newspapers and the last three pages were lists of events and exhibits at the Fair (White 152). The Department of the Interior, in the U.S. Government Building, displayed a model post office with an active branch which handled all the mail of the Exposition (White 458). The White City may have functioned like a real city with its own newspaper and post office, but it was only ever a temporary city, one that charged admission to enter, and would close its gates and tear down its buildings after six short months.

The World’s Columbian Fair had twelve divisions designed to encapsulate the activities of a civilized society. The buildings ranged from departments such as manufactures, machinery,
electricity, transportation, horticulture, fisheries, ethnology, administration, agriculture, mining, and fine arts; there was even a women’s building. Henry Adams said it best when he remarked in his autobiography, “Chicago was the first expression of American thought and unity, one must start there” (Adams 343). By packaging up the resources, products, and inventions of the nation and displaying everything in one splendid location, the Exposition suggested that from East to West the U.S. was a unified and prosperous nation. It is only through closer examination of the spectacle of the Exposition that it is realized the appearance of prosperity and unity was simply that, appearance only.

In the next two chapters, I will examine how spectacle was able to create the myths of prosperity and unity in America. In the first chapter, I will look at how the abundance of wealth exhibited at the White City eclipsed the poverty also present in America. Spectacle was used to mask the divisions of wealth and class in America. In the second chapter, I will look at how spectacle came to be used as a tool for imperialism. Spectacle obscured the fluidity of race. Finally, in my last chapter, I will look at how women were perceived as objects of spectacle. I will discuss how their separation from the means of production caused them to be valued only for their outward appearance, as objects to be displayed. In looking at the circus, I will also examine how circus imagery and spectacle came to be associated with the women’s movement. Even on the platform, presenting serious issues in need of reform, women were still perceived as objects of spectacle and amusement, rather than as serious agitators seeking social justice.
I. The Spectacle of a Rich and Prosperous Nation

For all its splendor, its magnificence, for all its overwhelming abundance of goods in departments like manufacturing, agriculture, and mining, the World Fair could not entirely mask the uncertain financial status of most Americans across the country. Opening its gates on May 1, 1893, the Fair operated between the financial panic of 1893 and the Pullman strike of 1894 (Trachtenberg 209). In no real sense was the spectacle of abundance and wealth portrayed at the World Fair actually reflected in the financial status of most Americans. In fact, the commissioners of the World Fair tried to attribute the lack of attendance at the Fair’s opening month to financial reasons. Apparently, “early in the summer there existed a stringency in money matters that was not local to any place, but extended all over the limits of this country. Banks and other commercial enterprises were compelled to suspend business” (White 630). Operating in the midst of a widespread financial panic across the U.S., the World’s Fair swept away these harsh, financial facts beneath the spectacle of abundance and prosperity.

In this section I will look at how the spectacle was used to shape our conceptions of class. I will look at how wealth is displayed and argue how this conspicuous showcase of prosperity comes to obscure the growing poverty in America during the period referred to as the Gilded Age. Like the material, staff, used in the construction of the White City, Americans learned it is the appearance of wealth and splendor that matters most; it makes little difference that staff is a cheap material, so long as it passes for white marble. The term “gilded” can mean “covered in a gold substance,” or it can mean “having a pleasing appearance that conceals something of little worth”—an apt name for an age that perfected the art of highlighting a nation’s prosperity while turning a blind eye to the nation’s poverty.

In his treatise, Theory of the Leisure Class, Thorstein Veblen presents an economic history of the world as he describes the emergence of a leisure class. For Veblen, the leisure class emerges with the initial stirrings of ownership (22). Veblen defines the root of ownership as emulation: everyone wants to have as much as his neighbor. Wealth equals honor (26). Veblen argues that, due to their wealth, the upper classes possess irreproachable social standing (29). According to Veblen, the wealthy proclaim their status to the world by disassociating themselves from all types of productive labor; the main requirement for the leisure class is to avoid working for a living (30). Veblen termed this abstention from work conspicuous leisure. In the minds of the upper class, work is inferior; it shows submission to a master (Veblen 36). The only employments allowed to this leisure class are positions in government, war, sports, or religion (Veblen 36). Even if an individual was born into this class without the financial means to support himself, or his family, he must still maintain this leisure, even if it means suffering economically (Veblen 76). It would be too undignified for him to seek productive labor. Conspicuous leisure did not simply involve abstaining from productive labor, it also involved showcasing how you spend your non-productive time. For Veblen, the leisure class possessed many methods of squandering their time. They participated in such activities as learning dead languages, using proper spelling and grammar, cultivating proficiencies in music and art, observing all the latest fashions, and playing games and sports (Veblen 45). The leisure class also focused their attention on developing manners, passing on ceremonial knowledge, and participating in social events (Veblen 65). With all this knowledge, the leisure class then proceeds to use these acquired proficiencies in education and decorum, in sports and leisure, to distinguish themselves from everyone else.
Not only does the leisure class display their status and wealth by demonstrating their abstention from work, but they also make their wealth conspicuous through endless consumption of goods. Similar to the way this leisure class needs to make conspicuous their non-productive expenditure of time, they must likewise announce their wealth through their possessions. Veblen calls this spectacle of the consumption of goods, conspicuous leisure. In this model, where the wealthy spend to demonstrate their worth and position to the community, women are the sole consumers for the household (Veblen 83). Woman, separated from the means of production and ownership, becomes the “chief ornament of the house” (Veblen 180). The more fashionably she dresses and the more excessively she decorates the home, the more reputable the house is perceived (Veblen 180-81). To use Veblen’s terminology, the woman consumes vicariously; since she is not the master of the house, she is not economically free. Everything, then, that the woman consumes reflects the pecuniary power of the male head of the household.

It is Veblen’s argument that in order for goods to be considered reputable they must contain an element of waste in their design (99). Oftentimes, the wasteful element is what makes the product more expensive; the more expensive the good, the more beautiful it is perceived to be (Veblen 130). According to Veblen, “the marks of expensiveness come to be accepted as beautiful features of the expensive articles” (130). This is why people prefer labeled, ripped jeans as opposed to the sturdier, K-Mart brand. Because humans still retain an instinct of workmanship within them, Veblen believes they must despise wastefulness on principle. Thus, “however wasteful a given expenditure may be in reality, it must at least have some colorable excuse in the way of an ostensible purpose” (Veblen 93). Similar to the way the wealthy create non-productive ways of spending their time, they also create various purposes for the wasteful and more expensive elements of their possessions. For example, the purpose of the ripped quality in jeans is to make the wearer look cool.

The spectacle of prosperity and wealth the leisure class creates by abstaining from work and lavishly displaying expensive possessions serves to set them above the rest of society. Every class below wishes to emulate the class above it, and this, in part, for Veblen explains the conservative mindset of our country. According to Veblen, “the result is an assimilation of the lower classes to the type of human nature that belongs primarily to the upper classes only” (244). Thus, the standards of the community are largely determined by the upper classes, whom everyone else emulates. It is up to the leisure class to determine what is honorable and decent (Veblen 104). By emulating the conspicuous consumption of the leisure class, people in lower classes attempt to publicly appear wealthier than they really are, hiding their poverty within the confines of their own homes (Veblen 112). This spectacle of wealth and prosperity displayed by the upper, middle, and lower classes obscures the real financial circumstances of many Americans, and it instills a false sense of abundance and prosperity in the consuming public.

In no other novel are the pretensions of the Gilded Age more poignantly exposed than in Henry James novel, The Golden Bowl. In his novel, James creates a whole cast of characters who participate in conspicuous consumption, whether they possess the financial resources or not. James’ story centers on an American family, the Ververs. Mr. Verver and his daughter, Maggie, both belong to the leisure class. Mr. Verver is a proud collector. He not only collects artifacts from around the world to display in his museum, but he also collects people, which is how Charlotte and the Prince are able to marry into the Verver family: both individuals offer unique additions to the family collection. First of all, both the Prince and Charlotte are Italian. Simply by being foreign, they appeal to the imperialist nature of the Ververs. Their foreignness carries romance, refinement, and sophistication. By marrying Italians, the Ververs can literally transfer
a piece from another country into their homes. Furthermore, Maggie’s marriage to the Prince is like acquiring a live piece of history and romance. Though the Prince may not have any money, he is still a Prince, thereby making Maggie a Princess. Also, the Prince goes by the name Amerigo, as in Amerigo Vespucci, the explorer credited with naming America. The value of this romantic history is not lost on the Ververs. In fact, as Mrs. Assingham suggests, the Prince’s name, his history, may have been what helped him the most in securing Maggie’s hand in marriage: “My point is at any rate that I recall noticing at the time how the Prince was from the start helped with the dear Ververs by wearing [his name]” (James 95).

The Prince is not an innocent victim in this marriage transaction; he understands his value to the Verver family. He is their Italian Prince with a romantic family history. As the Prince irreverently describes to Maggie, “I shall be one of the little pieces that you unpack at the hotels, or at the worst in the hired houses, like this wonderful one, and put out with family photographs and the new magazines” (James 50). Even the Prince sees himself as a unique artifact to be unpacked and put on display. James further links the Prince to a material possession when Mr. Verver compares the round nature of the Prince to a crystal, which indicates the monetary value Mr. Verver places on the Prince; he paid a lot for Maggie’s possession (James 138). Like any possession, the Prince’s value rises with outsider appreciation. Maggie’s appreciation of her husband increases when she sees other women admire him; she is exasperated when she goes so far as to admit that if the Prince should “some day get drunk and beat her, the spectacle of him with hated rivals . . . would suffice to bring her round” (James 157). Here, James clearly indicates that there is something wrong with the way Maggie feels towards her husband. Maggie feels she could endure physical abuse so long as the Prince is outwardly pleasing, and rivals can appreciate what a gem Maggie possesses. All that matters in Maggie’s eyes is appearance; it is enough that the spectacle of the Prince inspires envy among her friends and rivals.

Charlotte comes to be possessed by the Ververs in much the same way as is the Prince. Charlotte, too, lacks sufficient financial resources for the life she wishes to lead. Charlotte is so dependent she must rely on the hospitality of others to survive: “She’s always with people, poor dear—she rather has to be; even when, as is sometimes the case, they’re people she doesn’t immensely like” (James 167). In her dependence on the hospitality of others, Charlotte is the equivalent of Wharton’s Lily Bart. By marrying Mr. Verver, Charlotte gains financial stability, but she also stands to lose something from her collector as well, her freedom. In every way Charlotte participates in the vicarious leisure and consumption Veblen describes. The Ververs added Charlotte to the family in order to do the worldly for them. It was Charlotte who was to be conspicuous, to be Mr. Verver’s vicarious spectacle of wealth, prosperity, and success. For the Ververs, “Charlotte was a, was the, ‘social success’” (James 262). While Charlotte is allowed to vicariously live a life of leisure and display the wealth of the Ververs, she is in no way master of her own fate. Maggie compares Charlotte’s position to a dog on a master’s leash. In Maggie’s eyes:

Charlotte hung behind with emphasized attention, she stopped when her husband stopped, but at the distance of a case or two, or whatever other succession of objects; and the likeness of their connection would not have been wrongly figured if he had been thought of as holding in one of his pocketed hands the end of a long silken halter looped round her beautiful neck. (523)

Though Charlotte acquired financial freedom through marriage, she became even more restricted by becoming a valuable object in the Ververs’ collection.
As it turns out, much to the Ververs’ dismay, their human objects were not as unblemished and beautiful as they first appeared. It is part of James’ genius to use the object of the golden bowl to symbolize the crack, the façade, the gilding, so to speak, in the Ververs’ entire belief system and existence. The golden bowl first appears when Charlotte is searching with the Prince for a wedding gift for Maggie. The bowl is richly gilt in a gold substance. It is made entirely of crystal, but there is a flaw; the crystal has a crack in it. The crack, though, is entirely imperceptible to the human eye; you would not know of the crack unless you broke the bowl. The invisibility of the crack poses the main question of the novel—“but if it’s something you can’t find out isn’t that as good as if it were nothing?” (James 120). The question of the crack in the bowl evolves into a question of the cracks in each of the Ververs’ individual marriages. As it turns out, the Ververs did not purchase the spotless spouses they had originally believed they did. Charlotte and the Prince had been lovers in the past, and they continued this intimacy even after each had married a Verver. James further links the symbol of the bowl to the characters in the novel when he has Mr. Verver compare the Prince to a crystal. The Prince jokingly responds to this comparison, recalling his own encounter with the golden bowl, “‘Oh, if I’m a crystal, I’m delighted to be a perfect one, for I believe they sometimes have cracks and flaws—in which case they’re to be had very cheap’” (James 138). Yet neither the Prince nor Charlotte was acquired cheaply. The Ververs were fooled by the gilded appearance of their mates—by the Prince’s romantic history and by Charlotte’s social success.

The imperceptible crack comes to symbolize the falseness and deception in the Ververs’ society. The chief matchmaker in the marriages is a woman practiced in the art of gilded deception. Mrs. Assingham’s character clearly demonstrates the falseness behind what she conspicuously displays: “With her false indolence, in short her false leisure, her false pearls and palms and courts and fountains, she was a person for whom life was multitudinous detail. . .” (James 64). In one sentence, the word false is used three times, a repetition James did not intend his reader to miss. It is Mrs. Assingham who knows of the intimate history of Charlotte and the Prince and who decides to keep this information secret. Mrs. Assingham is not only false in her possessions, but she is also false in her dealings with her friends. She arranged the marriages knowing about the previous intimacy of Charlotte and the Prince, but believing that so long as the Ververs were kept ignorant, it was as good as if it were nothing. It is also the Ververs’ decision at the end not to let the other Verver find out about the discovered cracks in their marriages. All appearances of bliss and prosperity are kept, both for the outward public and for each other, neither daring to communicate the flaws in their lifestyle. The golden bowl, only golden on the outside, is really a cheap, cracked crystal. The Ververs’ perfect marriages to the Prince and to Charlotte are really only sham marriages, cracked by adultery. The life the Ververs conspicuously display to society is flawed, fake, and specious. The Ververs, as members of the leisure class, are specialists in maintaining appearance. Unfortunately, appearance does not translate to reality in their respective marriages. The world James scathingly creates in his novel, *The Golden Bowl*, is a society enthralled with false representation and spectacle.Appearances and reality simply do not always correspond.

Conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption worked well as models for how the leisure class was to define itself. A spectacle of wealth and prosperity came to be expected of both the members, and those who emulated, the leisure class. But what served as a model for the industrial class? For Janet M. Davis, the circus was another institution that helped shape American ideas about nationhood and class. In her book *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top*, Davis discusses how the evolution of the circus to the three-ring
spectacle of amusement came to be developed simultaneously with other visual representations of the nineteenth century: department stories, early motion pictures, World Fairs, and advertisements (24-5). Circuses were yet another form of spectacle developing in a nation struggling to define itself under its new, industrialized, capitalistic order. Davis explains that the circus transformed from being a small town, one-ring affair to the big top, three-ring circus of Barnum and Bailey days with the coming of the railroad and the invention of the canvas tent (17). In her book, Davis argues the circus operated in ways similar to a corporation, sometimes even a monopoly. By the year 1890, Barnum and Bailey’s circus employed 800 men and 200 women. Their show had 407 horses, 2 mules, 12 elephants, 4 camels, and 8 dromedaries (Davis 38). They were, by sheer number alone, the Greatest Show on Earth. When Bailey died in 1907, and the Ringling Brothers bought Bailey’s entire holdings, “other circus owners accused the Ringling Brothers of monopolistic actions” (Davis 41). In fact, it was not uncommon for newspaper cartoons to “depic[t] business trusts and industrialists as animal and human circus actors” (Davis 40). The War Department even sent officers to observe how the circus managers coordinated massive numbers of people and animals (Davis 78). Even the government recognized the corporate efficiency and management of the circus. This site of spectacle, this corporation, shaped American ideas about labor within its shows and exhibits.

One of the ways the circus reinforced ideas about capitalism was through its use of spectacular labor. Like a corporation, the circus had organized a highly specialized division of labor. Months before the circus even came to town, advance men would be sent to the projected area to scout out the site, procure supplies, get contacts, and advertise. Barnum and Bailey had four advance trains, each one with different tasks (Davis 42-47). When the circus did roll into town, usually at the crack of dawn, they would arrive to find spectators awaiting the construction of the canvas city. Each task for setting up the grounds had its own time. Typically, the train would arrive at 4 a.m., and the boss canvasman would survey the site and decide where the tents would go. Then the big top gang (roughly 85 brawny men) staked the ground while singing work songs. This task would be completed in 45 minutes. Then the gang worked to raise the poles and canvases. All twelve tents would be raised by 6 a.m., when they would then break to eat breakfast (Davis 47-48). Audiences enjoyed this spectacle of human labor so much that some were even willing to pay for it. Many times, the circus would have what was called an after show concert where they charged the spectator 25 cents to watch the workers take down the tents (Davis 50). This spectacle of human labor depicted various components of capitalism to its spectators: it showed them an intricate division of labor; workers completing tasks on a timed schedule, and worker contentment with their labor (singing work songs). It was American capitalism at its most entertaining—the big top circus.

Instilling a sense of worker contentment and the value of labor in the industrial class was an important task to undertake. If, from the leisure class, people learned to believe that the non-engagement in productive labor is honorable, there needed to be a competing ideology that highlights the value of productive labor, or no one would be motivated to work. William D. Howells’ novel, The Rise of Silas Lapham accomplishes exactly the task of instilling a sense of the importance and satisfaction of hard, productive labor. In Howells’ novel, Lapham’s rise is a moral one as he forsakes the life of ease and leisure for the life of hard work, poverty, and labor.

Practically millionaires, the Laphams are technically members of the leisure class; the only glitch is they have the money without possessing the corresponding traits and assumed behaviors of the leisure class. The Laphams are the social pariahs of leisure-class society. First of all, Lapham earned his money through productive labor. Not only did Lapham make, rather
than inherit his money, but he also failed to disassociate himself from work once he struck it rich; he continued to occupy himself with his paint. He even goes so far as to advertise his paint, a fact that other members of the leisure class find distasteful. Lapham advertises his paint everywhere: “there wa’nt a board fence, nor a bridegirder, nor a dead wall, nor a barn, nor a face of rock in the whole region that didn’t have Lapham’s mineral paint-specimen on it in the three colors he begun by making” (Howells 14). Lapham does not just engage in productive labor, he conspicuously advertises his product. His personal life and his labor are so intimately connected he even named a paint color after his wife, Persis.

Also, the Laphams do not have the slightest idea of how to conspicuously consume, how to display their wealth to the rest of society. Rather, the Laphams “dressed for one another, they equipped their house for their own satisfaction, they lived richly to themselves, not because they were selfish, but because they did not know how to do otherwise” (Howells 27). The Laphams value their own personal comfort over their outward social appearance. They may possess the financial means to belong in the upper class, but they do not possess any of the social characteristics that accompany this class. Howell’s novel suggests the gulf between the two classes cannot be bridged by money alone.

Thus, it comes of little surprise that the Laphams ultimately fail to bridge that gap. In fact, they actually appear much happier with their new, poorer lifestyle than they were before their financial failure. With his characterization of the Laphams, Howell sprinkles working class ethics throughout his novel. It is Howell’s intent to raise up the working man while casting a decaying light on the leisure class. Lapham simply cannot understand the leisure-class mentality of abstaining from productive labor. He is unable to see why the Coreys will not work for a living. Though far from poverty, the Coreys are not as well off as they would like; their inheritance is running out. Lapham feels the son, Tom, ought to get a job: “But I don’t see how a fellow like that, that’s had every advantage in this world, can hang around home and let his father support him. Seems to me, if I had his health and education, I should want to strike out and do something for myself” (Howells 58). In Lapham’s eyes, it is almost a waste of a human life not to put a man with as many skills and talents as Tom Corey to work, to do something productive with his life. Lapham sees labor as bringing value to a man’s life. For Lapham, a man is only as honorable as he is productive.

Howells’ working-class ethics appear again when Lapham discusses worker contentment. Lapham believes that poor men are generally satisfied with their lives, so long as they are able to get by and support their families. According to Lapham, “a poor man was satisfied if he could make both ends meet; that he didn’t envy any one his luck, if he had earned it; so long as he wasn’t coming under himself” (Howells 195). Perhaps Lapham speculates the lower class does not have the time or the energy to be discontent; all their thoughts and efforts are geared towards their subsistence. Or perhaps Lapham believes there is enough satisfaction in labor, in earning a living, to compensate for the lack of wealth. Either way we look at it, Lapham proposes that the working class is satisfied with their position in life. Working-class ethics are further stressed by the financial ruin of Lapham and his family. Howells constructs the Laphams’ fall from prosperity as a failure to fit into leisure-class society. Partially, Lapham falls into financial trouble because of poor investments in the stock market, an activity his wife classifies as gambling. Before the Laphams were wealthy, Lapham never would have considered gambling his hard-earned money. Gambling with the stock market was a leisure-class activity that Lapham acquired, and it backfires on him. Mainly, though, the real ruin of the Laphams was because Lapham was not capable of being ruthless enough in his business. It was Lapham’s fair
business ethics that cemented his financial ruin; his morality forever removed his family from the leisure class. In this way, Howells slants Lapham’s financial failure as a moral victory. The Laphams’ poverty is painted as achieving piety. Moreover, the Laphams are happier with their poverty: “In the shadow of his disaster they returned to something like their old, united life; they were at least all together again...” (Howell 357). Howells’ novel clearly conveys a message of the impassable rift between the classes. Though millionaires, the Laphams could never belong to the leisure class.

If anything, the real spectacle in Howell’s novel is in the pretences of the leisure class. The Rise of Silas Lapham paints the leisure class as a false, empty, disunified society. The Coreys, though they need the money, dislike the idea of working; they wish to maintain their appearance of dignity. Beautiful homes are wasted by the leisure class, sometimes for an entire season or more, when they are left empty as their inhabitants take a vacation. The purpose of these beautiful homes on Beacon Street then is to reflect wealth and prosperity, not to provide safety and shelter. When the Laphams try to adopt the traits of the leisure class, when they buy the house on Beacon Street and try to interact more visibly with society, they grow unhappy; they only are able to find unity again after they have lost it all. By highlighting the work ethic and the morality of the Laphams, Howells sheds a favorable, moral light on the industrial class while showing the leisure in a negative light. This portrayal of the good, hard-working American laborer obscures some of the real, growing problems with poverty, living, and working conditions in America. In his expose’ How the Other Half Lives, Jacob Riis offers a very different picture than Howells’ of poverty and the working class, as he looks at tenement life in New York city.

Riis, “a police reporter turned social reformer” was an immigrant himself, coming to the United States from Denmark when he was 21 (Madison v). For three years he lived the life many immigrants faced, jobless and hungry, until he found a job at the New York Tribune as a police reporter. It was by investigating the slums of the New York City tenements that Riis came to believe the rest of the world did not know how its poorer half lived. His project was to publicize the living conditions of the tenements in hopes of stirring the public’s conscience. By visibly displaying and publicizing the conditions of each segment of tenement life, Riis hoped that his spectacle of the poor would move people to reform tenement conditions (Madison v-viii).

According to Riis, three-fourths of New York’s population lived in tenements (1). Riis begins his expose by offering a brief history of the tenements. After the War of 1812, New York City began to rapidly expand in population. Before the War, the city was home to fewer than 100,000 people. It soon grew to be half a million, and it kept expanding. Housing had to be found for this influx of people (Riis 1). The old residents of the city began to move, leaving behind their big houses. This property fell into the hands of real estate agents who used the property to house all the immigrants. They divided the large rooms into smaller rooms without accommodating for light or ventilation (Riis 5). At first, the tenant houses were a good thing; they provided immigrants with housing in the city. As the city continued to grow, however, the tenements became a social evil. They started to build rear houses behind the tenant houses. Originally, these rear houses were two stories, but to accommodate the surging immigrant population, the real estate agents began to add levels, more and more levels to the houses, disregarding concerns like foundation and structure (Riis 5). They made blocks into barracks, “dividing the space into smaller proportions capable of containing human life within four walls” (Riis 6). On the East side, the most densely populated area of tenements, there were 290,000
people to the square mile (Riis 6). The rents for these inhumane conditions were high, supposedly “to cover damage and abuse from this class” (Riis 5). What used to be shell-paved walks from the old houses became alleys (Riis 6). According to Riis, enough people died annually from disease in the tenements to populate an entire city (6). Riis describes one vivid experience of trying to take a picture of a tenement in Blind Man’s Alley (a harbor for the city’s blind beggars). As Riis sets up to take a picture, he accidentally sets fire to the tenement. There were six people inside, all blind, men and women. Riis is able to smother the fire. When he reports the incident to a police officer, he is surprised to see the police officer laugh. Apparently the house Riis saved is referred to as the Dirty Spoon. According to the officer, the house catches fire quite frequently, but the dirt inside its walls is so thick, it smothers the fire (30). In How the Other Half Lives Riis illuminates the squalor of tenement life. What were once homes of ease and luxury are now houses overcrowded with people, disease, and filth; a place of leisure and refinement now seems a cesspool for the immigrant poor. The immigrants that came to America seeking wealth and prosperity were housed in the very places where prosperity fled, leaving only an unrecognizable remnant of the promise of wealth.

In How the Other Half Lives, Riis tries to illuminate the real conditions of poverty and squalor for many people, three-fourths of the population, in New York. Riis needed to make these terrible living conditions visible because he believed people had turned a blind eye to the tenements. Conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure obscured the real poverty of the majority of New York’s population. Though Riis chose to focus on New York, the growing rift between classes was felt across America. Ironically, the peak years in strikes (1886, 1892-93) surrounded the opening of the Chicago Exposition (Trachtenberg 90). In the Great Upheaval of 1886, the Knights of Labor struck against Jay Gould’s railroad, it was the peak of agitation for an eight hour workday continued and the Haymarket riot happened in Chicago (Trachtenberg 90). The opening of the World’s Columbian Exposition itself was in the midst of a financial panic and depression. Yet, despite dissatisfaction with working conditions and discontent with living conditions and finances, the capitalistic system won out.

Ironically, it was in the year of the World’s Columbian Exposition that Congress decided to adopt the gold standard of currency. Henry Adams remarks on this in his autobiography:

> For a hundred years, between 1793 and 1893, the American people had hesitated, vacillated, swayed forward and back between two forces, one simply industrial, and the other capitalistic, centralizing, and mechanical. In 1893, the issue came on the single gold standard, and the majority at last declared itself, once and for all, in favor of the capitalistic system with all its necessary machinery (Education 344).

Everything seemed to be coming to a head. It seems hardly coincidental that the adoption of the gold standard and the World’s Columbian Exposition happened in 1893. The dominating, ruling order in American won in its vision of America as being a centralized, capitalist, world power. Debord attributes part of the victory to spectacle. According to Debord, “the unreal unity the spectacle proclaims masks the class division on which the real unity of the capitalist mode of production is based” (46). The World’s Columbian Exposition created a spectacle of America as a prosperous, capitalist, unified nation and portrayed that collection of images not only to the world, but more importantly to its own citizens. The World’s Columbian Exposition showed the majesty of the machinery and products, but it did not show the working conditions in the factories, and it most certainly did not display the ruin of tenement life. The White City, with all twelve of its divisions conspicuously displaying America’s pecuniary strength within its walls,
suggested this abundance of wealth in America was available to all its citizens. There were no price tags informing this can be yours if only you pay. The White City was a city without laborers, without poor, without classes. The White City was the perfect institution to convey the ideology of America’s greatness to the Fair’s attendees. Debord believed “spectacle came to obscure the open and honest questions: socialism or capitalism?” (69). Debord claims if this question was honestly posed, the working class would not hesitate to choose socialism (69). It is the spectacle of unity, prosperity, wealth, and nationality that turns our attention away from the real economic conditions of all classes and people.

This spectacle of unity that obscured class divisions also was used to mask the instability of race. In the next chapter, I will look at how both World Fair and circus exhibits rigidly tried to define humans in terms of race. I will look at how spectacle was used as a tool for teaching imperialism to an expanding young nation. I will examine how the racial Other came to be presented through spectacle as inferior, savage, and in need of the civilizing force of white Americans. Ethnological exhibits at the Chicago Fair and at the circus were billed as being educational. They were advertised as presenting live pieces of culture for people to learn and absorb as they visually consumed the spectacle. Attendees of both the circus and the Fair were taught that it was America’s historic and present role to be a civilizing, democratic force in the world. By portraying other races as inferior and savage in exhibits, the young U.S. nation was able to see its destiny in expansion; it became America’s responsibility to bring civilization to all races, both inside and outside our borders.
II. White America as a Civilizing Force

Over the Eastern entrance of Machinery Hall at the World’s Columbian Exposition sat one of the numerous models of Columbia displayed at the Fair. Here, the figure of Columbia was:

seated on a throne with a sword in her right hand and a palm of peace in her left. To her left is standing ‘Honor’ with a laurel wreath ready for distribution. On one of the steps of the throne is seated ‘Wealth’ throwing fruits and flowers out of a horn of plenty. To the right and left are grouped inventors of machinery and members of an examining jury. The corners of the pediment are filled by two groups of lions showing brute force subdued by human genius, which is represented by two children (White 145-46).

Many messages are sent by this image, the symbol of the White City. The figure of Columbia herself is paradoxical; at once, she is both peaceful and violent. With a sword in her right hand and a palm of peace in her left, the figure suggests that peace is a state that can be achieved through violence, if necessary. Both ‘Honor’ and ‘Wealth’ are present at the throne of Columbia. At the World Columbian Exposition, it is only a slight inference to assume the U.S. saw itself as Columbia, a country both with incredible honor and abundant wealth. Veblen claimed that honor was conferred on those individuals who most demonstrated their pecuniary strength. The juxtaposition of the two images of Honor and Wealth suggests the U.S. also believed the most abundant and rich nations were the most honorable. Finally, the figure of Columbia portrays a group of lions being tamed by young children. The young American nation appears to see itself as a civilizing force over the once savage continent of America.

It should come as no surprise that there was an entire exhibit dedicated to Christopher Columbus at the World’s Columbian Exposition, an exposition conceived to be in commemoration of Columbus’s great discovery. The name of the exhibit, La Rabida, was in reference to a convent that provided sanctuary for Columbus. In the exhibit, there was even an exact replica of the convent. Supposedly, the priest of the convent helped convince Queen Isabella to fund Columbus’s expedition (White 471). For the exhibit, Spain had even built models of the three ships Columbus took on his first voyage. Reproductions of the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria sailed from Spain to the U.S. to participate in the naval review prior to the Fair; they followed, in large part, the original course of Columbus. After the review, the ships were transported to the Fair (White 493). Near the facsimiles of the ships is a strip of land where “a picture of the actual life at the time when Columbus first landed on its shores” can be seen (White 424). In this representation, Native Americans are gathered, dressed in the costumes of their ancestors, to live in primitive dwellings for spectators to watch. A spectator can even witness natives perform ceremonies and dances. According to Professor F.W. Putnam, Chief Department of Ethnology at the World Fair, “this little colony of native people is not intended for a sideshow for the amusement of the visitor, but for a scientific study of the first historic people of America . . .” (White 424). La Rabida is advertised as an objective mini-history lesson of how Columbus discovered America and what he saw once he landed upon these shores. Professor Putnam encourages the spectators to gaze scientifically on the Native Americans in the exhibit, as if the exhibit actually contained historic figures. Professor Putnam and his audience are unable to see past the spectacle, past the representation, that the Native Americans on display are living people. In viewing this spectacle as scientists objectively studying a culture, the spectators ignore the fact that time has elapsed. These people are not the first historic people...
of America; they are only representations performing a scripted part. “Moreover,” Putnam
continues, “these people are treated with kindness and consideration and are allowed every
opportunity for improvement by observation of the benefits of civilization and education” (White
424). Nearby the exhibit, there is a fully operating schoolhouse for Native Americans. It is run
by the government so people can visibly see “what the Indian is capable of when allowed such
advantages” (White 424). Designers of the Fair clearly saw America as a civilizing force to the
pre-Columbian land and its original people. The spectacle of the native community next to a
nearby U.S. government sponsored school, demonstrates America’s paternalistic attitude towards
the Native Americans; they saw them as a primitive people in need of education and civilization.

The circus also used spectacle as a method of presenting the historic and present role of
the U.S. as civilizer and savior. It was a common practice for the circus to theme its various
shows upon an historic moment in our nation’s past. These reenactments, or specs, as they were
called, always showed the U.S. in a powerful, leadership role. Often the circuses would use a
specific American war as a theme. The Spanish-American War and the Indian Wars were
particular crowd pleasers. A spec of America conquering a people or nation can easily justify the
warfare by portraying America’s intervention as a civilizing force. Perhaps it was because of this
reasoning that the Civil War was never reenacted in the circus (Davis 199). Davis argues that in
these reenactments, American spectators were taught how to deal with their colonial subjects
(203). Specs of the Indian Wars in Cody’s Wild Wild West Show portrayed Americans as the
inevitable, destined, civilizing force on the savage land of the Native Americans (Davis 203).
The same language used to describe Native Americans was used in specs of the Spanish-
American War, collapsing the difference between people, country, and situation in order to teach
Americans that these Spanish colonies were savages too, and it was inevitable for the U.S. to
move in as the great, civilizing force. For example, Filipino nationalists were called “Sitting
Bulls” (Davis 205). Always in these specs, the U.S. was depicted as the pinnacle of diplomacy
and peace, while people such as the Native Americans were painted as heathens in need of
guidance from Americans.

As part of the sideshow the circus contained an Ethnological Congress where people of
color, mainly women, were put on display. Typically, the Ethnological Congress was located
inside the menagerie tent. Ethnic women were physically placed next to animals, which,
according to Davis, “collapsed human and animal boundaries” (118). The circus billed the ethnic
women as “newly discovered races from newly colonized countries” (128). For example, Krao
Farini’s (a Laotian woman) story was that she was a missing link between apes and mankind.
She was known as “gorilla girl” and she would ape around in her exhibit that was placed near the
monkeys (Davis 128). In actuality, Krao was far more intelligent than most other people; Krao
could speak seven languages, and she tutored children at a local library. Yet because of her color,
her ethnicity, she was presented to a gaping public as the most primitive of humans (Davis 129).
According to Davis, “overtime Krao’s persona changed: although still playing a ‘missing link,’
she also became known as a ‘civilized primitive’ whose exposure to European and American
civilization had uplifted her” (130). Sideshow women of color were exhibited as primitive and
savage in order to reinforce imperialist and racial notions in America.

In addition to savageness, ethnic women were also portrayed as overly sexual. For
example, the Ubangi Duck-Billed Savages, were a group of eight Congolese women. Onstage,
they wore short, colorful skirts and had large wooden plates inside their lower lips. Though the
women were Congolese, circus owners did not find the French Congolese mysterious and exotic
enough so they billed them as Ubangi, a territory nowhere near where they were from (Davis
Like Professor Putnam at the World Fair, this circus exhibit had its own professor who explained the lip-stretching tradition of the Ubangis. Supposedly, the tradition had begun years ago in order to protect the tribe’s women from pirates by making them unattractive (Davis 135). Davis argues, “the huge lips of the Ubangi women . . . were central to the showmen’s construction of their sexuality: bodily disfigurement was a means for Ubangi men to keep their women ‘safe’ from ‘marauders’” (135). Davis believes the oversized lips of the Ubangi women would have suggested an engorged labia to the audience familiar with black women stereotypes (135). Here Davis references the Hottentot Venuses. Apparently, in the early 1800s, an Englishman abducted a young woman named Sara Bartman from South Africa and exhibited her in England from 1810-1815. She wore a short, tight-fitted skirt that exaggerated her hips; she was called Hottentot Venus. The words ‘hottentot apron’ referred to the “fictively large African labia and buttocks” (Davis 135). After her death, Bartman’s genitalia was pickled and put on display in a museum in Paris (Davis 135). In reducing an African woman to her reproductive organs, the exhibitors were able to dehumanize and sexually objectify the entire race. The exposed genitalia served as concrete evidence to differentiate between the races, not because the reproductive organs differed in size, but because no one would ever have put a white woman’s pickled genitalia on display in a museum. By placing ethnic women on display, by creating a spectacle of newly discovered savage tribes, the circus reinforced the idea of race as an indicator of worth; African Americans were exhibited as a primitive, uncivilized, highly sexualized race.

Both the World’s Columbian Exposition and the circus operated as institutions manufacturing spectacle and display for the consuming American audience. The spectacles, relaying the images of ethnic people as being inferior, savage, and highly sexual, taught white America to see itself as superior. With that superiority came responsibility; America saw itself as a force capable of bringing civilization to all cultures and races. In his exposé, How the Other Half Lives, Jacob Riis believes it is wealthy, white America’s duty to civilize the overwhelming population of immigrants in New York. The first step, Riis believed, would be cleaning up the tenements. Riis saw humans as a product of their environments. Riis postulates that when people are taken out of the streets, the gutters, and the tenements, their lives, and subsequently their behaviors, will improve.

Riis’ portrait of tenement life is stereotypically racial. Though he is an immigrant himself and a social reformer, his descriptions of various ethnicities demonstrate his belief in their inferiority as a people. For example, Riis paints the Italians as a lazy, dirty, swarthy, gambling, murdering people (43-44). He believes Italians are naturally drawn to the slums (Riis 43). As proof of their primitiveness, Riis observes the women doing all the work: “the women do all the carrying, all the work one sees going on in the Bend. The men sit or stand in the streets, on trucks or in open doors of the saloon smoking black clay pipes, talking and gesticulating as if forever on the point of coming to blows” (50). Veblen believed it was a mark of a primitive society when women were seen doing all the work. Here Riis perceives the Italian male as being lazy and hot-tempered while the women slaved away. Clearly, Riis wants us to see the Italians as a savage people. Another example of Riis’ racial stereotyping can be seen in his description of the Chinese as secretive and stealthy. Earlier, in his description of Jews, Riis had linked cleanliness to honesty (41). However, in his description of the cleanliness of the Chinese, he links their clean behavior to that of a cat: “He is by nature as clean as a cat, which he resembles in his traits of cruel cunning and savage fury when aroused” (Riis 80). Like the circus managers who placed ethnic people next to animals in the menagerie in order to suggest savageness, Riis compares the Chinese to an animal—a stealthy, secretive cat. The stereotypes continue: Jews are
greedy, Bohemians work seven days a week, and African Americans like to gamble (Riis 86-118). By drawing such stereotypically racial pictures of the tenement inhabitants, Riis marks the poor of the city as racially inferior and primitive.

Perhaps by printing the evil conditions of the tenements in conjunction with a savage portrayal of its inhabitants, Riis is more able to instill a sense of responsibility in his audience to clean up the tenements and to educate and civilize these poor people. Riis strongly believes in education as a civilizing force: “Thus the whole matter resolves itself once more into a question of education, all the more urgent because these people are poor, miserably poor, almost to a man” (113). In Riis’ mind, the first step is to raise their living conditions. Riis believes if the workers were paid more money, and if their living conditions were improved, you would see a decrease in violence and crime. According to Riis, “there is a closer connection between the wages of the tenements and the vices and improvidence of those who dwell in them. . . . Weak tea with a dry crust is not a diet to nurse moral strength” (132). Riis believes that if we place the immigrant poor in a clean, civilized, healthy environment, then we will see a clean, civilized, moral people emerge. Riis creates a stereotypically racist spectacle of the immigrants living in the tenements in order to appeal to the American who sees himself as a civilizing force that will raise the living conditions of these primitive people. By exhibiting the squalor of the tenements and by linking their poor conditions to ethnic stereotypes, Riis’ spectacle of drudgery argues for the civilizing intervention of white Americans; it is the true American’s moral duty to help.

In his novella, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (A Story of New York)*, Stephen Crane paints a depressing portrait of what happens when there is no civilizing, moral force to intervene in a young girl’s life. Crane’s story takes place in the tenements. The entire exposition sets up the violent and abusive environment Maggie was raised in. The first chapter begins with a street fight and ends with a mother beating her children. There is no civilizing force in Maggie’s life. The only bit of culture and refinement Maggie witnesses in her whole life is during a theatrical performance. During this performance, Maggie starts to wonder if she could achieve the refinement she sees being performed onstage: “she wondered if culture and refinement she had seen imitated, perhaps grotesquely, by the heroine on the stage, could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirt factory” (Crane 38). It is an interesting question for Maggie to ask. The culture and refinement Maggie observes is being performed onstage; therefore, Crane suggests that culture and refinement are skills that can be imitated and learned, as opposed to natural characteristics acquired in birth. In this brief moment, Crane suggests the possibility of Maggie’s moving up out of a life of vice, violence, and corruption. Maggie, though, is never given a chance to achieve the culture and refinement she perceives onstage. Rather, she turns to prostitution and, eventually, she dies. Crane’s rather fatalistic depiction of the tenement life paints a depressing portrait of the result of a life of abuse and neglect. Other than an actress Maggie once sees onstage, there is no civilizing force in Maggie’s life, no positive example or influence. In fact, the people in Maggie’s life were much more likely to be entertained by the spectacle of vice than to morally interfere into other people’s affairs. Whenever Maggie’s neighboring tenants heard a fight in their tenement, they would shout, “Whoop!” and “the hall filled with interested spectators” (Crane 41). The tenants were more interested in being entertained by violence and vice than in putting a stop to it. Crane’s story of New York highlights the depressing conditions of tenement life. Crane faithfully portrays the inevitable ruin of a young girl living in these horrible conditions. By making Maggie’s ruin appear inevitable, Crane argues we are a product of our environment, thereby pushing his reader to wonder what Maggie’s life would have been like in a different environment. Crane’s tale of
the ruined conditions and life of a young girl in New York is Riis’ argument fictionalized; both propose the inevitable ruin of the immigrant poor without the civilizing social reform of tenement life.

While the role of white America as a civilizing force was being reinforced through spectacle, it should be clear that the process of civilizing was not intended to make the constructed racial Other equal to the perceived white American; rather, the goal, as with Krao, was to create a ‘civilized primitive’ people. White America was to always be first-class citizens; everyone else was reduced to second-class status, a civilized, yet still primitive, people.

The World’s Fair may create the spectacle of the prosperity and unity of America, but how unified is a nation that excludes its own citizens from participating in their country’s Exposition? It had been 28 years since the Civil War had ended, and though African Americans numbered eight million, one-tenth of the population of the United States, not a single African American was invited to have any part in the planning or the designing of the White City (Rydell vi-xvi). Commissioners were appointed from every state and territory to help in the construction of the Exposition, yet all chosen representatives were white. If African Americans were going to submit exhibits, they had to go through existing state committees, all of which, again, were white (Rydell xviii). Most African Americans chose not to exhibit anything at all. Exhibits that did make it into the Fair usually furthered the purpose of showcasing African Americans as second-class citizens. For example, a prominent flour milling firm, the R.T. Davis Milling Company, asked a former slave to advertise pancake mix at the Fair. Fifty-seven year old Nancy Green agreed to “play the part of a stereotypical plantation mammy,” Aunt Jemima (Rydell xix). Green’s performance was one of the biggest hits of the Fair. The R.T. Davis Milling Company even won a medal for their display (xix). As Ida B. Wells rightfully points out in her pamphlet “The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition” was that in this White City:

in this wonderful hive of National industry, representing the outlay of thirty million dollars, and numbering its employees by the thousands, only two colored persons could be found whose occupations were of a higher grade than that of janitor, laborer, and porter, and these two only clerkships. Only as a menial is the Colored American to be seen—the Nation’s deliberate and cowardly tribute to the Southern demand ‘to keep the Negro in his place. (Wells 80)

The dominant, ruling economic power lay in the hands of white America. In building, planning, and running the spectacle that was the White City, it is clear that one of the messages relayed was that in this city, a microcosm for America itself, the African American could only ever be a second-class citizen, a worker in service to the needs of the White City, a worker in service to the needs of white America. The problem, though, with race determining the value of a person, is that race, itself, is a construction; the marker distinguishing a white American from a black American is not always apparent by skin color. One of the problems Nella Larsen’s novel, Passing, hinges on is the unreliability of appearance, of skin color, as an indicator of a person’s race.

Larsen’s novel circles around the relationship of two women, both racially tainted as black, but both able to pass for white in society. Clare chooses to live her life as a white woman; Irene sticks with what she perceives as her own race. The novel centers on Irene’s obsession with Clare; Irene is bothered by Clare’s life. Larsen characterizes Irene as liking life to be orderly and certain; she wants appearance to match up to reality. For instance, Larsen writes, Irene “didn’t like it to be warm and springy when it should have been cold and crisp, or grey and
cloudy as if snow was about to fall. The weather, like people, ought to enter into the spirit of the season” (Larsen 213). In other words, people like Clare should do what is expected; they should marry into their own race, and they should not try to pass for something they are not.

Irene’s reliance on appearance causes her trouble in her everyday life. For instance, Irene’s marriage is in trouble because she relies so much on her belief in appearance. Though she is never able to confirm it, Irene believes Clare is having an affair with her husband. Irene has no reason to suspect her husband. She even reasons, “what was there, what had there been, to show that she was even half correct in her tormenting notions? Nothing” (Larsen 223). Irene believes Clare is having an affair with her husband because he invites Clare over to the house. What could be perceived as innocently welcoming Irene’s friend is instead suspiciously treated as an affair. Irene believes in the appearance of an affair over her reason. Furthermore, Irene and her husband have been fighting because Irene refuses to see the real conditions of prejudice in Harlem, in America. Their fight is over how to raise their children. Irene wants to shelter her children from hatred and prejudice while Brian feels the children “better find out what sort of thing they are up against as soon as possible” (Larsen 231). Irene even realizes she never really loved her husband, though she is not willing to let go of the appearance of married bliss. Irene never thinks about divorce; rather, “she still intended to hold fast to the outer shell of her marriage, to keep her life fixed, certain” (Larsen 235). As long as everything appeared to be right, her life was certain. Irene is not capable of understanding that appearance can be illusory, that it may not match reality. She likes everything in her life to be certain.

Yet Larsen’s project in her novel is to continually reinforce the idea of the unreliability of appearances and the instability of Irene’s certainty. For example, Hugh Wentworth, an anthropologist, a man who makes his living thinking, researching, and writing about different cultures, often cannot distinguish between races. At a dance in Harlem, Wentworth expresses his frustration at not being able to always distinguish between black and white. To Irene, he exclaims, “‘Damned if I know! I’ll be sure as anything that I’ve learned the trick. And then in the next minute I’ll find I couldn’t pick some of ‘em if my life depended on it’” (Larsen 206). Wentworth, the celebrated anthropologist cannot with certainty always distinguish between the races. Irene, who likes everything to be so black and white, often ‘passes’ in public. When Irene meets Clare for the first time in years, it is in Chicago, having tea at the Drayton, a place Irene knows she would not normally be allowed to sit if people knew she was black (Larsen 150). Irene even admits that she often passes as white “for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that” (Larsen 227). What is it that agitates Irene so much about Clare for taking passing a step above petty convenience? Irene should understand the unreliability of appearance simply by knowing that she can pass for white at the Drayton. What seems to separate Clare’s understanding from Irene’s is that Clare dares to see race as an arbitrary social construction. Though she can technically pass, Irene sees race as something stronger than an arbitrary bond. Irene often describes herself as caught between two allegiances: “Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race” (Larsen 225). For Irene, race is a force that binds her. Irene feels bound by a color she does not even possess. Irene is bothered by Clare for ignoring the force that Irene finds so suffocating. In marrying her white husband, Clare ignores the color line and yet, later, desires to tell her husband the truth and be reunited with her race.

What Larsen’s novel makes clear is the force behind arbitrary racial lines. Both Irene and Clare, each in their own way, feel tied to a race. Though they both can ‘pass’ for white in
society, they still feel connected and obligated to reside within racial boundaries. The construction of race is closely tied to spectacle. Race is an image, a representation, with both perceptible and imperceptible qualities. Like spectacle, we should realize that when determining race we are only ever seeing a partial image, and appearances are misleading. This representation of race, like spectacle, is presented as society itself; it is an objective force that we all feel present in our lives, but we remain unable to account for its strength. At Pennsylvania State University, Professor Samuel Richards teaches a course in race and ethnic relations. As part of his class, he asks all of his students to take a genetic screening test to see where their ancestors came from. Many students who think they are 100% white or 100% black find out otherwise. “One white student learned that 14% of his DNA came from Africa—and 6% from East Asia” (“Debunking the Concept of Race”). Professor Richards uses this test in his classroom to teach his students that race is more fluid than most of us think. Exhibits at the World Fair and at the circus used spectacle to relay the image of African Americans as a primitive, sexualized, inferior race. These exhibits taught spectators to use color as an indicator of a person’s worth. What Larsen’s novel demonstrates, however, is that color often fails as an indicator. Appearance is deceptive. Race and ethnicity are more fluid than spectacle allows us to see. Everything is not as black and white as the White City.

The Columbian Exposition and the circus both model how spectacle can become a vehicle for ideology. With its divisions and abundance of products, the Columbian Exposition taught the world that America was a growing, rich, prosperous nation. The buildings dedicated to manufacturing, electricity, and transportation, exhibiting the innovation and force of America’s inventions, taught the world the power of this young nation. The specs performed at the circus always portrayed the U.S. as the savior, the civilizer, the democratic victor. These sites of spectacle did more than teach their audiences about the greatness of America; they also taught their viewing public how to be spectators, how to see others as objects of display for the spectator’s consuming pleasure.

In the next chapter, I will look at how women become objects of spectacle and how they learn to see themselves as figures on display to be purchased and collected. While the idea of the objectification of women is nothing new to the nineteenth century, I argue that with industrialization and the rise of commodity culture, the viewing of women as objects of spectacle significantly increased, and references to women as spectacles continually appeared in this period’s literature. The Chicago Exposition and the circus provided archetypes for the public on how to both place and view women on display.
III. The Display of Living Pictures

The Columbian Exposition in Chicago was the first exposition to involve women in its planning and to set aside a building for women and their exhibits. By an act of Congress, a Board of Lady Managers was created to assist in the planning of the Fair and the construction of the Women’s Building. The women, directed by Board President, Mrs. Potter Palmer, decided to even hire a female architect to construct the Women’s Building (White 445). Women’s inclusion in the World Fair would suggest that female activists were making significant progress. No other world exhibition had appointed a committee of women and had given them their own building at a World Fair. However, the design of the Building and the exhibits within only seemed to further reiterate their role in the private, domestic sphere. For example, the sculpture work inside the building illustrated stereotypical womanly virtues such as charity, sacrifice, maternity, and love (White 440). Furthermore, the exhibits inside the building consisted of areas devoted to reform work and charity organizations (White 440). The Women’s Building even contained a model kitchen, though progressive women such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman firmly believed in removing all kitchens from homes in order to separate women for the domestic duty of cooking (Gilman 242). Finally, inside the building were ladies’ parlors, committee rooms, and club rooms for various women speakers (White 440). Rather than having women speak publicly, outside the Building, they spoke only within the confines of their own walls. Though Mrs. Palmer remarked the purpose of the Women’s Building was to “provide evidence of women’s skill in the various industries . . . to convince the world that ability is not a matter of sex,” it is clear in the display of the Woman’s Building that the skills women possessed were domestic ones; their abilities were all confined to the private sphere (White 440). The separation of the Women’s Building from the rest of the divisions of manufacturing and production at the Fair visibly marks women’s separation from production in the nineteenth century. The building itself, highlighting the domesticity of women, reinforces the belief in separate spheres, which were dramatically enacted when the Fair gave women their own separate building.

Outside the Women’s Building, in other exhibits of the Fair, women’s bodies were being continuously placed on display. Down the Midway Plaisance, sometimes alternately called ‘the side show’ one could find all kinds of beautiful women chosen from around the world and displayed in a variety of costume. The International Dress and Costume Company selected forty-five women to be in their show, and the exhibit was the most profitable of all the exhibits at the Fair (White 564). Also, along the Midway, a Moorish Palace was reproduced and displayed. Inside the Palace the spectator could find such exhibits as the Fountain of Youth, which aged females would enter the Fountain and emerge as young, beautiful, nubile teenagers (White 590). If the Women’s Building itself was dedicated to reinforcing the cult of domesticity upon women, the rest of the World Fair was occupied with displaying and viewing the bodies of women. Interestingly enough, the Women’s Building was placed just before the opening into the Midway Plaisance, “just at the point of transition from official view of reality to the world of exotic amusement” (Trachtenberg 222). Though the World Fair made strides by allowing women to contribute to its construction and exhibits, the spectacle of women displayed suggests the question of woman’s position in the growing greatness of the American nation was still largely unsettled. On the one hand, she was emerging in importance by being given significant
representation at the World’s Fair. On the other hand, the spectacle that was portrayed only further reinforced the ideology of the domestic woman whose body can also be exotically displayed for male amusement and enjoyment.

Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, Charlotte Perkins Gilman understands and clearly articulates the position of women in her book *Women and Economics*. Gilman wants to argue that women’s inequality is not caused by biological conditions, by something in a woman’s nature, but by the social conditions within society. For Gilman, the main problem causing inequality between the sexes is the separation of women from the means of production and the distribution of wealth (9). Women are not positioned in society to be producers, rather, they are encouraged to consume. In order to acquire wealth, the means to consume, they are forced to be economically dependent on males. It is because of this economic dependence that Gilman believes the female comes to be over-sexed; she is female first, not human (38).

According to Gilman, “because of the economic dependence of the human female on her mate, she is modified to sex to an excessive degree” (38-39). Women are taught to be smaller, weaker, less physical, and less athletic than men to make the distinction between the sexes more profound. Gilman recognizes the hard fact that for women to profit economically, their only recourse is their power of sex-attraction (63). Furthermore, the real irony for Gilman is that the woman cannot even acknowledge that she needs to marry for money; she can never look too desperate or eager: “She must not even look as if she wanted it! She must not even turn her hand over to get it. She must sit passive as the seasons go by and her ‘chances’ lessen with each year” (88). The discourse of love must be used to sanctify women’s economic dependence on men, which can only be justified in marriage and shunned outside of that union (Gilman 97). In order to be selected by the male, women arrange their appearance in ways most attractive and appealing to the male eye. If they are successful, women receive in return economic security; if they are unsuccessful, they passively wait on the shelf as their ‘chances’ slip by and society casts them aside as old maids. As the Fountain of Youth exhibit in the Columbian Exposition demonstrates, young, beautiful women are more valued than aged females. By placing beautiful women on display, the Columbian Exposition strongly reinforced the idea of women as commodities for the male spectator. The spectacle of the Exposition became a useful tool for conveying the ideology of women as objects for display.

In no other novel is the economic situation of women so clearly presented as in Edith Wharton’s novel, *The House of Mirth*. Wharton’s protagonist, Lily Bart, is an unmarried, young woman living with her wealthy Aunt Peniston. Both Lily’s parents are dead and with little to no inheritance, Lily is completely dependent on the kindness and hospitality of others. She is also 29. As Gilman would say, Lily’s ‘chances’ of securing economic stability through marriage are dwindling with each passing year.

Wharton’s main project in *The House of Mirth* is to demonstrate how spectators view women, in this case Lily, as valuable commodities. Wharton opens the novel referencing the sight of Lily Bart seven times. Selden, our male spectator, is “refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart.” He is never able to “see her without a faint movement of interest,” and, for him, her figure “always raised speculation” (Wharton 1). Simply through the introduction of her novel, Wharton already establishes Lily Bart as an object for male spectatorship. The book opens with both Selden and the reader seeing Lily Bart, a woman on display. Wharton continues her purpose of demonstrating the commodification of Lily by showing how males, in this case Selden, view Lily as a highly specialized, almost manufactured, product. Selden notes “the modeling of her little ear, the crisp, upward wave of her hair—was it ever so brightened by art?—and the thick
planting of her straight black lashes” (Wharton 5). It is as if Lily were an exquisite doll the way Selden describes the molding of her facial features. The analogy of Lily as a manufactured product continues as Selden figures Lily “must have cost a great deal to make . . . He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay” (Wharton 5). In Selden’s eyes, Lily is a fine, exquisite object; she is valuable because her beauty sets her apart from the rest of her sex. Her beautiful appearance is what makes her a success.

For someone like Mr. Percy Gryce, acquiring Lily through marriage would be like acquiring a fine possession for a collection. Gryce is a wealthy collector of Americana; he inherited both his wealth and his collection from his father, taking equal pride in both. Lily first tries to capture Gryce’s attention because she is “determined to be to him what his Americana had hitherto been: the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it” (Wharton 44). At 29, a dependent on the charity of her friends and family, Lily is no fool. No romantic rhetoric confuses her sense of her precarious position; she clearly knows that she must marry to acquire economic security. Maybe more clearly than anyone else, Lily understands how she is a valuable commodity. Insightfully, Lily reflects to Selden:

“If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background if you like: they don’t make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed until we drop—and if we can’t keep it up alone, we have to go into a partnership” (Wharton 11).

Lily realizes that it is her outward appearance that makes her valuable, both as a pretty ornament at the tables of her friends, and as an object on display for the marriage market.

Men not only view Lily as an exquisite object, as something to possess, but they also see her as a means to enhance their own status in the community. Had Lily allowed Mr. Rosedale to escort her to the train station, she might have been able to purchase his silence, for Lily realizes that “to be seen walking down the platform at the crowded afternoon hour in the company of Miss Lily Bart would have been money in [Rosedale’s] pocket” (Wharton 14). Lily knows that by her simply accompanying Rosedale, his status would rise; he would be more accepted in New York society. Rosedale offers to marry Lily because he views her as a sure ticket into her set—the leisure class of New York society. Rosedale wishes to conspicuously display Lily to enhance his status in the community.

Nowhere in the novel does Wharton make clearer her understanding of Lily’s position as an object of spectacle than in the scene of the tableau vivants. Here, Lily chooses to depict herself as Reynolds’s Mrs. Lloyd. By drawing several stark similarities between Lily and Mrs. Lloyd, Wharton is able to show the representational nature of Lily, of women. In the notes, the editor, Janet Beer, informs the reader that Mrs. Lloyd “is shown in a sylvan setting, dressed in flowing draperies and carving her husband’s name upon a tree” (292). What interests me about Lily’s choice to portray this particular figure is that earlier in the novel a reference is made to Lily in a sylvan setting. When Lily visits Selden at his apartment, Selden watches her by his mantelpiece and notes the “wild-wood grace to her outline—as though she were a captured dryad subdued to the conventions of the drawing room, and Selden reflected it was the same streak of sylvan freedom in her nature that lent such savor to her artificiality” (Wharton 11). The word “sylvan” appears both in the description of Reynolds’s painting and in Selden’s description of Lily and refers to a woodland. Selden appreciates the ‘wild-wood grace’ of Lily’s form, and Lily chooses a painting where she represents a figure in a wooded area. The way Selden sees Lily in
his drawing room is similar to the way Lily chooses to display herself to a larger audience. Moreover, Reynold’s subject, Mrs. Lloyd, is painted as tracing her husband’s name in a tree. Previously in the novel, Lily confesses to Selden that whenever she sees him, she finds herself “spelling out a letter of a sign” (Wharton 60). Although we, as readers, are never told what the letter is, it is interesting that both the figure of Mrs. Lloyd and Lily are shown tracing letters. The Lily in real life is no different from the living painting she represents onstage: both are objects on display; both are objects of spectacle.

In the tableaux vivants scene, Wharton collapses the difference between Lily Bart onstage, as a figure of art, and Lily Bart in society, as an object of male desire. Wharton goes so far as to describe how like the figure in the painting Lily really is: “It was as though, she had stepped not out of, but into Reynolds’s canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty with her living grace” (Wharton 119). Like the painting, Lily is a representation; she is the spectacle, not the painting. In fact, both Selden and Gerty feel that, at this moment, when Lily is literally on display they are finally seeing “the real Lily Bart” (Wharton 119). Lily’s cousin, Jack Stepney, refers to the experience of seeing Lily on display as if he were at an auction and threatens to voice his disapproval to Lily’s aunt (Wharton 139). What Jack does not realize is that what the tableaux vivant scene makes so vulgar is what Lily goes through daily. Every day is like being at auction for Lily. Until she gets married, she places herself on display for men to admire. Even on her deathbed she remains a figure designed to flatter men. When Selden approaches her bedside, he feels that this “estranged and tranquil form” is not the real Lily, not because Lily’s spirit, mind, or even her life is gone, but because “for the first time, [she] neither paled nor brightened at his coming” (Wharton 285). For Selden, the real Lily responds to him. Because this dead figure failed to acknowledge his presence, it can only be a semblance of Lily Bart. The real Lily Bart is always depicted in relation to the novel’s main spectator, Selden. When this can no longer happen, Lily Bart dies. This reading of Wharton’s novel shows that even in literature, authors were beginning to recognize the representational nature by which society viewed women. Wharton’s genius lay in her recognition of the perception of women (even their own perception of themselves) as objects of spectacle.

In his book, Ways of Seeing, John Berger makes a similar assessment on the perception of women. Berger discusses the objectification of women and the valuable role appearance plays in a woman’s success. Berger believes women are taught to survey themselves; to understand that how they appear to others, especially males, will determine their success. Thus, Berger argues, two elements emerge in a woman’s identity: the surveyor and the surveyed (46). Women come to recognize that they are always objects of vision, a sight for the male gaze. They come to understand how to survey other women in order to imitate their attractions and, in turn, be more competitive (Berger 47). Berger argues that “women are depicted in quite a different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine—but because the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him” (64). In the consumer culture of nineteenth-century America, women, then, have become commodities for the male spectator. In our twenty-first century ‘society of the spectacle,’ women are still objects on display for the male spectator.

The spectacle was not only used as a vehicle for displaying women, but also as a tool to control the force of the women’s movement. As more women were participating in paid labor and circulating in public, the presence of women in the circus was heightened (Davis 88). Before the Civil War, female circus performers were considered vulgar and disreputable, but by the beginning of the twentieth century, more women were present in the circus, both in the
audience, and in the circus acts themselves (Davis 84-88). The circus even became a new venue for women’s public activism—in 1896, the New Woman came to the circus (Davis 82). According to Davis, the big crowds at circuses appealed to suffragists as a “visible occasion to promote the vote” (89). In order to advance such causes as dress reform, these New Women would be “clad in ‘becoming bloomers’ and perform amazing feats of athleticism” (Davis 82). Not only does Davis argue that the New Women came to the circus, but she also contends that the performances of women in the circus reflected the image of the suffragists as objects of spectacle. Davis claims, “the suffragists’ colorful tactics mirrored the spectacular display of the female body at the circus” (89). In her chapter, Davis describes the activities of various women circus performers. Some women demonstrated incredible feats of strength, like the German weightlifter, “She Tosses her Husband about like a Biscuit” (82). Others tamed dangerous animals and some even grew beards (Davis 82).

Davis also focuses attention on female nudity in the circus. Given that, as a woman in the nineteenth century, wearing anything other than long skirts, petticoats, and sleeves was considered promiscuous and vulgar, Davis spends a significant amount of time discussing the audacity of the female performer’s costumes. Circus acts “portray[ed] barely dressed women in a range of bodily attitudes: on the trapeze, with snakes, lions, horses, or clowns, or en masse as members of a great chorus” (Davis 83). Female circus performers became very sexualized to their audience. Since the New Woman was connected to the circus, and thus connected to the female performers who challenged patriarchy with their feats of athleticism and their sexuality, it makes logical sense that the public became increasingly anxious about the public women reformers. Davis argues, “women’s public activism occurred alongside growing popular references to sexuality” (89). According to Davis, people grew so anxious over the role of women that “physicians and intellectuals called the female athlete and the New Woman a danger to traditional notions of domestic propriety. The scientific community often represented them as ‘mannelish,’ a liminal ‘third sex’ neither female nor male (Davis 91). Women fighting for emancipation and equality tried to use the publicity of the circus to promote the vote. While this publicity may have benefited female reformers, it also intimately linked the New Woman with circus entertainment, allowing the women’s movement to be depicted as cheap spectacle and amusement. In no other novel is the comparison between the circus and the New Woman more intricately drawn than in Henry James’ novel, The Bostonians. Here James repeatedly uses circus imagery to belittle the women’s movement. In this novel, all the main female characters involved with the woman’s movement are depicted as ridiculous radicals and are made objects of spectacle.

It is through the eyes of the novel’s male spectator, Basil Ransom, a Southern man with old ideas, that we meet our chief women supporters of the movement. The novel’s central advocate for women’s rights, Olive Chancellor, is described by her sister as “a female Jacobin—she’s a nihilist. Whatever is, is wrong, and all that sort of thing” (James 5). Olive Chancellor is not merely a woman petitioning for equality; she is a radical revolutionary, an anarchist fighting for power; if given enough power she may terrorize the world. This early description of Olive Chancellor demonstrates the anxiety surrounding the New Woman; if women were given the right to vote, it could lead to anarchy. All rationality was denied to the New Woman. Even the meetings held by women reformers were described in terms of the supernatural. These women who met to talk about equality were “all witches and wizards, mediums, and spirit-rappers, and roaring radicals” (James 5). A woman radical possessed as much rationality and sense as a spirit from another world, or a witch.
But perhaps James’ strongest dig at the women’s movement is his portrayal of the chosen speaker of the movement, Verena Tarrant. Here, circus imagery reduces the women’s movement to a site of spectacle. We are told that Verena Tarrant is the daughter of a mesmeric healer, Selas Tarrant (James 41). In other words, Verena Tarrant’s family profits on cheap parlor tricks; spectacle is the main source of their income. When we first meet Verena, in order for her to even speak, she has to have her father lay his hands upon her to “start her up” (James 49). The inspiring words she speaks about the history of women and their current position are not really her own; they are spoken as of coming from “some power outside—it seemed to flow through her” (James 51). The voice of the movement is brought about by some outside power through a laying on of paternal and patriarchal hands. Verena, as the speaker of the movement, also becomes a servant of spectacle. If we remember Debord, the spectacle is relayed as images to the public, acting as a vehicle conveying the ideas and goals of the system. In this description of Verena’s speech, it is clear that she is being linked to some type of vehicle or vessel. She can only speak addressing the women’s movement once some outside force has flowed through her. Never at any moment does James lead us to believe that Verena is capable of autonomously speaking on her own. All authenticity of the real struggle and voices behind the movement are eclipsed by Selah’s laying on of hands.

Verena Tarrant, as the speaker of the movement, serves as a symbol of the women’s struggle. Whatever she says represents what the female reformers stand for; therefore, how she is perceived determines how the New Woman is perceived. Thus, when James continuously compares Verena to a circus performer, he invites the reader to compare all New Women to circus entertainers. Continually, aspects of the carnival appear juxtaposed with Verena. For example, the home of the Tarrants is described in circus imagery. First of all, the Tarrant residence is referred to as a “bare . . . temporary lair” (James 107). Like carnival folk, the Tarrants are nomadic and move around from town to town. Secondly, walking the footpath to the Tarrants’ home is compared to walking a tightrope: “a footway was overlaid with a strip of planks. These planks were embedded in ice or liquid thaw, according to the momentary mood of the weather, and the advancing pedestrian traversed them in the attitude, and with a good deal of suspense of a rope dancer” (James 107). Every time anyone enters the Tarrants’ property, he has to first complete a balancing act on these planks, like a tight rope walker in a circus.

A description of the Tarrant’s dwelling is not the only way James compares Verena to a circus performer. It is especially when Verena speaks on the platform that the circus imagery most often appears. When Olive hears Verena speak for the first time, she sees her “bright, vulgar clothes” and reasons that Verena “might have been a rope-dancer or a fortune teller” (Verena 73). Furthermore, when Basil sees Verena speaking onstage he compares her to an “actress. . . . or a singer spinning vocal sounds on a silver thread (James 244). James informs the reader that during Verena’s speech, Basil gazed at her “in very much the same excited way as if she had been performing high above his head on the trapeze” (James 244). As a rope-dancer, actress, singer, and even a trapeze artist, Verena Tarrant is consistently compared to a circus attraction. People come to see her not to learn from her speeches about the slavery of women but to be entertained by her presence. They come to see a beautiful woman address them. By depicting Verena Tarrant as a circus performer, an object of spectacle, James categorizes the entire women’s movement as a site for spectacle, thereby stripping all seriousness and authenticity from its platform. The women’s movement becomes a site for entertainment only, and entertainment can be replaced with whatever seems most amusing to a public. As one attendee at a woman’s reform meeting remarks, “‘I must say, I call it a very base evasion of Mr.
Burrage’s, producing Verena Tarrant; it’s worse than the meretricious music. Why didn’t she honestly send for a ballerina from Niblo’s—if she wanted a young woman capering about the platform?” (James 239). Mrs. Luna, the attendee, views Verena Tarrant as serving the same purpose as a ballerina. There is no difference in her mind between a ballet dancer and a platform speaker; they are both entertainers. Thus, the importance of the issues Verena speaks about (which do not even originate within her) are lost among the amusement of seeing her perform. James’ novel, *The Bostonians*, explicitly connects the women’s movement to circus attractions. Through this connection, James is able to bypass the importance of the issue of emancipation of women. What James’ novel most demonstrates is how spectacle came to be used as a vehicle for debasing women’s issues. Comparing female performers to mere circus attractions masks the real issues of the movement through the spectacle created by circus imagery. Just as the reader only sees Verena Tarrant as a performer, her voice being entirely muted by her appearance, so too are the female reformers silenced by the circus imagery associated with them. In terms of the circus, the women’s movement was no more than an act, allowing those who opposed the movement to pull the curtain and look for the next entertainment.

James’ reduction of the women’s movement to the spectacle of female circus performers reflects nineteenth century society’s growing anxiety about women’s rights and issues. The spectacle of female circus performers was used to direct attention away from platform issues as the audience simply focused on the entertainment of seeing a woman onstage. James’ characterization of Basil Ransom reflects an audience so used to viewing women as objects of spectacle that it is unable to see the women’s movement as anything other than a performance.

The World’s Columbian Exposition may have shown progress by inviting women to participate and by giving them their own building, but the exposition also simultaneously reinforced domesticity and the objectification of women. The location of the Women’s building, separated from the buildings of production and adjacent to the Midway Plaisance (the sideshow), reflects the still prevailing view of women as exotic amusement. As the Fountain of Youth exhibit demonstrates, women are only ever as valuable as their appearance is pleasing. In nineteenth century society, women, then, can be compared to Wharton’s tableaux vivants; they are living pictures valued most for their beautiful display.
Conclusion

During the nineteenth century, the American nation underwent many economic, social, and technological changes. Geographically, the nation expanded as the Western frontier was announced closed and the U.S. began to open up its market overseas. With the coming of the railroads, the whole nation was transformed since both people and products could be quickly transported from place to place. Industrially, the nation boomed as it surpassed previous world leaders in industry like Great Britain. Literally, the face of America was changing as the immigrant population in places like New York began to outnumber Americans. In part, U.S. expositions and the traveling circus provided unique opportunities for the U.S. to represent to the world, and to its own citizens, what it meant to be an American in the midst of all this change.

The spectacle created by the World’s Columbian Exposition portrayed the U.S. as a prosperous, unified, capitalist nation. The abundance of products stored in the White City conspicuously displayed the wealth of America in comparison to other, less prosperous, nations. The circus, with its after show concerts, visibly displayed various facets of capitalism under a spectacular and entertaining light. Behind all the glitter of prosperity and worker contentment was a nation facing concerns like labor unrest and economic distress. The spectacle of wealth and abundance created by the White City obscured the growing poverty in America by presenting a classless society to a country facing widening inequalities among its people. The unreal unity of the classless White City masked growing class divisions.

Both the Exposition and the circus used spectacle as a vehicle for presenting imperialist views to Americans. By exhibiting different ethnicities as savage and primitive, these sites of spectacle reinforced the notion of white America as a civilizing force. Exhibits such as La Rabida and the Ethnological Congress taught Americans their destiny lay in expansion. It was America’s moral and democratic duty to bring civilization to all races. These exhibits such as Krao, the gorilla girl, taught spectators to use color as an indicator of a person’s worth. The black and white simplicity of the White City obscured the fluidity of ethnicity. The activity of passing challenges the rigidity of race.

Finally, the World’s Columbian Exposition and the circus, as sites of spectacle, reinforced the perception of women as objects to be put on display. The Women’s Building at the White City focused entirely on domesticity, emphasizing women’s role in the home. Outside the Women’s Building, female bodies were placed on display in the Midway Plaisance. Youth and beauty are emphasized as the most valuable attributes a woman can have. Women reformers were not taken as seriously because society had difficulty viewing the women’s movement as anything other than an entertaining spectacle.

In his book, The Incorporation of America, Alan Trachtenberg argues the final message of the World’s Columbian Exposition was “a corporate alliance of business, culture, and the State” (217). For Trachtenberg, the White City “seemed to have settled the question of the true and real meaning of America. It seemed the victory of the elites in business, politics, and culture over dissident but divided voices of labor, farmers’, immigrants, blacks, and women” (231). The dominant, ruling, economic order, the elites in business and politics, found it could use the spectacle to create the image of America that it wanted to be: America as a prosperous, unified, capitalist, democracy. The unsettling voices in America, those of laborers, women, immigrants, African and Native Americans, were all painted over by the white splendor of the World’s Fair; the gilding of the White City was an attempt to cover the widening crack in American society. In Larsen’s novel Passing, all Irene had to do to be rid of a cup that reminded her of slavery was
to break it (222). Likewise, in *The Golden Bowl*, all the characters in the novel have to do was drop the bowl to expose the crack in its crystal. The cracks in the foundation of American society were only painted over by spectacle. Like Irene, Americans need only drop the gilded spectacle to expose the cracks in our society’s structure.
Works Cited


