'TEH HELL OR TEH WORK':

THE WOMAN ADRIFT AND MORALITY FOR

THREE TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY AMERICAN AUTHORS

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

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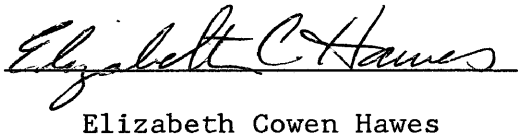

Elizabeth Cowen Hawes

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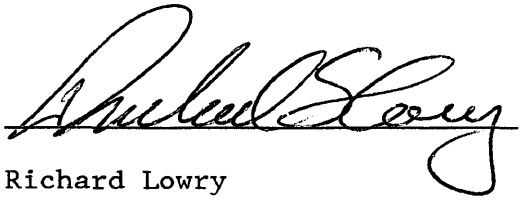
Elsa Nettels, Chair



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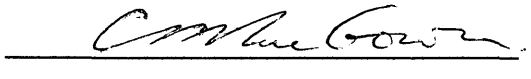

Christopher MacGowan

To my father and my own Atticus Finch, Albert Cary Hawes, for always answering my questions and for making all things possible.

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ABSTRACT

Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie, and Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth all address the turn-of-the-century phenomenon of the 'woman adrift' and the moral dilemmas her independence presented to society. Nowhere else in American literature do such detailed representations of these women appear, though 'women adrift' accounted for a sizable portion of the work force of the period. These women--young, single women of the working class living away from their families in the cities of turn-of-the-century America--were expected to find "acceptable" work to support themselves or their families until they married; the majority of these "acceptable" jobs were in the factories of the big cities of the age. But employment in the factories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not the morally strengthening, financially fulfilling endeavor that moralists and older brothers like Crane's Jimmie Johnson, from whose words the title is taken, so often figured it to be. The unmarried (and therefore 'suspect,' in society's eyes) women of these works come to realize that this kind of moral uprightness--manifested by employment--does not open the doors to health, wealth, and happiness (to say nothing of matrimony), and they leave the factories, cutting themselves further 'adrift.' Two then become kept women; one does not. The fates that ultimately befall these characters make powerful critical statements about the moral demands, expectations, and limitations imposed on these 'women adrift.'

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"Mag, I'll tell yeh dis! See? Yeh've edder got teh go teh hell or go teh work!"

--Stephen Crane, Maggie

'Teh hell or teh work'--this was the choice given to many independent young women of turn-of-the-century America. Gainful employment, it was believed, would keep unmarried women busy and therefore 'out of trouble': i.e., out of a life of idleness, prostitution, crime, and, in general, moral scrapes of all kinds. For young women like Maggie Johnson in Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, Carrie Meeber in Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie, and Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth, however, work proves to be hell itself. 'Gainful employment'--particularly in the factories of turn-of-the-century American cities, where all of these characters work at some point in the novels--was neither the healthiest nor the most successful nor the most morally uplifting course of action for all single young women, as these three authors show. Through Carrie, Maggie, and Lily, these authors promote a better understanding not only of the difficulties facing young single women seeking work in the cities but of the circumstances which

frequently led to their abandonment of their jobs and the assumption of socially ambiguous, if not altogether taboo, ways of living.

These works are novels of the city, which for many Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represented the new frontier. As industrialization continued to squeeze the self-sufficient small farmer out of existence, the hustling, bustling American metropolis, with its opulent display and cheerful promise of wealth and modern comfort, brought hundreds of thousands of hopeful American and European men and women under its spell. To cities from coast to coast came former farmers and their families; most ended up manufacturing the numerous cheap household goods and mass-produced clothing that had become standard in American life.

Among these hopefuls were thousands of single women, whose ranks steadily raised the number of women employed in manufacturing positions in the cities. (Increased mechanization had caused a drop in the number of manufacturing employees in the mid-1800s, but after the Civil War the numbers again began to rise.) A 1910 Congressional Report shows that 18.9 percent of all industrial workers were women in 1890; by 1905 the figure had risen to 19.5 percent (Sumner 250). In Cincinnati, a 1918 study revealed that roughly 40 percent of its

industrial and manufacturing workers were women (Mann 42). In Chicago between 1880 and 1930, the entire female labor force increased over 1,000 percent, from 35,600 women to 407,600 (Meyerowitz 5). Overall, the number of women working in the United States leapt from 2.6 million to 10.8 million in that same fifty-year period (Meyerowitz xvii). Causes for this dramatic increase include high unemployment rates in rural areas, partially due to the seasonal nature of the work and increasing farm mechanization, and low wages in the cities that could not keep pace with a rising cost of living (Kessler-Harris 122). In short, single women could no longer simply stay at home waiting to marry: one income rarely provided enough to maintain a large family's financial position, so women left the home and took jobs.

Joanne Meyerowitz' Women Adrift offers an in-depth study of these women. Many planned to stay with relatives, and came to the city armed only with an address and a headful of vague, grandiose visions of wealth and gaiety. Many were young girls who, no doubt encouraged by the popular magazines of the time, craved the finery and social life that had previously been the privilege of only the highest echelons of society; they came with the hope that such luxuries might now be theirs--in the city. Some of these same popular magazines ran articles and stories about such successful ventures (often female versions of

Horatio Alger's famous stories); some, along with aid societies, the Red Cross, and church organizations, published advice--and grave warnings about 'strange men'--for these women and ran services to help them find jobs and lodging (Meyerowitz 122). Many, hoping for marriage or for improved financial conditions back home, planned to work perhaps only for a few years; but more and more often those who came to the cities chose to or were left to look after themselves for longer periods. A new class of women emerged: young, single, and frequently free--by choice or by mutual consent--from any family financial responsibilities, they were dubbed by the social scientists of the period "women adrift."

These independent women were, of course, often viewed as failed or morally negligent members of society. The very use of the word 'adrift' suggests that they are without direction or purpose and should otherwise be attached to something--or someone. They were "vulnerable and sexually suspect...[and] often encountered sexual harassment and stigmatization" (Meyerowitz xviii). Eventually, most found that what was often acclaimed as an 'emancipation' from the traditional role of the country-homemaker, with all its hard labor and lack of financial reward, proved to be a mere transfer of location. Many of these 'women adrift' could not live on their meager wages and gave up, going back home or seeking employment, often

as domestics, elsewhere. Some starved. And many lived up to society's skeptical expectations and fell by the moral wayside, turning to prostitution or becoming kept women.

The urban mills and factories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries proved, after all, vastly different from those that had flourished at the outset of the industrial revolution. Consider the famed Lowell Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, of the 1840s: 'Lowell girls,' as they were known, were comfortably boarded and required to attend church; they usually earned enough money to spend a little for themselves; and much of their free time and energy they spent furthering their educations, experimenting with labor politics, or writing pieces for the literary effort, the Lowell Offering (e.g. Harris 34-7). But as industrialization continued to boom, working conditions, particularly in the cities, became less amenable to the worker and more and more directed toward production. The factories ceased to be the enlightened examples of labor beneficial to both producer and consumer; they became the exploitative, concealed abominations that writers such as Jacob Riis and Upton Sinclair were to uncover. The word "sweatshop" came into use in 1867, describing accurately the close, uncomfortable, and often inhumane conditions in the clothing and cigar and food factories of America's large cities.

Understandably, then, and much to polite society's dismay, some women chose amoral means of support. Jacob Riis, in his How the Other Half Lives, quotes a Working Women's Society report: "'...woman's wages have no [lower] limit, since the paths of shame are always open to her. ...It is inevitable that they must in many cases resort to evil'" (Riis 183). In the reformative spirit of the period, three other authors portray three women who were faced with such a choice. Two of the novelists, Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, began their careers as journalists, and Edith Wharton was a self-styled student of human nature. These authors' treatment of the characters and their ultimate fates bring home much of the poignancy of the moral problems facing the woman adrift.

II

Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets is a brief, stark account of the brief, stark life of a New York working girl of the type Riis' reference (see above) describes. Maggie Johnson is an attractive, young, single woman who is given an ultimatum by her brother: she must go 'teh work or teh hell.' She has reached the age at which she must either work and contribute to the family income, move out and work respectably to support herself, or get married (and possibly work)--or become 'sexually suspect.' Maggie, "having the feminine aversion of going

to hell" (Crane 20), takes work in a factory to supplement the family income. She loathes the stifling conditions there and leaves to become a kept woman. But upon her loss of that position, she cannot return to a 'respectable' line of work like factory drudgery. She becomes a prostitute. A short time later, she dies.

Crane tells his story quickly, with a sympathy and humor couched in irony and lurid description. His simple style and attention to graphic detail reflects the influence Riis' blunt, reform-minded journalism had on the period. Crane does not let his sympathy triumph in a happy ending, for Maggie's fate--ostracism and death at an early age--is, after all, exactly the fate that polite society expected of a woman who crossed the moral Rubicon into a life of prostitution.

Maggie is a product of the coarse streets; she has, after all, "blossomed in a mud puddle" (20). She has grown up with the reality of the sweatshop close at hand and would not have had unrealistic expectations of factory life. But regardless of how well-prepared she may have been, she hates her work, and she takes the first opportunity she can to escape its stifling and unrewarding--no matter how moral--monotony.

Maggie works in a collar-and-cuff factory, and Crane describes it in depressing detail. She is given

> a stool and a machine in a room where sat twenty

> girls of various shades of yellow discontent. She perched on the stool and treadled at her machine all day, turning out collars.... At night she returned home to her mother. (Crane 20)

Day after day Maggie repeats this hellish, unpromising routine, until she meets Pete, the resplendent masher friend of her brother (and would-be moral guide) Jimmie--and her "beau ideal of a man" (Crane 23). The more enamored she becomes of Pete, the more disagreeable her workplace--and home--grow.

Crane's descriptions of the "dreary place of endless grinding" (25) become more vivid:

> The air in the collar and cuff establishment strangled her. She knew she was gradually and surely shrivelling in the hot, stuffy room. The begrimed windows rattled incessantly from the passing of elevated trains. The place was filled with a whirl of noises and odors. (Crane 31)

Watching her wizened workmates, Maggie begins to fear for her youth and beauty. She fears that she will never attain monetary and marital success. She longs for pretty things and for

> far away lands where, as God says, the little hills sing together in the morning. Under the

> trees of her dream-gardens there had always walked a lover. (Crane 23)

Pete, she believes, is this lover, or perhaps future husband, and therefore a key to 'success.' He shows her a little kindness; she devotes herself wholly to him and, for a time, enjoys what were for her the finer things in life--burlesque shows and dance halls and the stares of other men. When her mother, in a drunken rage, orders her out of the house, Maggie jumps at the opportunity. She leaves her socially acceptable, if mentally punishing, family life and goes to live with Pete. She does not have to work at the factory, and is not 'adrift,' but she is unmarried--a kept woman--and therefore a disgrace. Some weeks later Pete forsakes her, and she returns home. Jimmie, who, it is revealed, has just abandoned and therefore similarly ruined one of his own lady friends, is nevertheless disgusted by her and she is ordered from the house. Thus barred from 'decent' society, she becomes "a girl of the painted cohorts of the city" (Crane 66).

Surprisingly, this route was not necessarily the awful hell that moralists and older siblings proclaimed it to be; those who strayed were often better-fed and -clothed than their overworked sisters, for even prostitution sometimes proved a much more financially productive endeavor than factory work. As one prostitute, Maimie Pinzer, explained

> I don't propose to get up at 6:30 to be at work at 8 and work in a close, stuffy room with people I despise, until dark, for $6.00 or $7.00 a week! When I could, just by phoning, spend an afternoon with some congenial person and in the end have more than a week's work could pay me. (Kessler-Harris 104-5)

Maggie's new profession keeps her in finer clothes than her miserable stint at the collar-and-cuff factory ever did, and she is certainly more assertive. Despite the fact that her family and old neighborhood have shunned her, this "girl of the crimson legions" (Crane 68) now gives "smiling invitations" to gentlemen and walks "in her handsome cloak, daintily lifting her skirts and picking for her well-shod feet the dryer spots upon the pavement" (Crane 66).

Those brief descriptions given of Maggie are the only accounts Crane gives of Maggie after her 'fall,' however, and it is not explicitly stated how Maggie meets her end; whether she commits suicide, is murdered, or contracts a fatal disease, Crane does not say. He has denied Maggie, and the reader, a specific end; instead, he leaves her as just another entry in the police records, so to speak.

This fictional life--Maggie Johnson--was great in its precedent, however. Crane, with this story, moves beyond mere social workers' accounts and naive romanticisms; he

draws a thinking, feeling character--and then subjects that character to a realistic fate. Sad and sudden though it may be, this fate was 'just,' in the views of the period, for prostitution, though in most cases a desperate last resort, was immoral and therefore a grievous sin.

An 1858 survey at Blackwell's Island Women's Prison in New York revealed destitution as the second most frequent cause for turning to prostitution, the number one cause being, surprisingly, inclination (in Baxandall et. al. 93). Even in the later years of the century, female sexuality--within or without matrimony--was regarded as suspect. Stephen Crane, then, created quite a public stir by choosing to depict hapless Maggie's journey 'teh hell' rather than what was conventionally desired--'poor virtuous working girl makes good.'

Crane offers two incidents to illustrate moral society's ignorance of or refusal to acknowledge the plight of these fallen women. Maggie, while streetwalking, is rebuffed by the one stranger from whom she would ask assistance--a clergyman. He hurries away, ashamed to have been associated with her. Another well-to-do man nearly knocks her down, then steadies her; he is quickly on his way, however, and does not stop to see if she needs help. Though Maggie does what she can to support herself, because of her occupation she is left to struggle on her own. Her independence is not a luxury, it

is imposed upon her: she is truly a woman adrift.

Crane perfected his flair for the graphic and doubtless encountered many women like Maggie during his own Bowery days. He had lived for a time the poor young student's existence in New York prior to writing Maggie; though he had not been born into abject poverty, he was fiercely proud and refused financial assistance from his family. He had slept in his share of shabby apartments and spent many a day without food (Linson 14-5). Crane saw in Bowery life the brevity and sometime futility of human existence that is portrayed in Maggie. Death is not spectacular--the deaths of Mr. Johnson and little Tommie and even Maggie herself are mentioned only in passing. He also, however, saw the stubborn endurance that often arises in the face of such unpromising circumstances--an endurance often depicted in the realistic novel--and in Maggie he represents these well.

Stephen Crane, then, used his journalistic eye and his literary pen with all the progressive spirit of the age to shed light on the problems of the single urban working woman. In Maggie, we are given a young woman's background and experiences in the factory and the circumstances which led to her downfall. Though Maggie's end is, according to the late Victorian morals of the period, just--she is punished for her loss of virtue by an early and, presumably, horrible death--Crane's story

evokes pity, not disdain, for Maggie and for the woman adrift.

III

Stephen Crane's short Maggie shed some light on the plight of women adrift and morality, but Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie offers by far the most extensive look into the daily dilemmas and actions--and controversial fate of--a woman adrift. Meyerowitz' Women Adrift makes much use of Sister Carrie as an account-in-literature; the words and experiences of hundreds of women of the period are echoed in the story of Carrie Meeber.

Carrie is encouraged by her family to leave her small Wisconsin town in 1889 to go to Chicago to seek her fortune. She is eighteen, and arrives in the city with only her sister's address and a headful of vague, grandiose visions of wealth and gaiety. Her pursuit of these visions leads her, too, away from the factory world and to the life of the kept woman and, later, to her job as a successful stage actress.

This progression into--and barely back out of--immorality shocked readers upon the book's release in 1900. Dreiser's description of the moral dangers of the city, given early in the novel, is typical of the period: no middle ground exists between damnation and "correct" behavior.

> When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility. (Dreiser 3-4)

And yet, in Sister Carrie, Dreiser presents exactly what he declares impossible: 'an intermediate balance.' At the end of the novel, Carrie has indeed assumed the 'cosmopolitan standard of virtue': she is on the stage, and she has been both a chorus girl and a kept woman. But it is difficult to judge whether she has 'become worse.' She has the fame, the attention, the clothes and the wealth that she had always dreamed of, and she is only slightly troubled by the paths she chose to get them. After all, Carrie's leaving the factories is, like Maggie's, certainly understandable, particularly after Dreiser has described her frustrating search for employment and stint at the shoe factory.

Dreiser, like Crane, had spent many days immersed in the poorest sections of the city; he, like Riis and Crane, turned a progressivistic, journalistic eye and pen toward the problems of those he encountered there. His own experience was, in fact, much like Carrie's. He left Warsaw, Indiana, as a young man (like Carrie, in 1889, at

the age of eighteen), to look for work in Chicago. Upon arriving, he wandered the streets with his brother and "experienced the terror of not being able to find work, and of having it discovered that he had stolen twenty-five dollars in order to buy himself a winter coat" (Lynn 511). Like Carrie, he eventually rose out of Chicago's worst work world into the world of the arts. And, like Carrie, he knew that such a rise invariably involved moral struggle and compromise. Dreiser, then, combines journalistic accuracy with personal experience to effectively describe the predicaments and perils facing young innocents seeking success in the city.

This is readily apparent in Carrie's search for gainful employment. She begins at establishments she considers respectable, but Dreiser is quick to present one of the double standards that hampered job-seeking women of the day. The offices Carrie visits--offices of what we would today call white-collar workers--are closed, mysterious, male worlds: worlds where "well-dressed men of forty and more" or a "grey-haired gentleman" are "surrounded by brass railings" or "hidden by frosted glass" (Dreiser 19-20). The naive Carrie has started her search in places where she would most like to work, in congenial, comfortably-appointed offices--where, she correctly assumes, her salary would be ample enough for her to afford some of the luxuries of which she has been

dreaming.

But women's work at that time was, in the minds of most employers, not only temporary (i.e., until a woman got married and started her 'real' job of caring for home, husband, and children) but little more than an extension of that 'real' job. Thus justification was made for paying women the lowest wages for working in laundries, clothing and food factories and as domestics (Baxandall, Gordon, and Reverby xv). This prejudice no doubt stems from the fact that the wage-setting company officials--the higher-ups that Carrie has seen in the aforementioned offices--are the heads of the upper-middle- and upper-class families. Most women workers were believed to be 'dutiful daughters,' who were living with family (or husband) and did not need full wages (Meyerowitz 40). For most employers (mostly men), a true woman could therefore never become or even wish to become an independent, full-fledged, full-time, well-paid member of the respectable work force. They do not want Carrie in their ranks.

Thus spurned, Carrie turns to the department stores--those monuments to American consumption that were just becoming popular in Chicago in 1889--and her hopes soar. The stores are just what she dreams of: they "were handsome, bustling, successful affairs, with a host of clerks and a swarm of patrons," and they embody the very "wealth, fashion, ease...she longed for...with a whole and

fulsome heart" (Dreiser 22-3). But Carrie soon realizes that she is inexperienced and unsophisticated and cannot immediately get work in such a heaven on earth.

> Neither had she before known the nature and appearance of the shop girls, with whom she now compared poorly....
>
> She was a work-seeker, an outcast without employment, one whom the average employe[e] could tell at a glance was poor and in need of a situation. (Dreiser 22-3)

Still drifting in unemployed limbo, Carrie next turns to the seedy clothing manufacturers of Chicago's South Side.

This is an obvious descent. Dreiser here makes evident the marked differences between the actual production of goods and the eventual selling of them by describing in close detail not only the retail establishments and sales operatives (consider the comfortable Drouet) but the manufacturing establishments that supplied their goods as well. In his descriptions also emerges the picture of the factory worker that, at the turn of the century, was quickly replacing the idyllic picture of the happy mill-girl in the minds of reading Americans.

Carrie first inquires at Speigelheim and Co., makers of boys' caps; the first person she meets is an unkempt, greasy, dirty, "frowzy-headed German-American, about

fourteen years of age...in his shirt sleeves and bare feet" (Dreiser 25). The shop girls Carrie sees are no cleaner; they are, in Dreiser's exposé-like language,

> drabby looking creatures, stained in face with oil and dust, clad in thin shapeless cotton dresses, and shod with more or less worn shoes. Many of them had their sleeves rolled up, revealing bare arms, and in some cases, owing to heat, their dresses were open at the neck. They were a fair type of nearly the lowest order of shop girls,--careless, rather slouchy, and more or less pale from confinement. They were not timid[,] however, [but] were rich in curiosity and strong in daring and slang.... (Dreiser 25)

They are, then, like the girls in the photographs of Lewis Hine, or Jacob Riis. They are, perhaps, like the girls that Maggie Johnson worked with in New York.

Dreiser takes his descriptions further:

> This place was grimy and low; the girls were careless and hardened. They must be bad-minded and -hearted, she imagined. (Dreiser 25, 26-7)

Carrie herself, then, is passing her own moral judgment on the employees of Speigelheim and Co.; she views these shop girls as already having adapted to 'the cosmopolitan standard of virtue.' She feels keenly that she is not meant for such a job with such people under such

conditions.

She finally takes a job, nevertheless, with Rhodes, Morgenthau, and Scott, a shoe manufacturer's. Her co-workers are slightly cleaner than the girls at Speigelheim and Co.; they are kind enough to try and ease the pace of her work, and they are a chatty, social lot, speaking freely of their clothes and dates. But Carrie feels no kinship with them, and the establishment is still strongly disagreeable to her. Her own sense of virtue is offended--she is teased several times by the men of the factory; "the whole atmosphere was one of hard contract" (Dreiser 39). Carrie realizes that work does not necessarily strengthen or even help to maintain one's moral standards and that, in fact, it often puts them to frequent testing.

The most hellish aspect of Carrie's job is not the establishment itself or the behavior of her co-workers, however; it is the physical discomfort of routinely performing a monotonous task. Carrie operates a leather punch, and Dreiser describes in aching detail the muscular fatigue and dull pain Carrie feels at the end of a day's hunching over her press in the hot, smelly warehouse. She despises her work and position and the imagined opinions of her co-workers. She wants desperately to escape them all: "She was not going to be a common shop girl, she thought. They need not think it either" (Dreiser 54).

When Charles Drouet persuades her to let him 'set her up,' he is a kind of savior. Carrie will no longer languish in the shoe factory; she begins to live the life to which she feels destined. Dreiser has very subtly drawn sympathy toward Carrie's choice--if it is indeed an active choice. Dreiser emphasizes Carrie's role as a woman adrift through his frequent descriptions of her as drifting, or, for example, as "a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea" (12). Carrie is passive, and therefore does not seem to actively seek work in what Meyerowitz calls the "sexual service sector" (38). But after first accepting Drouet's money, she discovers that that sector is far more in keeping with her dreams than work at a factory. Carrie 'adopts the cosmopolitan standard of virtue,' and finds it far more beneficial.

With Drouet, she begins her ascent; her health, beauty, and self-image all improve. With Hurstwood she has even more wealth and freedom, and as an actress in New York she finally achieves the role of self-supporting, steadily-employed woman--and even enjoys the company of 'polite society,' as with the moderately well-to-do Vances. But the uppermost echelons of that polite society could never completely accept Carrie, just as it found Theodore Dreiser and his earthy beginnings difficult to accept.

Carrie has, after all, chosen the most immoral

means--becoming a kept woman--to a productive end. Her ultimate livelihood, acting, was still considered shockingly unladylike in a few of those highest echelons. 'Sexual service' occupations, in the late nineteenth century, still included dance hall girls, cabaret performers, cocktail waitresses, taxi dancers, and hostesses, but work on 'the legitimate stage,' which Carrie finally attains, was gaining respectablity (Meyerowitz 40). By the turn of the century, the stigma which had for so long prevented actresses from becoming fully-recognized members of society had, for the most part, faded. Still, subject matter, women's actions, and women's costumes on the stage were far freer than those off the stage, and women who chose that career caused many raised eyebrows (see, e.g., Johnson). Nevertheless, it is acceptable for Carrie Madenda to be seen in public in the company of educated, cultivated gentlemen like Bob Ames.

Sister Carrie's is an intriguing case in which work does not necessarily prove to be the 'saving hands' of society, preventing young unmarried girls from succumbing to the advances of men like Charles Drouet. Succumbing to such advances, however, as Dreiser shows, is not as destructive as these young women were repeatedly told. He also shows that not only can morally questionable living be profitable, it is furthermore not always the active, willing choice of only the most infamous creatures.

Carrie, a young girl who was offended by the merest mentions of promiscuity and displays of fresh behavior at the miserable shoe factory, agrees to move in with Drouet. She is no abrasive gold-digger, but rather a naive, likable young woman. Dreiser, like Crane, has gone beyond mere journalistic casework. In Carrie Meeber/Madenda, he has presented a thinking, feeling character, one more complex than Maggie Johnson; Dreiser, like Crane, presents the circumstances that lead to this character's immoral choices. As in Maggie, sympathy, rather than condemnation, is demanded. Carrie is dissatisfied at the close of the novel--but vaguely so; most importantly, she is alive. Dreiser then challenges the popular expectation met by Crane, further calling into question the 'justness' of the fate of the woman adrift. He points out that no longer can the blind judgment be made that choices like Carrie's are not for the better.

IV

Edith Wharton, in The House of Mirth, also chose to contribute to the better understanding of the woman adrift. The House of Mirth, too, includes the account of an woman leaving her unrewarding, last-resort job in the factory to occupy a 'suspect' niche in society. Lily Bart, though, is a woman adrift who had been born to a life of wealth and ease; she is one of the very society

ladies that Carrie and Maggie so envy. Like Maggie, Lily Bart dies at the close of the novel. Unlike Carrie and Maggie, she maintains her morality. But she suffers by far the most dramatic change of station of the three women of these works: once in the very highest echelon of society, she comes to die, destitute, of a drug overdose in a run-down boarding house. This plunge, combined with Lily's sustained sexual morality, sheds new light on the plight of the woman adrift.

Lily, like Edith Wharton herself, is a member of one of New York's wealthy social sets. But Lily's wealth has been depleted by excessive living and poor financial planning. She still manages to function in her high society, though, through continued social invitations and, eventually, by giving most of the last of her money to Gus Trenor for him to invest for her--or so she naively believes. She later realizes that Trenor expects much more than simple heartfelt gratitude for his services. Lily refuses him. She eventually takes work in order to support herself--and to pay back Gus Trenor--and tries several types of 'acceptable' jobs for a woman of her position and upbringing. As a last resort, she takes a job at a millinery, hoping she will have to do little more than supply the finishing touches for hats, for which she has a natural flair.

Unfortunately, the job which is secured for her by

her friends--Wharton describes it as the job to which she is "committed by her friends" (Wharton 284)--is that of a mere stitcher. Instead of supplying the finishing touches, Lily works at a dull, utilitarian task in a workroom that, like Carrie's and Maggie's, is stuffy and close and noisy. Edith Wharton, unlike Crane and Dreiser, had never been destitute and on the streets, however, and her descriptions of the workroom, though effective, lack the photographic clarity of Crane's and Dreiser's.

Nevertheless, it too becomes a hell on earth as the exhausted Lily hears names of her former circle tossed about by "this **underworld** of toilers who lived on their [the former circle's] vanity and self-indulgence" (Wharton 285-6; my emphasis). Lily has seen sweatshops and shop-girls before, while doing charity work with Gerty Farish; but her sympathetic feelings had barely been stirred beyond just that--mere sympathy. Lily

> had known Nettie Crane as one of the discouraged victims of over-work and anaemic parentage: one of the superfluous fragments of life destined to be swept prematurely into that social refuse-heap of which Lily had so lately expressed her dread. (Wharton 313)

Doubtless Lily would have seen Maggie as such a creature, too. Now working as one of them, Lily is given clear insight into 'how the other half lives.'

This is, however, a novel of the upper classes. Wharton's choice of a milliner's shop is entirely in keeping with Lily's character, as milliners "have always been aristocrats among the clothing makers" (Sumner 156) because of the necessary creativity and personal attention involved. Nevertheless, Lily does not stay long. Wharton correctly describes the difference between those who actually did the artistic trimming and those who merely stitched the hat frames, and she points out the absence of mobility between those two jobs. Lily is therefore much more miserable as a mere stitcher than she would have been as a trimmer. Lily, like Maggie and Carrie, remains distant and wants no part of the world of the shop girls.

Lily has plummeted to the very nadir of her existence. Now it is she who becomes 'a victim of over-work and anaemic parentage.' Louis Auchincloss refers to it as "the final drop to the milliner's shop" (36), and Lily herself laments to Selden, "'you don't know what it 's like in the rubbish heap!'" (Wharton 308) She naturally describes what was the norm for thousands of New York working girls as 'the rubbish heap' because she cannot stand 'dinginess.'

She is, after all, the epitome of the late Victorian-American ideal woman. She is beautiful, charming, idle--in short, brought up for marriage, as she and Lawrence Selden discuss in the first chapter. And Simon Rosedale

tells her, "The idea of your having to work--it 's preposterous" (Wharton 298). She also speaks disparagingly in that first chapter of Gerty, the nearest semblance of the 'woman adrift' that Lily's class acknowledges. Just as Lily was unable to change her extravagant ways of life to save herself from bankruptcy, because she "identifie[s] 'dinginess' as the ultimate evil" (Saunders 8-9) she is unable to survive the changes in her life that working for an 'honest' living necessitate. Lily, like Carrie and Maggie, leaves the sweatshop.

But when Lily finally is 'dismissed' from Madame Regina's, no worldly young man awaits to show her the alternative life of the non-working, amoral girl. She has already decided against such a career. For although Lily's former circles would be horrified at the notion of her becoming a streetwalker like Maggie, or perhaps even a chorus girl/actress like Carrie, they are quite willing to offer her work 'in the sexual service sector' of a different kind.

Lily's society was perfectly amenable to having her live as a lovely parasite, flitting from house party to house party, until she was ultimately wed. She needed simply to avoid scandal whenever possible--but be willing to pay back in double kind when caught (by, for example, blackmailing Mrs. Dorset with her letters to Lawrence

Selden in order to save her own reputation). In fact, this behavior was expected of her. But Lily cannot live up to those expectations; to her they are morally repugnant. Now knowing what continuing in her own circles would entail, she chooses a different path: 'honest' work. But by doing so, she joins the 'suspect' ranks of women like Gerty Farish.

Lily had already performed some acts considered questionable in her society: visiting Lawrence Selden alone in his apartment, for example, and appearing in so daring a tableau vivant. She had also acquiesced to being part and parcel of her circle's adulterous schemes, as when she sails with the Dorsets to Europe. But having witnessed these moral transgressions, she then makes her choice to try 'honest' work. The moral standards of her class are revealed to be double standards, and Lily is above those, too. She has resisted the only paths offered to her--blackmail, parasitism, or marriage to men she did not really love--by that society to which she was born, and her last gesture is to settle the debt within that society that started her on her descent. Unlike both Maggie and Carrie, Lily remains sexually pure, but that is the extent to which her high moral sense proves of value.

Unfortunately, Lily had been brought up to believe that she would never have to function outside that society. Just as that "orchid basking in its artificially

created atmosphere" (Wharton 150) could not, earlier in the novel, fathom becoming one of the working class, Lily later cannot bear living as one of them. But neither can she learn to struggle to survive. She cannot bring herself to become a kept woman or a prostitute, as Carrie and Maggie do, even on her society's modified terms: therein lies the cause of her death. As Edith Wharton illustrates through Lily's downfall, even maintaining morality is not always enough.

Again, Edith Wharton had not, as had Dreiser and Crane, spent time on the streets of the city. She drew her characters largely from her own elite society, or from impressions gained from brief forays--literary and otherwise--beyond that world. Lily, like Maggie and Carrie, is drawn with great sympathy. But Diana Trilling attributes this sympathy strictly to Edith Wharton's innate sense of class rigidity (105). And Alfred Kazin explains that "at bottom she [Wharton] could love only those who, like herself...were inextricably bound to native loyalties and taste" (92). These critics believe, then, that Lily remains moral to the end because Wharton herself would, that Wharton could not sever Lily's bonds to her 'native loyalties and taste' and have Lily, like Nettie or Carrie or even Maggie do whatever she must to live.

But Edith Wharton is making a far larger statement.

Like Dreiser and Crane, she is drawing upon what she knows and can write about well to shed light on problems that touched all women. The House of Mirth is about a woman of high birth, to be sure; but the problems she faces are similar to those of women across all economic boundaries. Elizabeth Ammons sums up Wharton's purpose:

> Throughout her career [she] would examine social institutions and power structures to see how they worked, whom they served, and how they affected people, especially women. (18)

Lily remains, to her death, free from male obligation: she is a woman adrift to the last. But though she dies "with an indistinct sense of drowsy peace" (Wharton 323), she nevertheless dies. She has achieved moral success, but at the expense of survival. In The House of Mirth, Edith Wharton presents the same double standards of work, morality, and independent success and survival that Dreiser and Crane present. By using a member of the elite New York society as her main character, however, she adds another dimension: a chilling suggestion that the very members of polite society who were so quick to condemn 'fallen' women adrift might themselves, under the same circumstances, either fall or fail to survive.

V

These women all have what Crane called 'the feminine aversion of going to hell' and seek work because it is what society wished them to do. But work--particularly factory work--was not the panacea, the cure-all, the Lydia Pinkham's for what many moralists saw as the ills of an increasingly independent female population. While work may have prevented women from being economic burdens in their parents' homes, it certainly did not protect them from immoral influences, as Carrie and Maggie found. And certainly the three women's jobs reinforce the impression that factory work was a dead end.

Stores in American frontier towns were fond of high false fronts; they wished to create the illusion that inside thrived an expansive, profitable merchantry. The late nineteenth-century urban American selling trade and its promises of wealth, employment, and excitement can be compared to those stores of old with their false fronts--but these three authors, Dreiser, Crane, and Wharton, looked behind the fronts from their various perspectives and saw that functioning as a producer in that system does not always guarantee buying privileges, as the descriptions given of the goods produced in the novels show.

Each woman was, after all, laboriously producing goods that she could never use. Carrie makes shoes,

Dreiser's favorite and most frequently-mentioned article of clothing. But they are men's work shoes, certainly not the kind to be worn by the men she wishes to meet. She has, after all, a fascination with men's shoes (as well as her own, which seem to speak to her). She first notices Drouet's broad-soled shiny tan shoes, and she later uses his flashy patent-leather ones as a standard in her judging between Drouet and Hurstwood. (She, of course, chooses Hurstwood and his fine dully-polished calf shoes that indicate greater wealth and refinement.) Maggie makes collars and cuffs to be worn by no men she will ever meet--though Crane pointedly dresses the woman for whom Pete forsakes her in a spotless linen collar and cuffs. And Lily stitches the foundations for hats which she is no longer privileged to wear. These women quickly and painfully find that functioning as a producer often destroys those who want so much to be on the consuming end.

Middle- and upper-class families whose daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers were <u>not</u> having to go to work in the factories were, through these books, presented with some ugly realities that had previously been presented only in the newspapers. <u>Sister Carrie</u> and <u>Maggie</u> clarify and explain the motivations of the straying woman adrift. No longer could women be so easily 'committed,' both actually and in the minds of society as well, as Lily was,

to whatever dull jobs--or convenient marriages--were available. No longer could women like Carrie and Maggie who chose morally deviant paths be summarily condemned. And no longer could the aforementioned middle- and upper-class readers rest assured that they were far removed from such dire circumstances, for The House of Mirth presents a horrifying vision of what might become of their own daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers in similar situations.

These authors turned their pens to the problems imposed on these women adrift and created Maggie Johnson, Carrie Meeber, and Lily Bart. One fell from grace and died, destitute. One fell from grace, but succeeded socially and financially. One refused to fall from grace, but nonetheless died destitute and alone. Each author's treatment of these characters explores their motivations and circumstances in depth, and in doing so, makes critical statements about the moral demands, limits, and expectations, imposed upon these women adrift. 'Teh hell or teh work'--Carrie, Maggie, and Lily, three women adrift, proved that no longer could the easy directive be made.

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VITA

Elizabeth Cowen Hawes

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, 4 September 1967. Graduated from Beechwood High School in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, June 1985. Received A.B. in History and English from the Centre College of Kentucky, June 1989. As the 1989 Catherine Schroeder Graf Intern at the Heritage Museum of Kappa Kappa Gamma, Columbus, Ohio, wrote The Women We Were, the basis for the Museum's program with the Ohio Historical Society on home life and education for American women of the nineteenth century. Entered the College of William and Mary as a master's degree candidate, department of English, in August 1989. Began doctoral work in the American Studies program at the College of William and Mary, August 1990.