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## Nation, Self, and Foreign Space: Exploring the Expatriation of James Baldwin, Henry James, and Edith Wharton

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Nation, Self, and Foreign Space: Exploring the Expatriation of James Baldwin, Henry James,  
and Edith Wharton

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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## Introduction

*“After all everybody, that is, everybody who writes is interested in living inside themselves in order to tell what is inside themselves. That is why writers have two countries, the one where they belong and the one in which they live really. The second one is romantic, it is separate from themselves, it is not real but it is really there.” - Gertrude Stein*

From the moment I stepped off the plane at the Leonardo da Vinci–Fiumicino Airport I felt like there was a neon sign above my head that screamed “American.” It seemed as if this sign followed me everywhere I went throughout my time in Rome. The man who served me coffee at Caffè Greco greeted me with hello instead of ciao. The woman at the gift shop of the Vatican Museum replied in English when I asked her quanto costa? With every encounter I had, it became clear that my Americanness was what everyone noticed first. It was not my skin color or my gender, it was my nation.

Gertrude Stein was famous for being a woman of two nations who favored one more than the other. Just as she mentions in the quote above, writers like James Baldwin, Henry James, and Edith Wharton were among those who were “interested in living inside themselves” (Stein 2). The effects of having two countries resulted in a deep internal struggle for these three authors. In this case, their struggle is not seen as something negative rather it is seen as the inspiration for some of their greatest novels. This trio of writers resided in the liminal space between America and Europe. I refer to being an American in Europe as liminal because they “are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, [and] convention” (Turner 99). Although they resided in Europe and did everything they could to blend in “the American in Paris discovered that French society, high and low, is open at the surface, closed at its core” (Gopnik xvii). Generations of Americans flocked to Paris and discovered the loneliness that came with occupying a space that was not yours. For these authors,

Paris provided joy and inspiration while simultaneously disappointing them. Baldwin “writes that ‘it is perfectly possible to be enamored by Paris while remaining totally indifferent or even hostile to the French’” (xviii). Despite this indifference or loneliness that a life as an American in Paris could have, for most it was a life better than the one as an American in America. As members of the expatriate tradition, all three authors felt the need to flee America in search of both personal and literary freedom which they then found in Europe. The space of Europe allowed them to be free at last “of censorious eyes because nobody [was] looking” (xviii). The discussion of space, although generic, encompasses both the physical space where these authors lived as well as the psychological space that their struggles with identity occupied. Although these three authors were from different social classes, different genders and preferred different sexes, what Baldwin, James, and Wharton all had in common was their Americanness.

Before I tell you more about this group of writers let me tell you about the space that attracted them all, Paris. “Paris acted as a beacon for artists and intellectuals long before the twentieth century” (Sloboda 8). It served as a haven for artists of all kinds and continues to do so to this day. It is “a place imbued with great power in the cultural imagination of America during” times of war and economic troubles (72). It acted as a physical departure for those who were able to get out but to those who remained trapped within domestic barriers, it was a psychological escape, a dream that artists spanning generations hoped to one day journey to. Around the time that James is writing “Paris becomes not [just] a place you visit but a place where you can stay and still be an American writer. From then on, for almost a century, Paris remains a kind of literary laboratory, where American style gets made and proffered in refined form” (Gopnik xix). When thinking about the literary canon of Americans abroad there are “numerous personal narratives about going there, by such diverse figures as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Pound, Beach,



and Barnes, [that] indicate just how popular it was as a destination” (72). Malcolm Cowley takes the hyperbole even further when he “describes the city as a religious site, claiming that ‘to young writers like ourselves, a long sojourn in France was almost a pilgrimage to the Holy Land’” (73). The first writer that I am concerned with who made this pilgrimage was Henry James. Both James Baldwin and Edith Wharton admired James for his accomplishments abroad and for the novels that he produced in and about the “Holy Land”.

Chronologically, Henry James is the first of my writers to find literary success during the late nineteenth century. In this paper, James serves as the connecting link between James Baldwin, a deep admirer of his work, and Edith Wharton, a dear friend and confidant of James’s during his later years. Although he was not the first writer to flee America and move to Paris, James served as a model for authors like Stein, Wharton, and Baldwin who “were a part of a mass exodus of Americans, both male and female, looking for a new home. A great many of these expatriates sought a place where they could, as Stein puts it, be free ‘to create the twentieth century art and literature, naturally enough’” (73). James spent most of his life traveling between America and Europe but his ties were severed with his homeland after the loss of his dear brother during the civil war. After his brother’s death, Europe became a place where he did not have to be reminded of what America took from him as “it was not what France gave but what it did not take away that was important” (73). Europe provided James with the tools necessary to become the transatlantic writer whose influence has spanned generations. The tradition of Lost Generation writers and expatriates that Wharton helped to create and Baldwin followed, would not be what it was without writers like Malcolm Cowley and Gertrude Stein, but especially Henry James.

In her letters, Wharton referred to James as “cher maitre,” which means master or model in an art or profession. When Edith Wharton first entered the literary scene in 1902 she was known as an extension of James. This label followed her throughout her career, making it easy for me to draw connections between the two but for Wharton, it was her greatest burden. Even though many consider Wharton’s writing Jamesian, she tried hard to step out of his shadow and make a name for herself. Wharton, like James, grew up both home and abroad. Her decision to ultimately settle in Paris was a result of her divorce and a need to escape the gossip that followed her around New York society. The year of her divorce, 1913 was also the same year that her novel *The Custom of the Country* was published. A divorcee, an architect, and the first woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize in literature, Wharton blazed her own path as exemplified by the protagonists in her novels. Her time in Paris brought about some of her richest material. In the time that Wharton was writing there was a

decline in travel...[which] was inversely matched by an increase in the production of imaginative vehicles to transport readers elsewhere. Already a fashionable activity in the 1920s, literary-sightseeing truly came into vogue as Americans more and more sought experiences of places like Paris not directly but vicariously (78).

In the novels of James and Wharton, there is a great emphasis that is placed on the architecture. For both these writers, architecture served as an additional character. This is especially true in the novels, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Custom of the Country*. The immersive nature of these texts transported the reader from their home in America to the English Country home of Gardencourt that exists within James and to the Parisian hotel of Nouveau Luxe in Wharton.

In 1948, long after James had passed, James Baldwin fled America and settled in Paris in order to escape both the racial and sexual prejudice that he experienced while in New York. A few years later, Baldwin published his first novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. With this novel, Baldwin made a name for himself as a black writer, but he desired to be more than just that.

Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room* centered around a queer white protagonist, a deviation from what many believed Baldwin should be writing about. In an interview with David Leeming, Baldwin revealed that "*Giovanni* is about what happens to you if you don't tell the truth to yourself. It's about the failure of innocence" (Leeming 55). Luckily for Baldwin, he had accepted who he was and while in Paris had surrounded himself with people who did as well. Paris served as a haven for Baldwin as it did for many other black writers. "What black writers wanted from Paris, in the first instance, was freedom, the freedom to do their work and not be branded or shunned as a member of a particular group, or suffer the fear of an imprisoning mark" (Gopnik xxv). It was a place where he could escape the expectations that his community of writers back in Harlem had for him. In Paris, he could step out from the shadows of his contemporaries, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison and live in the place that one of his literary idols wrote so heavily about. Baldwin considered James to be his literary father. During the same interview with Leeming, Baldwin disclosed, "the closest thing to a model I could find for the means to order and describe something that had happened to me in the distance - America - was James" (Leeming 56). James inspired Baldwin not only in his fiction but also in his decision to exile himself abroad like James had done seventy-nine years prior.

The following chapters seek to explore the liminal space that these authors lived, wrote, and died in. We begin with a look into Baldwin's novels and essays as well as his life in exile. In his novel *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin delves into the topics of traditional masculinity and race through his main character David. When we meet David, he is putting on a performance of what he believes his father, the ideal American man, wanted to see. Once he flees America he is given the opportunity to live as his true self in the space of Paris. He finds himself trapped in a single room where he must come to terms with the identity he had long suppressed. The entrapment

that David feels within his own skin creates a nice transition into a conversation that his novel has with James's *The Portrait of a Lady*.

James's main protagonist Isabel Archer is not fully formed when we first meet her. She is simply an idea that James lets all characters in the novel have artistic license over. Similarly to David, Isabel must learn how to survive in Europe as an American while simultaneously discovering who she is behind the portrait that James has constructed. Both of these novels are considered semi-autobiographical, which invites me to make direct parallels between the lives of David and Isabel and Baldwin and James. Both of these protagonists let the spaces around them dictate their behavior and place in society. Ultimately both are able to break out of the confinement that they are placed in and find their sense of self but for much of the novel, I was unsure if they were going to make it out. On the other hand, I never doubted for a second that Wharton's main protagonist Undine Spragg would come out of her novel triumphant.

Wharton's novel *The Custom of the Country* takes many of the same themes that Baldwin and James work with in their novels and invert them. She redefines not only what it means to be an American but what it means to be a woman. As we move through the novel we are given front row seats to watch Undine Spragg, the protagonist of the novel, destroy female stereotypes and even go so far as to place men in the roles that we typically assume are for women. Wharton is able to critique from the inside both the spaces of America and Europe due to her intra-national identity. She was neither fully American nor European; she existed outside the customs of any country and like her character was unable to be contained.

All three novels deal with questions of identity brought about by an exile abroad. An exile that results from the entrapment that all three authors felt while living in America. For James, America took away his brother. For Wharton, America had attempted to hold her back

because of her gender and marital status. And for Baldwin, a queer black man, America was not accepting nor was it a place where he could be free. Because Europe, specifically Paris, represented a haven for artists of all kinds it only made sense that James, Baldwin, and Wharton found themselves drawn there. There are a plethora of American writers who can be categorized as Americans abroad and would have made a great topic for this project. But what Baldwin, James, and Wharton provide are three distinct experiences of the space of Europe at three distinct times both in history and in literature. Through a variety of literary techniques and descriptions, James, Baldwin, and Wharton attempt to transport their reader to the space of Europe and while there ask them to question what their relationship is, not only with America but with themselves.

## Chapter 1

### **Locked Doors and Empty Rooms: Escaping the Self in Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room***

*“Everything may be labeled – but everybody is not. - Edith Wharton*

James Baldwin, like many authors of his time, left America in search of his voice. Baldwin was not the first author to identify as an expatriate nor would he be the last. For Baldwin, “Paris offered a way out from this intolerable situation, providing a space where he had the opportunity to find a creative outlet for such tensions” (Miller 54). In his essay titled “The New Lost Generation,” Baldwin sought to reclaim Gertrude Stein’s *Lost Generation* for the authors of his time. In order to understand what is so “new” about Baldwin’s Lost Generation, we might take a look back at the expatriation of the original Lost Generation. Authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway are among those who make up this generation of writers. Malcolm Cowley wrote that “they were not a lost generation in the sense of being unfortunate or thwarted” (Cowley 8). In their minds they were without a home, exiled to Europe in a post-war world. Their sense of exile was one of luxury in comparison to Baldwin’s. In the group of writers that preceded Baldwin, two cities reigned as the culture capitals of the world. For the white writer of the Lost Generation, “Paris was where everyone was and everything could happen [and] Harlem represented the same thing to his black compatriot” (Wall 64). This, however, was not true for Baldwin. “As far as he was concerned, America had rejected him. Getting out was a matter of survival” (Miller 55).

Due to Baldwin’s unconventional upbringing as a child preacher without a strong father figure, he was constantly in search of something or someone while growing up.

Much of Baldwin’s early life was concerned with a search for a father, but not for a biological father... his search was, rather, for what an ideal father might have been for

him – a source of self-esteem who would have supported and guided him in his quest to become a writer (Leeming, *James Baldwin* 3).

America, specifically Harlem, could never fill the void that Baldwin's father had left. For Baldwin, literature and his literary fathers provided him with the necessary tools to succeed both as a human being and as a writer. But still, the void remained, causing him to feel lost and out of place in his own homeland. This was a common trope among the authors of the Lost Generation, which is why in the moments when they seemed the most lost they fled to Europe, specifically Paris. Many authors of this generation are able to pinpoint the moment in which they knew they had to flee. For Baldwin, that moment came after the death of a close friend. He writes in his essay "The New Lost Generation" that "we were in a hostile, public place. New York was fearfully hostile in those days, as it still is" and "if [he] stayed [there], [he] would come to a similar end" as his dear friend (Baldwin 660-1). When Baldwin finally decided to flee he was "following a long line of Americans – specifically black Americans – on the arts" (55). Authors that Baldwin looked up to such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay drew inspiration for their writing both from their time abroad as well as their lives in Harlem. Although Paris served as a place of inspiration for many of his writings, Baldwin was in search of something far greater than literary inspiration while in exile. The space of America made it nearly impossible for Baldwin to escape what he called the Negro problem<sup>1</sup>. This was a problem that not all black writers felt plagued by but one that Baldwin felt an incessant need to escape from.

## Two Cities

In America, Baldwin was either confined to his race or his sexuality. Paris provided a haven for all types of people, especially writers. The opportunities that Harlem provided Hughes,

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase the "Negro Problem" comes from W.E.B. DuBois. The Negro problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in which Baldwin is writing is the problem of the color line. Baldwin's problem and DuBois's problem are similar yet different because of the difference in the sociopolitical climate that each are writing in. Baldwin is looking at this problem not only from the lens of a black man but also as a queer man.

McKay, and Toomer, Baldwin found in Paris. Baldwin did not change who he was once in Paris. He knew that the man he was while living in Harlem would be the same man who lived in Paris. What his “sojourn in Paris” did allow him to do was to “become oneself” and better understand “what being a black man meant” outside of America (Tomlinson 136). Baldwin found that unlike the space of America, race was not at the forefront of the Parisian mind like it was at home. Europeans were more concerned that you were an American than they were about the color of your skin. It was Baldwin’s understanding that “the European treats the American – white and black – as an American whether the American likes it or not” (Miller 56). This statement of Baldwin’s is further explored in his literary works. While abroad, Baldwin was able to explore himself as a writer, free from the Negro problem and those in America who could not see past his race. He needed “to step out of the American dream and begin to find out what was happening to [him] - Jimmy - not Jimmy the black boy - but Jimmy” (Leeming, “Interview” 53). Baldwin and his new Lost Generation of writers were able to execute artistic agency in their work, as they were free from the constraints placed on them at home. The next step was to then accept themselves and their own art.

Baldwin spent a majority of his youth searching for that something or someone to support him and guide him as a writer. While in Paris he discovered that “what Europe still gives an American – or gave us – is the sanction, if one can accept it, to become oneself. No artist can survive without this acceptance” (Baldwin, *Discovery* 688). Even though black and white writers understood the spaces of Harlem and Paris differently, all could agree that once one had found their voice they “could begin to return home and realistically assess the successes and failures of their homeland” (Wall 68). For Baldwin, this was the job of an expatriate. When looking at Baldwin’s journey as a writer and an expat, Gertrude Stein’s opinion that “writers have to have



two countries, the one where they belong and the one in which they live really” is worth keeping in mind (Stein 2). I saw a strong connection from Stein’s words to Baldwin’s own journey, as he understood that he needed to leave America in order to no longer fear it. Baldwin was able to embrace who he was only after he found an environment and space that allowed his true self to be free. When I use the term “free” to describe Baldwin’s journey to Paris, I am using Baldwin’s definition of freedom. In an interview with David Leeming, Baldwin told Leeming that by freedom he “mean[t] the end of innocence. The end of innocence means you’ve finally entered the picture. And it means that you’ll accept the consequences too” (Leeming 54). Because of this freedom, he was able to discover his manhood and authorial voice, but it was only once he returned to America that he was able to put it to the test.

Baldwin’s journey abroad and his life, in what Malcolm Cowley called “exile,” can be seen in his novel *Giovanni’s Room*. In the novel, the protagonist David flees New York in hopes of finding the “Paris, from across the ocean” and a “refuge from the American madness” (Baldwin 662). The novel heavily juxtaposes the reality and the fantasy of Paris that exist in the space of David’s mind. David’s understanding of the space around him and where he is welcomed within it helps to form his own understanding of himself. This is seen in the way in which the novel seeks to explore the effects of exclusion from space on one’s identity.

*Giovanni’s Room* “participates in the tradition of the American expatriate novel exemplified by Stein and, especially Henry James” through the main character’s exile to Paris (Rohy 218). Baldwin uses a white American in Paris to best understand how certain spaces inform one’s understanding of oneself in relation to the themes of sexuality, nationality, and race.

In this novel, Baldwin uses sexuality to discuss issues that would otherwise normally center around race. Another avenue in which Baldwin explores racial implications on the self is

through the concept of nationality as seen in the many instances in which the American is put in contrast with the European.

Not only does nationality stand in for race in the novel – as Giovanni’s darker coloring and lower status contrast with David’s blindness and privilege – but perhaps more importantly, the rhetoric that would equate ‘race’ with ‘blackness’ suppressed, and the “whiteness” of the stereotypical Anglo-Saxon hero, foreground (220).

Critic Robert A. Bone says, “*Giovanni’s Room* (1956) is by far the weakest of Baldwin’s novels” as a result of what he claims to be a surface level discussion of homosexuality, but I would argue the opposite (Bone 219). I don’t believe that the themes of sexuality, nationality, and race can be looked at as separate from one another, as they are all integral parts in understanding identity both in Baldwin’s novels and in his own life.

### **Putting on Space**

Society and those that inhabit the space around David most often dictate his perception and understanding of those spaces. David spends a majority of the novel running from his identity and the American values that formed it. Baldwin explored the ideals of masculinity in the American tradition through the way David conceptualized his own manhood. For David, the space of America represented his failure to be the ideal American man that his father hoped he would become. The ideal American man is one who wanted a wife and a white picket fence life and that was not David. He spent most of his youth seeking the attention and approval of his father. David recounts his childhood and how night after night his father “would be reading his newspaper, hidden from me behind his newspaper, so that, desperate to conqueror his attention, I sometimes so annoyed him that our duel ended with me being carried from the room in tears,” a room in “which I never felt at home” (Baldwin, *Giovanni’s* 11). David spends most of the novel combating his own sexuality and confronting the patriarchal society that formed it. This internal

and at times external battle that David fights with himself stems from his relationship with his father and the strictly heterosexual household that he was exposed to while growing up. Because of this, he is forced to “venture into a space outside of American bourgeois heterosexuality” in order to find meaning and acceptance (Rohy 221). David searches for meaning in the arms of both men and women in every bar and every room; he never stops searching. Baldwin looks at how the societal norms of each space contribute to or take away from David forming his most authentic self. Ultimately, David comes to the same conclusion that Baldwin did in his own life: the need to return home.

The space of Giovanni's room serves as a microcosm of society throughout the novel. Just as Giovanni attempts to mold David into the type of man that can live in his room, so does the society in which the room is situated in. In the room, America's ideas of manhood did not affect him, but outside of it David felt obliged to abide by the gender roles that had been set for him all his life. This is “felt as a continual tension between the claustrophobic ‘inside’ of identity and its dangerous ‘outside’” (222-3). Giovanni's room begins as a physical space for David yet as Baldwin allows us to more closely examine the room, we begin to understand it as a more psychological space. David tells us how this one single room, over time “became, in a way, every room I had ever been in and every room I find myself in the hereafter will remind me of Giovanni's room” (Baldwin, *Giovanni's* 85). The room becomes a space where his identity is shaped, molded, rejected and lost in a matter of months just as it was in America. David felt like an outsider in America, forced to put on the space of American masculinity to please his father. Once he no longer felt obligated to wear this space he not only rejects his father but he rejects the nation that formed him, his homeland. David's rejection of his nation is essential in order to categorize the novel as part of the expatriate cannon. A novel, which at its core is a story about a

boy rejecting his homeland and the people that formed him, only to discover that he can't ever truly escape because they are a part of him whether he chooses to acknowledge it or not.

When looking at this novel through a nationalistic lens it is important to note that before David realizes that it is impossible to escape one's nation, he tries to reject all that reminds him of his Americanness. If David were to successfully reject all parts of him that were formed by America he would be left with nothing, aiding the cyclical pattern of acceptance and rejection that we see throughout the novel. In the case of Giovanni and David's relationship, Giovanni would never let David forget that he was American, no matter how much David begged to leave his nation behind.

When Giovanni wanted me to know that he was displeased with me, he said I was "*vrai américain*" [...] striking, deep in me, a nerve which did not throb in him. And I resented this: resented being called an American (and resented resenting it) because it seemed to make me nothing more than that, whatever that was; and [he] resented being called *not* an American because it seemed to make [him] nothing (89).

He thought that if he could create a space where his Americanness did not matter then he could be happy. Yet, he was resistant to letting that part of him go. "David is as unwilling to imagine being anything other than a heterosexual as he is unwilling to imagine being anything other than an American" (Rohy 223). In an effort to prove he could leave his Americanness behind David sought to "destroy th[e] room and give Giovanni a new and better life" a life where he was more than an American and Giovanni was more than a European (Baldwin, *Giovanni's* 88). He believed that the entry point into his "new and better life" with Giovanni was through this room (88). What David had yet to realize was that by erasing all remnants of Giovanni and his own Americanness, he erased the rules and notions that he felt bound by, leaving behind four blank walls. David soon discovered that it was not possible to separate one's nation from their identity as he began to crave the life that he thought he wanted to destroy. Without a nation, David was

lost. If he did not know who he was how could he make his life “new and better” (88)? This, in turn, throws David into a panic, causing him to try on various spaces until something seemed to fit.

In this novel, “both homeland and identity are revealed as retrospectively constructed fantasies” (Rohy 224). When David enters a particular space he fantasizes about what this space could be and who he could be within it. Just as an actor puts on a mask when entering the world of theatre, David puts on the space of those around him. He allows individuals that inhabit the space with him to mold and shape him. While in the room, David permits Giovanni to dress him in space, which results in “a brief pleasure in playing the housewife after Giovanni had gone to work.” This does not last long as David remembers, “men never can be housewives” (Baldwin, *Giovanni's* 88). To do the work of a woman was not only emasculating, but it went against everything that the American traditions of manhood represented, a tradition that despite all the pain it had caused him he was not yet ready to let go of. Because of this, he rejects the feminine role that the space of Giovanni's room had tasked him with and began yet another search for a space where he could become the man he thought he needed to be. Every space that David enters into forces him to confront the same questions that he began the novel with. Baldwin juxtaposes the spaces of America, Paris and Giovanni's room in order to show the effects that a multitude of places and spaces have on one's identity when it is vulnerable to outside influences. David cannot find authenticity in any of these spaces because none of them are environments in which his true self can feel free to come out.

### **Fighting the Self**

David desperately wanted to fit into society, yet he constantly resisted opportunities to conform because he knew that what he truly desired was the chance to be his true self. David

lives the majority of the novel in fear. He fears the unknown, he fears relinquishing control, but most of all he fears that who he was while living in New York will be the same person that he comes to find himself to be in Paris. He fears the day when he must take off the space that he has put on and discover who he is without it.

A major turning point for David occurs when Baldwin has him come face to face with a group of drag queens, whose job is to be their most authentic selves. This authenticity strikes both curiosity and fear within David. David equates the bar he is in to a zoo, as he feels them “watching” him. (38). At first, it is unclear who is doing the watching because of the ambiguity of the language. Baldwin is exceptionally purposeful in the language he uses when describing the drag queens. He describes them as an “it,” equating them to “a mummy or a zombie [...] of something walking after it had been put to death” (38). David dehumanizes them the moment he lays eyes on them because he is unable to fit them into a box. This act of dehumanization is his way of rejecting the otherness of this image. The ability that these men had to embrace their freedom and by extension, their innocence is what David craved most. He is initially repulsed by them but at the same time, he admits that he “could not take [his] eyes away” as he secretly longed for the very freedom that the men in front of him exuded (39). The initial disgust he felt for the drag queens was caused by David’s inability to accept his own sexuality and desire for men. The drag queens are described as “something walking after it had been put to death” (38). David desires their authentic life, yet he also fears the consequences of rejecting his constructed idea of masculinity. This is similar to how “David both hates to be labeled an American and is horrified by the possibility of being anything else” (Rohy 223). The nothingness or numbness that David feels when Giovanni calls him an American contributes to the shift in how he initially perceives “the maid’s room that [he] share[d] with Giovanni” as being a type of “Eden” to it

feeling “like a prison” (224). Once the room begins to feel like a prison, David conjures up images of disgust to fill the room with. This room is meant to be a place where David can be his true self, a self that does not align with traditional American masculinity. Instead of embracing this, he can see nothing but his own fifth leading him to believe that he is something that needed to be locked away.

Once viewed as a prison, Giovanni’s room is associated with images of filth and disgust, “functioning as a kind of objective correlative to his emotions and fears in relation to his own body and sex” (Henderson 319). David compares the size of the room to a prison cell and wonders what is smaller, Giovanni’s room or the cell that Giovanni currently resides in? Baldwin views the room as a “spatial metaphor for [David’s] claustrophobic sense of self-entrapment” (319). The sense of suffocation and helplessness that are associated with David’s homosexuality erupt in his denial and withdrawal from the physical space of the room. During his final days living in the room, we find David fighting a psychological battle with himself that “suggest both the self-imposed boundaries of his world and, at the same time reflect his own exclusionary, narcissistic worldview” (319). He would say to himself:

this *is* your life. Stop fighting it. Stop fighting. Or I thought, but I am happy. And he loves me. I am safe. Sometimes, when he was not near me, I thought, I will never let him touch me again. Then, when he touched me, I thought, it doesn’t matter, it is only the body, it will soon be over, When it was over, I lay in the dark and listened to his breathing and dreamed of the touch of hands, of Giovanni’s hands, or anybody’s hands, hands which would have the power to crush me and make me whole again (Baldwin, *Giovanni’s* 88).

His identity and experience are confined to a single room. In this moment, David’s identity is at psychological war with itself. There is not one part of his identity that comes out victorious. This is in part due to the person he is within the room being simply a reflection of that space; it is not his authentic self. Throughout the novel, we see his identity form from his whiteness, his

sexuality and his expatriation, which culminate and intersect in this one space. This is both a space of tension and of confusion. From the confusion emerges the desire to be relinquished from the shackles of his Americanness. He thought to himself, all he needed were “Giovanni’s hands, or anybody’s hands.” If only he could be made “whole again,” then he could give Giovanni a new and better life (88). When the confusion and the noise of society became too much and the hands around him disappeared, David found himself exiting the private space of the room and entering the public space of the Paris streets.

### **Sexuality**

Throughout the novel Baldwin uses sexuality and the exclusion one feels as a result of their sexual preferences as a “placeholder” for race. “Race is essential, communal, and public, whereas sexuality is contingent, individual, and private” (Rohy 225). For David, an American white male, his sexuality while living in America was seen as an individual private matter. Meanwhile, Giovanni views his as communal and public, a view that David will come to accept at the end of the novel. Baldwin inverts Rohy’s ideas of race and sexuality by making race disappear into the subtext of the novel by bringing sexuality out into the very public streets of Paris. Because race is not explicitly present in the novel, Baldwin uses nationality to invoke similar forms of alienation and struggles with one’s identity. Instead of sexuality being explored in the private as Rohy is suggesting, Baldwin has David grapple with matters of race, in the form of nationality, in the foreign and private space of the room. In the room, he would always be an American. To Giovanni, he would always be “vrai américain” (Baldwin, *Giovanni’s* 89). This notion began to suffocate him. “His ‘bitterness’ toward America marks the difference *within* the American ‘homeland’ – a difference that is for David, his own homosexual desire” (Rohy 222). Coming to terms with his sexuality and most of all, that the person he was in America was no



different than who he was now in Paris, made him feel as if “the walls of the room were closing in” on him (Baldwin, *Giovanni's* 105). In many of Baldwin's novels images of filth are connected to those of sin. The anxiety that David is overcome with in this room is a reflection of how David is unable to see himself in anything but a heteronormative space. This causes him to feel as if he is sinning. Sin is often associated with filth, which Baldwin connects to how David views his own sexuality. Baldwin's choice to pair falling and destruction together comes with the notion that a rebirth must follow. This language of sin is common for Baldwin to use in his novels because of his fundamentalist religious upbringing. Baldwin paints an image for the reader in which David is in need of some type of saving. It is not clear what he is being saved from but in a moment of “destruction” it was not the “touch of Giovanni's hands” that he longed for as he once did but “the light and safety, with [his] manhood unquestioned, watching [his] woman put [his] children to bed” (104). He wanted the hands of not just “anybody” but of a woman, the hands of a wife and mother. These hands represented a false sense of safety, one that was only temporary. His fall into sin is a retreat of the progress he had made thus far in coming to terms with his identity.

I viewed Baldwin's use of hands and arms as a representation of home, a place where David feels a sense of protection, even though it is nothing more than a fantasy. He truly desires Giovanni yet his ideas of masculinity, which are so heavily rooted in American tradition, cause him to choose the arms of “light and safety” over darkness and desire. Baldwin uses the image of light to represent a sense of safety within the space of America (104). For Giovanni, David was his light and safety but this too was nothing more than a fantasy. Giovanni tried “with his own strength, to push back the encroaching walls... he wanted [David] to stay in the room with him” (114). As hard as Giovanni tried the walls of his room had already fallen in David's mind and

instead of longing for Giovanni, he longed for a space that his true self, the self who loved Giovanni was excluded from, a woman's bed.

He wanted the same bed at night and the same arms and [he] wanted to rise in the morning, knowing where [he] was. [He] wanted a woman to be for [him] a steady ground, like the earth itself, where [he] could always be renewed [...] It only demanded a short, hard strength for [David] to become [himself] again (104).

The redemption that David believes will occur in the arms of a woman follows the destruction of Giovanni's room. David destroys space as easily as he puts it on. David's journey of self-discovery is cyclical. Even though he has already tried this space on while in America he once again decides to put on the space of a man who only desires a woman. He takes on the persona of a masculine American man, which allows him to find brief happiness with a woman named Hella. This happiness allowed David to feel as if he had gained control over his identity and found the answers he had long searched for. Holding Hella made it seem as if his "arms were home [...]" and the shock of holding her caused [him] to feel that [his] arms had been empty since she had been away," he felt "renewed" (120). Baldwin uses the terms dark and light to signal to the reader when David is hiding behind or wearing the space that desires a man versus when he is not. Baldwin describes his reunion with Hella to be a type of homecoming. He "kept kissing her and holding her, trying to find [his] way in her again, as though she were a familiar, darkened room in which [he] fumbled to find the light" (121). Baldwin does not describe their encounter as one of light and safety but as one that occurs in the dark. The effects of David fumbling to find the light instead of already possessing it speaks to the false sense of safety that exists when he is with a woman. Every encounter these two have with one another is a result of the space they are in. "David produces himself as heterosexual with Hella and as gay with Giovanni, who is himself passing, for the moment, as a gay man. Even Hella, as Baldwin makes clear, performs the rigorously scripted role of the heterosexual woman, passing as [a clear performance of the]

feminine” (Rohy 220-1). This “masquerade” cannot last nor is it authentic in any way (221). This is yet another example of a failed performance of masculinity that we see David give time and time again.

David’s rejection of Giovanni and his room, act as a dismantling of the homosexual space and identity that David had come to accept while living in their Eden. His attempts to create a life within a heteronormative space ultimately fail when the darkness of his desires eclipse the light that once lived in Hella’s arms. By the end of the novel, her arms that once represented a sense of home and belonging for David meant “nothing at all” (Baldwin, *Giovanni’s* 161). Hella’s arms produce the same feelings of suffocation that the encroaching walls of Giovanni’s room done just pages before. “In neither place does David feel comfortable: rather he remains ‘betwixt and between’ homosexual desire and the heterosexual imperative. Endeavoring to preserve his innocence by retreating into a safety zone of conventionally constructed [American] masculinity” (Henderson 320). David’s interactions within these spaces place him in a liminal state. He is neither queer nor is he straight, American nor European, black nor is he fully white. “The rooms and enclosed spaces in *Giovanni’s Room* become sites of liminality – sites that carry the potential of redemption, but which inevitably fail to become transformative” (320). This failure of transformation parallels the failure to leave behind ideas of American masculinity and embrace life in exile. Mae G. Henderson argues that expatriation and homosexuality are intertwined for Baldwin. Henderson is arguing that the “expatriate, who is more conventionally constructed as a stranger in a strange land, becomes, in Baldwin’s vision, one who is a stranger unto himself, one in exile from the body and desire” (Henderson 322). David departs from the space of America in hopes of escaping his own sexual desires, for they seem foreign to him. In order to find his “self”, David needed to find a space where his desires could live outside his

body, free from judgment and without innocence. This can only occur when David, the prodigal son, returns home to America ready to start anew.

In both Baldwin's life and in *Giovanni's Room*, Paris acts a space of opportunity and acceptance when America was no longer a place of tolerance. It is up to the individual, to embrace the opportunities that Paris has to offer. Baldwin welcomed the challenges that being abroad brought him while David's fear of discovering his true self held him back. In the novel, space and axes of marginalization are mutually constitutive. Certain spaces in the novel are only accessible to certain people and this is particularly true in the society that we, as well as Baldwin, lived in. For Baldwin, Harlem was no longer a space that he was able to access based on his race and sexuality. When both Baldwin and David entered the space of Paris, they began to conceptualize this space from within it instead of outside it. In his essay "The Discovery of What it Means to be an American," Baldwin concludes that "the freedom that the American writer finds in Europe brings him, full circle, back to himself, with the responsibility for his development where it always was: in his own hands" (Baldwin 22). Baldwin's reason to flee was out of a need for survival in comparison to David's, which was out of denial. He reiterates this in his interview with Leeming, "I wanted to become myself," Baldwin says "which I could not have done in America - locked in the Dream. I would have died if I had stayed in America" (Leeming 53). In Paris, Baldwin was free to be the writer he felt he was destined to be, while David's intention to discover his true self fall flat. Baldwin, unlike David, understands that one must leave their homeland in order to later return to it free from fear. David cannot be successful in Paris because he is so afraid of where he comes from and ending up back there.

## Whiteness

In order for Baldwin to explore the effects that space has on an expatriate, he decides it would be best for him to use a white American protagonist, as opposed to an African-American. “Baldwin suggests that for white Americans Paris actually functions as a buffer to keep them protected against reality, or experience, or change” (Miller 56). This protection and comfort that Baldwin claims Paris gives to white Americans, is what he ultimately takes away from his protagonist David by making him queer. “The white homosexual in America is in the same boat as the oppressed Negro – they are both, as it were, ‘black’ in the eyes of their culture” (Podhoretz 138). Baldwin does not allow Paris to shield David from the reality of his sexuality as he was able to do in America. Although “race is present [in the novel] blackness is erased. [Instead] Baldwin focuses on the paradoxical and self-contradictory issues of subjectivity: What is it to be a (white) American and an expatriate; what it is to be a homosexual and a man” (Henderson 313). Through the use of a white protagonist, Baldwin is able to address the influence that one’s nation and homeland have on their identity without confronting the complications of discussing race in a time where the consequences of such a dialogue might undermine his primary message. A Baldwin novel without race may come as a shock to some as it was commonly thought, “that black authors must write about what was euphemistically referred to as ‘the Negro Problem’” (313). Baldwin felt liberated from this problem while in Paris, where he wrote the novel. This allowed him “to explore the complexities of gender, national and sexual identity, uncomplicated by the issue of racialized blackness” through the character of David (313).

Baldwin writes in his essay “The Discovery of What it Means to be an American” that “in America, the color of my skin had stood between myself and me; in Europe, that barrier was down...and the question of who I was had at last become a personal question, and the answer

was to be found in me” (Baldwin 11). Baldwin went abroad to escape his race in order to ask this personal question of himself but that is not why David goes abroad. Baldwin uses the language of “Eden” when describing Giovanni’s room, which Valerie Rohy understood to be an exile in it of itself. It is important to understand why Baldwin went abroad and why he chose to have David’s exile differ from his own. This difference stems from Baldwin’s conspicuous decision to make David white. “Henry Miller’s expatriate declaration of independence, “I’m not an American anymore...even less a European... I’m neither for nor against. “I’m neutral,” draws upon assumptions Baldwin was unable to hold” because of “the colour of his skin” (Miller 55). Baldwin assigns these same assumptions to David to display the privilege that the white American expatriate had in deciding, “which aspects of American society they wished to reject, as well as which parts of European culture they wanted to embrace” (55). The white American expatriate takes for granted being able to call themselves American as opposed to Baldwin who, to claim himself as American was an act of “liberation and defiance” in it of itself due to the historical ties the black American has with his race and his nation (55). For Miller, this is why Baldwin explores this story through the eyes of the white protagonist. The effects of expatriation are far different for a black American than they are for a white American because of how

the estrangement and alienation of expatriation ha[ve] the potential to force white Americans to confront the strategies of denial, which have shaped their national self-image and so achieve a greater understanding of themselves in personal and historical terms (58).

Baldwin uses a white protagonist in order to uncover the long and problematic history that white Americans have when they “assume, on the basis of a common skin colour, that they have more in common with Europeans than with their fellow black Americans” (58). The need to confront one’s inner self and the society that shaped it is why both Baldwin and David ultimately must return to America.

We live in a society where you have a certain amount of control over how others perceive your identity. You can control what your pronouns are, what gender you identify with, and the race you most closely see yourself a part of. Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* creates a world in which this control is lost. The people around him determine who David is. David falls into an extremely cyclical pattern of wishing to be whatever he is not. Baldwin details the danger of nostalgia and the void that exists for one who is always looking at the past rather than living in the present. The nostalgia that David has for his homeland comes only after he feels defeated by the life he had tried to create in Paris. This sense of nostalgia is extremely prevalent in the resurgence of Baldwin's literature that exists today. I believe that there is a sense of displacement in America today, and as a result, many have turned to the words of James Baldwin to find comfort in knowing that this displacement is acceptable. Baldwin played by his own rules. His identity was just that, *his*. Baldwin, a black American expatriate, goes to Paris in order to find his voice as a writer, not as a black man or a queer man, but as an artist the same way that Henry James was able to. At the end of the novel, Baldwin challenges us to not only face our otherness but to embrace it without fear or hesitation.

## Chapter 2

### Consumed by Space: Navigating the House of Mirrors in James's *The Portrait of a Lady*

*“James was the only American writer – literally, for me, the only American writer – who seemed to have some sense of what was later to be called the American Dilemma, who had some sense of the American”* - James Baldwin

In James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* the space of Paris, more specifically the space of Giovanni's room, provided David with the freedom to confront his struggles with identity. But not all spaces are liberating for David. Even Giovanni's room, a place where he initially felt safe, became confining. Each space whether it was a room or a country demanded something from David. The demands of a particular space that David experienced is also something that Isabel Archer, Henry James's main protagonist in *The Portrait of a Lady* faces. One can find many similarities between the two protagonists and the ways in which they experienced Europe as Americans. These similarities can be attributed to their creators, James Baldwin and Henry James. Both authors found literary inspiration in their life abroad as expatriates. Before Baldwin could find success abroad someone had to draw the roadmap for him. That someone was Henry James. Henry James was one of the first American authors to seriously consider what it meant to be an American outside of America and then write about it. James spent much of his childhood as an American abroad. James's earliest memories of his childhood were not of his family's home in Albany, but of Paris. Although James is usually classified as an American author, he himself identified more with European life, specifically the English. Because of this, his expatriation and experience of being abroad was different than Baldwin's.

Although their specific experiences might have differed, both Baldwin and James were able to discover who they were as authors and as men during their time in Europe. Baldwin had long admired James, which is why it is easy to compare their journeys abroad and their journeys



as writers. Even though the two wrote years apart from each other, both struggled with being who they truly were in the space of America. As previously highlighted, Baldwin's essay "The Discovery of What it Means to be an American" explored how Baldwin himself defines being an American. Baldwin wrote that in order for an American abroad to truly find freedom they must return home after their time abroad, as that was where these authors were truly challenged. Baldwin and James may have found solace in Europe but whatever freedom was found abroad was not true freedom until they returned home to America and were able to maintain it. Both Baldwin and James were able to achieve this in their personal and literary lives. They were able to draw from their exploits as Americans abroad in their fiction as seen in *Giovanni's Room* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. The experiences they had at home and abroad helped each of them understand what it meant to be an American in Europe.

As stated in the previous chapter, Baldwin's exile to Europe was a self-exile. He had no choice but to leave if he ever wanted to escape the "Negro problem". Although James did not deal with issues of race as Baldwin did, he dealt with a problem that not many Americans had: he had to prove his Americanness to his readers. James received a lot of criticism after publishing *Hawthorne*

for adopting a "foreign" attitude toward Hawthorne, and for his emphasis on the parochial quality of New England life in Hawthorne's day. The American critics for the first time began to suggest that James was losing his native point of view by his continued residence abroad (Edel, *A Life* 247).

James, although a privileged white middle-class man, underwent many of the same pressures from America that Baldwin did. Baldwin too experienced criticism for writing about America and Americans in *Giovanni's Room* as it has been labeled the "gay novel" a trademark that many did not want attached to a novel within the American canon. In the case of *Hawthorne*, James's critics suggested that Europe corrupted him ergo Europe itself was a corrupted space. James

played with this idea in his novels by placing the Europeans at the source corruption and portraying the Americans as its victims.

Baldwin and James were chastised for the way they wrote about Americans as Americans. This criticism stemmed from the distance that is seen in their writings about America, which some inferred as them drifting from America. Whether or not this was their intention, the amount of criticism led them both to want to escape the confines of the box that so many were trying to place them into. The need to break from the norm and criticisms is where we meet Isabel Archer, James's protagonist in *The Portrait of a Lady*. This novel was a culmination of many of James's short stories and other novels. He had exhausted the American hero and now he wanted to tackle a heroine. Through this novel, in particular, James was able to write from

a cosmopolitan perspective on his own country... living 'abroad' gave James special purchase on Americans. It underwrote the particular inside-without perspective from which *Portrait* is written: the position of a sometimes participant who had observed Americans closely from within, then continued to do so from across the Atlantic (Zagarell 139).

Because *Portrait* is said to have been based on James's own experiences there have been numerous speculations about who Isabel Archer really is. In his biography *Henry James: A Life*, Leon Edel speculates that Archer could either be James's insider perspective on Americans in Europe or the spitting image of Minny Temple, James's dear cousin.<sup>2</sup> Whoever she is, James uses her to explore his own Americanness. Just as James did, she must navigate the space of Europe as an American.

Baldwin and James both used their fiction to sort out their own struggles with identity. These struggles with identity are triggered by the space of America and the uncondusive

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<sup>2</sup> At one point in the novel James alludes to Isabel's "flame-like spirit." This "suggests that Isabel is an image of James's long dead cousin Minny Temple, whom he described in the same way" (Edel, *A Life* 258).

environment it fostered. Who they were and who they wanted to be did not fit the space they were in. These struggles with space and their outcomes are explored in *Giovanni's Room* and in *The Portrait of a Lady*. In *Giovanni's Room*, we saw David struggle with his sexuality and attempt to come to terms with his true self after finally removing the mask that he had long hid behind. While living in America, David felt forced to wear a mask of traditional masculinity as means of survival. He found himself in Giovanni's room because it was a conducive space for forming his identity outside of America. It was a space that did not demand a particular behavior, allowing him to remove the façade that he was putting on. Life in Giovanni's room encouraged him to live outside the notions set forth by American society. In order to live a life free from the societal pressures that he described in his novel, Baldwin fled to Europe to further discover his identity both as a man and a writer, an idea he might have gotten from reading and studying James.

### **Constructing the Portrait of Isabel Archer**

The role that space played in James's novels can be attributed to his nomadic upbringing. James moved around as a child and young adult, bouncing between America and Europe. After the death of his parents and younger brother, James chose to permanently reside in London. The loss of his family also symbolized the loss of his homeland. This allowed him to "expatriate himself without difficulty" (Edel, *Henry James* 15). Leon Edel writes that following the death of his parents and brother, his "house on Quincy Street was no longer fixed in the orbit of his days. His return to Europe was like a new beginning of the career he had begun nearly a decade before" (Edel, *A Life* 292). Both James and Isabel Archer leave America in order to have a greater chance to develop. For James, it is a chance to develop as a writer and for Isabel, it is her opportunity to develop beyond her portrait. There has been speculation that James, like Baldwin,

struggled with his sexuality and “Portrait” was the result of James “accept[ing] the feminine side of his artist self” (246). Both Baldwin and James felt that “America made [them] feel cast aside,” and as a result, they were able to find themselves alongside the characters in their novels (248). I use the word “space” quite a bit when talking about these two authors. I understand that “space” is a vague word, but Baldwin and James interact with it in a variety of different ways. In *Giovanni’s Room*, we understood spaces through David’s eyes, and his readings of space are how we read him. This is in contrast with Isabel, who has fallen victim to space as she allows space to act upon her. Both these characters are emblematic of identity struggles as it pertains to nationality, sexuality and economic/social class.

Isabel Archer is a character unlike many I have encountered, as she is not fully formed when we first meet her. We are not given the full picture of who Isabel is until the end of the novel, once all those around her have finished painting her portrait. James is very strategic in how he constructs Isabel’s portrait. He frames both her character and the novel as a whole through physical architecture. The first *character* we meet in the novel is not a person but a house. The “old English country home” is a central part of understanding who Isabel is. (James 17). James tells us in the preface of his novel “the house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million” (7). The phrase “House of Fiction” is a play on words with his essay “The Art of Fiction.”<sup>3</sup> “Though James was a master illustrator of houses and interiors and of the metaphoric ‘stone walls which fatally divide us,’ he was not concerned with having his own home; he built ‘houses of fiction’ instead” (Armbruster 82). This analogy works in tandem with the large emphasis that James placed on architecture in the novel and the various ways one can interpret the house (the novel) that James created.

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<sup>3</sup> The Art of Fiction is one of James’s most notable essays. In his essay James wrote, “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it *does* compete with life.” (James, *The Art of Fiction* 54). For James, his art was his life and the only house he had any interest in building was the “House of Fiction.”

## Architecture and Archetype

James constructs his novel like one would construct a home. He describes the home, its gardens, and the landscape before he introduces a single character. “The house that rose beyond the lawn was a structure to repay such consideration and was the most characteristic object in the peculiarly English picture I have attempted to sketch” (James 18). Because we are given the descriptions of these spaces before the characters, the space becomes the authority in the novel. Instead of looking to the narrator for insight on a particular character, we look to the architecture. The various spaces that we are introduced to, specifically the home, control and contain those that choose to enter them while also demanding certain behaviors from them. In the case of the home, “details of houses and their inhabitants reveal the way James looked through exteriors in his attempt to understand interiors, to, as he had put it, guess the unseen from the seen (Armbruster 95). Understanding the various spaces, that each character is connected to allow the reader insight into the mind of James. It is also essential to know which characters become victims of these spaces and which are able to control and manipulate them for their own gain. The spaces that James highlights extend beyond the physical home. Many of the characters within the novel struggle with identity formation as it pertains to nationality. The focus on country is of great importance to the novel as it becomes essential to know whether one identifies as American or European. This not only applies to the characters in the novel but to the architecture as well. The idea of identity and its relationship to space and country are inherent to how we first meet Isabel and the place in which this first meeting occurs.

We are introduced to Isabel Archer through a discussion that Mr. Touchett, Mr. Ralph Touchett, and Lord Warburton are having during English tea, in the English garden, outside Touchett’s English country home. Isabel is introduced as Mr. Touchett’s niece who is

accompanying his wife back to England from Albany but at this point, she is just an idea as we have yet to actually see her. Mr. Touchett, in his “American tone” warns Warburton not to fall in love with his niece (James 20). We are told that unlike other “American girls [who] are usually engaged [...] she hasn’t come to [Europe] to look for a husband” (25). In response to this, Warburton says, “perhaps, after all, she’s not worth trying on” (25). From the moment we meet Isabel, she is an accessory to the men around her, objectified before she has even been introduced. She exists for the purpose of others, just as a portrait does. When we do finally meet her, James presents her within both a figurative and literal frame. Ralph Touchett is the first lens we see her through. “His face [was] turned towards the house, but his eyes were bent musingly on the lawn; so that he had been an object of observation to a person who had just made her appearance in the ample doorway for some moments before he perceived her,” the “her” being Isabel (25). Isabel first appears framed by a doorway. The effects that a frame has for a portrait are the same effects that this doorway has on Isabel. It is meant to confine her, keeping her still in order to give the viewer time to project what he wishes upon her. This image of Isabel fixed for the purpose of the viewer is repeated throughout the novel. We constantly see Isabel confined by doorways or to a single room. Because Isabel is defined by the spaces she is framed by, James relies on the architecture that Isabel is fixed within to reflect her relationships with the men around her. This allows the audience to understand who these characters are without even needing to hear them speak.

In James’s “House of Fiction” he tells us that there is “not one window, but a million – a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will” (7). I understood this to mean that I had the option of looking at this novel a

million different ways when it came to interpreting the role that architecture played. In an attempt to uncover the role of space and confinement within James, I want to focus on Isabel's relationship to Ralph Touchett and Gilbert Osmond as it pertains to the spaces that each occupied. Ralph is most often associated with the space of Gardencourt, the old English Country home.

“The front of the house overlooking the portion of the lawn with which we are concerned was not the entrance-front; this was in quite another quarter. Privacy here reigned supreme, and the wide carpet of turf that covered the level hilltop seemed but the extension of a luxurious interior. The great still oaks and beeches flung down a shade as dense as that of velvet curtains; and the place was furnished, like a room, with cushioned seats, with rich-coloured rugs, with the books and papers that lay upon the grass” (18).

Through the description of Gardencourt, James brings together elements of nature with the elements of the home. He describes the surroundings of Gardencourt as if it was the interior of a room. The space outside of Gardencourt seems to mimic its interior, more specifically the drawing room that Ralph and Isabel repeatedly find themselves in. Because Gardencourt is an extension of nature I found myself associating it with images of light. “Deep in [Isabel's] soul...lay a belief that if a certain light should dawn she could give herself completely” (57). James particularly emphasizes light and how imperative it is in Isabel choosing a husband. What is key in the phrasing here is this light that Isabel is referring to is not any kind of light, it is a “certain light” (57). There are times in which James tricks the reader into thinking that Isabel is ready to “give herself completely” because a light “has dawn[ed].” James places descriptions of light and darkness onto the various architectural structures like one places breadcrumbs.

### **The Natural Versus the Unnatural**

Images of light appear in the nature that surrounds Gardencourt as well as in the spaces and rooms where Isabel believes she has found this “certain light” (57). Her relationship with

Osmond is one of these spaces but if we look closely at how James describes his villa it is the anti-Gardencourt.

The house had a front upon a little grassy, empty, rural piazza which occupied a part of the hilltop; and this front, pierced with a few windows in irregular relations and furnished with a stone bench... this antique, solid, weather worn, yet imposing front had a somewhat incommunicative character. It was the mask, not the face of the house. It had heavy lids, but no eyes (200).

The appearance of the villa is rather cold and standoffish in comparison to Gardencourt. James described the front as “imposing” rather than inviting, like the man who lived there it “had a somewhat incommunicative character” (200). We are also told that the house wore a “mask” and “had heavy lids, but no eyes.” This tells us that the house cannot see, as it resides in the dark. If we attribute this description of the house to Osmond, one can assume that he is both deceptive and ignorant. Through these descriptions that James provides us with, the house becomes less like a space and more like a character that has the ability to control others. Osmond wears a mask of deception like his home in order to fool Isabel into thinking that she has found a “certain light” inviting her to “give herself completely” to him(57). Normally, women are not able to choose their husbands as their marriage serves the purpose of a financial contract. Isabel is able to pursue this relationship with Osmond because she is financially secure, unlike Osmond. Their relationship serves only Osmond, who through their marriage is able to gain economic status. The description of the “imposing front” as a mask foreshadows the duplicity that is to come in their relationship (200).

When talking about Gardencourt, James highlights the nature that surrounds it but with Osmond’s villa, James takes a more structural approach. James tells us that we should not be concerned “with the outside of the place,” rather we should focus on what is within (200). If one



were to follow James's instruction and try to look in, it would be nearly impossible due to the windows.

The windows on the ground-floor, as you saw them from the piazza, were, in their noble proportions, extremely architectural; but their function seemed less to offer communication with the world than to defy the world to look in. They were massively cross-bared, and placed at such a height that curiosity, even on tiptoe, expired before it reached them (200).

James's emphasis on windows relates back to his own "House of Fiction" and its use of windows. Both James's house and Gardencourt have countless windows to allow one to see in unlike Osmond's villa. As I previously stated, the description of the villa foreshadows the failure of their relationship, as well as the confinement that Isabel will experience while with Osmond. We are told that the windows are not there "to offer communication," similar to Osmond himself (200). He does not want Isabel to know his true self, the one that exists behind the mask. Instead of building walls, Osmond bars his windows. James describes the windows as being "massively cross-bared" conjuring up the image of a prison, the ultimate symbol of confinement (200). For a brief time, Isabel believed that Osmond could bring light to her life because she understood the mask that Osmond wore to be his true self. Osmond does not fool the reader, unlike Isabel, as James provides the audience with the warning signs that Isabel is blind to.

There is a point at the beginning of Isabel's relationship with Osmond where James describes it as one filled with light. Osmond associates his love for her "with a golden haze, and the shadows just lengthening, and that divine delicacy in the light, the air, the landscape, which [he] ha[s] loved all [his] life" (303). James's choice to use the word "haze" to describe Osmond's feelings for Isabel is vague. Haze has a flatness to it in the way a painting might rather than something that would provide dimension to a physical person. Instead, it minimized them. This "golden haze" was not the "certain light" that Isabel needed (303, 57). When Isabel discovers the

mask that Osmond has been wearing all along, we watch the light turn to darkness. Where there was once a “golden haze,”

she had suddenly found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end. Instead of leading to the high places of happiness... it led rather downward and earthward, into realms of restriction and depression where the sound of other lives, easier and freer, was heard as from above, and were it served to deepen the feeling of failure. It was her deep distrust of her husband – this was what darkened her world (363).

Where there once was light now saw only darkness and “infinite dismay when she thought of the magnitude of his deception” (366). Through this deception, we see that he is the true counterpart to Ralph. Her desire to give herself completely to another could only be fulfilled through Ralph’s own act of deception. This deception was not one of darkness but one of light. Ralph secured Isabel with economic status ensuring that she could marry for love and find the light she was so desperately in search of. Yet, this act of light did not carry her up, instead we see it pushing her “downward and earthward” (363). Elif S. Armbruster sums up James’s architectural technique nicely when he calls the mirroring of character and architecture an “endless house of mirrors in which characters resemble not only each other[’s spaces] but their author as well. James’s ornate, claustrophobic interiors...take possession of us so that we are left wishing for the same ‘light’ and ‘air’ that Isabel desperately desires” (Armbruster 98). These two men and their houses are two sides of the same coin, that coin being Isabel. Ultimately, they both are responsible for the creation of her portrait, and the “House of Fiction” that it is situated in.

### **Discovering Henry James in Isabel Archer**

Unlike Ralph and Osmond, Isabel does not have a fixed place. Instead, others fix her. Like James, Isabel spent her childhood both home and abroad. In Leon Edel’s *Henry James: A Life* we receive descriptions of James’s upbringing that are identical to those that James

describes Isabel having. James “endows [Isabel] with the background of his own Albany childhood, and when he sends her to Europe and makes her into an heiress, he places her in a predicament similar to his own” (Edel 258). From the descriptions of his Albany home to the pungent odors of the peach trees that filled the air, one can experience the Albany of James’s childhood in his fiction. If you have read Edel’s biography you might be able to guess what Isabel’s Albany home looks like from descriptions of James’s own home. Throughout the novel, characters are defined by their spaces, yet James leaves the audience without a description of Isabel’s Albany home. A home that we can only assume helped to form her identity. Without this description, we remain in the dark about who Isabel Archer truly is, as do the rest of the characters in the novel. This unknown space that James places us in is why we first meet Isabel through the lens of another character. When we are introduced to her she is invading Ralph’s space at Gardencourt, but it is important to note it is Mrs. Touchett who invades Isabel’s space first.

Over the first few chapters of the novel, we are given more and more information about Isabel’s upbringing and how she ended up in this foreign space. Mrs. Touchett tells Ralph that she “found her in an old house in Albany, sitting in a dreary room on a rainy day, reading a heavy book and boring herself to death” (James 48). This is not the image of someone full of light and hope, but rather of someone in need of saving. It is as if Mrs. Touchett found her hanging in a corner of a gallery and purchased her simply to show off around Europe, as a mere amusement. As Lionel Kelly writes in the introduction to the novel, Isabel “becomes an unwitting pawn in the hands of others” (James VI). For example, early in the novel Mrs. Touchett takes Isabel under her wing in an attempt to give her a better life, a life she could not have while living in Albany. Like James, Isabel needed to escape and “leave the past behind

her...to begin afresh” (40). Isabel has the potential to “begin afresh” but the men around her quickly extinguish this potential through their objectification of her. “Isabel’s fate is contested by others” at every step of the way. She is molded, manipulated and colored in by her surroundings. She is “melt[ed]” down like “iron” and shaped into the Isabel Archer that everyone wishes her to be (286). Without a space of her own, Isabel is left vulnerable and forced to enter into the spaces of those around her in order to survive. When she enters into Gardencourt, she must abide by the standards set by that space and the same can be said for Osmond’s Villa. Ralph is the only one who attempts to break her out of the mold that she has been placed in when he tells her, “don’t try so much to form your character – it’s like trying to pull open a tight, tender young rose. Live as you like best, and your character will take care of itself” (196). Even Ralph, the one person who tries to free her from confinement, sees her as a ‘tender young rose’ as opposed to a physical woman. This image is not one of strength but one of fragility. A young rose is too vulnerable to be taken out of the garden. Once Mrs. Touchett had prematurely plucked Isabel from her home in Albany she was left a victim to space. This is contrasted with the character of Madame Merle, who unlike Isabel was able to mature, allowing her to manipulate the various spaces she entered into. This granted her freedom rather than confinement.

### **The Fixed Versus the Unfixed**

Madame Merle is able to manipulate spaces and people because she lives in a hotel, a space that is never fixed. When it comes to the use of languages, James is purposeful with his word choice. Merle’s “name which means blackbird” in Old English, can be read as extremely symbolic especially once we discover that she is Osmond’s “former lover” (Ferguson 101). Merle, like Osmond, brings darkness into Isabel’s life (as implied by her name), but unlike Osmond, she is not bound to a specific space; like a bird, she is free to move as she pleases.

Because of her lack of attachment she is able to move openly without the approval of society, more specifically, of men. “Madame Merle had been a dweller in many lands and has social ties in a dozen different countries,” but roots in none (James 172). I would argue that she is the most successful character in the novel because she is able to move in and out of various spaces, manipulating them and those who reside within them. She is far more complex than a portrait but when we first meet her we are under the impression that she is as tragic as Isabel, some might say more. She tells Isabel to

live in your own land; whatever it may be you have your natural place there. If we’re not good Americans we’re certainly poor Europeans; we’ve no natural place here. We’re mere parasites, crawling over the surface; we haven’t our feet in the soil. [...] A woman perhaps can get on; a woman, it seems to me, has no natural place anywhere; wherever she finds herself she has to remain on the surface and, more or less, to crawl. (175).

All the men that we are introduced to in the novel are attached to a particular space. The women either have a space due to marriage or are in a constant search for a husband in order to gain one. Merle and Isabel are both unmarried and without their own spaces but Isabel, unlike Merle, is searching for a husband. At first, we are under the impression that Merle wished to help Isabel succeed as both a woman and a wife. Merle tells Isabel that being an American in Europe you are viewed as “mere parasites” but that it is even harder for women who have “no natural place” anywhere let alone in Europe. Despite this, there are ways that “a woman can perhaps get on” and she is proof of that. This begs the question of whether or not Isabel “can get on” like Madame Merle does (175). Time and time again, Isabel is compared to a painting of a woman as illustrated by the title of the novel. Unlike Merle, Isabel is reduced to an object, a portrait to be looked upon for pleasure. Merle is not seen in this manner and because of it she is able to find success in these spaces; she is not reduced to female archetypes. She is able to move freely, unlike Isabel who is fixed within the confines of a frame.

Some characters, like Madame Merle, are granted the ability to roam freely, while others are restricted to a specific place. Each space in the novel invokes a certain behavior from a character. Even the slightest glance or gesture can signify a mood shift for James. The question that this poses is whether or not the space demands a particular behavior, or if aims to work with it. The space of Gardencourt is one indicative of English life. Everything about the home including those in it is representative of this particular lifestyle. Isabel tells Ralph that she “came to Europe...to be as happy as possible” as she was “afraid of suffering” (53). Gardencourt had the illusion of a type of Edena place that Isabel always wished to return to in order to find the happiness that she had upon her arrival.<sup>4</sup> “In James’s fiction Americans are often treated as if they still possess the innocence of Eden, and in their awareness of evil they are shown as highly vulnerable once they venture outside the American paradise” (Edel, *Henry James* 7). To Isabel, Gardencourt represented her innocence when in reality her innocence was taken as soon as she was plucked from her home in Albany. Gardencourt was perceived as a space full of life and nature but in reality, it was as artificial as the drawing rooms inside the house. The garden at Gardencourt was created in order to impose control over the natural world. Just as the gardens, in a sense, were an illusion, so was the house it reflected. This very English home was owned by an American banker whose only desire was to be English. The house, like Isabel, is made from two different worlds, America and England.

### **Existing in a Liminal Space**

The individuals that are depicted as caught between two nations are shown as quite anxious as they exist in a purely liminal state. Mr. Touchett is the American banker who desires

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<sup>4</sup> This is a theme that we also saw in Baldwin regarding David’s romanticization of Giovanni’s Room after he had left it. *Giovanni’s Room* is known as “arguably the most “Jamesian novel” for Baldwin, which is why we see a lot of overlap in themes and representations of space (Stuart 53).

to be as English as possible. He looked the part of an English man with his grand English home, but it was merely a façade to hide his Americanness from the rest of the world. He is shown early on in the novel with “his hands in his pockets, and there was something in the way he did it that showed the habit was inveterate” (James 19). James is extremely subtle with these gestures and when analyzed we are able to better understand the psyche of his characters. James, like Mr. Touchett, was an American who settled into a life in England and at times wished to leave his association with America and all that it reminded him of behind. James is strikingly self-reflexive in his novel. So far, we have seen how the architecture clues the audience in on what is going on in Isabel’s relationships. Whether it is an imposing front or a doorway, she is constantly confined or framed by a space like a portrait would be. Every action and gesture is symbolic throughout the novel because James himself, through way of Miss Stackpole the newspaper writer, tells us how critical it is to “read between the lines [as it is] easier to follow than to follow the text” (113). There are many other instances where James asks us to read into the subtext in order to grasp at what is really going on. An example of this is seen in Isabel’s evolution out of the darkness through her marriage. At the beginning of the novel, Isabel tries desperately to find a “certain light” in order to “give herself completely” to someone (57). Instead of light, this search brings her darkness in the form of Osmond. As a result, she is left filled with anxiety. Her anxiety manifests itself in the way she “clasp[s] her hands behind her,” ashamed of herself and her failures abroad. At the end of the novel we see that Isabel no longer lives in fear of the darkness, and “in an extraordinarily short time – for the distance was considerable – she had moved through the darkness and reach[ed] the door... she was free,” no longer confined to the frame of the doorway (499).

On the other side of the door, Isabel was able to find the light for herself. James leaves the reader with a sense of hope at the end of the novel that she has developed beyond her portrait. This hope is a mere flicker as we are still left with the unresolved question of whether or not we know who the lady in the portrait is. Unlike the Isabel we first meet, this Isabel has experienced suffering, therefore the illusion of Gardencourt, as a type of Eden, no longer exists for her. She is aware of the ways in which she has been used as a pawn, confined over and over again. Similarly to David in *Giovanni's Room*, Isabel no longer thinks of a life abroad as one with a sense of optimism and hope like she did when she began. "A year ago [Isabel] valued [her] life beyond everything. [She] wanted to see life" and now she believed that she had "seen it [and] it doesn't look to [her] now, [she] admits, such an inviting expanse" (294). The life that she thought she had was never hers from the start. At the beginning "she is certainly a victim of circumstance and of unscrupulous manipulators, but it lies within herself that she is such easy prey to [those around her]. Because she wants to compose her life according to an aesthetic pattern, she compiles with the critical requirements of the connoisseurs of life who surround her" (McMaster 57). The Isabel we come to know is the result of a paintbrush being given to everyone in her life. Everyone around her has been given artistic license, except for her. A similar process occurs with Baldwin's David, as he let others determine his identity and sense of self. Both David and Isabel ultimately break free from the space that others had confined them to only to find out that their identity was dependent upon that space and without it, they were lost. Both James and Baldwin end their novels without resolving their characters' identity struggles but what we are given is a sense that their stories are not yet over. Similar to the beginning of the novel, the ending is told through someone else's voice. That voice is Henrietta Stackpole, an outsider looking in who tells Caspar Goodwood "just you wait" when he asked where Isabel had gone



(James 500). James leaves us with the hope that there is more for us to learn and discover about the lady we now know to be Isabel Archer. By leaving their stories unresolved, Baldwin and James leave their own personal questions of identity unanswered. Like their characters, both writers leave America in exile but realize that their issues and struggles follow them regardless of how much space they place between them and their homeland.

### Chapter 3

#### **Shattering the Glass House: Redesigning American Spaces in Wharton's *The Custom of the Country***

*"No one fully knows our Edith who has not seen her in the act of creating a habitation for herself."* - Henry James

Like Baldwin and James, Wharton sought a life abroad that would free her from the social and political constraints of America. Wharton's novel, *The Custom of the Country* follows a similar structure to Baldwin and James: semi-autobiographical works that deal with questions of deep estrangement with one's country. At the time Wharton was writing she had done the unthinkable for many New York society women; she divorced her husband. In order to live her life as a divorcée, she fled to Europe. But her sojourns to France began long before her time as a divorced woman. Wharton's upbringing was similar to James in the way she was brought up both in America and in Europe. Wharton, like James, felt rooted in European life, which is why it came as no surprise when she "decided to settle permanently in France in 1906" (Bellringer 110). Despite her love for France, she was first and foremost an American and wrestled with the tensions that a cross-Atlantic childhood brought to her life.

She frequently commented on the oddness of her intra-national identity. She stressed how much she felt the curse of having been brought up in Europe, of having it 'ineradicably in one's blood.' The result of this curse was that she could not feel securely American: '*We are none of us Americans*', she wrote in 1903 to Sara Norton, '*we don't think or feel as Americans do, we are wretched exotics produced in a European glass-house*' (110).

It is notable that Wharton used the word glass house to describe the condition of Americans abroad. Wharton, who wrote extensively on architecture, saw the American housed or rather contained in a European space. For Wharton, the glass house acted as a window in which Americans were put on display for all of Europe to see. She equated her experience of being raised as an American in Europe to one of confinement. These four glass walls make up a home,

a space that is normally considered private, but when made out of glass it becomes part of the public sphere. A glass house is also another name for a greenhouse.<sup>5</sup> The very function of a greenhouse is to cultivate and contain. I understood this metaphor to represent the state of limbo that an intra-national identity causes. Although her identity is cultivated by Europe, the glass walls contained her and prevented her from assimilating fully into European culture ensuring that she was neither fully American nor European. A simple piece of glass divided her identity leaving her and those like her to forever exist in a liminal space.<sup>6</sup>

Wharton, like most women, spent a lot of time in the home. However, unlike most women she was not maintaining the home rather she was constructing it. Aside from literature, Wharton had a deep love for architecture, specifically Italian architecture, a love she shared with fellow writer and friend Henry James. Being an architect was not an acceptable profession for a woman but that did not stop Wharton from learning all she could. Wharton both an architect and author, understood the purpose of space and the power it had on those within it. Wharton began her architectural path in the home. This was a natural starting place being that she was a woman and that was an acceptable place for her to be. Wharton got her start in architecture by decorating the interiors of homes before moving on to styling gardens, another place one might think to find a woman. In her novels, when Wharton described a room it was not merely the room that was significant but the entire structure. The interior of a space reflects its exterior and vice versa. The communication that exists between the inside of a space and its surroundings occur both in the physical home as well as in the world of the novel. By starting with the interior both in her profession as a decorator and in her novel, Wharton was able to gain control both as a woman

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<sup>5</sup> A greenhouse (also called a glasshouse) is a structure with walls and roof made mainly of transparent material such as glass, in which plants requiring regulated climatic conditions are grown.

<sup>6</sup> The idea of someone existing in a liminal space comes from the Anthropologist Victor Turner and his Study of Liminality

and an author. Through her understanding of these spaces and her knowledge of Italian villa and garden architecture, she was able to build and designed her own home, The Mount, making a name for herself as an architect, a field which was previously reserved for men.<sup>7</sup>

As a master of space, Wharton filled her novels with architectural references and lavish interiors. Wharton allowed the spaces in her novels to exercise power over those who enter them. The space, like the glass house, cultivates and contains the characters within them. In Wharton's novel *The Custom of the Country* there is one character who, like Wharton, masters the space around her. In the novel, Wharton places an extreme amount of emphasis on the interiors, especially the home. The focus on homes throughout the novel speaks to the traditional female archetype of the housewife that she is undermining. In Wharton, the space of the home is not where women get their power. Instead of empowering the woman in the home, she inverts the notion of the home as a female space by making it one that traps and silences the men of the novel. The typical twentieth century customs of domesticity that placed women into these spaces to begin with, are destroyed entirely by a character that mirrored the culture that created her as well as the author that brought her to life. This mirrored image of both culture and author is known as Undine Spragg. Although Wharton is exploring the same themes as Baldwin and James, her protagonist is vastly different. Undine, unlike David and Isabel, is a destroyer of space.

### **The Space of the Hotel**

The first space of the novel that Wharton grants us access to is the space of the hotel. The beginning of Wharton's novel differs from how James begins *The Portrait of a Lady*. James

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<sup>7</sup> Along with her works of fiction, Wharton published books on the architecture of Italian villas and gardens (*Italian Backgrounds, Italian Villas and their Gardens*) as well as books on the home and interior decorating (*The Decoration of Houses*).

begins his novel in the home, as Isabel's lack of a home and by extension her own space, leave her vulnerable and powerless. Although James's novel is centered on the home, the real power is granted to those who inhabit the space of the hotel. Wharton plays off of this and begins her novel with a description of a single room. Mrs. Spragg's hotel room can be equated to a display window of the new money society that she has only recently entered into. Mrs. Spragg's "rooms were known as the Looney suites, and the drawing-room walls, above their wainscoting of highly varnished mahogany, were hung with salmon-pink damask and adorned with oval portraits of Marie Antoinette and the Princess de Lamballe" (Wharton 5). The room is filled with decadence and is over-embellished. Wharton, being the skilled decorator that she was, would have never created a room like this unless it served a greater purpose. By exaggerating the showiness of the room, Wharton showed how this room stood as a grotesque example of the wave of new money that was invading Old New York. This is further shown in the portraits that Wharton chose to display in the room. Marie Antoinette, like Mrs. Spragg's hotel room, stood to represent the epitome of new money. Once the reader is aware of the kind of space that Mrs. Spragg exists in, they can begin to understand who the Spraggs are. Because the room only provides the illusion of wealth, there is no real power that exists for the individual who resides there. The room, much like the Spraggs was a façade. "The room showed no traces of human use, and Mrs. Spragg herself wore as complete an air of detachment as if she had been a wax figure in a show-window" (5). By comparing Mrs. Spragg to a "wax figure," she is put on display with the rest of her room, leaving her both lifeless and powerless.

Furthering the comparison between *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Custom of the Country*, I found that although both authors engaged with similar spaces, Wharton's emphasis on the interiors of rooms came to represent something entirely different than it did in James.

Thinking back to James, the only character that is able to manipulate space and those within it was Madame Merle. Both Madame Merle and Isabel Archer are without a home but it is Madame Merle who uses her homelessness to manipulate and triumph over others. Like Madame Merle, Undine's lack of belonging is her greatest weapon. Wharton allows the reader to believe that Mrs. Spragg, like Madame Merle, could gain power from the hotel. But unlike Madame Merle, Mrs. Spragg entered the space with customs of her own. These customs are taken away once she enters the hotel and without them, she becomes detached from the society that molded her. Uprooting her life in Apex and taking residence in the hotel, Mrs. Spragg severed herself from the customs she had once known in order to aid her daughter's quest in conquering New York society. Without a home to maintain she is stripped of her domestic duties, leaving her without a purpose. "Poor Mrs. Spragg has done her own washing in her youth, but since rising fortunes had made this occupation unsuitable" she had been "reduced to illness by boredom and inactivity" (10). Mrs. Spragg, unlike her daughter, had become accustomed to her life and duties as a housewife. Her lack of belonging was due to her lack of a home and without a home, she began to question her identity. For James, the lack of a home gives Madame Merle power, however the hotel room in Wharton gives nothing to Mrs. Spragg.

### **The Marvell Home**

If the hotel and the Spraggs represented the world of new money that threatened Old New York, then the Marvell family stood for everything that old money society had to offer. Ralph Marvell is Undine's ticket into Old New York and her way to gain access to a society that otherwise would not accept her. Just as the hotel room defined the Spraggs, specifically Mrs. Spragg, the Marvell home was seen as a reflection of Ralph and his understanding of the society around him. Unlike the space of the hotel, the Marvell home is inherited. Along with inheriting

the physical home, Ralph and the rest of his family inherit and abide by the customs that this old money space demanded from them. The Marvell home is found in the New York neighborhood of Washington Square. We are given a picture of what the exterior of the home looks like through Ralph's eyes. From its description, we immediately know that this home has indeed been passed down to him from his grandfather. Before entering the home Ralph, "mounting his grandfather's doorstep, looked up at the symmetrical old red house-front, with its frugal marble ornament, as he might have looked into a familiar face" (52). Because we know how much authorial emphasis is placed on the architecture we know that the exterior of the home mirrors that of its inhabitants. Similar to what we saw in James, the façade of the home can be the most telling part of a structure as it is an integral part of one's first impression of a space. The front of the house is described as "symmetrical" as well as "a familiar face." I read this to mean that the house, like the Marvells, adhere to the rules and customs of society. These customs that Ralph must live by are so familiar to him because they are embedded in his DNA. Unlike Mrs. Spragg's hotel room, there is little to no decadence present. In fact, Wharton described the material of the home as "frugal marble" (52). Despite the Marvell's status in Old New York, they are not as wealthy as Undine is led to believe. When I think of marble, I tend to associate it with images of wealth and status. But when the word frugal is attached to it, it takes on an entirely different meaning. Ralph describes the society that his home is situated in as "small" and "cautious," two words that contradict everything Undine is about. (53) These descriptions tell the reader that the Marvell's wealth is nothing more than an illusion. Although the audience is aware of this, Undine is not and she remains that way until after she is married to Ralph and assumes his name.

Just as we saw in James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, the job of the architecture was not just to foreshadow future events but to also reflect those who lived within its walls. Ralph Marvell is a product of the old money society that he has grown up in. In addition to being a product of Old New York, Ralph is also a reflection of his home and customs, which have both been passed down for many generations. Through their marriage, Undine invades his space undermining his customs and by extension society. Because Undine does not have a home of her own or customs to adhere to, she is resistant to being molded and manipulated. Instead of being a pawn in the hands of others, Undine takes on the role of puppet master, similar to what we see Madame Merle do in James. "Ralph Marvell's notion of women had been formed on the experiences common to good-looking young men of his kind" (59). From the moment we meet Undine she defies these typical notions. She did not wish to be second to anyone in her life, "she wanted to be noticed" and "assert herself as the dominant figure of the scene" (28). Initially, Undine's desire for attention and defiant nature enamored Ralph. It is clear to the audience that Ralph's notions of women will not apply to Undine but it is this very fact that attracts him to her. He "begins by being overwhelmed by her beauty and free spirit only to become increasingly frustrated by her refusal to accept his control" (Dupree 13). Everything he attempts to do to please Undine ultimately falls short because of her refusal to succumb to his "typical notions of women" (Wharton 59). Ralph, like his home, is frugal and Undine soon realizes that his name and status are a mere delusion. After the illusion of his wealth is shattered, Undine becomes overwhelmingly unsatisfied with Ralph both as a man and a husband. The dissatisfaction that Undine has for Ralph is seen in her emasculation of him. This was all in an effort to destroy the old money space that he and his family occupied. By destroying all that Ralph stood for Undine was able to manipulate and mold Ralph in order to aid her own cause. As the novel progresses



Undine places Ralph into the role of the housewife, forcing him to be the one “maintaining the household,” not her (104). Once he is emasculated, Undine is able to gain access to Ralph’s circle. Any attempt for Ralph to regain his foothold in society failed as Undine’s “resistance threaten[ed] both his ego and his reputation within his circle” (Dupree 6). Despite maintaining the household, “he had no study of his own” (Wharton 153). Without a space of his own, Ralph no longer had customs to ground him. Without this set of rules that he had become so accustomed to, Ralph was to play the role of the silent partner, a role typically meant for the woman. In an attempt to regain his voice in his marriage and in Old New York, Ralph encourages Undine to take on European society without him.

### **From the West to the East**

Before we look at what European society can offer Undine we must understand why the space of New York was so easily conquerable. Wharton described New York as a society that “was really just like the house it lived in” it had a “roof and the skeleton walls supporting them” (52). By portraying New York as a society built on “skeleton walls” it becomes a non-existent space, making it so easily conquerable for Undine. The “skeleton walls” imply that this is a dead society with outdated customs that only those who belong submit to (52). Undine triumphs in the East because she does not adhere to its rules or customs. Without customs, Undine is able to enter a variety of spaces throughout the novel. Some spaces she destroys while others she uses for her own personal gain. So far, we have examined what the space of the hotel room means and how the limitations that are placed on those who have a home restrict their movement within society. At the time Wharton was writing, the West was an unknown place. To those living in New York, the West had no history, no real culture. Because of this, Undine lived customless allowing her to focus solely on climbing the ladder of society, a ladder, which for her had no

rules, restrictions or limitations. Wharton situated Undine, as well as the novel as a whole, in a space and time in which the new money society was encroaching on the old and Americans were invading and appropriating the space of Europe.

Without culture, or customs to constrain her, Undine is able to inflict destruction upon the worlds she inhabits. Her move from Apex (the West) to New York society was triggered by the societal failure of her first husband, Elmer Moffatt and her refusal to let herself be tarnished by his mistakes. “The scandal was considerable” and Moffatt managed to “vanish from the social horizon” (385). Amid “his downfall, the sense of being able to succeed where she had failed” came over her and ignited a fire under her that never burned out. “All her own attempts to get what she wanted had come to nothing” in the West but there was no stopping her once she gained access to New York (386). Not only did she leave Moffatt behind but she also forced her parents to leave their home “because Undine was too big for th[at] place” (11). Her selfish desire for success is what led her mother to be stripped of her domesticity and her father to be confined to a life in “the steel and concrete tower in which his office occupied” on Wall Street (84). This pattern continues as Undine’s destructive nature enables her to stay in one place for too long. The destruction she leaves behind after she has exhausted all societal benefits is at the expense of those who are closest to her. An example of this can be seen when Undine reconnects with her parents after some time away. She finds that “her father and mother seemed much older seemed tired and defeated” (257). Through their demise, Undine is able to separate from her past and shrug off all reminders of Apex, as she has no use for them or the culture that they came from. After conquering Apex and Old New York, Undine used Ralph’s name and what remained of his wealth to enter into the international arena of Europe.

### **A Quick Trip to Europe**

Initially, Wharton portrayed the space of Europe as one accepting of Americans. The first time Undine goes abroad she is on her honeymoon with Ralph. Unlike most people and even most characters that I have introduced, Undine is not infatuated with the space of Europe. She wished to conquer it but at no point does it represent a space of reality. It was “not what [she] expected...it’s all too dreadfully dreary” (109). The purpose of her marriage to Ralph was to gain status and acceptance into the world of old money. What was unbeknown to her was that being from old money did not necessarily mean that you had money. Once abroad, Undine realized that although she might be a Marvell, she was also a “poor man’s wife” (205). In New York, the status that his name provided sufficed her to a certain degree but while in Europe it did not matter who you were if you did not have the money to support the lavish lifestyle of an American abroad. Her desire to live a lavish American lifestyle will also be an issue later on in the novel in her marriage to Raymond de Chelles as she will learn the harsh reality of what it means to be an American living France. Just as Baldwin, James, and Wharton experienced in their own lives, the class and status you held while in America meant little to nothing to those in Europe, which is why we see Undine return to America.

### **Entering Interior Spaces**

Once we have understood the various spaces and societies that Undine is taking on, we can then look to the interiors of these spaces to allow us to further understand Wharton’s intentions. Because of Wharton’s background in architecture and interior decorating, the descriptions of rooms are essential in understanding the novel. Aside from the hotel room, the first room that Wharton emphasizes is the drawing room. In the space of the home, the drawing room is where the guests are entertained. Often times, this room was all that one was exposed to

upon entering a home. Because of this, the drawing room acted as a façade of wealth and status if, like the Marvells, your wealth was an illusion. Just like any space, certain behaviors were expected in the drawing room and there were even certain discussion topics that were classified “as a drawing-room topic” (65). “Politics” was one of these drawing room specific topics that for Undine “had the hollowness of Fourth of July orations, and her mind wandered in spite of the desire to appear informed and competent” (65). And while the women were limited to talking about “books, pictures and politics” in the drawing room, the men could be found in “the smoking-room” (65, 29). Undine’s presence in the drawing room drew the men away from their own gender-specific space, causing a shift in what are usually traditional spatial norms. As a result, Undine held “her vivid head very high” as she watched the drawing room transform from a female space to one “where men and women, though divided by politics and by class, could unite in general conversation” (Wharton 29, Bellringer 111). The drawing room acted as a space where the private sphere was made public. This space was one for Undine “to be noticed” and “assert herself as the dominant figure of the scene,” therefore conquering it and the society it mirrored (Wharton 28).

Another interior space that Wharton placed Undine in was the dining room. Through the various dining rooms that the reader is granted access to, we are able to see how different societies function within the same physical space. The two societies that are most prominent in the novel are Old New York and France and Wharton provided us dining rooms in both. “Undine had a sharp vision of the Van Deegan dining-room – she pictured it as oak-carved and sumptuous with gilding – with a small table in the center, and rosy lights and flowers, and Ralph Marvell, across the hot-house grapes and champagne” (45). This room is one of Undine’s first glimpses into Old New York, a space in which she craved access to. Until now, Undine had only

witnessed this world from “scenes on the stage... [and] come upon them in the glowing pages of fiction” but never up close (45). Yet, despite being granted access to the room she would never “really count among these happy self-absorbed people! They all had their friends, their ties, their delightful crowding obligations: why should they make room for an intruder in a circle so packed with the initiated?” (45). The Van Degen dining room represented a microcosm of Old New York. If Undine “could never really be happy in such a poisoned atmosphere” that was the dining room then she would never be happy in her marriage to Ralph, a man who exuded the customs of this very room. It is at this time and in this space that Undine realizes if those within the space would not “make room for an intruder” she would have to make room for herself.

When Undine ventures to Europe she does not make the same mistake she does in the Van Degen dining room. “The dining-room at the Nouveau Luxe represented, on such a spring evening, what unbounded material power had devised for the delusion of its leisure: a phantom ‘society’, with all the rules, smirks, gestures of its model, but evoked out of promiscuity and incoherence” (191). Undine finds herself in this illustrious dining room on her sojourn to Paris without her husband. The “phantom society” that Wharton describes here existed within a hotel in Paris (191). A hotel, in which, many of the guests were Americans. Being that they are Americans in Europe, their customs and rules are non-existent in this foreign space. The phrase “phantom society” that Wharton used to characterize the space within the hotel is very similar to how we see her describe Old New York (191). The way in which Wharton depicted these spaces as ghostly and fragile make it easy for Undine to both infiltrate and destroy them. Their customs are as illusory as the society that they are built upon. The fragility of the space allows Undine to momentarily invade Paris as an American. While in the dining room at the Nouveau Luxe “Undine’s party was one of the liveliest in the room: the American laugh rose above the din of

the orchestra as the American toilets dominated the less daring effects at the other tables” (195). Her ability to dominate this space is the same reason why she is able to dominate Old New York and Ralph. “Wharton uses her ‘Western Girl’ to deconstruct the feminine ideal: as Undine consciously adopts certain conventions and rejects others, the upper-class woman's role is exposed to view” (Dupree 6). By placing herself in these non-existent spaces that are characterized as “dead” or “phantom” she is able to triumph just as she did in the West, a space that for many was also non-existent.

Even though these spaces are seen as non-existent they still act as a place of belonging. If having a space of your own seems to limit those in the novel, then having your space taken from you is far worse. Many of these characters depend on their spaces to provide them with identity and their sense of self. As discussed, the drawing room is the space in which the private meets the public; it is the façade you wish the world to see. When one is granted access beyond the drawing room, it is a reflection of the intimacy one has with those who reside in that space. Since the drawing room is situated at the front of the home, the farther back you go, the more intimate the space becomes. The sitting room is the next space one would encounter if they are invited past the drawing room. Wharton described many sitting rooms in her novels while also highlighting those who are not afforded one. The two sitting rooms that I want to contrast are Undine’s in Paris and Mrs. Spragg’s lack of one in America. While Undine’s “hotel sitting-room had, as usual, been flowered, cushioned and lamp-shaded into a delusive semblance of stability” back in New York “Mrs Spragg had no sitting-room” (197, 219). A sitting room is a place of comfort, of relaxation. It is a privilege to have one, a privilege that Mrs. Spragg was not allotted. Undine’s disregard for the rules and customs of society allowed her to triumph in America whereas Mrs. Spragg, a mother willing to do anything for her daughter, flounders.

### **All Roads Lead to France**

Because of Undine's societal achievements in America and her successes in the rooms of the Nouveau Luxe it seemed only natural that her next stop on the climb to peak social status was France. But, in order to do so, she would need to be free of the Marvell name. Once free, she could conquer France with a new husband whose name would benefit her abroad like Ralph's had done at home. Ralph was aware that "in New York...a divorced woman is still...at a decided disadvantage" so when "he said to himself: 'My wife...this will make it all right for her'" he knew he would be granting her the freedom that he could never give her while he was alive (67, 330). And at that moment "he felt again, more deliberately, for the spot he wanted, and put the muzzle of his revolver against it" (330).

Ralph's death also marks the defeat of his society. As Carol Singley details in her *Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*, Ralph and his customs were "no match for [Undine's] boundless, aggressive self-interest" (Singley 96). And after Ralph's death, Undine put these qualities to the test on the European stage of French society. Once abroad and newly married to Raymond de Chelles, Undine was expected to adopt an entirely new set of customs and behaviors now that she held the name "Countess Raymond" (334). Initially, Undine felt "that the life she was leading there must be going to last – it seemed so perfect an answer to all her wants!" (197). This illusion was quickly shattered when those in her husband's circle were insistent on "a woman...adopt[ing] her husband's nationality whether she wants to or not. It's the law, and it's the custom" (338). This did not bode well with Undine. Her refusal to conform and adhere to the rules of society was out of pure selfish desire. These desires, just as they had with Ralph, "bec[a]me increasingly frustrat[ing]" for Raymond as they contradicted the customs that were central to his space (Dupree 13). At this moment, Undine stood at a crossroads, either

she could embrace her adopted country for the sake of her marriage or reject it entirely. As discussed in the previous chapter, Isabel Archer was faced with a very similar dilemma. Ellen Dupree, feminist theorist and Wharton scholar, investigates why a comparison between Henry James's Isabel Archer and Undine is a fruitless exercise. She writes that

by introducing Isabel's example, Wharton reminds the reader of patriarchy's expectations of a woman in Undine's situation: she should remain De Chelles, accepting the consequences of her mistaken judgment of him. But by now we have left James's viewpoint far behind (14).

In true Undine fashion, she chose to embrace her own desires instead of converting to the customs of her husband. "Because French society is even more conservative than Old New York, the suppression of women is more overt" therefore Undine's destruction needed to be greater than it had been in New York (Dupree 13). Just as she had done with Ralph, Undine tasked her new husband with doing what[ever he] like[d] with [his] own house" (Wharton 351). Through Undine's relationship with Raymond, Wharton provides us with a criticism of Americans and the way Americans lived as seen by Europeans. Undine must attempt to push back on those around her in order to not let the customs of this family influence her and attempt to confine her. The de Chelles women led "the most conventional lives, their interests confined to their families and the few social events that break the days' monotony" (Dupree 12). But just like the Marvell's, their wealth was a mere illusion and their status in society was being held together by the de Chelles name. To destroy it, all she had to do was threaten their name and she would regain all the power and status that Raymond and his family had sought to dispel her of.

### **Undine's Final Act**

The de Chelles family was known for their illustrious tapestries, which "had been a gift of Louis XV to a previous Marquis de Chelles" (Bellinger 117). These tapestries hung in "the



innumerable rooms of Saint Désert [which] were furnished with embroidered hangings and tapestry chairs produced by generations of diligent chatelains” (Wharton 357-8). They represented the de Chelles family history and held what was left of their wealth in its fabric. Selling them would not only destroy the de Chelles name but the society in which his family represented. A society Undine, the American without customs, was never quite good enough for. The irony here is that the man to try and help sell these tapestries is a fellow Westerner, her first husband from Apex Elmer Moffatt, whose societal failure began her on this road of destruction. Because neither came with customs of their own they were able to play by their own set of rules. Upon Raymond discovering Undine’s plan to sell away his family’s history he unloads his feelings towards Americans specifically those who feel they can take from European culture what is not theirs. He tells Undine,

you come among us from a country we don’t know, and can’t imagine, a country you care for so little that before you’ve been a day in ours you’ve forgotten the very house you were born in – it wasn’t torn down for you knowing what we mean; wanting the thing we want, and not knowing why we want them... you come from hotels as big as towns and from towns as flimsy as papers...and the people are proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have – and we’re fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for us! (379-80).

In this passage, Undine represents the generations of Americans, including the one in which Wharton was writing in, that come to Europe thinking that they will be welcomed without question. Different countries have different customs attached to them and for Raymond and his European society, the thought of abandoning one’s home and never looking back was unthinkable. Through Raymond’s voice, Wharton demystifies the expatriate tradition. She paints Americans as invaders. According to Raymond, who is Wharton, America does not value customs and cultures like Europe does. This among many other reasons was why Wharton did

indeed flee America and settle in Europe. This passage is Wharton's critique of Americans both at home and abroad. Wharton herself was in a marriage consumed by new money status, a marriage that destroyed her and her reputation. Although Undine and Wharton share many of the same attributes, Undine is a result of valuing money over people and places, something Wharton's husband did at her expense. Yes, Europe was a haven for many wishing to escape the trials and tribulations that America presented to them but as we have seen in both Baldwin and James, life in Europe was no cakewalk nor was it a permanent solution. There were many Americans like Baldwin, James, and Wharton who appreciated the customs of Europe but there were also many who did not.

By being an American in Europe you are placed in limbo regardless of whether or not you appreciate European culture. The criticism that Wharton is referring to in the passage above has to do with the careless loss of one's country. Although Wharton fled America, it remained a part of her identity as exemplified by Gertrude Stein's words that "writers have two countries" (Stein 2). As an American in Europe, you grapple with the reality that you are no longer in America but you are not fully accepted into European society either. This limbo is where the space of the hotel is found. The hotels in Europe were far different than those in America, as we have seen. "It was natural that the Americans, who had no homes, who were born and died in hotels, should have contracted nomadic habits" (Wharton 357). Once you left your country you had the choice of whether or not you wanted to reject your homeland. For Undine, there was never a choice; since she never had a home to begin with. Because of her lack of country, customs did not apply to her, therefore Undine was able to do what many could not at the time, "get a divorce" (400). The leverage she gained in her divorce was enough to marry her first husband Elmer Moffatt again as he had now been deemed the "Railroad King" and recaptured

“the Saint Désert tapestries” that now hung “under her roof after all” (406,411,412). The power that Undine finally gained was what she had been searching for from the moment she landed in Old New York. Now that she had obtained it and destroyed all that had stood in her way she thirsted for more.

One could read the ending of the novel as full of hope and optimism for the future. On the very last page of the text, Undine “learn[s] that there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never be an Ambassador’s wife” because “they won’t have divorced Ambassadors” (413). And at that moment, when most women would have seen this as too large of an obstacle to overcome, Undine “said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for” (413). Just when you think Undine has everything she could need, we realize that she would never allow herself to be contained by the culture and customs of American society. Undine’s triumph is proof that we are more than the spaces that are constructed for us and the customs of a country are a mere phantom of the society they represent. In fact, the same could be said in the novels of Baldwin and James, as their endings appear to be a jumping off point for their protagonists’ further journeys.

Rooms, houses, and hotels: these become metaphors for the harnessing of human potential and possibility. The idea that a single room can dictate who we are as individuals seems rather un-American. As seen throughout these novels, part of being an American is that space can’t contain you. All three of the protagonists at the end of their novels are optimistic that their story goes on. They succeed in proving that these spaces from which they have broken out fail in their attempt to dictate who they are. Once out, the question then becomes who one can be without a space of their own or a culture to belong to. Without a clear sense of self or culture to be influenced by, it is nearly impossible not to be consumed by space unless, like Undine, you

never had a culture to begin with. Despite the need to flee or distance yourself from your country, you are nothing without it. This, in fact, is what the ending of all three novels caution us against. A simple sentence or gesture that occurs on the final page lets the reader know that these characters are somehow being liberated from all these notions of space that they had labored under throughout the entirety of the novel. In *Baldwin*, we saw David return the key, turn off the light, and finally shut the door to Giovanni's Room. In *James*, we are told from Henrietta Stackpole, an American and a "New Woman", that Isabel will be back. And throughout *Wharton*, Undine was never able to be contained by anyone or any space and her ending is indicative of that.

The optimism that exists for these characters is really meant to serve their authors. All three novels begin with idealizing the space that they are in as a solution to the problems of yesterday. Perhaps it's this hopefulness that tomorrow will be better that makes them American. Or perhaps it is the need to continue searching for something that they believe is missing. It seems as if we are constantly reaching for an ideal that we can never fully grasp because it exists only in our minds. As F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* ends so does this chapter. "It eluded us then, but that's no matter — to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . . And one fine morning — So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald 180).

## Conclusion

So where does this leave us? As Americans, we have always walked around with that flashing neon sign above our head that screams “American”. No matter how much we wish to be fully integrated into European society, we still tend to migrate towards other Americans while abroad. The space of the hotel, described in Wharton, is one that Americans flocked to so that they could be alone, together. As much as the writers of the Lost Generation were categorized as lost, they were “perhaps not lost enough” (Gopnik xxi). The goal of the expatriate was to take what they had learned abroad and “return home and realistically assess the successes and failures of their homeland” (Wall 68). If this were the definition of a successful expatriate, then I would claim that Baldwin, James, and Wharton are the pinnacle of success for the expatriate tradition. Although all three exiled themselves from America early on in life, they never turned their back on their homeland. Just as they ended their novels with a great sense of hope for their characters, their return home brought hope that one day artists and writers would not have to exile themselves in order to discover who they are as individuals. I, for one, would like to believe this hope has come true.

The life of an “expat” during the twentieth-century is not the same life that they might find today. It is not as simple as declaring your own exile and getting on boat to France. There is paperwork and signatures and more paperwork all just to legally declare yourself an expatriate. So why do so many still do it? What is so special about this foreign space? Today, there is not a great war or economic crisis that are forcing Americans to flee to Europe. The Americans who are going abroad are your typical college students during their junior year, or the twenty-year-old who doesn’t know what they want to do with their life that spends a year traveling in hopes of finding themselves. And even after the countless novels that have been written about this space,

Europe still remains a place where Americans believe that they “can get on,” as Madame Merle did. Europe, especially Paris, is still romanticized in our imaginations, and it is not until we are there that we realize it is simply just another place. No matter how many books are written about this foreign space, Americans continue to view it with rose-colored glasses. Baldwin, James, and Wharton create novels that detail extensively the effects of being an expatriate. Their novels ultimately become a critique of both the space of America and the dangers involved in romanticizing the space of Europe. This critique is not a verbal one but one displayed through the actions of the characters in their novels.

These authors spent majority of their literary career attempting to answer the question of what it is like to occupy a space that isn't yours. In the space of Europe, it is not that class, gender, and race are erased, but that being American supersedes it all. As soon as these authors stepped outside the boundaries of America, they became “other.” Although race was secondary to nation, Baldwin's experience abroad differed from James's because of his race, and the same could be said for Wharton with her gender. Both James and Wharton's novels reiterated what happens in these spaces when you aren't male and aren't allowed a choice. Baldwin's novel, meanwhile, explored the dangers of thinking that being given a choice is any easier. And through all these differences in their experiences one thing remained the same, at their lowest point in life, all three chose to break out of the space of America in hopes of finding something that was missing whether that be within themselves or their writing. If I have learned anything from these authors it is that being American was not about race, class, gender or sexuality. It was about living in a state of freedom and embracing that freedom at all costs, a freedom that Baldwin tells us is really an end to their innocence. No matter how often they tried to fight it, at their core

these authors were American. Despite their expatriation and struggles with identity, they all eventually returned home to where their stories began.

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