

Taste and Colonial Conjugality in Susan Frances Harrison

I. Loving in bad taste: colonial vulgarity in London

Critics have long seen an autobiographical gesture in the internal monologue that stands as the title story of Susan Frances Harrison's collection, *Crowded Out! and Other Sketches* (1886), a story in which a male, English Canadian writer seeking a London publisher for his work encounters acute rejection and isolation in the metropolis, dying in the attic room of a lodging-house beside a dry ink well (Wetherald 268; MacMillan 118, 109). Harrison herself had already made unsuccessful trips to London and New York to find a publisher for her work (MacMillan 109). *Crowded Out!* was her first book, published under the pen name Seranus and probably at her own expense by the *Ottawa Evening Journal* (MacMillan 121). But the rejection experienced by Harrison's narrator in this opening story is multiple in its origins: the message that he is "nobody" comes from Canada as well as London, and he is "not wanted" in matters of love as well as art (*Crowded* 8, 12). Before coming to London to seek artistic recognition, he has been rejected by his French Canadian muse, Hortense, the "last one of the noble line" (12). Harrison makes the position of the rejected suitor work as a figure for the narrator's rejection as a writer in the metropolis. The pain of both experiences is expressed in terms of a passionate lover's failure to make himself the "accepted, delighted lover" of his love-object (8-9). The narrator's problem, much as Harrison saw her own, is a problem of reception, or taste.

Strangely omitted from the original edition's table of contents,¹ the title story establishes a metafictional concern with taste as a densely encoded form of judgment; this concern is central to a number of stories in the

collection, but I shall focus on one in particular, the novella, “How the Mr. Foxleys Came, Stayed, and Never Went Away,” which develops the specific problem of taste’s fractured geographies and histories introduced in the opening story.² The extent to which Harrison was interested in taste as a category bridging the aesthetic and the social, a means of assigning value based on a mixture of historically and contextually specific distinctions, is suggested in the opening story by the narrator’s insight into the factor that joins his experiences of rejection as a writer and a suitor: “It was all caste. Caste in London, caste in *Le Bas Canada*, all the same” (11). What the narrator confronts is taste’s contamination with history, the social hierarchies of class and colonialism, and the encrustation of persons and things with these value determinations. The relevance of caste to his rejection by Hortense, the “delicate, haughty, pale and impassioned daughter of a noble house,” is more apparent than its relevance to his rejection by London publishers, however (10). Hortense’s distaste for him derives from an older code of good taste explicitly linked to status and impermeable social boundaries, a code which, as the title story of *Crowded Out!* implies, is still operative in Canada, and perhaps especially in *Le Bas Canada*. Rejected in art as well as love, by London publishers as well as Hortense, the narrator is depicted as caught between that older code of good taste and the modern, bourgeois one according to which his work is judged in London, a code in which taste by definition transcends worldly distinctions.

In the modern redefinition of taste that began to make discrimination available to non-aristocratic individuals in the eighteenth century, taste was disassociated from inherited status and made a matter of individual moral sensitivity (Garson 8). As a number of cultural historians of taste have observed, modern bourgeois taste was constituted through taste’s apparent separation from the instrumental, the calculating, and the self-interested. The “true gentility” of moral refinement, now reflected in the exercise of good taste, was to be distinguished “both from the decadence of the aristocracy and from the ‘violence’ of the working class” (Garson 8). Thus it is too bad for Harrison’s narrator—too bad a second time, on the other side of the Atlantic (but for different reasons there)—that he has the bad taste to be in love with an aristocratic daughter with a name like “*Hortense Angélique De Repentigny de St. Hilaire*” (11). As Elsie B. Michie has argued, the modern form of tastefulness that was inflected as moral refinement was performed in choices in love as well as in aesthetic responses; indeed, the two kinds of choice are fused in the nineteenth-century novel’s marriage plot

designed to affirm the virtue of the hero who has the good taste to resist the vulgar appeal of money, rejecting the unsympathetic heiress in favour of the woman embodying anti-materialist, altruistic values (423). The cordoning off of a newly privatized and interiorized taste from the “external” realm of economic transactions had made taste the expression of virtue understood as a capacity for disinterested, benevolent feeling, including the feeling of love. In this context, the fictional marriage plot that Michie describes operated as a necessary “sibling discours[e]” to political economy, offering readers, through its specialization in questions of aesthetic-moral taste, the reassurance that there was a realm uncontaminated by self-interest and economic consideration (432).

As John Barrell has noted, bourgeois taste was embroiled in economic considerations, precisely to the extent that its mode of sympathetic aesthetic response pretended to transcend the crassly material. In reconstituting taste as private and as linked to a subject’s interiority, the new code freed economic transactions from moral scrutiny. The role of the artwork in this context was to teach readers “to take a private pleasure in alleviating the results of activities of which they were the economic beneficiaries, . . . to clear up after the accidents” of commercial and industrial capitalism, through aesthetic-moral responses to representations (60). The remapping of the public and private that allowed for this “privatization of virtue” (Barrell 58) also entailed a designation of the family and its intimate relations as part of that sphere cordoned off from the self-interested passions: “[M]arriage for love rather than marriage for reason, that is, for economic or social considerations,” thereby became the normative basis for unions (Habermas 47 qtd. in Povinelli 233). Love, as Lauren Berlant puts it, became the conceptual “loophole” through which the modern, liberal, capitalist subject could “disidentify” from the aggression in “his pursuit of desire and interest in all spaces” (293).

By the end of the nineteenth century, Michie notes, this marriage plot was employed with increasing self-consciousness and even subjected to ironic reversals. For Harrison, though, self-consciousness about the rules of taste was also made available by the asynchronies of metropolitan and settler-colonial cultural “development,” associated with the comparatively delayed emergence of industrial capitalism in Canada. As Nancy Christie has argued, “contractual social relations, individualistic notions of wages and labour, and the separation of the public and private spheres of workplace and home” were relatively slow to displace older social forms of obligation and duty

associated with the persistence of economic production within the family in the settler-colonial context, and thus “gender, status, and wealth hierarchies” were preserved through informal cultural mechanisms in Canada’s experience of a particularly “‘long’ eighteenth century” (“Interrogating” 13; “Broken” 28; “Painful Dependence” 72).³

Harrison is an astute observer of this transatlantic asynchrony and the complexities of taste produced by its disjunctive temporality. As the opening story in *Crowded Out!* suggests, this asynchrony poses a problem for a writer wanting to write *of Canada for* a transatlantic audience. The narrator is caught between conflicting regimes of taste, in Canada and England, in which his love for Hortense counts as presumptuous and *déclassé*, respectively. His straddling of the two regimes is precisely why he can see through the ostensible disinterestedness of metropolitan bourgeois taste to insist that his rejection in London is as much about caste as is the rule that prevents him from winning the hand of Hortense at home.

He knows he is a colonial nobody in London, but the relevance of caste to the rejection of his writing in the metropolis stems more specifically from his aesthetic choices, especially insofar as these are inseparable from, indeed shaped by, his doomed choice in love. He has come to London with “an opera, a comedy, a volume of verse, songs, sketches, stories” (8). We meet him at the point at which he has tried to sell everything but the opera, which is metonymically associated with Hortense.⁴ His fear is that when he takes the opera to the theatre managers, and “even tell[s] them about [himself] and Hortense,” he will face ridicule (10). It is not just that he may be “nobody” to the London gate-keepers, but that to them, “Hortense, with her imperial brow, . . . my Hortense, [may be] nobody!” (10). If his works are judged as foolish or tasteless in London, then, it is because they are infused with his love for Hortense, an expression of taste that is not tradable—because it has no value—where the market is largest. As Margaret Steffler has noted, the story suggests that what makes Hortense erotically attractive to the narrator is her unattainability and exoticism: the fact that he is “‘crowded out’ of the *château* by its nobility and religion, not to mention its perceived perversity” (247).⁵ In London, however, this form of desire—and the opera that is its aesthetic correlative—registers as embarrassingly formulaic, according to a bourgeois code of good taste that requires object-choices to reflect moral integrity. The narrator only proves his aesthetic and moral backwardness when he protests that Hortense is “better born than most of these girls I have seen here in London” (11). Within London’s regime

of taste, his pursuit of a noble heiress will be received as vulgar and morally anachronistic; it will be seen to violate both moral codes and the rules of good art. London will not love him for his love of Hortense.

In "Crowded Out," then, Harrison provides a perceptive representation of the confused performance and decoding of taste in contexts of inconsistent, overlapping, or transitional social relations.⁶ That the contingency of taste was already Harrison's topic makes the difficulties contemporary and later critics have had in placing her work in relation to genre somewhat ironic. It is certainly tempting to read in her narrator's passion for the daughter of Old Quebec a trope for Harrison's own often-remarked penchant for "the romance typical of turn-of-the-century English-Canadian literary interpretations of the lower province" (Gerson, "Susan" 145).⁷ The suggestion that London will "laugh" at the narrator's work may reflect Harrison's sense that her own work's "special subject" failed to resonate with London tastes, and was also "wasted" at home (qtd. in MacMillan 107). But if her work was "wasted," in Harrison's view, it was precisely because it was not typical in its treatment of "French" material and did not correspond to the ruling taste in nineteenth-century English Canada for historical romances, either. In English Canada, a politically conquered French Canadian cultural other was relegated to a mythical past, in the service of a broader nationalist project to invest Canadian identity with romance and distinctiveness.⁸ In an interview with William Dean Howells for *Massey's Magazine*, Harrison observed that "there may be work which is a little too good for Canada, and yet, not quite good enough for English or American markets" (239). She went on to insist on an aesthetic distinction between two ways of working "French Canadian subjects," separating her own attempts from the contemporaneous "dialect craze" by explaining, "I try to get the *idiom*" (239; emphasis added).⁹

One contemporary who did recognize that the "Frenchness" of Harrison's material was not what Harrison called the "easy historical" of other writers was Agnes Ethelwyn Wetherald, whose discussion of Harrison's work in 1888 in *The Week* addressed the "tone and spirit" of "Crowded Out."¹⁰ Wetherald explains the difference of Harrison's aesthetic by drawing on the concept of national character, and implies that the tastes corresponding to national characters are indexes of their differing moral codes. The unmitigated anguish expressed by the narrator of "Crowded Out" flouts an English moral and aesthetic code of restraint, Wetherald observes. The "intensity of the emotion" in the story is "entirely French" (268): "It is as if one were inspecting a butterfly pierced but not chloroformed" (268). Interestingly, it

is when she is discussing a story largely set in London, and with an English Canadian narrator, that Wetherald sees a “French” tone in Harrison’s work (268). The adjective refers to the psychological interest of “Crowded Out,” its dramatization of emotional processes, which would seem to support Harrison’s self-characterization as “a realist, a modern of the moderns” (qtd. in Gerson, “Susan” 145).¹¹ Harrison, indeed, is not a romancer of “the Old World of America” (Wetherald 268; qtd. in Gerson, *Purer* 110), but a writer of modern genre fiction, in whose work the most uncompromising ironic detachment can sit alongside eruptions of melodrama and the gothic that are framed as aesthetic-emotional genres at work in everyday life, that is, in a world perceived through the lens of realism.

In identifying the body of nineteenth-century English Canadian fiction fascinated with Lower Canada, Carole Gerson concurred with Northrop Frye in assessing the values it promoted as those associated with the “pastoral tradition,” marked by a nostalgia for a past world now lost to a present marked by artifice and self-interest (*Purer* 115). The historical fiction of Old Quebec granted its readers the pleasure of an aesthetic-moral distinction based on disidentification from the purportedly less authentic version of themselves, forced to participate in the competitive, instrumental social relations of the present (Barrell 58; Berlant 293).¹² Harrison’s fiction seems to write against precisely this middle-class code of good moral and aesthetic taste. Her rejection of the approved uses of romance in late-nineteenth-century Canada implies an at best ambivalent relation to the private sphere as the source and sustaining ground of the tender, selfless virtues, the space of a love based on mutual, intimate recognitions of moral worth in which instrumental calculations have no part.

As Elizabeth A. Povinelli has argued, recognition according to individual moral worth (differentiated from “primitive” or aristocratic valuing of rank or descent) is supposed to be the basis for intimacy not only in the bourgeois family but also in the modern nation, the intimate national community made up of subjects formed in the “natural” bonds and recognitions of the nuclear family. Modern “nationalism,” Povinelli writes, “absorbed the structures of this recognition: We-the-People emerged as a transposition and lifting-up (*Aufhebung*) of the dialectic of the intimate I and thou” (230). So bourgeois taste as a mode of recognition, conjugal relationships and their meanings, and the modern nation as a structure that includes and excludes on the basis of an imagined intimacy set against the illegitimacy or backwardness of other modes of recognition—all of these may be seen as analytically linked

in the writing that struck Wetherald as “wholly un-English” (268). Gerson’s discussion of Harrison’s fiction in the chapter of *A Purer Taste* devoted to historical romances of Lower Canada allows that Harrison’s work represents an exception to the genre’s project of “comfort[ing] and disburden[ing]” the middle-class reader (132). Harrison deploys French Canada as the site where the “fears and desires,” the “lower depths” of English-speaking characters might be projected and explored (128). But Harrison’s exploration of the “lower depths” of her English-speaking audience does not always rest on the dynamic of projection onto French others; indeed, the critical representation of such a self-deluding cultural dynamic is key to her dissection of Ontario taste in the novella published as the second-to-last story in the *Crowded Out!* collection, “How the Mr. Foxleys Came, Stayed and Never Went Away.” Here the unconscious depths that interest Harrison are inseparable from relations of class, especially insofar as these are inflected by the context of colonial settlement and its particular distances, longings, and anxieties about social distinction—anxieties which, the novella suggests, are disowned as foreign, or French. The narrator of this story, set in the fictitious southern Ontario village of Ipswich,¹³ is an English Canadian, unmarked as to gender, but equipped with a historical consciousness and a capacity for observing with an air of worldly detachment and controlled irony the playing-out of dynamics of class and gender at a moment of unsettlement, and within a place mapped by the complex spatio-temporality of cultural transposition, settler nostalgia, and “New World” ambition.

While “Crowded Out” dramatizes the disastrous fate of a writer whose muse and intended audience are defined by the asynchrony of colonial and metropolitan tastes, the penultimate story in the collection turns to the protracted survival of pre-capitalist social forms in the settler context as fascinating material for fiction consciously focused on the vicissitudes of taste, and on characters positioned at the crossroads of different orders of value. “How the Mr. Foxleys Came, Stayed and Never Went Away” thematizes taste as an encoding of social and moral judgment. It follows the fortunes of two Englishmen of the fox-hunting class as they move into an apparently “placid” and uncannily familiar Ontario settlement, with “a certain Old World haze hanging over it” (108). *How* these English travellers come to remain in the town of Ipswich, as the title suggests, is the story’s explicit preoccupation, as it traces the slow transformation of the two sojourning brothers, George and Joseph—well-heeled but, as it turns out, disinherited members of the English gentry—into permanent residents.

Their ability to exhibit the outward signs of rank wins them easy passage into Ipswich, for the town residents are only too ready to be flattered by the attention of visitors displaying the codes of English nobility. Thus, even as the brothers appear to become unwittingly drawn into the village's "haze," the story suggests that they deliberately deploy the currents of nostalgic projection, the residual consciousness of inherited status, and the bourgeois disavowal of the selfish passions that make up the complex moral order of Ipswich's emerging middle class. Thus we move from the state of abjection that anachronistic colonial taste produces for the narrator of "Crowded Out" in London, to the ironically observed state of grace that this colonial taste produces for a pair of English travellers in southern Ontario who understand how to make the most of this residual code, while it lasts in the colony, insofar as it buys them time which they have run out of at home.

II. Companionate marriage and colonial asynchrony

Among the semi-acclimatized British settlers of Ipswich, who have created a town and local landscape that is a citation of England, the newly arrived Foxleys seem to promise access to a more-valued original, a mother country idealized in class terms.¹⁴ The villagers eagerly decode the signs of the Foxleys' gentrified status in the details of their appearance. It "was easy to gather from their picturesque and unusual attire of neat gray small-clothes meeting gray stockings at the knee, low white shoes, a striped blue and white flannel shirt and canoe-shaped hats of gray, each bearing a snow-white 'puggree' with blue and gold fringed ends. Such was the outward adorning of the Mr. Foxleys" (108). But as the exacting detail of the description suggests, something is at stake for the observers in demonstrating this expertise, the assertion of their own identity as English or at least British. The codes of Englishness are both familiar and tinged with distance and longing. They represent cultural materials from which the residents of Ipswich have themselves, by time and circumstance, become alienated. The simile used to describe the visitors' hats draws on a point of reference that seems to allude, as if unwittingly, to a pre-European social geography of the deceptively English river the visitors are crossing over in their carriage.¹⁵

The colonial situation makes for important slippages and misrecognitions, especially insofar as it produces a form of historical lag in the reading of social types. Mrs. Cox, the landlady of the Ipswich Inn, "took [the Foxley brothers] to her heart at once. They were *gentlemen*, she said, and that was enough for her" (114). But just before this we have been led to suspect

that her certainty that “she knew gentlemen when she saw them” might be questionable, or her judgment out of date, for her estimation of “the only well-to-do man in the place”—the American owner of “the new and prosperous mill”—as falling short of gentlemanly status is based on an outmoded “knowledge of types”: “[t]he aristocracy of money was as yet a phase unknown to her simple English mind” (113-14). The unfamiliarity to Mrs. Cox of this new phase which signals the breakdown of a whole regime of value is key to the Foxley brothers’ ability to make themselves at home at her inn and indeed in the village as a whole. The codes according to which the people of Ipswich read and desire are what we must understand, if the story of the village’s seduction by the Englishmen is to unfold with the dramatic irony that allows us to share in the controlled bemusement of the narrator. More precisely, the reader needs to understand the contingency and the confusion of the codes of taste operating in the village, their inextricability from social relations of class which are, fortunately for the Foxleys, not quite in synch on either side of the Atlantic. Thus, the brothers’ casual references to Foxley Manor, the family home in the Old Country, work such powerful magic among the admiring settlers that by the end of their first afternoon, the narrator wryly observes, George was “in full possession of [the town’s] charming and comfortable Inn” (112). The state of possession referred to here anticipates the later, legal possession that George will be able to claim, when after four years’ enjoyment of the inn’s services and domestic comforts, he marries Milly, the young maid, who also happens to be the landlady’s niece and the heir to the charming establishment.

Indeed, the Foxley brothers discover soon after their arrival that “the entire village” seems to be “populated by people of English extraction”; what they also find is a village populated by unmarried people: spinsters, eligible maidens, widows, and widowers (113). While there are homes and properties, there are no marriage relations, and so the desirability of the Foxley brothers is keyed to the problem of marriage in the colonial village, and to the vexed question of what constitutes “tasteful” marriage material there in that moment, repeatedly specified as “twenty years ago,” a moment that places the events around both the time of Confederation and the transition from a commercial to an industrial mode of production in southern Ontario (122).¹⁶ The story’s metafictional concerns with genre and taste are played out on conjugal terrain that is explicitly invested with these material, historical, and political concerns. In its broadest sense, conjugation means a “yoking together.” The novella explores conjugation’s more specific sense, the art of

making a good marriage, but in a context that also reflects a wider yoking of contradictory schemes of value.

Taste that is out of place and out of time is the basis for the story's many misrecognitions, but it is not just the villagers' misrecognition of the Foxleys as the real thing that is in play, it is also their more general sense that the distinctions of inherited property should be relevant to social standing. In Charlotte Dexter, one of two unmarried middle-aged sisters who count among the "persons of distinction" in the village, the novella condenses the tragic pathos of the fantasy, shared by numerous characters, that affiliation with an English estate will provide the necessary means of re-establishing the distinction lost through emigration (116). In Joseph Foxley, Charlotte misreads the careless attentions of a flirtatious and worldly "general lover," imagining that his visits for tea constitute a courtship that recognizes and reaffirms the social distinction of her family. When she comes to understand that Joseph's attentions have been indiscriminate, and thus that his presence among her things has defiled them with disregard, it is fitting that the punishment Charlotte delivers—blinding him by tossing vitriol into his eyes—attacks the organ of aesthetic evaluation by which she and her "beautiful and interesting objects" have been so violently insulted (130).

The two Foxley brothers turn out to have starkly different fates in Ipswich, according to a subtle difference in their initial aesthetic judgments of the place. This is the other side of the circuit of desire and projection that draws the Foxleys into the village and keeps them there. The Foxleys stop at Ipswich, and go no further, because they recognize the town's resemblance to an English original. "*This is better,*" remarks George as they approach the "pleasant picture" of the village. "It's a little bit after—Devonshire, don't you think?" responds his brother Joseph (108-09). The younger Joseph is the brother more convinced of the reassuring familiarity of Ipswich. George, with a "weary smile" and "weary eyes," allows that the landscape is "better" than what they have seen to this point in Canada, but reminds his brother that it is "*not English*" (109). What George seems to understand already, and what Joseph has yet to learn, are the social dimensions of taste. For Ipswich, in straining to look like England, promises a fertile social terrain but only if one plays the value of one's status as an Englishman carefully. The enchantment of the comfortably familiar must be resisted, for this is a setting of overlapping and contradictory regimes of value, where the residual power of inherited social rank pulls against an emergent liberal order in which property is made, and entitlement earned, by individual effort.

Only George, the world-weary elder brother, who arrives weak and wasted from his adventures in the Old World, knows how to secure for himself all the benefits of the relatively delayed emergence of a liberal order in Ipswich, particularly through his success in the domestic sphere. For him, this narrative of arriving, staying, and never going away is a narrative of regeneration. In marrying Milly, the “buxom maid in bare arms” (110), he appears to accomplish a modern marriage across class lines that, in the eyes of a character like Charlotte, consumed by a nostalgia for Old World distinctions, would constitute a scandalous *mésalliance* between a gentleman and a “common drudge, the scullery maid of a country inn,” at home in England (143). Of course, Charlotte is mistaken, for in Harrison’s representation of metropolitan-colonial asynchrony, those social distinctions are now relatively outmoded in England and only persist in the colonial settlement, especially in the nostalgic fantasies of the social type that she herself represents. What Charlotte does not see about the New World, but George evidently does, is that it produces social identities and mobilities unthinkable even in those fictional plots in which the country squire becomes besotted with the maid, because Milly is not just a maid, she is a servant-*inheritor* and George’s goal is not to seduce her but to “make” himself, to secure a middle class existence by *marrying* her.

In England, as the reader suspects before it is made explicit through George’s confession at the end of the story, the elder Foxley brother has already lost any prerogatives associated with his birth. He can no longer rely on a system of familial interdependence and obligation, and faces the brisk demands of a new liberal order of contractual individualism—an unfortunate situation for a man who had “passed the meridian of his years, [whose] health was gone, [his] life rapidly passing away and [for whom] it was impossible now . . . to make any new departure in his life or habits” (149-50). In justifying his choice of the maid, George makes the most of the idea of the affectionate family associated with this new liberal order, praising Milly’s embodiment of the virtues of the domestic woman: “if a girl is lovely and gentle and pure-minded, and innocent, and neat, and clean, and refined as [Milly is], it matters not about her birth” (161).¹⁷ But there are other signs that this is actually a marriage that will sustain feudal deference and obligation in a new form, and a match that could not have been achieved without George’s special lustre in a place like Ipswich.

Harrison is clearly suspicious of the set of domestic virtues alluded to by George, and skeptical about the “progressive” and supposedly non-instrumental

form of conjugal relation that they sustain, the sympathy of protective husband and infantilized wife. In the case of George and Milly, this natural sympathy is actually fuelled by pre-modern elements that persist precisely through the alibi of the marriage's modern, liberal form, which claims to turn a blind eye to differences in social station. Before the marriage, what permitted George to remain at the inn as a specially indulged, long-term guest was his presumption of his social inferiors' spontaneous submission. With his marriage to Milly, that presumption is merely translated, and thereby perpetuated, in the form of a gender hierarchy naturalized as a relation of affection. The translation seems already to be underway just before the marriage proposal, when Milly is still officially in domestic service at her aunt's inn, but already operating in the role of the domestic woman: "For a long time her share of daily work in the inn and out of it, had been growing less and less, until now she hardly did anything at all besides wait on her master, lover and friend" (155).¹⁸

Harrison's fiction suggests skepticism about the bourgeois division between the private realm of the affections and the political and economic realm of instrumental calculations, the division upon which the model of the affectionate family rests. In the novella, that skepticism is expressed through the emphasis placed on the profit the Foxley brothers, and especially George, can draw from the nostalgic fantasies of Ipswich's English settlers, fantasies that permit pre-modern social relations to survive as a residual force within the new horizontal relations of an incipient industrial capitalism. Nostalgia conditions both the working-class Mrs. Cox's spontaneous deference to English gentlemen and the desperate desire for recognition of the shabbily genteel Charlotte Dexter. But while some residents of Ipswich cling to a fantasy of gentrified Englishness, other residents are susceptible to a different form of false consciousness, believing that "accidents of birth" make for no real distinctions in the New World (129). That is the view of Farmer Wise, whose sadly misjudged proposal of marriage to Charlotte is accompanied by the argument that "it's the New Country that's made me . . . [and] I says, to all as come out to it, 'it's better to try and forget the past'" (137).¹⁹ The ostensible progressiveness of the New World is also mobilized by George Foxley. Insofar as his marriage breaks the code of the "deployment of alliance"—in which marriages serve to connect the blood and property lines of the nobility—it may horrify a character like Charlotte, but it can be validated by the liberal critique of arbitrary power that goes along with Farmer Wise's injunction to "forget the past" (Foucault 106). Based on "bonds of deep

and lasting affection, as well as [mutual] respect for and appreciation of . . . character and individuality,” the modern companionate marriage cuts democratically across class lines and ignores accidents of birth (Abbey 79). As Foucault argued, the advent of this new ideal was also tied to modern race-making and the project of cultivating healthy bourgeois bodies and conducts, a biopolitics of sexuality and childrearing (106).

Although Charlotte is punished for her outmoded attachment to the Old World regime of alliance, and the narrator at one point even seems to recommend a more general training in “th[e] faculty of self-repression” that would correct the excesses of passion in such people, it is crucial that when the story delegates point of view on companionate marriage, it is given to Charlotte (121). The novella thereby privileges one of taste’s more embodied responses—revulsion—as a potential response to this new institution, whether exemplified by George and Milly, or offered to Charlotte herself by the “comfortable placid unimaginitive elderly farmer” (138). Charlotte refuses her only opportunity for security when she haughtily rejects the offer of a sensible marriage from the local widower. The picture Farmer Wise offers of the “comfortable ‘ome awaitin’ . . . with two ‘ired girls to do the work and plenty of hands on the farm and the best of cheese and butter and the Harmonium in the parlor and drives to and fro’ the Church and behind it all a—solid man—a solid man” constitutes the story’s other representation of companionate marriage, to which Charlotte responds with “disgust and embittered hostility” (136, 137). Her point of view thus operates as the source of, if not quite a fully developed critique of, then at least an embodied discomfort with, bourgeois marriage. Her revulsion pulls against what the plot seems to affirm, that Charlotte should have given up her Old World tastes and identifications long ago, and accepted “real life.” Like the narrator in “Crowded Out,” Charlotte refuses prudence, refuses to adjust her desires to an emerging regime of good taste.

It is the shocking news of the impending marriage of George and Milly that re-awakens Charlotte’s knowledge of something she had forgotten about the Old World, having “lived so long out of England”: the “sweet relations that prevailed there between the aristocracy or landed gentry and their inferiors” (130). The announcement of the impending nuptials reminds Charlotte of the nobility’s sexual presumption with respect to the servant class, and shapes her judgment of the marriage of George and Milly as “not a proper marriage at all, it is a very sad thing for the girl . . . and some friend should tell her so” (135).²⁰ Even here, it might be said, the “truth” of England

that Charlotte retrieves has the outlines of a vaguely remembered Samuel Richardson plot, a fantasy used to paper over the painful contradictions of her immediate context, in which a maid can also be an heiress, and a Foxley of Foxley Manor make himself through marriage to a social “inferior.” But in spite of the indications of the outmodedness of Charlotte’s reading of it, the George-Milly union seems designed to produce an unsettling effect, a response of distaste, even in that class of reader inclined to applaud the union’s transcendence of status barriers. As the story’s successful instance of companionate marriage, it is represented in highly equivocal terms that stress its costs for Milly. In marrying the maid, George will eventually acquire the business to which his young wife is heir, but the emphasis is placed on a different kind of gain: he also secures a legitimate, permanent claim to Milly’s domestic services and a new lease on life through her body. By the end of the story, the formerly pallid George is flush with new colour; Milly, meanwhile, has acquired a new pallor and thinness.²¹ The details suggest a perverse if not vampiric relation, something gothic at the heart of this form of conjugality. The marriage proposal itself comes in the form of an invitation to “give me your young life,” as George puts it (153). As it happens, Milly already seems to have been doing so, during the long period of George’s residence at the inn as a paying guest. “Poor Milly!” the narrator observes, the third year in, “[h]ow she worked for him . . . ! Milly was always near with her strong young arms, not quite so pink as they used to be” (121). In thus unsettling the meaning of the propertied man’s choice of the unpropertied woman, Harrison ironizes the nineteenth-century marriage plot’s code of altruistic taste and thoroughly corrodes its happy ending.

In the confession to Milly that comes in the last few pages of the novella, George reveals the extent to which he has been falsely credited with values both economic and moral. Having become alienated from his widower father upon the father’s remarriage, he is now cut off from any claim to the Tudor family estate in Nottinghamshire. Neither has he any claim to moral credit-worthiness, he reveals, as he recounts his experience of seduction and humiliation by a widow in Paris, in a story that makes him the male counterpart of Charlotte in its revelation of his catastrophic misreading of another’s attentions. Although the move to expose George’s sexual history inverts the norm that stakes family reputation on female rather than male virtue, and suggests that, at least for Milly (the immediate audience for the confession) moral credit-worthiness might have mattered, all of this is now moot since George is the one character who has found “rest” at the end of

the story (150). And this is in spite of the fact that he has neither inheritance, nor reputation, nor even the ambition and capacity for self-improvement of the new normative liberal individual. As a social type, George represents what, in another context, has been called the “end of the line for the aristocracy [at] a moment of historical rupture” (Garson 380-81).²² Rather than constituting a “non-mercenary marriage” (Michie 424), then, his union with Milly is a means of equipping himself to survive in the new era by connecting himself to another’s hard-working, robust body.

Prior to the marriage, while George is enjoying the services provided at the inn, his brother Joseph is breezily courting the whole town with no end in view but the pleasure of seeing his rank reflected in female adulation. As we’ve seen, he is eventually punished for his careless reading of the Dexter sisters as “gentlewomen, neat and sweet spoken, and capable of offering small evening entertainments of cribbage and hot weak tea” (117). Charlotte is likewise punished for her failure to adjust her taste to a new order of value. Not only does she misread the meaning of Joseph’s attentions, she fires her vitriol at the wrong cad, believing that Joseph, not George, is going to marry the maid. This is indeed a story of misapprehensions, of wires crossed in the muddle of contradictory codes, but it is more than a farce for all of that because at stake in that muddle is the “architect[ure] of private life” that will form the basis for the new nation of Canada (Carter 59). As the historian Sarah Carter has argued, the bourgeois British version of that architecture—“submissive, obedient wives and commanding, providing husbands”—“was not a foregone conclusion” in Canada at the end of the nineteenth century (59). Harrison explores that space of uncertainty or precariousness through questions of taste, which link the pointed self-consciousness with respect to genre in her work with a broader commentary on the domestication of bodies and desires within the liberal order of the new nation. “How the Foxleys” suggests that this domestication occurs as the dazzling power of rank becomes recoded, and naturalized, as feminine subservience in the institution of companionate marriage.

Taste, as Denise Gigante reminds us, remains tied to the “lower’ somatic world of appetite,” even after it has been sublimated into a law that is supposed to regulate the most civilized appetites from within (10). For the middling classes, good taste is supposed to become the exercise of an instinctive moderation that is set against the overindulgence of the rich and the animal hunger of the poor (9-10). The only character in Harrison’s novella whose tastes might be said to have been satisfied by the end of

the story is George,²³ whom Harrison makes the instrumental pursuer of a comfortable middling station in the settler context. The exercise of tasteful moderation that goes along with this station, however, is encoded by the story as a condition of mediocrity and bloated self-satisfaction. If his middling tastes in literature, art, and conversation are enough to make him an “oracle, prophet, God” in his new circle in Ipswich, the relationship with Milly reveals the raw appetite, the impulse to consume, that tasteful moderation is supposed to have civilized (150). George becomes “brown and bonny, with his wife on his arm,” but a strange post-nuptial scene suggests that the exorbitant health and energy of the husband is related, through some strange ritual, to the young wife’s new state of somnolence (160). Stumbling onto the scene, Mrs. Cox recounts, “there was [George] standing behind her in a chair, with all her hair down, and a brush in his hand and his wife fast asleep! He looked frightened for a minute when he saw me and I besought him to bring her to, thinking he’d mesmerized her” (160). Whether Milly is mesmerized or just put to sleep by George’s attentions, it is clear that her fate—like Charlotte’s, although more gradually paced—will be to recede.

III. Colonial nostalgia and the dazzle of rank

At a pivotal point in the plot of “How the Mr. Foxleys” the narrator provides an extended metafictional commentary on the surprising irruption of melodrama in a chain of events, which, up to this moment, has appeared to the other characters in the story—and, it is presumed, also the reader—to conform to “real life” (128). The passage suggests that that understanding of the real is mediated by hierarchies of genre and taste, and the way in which these hierarchies operate to disavow as foreign, and to abject from the recognizable social world, those violences that threaten to unsettle the village’s sense of itself. Anticipating surprise and resistance at this sudden moment of melodramatic excess in the story of a “dear placid little village” in Ontario, the narrator challenges readers not to be like the village residents, who expect to see such displays of excess only on the French stage (112). The metafictional commentary comes when Charlotte Dexter, a character who has been violently disappointed in her love for Joseph Foxley, conceives of an act of revenge that will have tragic consequences. Returning to the privacy of her little cottage, she

enacted a scene which would have petrified with astonishment any inhabitant of the prosy little village in which she had dwelt so long and indeed many other people as well, for when you and I, dear reader, go to see one of these emotional

plays in which the French actress writhes on the sofa . . . and strides about the stage as no woman in real life has ever been seen to stride, . . . we are apt to look around at the placid Canadian or the matter-of-fact American audience and wonder if they understand the drift of the thing at all, . . . forgetting that perhaps the most placid, the most commonplace person in the theatre has gone through some crisis, some tragedy as thrilling, as subtle and as terrible as the scene we have just witnessed. "Not out of Paris," we say, "can such things happen?" Do we know what we are saying? . . . Is it only in Paris that money allures and rank dazzles, and a dark eye or a light step entrances? . . . Oh! In that obscure little Canadian village, a lonely old maid locked her door that morning and pulled down her blind[.] (128)

The passage serves as a reminder that violent emotion—the "thrilling, the subtle, the terrible"—need not be situated in projections onto others. The commentary on the resistance to believing that such intensity of emotion is plausible and on the temptation to disavow such emotion as "foreign" bleeds over into the social world into which *Crowded Out!* is launched in Ontario in the late 1880s. Surely "no woman in real life" has ever writhed on the sofa in *that* way, readers are imagined to say, observing their fellows for confirmation. Of course, Charlotte does not actually stride across the stage in the novella's domestication of melodrama, because Harrison's interweaving of the genre with the "commonplace" is designed to show, in realist fashion, how melodrama lives in an intricately specified historical and social environment. But in making Charlotte, of all the characters in Ipswich, the one who might be confused with a "French actress," the novella is also insisting that this "foreign" excess resides in the very heart of the nostalgic colonial taste for Englishness, and in the performance of this taste as a means of clinging to social distinction.²⁴

As the daughter of an Englishman who was "at one time a prominent medical man," Charlotte, we are told, "respected all th[o]se accidents of birth which we are supposed to ignore or at least not expected to recognize in a new country" (116, 129). It is the waning of this distinction that makes her peculiarly vulnerable to the appeal of the Foxleys, and to the need for the kind of recognition that their attention would bestow. As the melodramatic passage continues and the reader is allowed past Charlotte's drawn blind "to see her misery," her disappointment in her quest for such recognition is dramatized through her immediate point of view, as her gaze takes an inventory of the beloved mementoes, ornamental objects, and collections in her Victorian sitting room, objects that speak of genealogy, empire, and childhood. What Eva Badowska has observed of descriptions of interiors in the nineteenth-century novel holds true here, for Charlotte's anxious "sense

of identity” is “owed to the furniture and the parlor whatnots,” objects which bear a “fetishistic significance” because of what her relation to them disavows (Badowska 1515). The nostalgic affect they bear is based on Charlotte’s need to believe that her true identity transcends her real circumstances, that it is really noble and English, and that there was a time when it did not depend so precariously on the possession of these few last things and, especially, on their recognition by particular others. The passage stresses that the rejection in love really counts for Charlotte as a blaspheming of the precious things on which she has constructed her sense of self. The intimate, personal meanings of these things are revealed to be impersonal and public in the sense that they amount to markers of social distinction, utterly dependent on their appreciation by other “persons of distinction” (116). Thus, it is fitting that in her hour of heartbreak, the memory of the Foxley brothers’ contact with these things is rehearsed and re-evaluated: “And how glad those foolish Miss Dexters had been to possess such beautiful and interesting objects when it pleased Mr. George Foxley to drink tea out of the cups on summer afternoons . . . or when Mr. Joseph would wind the Indian shawl round his silly head in the evening. . . . These and other memories crowded into Charlotte Dexter’s brain as she looked around her room, crowded thick and fast, crowded fast and furious, surged, broke, leaving an empty moment of perfect blankness” (130).

The point is that Charlotte’s most intimate self rests in these trinkets, and by extension that the innermost movements of her heart are propelled by the desire for caste recognition. Thus Harrison’s insistence that French melodrama is at the heart of colonial Englishness and that “money allures and rank dazzles” at the very heart of love, are interconnected (128). The conviction that melodrama is too far-fetched for a place like Ipswich, Harrison suggests, is connected to the village’s inability to read the Foxleys accurately. The illusion of a natural moderation in sentiment is sustained only by the division between public and private spaces and conducts. This, as I’ve noted, is the division of an emerging industrial capitalist middle class that insists selfish passions are limited to the public sphere of economic transactions and do not touch a private sphere cordoned off as virtuous. Behind locked doors, Harrison’s narrator suggests, we are all susceptible to Parisian extremes and to the residual power of status. The private room of desire’s hopes and disappointments is not closed off from the public pursuit of social distinction. And if hearts are indeed moved violently in this “obscure little Canadian village,” it is because even (and perhaps especially) here, where it is not *supposed* to, “rank dazzles.” In the new nation of Canada,

the arbitrary claims of noble birth are supposed to be nullified, in favour of the claims of individual merit and hard work, but inherited rank continues to operate as a residual, disavowed force in social life, a force that lives on in the form of taste. The novella refuses the relegation to spheres that are foreign, or unreal, or historically superseded, of that to which it gives a generic name—melodrama.

Harrison's representation of the social relations of taste in *Crowded Out!* thus affords an opportunity to ask what else the use of materials encoded as "French" might have meant in English-speaking Canada in the 1880s, besides a nationalist re-sourcing of cultural difference. In Harrison's collection, it may be read as alluding to a cluster of distinctions—esthetic, moral, and socio-economic—which are in the process of coming to seem anachronistic, but also available for nostalgic inscription, in the emerging regime of taste in industrializing Ontario. In this reading, "French" is a broad trope that refers as much to what is imagined to be aristocratic as it does to French Canada more narrowly, and the reference to the aristocratic functions as a coded critique of bourgeois morality. In "How the Mr. Foxleys," the sharp edge of this critique is aimed at the conjugal relations of an emerging bourgeois order in the space/time of the settler colony. The novella thematizes the persistence of inherited status as a category of social distinction charged with a peculiar force—the force of nostalgic colonial fantasies of the "Old World"—and capable of provoking instantaneous, compulsive attraction, as well as forms of classed and gendered subservience which are supposed to have been forgotten in the New World.

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NOTES

- 1 Jennifer Chambers suggests that the absence of "Crowded Out" from the table of contents may be read as a "playful gesture" through which the titular reference to being excluded is enacted (262).
- 2 In addition to the novellas I discuss, questions of taste are central to "The Prisoner Dubois" and "The Gilded Hammock." (On the latter, see note 22.)
- 3 Christie uses the term "familialism" to refer to interdependent, usually extended families governed by patriarchal authority and sustained by a network of duties and obligations exchanged with a view to upholding moral reputation. This form of social organization was able to persist until the 1920s in most parts of Canada because of factors that reinforced the family as the primary institution of social control: the

weakness of alternative institutional structures such as poor relief, and the constraints on the development of industrial capitalism in rural, agricultural contexts (see Christie, “Interrogating” 3-24). It is fair to say that in the stories I discuss in *Crowded Out!*, Harrison exaggerates the survival of pre-capitalist social forms and tastes in the colony and their seemingly complete disappearance in England. As Raymond Williams argues in *The Country and the City*, “even after [English] society was predominantly urban its literature, for a generation, was still predominantly rural” (2). But Harrison’s schema of taste’s transatlantic asynchronies also pairs rural Canada with urban England.

- 4 The opera was “scored . . . nearly altogether, by *her* side” (10). “Crowded Out” is read by both Chambers (262) and Gerson (“Susan” 145) as reflecting Harrison’s disappointment with the fate of her own opera, *Pipandor*.
- 5 Hortense is protected by a Catholic priest. The end of the narrator’s acquaintance with her comes when he “burst[s] in” to the château to interrupt what he believes to be a scene of lechery (12) but as Steffler notes, the scene may amount to no more than the narrator’s “paranoid creation” (247).
- 6 I borrow the notion of taste as a performance requiring decoding from Marjorie Garson 18.
- 7 See also MacMillan 110.
- 8 See Gerson, *A Purer Taste* 110-31.
- 9 Although, Harrison notes, her work on French Canadian idiom has been misunderstood as stylistic incompetence, as “‘wordy,’ ‘garrulous,’ or something to that effect” (335).
- 10 Harrison’s comment that she is not writing the “easy historical” Montreal favoured by many of her contemporaries in English Canada is quoted by Gerson (“Susan” 145). Reading for the codes of literary taste in the pages of *The Week* (1883-96), Claude Bissell observes that “local colour” fiction or “picturesque realism” was what was “most palatable to the Canadian reader” in the 1880s and 1890s (33). Harrison’s fiction, however, is characterized by a pitiless irony and is arguably closer to the realism of Henry James, especially in its interest in comparison of “the English type with the Canadian type, a popular pursuit in the days of the international novel” (MacMillan 110).
- 11 Harrison was a student of the disciplinarily impure psychology, mixed with philosophical speculation and sociological observation, of her time. At some point in the 1870s, she studied at McGill University with John Clark Murray (MacMillan 108), the author *A Handbook of Psychology* and *The Industrial Kingdom of God* (see Armour and Trott 107-25).
- 12 As Eva Badowska has proposed, nostalgia is constitutive of nineteenth-century bourgeois moral selfhood insofar as the latter turns on a notion of true interiority as something accessed through the memory of a time before the appeal of commodities.
- 13 MacMillan notes that Harrison has written “Lambton Mills” on the first page of the story in one copy of the book (115). The village of Lambton Mills was at the crossing of Dundas Highway and the Humber River (an intersection now within the city of Toronto). By the mid-nineteenth century Lambton Mills was a commercial centre with a number of milling operations, a post office, and a hotel and tavern, Lambton House, which served as the “centre of social activity for the area.” See “History,” *Lambton House: A 19th Century Landmark Located by the Banks of the Humber River*. The village was named after John Lambton, Lord Durham, High Commissioner and Governor General of British North America, and the author of the *Report on the Affairs of British North America* (1838).
- 14 A “thoroughly British settlement,” Ipswich is so self-enclosed in its transplanted Englishness, so peculiarly oblivious to its wider cultural and historical context on a different continent that, the narrator conjectures, a “French-Canadian would have been hoisted on a table and examined minutely all over, hair, eye, skin and costume, had one

- been present" (113, 139). It is noteworthy that the exception, the American owner of the new mill, and thus the character associated with drive towards industrial capitalism, is the one Ipswich resident unaffected by "the advent of the Mr. Foxleys" (114).
- 15 Long before the arrival of Europeans, the Humber River provided an important inland route from the north shore of Lake Ontario. Although by the mid-nineteenth-century Toronto residents "may have believed that the local Mississaugas had vanished," Victoria Jane Freeman writes, the sense of residents in outlying villages was likely quite different (124). Freeman cites evidence that Mississaugas sold baskets at Lambton Mills in the 1890s and that, along the lower Humber, they "came constantly" (Lizars qtd. Freeman 152 n90).
- 16 See Burley 103-26. Focusing on the town of Brantford in southwestern Ontario, Burley documents changes in class consciousness in the decades from the 1840s to 1870s which saw a transition from a commercial economy, in which credit was given on the basis of character and reputation, to the impersonal system of exchange relations associated with industrial enterprises and wage labour "under the protection of a national political economy" (17). The narrator of Harrison's novella reminds the reader that "[n]ow," that is, twenty years after the story's mid-century setting, "everything is different" and the "tempting picture" presented of the recent past should not induce any Englishman to "come out to Canada to-day in search of such a Utopia" (151).
- 17 "Affectionate family" is borrowed from Nancy Christie ("Broken" 28). My argument is indebted to the case Christie makes for a rethinking of the "periodization of the rise of modern values in Canadian society" that would recognize the persistence of an order of familialism within nineteenth-century Canada's precariously-established "modern" liberal market society (73).
- 18 The gender positions of the master-servant relation that persists within the companionate marriage of George and Milly are reversed in the marriage depicted in the final story of *Crowded Out!*, "The Gilded Hammock," where the husband has "joyfully acquiesced" to an arrangement in which he will "make himself of use to [his wife], be in fact, her major-domo, steward, butler, amanuensis, anything and everything" when she brings him back from Europe to New York (176). In Harrison's ironic rewriting of the international novel, the cash-strapped Italian prince is too proud to be seen to marry the American heiress, whom he really does love. His agreement to a marriage in which he makes himself "of use" to her constitutes a bargain with his own conscience. Insofar as the marriage is kept secret, it is also a wager on public opinion. There is no gender ideology to naturalize the husband's playing the servant; therefore, it is safer for the couple to pass as an unmarried heiress and her "foreign butler" (170). As in "How the Mr. Foxleys," Harrison is concerned in this story with the inconsistency of codes in "Old" and "New" worlds, and with the relations between aesthetic-moral taste, economy, and conjugal relations. But whereas the novella ironizes the moral significance of marital choice in the nineteenth-century novel, "The Gilded Hammock," instead of including the reader in ironic recognition actually tests the extent to which the reader's aesthetic-moral judgments coincide with those of the fickle public opinion represented in the story. Not until the tide of opinion turns against the heiress' extravagant tastes and she becomes the object of moral judgment does the story reveal the fact of her marriage to the "butler." The "paralyzing statement" that reveals the secret marriage to a prince—in the newspaper and, at the same time, in the story itself—only "for the moment" "reinstat[e]s [the couple] into public favour," that is, for as long as the power of a melodramatic reversal can offset moral uncertainty (178).
- 19 Shelley Hulan provides a contrary reading of Farmer Wise as an "ideal local colour subject" whom Harrison writes against type, granting him insight and even self-reflective

distance from “old country” nostalgia (302-03). My reading stresses the mixed codes at work in Ipswich which make his insight only partial, and the disgust with which his picture of “domestic contentment” is received by Charlotte, whose point of view I see as being privileged (301). To my mind, these aspects of “How the Mr. Foxleys” qualify the extent to which the novella can be read as arguing for adaptation to the New World as a “cure” for the psychological complexes that Hulan reads in Harrison’s depiction of Charlotte and George (304).

- 20 Whether Charlotte could be a friend to Milly is very doubtful, but the reader is made to share Charlotte’s discomfort with the marriage of the gentleman and the maid when the narrative returns to the scene of the proposal, and draws out a dialogue between lovers who call one another “sir” and “child,” with George persisting in his use of “child” even after insisting that Milly call him by his given name (152-53).
- 21 In the “Utopia” of twenty years’ beforehand in which Harrison’s novella is set (151), women still lost ownership of all property, wages, and profits from inherited land when they married. “Marriage law,” as Bettina Bradbury puts it, served as a powerful instrument of male accumulation” (137). By the time Harrison was writing, married women’s property laws in Ontario had changed to make wives’ property separate from their husbands’ after marriage. But this liberal reform brought with it the elimination of other “historic and gendered claims” (specifically, those of First Nations to land and widows to a dower), and did nothing to change “[m]en’s control over their bodies and their labour power” (Bradbury 138, 149).
- 22 Garson refers here to the fiction of Thomas Hardy. Harrison’s later novel, *Ringfield*, includes a citation from Hardy’s *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876). Milly is a little worse off and certainly less cunning than Hardy’s character, Ethelberta Petherwin, but it is noteworthy that both *The Hand of Ethelberta* and “How the Mr. Foxleys” include a young woman of the servant class marrying a much older member of the gentry.
- 23 The two imprudent characters, Charlotte and Joseph, die prematurely, outlived by the “successful and happy” George and his “pale” wife (166).
- 24 “The Gilded Hammock” also domesticates melodrama through ironic observation of its “far-fetched” plot conventions at work in a specific socio-historical environment—not a “placid little village” in Ontario, but New York high society (112).

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