“You’re very skilful . . . but women are not quite as simple as clocks.”

As simple as clocks. How like a woman to say that! The Duke smiled. “Some clocks are not at all simple,” he said with an air of superior knowledge.

“Neither are some women,” his mother rejoined. . . .

—Edith Wharton, The Buccaneers, 1938

We have been having here lately the great and glorious pendulum in person, Mrs. Wharton, on her return oscillation.—Henry James, to Margaret White, 29 December 1908

Towards morning she died with a rapid series of hiccoughs that sounded like a piece of clockwork running down.

—Frank Norris, McTeague, 1899

What happens when a woman becomes a clock? The demise of Frank Norris’s antiheroine, Trina McTeague, offers a rather dark view. As this once-devoted wife “expires like a mechanical doll,”1 the emphasis falls less on the immediate cause of death—a beating by her enraged husband—than on the end of a much longer process of decline, for which the wheels seem set in motion by Trina’s own tendencies. From the first, there is something overly industrial in her ceaseless yet superfluous wage labor, a kind of piece-work she brings into the home, and in her obsessive devotion to her earnings, which more than anything else spurs both the domestic decline and, finally, McTeague’s unstoppable rage. As she dies, Trina’s insistence on laboring like clockwork invades her very person; as she herself becomes the clock, it finally runs down.

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In moments like Trina’s death, the woman’s body tells a historical story. As Henry Adams put it in 1910, “If the entire universe, in every variety of active energy, organic and inorganic, human or divine, is to be treated as clockwork that is running down, society can hardly go on ignoring the fact forever.”\textsuperscript{2} Naturalist novelists like Norris have long been thought to be among those already willing by the 1890s to stare the fact grimly in the face. The law of entropy replaces progress—or, rather, raises the already burgeoning suspicion that progress itself, human beings’ growing mastery over the natural world, might engender decline. Thus, none of the households in \textit{McTeague} appears capable of producing the next generation. Mechanized women—what one period commentator termed “cold, metallic non-mothers”—might be the motor behind this failure or merely its sign.\textsuperscript{3} Certainly this connection was prominent in the mind of Adams, who figured the entire shift he was tracing through the replacement in men’s hearts of the Virgin Mother, symbol of the glory of natural feminine fecundity, by the mechanical dynamo.\textsuperscript{4} The machine itself, of course, could be figured as a woman, as in Fritz Lang’s \textit{Metropolis} (1926), yet in a discussion of that film, Mary Ann Doane suggests that “[m]otherhood acts as a limit to the conception of femininity as a scientific construction of mechanical and electrical parts.”\textsuperscript{5} In \textit{McTeague}, it would seem, there is no such limit, for there is no mother.

Such nineteenth-century commonplaces about the mechanical woman appear to have been complicated by the notion, familiar enough in our own era, that female maternal capacities themselves take the form of a biological clock. In countless magazine articles, a woman, usually a “career woman,” is portrayed as hearing a time-bomb-like ticking deep within, reminding her of the shortened time available to marry and, in particular, to bear a child. The turn-of-the-century examples above can help to remind us that, its prevalence notwithstanding, this remains a surprising figure. It differs, for example, from the broader use of the same term by scientists, for whom, despite the retention of the clock idea, the key point is that our natural bodily rhythms do not march to the inexorable beat of the mechanized time-piece.\textsuperscript{6} The gendered biological clock, by contrast, implies that reproduction itself takes such a form. Nature is thus not evacuated by clock time but figured anew through that time. Such a notion may be even more disturbing, given the concern often voiced by historians of the clock: to what extent did the new sense of time it promoted become “internalize[d],” making human beings “truly ‘self-winding’”?\textsuperscript{7}
In what follows, I will argue that this deeply internalized concept of the clock-timed person, embodied by the woman beholden to her biological clock, might actually help to bring forward a feminist dimension to naturalist fiction. Edith Wharton’s interest in the same scientific theories that interested male naturalists like Norris is well known; less often addressed has been her praise for *McTeague* alongside several other novels of the time, the latter of which Elizabeth Ammons has observed “have in common a focus on the marriage question from a young woman’s point of view.” While *McTeague* has not generally been read in such terms, it certainly could be.9 And it is in this context of the modern female life plot, I want to suggest, that the figure of the woman as a clock may have been suggestive for Wharton, who explores its potential meanings far more thoroughly in her novella from the same era, *Bunner Sisters* (1916), which has been described as “one of Wharton’s few stories written in a naturalistic mode.”10

In *Bunner Sisters*, the clock figure is shown to take over from an older, more nature-based conception of the feminine plot in literature in which the woman as a delicate flower buds, blooms, and finally must shrivel and fade. This image is much more prevalent in Wharton’s more celebrated work of the period, *The House of Mirth* (1905), with its heroine “Lily” Bart, although even here, a tension emerges between the older figuration and the newer sense of female temporality imposed by the clock. That the more conventional image finally triumphs makes *The House of Mirth* a less interesting text than *Bunner Sisters* in respect to the question of woman’s life story in modernity. In *Bunner Sisters*, surprisingly, the very extension of the relation between womanhood and the clock introduces the potential for a less strictly determinist trajectory. If *Bunner Sisters* is a naturalist work, in other words, our conception of naturalism’s “nature,” specifically in its relation to the woman’s body, may require a reconsideration.11

**Clocks, Workers, Mothers**

The history of the clock is always a story about the fate of nature’s time. As such, it is also a story about women. Most immediately, however, it tells of a transformation of human labor: work is no longer governed by signals from one’s complete environment but by an arbitrarily imposed, abstracted, and standardized time. Lewis Mumford, who terms the clock “the key machine of the modern age,” writes that “by its essential nature it dissociated time from human events and
helped create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences.”12 Once a bare fact of life, nearly synonymous with existence itself, time became newly available for saving, parceling, reconfiguring, and perhaps most of all, accelerating. Although as Mumford points out, clock time first prevailed in the monastery, where bells had to be rung at specified intervals, the rise of industrial capitalism has generally been deemed essential to disseminating the importance of attending more closely to time—of seeing that, in Benjamin Franklin’s memorable conception, “Time is money.”

As in E. P. Thompson’s landmark essay on the subject in 1967, this shift has often been described as a move away from “task-oriented” labor. This premodern relation to industry derives its temporal pattern from “‘natural’ rhythms”: the fisherman must learn to “‘attend the tides,’” the farmer to redouble his efforts when “nature demands that the grain be harvested before the thunderstorms set in” (“T,” 59–60). Another way of figuring the same distinction, Thompson notes, opposes “cyclical time,” based on the sine curve of the seasons, from the “linear time” imposed by the relentless clock. Rather than the latter’s steady, unvarying demand, task orientation produces a rhythmic alteration between “bouts of intense labour and of idleness” (“T,” 73). The impetus to work, like the drive to eat or sleep, answers only to nature’s requirements, seen as a far more “humanly comprehensible” set of dictates than those of a clock-timed world (“T,” 60), where even bodily functions are randomly regulated by a convention of the proper hour for feeding or rest.

Thompson singles out women’s experience of time in the home as a remnant of the period before clocks, as have others, from feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir to novelists such as Richard Wright. “The mother of young children has an imperfect sense of time and attends to other human tides,” Thompson notes. “She has not yet altogether moved out of the conventions of ‘pre-industrial’ society” (“T,” 79).13 Such assertions comport with a larger sense that clocks drive a wedge between public and private time.14 The first clocks occupied public space; only gradually did they move indoors, where the immobile grandfather style long prevailed. Watches, which enabled time to be carried along with an individual from one space to another, date from the fifteenth century yet were conceived for a long time afterward as chiefly for male use. Even their design was clearly predicated on the masculine waistcoat pocket. Inseparable from the rise of the city,
clocks enable those who use them to coordinate their activities with the movements of other people. If women had no duties in the public realm, remaining enclosed in domestic space—if they lacked “a list of busy appointments to keep”—what need had they for a portable time-piece? ConceIVED primarily as ornament, women’s watches were thus often mechanically less sound than men’s. As Moira Donald puts it, “There appears to have been something unfeminine in having, or even wanting to have, an accurate knowledge of the time.” Not until the twentieth century did a significant market in watches for women begin to emerge, although the wristwatch became a popular feminine accoutrement in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, to be worn during “hunting, horseback riding, and, later, bicycling.”

Indeed, the 1880s and 1890s had already begun to witness an unprecedented diffusion of the principles of clock time across the general populace. Accurate instruments became cheaper, and the manipulation of time for industrial and educational purposes was strengthened anew by developments such as electric lighting, alarm clocks, the punch clock, and the first steps toward Taylorist time-management strategies in the workplace. Moreover, at least one historian has made the case that “[t]he most momentous development in the history of uniform, public time since the invention of the mechanical clock in the fourteenth century was the introduction of standard time at the end of the nineteenth century.” The United States, a nation previously beholden to innumerable local senses of time, came, not unresistingly, to accept the dictum handed down by the railroads that one true time prevailed (or with the invention of time zones, four true times).

Published in 1905, *The House of Mirth* locates us immediately in this new temporal realm, specifically, in Grand Central Station, where Lily Bart has just missed her train. “‘And there isn’t another till half-past five.’ She consulted the little jewelled watch among her laces”—a fact that sets the rest of the novel’s plot in motion, as she opts to spend the resultant window of time taking a risky tea at the apartment of her “rescuer,” the bachelor Lawrence Selden. Wharton clearly aims to call into question prior distinctions between male and female (or public and private) time through her portrayal of Lily, for whom the quest for a husband is every bit a full-time “vocation” involving many “busy appointments to keep” and coordinations with public time (*HM*, 9). While Lily’s goal is often understood in relation to Thorstein Veblen’s
theorization of the ornamental leisure-class wife, her endless calculations toward attaining it also confirm Veblen’s later account of the way the “discipline of the timepiece” produces distinctly modern “habits of thought”: “The mere mechanics of conformity to the schedule of living implies a degree of trained insight and a facile strategy in all manner of quantitative adjustments and adaptations, particularly at the larger centres of population, where the routine is more comprehensive and elaborate.”21 In and of themselves, such points might only confirm a familiar sense that at the turn of the century—with the advent of the New Woman, the consumer, the female typist—all that was once private, including women’s lives, was yielding to the logic (here, the temporal beat) of the public world.

The possibility of imagining women’s lives and even their bodies as in tune with the clock, however, possesses in fact a longer and stranger history. Considerably prior to Lily’s hectic era, young women had formed one of the first groups of Americans to labor under the strict clock time of industrial capitalism in the factories and mills of New England during the 1830s and 1840s. Despite a standard equation linking men to machinery and women to nature—as in, for example, Leo Marx’s benchmark study *The Machine in the Garden* (1964)—the early U.S. factory seems to have reversed these terms. If anything, the women became machine operators in a male-controlled garden, as when one promoter of industry argued that “[f]emale aid in manufacturers prevents the diversion of men and boys from agriculture.”22

Such a shift might imply simply an earlier dating of the invasion of women’s lives by masculine time. At least one notable literary depiction of the mill girls, however, portrays their labor in terms that conflate it with the natural temporality of maternity. At first glance, Herman Melville’s “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (1855) would seem to do the more familiar opposite: express the horrors of industrial clock time by rendering it the opposite of the natural female bodily story. The problem is that throughout the narrative the wrongness of the women’s factory labor is manifested by its figuration as a grotesque parody of the ordinary activity of human reproduction. The uncanniness thus finally derives less from the perversion of the maids’ maternal capacities that the factory represents and more from the disquieting parallels between the two that enable the comparison in the first place. The “great machine” is said to contain “two great round vats,” filled with “a white, wet, woolly-looking
stuff . . . not unlike the albuminous part of an egg”; in a room “stifling with a strange, blood-like abdominal heat,” these “germinous particles” are gradually “developed” such that they begin to look a bit more “like paper, but still quite delicate and defective yet awhile.” The entire process, start to finish, we find to be “nine minutes” long.

Hearing this, the appalled bachelor narrator experiences one of several moments of “strange dread.” “[H]ow absurd,” he tells himself. “[T]he thing is a mere machine, the essence of which is unvarying punctuality and precision” (“PBTM,” 1277, 1276). Yet by the end of the tale, it becomes clear that these very qualities produce the uncanny feeling: “[W]hat made the thing I saw so specially terrible to me was the metallic necessity, the unbudging fatality which governed it”—or, as his guide puts it, “‘It must go . . . just so’” (“PBTM,” 1277). Is this a figure for nature’s violation, the theft of the maids’ reproductive resources, or for “inscrutable nature” itself (the story’s final image)? If the latter, we see here an alignment of women’s bodily time with rather than against the clock. This possibility might remind us that the relevant distinction should not strictly oppose industrial labor as entrapment and task orientation as freedom but, rather, distinguish between what Thompson himself characterizes as two modes of “compulsion”—only, in the one case, “the compulsion is nature’s own” (“T,” 60). In this understanding, too, biology could itself be considered a kind of clock, asserting a demand for reproduction as insistent and irresistible as the factory clock’s demand for production.

Such an image might seem in total contradistinction to the more standard assertion that the rhythms of maternity represent the aspect of human existence least governed by clock time. Yet at the end of the nineteenth century, we will see, these two opposed views actually merged; moreover, they did so in a way strikingly predictive of invocations of women in helpless thrall to their biological clocks today. Then as now, such accounts emerged at the moment that women were seen to be turning away from maternal duties toward smaller families, increased education, and wage work. And as this familiar debate took shape in the decades following the Civil War, it was framed as a matter of women’s biological relation to public, clock-driven time.

In his widely read treatise Sex in Education: Or, a Fair Chance for the Girls (1873), Dr. Edward Clarke thus strives to make clear that he does not oppose women’s schooling. Instead, his objection is to a similar program of education for both sexes, which would be unfair, he
explains, to two kinds of beings, male and female, their workings governed by linear and cyclical time, respectively. “Periodicity characterizes the female organization. . . . Persistence is masculine,” he writes; hence, while men “must obey the law of sustained effort,” women require an intermittent ebb and flow.24 As the psychologist G. Stanley Hall would agree nearly three decades later, to impose “a man- and school-bred . . . logical consistency” on woman “is an outrage to her nature.”25 Submission to the unsparing dictates of the clock would jeopardize women’s own “strange chronometry”—that which keeps them “in mysterious rapport with moon, tides, reproduction, race, climate, and all the environment” (A, 1:503).

Here the feminine time of reproduction appears anything but clock driven. On another level, however, a treatment like Hall’s is equally in keeping with the alternate view of biology as a clock that we see in “The Tartarus of Maids.” For at a broader level, Hall clearly aims to warn women that they may wake up, unmarried at thirty, and find that “the clear air of morning [has begun] to haze over,” and something is missing from their lives (A, 2:630). There is a sense here of a biological clock whose warning tick is ignored at a woman’s peril. Hall reconciles these two notions of women’s time—as too cyclic for school yet too clock-like to sway from a maternal path—by explaining that woman appears “less consistent than [man] if we compare days and hours” (“Every day of the twenty-eight she is a different being”) and at the same time “more so if we compare months as the units of her life,” where her more “generic” quality, her closeness to the reproductive aims of the race as a whole, comes forward (A, 1:494).

Responses to these arguments during the period when they were written, however, targeted the everyday aspect. A collection of rejoinders to Clarke gathered and edited by Julia Ward Howe takes two tacks that are particularly relevant to my present concerns, for they call into question the prevailing opposition between men’s clock time and women’s daily bodily rhythms. As Howe enjoins in her introduction, “Boys as well as girls break down under severe study, men as well as women.” For just such reasons, Thomas Higginson notes in his contribution, “[t]he steady, untiring, day-to-day competition that Dr. Clarke deprecates is being utterly laid aside; and a more flexible system is being introduced for young men, which turns out to have also the incidental advantage of being precisely what young women need.”26
Alternatively, others point out that the much romanticized home space already demands quite a bit of “sustained effort” from women, with just as many untoward consequences for their overall health. “Is it not possible,” opines one “C,” “that in what is technically and prettily called helping their mothers, lifting and carrying baby, &c.,” young girls’ “poor curved spines may have got a twist long before they had won admission to the high school?” Adds Maria Elmore, few seem concerned that a woman “may bother her brain over bread, pies, cakes, condiments, and the like, with equal and sustained force on every day of the month, thus diverting blood from the reproductive apparatus to her head.”

The thrust of these responses is clear. On one hand, everything in the modern world is driven by the clock; it is absurd to imply that women ever experience a realm wholly outside the demands of a steady timepiece. (Indeed, as historians have pointed out, not only were home clocks seen as especially useful in kitchens beginning in the late eighteenth century but Catharine Beecher’s Treatise on Domestic Economy (1841) can be read as one of the clearest American precursors to Taylorist time-management strategies.) On the other hand, these respondents believe that we should still work toward making it otherwise. Like present-day proponents of circadian rhythms, however, they argue against clock time not as a gendered but as a human issue.

Opposing the clock tout court, such responses thus focus on daily time rather than the larger, and more novel-friendly, issue of the woman’s life trajectory—although this newer and more difficult issue, concerning what precisely women’s work and education were going to mean for the necessity of childbearing, clearly stood front and center, often with nationalist and racial overtones, for both Clarke and Hall. At least one period novelist, however, seems to have picked up on the irony whereby the insistence that women attend to nature’s time had itself begun to take the form of a ticking clock. Once this had occurred, was the purely natural feminine story line—woman as the unfolding “flower of an ordered universe,” as Henry Adams put it—any longer imaginable? In The House of Mirth, and more sustainedly in Bunner Sisters, Wharton takes up this question by pitting that notion of the feminine plot as a flower’s blooming—easily one of the most conventional of literary symbols—against the newer possibility of conceiving woman as a clock.
From Flower to Clock: Lily Bart

The flower image itself is already more complex than it might seem. It implies fecundity but also beauty, which writers like Hall and Adams (along with period feminists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman) feared was replacing maternal power as the most sought-after feminine quality. Certainly in Wharton’s famously named heroine Lily Bart the flower’s loveliness cannot be separated from its commodification. Critical discussions of Wharton’s working titles for The House of Mirth, A Moment’s Ornament and The Year of the Rose, emphasize their focus on Lily’s purpose in life: to be a “beautiful object,” to “adorn and delight.” Lily is most clearly a flower in the ornamental or decorative sense, one whose beauty should allow her both to make a winning match and to serve as the visual emblem of her husband’s success.

More rarely noted about these titles is that they also share a conception of Lily’s story in terms of temporal limit. The tale of an ornament or a rose is also the story of a “moment” or a “year.” To think of these two stories together is to recognize how much the notion of the woman as flower is predicated on a sense of fleeting time. If a young girl resembles a blossom in being delicately beautiful, the image also reminds us that the beauty has boundaries: it begins as a bud, unfolds toward a single moment of perfect glory, and then can only decline. “[L]ocating Lily’s value in her beauty,” Judith Fetterley writes, also means tying that value to a quality with a “duration” beyond her “control,” leading necessarily to a feeling of “fragility and impermanence,” which she seeks constantly to overcome. Ideally, this would be accomplished by marriage. The prospect of marriage “seemed to give [her beauty] a kind of permanence,” Lily thinks as she pursues a likely suitor, an ability “to carry her through to the end” (HM, 51)—that is, straight through to the conventional final page of the feminine story.

Yet The House of Mirth, of course, is not about reaching that happy conclusion. As Wharton’s language of the “moment” and the “year” suggests, the novel concerns the temporal location of being situated on the cusp between marriageability and terminal spinsterhood. Understood as a flower, the twenty-nine-year-old Lily would seem to face intractable natural limits in her attempt to secure a husband before the bloom is off the rose. Looking back on Lily’s early life, Wharton tellingly casts the moment when the teenaged Lily real-
izes human “failures” can occur—the day of her father’s financial “ruin”—as a scene when the girl learns the absurdity of complaining to her mother that they really ought to have nice new “jonquils or lilies-of-the-valley,” at two dollars a dozen, freshly placed each day on their lunch table instead of confronting last night’s “dissipated purple” roses (HM, 32). Similarly, the decisive plot turns might be said to be those in which Lily—rather like another literary flower, Henry James’s Daisy Miller—gets both socially “cut” from her stem by her nemesis Bertha Dorset and economically “cut off” by her aunt, Mrs. Peniston; these mortal wounds lead to her death “in the flower of her youth,” to use Nancy Miller’s term.33

Miller also describes the “rule” of traditional novelistic female experience as “the drama of a single misstep,” a phrase that more than fits Lily’s fatal tendency toward impulsive “mistakes,” most prominently her moments spent in the company of Lawrence Selden.34 Lily herself describes courtship as an “intricate dance, where one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time” (HM, 49–50). Yet it is with Selden in forests and gardens that she seems able to move “out of time” in a more appealing way, briefly finding in such moments a “zone of lingering summer,” in which her face still possesses “the soft motion of a flower” (HM, 66, 145). Selden’s presence in the book’s final scene, with the lovely Lily stretched out motionless before him, underscores that in her penultimate act of saving herself for the impossible ideal that Selden represents—the “republic of the spirit”—by refusing to stoop to blackmail, Lily also preserves herself in both his memory and ours as an unsullied ideal. Perversely, then, to die “in the flower of her youth” becomes one way for the woman as flower to inhabit an eternal spring.

Readers have differed, however, on what to make of this novelistic preservation of Lily as something like a nosegay pressed in a keepsake book. While some have seen this scene as an aptly beautiful finale, others have dismissed it as a lapse into sentimentality unworthy of the rest of the novel, though some attribute this mode to Selden alone. Still others, such as Robin Beaty, see Wharton herself as “heartily sick of [Lily’s] purity” by this point and eager to kill her off.35 At the very least, the spectrum of potential readings here indicates Wharton’s ambivalence toward the ideal of femininity that Lily, as preserved flower, seems to represent.36

Indeed, *The House of Mirth* elsewhere seems to mock the notion
of the floral feminine story by showing its subjection to the modern speedup imposed by the clock. More surprisingly still, the book at least fitfully implies that the latter might even be preferable. This is made possible, we will see, by two very different conceptions of clock time. One gives a tough modern push to the flower’s unfolding, but the other suggests a different temporality altogether. While Lily Bart’s finale may indicate a capitulation to sentimental ideals of femininity, her cyclic pursuit and deferral of marriage in the book’s first half takes a much less predetermined form—a trajectory in keeping with Wharton’s own postmarital “oscillations.” It’s this less natural path—Lily as “pendulum,” like Wharton herself in the words of her friend Henry James—that *The House of Mirth* explores through the woman imagined not as a flower but as a ticking clock.

At first the presence of clocks seems to function in *House* only as a hyperbolization of the way “nature,” or her changing physical self (the lines on her face), functions for Lily as a flower: as merely the most obvious signal that time is running out. Lily’s most relaxing scenes with Selden tend to end abruptly with a glance at the clock (“Dear me! I must be off. It’s after five” [HM, 13]), while her heart beats out the seconds as she waits for him in vain at the end of the novel’s first section. George Beard’s concerns about the effect of clocks on late-nineteenth-century American life seem particularly applicable to Lily Bart:

> The perfection of clocks and the invention of watches have something to do with modern nervousness, since they compel us to be on time, and excite the habit of looking to see the exact moment. . . . [Earlier] men judged of the time by probabilities, by looking at the sun, and needed not, as a rule, to be nervous about the loss of a moment, and had incomparably fewer experiences wherein the delay of a few moments might destroy the hopes of a lifetime.

Here the mechanization of time seems simply to accelerate the “drama of a single misstep” as it already confronts the novelistic heroine. As Gilman puts it in *Women and Economics* (1898), “The girl must marry—else how live?” Gilman’s own mother, abandoned by her husband, had led her children through a transient, debt-ridden existence strikingly like that of Lily Bart. Yet there is of course one other option, one that Lily finally tries: the wage-earning life of a poor working girl. The problem is that Lily imagines making hats will be like getting mar-
ried, in the sense that she expects to show up only to offer a single “finishing touch”: placing a ribbon or a flower on the completed whole. What she finds as an actual seamstress is then similar to what she finds in the marriage market: the “day” of being ready for such a flourish remains “remote” and in the meantime, she is bound “inexorably to the routine of preparatory work” (*HM*, 300).

I want to compare this insight with a strange, fleeting moment in *The House of Mirth* when Wharton almost does seem to cast Lily as a clock, as opposed to someone who lives by one. There is a key scene involving Lily’s philanthropic friend Gerty Farish—her connection to the “dingy” life of working girls (*HM*, 37)—in which Gerty, who has been cast as staggeringllyselfless throughout the book, finally gives in to a paroxysm of sheer longing. She does so, inwardly, as she realizes that Selden, whom she loves, has paid her a visit only to speak to her of Lily Bart. And as this realization sinks through Gerty, there is an odd scenic detail that, unusual in the novel, recurs twice: a “foolish pink-faced clock” can be heard “drumming out [the] hideous hour” (*HM*, 165). Selden’s glance at this rosy timepiece is what cues him, Lily-like, to rush off (in search of Lily); shortly afterward, the same clock “drum[s] out another hour” as a deeply brooding Gerty revises her mental image of her trusted friend. “When had Lily ever really felt, or pitied, or understood?” she grumbles. “All she wanted was the taste of new experiences; she seemed like some cruel creature experimenting in a laboratory” (*HM*, 171).

Is it possible that this “pink-faced clock” might represent the striving “rose,” Lily, herself? If so, we might consider two very different temporalities for the woman as clock. The first, as we have seen, acts like the discourse of the female biological clock today, simply scientificizing and thus codifying further the existing sentimental trajectory of the flower that blooms, spreads its seed, and fades. The second would be different in that it would be a circular, endlessly back-and-forth motion, like the hand moving around the dial or the pendulum swinging. This is the time of the “routine of preparatory work” or of the experimenter who is trying things out without imagining a follow-through. I would say that this time is, in fact, as Gerty is sharp enough to recognize, the kind most characteristic of Lily Bart.

In Freud’s writings over the decade or so that followed, clocks make two symbolic appearances that also embody these two possibilities. In *Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis* (1909), the obses-
sional individual is described as having an antipathy to clocks. This is because, in “at least mak[ing] the time of day certain,” clocks work against the need to sustain “uncertainty” or “doubt,” which Freud, like his nineteenth-century predecessors, makes central to the condition. Indeed, the obsessionals described here look very much like Lily Bart. “Their essential characteristic,” Freud writes, “is that they are incapable of coming to a decision, especially in matters of love; they endeavor to postpone every decision.” As when they startle Lily out of her time-stopping romantic reveries, clocks give the lie to this luxury of postponement, insisting on limits in the face of the desire for doubt.

In Freud’s *Introductory Lectures* (1916), however, clocks appear in a very different guise when Freud writes of a woman who cannot sleep if she hears a clock ticking alongside her in the room. Here, he explains, the clocks become “symbols of female genitalia”; indeed, they “have arrived at a genital role owing to their relation to periodic processes and equal intervals of time. A woman may boast that her menstruation behaves with the regularity of a clockwork.” At the same time, “[t]he ticking of a clock may be compared with the knocking or throbbing in the clitoris during sexual excitement,” which is said to produce anxiety in this particular patient. In a stroke, then, the clock moves from standing as the arbiter of inexorable, linear social time, to a role as the embodiment of cyclic time (associated with women’s cycles), and finally to an ability to embody female sexual excitement. The potential for confusion between these different functions of the clock seems to be something on which Lily Bart (and Wharton herself) capitalizes. Unlike the flower, which promises only decay or sentimental preservation, the clock hands moving round and round figure ongoingness at the same time that they point toward a finale. The clock as figure for clitoral excitement gets at the same duality: the “increasing exhilaration of the game” that Lily feels while gambling, despite her need to stop “playing” and get on with the business of marriage (*HM*, 28).

It might at first seem surprising that this temporality of endless “experimentation,” of the “routine of preparatory work,” is related in *House of Mirth* to the literal time of work—work that does not involve the “finishing touch” Lily desires, with herself as a flower crowning the scene, but ticks on with the gray regularity of a time clock. The duality here is important, however, and can help us consider the rela-
tion of *House of Mirth* to Wharton’s more thoroughgoing exploration of the woman’s body as clock in *Bunner Sisters*. What is especially important about the ambivalent portrayal of work time here is that it can get us past a standard critical tendency to read this novella, with its (rare for Wharton) working heroines, as a tale simply given over to unremitting “dinginess” of the kind Lily Bart spends all her life trying to avoid.

**Reimagining Clock Time: *Bunner Sisters***

In *Bunner Sisters*, this sense of gloom has appeared to be inseparable from a far more relentless reduction of woman to object, made palpable by Wharton’s opening focus not on the sisters themselves but on their little shop.\(^43\) The story’s title, which is the shop’s name, creates an immediate confusion between person and place of employ, between being and selling. As in *House of Mirth*, marriage appears as a market in women. In their attempt to preserve themselves as attractive commodities, Ann Eliza and Evelina Bunner share a position similar to Lily Bart’s, suspended between bloom and decay. As a result, they are indeed not unlike the objects in the window of their shop: “artificial flowers,” “jars of homemade preserves,” things possessing “the undefinable greyish tinge of objects long preserved in the show-case of a museum”—the language of preservation suggesting at once some maintenance of former glory and the growing distance from it evident in that “undefinable greyish tinge.”\(^44\) The story describes this teetering between states using the natural language of a day, on the one hand, and a year, on the other. While Ann Eliza is “worn and glossy,” “a faint tinge of pink still lingered on her cheek-bones, like the reflection of sunset which sometimes colors the west long after the day is over”; her younger sister, though “nipped and faded” with her “cold-reddened nose,” gives the impression “that under happier conditions she might still warm into relative youth” (*BS*, 168–69).

The issue is, again, to what extent those conditions remain procurable. Like Lily puzzling over the way her once-grand “ambitions” seem to have “shrunk gradually in the desiccating air of failure” (*HM*, 30), Ann Eliza recalls that “in the original plan of things,” the more attractive Evelina, at least, “had been meant to marry and have a baby, wear silk on Sundays, and take a leading part in a Church circle” (*BS*, 176). And yet these “ambitions,” at the story’s outset, seem as
“shrunken” (Wharton uses the same flowerlike language here as in *House of Mirth*) as those they had once harbored for their little store (*BS*, 167). Located in “a shabby basement, in a side-street already doomed to decline” (*BS*, 166), both sisters and shop seem tailor-made for a conventionally “naturalist” downward trajectory, which is indeed how the story has most often been understood.

I want to argue that a focus on the particular object in which this story shows greatest interest, the clock, can in fact complicate this one-note sense of its temporal path. It’s important, however, to see that at the start of the story, the clock would appear to do anything but this. When we first meet the Bunner sisters, their failure to attain the narrative ambitions of marriage, baby, and church circle has settled them into a life marked by repetitive habits and “treadmill routine” (*BS*, 183). In the first few pages alone, we hear of Ann Eliza’s “habitually anxious face,” Evelina’s “chronic fretfulness,” and Ann Eliza’s “habitually repressed emotion” (*BS*, 168–69). Hence, though Ann Eliza’s decision to purchase a clock for her sister’s birthday appears at first as a dramatic break from the expected, the object itself, once installed atop a shelf in their small back-room apartment, seems chiefly to underscore what is “chronic” about their routinized lives. Evelina sits down to “the monotonous work of pinking a heap of black silk flounces,” and “the clock, from its commanding altitude, kept time with the dispiriting click of the instrument under her fingers” (*BS*, 172). In these opening moments, then, the clock assumes a standard (and standardizing) function familiar from all manner of representations of modern life—perhaps most famously, the image of the worker’s body literally tied to the clock in that ultimate dystopian view of the modern workplace, *Metropolis*. The installation of the “commanding” clock on high in the Bunner sisters’ “home” essentially erases any distinction between the shop that fronts it and the room in back, between work time and privacy or leisure.

Once again, however, this familiar dichotomy is quickly complicated by language that, nearly from the first, suggests a natural connection between the clock and that most private of mechanisms, the female body. Referring to the clock as “she,” Ann Eliza explains to her sister that it forms a necessary replacement for “mother’s watch” (*BS*, 170). The possibility that what is being replaced here has more to do with mothering than with mere timekeeping gets underscored when Ann Eliza begins to feel that the clock’s “loud staccato tick was
becoming a part of her inmost being” (*BS*, 174). (Both, it would seem from what we know about Ann Eliza, are “‘wound jest as tight—’” [*BS*, 177].) She thinks such thoughts in tandem with another new set of thoughts, concerning the man from whom the clock was purchased, Mr. Ramy.

Indeed, it is the consistent association between the clock and Mr. Ramy himself, as a potential suitor for both sisters, that most develops the clock’s potential to express the temporality of the sisters’ bodily lives. In this role, the clock still holds the capacity to make clear to them the repetitiveness of their daily existence, but it does so for the very reason that it also, in its relation to Mr. Ramy, holds out the possibility of reinstating that chance for a more narrative storyline, a marriage-and-children plot. Put otherwise, it’s precisely because the sisters begin to feel that this plot is still a living option that the routine that once seemed the norm begins to feel no longer tolerable (*BS*, 176). Having revived their hopes—and we might note that the clock, in its initial placement atop their rosewood whatnot, “dethrone[s] a broken china vase full of dried grasses,” a symbol of what the sisters have otherwise become (*BS*, 172)—the birthday gift becomes a treasured object indeed. When the clock appears, one day, to have stopped, the sisters are appalled, bending over it “as though . . . trying to revive a living thing.” “Seems like somethin’ dead, don’t it, Ann Eliza?” Evelina cries. “How still the room is!” (*BS*, 177). The spectre of the “crippled clock” is more than they can bear (*BS*, 178); the only answer—a fortuitous one, it turns out—is to return it, for repair, to Mr. Ramy.

From here the drama accelerates, for prior to this moment, only Ann Eliza had met and begun to fantasize about the appealingly lonely clock seller. By a random stroke, Evelina decides to take the clock in for repair while Ann Eliza is out, and she returns bubbling over with details about her long talk with Ramy and his interest in a follow-up visit to their own shop, “Just to see how the clock’s behaving,” as he later puts it (*BS*, 186). For Ann Eliza, both the connection here and its meaning are clear: “Had not the sight of Evelina . . . inspired him with a sudden solicitude for the welfare of the clock?” (*BS*, 187). And indeed, once Ramy has visited, the new intolerability of the shop’s routine spreads to both sisters (*BS*, 183). Life becomes, as in any romantic narrative, a grey sea of nonevents punctuated only by Ramy’s increasingly frequent visits to Bunner Sisters.
Yet Ann Eliza is sure he is coming for her younger and prettier sister, whose dramatic perking up as a result gets associated by the story with the return of spring. Once a maker of artificial flowers like those in the shop window, Evelina now prances in with a “cluster of jonquils” that she uses to replace the dried grasses in the broken china vase. “‘Seems as if spring was really here, don’t it?’” she cries, and Ramy, entering a moment later, echoes the sentiment (*BS*, 189). The blooming and ticking Evelina thus becomes the belated embodiment of the idealized feminine story; flower and clock combine to figure her as one who has slipped in under the wire to secure her marital destiny. When Ann Eliza’s sibling preserves a jonquil that night “with a certain ostentation between the pages of her prayer-book,” she seems to be sealing for herself that planned-for life of marriage and church circle (*BS*, 190). And when she and Mr. Ramy finally wed, a set piece of decor for the event speaks to the newly codified gap between the sisters as surely as the shop window once announced their similar positioning: “Autumn leaves studded with paper roses festooned the what-not and the chromo of the Rock of Ages, and a wreath of yellow immortelles was twined about the clock which Evelina revered as the mysterious agent of her happiness” (*BS*, 212). Ann Eliza, then, is now the one best figured by the faded, preserved “autumn leaves,” “paper roses,” and the “Rock of Ages,” while Evelina’s glorious future is depicted as a clock wrapped not just in any flowers but in “immortelles”—the marriage plot decisively stopping her process of decline, in effect letting her live on indefinitely.

There has been one little wrinkle, however, unbeknownst to Evelina herself; initially, Mr. Ramy actually preferred her elder sister, and he made his feelings known to her. Yet Ann Eliza is so accustomed to sacrificing everything for her younger sibling that she takes this route with respect to Ramy as well, giving up her own happiness and even, with a flourish worthy of Mary Wilkins Freeman, seeing this very act as the summit of her existence, a glorious moment marred only by the fact that “it had happened in the shop, and that she had not had on her black silk” (*BS*, 204). The two options for the woman’s story, then, appear at this point not dissimilar from what we see in *The House of Mirth*—“immortality” courtesy of marriage, or failing that, the equally sentimental alternative of renunciation—though Wharton sees the latter here in notably more ironic terms than those attached to the death of Lily Bart.
The irony would seem to have much to do with what Ann Eliza is revealed to have sacrificed. From the first, there is something a bit odd about Evelina’s letters home to her sister from her new home in St. Louis, an oddness that is actually linked to their status more as idealizations than as chronicles of daily life. As Evelina rambles on, speaking of how “my dear Husband is all love and devotion,” it becomes evident that she is not at all perfectly content. Her “swelling” rhetoric, however, is such that Ann Eliza is left far from clear about what may be really going on. In time, it becomes even harder to tell, for the letters “fell off; and finally they ceased to come” at all (BS, 215). Ann Eliza must resort to other means to track her sister, and here the figure of the clock returns, in a dramatically different form.

Ramy had once told the sisters of a former job as head of the clock department at Tiffany’s, and there Ann Eliza goes, hoping that he might have left some forwarding address. She is “waved... down the endless perspective of show-cases” by the “lordly gesture” of a salesman, and abruptly finds herself within

a great hall full of the buzzing and booming of thousands of clocks. Whichever way she looked, clocks stretched away from her in glittering interminable vistas: clocks of all sizes and voices, from the bell-throated giant of the hallway to the chirping dressing-table toy; tall clocks of mahogany and brass with cathedral chimes; clocks of bronze, glass, porcelain, of every possible size, voice and configuration. . . . (BS, 224–25)

Wherein lies the strangeness of this cavalcade of clocks? Earlier in the story the singular clock seemed capable of embodying two kinds of temporal order, either the habitual tick-tock routine of the shop or (wreathed in flowers) the natural trajectory of the female body. Here, however, as in any clock shop, the sudden sense of cacophonous competition between “thousands of clocks” has a vertiginous effect, suggesting “interminable vistas” rather than any particular organization of time. It’s no accident that, in this same scene, the entire meaning of marriage to Ramy shifts in a similar direction; Ann Eliza is told by the manager not only that Ramy worked there only as a common salesman but that his discharge came on the heels of a revelation of “drug-taking” (BS, 226). Interestingly, this disclosure does not simply shock Ann Eliza. The moment it is made, her mind flashes back to a day long past when she had visited Ramy in his own shop and found him in
an “attitude of strange dejection,” speaking in a “slow laboured way.”
At that moment, in her confusion, she had fixated unconsciously on
a particular clock in the shop’s window, representing “a Newfoundland
dog with his paw on an open book” (BS, 194); hearing now about
Ramy’s opium habit, this weird, nonnarrative detail comes racing back
to her—as does her unseeing gaze. The manager gives her a pencil,
she writes her address, and “then she walked away blindly between
the clocks” (BS, 226).
Within the subdued realist framework of Bunner Sisters, this scene
stands out dramatically for its almost surrealistic force. Like Dalí’s
melting watches, the chattering clocks suggest a deformation not
simply of everyday things but of the a priori that order them (necessary
for, among other things, distinguishing the significant from the
minor details). From here, things fall apart with devastating complete-
ness. Evelina returns, ill and in beggar’s garb; she tells a dark tale of
living with Ramy’s habit, of his abuse of her, his hatred of their baby
(who “only lived a day”), and finally, his flight with her money and
another woman, leaving Evelina prostrate in the hospital with “brain
fever” (BS, 234). These revelations mark the final blows to Ann Eliza’s
entire worldview—most particularly, her Calvinistic belief in the value
of self-sacrifice. “She felt,” Wharton writes, “that she could no longer
trust in the goodness of God, and that if he was not good he was not
God, and there was only a black abyss above the roof of Bunner Sis-
ters” (BS, 236).
Ann Eliza thus becomes a doubting modern subject as surely, and
as surprisingly, as one of Freeman’s spinster heroines. Whereas for
Freud, the obsessional’s doubt marked a deferral of the temporal
reality clocks could reveal, here the proliferation of clocks ushers in a
new era defined by doubt—particularly if we consider the contours of
the God-like position initially accorded Ramy by the Bunner sisters.
He did, in fact, spend a number of evenings at their home, lapsed into
what now seem to have been suspiciously “long stretches of medita-
tive silence”; the Bunners, however, were able to see in these phases
a certain “charm”:

There was something fortifying and pacific in the sense of that tran-
quil male presence in an atmosphere which had so long quivered
with little feminine doubts and distresses; and the sisters fell into
the habit of saying to each other, in moments of uncertainty: “We’ll
ask Mr. Ramy when he comes,” and of accepting his verdict, whatever it might be, with a fatalistic readiness that relieved them of all responsibility. (BS, 188)

In retrospect, the “little feminine doubts and distresses”—the “habitual anxieties” at the start of the story—seem perhaps the preferable “habit” if the alternative lies in a “fatalistic” surrender to a male “tranquility” revealed to be pharmaceutical in origin. The notion of marriage as lethally tranquilizing reverses the temporalities at work in the story’s first half, indeed to the point of suggesting a revaluation of the degraded life of “chronic” routine typifying the life of the shop. As Evelina accuses Ann Eliza upon her return, “You don’t know what life’s like . . . setting here safe all the while in this peaceful place” (BS, 232). Suddenly the shop’s routine is not deadening but, in comparison to a “fatal” marriage, “peaceful.” This is how Ann Eliza herself begins to find it in the months between the revelation at Tiffany’s and Evelina’s abrupt reappearance. As spring comes once again with its “galaxies of yellow jonquils,” the elder Bunner sister finds she is “insensibly beginning to take up the healing routine of life” and to grow “used to being alone,” to the extent that she even begins to think with curiosity about future customers (BS, 228–29). It is Evelina’s arrival along with the need to care for her, more than the initial revelation of the truth about Ramy, that disrupts this process for Ann Eliza.

As a result, it is possible to see the story’s conclusion not as the pathetic consequence of a life given over to mere routine but as the final revenge of the marriage plot. Conversely, the possibility of routine’s “healing” aspects turns out to have been underscored by Wharton throughout the story. When Ann Eliza first hears Evelina will be moving away, “[t]he trivial obligations of the moment came to her aid”; and later, as her sister’s health grows worse, “[t]o steady herself she began to sort a trayful of buttons” (BS, 209, 238). The “rescuer” here is the time of work, the clock, habit; only it can imply a life that might go on.

**Modernity, Women, and Time**

Against all odds, then, even more clearly than in *House of Mirth*, clock time registers not the most inexorable of demands but a narrative mode resistant to what turns out to be the even more fatally determin-
istic unfolding of nature’s plot, the story of the woman as flower. As such, Wharton offers a powerful countervision to assertions, feminist and otherwise, of the dehumanizing effects of the mechanical time-piece. Samuel Macey has argued that this less “antagonistic” treatment of clocks may be typical of the realist novelist. Reading Dickens and Hardy against Hoffmann and Poe, he finds the former far less appalled by mechanized time, and he suggests that this may result from their “knowledge that successful novel-writing,” particularly in an era of serialization, “requires a regular and time-oriented application to work.”

This is one explanation; another may lie in an intriguing paradox in the definition of clock time itself, one already visible in their differing symbolic functions for Freud. The insistence on clock time as dehumanizing tends to emphasize the difference between our cyclic bodily rhythms and the clock’s hands moving ever forward, brutal in their unceasing march. Another perspective on the same issue, however, stresses nearly the opposite view: human life is by definition linear—a process of “birth, growth, development, decay, and death”—while “mechanical time is strung out in a succession of mathematically isolated instants,” forming not a “sequence” but a “collection.”

This is Lewis Mumford’s argument in his classic account of the clock as modern machine in Technics and Civilization. He cites Bergson, who contrasts the narrative whole produced by organic time, or durée, to the false reduction of life’s flow to an abstracted series of details, embodied for him by the fragmented arc of Zeno’s paradox. Katherine Hayles argues similarly that these two temporalities distinguish the human life cycle from that of the machine or cyborg, which is based not in growth and decay but in the endless possibility of “being disassembled or reassembled either into the same product or a different one.”

These are moving accounts that, at one level, can hardly be contested. Yet nature’s plot in the feminine stories I’ve been considering clearly entails more than simply the biological fact of aging and mortality. Through the flower, that plot also tells the story of romance and reproduction, and in this case, the alternative of dis- and re-assembly takes on a different and perhaps less inhuman meaning. Wharton herself, of course, thwarted the finality of the marriage plot through a now familiar means, one first gaining ground during her time: the escape route of divorce. For her friends, however, this swerve away
from the “long white road” of the marriage plot (HM, 73) did heighten an already notable tendency to refer to the novelist as a mechanical woman. Henry James spoke of Wharton’s “frame of steel,” Gaillard Lapsley of a “metallic radiance about her.” Although her face at forty-three “looked tired in repose . . . ,” Lapsley notes, “it seldom was.”48 These depictions, indeed, appear inseparable from a sense of Wharton as a flurry of unceasing “rush and movement,” something that only increased after her divorce: “Her new sense of herself as both a liberated and a divorced woman gave her a more than customary restlessness,” as R. W. B. Lewis explains.49

In James’s view, Wharton’s endless parade of activities made her resemble not just any machine but, specifically, a clock. “‘She was never more wound up and going,’” he commented in 1912, the year after her separation from Teddy Wharton.50 Earlier, James had spoken of a visit from Wharton by remarking: “We have been having here lately the great and glorious pendulum in person, Mrs. Wharton, on her return oscillation.”51 In such depictions, Wharton’s figuration as a clock seems paradoxically to contribute to a sense that she is pushing the boundaries of time itself. While “one misstep” can fling Lily Bart “hopelessly out of time,” Wharton here looks, surprisingly, much more like the lone divorcée in The House of Mirth, Mrs. Hatch, who is said to “float . . . outside the bounds of time” (HM, 49–50, 289).

Rejecting the one-way street of the marital story, Wharton accesses the time of the clock precisely as a way to conceive of a different form of feminine life trajectory.

The question would then be, Is this alternate plot at all accessible to the far less privileged Ann Eliza Bunner? At the end of the story, having spent all her earnings on Evelina, the elder sister has no choice but to leave the shop and search for a new job. At this point, spring is back again, “summon[ing] to the window-sills the sickly plants nurtured indoors in winter” (BS, 244). We see Ann Eliza enter another shop, inquiring about employment, only to have the woman behind the counter assume she is looking on behalf of someone younger. As the saleswoman expresses it, “‘We want a bright girl: stylish, and pleasant manners. You know what I mean. Not over thirty, anyhow; and nice-looking.’” And so the story ends as Ann Eliza walks back out into the “thronged street”: “The great city, under the fair spring sky, seemed to throb with the stir of innumerable beginnings. She walked on, looking for another shop window with a sign in it” (BS, 246).
To my knowledge, this ending has never been read as anything other than a bitter one, leaving the over-the-hill Ann Eliza to a fate likely to resemble that of Lily Bart.\textsuperscript{52} And yet, of course, hers is not quite Lily’s decisively fatal ending. It is not even the ending of Stephen Crane’s Maggie, for whom it must be made clear that when we last see a woman walking alone down a city street, her destruction will shortly follow. These endings do not equivocate. Ann Eliza, by contrast, is sent forth into a city whispering the promise of “beginnings” and spring. Certainly, this might seem—as it appears to have to most readers—merely a crushing bit of irony on Wharton’s part, but this is not quite true to the story’s tone.

Who did fill the “thronged street” in the years around 1900? Henry Adams, looking out, saw an unprecedented stream of working women: “myriads of new types—or type-writers—telephone and telegraph-girls, shop-clerks, factory-hands, running into millions on millions, and, as classes, unknown to themselves as to historians.”\textsuperscript{53} “Women adrift,” they were termed by journalists, who, as Joanne Meyerowitz has shown, had trouble conceiving their stories outside the polar alternatives of rapacious gold digging or abject victimization.\textsuperscript{54} Naturalist novelists often did a better job. Indeed, in comparison to a book like Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie, Crane’s Maggie is something of a throwback in its insistence that a woman’s downfall must begin from the moment she begins to think explicitly about economic considerations.

Perhaps Bunner Sisters might better be considered alongside Sister Carrie, for their endings leave us similarly in medias res. Carrie’s movement back and forth in her rocking chair, in a motion again akin to the clock’s empty, endless ticking, has seemed to many no different from a Lily-like “plot of decline.”\textsuperscript{55} Yet why should this be? Carrie has not attained perfect happiness, certainly, but the point of her story seems closer to Bunner Sisters in its recognition that the stories thought to promise such a conclusion—the plot of marriage, the “rescue” by a protective man—turn out to be less palatable than remaining on one’s own. Despite a standard (and curious) critical tendency to see naturalism’s heroines as poverty-stricken, the class positioning of working women like Carrie, Trina McTeague, and Ann Eliza, as Adams saw, is at the least ambiguous, too new yet to be slotted simply under existing alternatives.\textsuperscript{56} If Ann Eliza cannot be hired after thirty, is not this fact itself the historicallymutable consequence of
seeing women’s work still as a brief pit stop along the way to the real story, the marriage plot?

Such observations are not at all meant to turn these often very dark stories into cheerful tales of female liberation. They are intended only to refigure them through the new image of clock time that I have been bringing forward—a time for which, indeed, there might be not just one “spring” in a woman’s life but the possibility of the limited but still significant pleasure of many springs. This, we might say, is the moment in naturalism when its more intense scrutiny of nature’s workings actually opens it up to potentialities that exceed the foreordainments of the natural. The governance of human lives by mechanisms beyond our willing ushers us on to inevitable dissolution, yet Ann Eliza’s capacity for renewal stems from the same sources.

In its association with women’s bodies, the clock still looks natural when it figures the story of reproduction, the succession of generations; unnatural when it forestalls that story, breaking up time into what have appeared as meaningless fragments. What is most important to recognize, however, is that these opposed temporal possibilities have their root in the same figure. Once nature has been refigured in mechanical terms, the latter idea—of clock time as a “collection” of random segments—becomes available as a new understanding of (at least an aspect of) nature itself.

This aspect is finally, then, as central to naturalist fiction as the inexorable tale of biologized decline. Indeed, naturalism has often been critiqued for the same reasons Bergson (and Mumford) critiqued clock time. That is, its portrayal of human lives has been deemed objectifying as a result of its Zeno-like fragmentation of temporality, its eschewal of the realist ideal of organic wholeness. Yet what if the organic as whole is crucial to what naturalism refuses simply to endorse, particularly around the question of plots for women? What if, for them, the most rigorously clock-timed work might actually offer a certain freedom not available when the only “compulsion” was “nature’s own”? The irony, in such stories, if Ann Eliza’s is any indication, is that if a clock lay deep inside them, part of their very being, its curious ticking might mean anything but a familiar biological demand.

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Notes

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Robert Bart.


11 The most important step toward such an interpretation is Mark Seltzer’s argument that naturalism conceives of a nature paradoxically “unnatural” or perverse (Bodies and Machines [New York: Routledge, 1990], 14).


13 For Simone de Beauvoir, of course, women’s confinement to “imma-

14 See O’Malley, Keeping Watch, 152.
16 Ibid., 69.
17 Carlene E. Stephens, On Time: How America Has Learned to Live by the Clock (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002), 129.
18 See O’Malley, Keeping Watch, 147–52. On alarm clocks and the increasing affordability of clocks overall, see Stephens, On Time, 127, 89.
20 Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth, in Novels (New York: Library of America, 1985), 4. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as HM. Martha Banta has suggested to me that the jeweled watch would likely have been worn fashionably as a pendant around the neck.
23 Herman Melville, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” in Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence Man, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1274–75. Further references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as “PBTM.”
25 G. Stanley Hall, Adolescence, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton, 1904), 1:494. Further references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text as A.
27 “C”; and Maria A. Elmore, in Sex and Education, 117 and 178, respectively.
28 On kitchens, see Donald, “Greatest Necessity,” 71. On Catharine Beecher as proto-Taylorist, see O’Malley, Keeping Watch, 165.
29 See Clarke, Sex in Education, 63; and A, 2:595, 606.
32 Fetterley, “Temptation,” 201.
34 Ibid., x.
36 Wharton seems to have been equally ambivalent on the subject of motherhood, despite Lily’s deathbed fantasy of, Madonna-like, holding the working girl Nettie Struther’s child. As Lewis notes, while her texts could seem to uphold maternal glories, Wharton never had any offspring of her own, and her view toward other people’s children was at times “scathing” (Edith Wharton, 134).
This is not the only text relating sexual arousal to clocks. In addition to Wright’s “Long Black Song,” we might consider Henry James’s *Watch and Ward*, as discussed by Leon Edel (“Nora, in deshabillé at bedtime, bringing her watch to be wound”); see *Henry James: 1870–1881* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), 44–45.


Edith Wharton, *Bunner Sisters*, in *Collected Stories, 1911–1937* (New York: Library of America, 2001), 167. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as BS.

Samuel Macey, *Clocks and the Cosmos: Time in Western Life and Thought* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1980), 193.


Henry James, quoted in Lewis, *Edith Wharton*, 322.

James to Margaret White, quoted in *Edith Wharton A to Z*, 134.

See, for example, Jay Martin, *Harvests*, 267; and Ammons, *Argument*, 37.


See Meyerowitz, introduction to *Women Adrift*, xix.


In leaving home to seek work in the city out of boredom, not dire neces-
Carrie resembles actual women of her time (see Weiner, *From Working Girl*, 25). Trina continues her little business of making toys after marriage because she prefers to do so. On the shifting class status of the era’s female workers, see Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 135.
