A Reading of the “Anachronistic” Museum in *The Age of Innocence*\(^*\)

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“There’s the Art Museum—in the Park” (324).

Edith Wharton chose the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Central Park for the most crucial scene in *The Age of Innocence* (1920)—the one in which the thwarted lovers Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska have their last clandestine meeting. However, the museum was actually not located in Central Park in the 1870s, when the main action of the novel takes place.

Briefly examining the early history of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, we observe that the museum initially opened in Dodworth’s Dancing Academy on Fifth Avenue in 1872. At the end of 1873, it moved into the building known as the Douglas Mansion on West Fourteenth Street; finally, in 1880, the museum settled in its permanent home in Central Park.\(^1\) In the controversial scene in Wharton’s novel, approximately two years have passed since the beginning of the story “[o]n a January evening of the early seventies” (23). Therefore, if the time of the text were to be juxtaposed with actual time, the museum where Newland and Ellen meet would most likely be located in the Douglas Mansion, which was the museum’s second residence between 1873 and 1879.

Since the novel, which brilliantly revives the fashionable New York of the 1870s, was first published, many critics have pointed out the historical inaccuracy of the museum’s location. For instance, a book reviewer for *The Literary Digest* (February 5, 1921) pointed out that the anachronism is “sure to be noticed by old New-Yorkers” and dismissed it as Wharton’s mistake (“Mrs. Wharton’s Novel of Old New York” 52). Singly, in her annotated edition of the novel in 2000, comments that the author is “confused about dates” (246n). Perhaps, however, we should not make this judgment in haste. As the book was reprinted several times, Wharton corrected some erroneous descriptions that had been detected in the first edition; yet, she never placed the museum in its correct 1870s home.\(^2\) This suggests that Wharton was knowingly using the new museum in Central Park. As Lee, the author of a relatively new biography of Wharton, states, “Though so careful, on the whole, with her historical authenticity, Wharton allows a destabilising anomaly in here [the museum scene]” (578). In this regard, other critics also assume the mistake to be “unlikely” (Klimasmith 571; Takamura 65); they ingeniously develop their arguments on the museum scene by considering the effects of its anachronism. However, they appear to leave room for examining the assumption that the anachronism is not simply an error on Wharton’s part.\(^3\) Although it may be difficult to provide conclusive evidence for the author’s intention, this essay aims to explore why Wharton refrained from correcting the location of the museum and, by extension, what this location implies. It ultimately attempts to present a new reading of the “anachronistic” museum by focusing on its location rather than on its exhibits, the Cesnola collection; many critics have already emphasized the significance of the lat-

\(^{1}\) For further references to the history of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, see Burt, Howe, and Tomkins.

\(^{2}\) For a discussion of Wharton’s attempt at historical accuracy and some examples of the corrections, see Ehrhardt.

\(^{3}\) As the basis for their assumption that the anachronism might not be a simple error on the part of Wharton, they only briefly mention Wharton’s uncle, Frederic Rhinelander, who was one of the Metropolitan’s trustees at that time. Although I do not completely agree with them, their main arguments about the museum, which they seem to regard as non-existent in space and time, are intriguing. Klimasmith argues that “through the museum, Wharton both examines personal and cultural memory and transcends the genre of historical fiction” (571). Further, Takamura asserts that “Wharton creates a temporal fissure in chronological time that opens a possibility to bridge the past with the present” (78).

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ter. Wharton's choice to use the museum in Central Park might demonstrate not only her masterly skill of story construction using a device to create contexts to place her characters in but also her genius as an artist with a profound understanding of the ways in which her work would resonate with future generations.

I. Reproduction of Wharton's Childhood Memories

As Ehrhardt observes, the author's extremely short writing period coupled with "the extraordinary number, depth, and breadth of the historical references" can be taken as "a testament to Wharton's remarkable memory" (402, 403). In September 1919, just after the war, Wharton began writing a manuscript on 1870s New York (Lee 561), recalling her "childish memories of a long-vanished America" (A Backward Glance 369). Within only seven months, at the end of March 1920, she finished it (Lee 561). Although Edith was ten years old when she returned from Europe to America in 1872—the approximate time at which the beginning of the novel is set—she wrote to her sister-in-law Minnie, "every detail of that far-off scene was indelibly stamped on my infant brain" ("To Mary Cadwalader Jones" 439). Nevertheless, the expatriate author in France asked Minnie, who was "Newland Archer's contemporary" (Lee 564), to check the exact dates for some materials that she was planning to use in her novel. Their correspondence, some of which we can find in the digital collections of Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, shows how Minnie was involved with the process of Wharton's creation before its publication. On reading the manuscript, she wrote to Wharton, "The Age [of Innocence] is very interesting, and your memory quite amazing; you recall things I had entirely forgotten, and you bring back that time as if it were last week" ("Letter: 1919 December 19" 2).

Wharton's photographic memory of her childhood can secure sufficient credibility for her recollections in "A Little Girl's New York," which was posthumously published in 1938. The postscript to her autobiography A Backward Glance presents the author's remembrances of a great number of drawing-room conversations she heard among her parents' guests. In a long, enumerative sentence, she provides those topics of conversation one by one, including mention of her uncle Frederic Rhinelander:

[The conversation ranged safely from Langdons, Van Rensselaers, and Lydigs to Riveses, Duers, and Schermerhorns, with an occasional allusion to the Opera (which there was some talk of transplanting from the old Academy of Music to a "real" opera House, like Covent Garden or the Scala), or to Mrs. Scott-Siddon's readings from Shakespeare, or Aunt Mary Jones's evening receptions, or my uncle Frederic Rhinelander's ambitious dream of a Museum of Art in the Central Park, or . . . . (283; emphasis added) 6]

In fact, Wharton's uncle was closely involved with the development of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from its founding in 1870; as explained by Burt in his book on the history of American museums: "Edith Wharton's kinsman, representing her Old New York, Frederic Rhinelander, came on the board almost immediately in 1870 and stayed to become President before his death in 1904" (88). Combined with Wharton's acute interest in art since childhood, it is no wonder that the author was knowledgeable about the temporary Douglas Mansion site and the opening of the museum in Central Park in 1880.

Furthermore, it is likely that Wharton's memory of

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4 In addition to the studies I have mentioned previously herein, see, for example, Bentley, Kassonoff, and Roffman.
5 To give some examples of Minnie's help, R. W. B. Rewis says, "At Edith's request Minnie had put in hours of research in New York and at Yale, pinning down the exact dates when Mine. Christine Nilsson sang Faust at the old Academy of Music, when Delmonico's moved north to Twenty-sixth Street, and the times of the first Patriarchs' Balls, the Assemblies, the Friday Evening Dancing Classes" (430).
6 Notably, this passage includes other topics that Wharton uses in the novel. The talk of the new opera house is found in the opening scene. "Aunt Mary" is Mrs. Mason Jones, "Edith's formidable, benevolent Aunt Mary—in her guise as the lordly and obeis Mrs. Manson Mingot" (Lewis 431).
7 In this regard, Roffman also investigates the fact that the board member of the Metropolitan Museum of Art was related to Wharton (28). For further references to Frederic Rhinelander's contribution to the development of the museum, see Howe and Tomkins.
her uncle is reflected in her portrayal of Newland Archer in the epilogue, the beginning of which is set in New York about thirty years after the main action of the novel. The final chapter, set in approximately 1900, begins with the recollection of Newland, who has come back from "a big official reception for the inauguration of the new galleries at the Metropolitan Museum" (359). Considering the time, Wharton must have borne in mind the inauguration of the new wing of the museum in 1902. Significantly, her uncle Frederic participated in the opening ceremony, which was held on December 22 of that year (Howe 277-78). Newland's engagement in "reorganising the Museum of Art" (362), which evokes an image of the author's uncle, may be her homage to him.

II. Wharton's Choice of Making Dates "Uncertain"

Judging from what we have seen herein, it follows that Wharton, who was familiar with the early history of the museum, dared to choose the museum that opened in Central Park in 1880 as the setting of the most significant scene in the novel. As for the year itself, Wharton seems to have originally placed it within the range of plausibility. This can be corroborated by letters that she exchanged with her editor, Rutger Jewett, and with her sister-in-law Minnie; letters to the latter seem to provide especially strong evidence, because they were exchanged while the author was actually developing the story.

First, Wharton seems initially to have imagined that the historical sources of the novel's background would not necessarily be limited to the two years during which the main story actually develops. After the first publication of the novel, tired of the criticisms against small anachronisms, Wharton complained in a letter to Jewett:

> What I was trying to do, and what I believe every novelist who write [sic] an "historic" novel should do, was to evoke the intellectual, moral, and artistic atmosphere not of one year, but of ten years: that is to say my allusions range from, say, 1875 to 1885. Any narrower field of evocation must necessarily reduce the novel to a piece of archaeological pedantry instead of a living image of the times. (qtd. in Ehrhardt 411)

Here, we can confirm that the author, above all, wanted to produce the atmosphere of the age by conjuring vivid images of the decade, a period longer than the length of the main action of the novel.8

Wharton's correspondence with her sister-in-law Minnie during the period of writing the novel can provide further, more compelling evidence for those who might take the author's letter, quoted herein, to be her post-publication excuse. The letters exchanged between Wharton and Minnie show us the process through which the author, after first requiring a strict chronology, ultimately "decided to make the date in the opening scene uncertain" (Wharton, "Letter: 1920 January 14" 1). In the completed novel, Wharton avoids specifying the time; the story begins "[i]n a January evening of the early seventies" (23). Additionally, on the inside of the wedding ring is engrave "Newland to May, April—, 187— " (198). This device enables her to use a wider range of materials familiar to her youth and that may be more effective for creating the fictional world.9 Wharton seems to have taken the trouble to change some names that she might have used, as she says, "to give the atmosphere of New York in my youth" ("Letter: 1920 January 14" 1).

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8 The second outline of the story in her "Subjects and Notes" workbook, in which Wharton planned "Langdon" Archer and "Clementine" Olenška's elopement to Florida—never allowed by the completed novel—also attests to this fact. It seems that she imagined Old New York "in 1875-80" as the setting of the second version of the story, while she determined that the actual length of action would be "about 18 months" (Gresson 415-16).

9 Wharton seems to have originally set the opening scene of the novel in 1875 (Jones, "Letter: 1919 November 5"); she particularly wanted to use "The Shaughraun" for its "black velvet ribbon" scene (132), as an effective setting for chapter 13; the play ran "from November 1874 until April 1875" at Wallack's Theatre (Jones, "Letter: 1919 November 22" 1). Wharton also wanted to portray Christine Nilsson singing in Faust in the opening of the novel; however, according to Minnie's research, it was "in 1872-3" that the Swedish opera singer sang at the old Academy of Music. Minnie proposed that Wharton change the opening "to stick to 1875, because that allowed you [Wharton] to bring in the nice allusion to the Shaughraun" (Jones, "Letter: 1919 December 19" 1). At one point, Wharton seems to have tried to substitute Clara Louise Kellogg, who sang in New York in 1875, for Nilsson (Wharton, "Letter: 1920 January 14" 1).
This particular letter continues as follows:

At any rate, the whole flavour of the book will be lost if dull names are substituted for vivid ones, and by leaving the date of the year uncertain I allow latitude enough to use any names that were familiar to me in my girlhood. Moreover I do not think accuracy of date in such matters is nearly as important as the rendering of the atmosphere. The unimagina- tive person who writes a letter to point out that so-and-so did not sing in New York till 1880 is of very little importance. (“Letter: 1920 January 14” 1; emphasis added)

To a substantial extent, this letter demonstrates the likelihood that Wharton knowingly chose the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which did not open until 1880. She presumably used it to gain a specific aesthetic effect; the completed novel indicates the probability that she carefully planned this use.

Thus, we can say that the “anachronistic” museum is consistent with the author’s intentions. However, before looking into its effects and uses in the text, we must confirm one more point regarding the “Cesnola antiquities” in the museum (325). Some may say that Wharton used the new museum because she wanted to depict the collection of ancient Cypriot artifacts as the backdrop of Newland and Ellen’s last private meeting; yet, if she had simply wanted to describe the archaeological trove, the museum would not necessarily be placed in Central Park. The collection was originally displayed in the Douglas Mansion on West Fourteenth Street in the 1870s and was reinstalled in the new building in Central Park (Burtt 96, 98). Therefore, Wharton must have had other reasons for using the new museum.

III. How Wharton Uses the Location of Central Park in the Plot

In New York at that time, the location of Central Park might have been more suitable for a secret rendezvous than the Douglas Mansion on West Fourteenth Street would have been. The Street was “then a fashionable residential section” (Tomkins 44), and the Mansion was “near enough to important thoroughfares to be easily accessible” (Howe 161). In contrast, Central Park in the 1870s “was a long way out of town so far as most of them [the Metropolitan’s trustees] were concerned, and they doubted whether people could ever be persuaded to travel such a distance to see works of art” (Tomkins 39). Thus, for Newland, who desperately requires a quiet place where he can be alone with Ellen, the new museum in Central Park is geographically situated better than the place where the museum was actually located in the 1870s.

More significantly, near the beginning of the novel, Wharton carefully prepares for the couple’s later tryst at the museum, making their meeting more plausible and reasonable. The scenario is also convincing in light of the situation surrounding Ellen before she meets Newland at the museum: having received the news of the stroke suffered by her grandmother, Mrs. Manson Mingott, Ellen hastily returns to New York from Washington, D.C. and temporarily stays at the home of Mrs. Mingott. The following quotation is from the scene in Chapter 31 in which Newland is desperately determined to be alone with Ellen:

“Tomorrow I must see you—somewhere where we can be alone,” he said, in a voice that sounded almost angry to his own ears.

She wavered, and moved toward the carriage.

“But I shall be at Granny’s—for the present that is,” she added, as if conscious that her change of plans required some explanation.

“Somewhere where we can be alone,” he insisted. She gave a faint laugh that grated on him.

“In New York? But there are no churches . . . no monuments.”

“There’s the Art Museum—in the Park,” he explained, as she looked puzzled. “At half past two. I shall be at the door . . .” (324)

From the first half of this dialogue, we can speculate that it might be difficult for Ellen to go out, given the fact that she must stay with her grandmother. However, Mrs. Mingott’s house is actually near Central Park. The location of the house is described in Chapter 2:

[Mrs. Mingott] put the crowning touch to her audacities by building a large house of pale cream-coloured stone (when brown sandstone seemed as much the only wear as a frock-coat in the after-
noon) in an inaccessible wilderness near the Central Park. (32-33)

In this excerpt, the house, which is utterly astonishing for its time in terms of its architecture and location, characterizes Mrs. Mingott as an audacious matriarch of one of the Old New York families. Later, we can recognize that this is Wharton's ingenious device to make Newland and Ellen's meeting at the museum "in an inaccessible wilderness" seem to be reasonable. Wharton, without making their assignation look strange in the context of the story, provides them with a quiet retreat away from the prying eyes of society.

Additionally, Wharton prepares one more situation to give Central Park a role as the protagonist's retreat. Early in the novel, Newland, who is irritated about the long engagement period with its endless array of tacit society rules, hopes to "carry off May for a walk in the Park" to "have her to himself" (87). His plan to escape, which was impeded by the endless family visits "from one tribal doorstep to another" (87), is actualized later, when Newland, with "the simple joy of possession" (100), is walking with his betrothed in Central Park. Curiously enough, during their walk, Newland and May jokingly talk about eloping to escape from the inviolable conventions that their echelons take for granted. Thus, the Park is carefully introduced here as a place that allows Newland to have a temporary retreat, before the later and more significant scene in which Newland covertly meets Ellen there.

IV. Wharton's Strategy of Using the "Monument" in Central Park

Furthermore, the very location of the museum might also emphasize one of the novel's themes, the preservation of the past, of which Wharton became more acutely conscious after World War I. The edifice plays a vital role in bridging the temporal gap between the 1870s story and the epilogue set in approximately 1900 and in linking the fictional world to the reader in reality. Wharton, who writes this novel in a retrospective fashion, must have been aware that the space that would be familiar to the future reader is the museum in Central Park, not the temporary Douglas Mansion space from the 1870s. This awareness seems to be expressed in Newland's words: "Some day, I suppose, it will be a great Museum" (325).

Compare the author's use of the museum with her use of the Academy of Music. Wharton chooses the two buildings for the most important and impressive settings for the opening and ending of the novel, respectively. However, she describes them in a highly contrasting way: one distances the reader while the other remains close to the reader. Wharton skillfully utilizes the Academy of Music to introduce the idiosyncratic conventions of Old New York. As the novel's beginning predicts, the old opera house, a representative of exclusive New York upper-class society in the 1870s, followed a path parallel to that of the old society losing its power to the nouveau riche, and was replaced by the new venue, the Metropolitan Opera House, in the early 1880s. The Academy of Music lost its function as an opera house, although the building itself remained. What readers in 1920 and today would recognize as an opera house in New York is, needless to say, the Metropolitan Opera House. The Academy, which was a symbol of the fashionable New York of the 1870s, is separate from the reader's reality; this might be one of Wharton's strategies for making the reader feel a sense of distance from that age. Even as she looks back-

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10 For a further examination of Mrs. Mingott's personality in relation to the exterior and interior of her house, see Gastel (144-45), who shows that in general, the locations and decorations of houses are used as "signs about characters" in this novel (140).

11 As the setting of a meeting between secret lovers, a museum in itself seems not to have been so rare in the nineteenth or the early twentieth century. For example, Chapter 7 of Book 5 of Henry James's The Wings of the Dove contains a scene in which Milly Theale, who happens to visit the National Gallery, comes across Kate Croy and Merton Densher, who are furtively meeting there.

12 Of course, this is Wharton's autobiographical novel in a sense, so it might be natural that she begins the story at the Academy of Music, which was a familiar building in her childhood. However, in terms of the stage setting for the opening opera scene, the main devices she uses in the Academy of Music are also possible in the Metropolitan Opera House: Christine Nilsson was also singing Marquise in Faust in the inaugural performance in 1883 (Disizikes 219). Further, the club box, from which Newland and other gentlemen together look up to see Ellen in the Mingott Box, did not actually exist in the old Academy; the club box was first introduced in the new opera house ("Mrs. Wharton's Novel of Old New York" 52).
ward from the time of writing in 1920 into the time of her childhood in the 1870s, Wharton also looks forward into the future. Her choice of the new museum implies that she seeks the possibility of the preservation of the lost world. The museum, beyond time and space, can be a "monument" reminding the reader of her story,\(^\text{13}\) while many places that build up the novel's scenes have disappeared even by the time in which the earliest reader lives.

Consequently, it can be said that the museum described at the same location as that recognized by her reader is a fictional device that makes the book's most significant scene resonate more clearly in the reader's imagination. The "Cesnola antiquities" in the museum project an objective view of the fate of Old New York. The exhibited wreckage from an ancient civilization, "small broken objects—hardly recognisable domestic utensils, ornaments and personal trifles—made of glass, of clay, of discoloured bronze and other time-blurred substances" (325), ironically predicts the future disintegration of Old New York, for whose tribal code Newland and Ellen are sacrificed. Ellen laments the broken artifacts displayed in the glass case:

"It seems cruel," she said, "that after a while nothing matters . . . any more than these little things, that used to be necessary and important to forgotten people, and now have to be guessed at under a magnifying glass and labelled: 'Use unknown.'" (326)

Ellen foretells Old New York's destiny and her own. In the final chapter, the traditions that the community used to value have become meaningless for the new generation, as represented by Newland's son, Dallas.

Whereas Wharton highlights the evanescence of worldly things in the scene, the way in which Newland preserves his image of Ellen is highly suggestive of the permanent preservation of memory that Wharton must have attempted in the novel. We should note that the vividness of the descriptions of Ellen is highlighted by their contrast to the "discoloured" and inanimate "time-blurred" objects in the room. Against the deathly background, Newland appreciates "the light movements of her figure, so girlish even under its heavy furs, the cleverly planted heron wing in her fur cap, and the way a dark curl lay like a flattened vine spiral on each cheek above the ear" (325). The details in which Newland's mind is "wholly absorbed" are described by emphasizing his sense of the immediacy of Ellen's existence and her youthfulness (325):

As she stood there, in her long sealskin coat, her hands thrust in a small round muff, her veil drawn down like a transparent mask to the tip of her nose, and the bunch of violets he had brought her stirring with her quickly-taken breath, it seemed incredible that this pure harmony of line and colour should ever suffer the stupid law of change. (326)

Twenty-six years later, as if the museum is a sealing device, Newland's return to the site evokes his memory of the moment that was preserved there. Newland, who revisits the place to attend the inauguration of new galleries, is at first unable to recognize the former Cesnola room. A remarkable change has occurred inside the museum: the unvisited room, where "Use unknown" objects were housed, has disappeared; in its place, the newly renovated galleries abundant with "scientifically catalogued treasures" are crowded with fashionable people (359). The inside of the building reflects how times have changed; however, what should be more noteworthy in this scene is that although the exhibitions have changed, Newland's awareness of being at the same spot to which he has come before conjures up in his mind a vision of the long-preserved scene:

"Why, this used to be one of the old Cesnola rooms," he heard some one say; and instantly everything about him vanished, and he was sitting alone on a hard leather divan against a radiator, while a slight figure in a long sealskin cloak moved away down the meagrely-fitted vista of the old Museum. (359)
Newland’s return to the old Cesnola room, which is realized by the “anachronistic” museum in the main story, appears to be designed to allow a memory from the distant past to be reproduced. The two museum scenes, reminding the reader of the inevitable change and loss in the material world, appear to convey the author’s wish that the story constructed by her vivid images of Old New York, including its lost mentality, would continue to live in the imagination of the reader.

This idea might be convincingly explained by the fact that Wharton does not allow Newland to see Ellen again at the end of the novel. Although there are no longer moral obstacles to separate them from each other, Newland refuses to meet Ellen in Paris, probably because he desires to eternally preserve the memory as it was. Newland keeps his images of Ellen, which will never be lost to him, intact; he knows that in reality he can no longer recover his past. His attitude may well be showing, to borrow the words of Haycock, “reverence for the past” (181).

Conclusion

Wharton’s choice of making the dates “uncertain” in the novel enables her to reproduce “a living image” of her youth in America and to use the location of the museum as multiple literary devices. In the process of considering why Wharton “anachronistically” describes the new museum in the Park, we at first discover how ingeniously but naturally she leads the reader to the novel’s pivotal scene at Newland and Ellen’s last trysting place. Furthermore, the museum, behind the plot of the story, is given manifold contexts beyond time and space. Arguably, Wharton calculates that the great “monument,” which could remind the reader of the most essential scene, will be preserved into the future. In other words, the intentional “anachronism” of the museum demonstrates the author’s profound insight into the future reception of the novel.

14 After the first publication of the novel, Wharton says to her friend, Bernard Berenson, “I did so want ‘The Age’ to be taken not as a ‘costume piece’ but as a ‘simple & grave’ story of two people trying to live up to something that was still ‘felt in the blood’ at that time” (“To Bernard Berenson” 433).

Works Cited


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A Reading of the "Anachronistic" Museum in *The Age of Innocence*

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In *The Age of Innocence* (1920), set in the fashionable New York of the 1870s, Edith Wharton skillfully constructs her story, reproducing the atmosphere of New York at that time by including a wide range of historical references. As the backdrop of the most crucial scene in the novel, where Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska have their last clandestine meeting, the author chooses the new Metropolitan Museum of Art in Central park, which did not open until 1880, rather than the old museum building in the 1870s. Since the book was first published, some critics have regarded this anachronism as a simple error on the part of the author. However, Wharton might have used the new museum deliberately, given the fact that she did not restore the museum to its historically accurate place when she corrected some erroneous descriptions in the reprinted version.

In recent years, some studies discussing the museum scene have considered the effects of its anachronism; however, scope still exists to examine whether the museum anachronism represents the true intention of the author. This essay begins by exploring the author’s intentions regarding the period of the novel; ultimately, it attempts to present a new reading of the "anachronistic" museum by focusing on its location. Wharton’s choice of placing the museum in Central Park might demonstrate not only her mastery of story construction, which naturally leads the reader to the pivotal scene, but also her profound insight into the future reception of the novel.