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FRAMING GERTRUDE: PHOTOGRAPHIC NARRATION AND THE SUBJECTIVITY OF THE ARTIST-OBSERVER IN LEVY'S *THE ROMANCE OF A SHOP*

By David Wanczyk

IN AMY LEVY'S 1888 NOVEL, *The Romance of a Shop*, four orphaned sisters, the Lorimers, open a photography studio in London and struggle to find business and a balance between free expression and propriety.[1] Certainly, the sisters' commercial involvement with photography can be read as artistic and unconventional for women of the time, but their position as artist-observers sometimes seems to relegate them to a space behind the lens and behind the window that divides their apartment from the society they look out upon. It is from that position as photographer-observer that Gertrude, the most introspective and yet most socially conscious of the sisters, wields her perceptive powers, her piercing gaze. Photography, and the way in which it influences her mode of observing, gives Gertrude an accurate, superior vision and a kind of social agency; but that gaze is negatively mediated by photography, too, filtered by the machine.

Levy dramatizes this conflict by employing narration that seems subtly photographic, and her technique renders Gertrude's vision, like photography, both active and passive, creative and receptive, subjective and mechanical. These paradoxes, which emphasize the strength and the inefficacy of the female photographer-observer, help us understand the plot of the novel and Levy's views on Realism as well. As the modified New Woman, Gertrude[2] pushes up against financial, artistic, and patriarchal boundaries, but she settles for a kind of mediated freedom within the bonds of marriage. And as Levy creates a photographer character, she parodies the novels of William Dean Howells and others – which she saw as "just so many photographs where no artistic hand has grouped the figures" (New 514) – while following some of their descriptive patterns. Thus, Levy's photographic narration highlights the halting emergence of the protagonists of New Woman novels, while also drawing attention to her own sharp-eyed views on the fiction of the end of the nineteenth century.

By the 1880s, photography had begun to permeate British urban society, and its effect on the craft of fiction was hard to ignore. Writers described cityscapes with the knowledge that their words had visual, reproducible analogues, that their created worlds were in some sense already captured. In fact, according to Nancy Armstrong in her book *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, "Visual culture supplied the social classification that novelists had to confirm,

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adjust, criticize, or update if they wished to hold the readership's attention" (3). Photography, the social order it promoted, was not only influencing fiction, then; it was forcing fiction writers' hands and forming their projects.

With photography as a force, the idea of literary Realism changed as well. Now, the written word had to represent a level of visual precision that had been foregrounded by photography. Considering these changes, Armstrong argues, "Writing that aims to be taken as realistic is 'photographic' in that it promise[s] to give readers access to a world on the other side of mediation and [seeks] to do so by offering certain kinds of visual information" (26). This is not to say that writers always constructed their scenes as if describing a photograph; but they now had a visual standard to contend with which could arguably capture the real very effectively. In her book *Framing the Victorians*, Jennifer Green Lewis also advances this argument and sees "photography as a structuring principle or standard of truth to which the language itself aspires" (35). It seems appropriate, then, to read Levy's language in *The Romance of a Shop*, a book obviously concerned with photography, as aspiring to that same visuality.

From the opening of the novel, there is a narrative focus on vision, eyes, light, shadow, blurriness, clarity, colors, changing appearances, and contrast. The opening paragraph describes the Lorimers' building as "dun-coloured" and of "dejected and dismantled appearance," and the grounds are scattered with black and white posters; the mistiness of the garden contrasts with the "tender green of the young leaves" (51; ch. 1). Beyond giving us these common visual descriptions, our narrator – about whom more will be said in a moment – seems especially focused on outward appearance, on pictures. About Frances Lorimer, the eldest sister, we read that she

> [presented] somewhat the *appearance* of a large and superannuated baby. She had a big face, with small, *meaningless* features, and faint, *surprised-looking* eyebrows. Her complexion had once been charmingly pink and white, but the tints had hardened, and a coarse red colour clung to the wide cheeks. *At the present moment*, her little, light eyes red with weeping, her eyebrows arched higher than ever, *she looked the picture of impotent distress*. (52–53; ch.1; italics mine)

Here, we see only an image of Frances – what she appears to be – and at one specific "present moment." Her features are just features, not representative of any character trait or subject to any judgment. And we can note that Levy's narrator seems to infer from visual information what Frances's mental state is – "she looked the picture of impotent distress" – instead of telling us directly, omnisciently. This kind of photographic narration accumulates throughout the novel. Levy's narrator often seems to perceive only surfaces. Meanwhile, that narrator tells us about a character, Gertrude, who also struggles to see beyond what is in front of her nose, and her camera.

We find out the most about the interior life of Gertrude Lorimer, though, and most about her perspective. This failed writer and keen observer inhabits nearly every scene, and Levy – for the most part – presents us with information that Gertrude herself could have gathered, as if we're sitting on the character's shoulder. The first sister we get to know, Gertrude is described physically at first, too, but as the novel continues, we have access to her memories,[3] her dreams,[4] her rhetorical questioning,[5] her fears, and some of her vision. She is "not a beautiful woman" we're told, but her looks change "from hour to hour" (51; ch. 1), and those details combined with the fact that she has "short-sighted eyes," suggest that we are to question Gertrude's subjectivity and her observational position. This is a photographer whose own appearance is unfixed, whose gaze is at least slightly skewed.

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Before I analyze additional photographic moments from the text, though, a few words about Levy's own narrative vision and approach, which are somewhat complex. Since the novel concerns itself so much with photography, perspective, and who perceives, I am drawn to the work of Gérard Genette and James Phelan – specifically their understanding of "focalizers" – to help me understand Levy's narrator. Who is *speaking* and who is *perceiving* in *Romance*? Who is, if you will, photographing the story-world? And is there a clear narrative point-of-view?

"The key insight in Genette's approach to voice and vision," writes Phelan, "is that the term 'point of view' is inadequate because it conflates the two distinct elements of narrative discourse: who speaks (voice) and who sees, or, more broadly, who perceives (vision or what Genette calls focalization)" (316–17). In *Romance*, we have a first-person narrative presence ostensibly speaking the story to us. This "I" narrator appears only six times in novel, though (51; ch. 1; 57; ch. 1; 64; ch. 2; 106; ch. 8; 136; ch. 12; 194; Epilogue). There is, as usual, a question about whether the narrator perceives or whether the characters perceive the story-world as it is presented.[6] The "I" narrator, we should remember, is not a character herself. We get no direct information about this narrator beside the facts that she is writing the story (51; ch. 1; 106; ch. 8; 136; ch. 12), that she's conscious of readers (57; ch. 1), that she knows a little bit about the motivations of the Lorimers' Aunt Caroline (64; ch. 2), and that she had occasion to pass the house the Lorimers eventually abandon (194; Epilogue). But this disembodied, anonymous journalist has strange access to some of the characters' interior emotions, primarily Gertrude's. She also occasionally seems to see through Gertrude's eyes, as we receive some visual information without the usual narrative interpretation.

That access makes this narrator a rare kind of first-person limited omniscient presence. She is somehow an "I": a detached paparazzo and a kind of sister herself, coldly reporting in some cases, but taking on a warm familiarity in others. Consider her musings about Frances Lorimer: "That was the worst of Fan; there was no standing up in fair fight and having it out with her; you might as soon fight a featherbed" (56; ch. 1). There is exasperation there, as if the narrator has herself fought with the nicknamed Fan, and so we begin to feel that Levy blends the perspectives of narrator ("I") and character (Gertrude).[7] Moments like this are common in the text and Gertrude emerges as the central figure. We trust the narrative voice, but we sense that some of the reflections are coming at least partly from this charismatic, intelligent young photographer.

The narrator in *Romance* is a fly on the wall and an occasional intimate, both removed and involved. This is a social stance Gertrude also takes on in the novel's later scenes when she's often presented standing in a doorway, or otherwise on the outside looking in. But this removed narrator also seems to transmit Gertrude's intimate feelings. How, for instance, could the traditional first person narrator[8] tell us the following about Gertrude's interior state?

> Reviewing one by one all those facts which bore upon her present case; setting in order her thoughts; and gathering up her energies for the fight to come; Gertrude felt her pulses throb, and her bosom glow with resolve.

> Of the darker possibilities of human nature and of life, *this girl – who believed herself old, and experienced – had no knowledge, save such as had come to her in brief flashes of insight*, in passing glimpses scarcely realized or remembered. (70; ch. 3; italics mine)

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In the dialogue-heavy opening, this is one of the few passages that delves into a character's psyche. It suggests narrative omniscience despite the presence of the "I," and Levy asks us to consider Gertrude's vision within that context. Gertrude doesn't know much about the world, but Levy's narrator suggests that what she does know has come to her in flashes, brief moments of photographic insight. Both narrator and character, then, seem to have a limited and heightened observational ability. They know more than they should, perhaps, but they're not all-seeing.

We will see some of those moments of observational acuity as the novel continues because both the narrator and Gertrude are perceivers in *The Romance of a Shop*, if inadequate ones. They become dual-focalizers, and it's safe to say that we readers receive information about the story-world from a mostly removed narrator whose attitudes are often inflected by Gertrude, who is herself present in nearly every scene, watching and judging. (It is almost as if Gertrude, who'd abandoned a literary career to take up photography, has picked up the pen once again, or at least granted a wide-ranging interview upon which the novel is based.) But as we will see, Levy focuses on the ways in which Gertrude's watching, Gertrude's perceiving has its limits. In a story with a focus on perspective, it is appropriate that Levy complicates her own narrative approach and appropriate that we are left questioning whose eyes give us visual access to the story.

In the opening of the novel, as I've said, vision and perspective are central, and that continues until the culminating romantic scene. Early on, Lucy and Phyllis – the other Lorimer sisters – are depicted with a focus on their "searching and intensely modern young eyes" (56; ch. 1), and the opening pages, rife with physical description of faces and rooms and fashion, offer the kind of visual information Armstrong argued was necessary for post-photography fiction. As the sisters, whom Levy describes as "the most astonishing productions of the age" (62; ch. 2), begin their photographic work, Levy's photography-influenced narration becomes more apparent. While Fred Devonshire, the brother of the sisters' friend Conny, helps with the facility they have procured, Levy gives us the following picture: "Indeed, the spectacle of that gorgeous youth hammering away in his shirt sleeves on a pair of steps, his immaculate hat and coat laid by, his gardenia languishing in some forgotten nook, was one not easily to be overlooked or forgotten" (78; ch. 4). The word "spectacle" turns this sight into a commodity, like a photograph. The attention on Fred's looks, too, and the careful way the objects in the scene are laid out in relation to one another, as if posed, draws attention to the fact that this scene seems framed. Levy also ties the picture to memory; it won't be forgotten because it has been so thoroughly captured. In fact, we find out that Fred becomes the sisters' first model, framed again, "with an air of mingled archness and shamefacedness, through one of his own elaborate lattices" (79; ch. 4).

It is Gertrude's specific gaze that is most compelling in the novel, though, and Levy often describes the visions Gertrude has in starkly photographic terms. As their business grows, the sisters become more involved in the artistic society around them, and this offers Gertrude more chances to observe. While these business breaks at first seem positive, Gertrude, always "laden with her apparatus" (86; ch. 5), eventually receives an assignment to photograph the dead wife of a certain Lord Watergate. The sisters' landlady, Mrs. Maryon warns Gertrude about the inappropriateness of going to such a job alone at a man's house, but she calmly ignores those qualms and Levy sets up the job to be a triumph of the progressive woman. Even before the end of that section, though, Phyllis, the youngest of the bunch, asks, "Who votes for getting married? I do. So do you, don't you, Fan?" (85; ch. 5). As Levy presents

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the contrast between self-reliant New Woman, Gertrude, and the more socially-acceptable Phyllis, ready to take on her prescribed cultural role, she offers a strange preface to Gertrude's appearance at Lord Watergate's. What should be a kind of social transgression, and a lucrative one for the Lorimers' business, turns into an example of Levy's complicated photographic narration. With that narration, she characterizes Gertrude's way of seeing as both powerful and potentially limiting.

Gertrude is a photographer at Lord Watergate's, but she seems to be a sort of camera as well, receiving the images she sees without necessarily reacting, and the narration changes drastically in this first scene that depicts her doing her work. Levy, in fact, connects processes of camerawork with her character's consciousness. Gertrude takes in distinct pictures of the scene and registers them brilliantly, sensitively, but the photographs she takes with her eyes overwhelm her, evidenced by the following section, which deserves lengthy quotation:

> Here the blinds had been raised, and for a moment *Gertrude was too dazzled to be aware with any clearness of her surroundings*.
>
> As her eyes grew accustomed to the light, she perceived herself to be standing in a daintily-furnished sleeping apartment, whose open windows afforded glimpses of an unbroken prospect of wood, and lawn, and water.
>
> Drawn forward to the middle of the room, well within the light from the windows, was a small, open bedstead of wrought brass. A woman lay, to all appearance, sleeping there, the bright October sunlight falling full on the upturned face, on the spread and shining masses of matchless golden hair. A woman no longer in her first youth; haggard with sickness, pale with the last strange pallor, but beautiful withal, exquisitely, astonishingly beautiful.
>
> *Another figure, that of a man, was seated by the window, in a pose fixed*, as motionless, as that of the dead woman herself.
>
> Gertrude, as she silently made preparations for her strange task, instinctively refrained from glancing in the direction of this second figure; and had only the vaguest impression of a dark, bowed head, and a bearded, averted face.
>
> She delivered a few necessary directions to the housekeeper, in the lowest audible voice, then, *her faculties stimulated to curious accuracy*, set to work with camera and slides.
>
> As she stood, her apparatus gathered up, on the point of departure, the man by the window rose suddenly, and for the first time seemed aware of her presence.
>
> For one brief, but vivid moment, her eyes encountered the glance of two miserable grey eyes, looking out with a sort of dazed wonder from a pale and sunken face. The broad forehead, projecting over the eyes; the fine, but rough-hewn features; the brown hair and beard; the tall, stooping, sinewy figure: *these together formed a picture which imprinted itself as by a flash on Gertrude's overwrought consciousness, and was destined not to fade for many days to come*. (86–87; ch. 5; italics mine)

The first thing to notice about this passage is the way Levy describes light, obviously an important feature of the photographic process. While at first the scene is a dark, confining

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one, the blinds are opened to reveal a sight that dazzles Gertrude. Here, during the description of Gertrude's most daring professional venture to date, Levy makes it clear that she is in over her head. But Gertrude gathers herself and the fact that she is not "aware with any clearness of her surroundings" shows again that her gaze focuses like a camera – she captures, memorizes, frames. She can picture without necessarily synthesizing.

Gertrude then sees another person in the room, described tellingly as a "figure," as if a model himself. He is "in a pose fixed" and "motionless." In her first meeting with Watergate, then, Gertrude sees him as a kind of photographic reproduction, and it is that way of seeing, influenced by Gertrude's submersion in the photography business, that Levy actually develops here.[9] Gertrude's introduction to Lord Watergate, who will represent a return to conventional womanhood for her when they are married, is mediated by the language and processes of photography, which in other ways are also Gertrude's expression of freedom. Her vehicle of expression becomes bound up with what limits that expression, and though "her faculties [were] stimulated to curious accuracy," we know that her faculties, in this scene and others, are strangely mechanical.

The scene is peculiar in that we never see Gertrude taking the picture she's there to get, but Levy gives us examples of many pictures of what "her eyes encountered." Language like that further cements Gertrude's role as a focalizer, and she perceives precisely, internalizing what she sees as flashes, "brief, but vivid moment[s]." Even the syntax, saturated with semi-colons, enhances the feeling that Gertrude takes in a series of individual images and no coherent scene.[10] Armstrong understands this sort of discernment as a feature of post-photography fiction. She writes that "photography endowed fiction's rendering of certain characters, settings, and objects with a truth-telling capability resembling the transparency attributed to the photograph" (27–28). Here Levy gives us a photographer and develops the truth-telling, truth-collecting ability of her character's gaze in a particularly complex way.[11]

As Levy ends the scene with Gertrude taking a sort of mental picture of Lord Watergate, she employs photography-influenced narration again. She writes, "[T]hese [images] together formed a picture which imprinted itself as by a flash on Gertrude's overwrought consciousness, and was destined not to fade for many days to come." The description, undoubtedly photographic in its inclusion of the word "flash," almost predicts one of William James's theories about the modern consciousness published just two years later: "Central to [James's] account of consciousness," Deborah Parsons writes, "is the notion of differing pace, to suggest periods of rapid glimpses of phenomena interspersed with intermittent captured moments" (71). It seems that Levy's photographic narration, the way she shows us Gertrude's way of perceiving, is an appropriate representation of the experience of modernity itself. While Gertrude's consciousness is overwhelmed by scattered images, she still sees, as if in a single frame, some of the most important moments of her life.

Green-Lewis writes, "[T]he idea of photography as a way of looking became increasingly present to the literary text [in the late-Victorian period], suggesting an intensified focus on issues of perspective, multiplicity, and fragmentation" (88). Reading the talented and troubled Gertrude in light of that argument, I see photography as more than a brave trade she has taken up; it is a key into a world that has been denied to women. Levy's narrator tells us, "[f]astidious and sensitive as [Gertrude] was, she had yet a great fund of enjoyment of life within her; of that impersonal, objective enjoyment which is so often denied to her sex" (135; ch. 12). That objective enjoyment of a traditionally masculine world seems wrapped

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up in her ability to observe and photograph; and yet photography is another sort of locked door that keeps her from that world as well. While Ana Parejo Vadillo[13] understands the late-nineteenth century as a time in which "women ha[d] now mastered the gaze and [were] active lookers, wielding it against themselves and each other as well as against the male 'starer'" (212), photography, I argue, sometimes limits Gertrude's subjective observations and keeps her at bay within a conventional system of looking.

Before addressing more examples of Levy's photographic narration, I want to review her ideas about Realism, about what she called "The New School of American Fiction" in an 1884 essay of that name. In the essay, she criticizes the minute details of Henry James and William Dean Howells, the detachment of those writers. Of James's novel *Roderick Hudson*, she writes, "He is losing his sense of proportion; where he would be subtle he is often merely futile. Certainly he makes us see a great many things, but we should see them better if we could feel them as well" (New 513).

This distinction between seeing and feeling emerges consistently during *Romance*, especially as Gertrude ventures out into London to look through her camera. Meanwhile, Levy's review here suggests that she wants her work to transcend James's mode of Realism, wants her readers to see clearly while also feeling deeply. Interestingly, she creates a character in Gertrude who has a difficult time feeling while she's seeing. At times in the novel – the above scene in Watergate's home is an example – Gertrude seems to look at the world the way Levy believes James's novels do, with a detached glare. Reading "The New School of American Fiction" side-by-side with *Romance*, then, we gain insight into Levy's constant use of photographic narration to characterize Gertrude's powerful glare that magnifies the surface of things and sometimes minimizes all else.

Later in her essay on American Fiction, Levy takes Howells to task for his own overly-photographic style, and her analysis can help us understand Gertrude, her artist-observer:

> No one can deny that up to a certain point [Howells] is highly realistic; that he is in any sense real is another matter. If we compare Henry James' books to paintings by Alma Tadema, so may we compare those of Howells to a photograph from life. There are all the familiar details; the table, the picture in its frame, the very orange lying cleft on the casual plate. We ourselves, to be sure, are a little self-conscious in our attitudes, a little stiffly posed; but then there were those uncomfortable headrests, and the photographer made us put our hands on the silly ornamental columns he brought with him. We are like and yet strangely unlike ourselves. And the novels of Mr. Howells are just so many photographs where no artistic hand has grouped the figures, only posed them very stiffly before the lens. (New 513–14)

We might think here of the way Gertrude and her sisters saw Fred, who was stiffly posed amidst a scattering of objects, ashamed and self-conscious. Gertrude saw Lord Watergate's wife similarly, even more stiffly posed before the lens. Even the real thing isn't the real thing, Levy suggests, and so when Gertrude sees with the clarity of a camera, what is she missing? Levy saw, as Owen Clayton has, that "[t]he challenge for Howells and other realists was how to approximate the best qualities of photography without losing 'feeling,' that most 'vital element' of writing" (376–77). But she seems to suggest that this is also the challenge for Gertrude: to create a realistic reproduction of the world without sapping that world of its life.[14]

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Levy reacts against the emerging style of American Realism, the perceived loss of feeling, with her essay and her novel. The question is, why would she so heavily criticize an author for having a photographic style and then write a novel only a few years later about female photographers, one of whom stares mechanically at her subjects? It seems that Levy is up to two things: she wants to dramatize the artist-observer to show that the very instrument that gives Gertrude her power can also limit that power. And she also wants to mock, in both senses, the literary trends she saw emerging in James and Howells. Where her character Gertrude succeeds, she feels the most deeply. Consider this passage in which Levy contrasts Gertrude's natural emotions with the deadening work she's taken on: "There were hints of vague delight in the sweet, keen air; whisperings, promises, that had nothing to do with pyrogallic acid and acetate of soda; with the processes of developing, fixing, or intensifying" (70; ch. 3). But where Gertrude fails, she stares too intensely, noticing every detail but not capturing the whole picture. So while Karen Wiseman sees Levy as a caricaturist of "a Victorian empathetic imagination" (64) and Linda Beckman believes the novel to be "parodic . . . in calling attention to its imitation of art rather than life" (158), I argue that Levy's real target is the kind of photographic Realism practiced by Howells.

Levy's criticism is in line with some contemporary views on the literary influence of photography, and at odds with others. In an 1883 essay for the *Atlantic*, Charles Dudley Warner anticipated her argument, writing, "When we praise our recent fiction for its photographic fidelity to nature we condemn it, for we deny to it the art which would give it value" (qtd. in Bogardus 233). But Grant Allen argued that "[t]he modern American novel . . . is the real realism, the natural naturalism; it depends for its effects upon the faithful, almost photographic, delineation of actual life" (qtd. in Bogardus 233). Curiously, Levy might have found some support for her ideas from the target of her essay, Howells himself. According to Ralph F. Bogardus,

> On the one hand, [Howells] seemed to believe that the photograph was a poor substitution for actual experience, superficial and cheapening in its representation, and thus inferior to seeing reality in the flesh. Yet on the other hand, he seemed to think that the photograph could give the viewer a clearer, more revealing picture of reality, one that was equal to, or even better than, actual experience. (236)

If Gertrude's way of seeing is influenced by photography in *The Romance of a Shop*, her own experience relates to Howells's ideas here. The camera, as I'll continue to explore, enhances and restricts her way of seeing, her way of experiencing. And the mode of Realism Levy criticizes and imitates presents a clear image of the world while draining the color from that image. In order to scrutinize that mode of perceiving the world – Realist accuracy – Levy has Gertrude embody both its strengths and weaknesses. In Beckman's words, "[She overconforms] to the devices of what postmodern critics often call 'Classic Realism'" (158). Again, the photographic narration allows Levy to subtly critique the Realist authors with whom she struggled. She might have flashed an ironic smile, then, when a contemporary critic wrote of *Romance*, "It reminds one of Mr. W. D. Howells, and would add to his reputation" (Levy 195).

While Levy's photographic narration allows her to work within a mode she's also criticizing, she points out the ways in which a steady, accurate gaze can help her characters, too. Gertrude's perceptive powers are impressive, arguably superior to those of other characters, and at a meeting with Sidney Darrell, the nefarious painter who will eventually

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manipulate Phyllis, Gertrude's ability to judge him seems tied to her profession. But she is violated by his gaze and it forces her to consider her own shortcomings as well:

> Gertrude, looking up and meeting the cold, grey glance, became suddenly conscious that her hat was shabby, that her boots were patched and clumsy, that the wind had blown the wisps of hair about her face. What was there in this man's gaze that made her, all at once, feel old and awkward, ridiculous and dowdy; that made her long to snatch up her heavy camera and flee from his presence, never to return? (107; ch. 8)

Gertrude is uncomfortable here and wants to take the tool of her vision, the camera, and leave forever. Her looking cannot give her any definite knowledge about Darrell because his appearance belies his slippery character. Gertrude senses something about him, but her staring cannot do to him what his does to her. Levy presents the question again: "What, indeed? Gertrude, we know, had a vivid imagination, and that perhaps was responsible for the sense of oppression, defiance, and self-distrust with which she followed Mr. Darrell" (107; ch. 8). The nod to her "vivid imagination" seems to invoke her photographic powers of observation, and we see here how Gertrude can almost surmise Darrell's character based on her visual impressions, but the sentence is ambiguous because she looks at him out of both weakness and strength. Her camera, and her photographic way of observing, allows her to see and gives her status in the world, but when confronted with a penetrating gaze, her apparatus seems useless.

Gertrude takes in images likes this throughout the novel and her perceptive powers as Levy narrates them give us a sense of the characters she confronts. We never doubt the veracity of her observations, but her vision is relatively powerless in a situation like the one quoted above. While Darrell's stare is like a flashlight – it makes her self-conscious and reveals her flaws – hers is once again like a camera, superior in its ability to capture the physical details, but unable to shame or level. In the famous essay "Visual Pleasure in the Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey recognizes this possibly reductive, though valuable, difference: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (37). In some sense, photography has given Gertrude a way of experiencing what she couldn't otherwise, but that isn't always her personal experience at all. Granted, Gertrude is a flesh-and-blood, likable character – to Darrell, a "dragon-sister" (131; ch. 11) – and she doesn't always behave as if she is a receiving-machine, but the evidence that her way of seeing is blurred by photography is hard to ignore.

Photography and the photographic way of seeing is, it seems, an emblem of the New Woman in the novel. In one of the earliest references to photography, we're told that all of the sisters can make photographs besides Fanny, who is an "anachronism" and "behind the age" (56; ch. 1). And to the sisters' Aunt Caroline, engaging in photography and commerce is "dangerous and unwomanly" (72; ch. 4). In other words, dangerous and progressive. There is a noticeable generation gap here, but Gertrude, too, notices the dangers of an overactive, photographic way of observing. She lightly chastises her sister Phyllis for her keen eye, for her staring and her penchant for gossip: "What busybodies you long-sighted people always are" (79; ch. 4). And in these first chapters, Levy explores the idea that there could be something dangerous, if not unwomanly, about seeing too closely. She also lightly hints that the photographic process can deeply affect her characters. It's Phyllis who notices that Lucy has "not been the same person since [she] developed those plates this afternoon" (83; ch. 5).

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And it's Levy who ramps up the photography-inflected vocabulary as the novel continues, frequently using words like "dilated" (84; ch. 5) and "fixed" (85; ch. 5), while constantly pointing out "the fire of four pairs of feminine eyes" (93; ch. 6).

Writing about the Rossettis – favorites of Levy – Isobel Armstrong notes the influence of photography on their sonnets: "The presence of the camera and its technology is not, of course, a literal presence but it is an ontological one. The suggestiveness of these new technologies created an imaginative and aesthetic charge that released new meanings into the culture – of the image, of time, of light and shadow" (462). Armstrong reads the sixth sonnet of Rossetti's sequence *Later Life* – a poem which shares features with Levy's own poem, "Sonnet" – and she sees the poem in light of new photographic processes. Following her lead, I read Levy's description of Sidney Darrell to be thoroughly-influenced by the new technology as well: "His whole appearance was a masterly combination of the correct and the picturesque" (107; ch. 8). So Levy's narrator, connected to Gertrude, presents a person as though he's an image, and Levy again characterizes Gertrude's somewhat certain way of seeing.

In a later meeting between Gertrude and Darrell, Levy employs photographic terminology again to explain their fraught exchanges: "As for her own relations to Darrell, the positions of the two had shifted a little since the first. In the brief flashes of intercourse which they had known, a drama had silently enacted itself; a war without words or weapons, in which, so far, she had come off victor" (150; ch. 15). Here, Gertrude's way of interacting seems to have been influenced by her flashy new job and that's a positive thing. She has bested Darrell with her glares, she's been reserved and in control, the picture of the perfect photographer. But as we know, Darrell will come to harm Gertrude's family a great deal when he betrays Phyllis, so Gertrude's silent flash of dominance seems much less powerful by the end of the novel.

We've had these hints throughout that Gertrude's observational position might bring her sadness and limit her social prowess. Early on, Phyllis says to Gertrude, "It is a little dull, ain't it, Gerty, to look at life from a top-floor window?" (106; ch. 8), and Levy gives us this reaction from Gertrude: "[a] curious pang went through Gertrude, as she tenderly stroked [Phyllis's] nut-brown head." We can see this pang in two ways, I think. First, the description foreshadows Phyllis's downfall, a downfall caused by unguarded involvement in society and unguarded involvement with Sidney Darrell. But we can also see this moment as Gertrude recognizing the potential coldness of her own bird's eye view, the detachment of a watcher. Later, as she speaks to Lord Watergate, Gertrude encapsulates her own position in society and it is not necessarily a happy one, despite what her photography skills have opened up for her. Watergate begins:

> "Oakley has been telling me about the great success in photography of you and your sisters."
> "I don't know about success!" Gertrude laughed.
> "You look so tired, Miss Lorimer; let me find you a seat."
> "No, thank you; I prefer to stand. One sees the world so much better."
> "Ah, you like to see the world."
> "Yes; it is always interesting."
> "It is to be assumed that you are fond of society?"
> "Does one follow from the other?"
> "No; I merely hazarded the question."

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> "One demands so much more of a game in which one is taking part," said
> Gertrude; "and with social intercourse, one is always thinking how much better managed it might be."
> They both laughed. (115; ch. 9)

The witty repartee doesn't cover over the darkness here. Levy seems to want us to see Gertrude's knack for observation as separate from her ultimate happiness. She's been able to see more of society because of her business, her camera, and her photographic eye, but that hasn't made her fond of social life or fully comfortable in it. Gertrude, meanwhile, feels more conflicted, even optimistic, about her relationship to the outside world since the photography business opened: "That she had been brought face to face with the sterner side of life, had lost some illusions, suffered some pain, she did not regret. It seemed to her that she had not paid too great a price for the increased reality of her present existence" (127; ch. 10). In a few chapters, though, Gertrude's run-ins with "increased reality" will become more painful.

Joseph Bristow, analyzing Levy's work, writes, "Indeed, in both her fiction and poetry, the closer women come to entering patriarchal institutions, the more deeply dissatisfied they are" (82), and two of Levy's poems complicate this discussion of Gertrude's damaging objectivity. In her poem "Philosophy," Levy's speaker describes a relationship with a friend that is based on "the pure delights of the brain." These two stand above "light loves and sweet champagne," above the stuff of Romance. Levy writes, "Proudly we sat, we two, on high, / Throned in our Objectivity" (New 401). This poem is a positive take on Gertrude's kind of intellectual removal, but Bristow writes, "Even when one wants to uphold an ideal of dispassionate 'objectivity', the thirst for knowledge is both gendered and sexualized" (86). We certainly see that struggle in *The Romance of a Shop*. Scenes that detail Gertrude's way of looking – at Watergate, at Darrell – seem both erotic and robotic as she internalizes the ability of the camera to see both deeply and blankly.

In Levy's poem "Sonnet," meanwhile, she shows us a lyric "I" with a "wildly throbbing brain," a person "who peered into the darkness," "[w]atching and waiting, – waiting passively" (New 367). This character, who seems to be closely related to Levy herself, has an "aching heart." She also waits and watches "passively." The result of this waiting and watching is that the "dark has faded, and before mine eyes, / Have long, grey flats expanded, dim and bare." The watching allows the speaker to see "the changing guises all things wear," and the description mirrors the progress of a photograph developing. Interestingly, this process leaves the speaker feeling both hope and despair, a mix which Gertrude herself feels on account of her own photographic talents. She's often happy to be running the business and observing the world, but she also thinks, "Was this life, this ceaseless messing about in a pokey glass out-house?" (120; ch. 10).

In her seminal work *On Photography*, Susan Sontag theorizes about the photographic experience, and her thoughts inform my argument about Gertrude and the ways in which Levy seems to be developing her:

> Photography is acquisition in several forms . . . [T]hrough image-making and image- duplicating machines, we can acquire something as information (rather than experience). Indeed, the importance of photographic images as the medium through which more and more events enter our experience is, finally, only a by-product of their effectiveness in furnishing knowledge dissociated from and independent of experience. (137)

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I find it reasonable, in light of Sontag's argument, to read Gertrude as a character who does not fully experience what she sees. And if experiencing is a subjective act, purely gaining visual information is an objective one. Again, it seems that Gertrude has a superior documenting capacity and a difficulty engaging. Her photographic receptivity seems to give her clear sight at the expense of subjectivity.

In considering British culture after the advent of photography, Nancy Armstrong also sees that the precision of photography can affect the way people see:

> [T]he invention of photography not only placed the camera on the same terrain as the eye, as something that could see for itself, it also shifted the camera into a position of potential superiority, where it decided that objects would henceforth be seen in the ways in which photographs either had or would picture them. (81)

As I have argued, Gertrude's perceptive powers are superior. She can capture and reflect an image the same way a camera can, and perhaps the strongest evidence of her objective way of seeing emerges when Levy continues to describe her as if she were a machine. During a scene of Gertrude's out-the-window gazing, Levy describes her heroine with the following: "Gertrude sewed by the window, too tired to think or talk. Now and then she glanced across mechanically to the opposite house" (160; ch. 17). Here the adverb enhances the idea that she is fatigued, but since she looks out the lens of the window, and since it is actually her glance that is described as mechanical, it seems that Levy intentionally connects Gertrude's way of seeing to the mechanical eye, the camera. Later, Levy describes Gertrude's "apathetic eyes mechanically following the green garment of the High School mistress" (186; ch. 23), and points out her "mechanical lips" (174; ch. 20); she depicts Gertrude "mechanical acquiesc[ing] (130; ch. 11), and shows her "mechanically arranging some flowers in a vase" (187; ch. 23); we see that Gertrude is "frozen, tense, silent" and that "she vibrated between the studio and the sick-room, moving as if in obedience to some hidden mechanism, a creature apparently without wants, emotions, or thoughts" (175; ch. 20). Has Gertrude become a machine? Has photography harmed her in some way?

Years before the publication of *Romance*, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake penned an essay that can give us a sense of the Victorian attitude toward photography, whether it was considered an art or a mechanical process: "Here, therefore, the much-lauded and much abused agent called photography takes her legitimate stand. Her business is to give evidence of facts, as minutely and as impartially as, to our shame, only an unreasoning machine can give" (267). In some of the above examples Gertrude is grief-stricken over Phyllis's condition to be sure, but the compulsive way in which she gazes like an unreasoning machine once again suggests that her perspective is linked to a camera's lifeless stare.[15]

"During the Victorian era," writes Susan David Bernstein in her excellent edition of the novel, "as photography became an established medium, a sustained debate arose about whether it constituted an art form or merely a mechanical practice" (32). This is a question in *Romance*, but my question is whether Gertrude's gaze constitutes an advance for her or whether it holds her back. Just as social media can create a space for the shy to communicate while shielding them in a potentially harmful way, photography for Gertrude both permits and restricts. Parsons sees this kind of removal from experience as a symptom of encroaching modernity: "There is something detached and overseeing about the cosmopolitan modernist identity that works against social participation and agency" (14), she writes. Ironically, it is

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that social agency that Gertrude longs for. She gains a measure of it by performing the role of photographer and business-owner, and considering Levy's position as a first-wave feminist author writing about a character who appears to shun conventional gender roles, we might expect the novel to be a more triumphant narrative of female progress; but *The Romance of a Shop* fits Levy's typical mode according to Parsons, who suggests that "[Levy's] writings self-consciously debate the freedoms and limitation identifiable with her position as a female . . . urban observer" (87). So, in this novel, Levy creates a character in Gertrude whose way of seeing is wrapped up in onrushing modernity. Hers is a more powerful seeing and Levy narrates her observations in a way that makes them appear incisive, direct. But is her gaze more powerful because of photography or less powerful as photographic objectivity outdoes her own subjectivity?

In his provocative essay, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," André Bazin explores the objectivity of photographic art, writing, "For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man" (13). Bazin posits that the photographer can create an impersonal art in an act of infallible capturing. This idea of an automatic accuracy is certainly arguable in that it does not take into account the choices of the photographer. It assumes that the artist (Gertrude in the case of *The Romance of the Shop*) is nonessential to the production of the image. But, practically, photographers *are* essential and their vision is perhaps even more penetrating than the unmediated gaze. It seems fair, then, to conclude that Gertrude's gaze both receives, in a Bazinian way, and reconstructs, in a socially powerful way.

Green-Lewis notices a similar duality in the way photographers were treated in this era, writing, "Images of photographers and their works tend to fall into two categories in nineteenth-century fiction, either culturally marginalized or strangely empowered" (66). Nancy Armstrong, too, suggests that photographers inhabit a role that is both passive and dynamic, while Parsons understands Levy's take on urban women this way: "[The urban woman] has the means to enter the city environment but is weighted down and unable to use them. She can only gaze unspeakingly over a tortured cityscape, impotent to change its continuing process of historical destruction" (92). In Levy, then, characters have the agency to understand but much of what they feel is their own fraught position within sexist boundaries. Like a Bazinian photographic artist, they may take in an image of civilization without being able to affect it.

If Gertrude falls in *The Romance of a Shop*, however, she falls softly, into the arms of Lord Watergate. Curiously, Levy's narrator describes their attachment at the end of the novel as one in which "soul looks straight to soul through no intervening veil; when human voice answers human voice through no medium of an actor's mask" (182; ch. 22). In this romantic relationship, then, perhaps Gertrude can see clearly and has no need for the veil or the medium. She *does* give up the photography business for motherhood, incidentally, but her sister Lucy continues it and the novel ends optimistically. Gertrude is happy if not liberated. Both photography *and* bucking conventions have been adventures worth trying, but both have been exceedingly difficult. As Gertrude and Watergate recognize that they will finally be together, Gertrude covers her eyes with her hands. For once, she does not look out as a photographer would, but is instead overcome by "the human cry for happiness – the woman's cry for love" (188; ch. 23).

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The New Woman fiction of the 1880s customarily dealt with issues of gender conventions and gendered observation, but its critics found that it too often turned its gaze inward, offering a perspective on female mentality that, to some, seemed unnecessary, even vain. One critic, Hugh E. M. Stutfield, derisively suggested that women writers were "for ever [sic] examining [their] mental [selves] in the looking-glass" (qtd. in Pykett 41). The backlash against what we might call confessional fiction was intense and Levy must have been conscious of the criticisms of the chauvinistic literati. With *The Romance of a Shop* she writes a strong rebuttal, though, creating a main character who, though introspective at times, almost constantly looks outward.

The novel also succeeds by turning the reader into an occasionally powerful, sometimes short-sighted, observer. In fact, Levy gives us in the text an analogue for our reading experience. The sisters' landlady, Mrs. Maryon, a half-formed character who early in the novel has a conventional and critical view of the businesswomen, gives us a chance to see the sisters from an outside perspective, not necessarily as the narrator would have us see them, but as a neighbor would. Mentions of Mrs. Maryon end three connected sections and we are able to look from her mostly conservative, though increasingly generous perspective. Levy ends a particularly dramatic scene – in which the sisters hear that their friend and Lucy's fiancé Frank Jermyn is feared dead – with what seems to be the out-of-place appearance of Mrs. Maryon. In another, the landlady grumbles about Gertrude's lack of propriety as the latter ventures out on a late-night ride with Lord Watergate. And then, as if a stand-in for the contemporary reader, she changes her view at the end of the next chapter. She stops judging Gertrude, who has suffered through both romantic desperation and family illness. Levy writes, "Mrs. Maryon asked no questions; her genuine kindness and helpfulness were called forth by this crisis; and her suspicions of Gertrude had vanished forever" (174; ch. 19).

For me, it is important to connect Mrs. Maryon with the reader because this novel becomes so much about the structures of observing, about who is allowed to look, about how we gaze and interpret. Like the landlady, we're on the outside of the family and mostly on the outside of Gertrude's perceptions. We gaze weakly at the sisters' lives – their tragedies and triumphs – and are only able to passively receive the visual information we're presented.

This is, of course, the trouble Amy Levy had with the novels of Howells and James; readers weren't allowed into the emotional lives of the characters but were instead buffeted with small details. She seems to want to show us how difficult it is for Gertrude to make sense of an onrush of detail and for us to see through the Realist veneer to the core of any character who's described photographically. In a late scene, Levy gives us yet another moment inflected by that photographic language, and I argue that it is yet another comment on the efficacy of Realist writing:

> Gertrude had entered noiselessly, and, pausing on the threshold, hidden in shadow, remained there motionless a moment's space.
>
> Every detail of the great room, seen but once before, smote on her sense with a curious familiarity. It had been wintry daylight on the occasion of her former presence there; now a mellow radiance of shaded, artificial light was diffused throughout the apartment, a radiance concentrated to subdued brilliance in the immediate neighbourhood of the fireplace. (171; ch. 19)

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She then sees Darrell "outlined against the screen" and "Phyllis, yet somebody new and strange." "For a moment," Levy writes, "the warmth, the overpowering fragrance of hot-house flowers, most of all, the sight of that figure by the table, had robbed Gertrude of power to move or speak." Here, Levy shows us Gertrude's amazing ability to see, and she also shows us that Gertrude is consistently overwhelmed by these details she takes in. She is like Levy's hypothetical reader of American Realist fiction, overcome by the exactitude and complexity of a scene.

By the end of the scene, though, she gathers herself and once again wins "the silent battle" of the gaze against Sidney Darrell. She's taken a shot of him and of Phyllis, but this time she's able to group the figures. She sees, and with feeling. In the mid-twentieth century, the photographer Edward Weston wrote of this kind of piercing, photographic skill: "Guided by the photographer's selective understanding, the penetrating power of the camera-eye can be used to produce a heightened sense of reality – a kind of super realism that reveals the vital essences of things" (qtd. in Bogardus 237–38). And so Levy's photographic observer captures the world like a Realist writer but sometimes imbues it with an artist's meaning.

Amy Levy sought that vital essence in her fiction. She relied on conventions of both Romance and Realism, engaging in some of the patterns she noted and derided in William Dean Howells and maintaining an aesthetic that was often just as dependent on deliberate visual description. In *The Romance of a Shop*, though, she parodies what she saw as the overly-photographic work of Howells and others. In "The New School of American Fiction," she wrote that "we protest against the artificiality, the self-consciousness, the *pose* of the novels of the new school. Are people in real life perpetually on the *qui vive* to observe the precise shade and meaning of one another's smiles, to attach precisely the right interpretation to one another's monosyllables?" (515). Instead of that subtlety, it seems that she's interested in Weston's brand of "super realism," a reality that can be accessed and changed by creative women, a reality that has been touched up by an artistic hand or an active viewer.

Nancy Armstrong concludes *Fiction in the Age of Photography* with the following theory of how active readers gather information:

> My point in using photography to rethink literary modernism has been to suggest that all forms of modernism offer ways of dealing with the fact of mass visuality: the production of a field of vision that not only possessed the tangibility and wholeness of a world, but that also provided the common ground for readers of fiction, a world to which any novel could refer with considerable confidence. The production of such a world necessarily transformed the reader-observer brought up on omniscient fiction and popular photography into a reader-viewer who was arguably more passive in the face of visual information than at any previous moment in modern history. (274)

Armstrong suggests that readers themselves are inundated by photographic representations that stand in for lush language, and her idea guides my reading of *The Romance of a Shop*. It's a book concerned not only with the artist-observer but with the observer of Realism as well. In writing a novel about looking, and then providing us visual information that suggests when and how we should look at the main character, Amy Levy gives us the same kind of visual agency that Gertrude has. As we see the photography-influenced narration develop, we're turned into reader-viewer, Gertrude-viewer. Mechanically, we accept the happy ending, the pretty image, but Levy's painted a different portrait of womanhood to

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consider in Gertrude: a strong, downbeat person (much like her creator) who sees piercingly who eventually composes her own sense of reality.

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NOTES

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1. My understanding of the female artist-observer and the New Woman was aided by Ann Heilmann's *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First Wave Feminism*. Heilmann writes, "[F]eminist writers problematize the conflicting desires and pressures women artists feel when their private and public roles are in collision. In particular, they explore the precarious balancing act women artists have to perform between conforming to traditional notions of feminine morality and securing their individual professional survival" (159). That standard and the way in which Levy works within it governs this argument.
2. In her book *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity*, Deborah Parsons complicates the idea of Gertrude as the classic New Woman. She sees Gertrude and her sister Lucy as embodying different aspects of the New Woman. It is tempting, however, to read Gertrude as Levy, as a female artist-observer struggling with her art constructed by a female artist-observer struggling with hers. My argument will (sometimes) avoid that pitfall and focus instead on Gertrude's position within the tradition of the New Woman, within the framework of burgeoning feminism.
3. "Long afterwards Gertrude could recall . . ." (92; ch. 6).
4. "A curious, dreamlike sensation stole over Gertrude . . ." (112; ch. 9).
5. "What was there in his voice, in his face, that suddenly brought before Gertrude's vision the image of the dead woman, her golden hair, and haggard beauty?" (115; ch. 9).
6. At the risk of too-closely associating Levy with the narrator, I will refer to the narrator as "she."
7. We briefly have access to the interior lives and perspectives of Lucy Lorimer, Fred Jermyn, and Lord Watergate as well, but this happens so rarely that it should not distract from the interpretation that Gertrude is the character to whom the narrator seems most connected.
8. Narratologists would refer to this narrator as "heterodiegetic," or outside the story-world. Even though she is an "I," like Jane Eyre, she does not, as far as we can tell, "interact directly with the characters" (*Phelan* 317).
9. In his book *The Form of Victorian Fiction*, J. Hillis Miller reads Dickens similarly to how I am reading Levy here. I have argued that Gertrude's experience with photography and cameras connects the narration attached to her gaze to photography. Along the same line of thought Miller writes, "The narrator is present, for example, in the irony of details of language which reveal the blind enclosure of each character within his own language and within his own vision" (106). A character's employment, then, can influence the way an author might narrate that character's life. The phrase "blind enclosure" is especially interesting when considering Gertrude, who is, in a sense, trapped by the machinations of her own vision.
10. Ezra Pound famously used the semi-colon twenty-five years later to highlight two disparate images blending in his poem "In a Station of the Metro."
11. In his book *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary sees the mid- and late-nineteenth century as a time in which "a new perceptual autonomy also coincided with the making of the observer into a subject of new knowledge and new techniques of power" (79). Within fiction and the culture at large,

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then, the subjective gaze was giving power to those who had become familiar with new ways of seeing ushered in by mechanical advancements such as the stereoscope, and, later, the camera. However, the question remains: Is a gaze mediated or influenced by machinery subjective at all?

12. Kate Flint also notices the "language of flash" in her reading of Levy. According to Flint, Levy would have been familiar with flash powder, and so it's hard to ignore the repetition of the word "flash" as a description of Gertrude's specific perception. Levy, incidentally, does not use the word "flash" in this way in her other novel, *Reuben Sachs*.
13. Vadillo's article "Phenomena in Flux: The Aesthetics and Politics of Traveling in Modernity" offers an enlightening reading of Levy's poetry as well. She, too, sees the female gaze as both powerful and limited, and she explores Levy's common tactic of placing a female artist-observer behind a window. She writes, "On the one hand, the woman seems to be incarcerated in an almost transparent prison. . . . On the other hand, and paradoxically, it is because of this transparency that the woman poet can be a spectator of modern life" (214). Heilmann agrees that "these rooms provided the space and inspiration necessary for moral and philosophical enquiry and, ultimately, for artistic activity" (192–93), while Armstrong notes the "pent-up subjectivity" inherent in experiencing a world through the window that divides the observer from it (109). Just as these scholars read the window as something that provides both a view and a physical barrier, I am reading photography as both key and door, a technique that provides a gaze but shuts out individual observation as well, binding it up in mechanical objectivity.
14. In a related charming moment in the middle of the novel, Phyllis, the sister with the weakest ability to judge character, tells Lucy what she does not like about the sleazy Sidney Darrell: his eyes "and those little puffy bags underneath" (118; ch. 9). "Phyllis, spare us these realistic descriptions," Lucy responds. This is just a light moment, but Phyllis's "realistic descriptions" obviously don't get at the heart of Darrell, just as Realism might miss the "vital element."
15. At the end of one of the bleakest chapters, Levy writes, "Gertrude, as she lay awake that night, heard the rain beating against the window-panes, and shuddered" (180; ch. 21). While we can't know if Levy intended this pun, the "shutter" – the part of the camera that opens to allow light in and quickly closes – was a well-known feature at the time of the novel's publication. Coincidentally, the "Kodak" camera, which featured a mechanical shutter, was released in 1888 as well. For Gertrude to shudder/shutter, she would need to quickly and correctly grasp a situation and yet still feel overwhelmed by it, as if she hasn't been able to take in the whole scene but still senses its implications. That certainly happens quite often in the novel.

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